

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF AESTHETIC EDUCATION ON ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Environmental degradation is considered by many to be one of the major challenges facing humanity in modern times. The environment is being severely and seriously undermined by human activities. Industrialization and its products irretrievably affect the land surface, the seas, and the atmosphere of our planetary environment. These undesirable effects on the environment imprint ugliness on the world and limit people's opportunities for pleasurable environmental aesthetic experiences. As one of the branches of aesthetics, environmental aesthetics determines the factors that shape our understanding and the creation of the natural and built environment. It examines among other things appreciation of nature as a powerful foundation for positive and affirmative action on environmental issues. Through the framework of the cognitive account of the aesthetic appreciation of nature in contemporary environmental aesthetics which maintains that aesthetic education concerning nature should incorporate the contributions made by scientists and naturalists so that our attitude towards nature will develop with ecological sensitivity. This is predicated on the ceteris paribus condition that a good aesthetic education and right aesthetic attitude is instrumental in the preservation and protection of our natural and human-made environments in Nigeria. It bemoans the negative consequences and effects of environmental degradation and discusses the positive effects that might follow from taking natural beauty seriously.

Keywords: Environmental Aesthetics, Aesthetic Appreciation, Aesthetic Cognitivism, Aesthetics Attitude, Environmental Degradation.

Introduction

The City of Port Harcourt, the Capital of Rivers State, Nigeria, popularly known as the Garden City because of its green and open spaces with nicely patterned houses built in well-planned layouts has now been described as a dirty and dark city because it has been engulfed in recent time with dark, hazy and hazardous soot, coupled with dirty environment caused by lack of proper attitude towards disposal of solid waste. In recent time, this hydra-headed monster called black soot has become the major concern of all, as residents of the state have publicly decried the dangers of such environmental degradation that is likely to cut short the life expectancy of the people in the city. Concern citizens have taken to the social media to raise alarm about the possible danger of this problem. Canon, a concern resident and an environmentalist describe this worrisome

situation in *This Day* thus: You're wiping your face with a handkerchief and everything is black. You're trying to clean your car and everything is black. Or you look at the soles of your feet and it is just pitch black. (January, 20th, 2022).

His words summarized the severity and magnitude of the threat that the situation poses to public health and livelihood for men and animals, like every other air pollutant. Experts maintain that black soot is associated with series of diseases like asthma, bronchitis, coronary heart disease and some other respiratory illnesses. The toxicity of the black soot sometimes causes cancer which may lead to premature death (Ukpere & Igwe 67). The cause of the soot has been attributed to numerous factors. Some residents and activists attribute it to the flaring of petroleum products and burning of tires and illegal refineries that are operational in the city. Others believes that the illegal oil activities undertaken by bunkers and vandals are chiefly responsible for the dilemma the city is faced with. Some other concerned citizens are of the opinion that the soot is as a result of abattoirs burning tyres, heating of asphalt and also the burning of stolen petroleum products by security agencies. The blame trade has left no one in exception. Some blamed kpo-fires — illegal refineries in Rivers State and much of the oil-rich Niger Delta. Others have blamed everything else under the sun. It is no longer a joke and like the slogan of one of the giant telecom communication in the country, MTN, the soot is visible 'everywhere you'. Homes are no longer safe because the soot filters in through unlocked doors and opened surfaces. If you take a clean tissue and clean your nostrils, you would see the blackness that has mixed with the natural mucor.

Beside the air pollution caused majorly by the recent black soot, Port Harcourt city which as described above used to be a city adorned with fine gardens has become a dirty city; a city as would be described by environmental aestheticians as a city coloured everyday with ugliness and unpleasant smiles. The streets of the city are littered with solid waste. The residents of the city dump their waste right in between the middle of the road, causing them to be flushed into the drainages thereby blocking the water ways. Some of the waste are scattered along the roadside by moving cars littering the surrounding which will eventually be flushed into the drainages. One of the major consequences of this ugly incident is that the residents suffer the problem of flash flood during the raining season because solid waste products are being flushed into the drainages causing untold suffering to the inhabitants of the city as they are forced out of their home by flood. In recent time, The Rivers State Waste Management Agency (RIWAMA) has totally lost control of managing the waste disposal in the state as the city has being submerged with waste for days, weeks and even months (This Day, May 18, 2022). There is general lack of proper attitude towards disposal of solid waste and lack of government's political will according to Ayotamuno and Akuro about this problem has contributed to the city being described as a breeding site for diseases and air pollution (Ayotamuno and Akuro 389). In fact there is this lack of proper environmental concern by the residents due to lack of proper environmental and aesthetic education. Apart from the fact that the city has lost its aesthetic glory, it has equally become a pitiful cynosure of environmental pollution and general environmental degradation.

This worrisome situation is not peculiar to Rivers state alone, as Nigeria, especially the

Niger Delta states of the federation are equally battling with the issue of air pollution and environmental degradation in general as a result of the activities of the multi-nationals due to the exploration of crude oil. In the Niger Delta region of the country, the effects of environmental degradations are visible in all nooks and crannies of the regions. These ugly situation ranges from oil spillage, gas flaring, deforestation, destruction of wide and aquatic lives and air pollution to mention but a few. The social and economic impacts of oil industries in these regions has brought great frustration and anger to their lives as it has brought great conflict between the government, the host communities and multi-nationals (Nwangbu Xiii). The major effect of this problem is environmental degradation and other environmental hazards which have led to the change in the ecosystem (Amadi, "The consequences of Man's Abuse and Misuse of Scientific and Technological Feat", 89)

The general orientation about the problem of black soot, lack of proper disposal of waste and general environmental degradation in the Garden City, the Niger Delta and the country as a whole, is that it imprints ugliness in the city and limit people's opportunities for pleasurable environmental aesthetic experiences. The question is: what is the significance of aesthetic education to the problem of environmental degradation? Can aesthetics as a branch of philosophy contribute to the recent call for environmental concern? As Heesoon Bai puts it:

In times such as ours, when suffering and trauma abound, when violence and violation continue (their scale and reach enabled by modern technologies), when species are increasingly becoming extinct, and when ecosystems are collapsing, philosophies are being addressed to engage in conversation and contemplate how we might globally contribute to a world in which our children, species, and environment can live well and thrive. (Heesoon Bai).

One of the most encouraging signs in the widespread interest in environmental values is the recognition of the importance of the aesthetic. Scholars and researchers have tilted towards aesthetic experience and appreciation in the fight against environmental degradation. But the question is: how can aesthetics contribute to the fight against environmental degradation in Nigeria? Traditionally, aesthetics is mostly focused on art. It is generally concerned with arts and other objects that are explicitly designed for human sensory enjoyment. However, aesthetic appreciation is not limited to art; it is frequently directed towards the world at large. This is the world that surrounds humans in their day-to-day existence and thus constitutes the everyday environment. Therefore, as one of the many branches and approaches to aesthetics, environmental aesthetics is concerned with enhancing cordial respect for the environment and for protection of the environment. Even though environmental aesthetics is a child of contemporary age, this field of study collaborates with other environmental study aimed at enhancing cordial respect for the environment and for protection of the environment. The aesthetic experience of this world is the subject matter of environmental aesthetics. This area of aesthetics focuses on philosophical questions concerning appreciation of the world at large and, moreover, that world as it is constituted not simply by particular objects but also by environments

themselves. Therefore, environmental aesthetics extends beyond the narrow confines of the art world and beyond the appreciation of works of art to the aesthetic appreciation of human-influenced and human-constructed as well as natural environments. The importance of the aesthetic dimension of environment becomes increasingly compelling according to Yuriko Saito “as industrialization and its products irretrievably affect the land surfaces, the seas, and the atmosphere of our planetary environment.” Therefore, environmental aesthetics investigates the importance of aesthetic education to environmental concern. This essay argues that as an axiological discipline, the relationship between ethics and aesthetics is cordial. It therefore submits that a good knowledge of this relationship will encourage how we aesthetically appreciate our environments and how we should treat them. It went on to argue that when the right aesthetic interest and attitude is cultivated and the right aesthetic education and knowledge is inculcated, it will curtail the problem of environmental degradation in the world and Nigeria in particular. This essay uses the framework of the cognitive and non-cognitive account of the aesthetic appreciation of nature in contemporary environmental aesthetics to make a case for environmental aesthetics as a way forward for the problem of environmental concern in Nigeria and the world at large.

Environmental Aesthetics and the Call for Environmental Protection

Aesthetics is a branch of philosophy that is primarily concerned with the way human beings experience and perceives the world through their senses. This philosophical enquiry is geared towards a good understanding of the arts and beauty. Traditional aesthetics has from inception being concerned with fine arts. These arts have equally contributed significantly in shaping this field. Central to the claims of traditional aesthetics is the fact that art is sufficient and autonomous and that it does not require any justification for its existence. The proponents of this theory is of the opinion that fine arts requires a special mode of attention called disinterested contemplation; and that the art object must be removed from any cultural, social and economic context and that it must be perceived for what it is. These claims are well suited for arts like painting, sculpture, music, theater, dance, and literature. These arts are littered everywhere in our museums, theaters, concert halls, and libraries. These places provide special locations for their appreciation and enjoyment. Thus, aesthetics and the arts complement each other. While aesthetic theory guides our appreciation of the arts, the fine arts on the other hand exemplify the precepts of aesthetics.

However, aesthetic appreciation is not limited to art; it is equally directed to our experience to our experience of the world at large: our everyday environment; the environment in which people work, play and live. Thus, the scope of aesthetics extends beyond the narrow confines of arts and other aesthetic objects that elicit aesthetic appreciation. According to Arnold Berleant (2003) the scope of aesthetics has widened to embrace “ethical, social, religious, environmental and cultural concern... Varied traditions have joined with its historically interdisciplinary character, making aesthetics a focal centre of diverse and multiple interests”. Zetl collaborates this assertion with his position that aesthetics has gone beyond traditional philosophical concept to being the understanding and appreciation of beauty and our ability to judge beauty with

consistency. He further maintains that in media aesthetics “art and life are mutually dependent on each other and essentially interconnected” (Zettl 2). The aesthetic experience of this world constitutes the subject matter of environmental aesthetic. Environmental aesthetic focuses on philosophical questions bordering on the appreciation of the world at large, the world as it is constituted not by particular objects but also by environments themselves. Therefore, environmental aesthetics extends beyond the narrow confines of the art world and beyond the appreciation of works of art to the aesthetic appreciation of human-influenced and human-constructed as well as natural environments.

In recent time, scholars have expressed interest in the importance of aesthetics to environmental values. As Arnold Berleant observed, “aesthetic values are a large part of what draws people to environmental activities and issues.” (Berleant, *What is Environmental Aesthetics?* 1) Aesthetic value is the value that an object, event, or state of affairs has. This can be an artwork or natural environmental possesses because of its capacity to elicit either positive or negative value when experienced aesthetically. Just as humans are not distinct from nature nor especially favored by nature as some environmental scholars argued, aesthetic values are embedded in natural conditions. Our experiences and interactions with the natural world are suffused with aesthetic values, from the greening of the grass to the ever-changing cloud formations in the sky. We find delight and renewal in these simple perceptions. And it is well that we recognize these aesthetic values. However, the challenge is that the recognition of these aesthetic values in the natural environmental requires some special forms of consciousness and education as some persons are dangerously unaffected by these aesthetic values. The environment possesses values and most fundamentally aesthetic values, and this is why it is always our concern and interest for the environment to elicits the right pleasurable experiences. However, when the right experiences and values are not elicited, concerns are raised about the need for the environment to be protected and care for. Scholars and environmental activists have raised serious concern about the damage done to the natural environment in recent times. The activities of man have caused serious damage to the environment. Environmental crisis which range from air pollution, improper disposal of solid waste, soil pollution and the depletion of the ozone layer are major consequences of man's abuse and misuse of science and technology. (Amadi, “The consequences of Man's Abuse and Misuse of Scientific and Technological Feat”, 89) Industrialization and its products irretrievably affect the land surface, the seas, and the atmosphere of our planetary environment. The earth cries out for help. This is beautifully demonstrated by Galindo Galindo et al thus:

Over the last thirty years or so, the escalated worsening of physical environments has reached an alarmed level that not only gave rise to a political-social outcry on the urge to legislations at identifying and managing public landscape resources ...but also raised the public awareness about the value of aesthetic appreciation of one's environment, be it natural or human-constructed.
(1)

This public outcry has led to the call for the protection of the earth for obvious reasons. The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), by name Earth Summit, conference held at Rio de Janeiro, Brazil between June 3-14, 1992), to reconcile worldwide economic development with protection of the environment was a case in point. This has even led some scholars to attribute ethical and moral value to the environment, arguing that the environment is a moral person with rights and responsibilities. Arnold Berleant argues that the reason why we exploit the earth and the natural environment is because we tend to separate and segregate the earth from ourselves. According to him:

... we cannot wholly objectify nature. We cannot segregate nature or separate ourselves from environment. We are, flesh and bone, the product of the environment with which we coexist. Not only our activities but our thoughts and feelings are profoundly influenced by climate, topography, wind, and water conditions. We are, in other words, inseparable from our environment. (Berleant, What is Environmental Aesthetics? 2)

Berleant argues that the only remedy for this attitude towards the environment is to see the environment as indistinguishable from us. This is why we should speak of environment rather than "the" environment. According to him, when we talk about "the" environment, we tend to treat it as something independent of us, as a separate place. It is as if we could objectify environment, give it limits-- circumscribe it. On the other hand, speaking simply of "environment" according to him recognizes that environment is indeterminate, that its extent varies with the situation. Moreover and most importantly, "environment" is not "out there" but includes me as an active part.

Just like everyone who has concern for the protection of the natural and manmade environment, and just like every other environmental activist whose major duty is to seek for the protection of the environment, it is our assertion that a good aesthetic education and right aesthetic attitude is instrumental in the preservation and protection of our natural and human-made environments in Nigeria and the world at large. The need to apply aesthetic theories to the environment arises from the fact that human actions have contributed to the destruction of the environment. Humans as an aesthetic being have exploited the environment. We exploit our environment because we think that the environment is separate from us. If the environment is part and parcel of us, there is need to protect it.

The Significance of Aesthetic Education on Environmental Degradation in Nigeria

The standards of scientific thought and modern technology have come to dominate the lives of individuals. Pedagogical models have warned us against trying to pay too much attention to rationalism and emphasizing the development of the affective domain of the young mind. All the critical periods in the history of philosophy have warned about the dominance of reason over the senses. This is why Olga Denac evidently demonstrates the importance of artistic and aesthetic education thus: At the point when the child's or young

person's development of integrity becomes unbalanced, aesthetic education is seen as the “last resort” in the reestablishment of harmony among the individual areas of the child's personality. (1714-1719).

According to him, modern pedagogy teaches that each child should have the opportunity to develop his abilities to observe, experience, evaluate and create that which is beautiful. This can only be achieved if we offer children a healthy living environment and an active artistic and aesthetic education. Olga went on to recommend that the educational curriculum should be structured to accommodate the other domain of man's developmental stages to include the aesthetic. This is because according to her:

Every child needs planned, aesthetic education in order to influence the experiencing, feeling and enjoying of beautiful things as a counterbalance to our currently rationalized world. Since the contemporary school strives for the development of professional knowledge and skills on the basis of intellectual actions, while (at the same time) neglecting other dimensions of the child's personality (emotions, feelings, etc.), it is one of the most important tasks of the education of children and young people to develop the ability to enjoy art and beauty, and in one's inner and outer life to act in accordance with a sense of proportion, harmony and beauty. (1714-1719)

Plato for instance regarded aesthetic education as an indispensable element for the upbringing or training of man in the ideal society even though he was quite antagonistic to mimetic arts. Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805) equally observed that pedagogical goals could also be achieved through aesthetic education. He thus emphasizes the educational functions of the aesthetic in art which will eventually cultivate in him a genuine sense of humanity. Herbart recognizes the danger of rational unilaterality in education of the child. And he is of the opinion that harmony and balance in the child's personal integrity can be maintained through aesthetic culture. Thomas Read maintains that the fundamental mistake of all educational system lies in their constant focus on rationalism. He insists that the educational curriculum should be expanded to include the aesthetic so as to create a perfect harmony in the life of the individual (Gilbert & Kuhn, 1967).

The recognition of aesthetic qualities and appreciation of aesthetic experiences require the development of our aesthetic consciousness. This is because, even when these natural aesthetic experiences are littered all over us, experience has equally revealed that not all human beings are affected by this experience. Some persons are often and always unaffected by the way their environment feels even when the environment is suffused with aesthetic and artistic value. The environmental degradations we feel all around us today is as a result of lack of aesthetic consciousness and wrong aesthetic attitude. The question fundamental at this juncture is: why are we not affected by the way our environment looks? Arnold Berleant has a ready-made answer to this question:

Appreciation can be developed. Some environmental values are so direct that it takes no more than noticing them to evoke appreciation, although such attention is not automatic and can be enhanced by focusing our attention. It is easy to be environmentally blind and simply unaware of the quality of light or the temperature of the air. We may fail to notice the décor of a room or the color of a person's eyes. Having these pointed out can make us aware of environmental values that, of course, are everywhere and always present to a receptive sensibility. (Berleant, *What is Environmental Aesthetics* 4)

To appreciate and experience aesthetic qualities, we have to develop, cultivate and nurture our aesthetic consciousness. This is because it takes only a conscious attitude and a correct disposition for the right aesthetic experience to be felt. The questions that call to mind at this juncture is: How can one develop the right aesthetic attitude towards nature or the natural environment? Or to join Yuriko Saito and ask: Is there a correct Aesthetic appreciation of nature? Scholars argue that just as some appreciations of art are aesthetically more appropriate than others, so there are more or less aesthetically proper interpretations of natural objects. Kendall Walton lists the following categories as the appropriate features for the appreciation of the work of art. These include: the condition of standard features, the condition of aesthetic pleasure, the condition of the artist's intention, the condition of societal recognition and the condition of generic origin (104-105). According to him, works of art are interpreted based on these conditions and categories. While some scholars are of the view that all the conditions outlined above are appropriate for the aesthetic appreciation of natural objects, others claim that some conditions do not always apply to the environment and the natural objects. According to Allen Carlson, while other categories may apply to natural objects and to the environment, the conditions of the artist's intention and societal recognition are not inappropriate and inapplicable in the aesthetic appreciation of nature. The various traditions or categories for the aesthetic appreciation of nature include: the formalist/picturesque category, historical category, literary category and naturalist category or scientific category. Even while all these categories are outlined as the various aesthetic conditions for the appreciation of natural environment, some of these scholars who belong to this school of thought argue that the most appropriate aesthetic appreciation of nature is the one which incorporates our scientific knowledge concerning nature. This school of thought can be generally called aesthetic cognitivism. They claim that scientists and naturalists can best help develop in us an aesthetically appropriate attitude toward nature. Saito captures the general orientation of the cognitivist theory thus:

to appropriately appreciate [natural] objects or landscapes . . . aesthetically . . . it is necessary to perceive them in their correct categories. This requires knowing what they are and knowing something about them. In general, it requires the

knowledge given by the natural sciences. (90)

Cognitive approaches have the assumption that it is central to have information and knowledge about a topic matter or object in order to be able to appreciate it. One cognitive approach to the aesthetic appreciation of natural environments for example stresses natural history, biology and geology as central. Knowledge from these scientific disciplines is seen to be central in order to appropriately aesthetically appreciate a natural environment. According to Connie Svabo and Kathrine Ekelund, "cognitive approaches cluster around the conviction that information is central for appreciation." (3) This school of thought argues that aesthetic education concerning nature should incorporate the contributions made by scientists and naturalists so that our attitude toward nature will develop with ecological sensitivity (Saito 35). Scholars who belong to this school of thought predicated their argument on the ground that philosophical aesthetics suggest that the aesthetic appreciation of a work of art necessarily involves various cognitive considerations regarding its origin, art history, artistic medium, and some-times the artist's intention, as well as discriminating sensibilities. Without these considerations, it will be improper to determine the proper aesthetic category to experience the artistic objects and without demarcating the proper categories, our aesthetic appreciation of the work of art will be inappropriate, either because it misses some of the work's aesthetically significant aspects or because it attributes to the work an improper expressive quality (Saito 36). This can also be a valid argument for our aesthetic appreciation of our environment and natural objects. Knowledge of the sciences enriches our understanding of aesthetic experience. Carlson argues that the reason why other categories like the historical, literary or the formal categories are inappropriate for the aesthetic appreciation is because of "its ecologically and environmentally undesirable consequences: it is not effective in justifying the preservation of nature, a pressing issue especially today when the destruction and abuse of nature are causing serious environmental problems." (Saito 41) Carlson argues that if we are to save the environment from possible destruction, then a formalist appreciation of nature should be avoided because the destruction of nature cannot be seen as an aesthetic loss from a formalist perspective. Considered from a formalist perspective, "a playground, a strip-mined landscape, or a factory, considered merely as colors, lines, and shapes, do not necessarily destroy the scenic beauty of the environment; moreover, at least in some cases they each can be shown to improve the sensuous surface of the environment. Thus, for Carlson, the aesthetic justification for preserving natural environment becomes inane when the aesthetic value of nature is considered in formalistic terms. The conflicts and contrast seen in the natural environment might be an aesthetic merits viewed from a formalist perspective. However, when it comes to appreciating an environment, overwhelming evidence indicates that we normally appreciate its unity of expression and consider contrasting or incongruous elements an aesthetic demerit. Most of the literature on our environmental perception and appreciation suggests that our appreciation of an environment, whether natural or man-made, is primarily directed toward its "character," "mood," "atmosphere," or "ambience."

In contrast to the cognitivist perspective on the aesthetic appreciation of nature, the non-cognitivist aesthetic appreciation of nature argues that "nature as an aesthetic object is not

as determinate as a work of art” and as such should incorporate a wider range of interpretations. The non-cognitivists do not give the same importance to information but also do not deny that information about an environment can contribute to appreciation, but they do not see information-based ways of relating as being the core of aesthetic appreciation. Instead these approaches give priority to for example emotion. A central non-cognitive approach is Arnold Berleant's aesthetics of engagement (Berleant 2004). This approach breaks with traditional models of aesthetic appreciation. It for example argues that phenomena such as disinterest and objectified and distant gazing are inadequate descriptors of aesthetic appreciation of nature and the natural environment. The advocates of non-cognitivist aesthetic appreciation of natural environment argue that humans are inseparable from the natural, built, and everyday environment that they inhabit. As such, the relationship between man, the environment and natural objects should be a reciprocal one; one that challenges according to Matthew Auer, “the subject (observer)—object (environment) dichotomy”. This perspective is closely linked with the moralist perspective of the aesthetic appreciation of artistic and aesthetic objects and natural environments. According to this perspective especially as concerns the aesthetic appreciation of nature, the environment has some moral worth, as such should be treated as one.

Conclusion

There is a general concern for the protection of the earth from possible annihilation. Human activities have affected the normal and natural functioning of the earth. Thus, the earth cries out for more moral concern towards it. Environmental activists both from the wings of ethics and aesthetics have devoted much attention to the protection of the earth and have offered palpable solution to the preservation of the environment. This essay argues that the destruction of the environment and the consequent environmental degradations that follow is a result of lack of proper aesthetic education and consciousness and general lack of proper aesthetic appreciation. Developing our aesthetic sensibility toward nature, therefore, can contribute to our comprehension of nature's workings and our appreciation of their value. The researchers have argued that both cognitive and non-cognitive aesthetic appreciation of nature offer insights for environmental aesthetics in a climate-changed world. However, the cognitive perspective of the aesthetic appreciation of the environment is most likely to succeed because it incorporates the contributions made by scientists and naturalists and by so doing, enriches our knowledge of the environment and its protection.

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