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Chapter Four

THE HUMAN TOUCH AND THE BEAUTY OF NATURE

Beauty in nature

Ruskin notes in one of his observations about nature that "the clouds, not being much liable to man's interference, are always beautifully arranged...."¹ It is a revealing comment, for the sky is surely one of the most striking natural wonders. What is especially fascinating about the sky are the endless configurations of clouds, for the heavens are least interesting when they are pure and perfect. Clouds are what makes the sunrise and sunset brilliant and dramatic.

Can the same be said of other natural phenomena? Doesn't every flower possess a loveliness peculiar to itself, the more so the more closely we examine it? The shapes of trees and their details of leaf, branch, and bark; the changing sounds of a brook as it rushes over rocks on its downward course; the calls and songs of birds--each of these has its peculiar appeal. Certainly every beauty has unique qualities, a distinctive character, and a recognizable degree of value. An orchid may appear more attractive than a violet, the call of a cuckoo more winsome than a crow's. The scale of beauty is a qualitative one, ranging from the pleasant to the profound.

Yet cases appear that are more difficult to assimilate to this benign aesthetic of nature, and for different reasons. The slug leaving behind its trail of slime may fascinate the naturalist but repels most others. The colors of the setting sun may be more varied and striking through the miasma that hovers over a city, but they are a distressing sign of the pollution that produces them. Other states of nature may have even less to redeem them: a perfect Caribbean

beach deformed by sand mining into a lunar landscape, or a hillside stripped of its trees, washing away as we look on. Although one can find aesthetic interest in the texture, color, and light of such landscapes, it is hard to overlook the violence revealed in their barrenness.

One may remark, however, that most of these are unnatural cases, cases in which the human hand has created the problem, that beauty is everywhere in untouched nature, and only when people intervene in the natural process do problems arise. Yet the issue is more complicated than this picture allows: The human presence is unavoidable, not only in the natural world but on the very occasion of beauty. There is little or nothing on this planet that has not been influenced by human action. Not only have people radically altered the earth's surface, but human practices have affected the atmosphere, the seas, the very climate. Moreover, the awareness of beauty and the aesthetic satisfaction this affords are grounded in perceptual experience, a human occurrence. Our recognition and participation are essential in recognizing beauty's presence and indeed for its very possibility.

Nature untouched, then, is a state found exclusively in prehuman history and about which we can only conjecture. It exists now merely as a speculative idea, for a person's awareness is the filter through which both nature's meanings and its beauties are necessarily apprehended. The title of this chapter is therefore not a conflict of opposites but somewhat ironic, since nature, as we know it, and human action, as we have just seen, are not different realms but the same. They are cited as the subject of my discussion and not as an implied contrast.²

The observation is well made that our appreciation of nature has developed historically. What was once regarded as fearsome wilderness, forests of lurking danger that should be avoided, has come to be seen as a place to admire and enjoy. The historicity of nature applies not only to our appreciation and to the meanings we discern but to the forms of nature as well. The landscapes we inhabit are cultural landscapes, their shapes, vegetation, and processes influenced by the characteristic living patterns of the people who dwell in them. These patterns themselves vary historically

and change with new technologies. We can see this not only in urban scenes but also in agricultural landscapes and in the countryside as a whole. Furthermore, as we now realize too well, human intervention has redistributed many species and exterminated many others. Nature alone is therefore a fiction; even in its wildest places, nature is always culture.

Yet the spectrum of nature includes more than open and cultivated landscapes. We must come to terms with nature remade: the natural scene transfigured by human action into towns and cities, reshaped by dams and irrigation projects, deforested into eroded and barren hills, cleared for farming and then abandoned to reforest itself, abused into deserts and irrigated into lush fields. These too are nature's human landscapes, and in the processes of inhabitation the planet itself has been transformed. New kinds of beauty have appeared, but so has its denial. The landscape humanized by fields and clusters of farm buildings, villages settled at the confluence of rivers or nestled among hills, cities constructed as monuments to the possibilities of a harbor--these may represent forms of mutual fulfillment that create new kinds of environmental value. But, as Ruskin implies, untouched nature is always beautiful, the nature people have made is not. It ranges across the positive degrees of a continuum of values to cross its neutral point and enter the negative. As there is bad art, bad in different ways, so there is unlovely nature, unlovely in ways that are perhaps unimaginable but unflinchingly real: an automobile graveyard spreading junked cars across the wide folds of a rural hillside; a development of nearly identical houses on a site leveled for convenience into anonymity; a stream crossing an urban region straitened into a concrete channel, buried beneath the pavement, or turned into an open sewer for industrial waste; wetlands filled in to provide room for industry or housing; a lake in a quiet, wooded setting turned into a playground for power boats and water skiers. Does entertainment value exceed aesthetic value, casual pleasure take precedence over national landscapes, economic interest override the irrecoverable resources embedded in primal wilderness? These considerations raise many issues--political, economic, social, and moral, as well as aesthetic. Human life is a complicated affair,

and our actions in the natural world introduce deeply interrelated dimensions of difficulty.

Aesthetic values in art and nature

Aesthetic values take many forms, then, both positive and negative, and they are intermixed with values of other kinds. The issues are complex and conflicts often occur, not only about the variety of values but also about the forms they take and the degree to which they are present. One may wonder, in particular, what the aesthetics of nature has to do with the domain with which aesthetic value is usually associated: the arts. Yet many of the questions about negative value in aesthetics can be asked of artistic as well as human and environmental forms of negativity. One of the features of aesthetic experience, commonly underrated, is its catholicity. The aesthetic ranges over a continuum from positive to negative and is present to some degree in all places and on all occasions. Dewey's critics rarely grasp his recognition of the pervasiveness of the aesthetic character of experience, for the academic tradition has confined it to carefully selected objects on chosen occasions and in special places. Of course, to argue for the omnipresence of the aesthetic is hardly to claim that it is exclusive or always dominant. Clearly it is neither, but the case can be made that all aesthetic occurrences exhibit a basic similarity, whether they involve nature, art, or human relations. Reflecting on the negative in nature and in art, then, can be mutually illuminating, and I will take advantage of this commonality by moving readily between them. This is especially appropriate, since nature, as we have seen, is a human artifact, at times a human art. In discussing art and nature, we are really talking about the same thing.

Negative values arise in the fine arts as they do in nature. We discover them, for example, when art panders to sentimentality or fails in the requisite skills of material, technique, or style. Like all art, works of negative value involve forms people have fashioned primarily for perceptual appreciation and experienced meanings. Yet such art is not merely less good; it denies itself, contradicting art's very function of leading us into living, illuminating experi-

ence. Kitsch exemplifies this kind of negativity, proffering sentimentality and surface significance as serious art. Art may acquire negativity, too, when it is inseparable from the uses to which it is put and when its aesthetic strength is overwhelmed by its social role, as in the service of repression, persecution, or war.

But it may be that a negative aesthetic is most clearly intelligible in environment. Even in largely unchanged environments, aesthetic appreciation occurs in varying degrees. Such values arise when people engage with the landscape. "Full many a flower is born to blush unseen, and waste its sweetness on the desert air," Gray sang, but these are only botanical events, except insofar as we see them and taste their sweetness, or entertain them, as here, in poetic imagination.³ Moreover, the manner of our entering into the landscape recognizes differences in aesthetic value. When we choose a scenic route over a shorter and faster one, select a vacation site, or compose a scene with a camera, we are shaping our experience of nature on aesthetic grounds that recognize degrees of beauty. As with the arts, the aesthetic value of natural environments varies with the features of the object and the contribution of the perceiver.

More striking, however, are those cases of environmental experience that have little or nothing to redeem them. These are, unfortunately, not difficult to find, from land surfaces gutted by strip mining to continuous blocks of plain, uniform high-rise apartment buildings. We make judgments of aesthetic disvalue just as we do of positive value, and we recognize differences of degree, but no clear, graduated scale defines quantitative increments of aesthetic negativity. Moreover, two or more orders of negation may be at work in many instances--one of morality and another of aesthetics--and within each mode of disvalue we recognize quantitative and qualitative differences. As in art that may be skillfully and beautifully made but that has a sadistic subject matter or induces a destructive reaction, positive and negative scales may be implicated simultaneously. In Maine, lovely low-spreading blueberry fields are treated with the pesticide Velpar, whose effects are not fully known. Manhattan's Central Park, an Olmstead and Vaux masterwork, is a magnet to visitors, yet its secluded areas host violent attacks. Here the aesthetic and the moral are not only combined but interdependent. Is it the moral factor that

renders the case negative and not just less beautiful? Do instances of negative aesthetics in environment always occur in a moral context or can the negative be aesthetically (im-)pure? Finally, is the negative case in environment different from that in art?

These are not questions easily disposed of, nor does this catalog of negative instances in nature and art provide a foundation for criticism. So let me approach the subject more systematically by considering some modes of negativity as they occur both in the arts and in environment. The modes that follow do not exhaust the possibilities, their order is not a strictly logical one, and my analysis of them is not exhaustive. Still, they represent a range that is broad enough to exhibit the variety and curious complexity of the aesthetically negative.

Modes of negativity

The most obvious case of aesthetic negativity seems to be the ugly. To the popular mind, ugliness is the antithesis of beauty. Whereas the one represents what is precious in art and in the appreciation of nature, the other represents its opposite, that which offends precisely by being unattractive. Beauty and ugliness, however, do not provide the proper frame for this discussion. They are not opposites, nor is the ugly necessarily a form of aesthetic negation.

Beauty has several meanings, ranging from a general recognition of aesthetic value to perfection of form. It is with the latter that the ugly stands in contrast, as when Aquinas writes that integrity or perfection (integritas sive perfectio) is one requirement for beauty, since what is defective is deemed ugly.⁴ Perfection, however, is conceptual, not empirical. It is linked with the classical notion of ideal form, as in Plato's theory of ideas, where the eidos is the flawless model that actual things only approximate, and in Aristotle's entelechy, where the achieved form of an organic body that some vitalists have interpreted as a force regulates and directs the development and functioning of living things according to an inherent pattern. For Aquinas, perfection is linked to an argument for God's existence, since gradations of goodness, truth, and nobility in our

experience require an ultimate or perfect point from which they can be measured, and God is that perfection.⁵

Experience and its objects invariably fail, by this criterion, since they are never perfect. Yet this is a defect only when one is governed by a conceptual model, not an empirical one. Perfection is an inappropriate standard for nature, not just because the world never attains it but because such an ideal is both irrelevant and misleading. It turns our eyes away from the endless variation and infinite detail of natural experience. It is, in fact, out of this very succession of uniquenesses that the wonder of natural beauty emerges. Perfection is an external measure, chosen on metaphysical, theological, or epistemological grounds but not on empirical or aesthetic ones. So in this sense, nothing in nature is ugly because imperfect, since nothing can be perfect. The straight line, the circle, and other geometrical abstractions are often useful but are rarely if ever found in faultless form in a natural setting. The fascination of natural objects lies in their uniqueness and endless variety. Never perfect, they are, like Ruskin's clouds, nonetheless always beautiful.

But what can be said about such apparently repugnant creatures as rats and snakes, spiders and slugs? Although they find an unsavory place in some folk cultures, they are an acquired distaste and even have their aficionados. What about commonly repulsive objects such as excrement and putrid flesh? The first gave Plato pause in his search for ideal forms, and the second provided food for Baudelaire's sadistic love lyric, Une Charogne (A Carrion). Yet both have found a place in art, possibly even good art, in company with "Piss Christ," Rembrandt's side of beef, and Soutine's strangled chicken. For some observers, the cultural mix of morality, folklore, and psychology that surrounds such things may obstruct any aesthetic interest. Yet other experienced and knowledgeable people may recognize that interest. Just as beauty need not be perfection, its recognition need not be universal. Insofar as these objects provide aesthetic value, they merit the claim of beauty in the broadest sense of the term that is synonymous with such value. In nature as in art, the ugly has its beauty.

Perhaps it is the poverty of our negative vocabulary that has led us to take the ugly to represent aesthetic negativity. Shorn of this unseemly obligation, the ugly, like the grotesque, which is one of its special cases, is really a species of positive value. Art, especially in this century, has found inspiration in the ugly, probing its many forms and facets. We need no longer turn only to the gargoyles on Notre-Dame de Paris to exemplify the grotesque; the ugly has bloomed in many other directions: Picasso's sculptural wrinkles on the head of an old woman, Soutine's contorted visage of the bellhop at Maxim's, and the virulent slashes of yellow and pink that depict de Kooning's women are a few striking examples. The search for transcendent beauty has been abandoned in our time for a fascination with its other sides.

More genuine forms of aesthetic disvalue occur, though they are not conventionally recognized as such. The offensive is one: If the ugly is not unbeautiful, surely it may offend us. Offense occurs in transgressing a rule of taste or behavior in nature and in art, just as it does in equivalent ways in morality and law. Such rules have their origin in custom, and although they may not be arbitrary, they are certainly the victims of circumstance. Moreover, rules in law, art, and morality obviously have different social purposes and functions. They must therefore respond to different considerations, and the ways in which we can offend them are different. Furthermore, the demarcations between these domains are entirely customary, and the interrelations of law, morality, and art are constantly being challenged and redefined, further complicating the nature and scope of their rules.

When art offends, it may insult our moral sense or our aesthetic sensibility. Usually it is the moralist who is offended when artists press against the self-satisfying constraints of convention. Mapplethorpe's photographs of interracial homophilia are the most well known recent example, not yet having had time to be assimilated--like Courbet's "The Awakening," with its lesbian lovers, or "The Origin of the World," depicting female genitalia--into the canon.⁶ Yet there are times when art can offend on exclusively aesthetic grounds, as when it offers pretension masquerading as profundity. This takes its most common form in kitsch, where artists apply their

craft and sensibility to pander to a low taste for sentimentality. At its extreme such kitsch merges with banality, a distinguishable aesthetic disvalue of its own.

When we call commercial strip development offensive, is it on moral or aesthetic grounds? There are no unbreachable aesthetic rules that govern the design of a commercial district, but there are standards of taste, standards related, as Hume pointed out long ago, to the cultivation and capacity of the critic. An aesthetic interest lies in perceptual relatedness, in coherence, perhaps in harmony. The incongruous or obtrusive can have a place, certainly, but when it is aesthetically effective it is assimilated into some larger frame or purpose. Aesthetic offense diminishes us humanly by manipulating us perceptually in the interest of other ends, by exploiting our susceptibilities, by engineering measured anxieties to impair our judgment, or by creating sheer discomfort. No absolute reigns here, to be sure, for even a practiced eye may inconceivably find charm in Las Vegas, but a preponderance of expert judgment is all we need in an aesthetic realm that is responsive to custom and change. And is this any less authoritative than the custom that underlies law and morality?

What is aesthetically offensive in strip development is not the self-defeating character of marketing hyperbole, where visual shrillness drowns all perceptual discrimination in an ocean of overstimulation. The aesthetic affront lies in an insensitivity to place or, when the commercial value of place is recognized, by vulgarizing its attractive features or imposing contrived or false ones. A common instance is the exploitation implicit in a fake historical design theme chosen for its emotional and hence its economic value, with little regard for its appropriateness in time and place. Perceptual deception is offensive aesthetically as well as morally. It lulls us with easy pleasantries. It may obscure an aesthetic interest by incoherent visual and architectural features, or it may distract us with exaggerated perceptual qualities while failing to satisfy genuine needs.

Shopping malls provide a different field for offense. They display a complete range of aesthetic value, from malls that simply rectangularize the commercial strip to others that reach toward

positive value by an overall design logic and humanize their market function by integrating it with recreational and cultural facilities. Summer cottages whose presence pollutes the scenery of a shoreline are offensive in a different way; the builders place personal indulgence over the commonly acknowledged attractiveness of an uncluttered and natural landscape, despoiling the very qualities that originally made the area attractive.

A related form of aesthetic negativity is found in art and design that offend us because they lack the fresh force of creative imagination and acquiesce in a conventional style, subject matter, or sentiment. Such failure can be called the banal. Art that is trite is doubly disappointing, first because it fails aesthetically--that is, it is flat and ineffective in appreciation--and then because it fails as art by not utilizing the capacities of the craft to reveal new possibilities of awareness in perception and imagination. This criterion does not imply that art must always innovate to avoid such a charge, but rather that it must be vital enough, even when repetitive, to attract and even excite fresh attention.

Is nature ever banal? Is the sunset trite because it is overdone or does it become banal from repetition? Like the conventional artist, nature repeats itself endlessly. Yet our expectations of nature are somewhat different from our expectations of art. Here the wonder lies in the particularity of a common field flower, the texture of a pebble on the beach, the passing glint of light on the water. The interest in the most ordinary occurrences of nature, such as the clouds, lies in their subtle differences and uniqueness or, on another scale, in the qualities of the overall pattern. Although there is a history of styles in appreciating nature, change is not aesthetically necessary. Slow development was once true of the arts, and it might still be if we were not so obsessed by newness and change. A static art is not inevitably banal if it proceeds by refining its technique, subtly varying the style, offering a richness of aesthetic surface and imaginative depth within its chosen range.

The dull may be a consequence of banality, but it is not confined to it. New art can be dull from lack of invention, clumsy technique, or shallow imagination. Such are failures of the artist. Dullness in the appreciation of nature, however, results from the feeble

contribution of an unperceptive observer, a lethargic participant. For the excited eye, nothing in nature is ever dull but becomes more fascinating the more closely it is examined. Curiously, when nature is dull, it is through the human touch: plantations of evenly spaced spruce, rows of development houses, a flat lawn with less irregularity than a hand-woven carpet.

A rather different form of disvalue is the unfulfilled, which is difficult to judge because it refers not to what is there but to what is not. Its negativity lies as much in our disappointment as in the aesthetic object, since what is present may be of high quality. Unfulfillment is hard to specify, for it is difficult to judge on the basis of what we do not have. Some cases are easy enough, such as unfinished works like the Scherzo of Schubert's B minor ("Unfinished") Symphony, of which the composer sketched only a few bars. Some works that others have completed, such as Mozart's Requiem and Bartók's Viola Concerto, are rightly considered masterly, yet one can often detect where the composer's hand faltered and wonder how the music would have sounded had his pen remained steady. Unfulfillment may be an insignificant factor in paintings such as Gilbert Stuart's 1796 portrait of George Washington, which is frequently reproduced with its lower portion still only gessoed⁷ or Turner's seascapes, which the artist was always touching up even when they were on exhibition. Some find in Michelangelo's Slaves, struggling to emancipate themselves from their marble blocks, a sculptural power and symbolic significance that are greater perhaps than if the works had been completed. The unfulfilled also applies to good ideas poorly executed, such as an art object inadequately worked out or polished, or art that fails to take advantage of the possibilities inherent in the materials or subject matter, or a richly suggestive idea for a work that is never executed at all.

Can environment be unfulfilled? This is a complex question, considering that people have had a hand, more or less, in every environment. Was the English landscape, which had been deforested over centuries, unfulfilled before Kent, Repton, and Brown shaped it into a pastoral idyll in the early nineteenth century? Could one have known this before the fact? Unfulfillment is often joined with other forms of aesthetic disvalue when one mourns

failed opportunities, seeing trailer houses dotting a rural landscape or a ranch house and lawn not far from a native farmhouse on a country road in New England.

What about the effects of war on the landscape? When moral concerns are such a powerful factor in judgment, the aesthetic can easily be overlooked. Yet a strong force in our perceptual disfavor is the loss of agrarian harmony in the landscape and the failure of its productive order. Like an untended garden, the waste in an agricultural landscape left to itself has an aesthetic element.

Should not in this best garden of the world,
Our fertile France, put up her lovely visage?
Alas, she [peace] hath from France too long been chased!
And all her husbandry doth lie on heaps
Corrupting in it own fertility.

The even mead, that erst brought sweetly forth
The freckled cowslip, burnet and green clover,
Wanting the scythe, all uncorrected, rank,
Conceives by idleness, and nothing teems
But hateful docks, rough thistles, kecksies, burs,
Losing both beauty and utility.⁸

There is an aesthetic argument, too, for peace. In industrialized countries, moreover, much of the urban and rural landscape is a condemning witness to scarring misuse and lost possibilities. The aesthetically negative is no simple quantity, and many of the modes I am identifying form complex combinations. Unfulfillment is often a factor when other negative and even positive elements are present.

Closely related to the unfulfilled is the inappropriate, where aesthetic failure comes not so much from what is not done as from the unsuitability of a work to its context. A funeral march played for a wedding processional, like a ball gown worn to an afternoon tea, is jarring in context, not in itself. Similarly inappropriate is a house built without regard to the features of its site, or a building that towers irrelevantly above its neighbors or whose design ignores the architectural context and introduces a disruptive disequilibrium. Foreign regional or ethnic designs used without regard to local building traditions never succeed in being at home, such

as when a Spanish hacienda or a Swiss chalet is built in a Maine coastal village.

Another form of negativity consists in trivializing what is real and important, limiting experience to a petty plane when it could be enlarged into significance. One common form this takes consists in treating matters that are significant and serious as merely casual. Among the arts, film is especially culpable. It often uses current social and personal issues of race, ethnicity, gender, and sex for their popular appeal and glibly exploits their serious content on a superficial plane for purely commercial purposes.

Does environmental design ever trivialize its subject matter? The scope of this question is dangerously broad, for a positive answer could lead to condemning much design and building practice. A themed hotel or restaurant that unimaginatively imitates an earlier architectural style trivializes the past for those who visit or work there by conveying a false sense of history. These cases anticipate a more general sense of the trivial found in treating the genuine needs and values of the human participant in a slick and thoughtless manner. One thinks of the soulless box-like buildings encouraged by the international style and of the cliché-ridden pastiches that substitute for the playful and imaginative possibilities of postmodernism. Perhaps the one-design development house and the standardized suburb trivialize people's home environment, as these larger buildings do public places. All these diminish the human participant. Shaping an environment that provides enabling conditions for the lives of its inhabitants is a powerful moral responsibility. The tragedy of the trivial rests as much in the failure of opportunity as in what it actually does.

The deceptive carries the negativity of the trivial still farther by introducing an intentional factor. This is what makes artistic forgeries so unpalatable, for although a van Meegeren Vermeer may have some inherent merit, the affront of deceit, not only to the financial interests of the art market but also to the wider art public, brings the opprobrium of the art world down on the offender, along with the punitive arm of the law.⁹ The trompe l'oeil painting excites our admiration through its virtuosity rather than our annoyance at having been taken in. Is it the same with architecture? Plastic palaces

that imitate solid materials are more than a difference in degree from tromp l'oeil marble mantels and wood-grained moldings. When we discover that a charming white clapboard house or a church in Vermont is covered with aluminum or vinyl siding, we feel foolishly duped and look about for the real thing to satisfy our expectations. Do people notice when their slate countertops are formica or their dens oak-paneled in plastic? Is there an answer to the defense that no one is deceived for long by these false surfaces and that their low maintenance justifies their use? It is not the materials that are at issue here but the deception. The condemnation lies not in using new building materials but in using them falsely.

Other forms of deception are easier to identify than to judge. What about the false vernacular? Unlike postmodernism, which combines various stylistic features but doesn't disguise the fact or pretend that they are authentic, architecture has long used historical styles freely but less playfully, from nineteenth-century Gothic churches to early twentieth-century neoclassical museums and government buildings. Most domestic architecture in this country since the middle of the twentieth century ignores indigenous traditions and makes the choice of style as arbitrary as selecting an upholstery fabric--more so, since in this last instance, the decor of the room is usually taken into account. The New England colonial stands in southern suburbs; the ranch house sits on a suburban street in the East. The most egregious cases of false vernacular occur in theme parks, themed hotels, restaurants, and housing developments, where historical and national styles are chosen with blithe indifference to time, place, and context. At what point does the willing self-deception of the user merge into unthinking acceptance and belief? And what is its influence on children, for whom comparison and judgment are not possible? Deception is particularly troubling in matters of environmental design, for here it is not a matter of a false statement, a book that misrepresents its subject, or a propaganda film. All these are relatively easy to counter by exposure, argument, and disproof. But how does one disprove the false world a person inhabits, especially when there is nothing outside with which to compare it?

Here we move clearly onto moral ground, for the deceptive incorporates a moral issue in the very heart of the aesthetic one. Within this mode of aesthetic negativity the two are, in fact, fully interdependent. We regard both the practice and the harmful effects of deception with opprobrium, and nowhere more than in deceptive education. Aesthetic deception undermines people's sense of reality. What is environmental reality when the only thing that is real in people's experience is the false: When history is "Main Street USA" and the American western, science is "Star Wars," the legal system "L.A. Law," and geography and culture are The National Geographic? At this point the aesthetic shares moral culpability with the other forces of deception.

This sequence of aesthetic negativities leads finally to its most extreme degree: the destructive. It may seem odd to apply so strong a word to the aesthetic, which many regard as the wimp of cultural interests. Yet protectors of the social order have long recognized and feared the power of the arts. Censorship is often used in the service of moral convention and political domination, and although it can be self-defeating as a means of control, there are other places where tolerance need not be extended voluntarily simply on principle. Not everyone agrees on what constitutes socially destructive art. Yet such representatives of negativity as ethnic and nationalistic demagogues, priests of moral repression, and purveyors of persecution propose some form of destruction as the means to their end, means in which the aesthetic has a time-honored place. Songs and anthems, posters and dress, theater and ritual, oratory and literature, film and photography are used in the service of every cause, those that undermine as well as those that promote human good. The glorification of these causes in art need not be welcomed into a public forum in the name of the free speech that their proponents would revoke. Why should we extend toleration to the intolerant? These comments are not intended to endorse any sort of official board of censors but rather to highlight the fact that the arts have destructive uses and that a negative aesthetics provides the grounds for condemning them. Exposure is a powerful defense.

Environmental design has long been used for repressive ends; that is part of its tradition. From the walls that divided the ancient Chinese commercial city into wards to make crowd control more effective to the harassing design and ostracizing location of public housing today, an antihuman aesthetic has often shaped people's perceptual world and created realities that limit and deny them.¹⁰ Only in recent times has urban design been thought of as a humanizing and liberating force.

Aesthetic harm

The destructive appears in many guises. This region of negativity can be given some order by centering further discussion around three interrelated forms: the moral, the social, and the aesthetic.

Moral thought has been preoccupied more with regulating and prohibiting actions rather than enabling them. The tradition of Western ethics has been a prescriptive, often negative one, devoted to developing and justifying principles of control, from the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule to the categorical imperative. One might even regard the very quest for an ethical principle as a search for a rational order of restraint, and the attempt to universalize any such principle as the desire to impose constraint consistently. Even classical utilitarianism, although concerned with promoting people's interests, is regulatory, disregarding peripheral harm in the name of maximizing the quantity of benefit with the abstract impersonality of rational judgment.

Although the socializing role of morality is essential, its humanizing possibilities are largely undeveloped. Yet that tradition is an ancient one. It appears in the ancient Hebrews' responsibility for the indigent and the stranger and in the early Christians' morality of love, and it returns in our own time in the feminist ethic of care. We can understand the need for constraint, yet one wonders about the undeveloped realm of positive ethics, about what forms this might take and how it would answer to criteria different from those of logical order and generalizability. Still, moral belief, both in its theoretical elaboration and in its institutional application, has

tended to work as a negative force, controlling, impeding, and imposing on people's actions by precept and edict.

Much has been written recently about socially destructive actions, such as the Holocaust and ethnic cleansing. The social malpractices of the modern world--war, drugs, crime, intolerance, terrorism, repressive power--dominate collective life. These obscure the many small, unsensational acts of cooperation and benevolence that are the true heart of social living. Yet the socially destructive reverses the healthy dynamic equilibrium of a sound society, where the negative is an aberration.

We are, unfortunately, well acquainted with morally and socially destructive actions, and the study of normative negativity must examine them individually and fully. I mention these types of negativity mainly to acknowledge the scope of the destructive, but my concern here is with the aesthetic. Is there such a thing as aesthetic harm? How can something be aesthetically destructive?

Aesthetic harm, at the very least, is the denial of sensory richness and perceptual fullness. It takes a more assertive form in perceptual conditions that desensitize people, that impede, impair, or diminish human capacities for experience. Harm here occurs at the most basic level of the aesthetic, whose roots lie in perceptual experience. But the aesthetic becomes refined as factors are added--the kinds of factors that are most developed in the arts. Among these are fineness of discrimination, the enhancement and enlargement of perception, the awareness of sensory relationships, the vital engagement of intense appreciation, the grasping of embodied meanings, the expansion of what is called, poetically, the human spirit. Aesthetic harm undermines these. It coarsens perceptual consciousness, constricts the development of sensory awareness and the pulsing vitality of the body, and promotes sensory depravity. Aesthetic harm thus demeans the values and meanings embedded in that complex functioning we call human experience. Moreover, the distortion or restriction of perceptual experience manipulates and misleads our sense of reality. Extremes of deprivation or excess and disorienting misdirection can cause madness or death. All these are kinds of aesthetic harm.

Aesthetic harm can be distinguished from such other modes of negativity as the dull and the trivial by the seriousness of its effects.

This may occur in different ways. The harm caused by lack is one way, by the deprivation of the values found in deepened and enlarged perceptual experience. An aesthetically impoverished landscape diminishes its inhabitants, surrounding people with the bland uniformity of slum, urban, or suburban housing, with littered streets and empty lots filled with refuse, with desperate tufts of grass and scraggly bushes, or with the predictable plantings and arbitrarily curved streets of suburban developments. Those who inhabit such places know nothing else but a contracted world and suffer the impoverishment of a spirit denied.

Aesthetic harm also occurs by imposition. It comes in the inescapable noise of traffic, factories, lawn mowers, and canned music; in vehicular exhaust gases, industrial smoke, chemical odors, and the blue wisps of burning tobacco. Even the sense of taste is unavoidably polluted by excessive sugar and salt, exaggerated flavors, and extravagant quantities of cheap sauces. The visual pollution of the landscape is omnipresent and unavoidable in the blight of telephone poles and lines, the bland oppressiveness of most skyscrapers, the random punctuation of transmission towers and TV satellite dishes, and the ravages of mining and clear-cutting on the surface of the land. But the harm of aesthetic presence is probably most overwhelming in the strident signage of commercial strips in urban areas and of billboards in the countryside.

Is there aesthetically offensive behavior? The aesthetic harm found in individual actions is elusive, perhaps because it is more personal and easier to overlook in oneself. Among the things to consider here are loud voices, heavy perfume, tobacco smoke, the various forms of inconsiderate behavior that offend our sensibilities, including our aesthetic ones. Of course, this must be qualified culturally. In some circles, loud laughter and a radio played at high volume outdoors are proper enjoyment; in others, they are crude and insensitive. This poses a problem mainly when such circles overlap, as in a restaurant or in contiguous neighborhoods. But social living creates many such conditions. Which sensibility should take priority? Questions of etiquette raise similar questions, for they involve social aesthetics as much as they do ethics. Moreover, the destructive as a mode of negativity raises a tantalizing ques-

tion: just as the aesthetic can generate a moral critique, can it also ground a positive morality?¹¹

The negative sublime

One further domain of negativity remains to be discussed here. In traditional aesthetics the sublime denotes an extreme degree of value whose force exceeds the measured proportions of the beautiful. Like beauty, the sublime inhabits the aesthetic because it reflects the direct encounter with a thoroughly perceptual content. Yet its distinction and fascination lie precisely in the experience of incommensurability. The sublime rests on an experience of power and magnitude so overwhelming that it cannot be circumscribed. Kant, whose discussion of the sublime is best known, associated it not with art but with nature, manifested in the uncontrollable power of the sea in a storm and the magnitude of the starry sky.

Why have we returned with renewed interest to this notion, developed largely within the traditional aesthetic of the eighteenth century? I suspect that in part, it may be because the sublime is the aesthetic category that captures most compellingly the dominant perception, in sense and in meaning, of our lived world. But that world is not the world of nature, a world whose greatness evoked humility in Kant. We live in a vastly different one in which the power of nature, though still awesome, has been cast into insignificance by the unbounded power that lies, barely controlled, in human hands. Order has slipped into chaos, rationality has been undermined, certainties have degenerated into probabilities, and absolutes have died along with God.

We have not developed new cognitive structures and social institutions to deal with these changes in knowledge and understanding. Instead, societies have succumbed to the influence of demagogues of the Left and the Right, producing the totalitarian state, mass production, mass marketing, mass culture, and mass murder. We face the plague of AIDS, the glacier-like threat of an expanding world population, and the still present threat of nuclear annihilation. The corporate amoeba, scientifically engineered to a

size and power that allows it to engulf the human personality and absorb human consciousness, is gradually assimilating the national state and monopolizing the productive process and the economic order of the entire planet. Most people are no longer aware of the starry heavens that so awed Kant that he took them to exemplify the sublime. The glow of light from our cities renders the stars quite invisible.

No longer is it nature, then, that exemplifies the sublime, as it did when viewed from mountaintops and stormy coasts in the eighteenth century; it is the human environment. This is not just an environment of towering edifices but a cultural environment of towering institutions whose power is so great that it cannot be conceived directly and concretely and exceeds our capacity to grasp it rationally. Such an environment exemplifies the sublime precisely because it cannot be grasped, because it is unrepresentable. It is the sublime of excess, not of the positive but of the negative. The negative sublime has, in fact, become the dominant aesthetic consciousness of our age.¹²

The scope of negativity

This discussion has ranged widely, though no more so than the negative aesthetic itself, and matters have become somewhat clearer. One of them is that the modes of negativity, from the banal to the destructive, are found equally in environment and in the arts. Instances of one illuminate and support the case for the negative in the other. Certainly there are differences, but they are more of individual cases than of genres. Rather than setting art and environment in opposition, it is more useful to examine particular forms and occurrences of aesthetic negativity wherever they occur.¹³ Moreover, the modes of negative aesthetics are many, and these reflections have left some of them untouched. Whether the grotesque and the boring, for example, can be understood as variants of the ugly and the dull or as separate categories needs further thought. And how should one deal with the bland, the insipid, and the vulgar? Obviously, too, we can analyze the individual modes of aesthetic negativity differently and debate

particular instances. Rather than vitiating the case for the negative, this ability acknowledges it.

What is important is to make such negativity explicit. This means realizing that aesthetic value has a negative range and that it occurs in identifiable modes that we can apply to environment and the arts in ways that lead to specific judgments. What complicates the task is that the modes are not all on the same footing. Each occupies a different place in an order of negativity, yet that order is not immediately apparent. It clearly cannot assume a linear, one-dimensional progression. Indeed, the order of negativity is not mathematical at all but rather takes the form of a normative complex, another matter that needs examination. Furthermore, the scope of aesthetic negativity itself is unclear. Even the positive end of the spectrum is not inviolate. Can there be too much good taste? Can things be too perfect? Is aesthetic excess itself a kind of negativity? One may yearn for irregularity, for rough edges, for the unpredictable, like the surface depression deliberately pressed into the otherwise perfect roundness of a Japanese teapot or the subtle differences in the repetitive pattern of a Persian rug.

Aesthetic and moral values

Perhaps the most troublesome and complex issue of all concerns the interrelation of the aesthetic and the moral, a question raised early in this chapter and one that a discussion of negativity cannot avoid. We face this issue directly when we attempt to judge the aesthetic component in art that is considered degraded or degenerate. The aesthetic and the moral are equally central here. Despite a feeling of moral repugnance, we recognize the aesthetic and want to be able to acknowledge its own value. Yet at the same time we are troubled by the fact that this aesthetic value may be inseparable from the moral message. Can something that is morally negative ever be aesthetically pure? And, conversely, do instances of negative aesthetics invariably possess a moral dimension? Is moral condemnation at the basis of aesthetic negativity, or is it distinguishable and separate?

Each mode and instance of the negative requires its own answer. In some of its forms, the disvalue may be primarily aesthetic, even

though a moral element is present. This is the case with the failure of aesthetic opportunities in the banal, the dull, the unfulfilled, and the inappropriate, which, by disappointing human good, become a moral as well as an aesthetic loss. In other modes, such as the trivializing and the deceptive, a moral presence may dominate the aesthetic and diminish its effect. In the destructive and the negative sublime, the moral component is even more serious, but it still may not overwhelm the aesthetic one. In other modes not developed here, such as the degrading and the degenerate, the moral content may overpower any aesthetic consideration altogether. Yet even here the aesthetic is not entirely displaced, and this raises the issue of their conflict most pointedly.

What emerges from reviewing the range of aesthetic negativity is that a moral content is present to some degree in each of its modes. Even when an aesthetic interest is most pronounced, the moral is never altogether absent. Conversely, although not with perfect symmetry, an aesthetic element may occupy a vestigial place in a moral situation, even though its author may claim more for it. Is the importance of the aesthetic in *The Tropic of Cancer* different from that in *The Story of O*? Determining the degree of imbalance is a task for responsible criticism. Although we should discriminate carefully in exposing the interrelationship of the moral and the aesthetic in the different modes of negativity and their interplay in particular cases, the variety and complexity of instances make it unlikely that we can develop any general rules. The character and degree of negativity depend rather on the individual mode and the specific instance. The art in judging art becomes even more delicate at the intersection of the moral and the aesthetic.

The presence of a moral dimension reinforces the claim for the significance of aesthetic value. It also makes unacceptable the view that such value can be dismissed as inconsequential or undiscussable on the grounds that it is purely personal. Quite the contrary. The aesthetic offers a basis for social criticism precisely because it, like morality, is grounded in experience that is similar in basic ways. This is complicated by the fact that, again like the moral, aesthetic experience always takes place in a cultural realm having a history and a tradition, and where its value is ultimately judged

collectively. The omnipresence of a moral component confirms and reinforces the social character of such experience.

All this is explicit in the negative aesthetics of environment, for environment is visibly common and shared. Values inhere in the human environment, whether it has been consciously designed or not, and aesthetic value, along with moral, political, and economic ones, is an inseparable component. By exposing its presence and developing its interrelationships with these other values, an aesthetic critique can have great force and provide the grounds for a distinctive commentary on environmental proposals and actions. An expanded sense of the aesthetic and a vocabulary of its negative modalities are therefore essential.

Positive environmental values

A discussion of negativity runs the risk of identifying the negative with those things associated with it. But it would be a mistake to infer that the human touch always causes nature to wilt. There is an affirmative side to this complex scale of aesthetic value and it is good to acknowledge it, for we can discover models of how natural processes fulfill some of their inherent possibilities and gain aesthetic richness through a guiding hand. England and France, for example, have characteristically looked on nature as a garden needing to be cultivated. Sharply different garden traditions have led to different cultural landscapes, yet at their best they reflect in contrasting ways a harmonious fusion of natural and human forces. Lancelot Brown's reshaping of the English landscape is one way of cultivating nature, just as Japanese and Chinese gardens integrate the human and the natural through distinctly different sensibilities. Even within national traditions one finds successful variety. The geometrical order of Le Nôtre's gardens at Versailles hardly resembles the informal groves, ponds, and plantings in the Jardins Albert-Kahn in Paris. A less deliberate blending of human actions and natural processes occurs in unexpected places: a road that hugs the contours of the land instead of forcing its way across it; a farmhouse and buildings that complete their site; a port town that embraces its harbor. In such cases, the designers--known or unknown, working

individually or collectively--are environmental artists who respected and responded to the demands of their materials with imagination, sensitivity, and affection.

It is a mistake, then, to regard human environmental acts as invariably negative aesthetically, for there are numerous forms and instances of successful collaboration with natural conditions. When negativity does occur, however, we can usually locate its source in careless, unconsidered, narrow, selfish, or deliberately exploitative actions. It would be tempting to say that the natural world, left alone, would always be beautiful. But that is too simple and sentimental a view, for without a human presence, there would be no appreciation of beauty and no awareness of value. So we must be content with the far more difficult matter of directing our necessary environmental presence toward activities that are aesthetically positive. William Morris's well-known comment recognizes the primary importance of the larger sphere: Unless people care about carrying on their business without making the world hideous, how can they care about art?

I have not considered directly all the questions raised at the outset, yet some interesting things have emerged. It has become clear that a human presence is necessary for aesthetic awareness to occur and aesthetic value to arise. And just as an aesthetic factor can be discerned in all experience of environment, this is even more clearly true of moral value, which comes, like the aesthetic, from the very presence of people in their social context. With both moral and aesthetic value always implicated, the question of whether they can be dealt with separately is misguided. Types of value have no ontological locus beyond human experience, and discerning their differences is always empirically grounded and historically relative. Enlarging the aesthetic to accept subject matter and experience that are openly sensual, for example, has lessened the influence of conventional morality and has led to intense dispute over their overlapping claims. A newer debate has developed over the acceptability of violence on television, in film, and in performance art. And a growing awareness of ethnicity and the categorial revisions of feminist scholarship have redefined and ex-

tended the meaning and scope we give the to moral and the aesthetic in still different ways.

It was a false aesthetic, then--false in its exclusiveness and limits--for the picturesque traveler in the late eighteenth century to find unalloyed aesthetic delight in the decaying cottages and ragged inhabitants of the countryside. And it is just as false for us to ask whether *Triumph of the Will* is a beautiful film independent of its Nazi ideology and propagandistic purposes. It is not the moral factor that renders these cases negative while leaving their beauty untouched. Moral repugnance affects their aesthetic value as well. To isolate these modes of value is an intellectual indulgence unconnected with human experience.

Although this chapter has explored the negative, my intent in writing it was not a Baudelairean perverseness that delights in undermining the sanctity of the aesthetic. Nor did the choice of subject stem from a logical compulsion to conceptual symmetry that must balance the positive value generally associated with the aesthetic by its obverse. My purpose was rather a constructive one. As the range of aesthetic value has enlarged in recent theory beyond the beauty of art and nature to include the many other forms that human activity takes, aesthetic criticism has the potential to become a powerful intellectual tool for understanding the world we have created. We are all too conscious of the negative at a time when growing material abundance has been overwhelmed by a still more rapid increase in the degree and kinds of threat. To grasp more fully what these dangers are and how better to proceed, we need strong instruments for analysis and judgment. An enlarged aesthetic is one of them.

NOTES

1. John Ruskin, The Elements of Drawing (London: J.M. Dent, 1920), Letter II. See also John Ruskin, Nature Studies, ed. Rose Porter (Boston: Dana Estes & Co., 1900), pp. 112-113.

2. Pauline von Bonsdorff develops a somewhat different discussion of the meaning of nature in "Forest Aesthetics as Aesthetics of Forestry," unpublished ms.

3. Thomas Gray, "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," st. 14. The entire stanza reads:
"Full many a gem of purest ray serene,/The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear:/Full many a
flower is born to blush unseen,/And waste its sweetness on the desert air."

4. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica (c. 1270), Ia.q.39.a.8.

5. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, I, q.2, a.3.

6. Courbet's painting, in the collection of the Musée d'Orsay, is also known as "Venus and Psyche." "The Origin of the World" is in a private collection in Paris.

7. Gilbert Stuart's 1796 portrait of Washington is held jointly by the Museum of Fine Art, Boston and the National Portrait Gallery.

8. William Shakespeare, King Henry V, V, ii. Kecksies are dried hemlock stems. I am grateful to Peter D. Paul for calling this passage to my attention.

8. The recent fashion of making new art that deliberately reworks well-known paintings from the canon has clearly nothing in common with this.

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10. For the division of Chinese cities into walled wards, see Yi-Fu Tuan, Topophilia (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1974), p. 176.
11. Aristotle suggested that the aesthetic and the moral are reciprocal when he noted that anything is beautiful "which, being desirable in itself, is at the same time worthy of praise, or which, being good, is pleasant because it is good." Rhetoric, 1366a.
12. Chapter Three, "Deconstructing Disney World," uses the concept of the sublime in a similar way. Also see J.-F. Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
13. I discuss the relation between the aesthetics of art and the aesthetics of environment in The Aesthetics of Environment (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), Ch. 6.