

ON THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CATEGORIES OF ARTWORKS AND NATURE

A Critique of Allen Carlson's 'Unified Aesthetics'

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This paper critiques Allen Carlson's attempt to explain the aesthetic appreciation of nature and art in a single theory called 'Unified Aesthetics'.¹ Carlson—a pioneer in environmental aesthetics—applies Kendall Walton's categorical thesis regarding artworks to nature. Walton asserts that we can make correct aesthetic judgments about artworks when we appreciate them under categories correctly applied to them. Carlson claims that we make appropriate aesthetic judgments of natural objects (or phenomena) only when we appreciate them under the correct categories, based on common sense and scientific knowledge. However, Carlson's adaptation faces two problems. First, the categories relevant to artworks and those relevant to the scientific aspects of nature differ in terms of 'standard,

¹ Carlson 2009, pp. 42–44.

variable and contra-standard properties'.² Second, aesthetic judgments of nature based on common sense and scientific categories are less objective than Carlson expects, because categories acquire different meanings in different cultures and languages. I conclude that Unified Aesthetics fails because categories of art and those of nature are different in terms of their origins and function. Appreciation of nature and art should be discussed under different frameworks, because nature is contiguous to our daily life but art is not.

1 Differences in Standard, Variable, and Contra-standard Properties

To clarify the first problem—that the categories relevant to art and nature differ—let us briefly review Walton's categorical thesis and Carlson's claims. Walton says that there are three groups of non-aesthetic (perceptual) properties in artworks: standard, variable, and contra-standard. Standard properties are those without which we cannot appreciate an artwork under a certain category.³ These properties do not play an important role in our aesthetic judgments, but they tend to render a work ordered, stable, and correct.⁴ Variable properties are those that are irrelevant to whether an artwork belongs in a specified category, but they play a presiding role in our aesthetic judgments.⁵ Contra-standard properties are those that tend to prevent us from appreciating a work under a certain category.⁶

To clearly understand these properties, consider Picasso's famous *Guernica*. If we categorise the work as 'French Impressionism', its shapes are contra-standard properties for that category. Thus, we feel

² The definition of these terms appears below.

³ Walton, p. 334.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 347–348.

⁵ Ibid., p. 339.

⁶ Ibid., p. 352.

it is awkward. However, they are standard properties within the category 'Cubism'. In this case the work is stable, and viewers can proceed to aesthetic judgments of *Guernica* by considering its variable properties such as composition or colour.

Walton posits four circumstances under which a work, *W*, is perceived within its correct category, *C*.⁷

- (i) The presence in *W* of relatively many features are standard with respect to *C*. Conversely, *W* has a minimum of contra-standard features for us under *C*.
- (ii) *W* is 'better', more interesting, aesthetically pleasing, or more worth experiencing when perceived in *C* than when perceived in alternative ways.
- (iii) The artist who produced *W* intended or expected it to be perceived as *C*, or thought of it as a *C*.
- (iv) *C* is established in and recognised by the society in which *W* was produced.⁸

These four circumstances guide aesthetic judgments by correctly categorising artworks. In positing these circumstances, Walton avoids strong relativism in aesthetic judgments of artworks. However, Walton thinks that his thesis is not adaptable to natural objects or phenomena because there are no correct categories for aesthetic judgments of nature. In short, according to Carlson, Walton takes an objectivist view towards aesthetic judgments of artworks and a relativist view towards those of nature.

By adapting Walton's theory to the aesthetic appreciation of nature, however, Carlson adopts an objectivist view of aesthetic judgments of nature. In this process the most important problem relates to Walton's circumstances (iii) and (iv), which are connected

⁷ These four circumstances are not necessary and/or sufficient conditions for categorizing artworks correctly. Walton himself says that there is no very precise or well-defined procedure for determining in which categories a work is correctly perceived. These circumstances serve only as one type of guideline (Walton, p. 357.)

⁸ See Walton, pp. 357–358. I summarise Walton's descriptions for the sake of brevity.

to the origins of artworks.⁹ Nature, of course, is not our creation; thus, we cannot straightforwardly apply circumstances (iii) and (iv) to its aesthetic appreciation. Walton insists that we cannot aesthetically judge artworks correctly if we do not know about their origins and that aesthetic appreciation of nature is analogous to appreciating artworks of which we know neither how they are produced nor who produced them.

Carlson rethinks this point: 'In general, we do not produce, but rather discover, natural objects and aspects of nature. Why should we therefore not discover the correct categories for their perception?'¹⁰ For Carlson, discovering the correct categories of nature does not mean simply finding them. It means understanding what nature is and how it has attained its present appearance. According to Carlson, these categories are based on common sense and scientific knowledge. In the case of artworks, categories deriving from the origins of the works are devices for interpreting features they have. Carlson claims that common sense and scientific categories can play the same role because such categories are related to the process of discovery. Thus, he claims that applying common sense and scientific categories can lead to appropriate aesthetic appreciation of nature.

However, I do not think this analogy is successful. Carlson perhaps misunderstands Walton's anxiety over applying his theory to nature. As Brian Laetz points out:

...if Carlson and his followers want to resist nature-relativism, it will not suffice just to say that natural entities should be viewed under scientific categories, because they belong to them. On my interpretation, Walton's concern is not that we cannot identify categories, including scientific ones, that natural items belong to, but rather that it is not clear what reason we have for privileging one of these as the correct category—the category

⁹ Walton, p. 364.

¹⁰ Carlson 1981, p. 21.

that actually helps determine its aesthetic character.¹¹

Carlson interprets 'correct categories' as the categories to which natural objects (or phenomena) ontologically belong. However, Laetz has another interpretation of this phrase. For Walton, according to Laetz, correct categories are privileged in determining the aesthetic character of objects. However, Laetz asserts that common-sense and scientific categories of nature have no aesthetic privilege because a natural object can belong to several common-sense and scientific categories, none of which is the only aesthetically correct category.¹² Therefore, we cannot attribute aesthetic privilege to common-sense or scientific categories.

Laetz's interpretation of Walton's theory is a valid critique of Carlson. At first glance Carlson can perhaps answer Laetz by raising the following point: the more scientifically accurate category has greater aesthetic privilege among multiple common-sense/scientific categories because a more correct categorization makes nature more beautiful. However, if Carlson replies to Laetz in this way, the analogy between categories of art and of nature collapses through the mechanism of scientific categorization.

I think the mechanism of scientific categories is to subsume natural things with the same appearance under one category. If this is so, the standard, variable, and contra-standard properties of scientific categorizations differ from those of artworks. For example, consider *Guernica* once again. On Walton's account, its status as a masterpiece of Cubism depends on the excellence of its variable properties (e.g. composition, colours, forms) once the work is correctly categorised as 'Cubism'. Variable properties are important in aesthetic judgments. If *Guernica* had too many standard properties and few salient variable properties, it might be judged as a mediocre Cubist painting. In sum, artworks can have a certain amount of variable properties under their categories. Categories of artworks

¹¹ Laetz, p. 300.

¹² Ibid.

allow us to make aesthetic judgments by comparing things that belong to the same category.

Now, let us discuss common sense and scientific categories. Working towards a more accurate scientific categorization, scientists find common properties (standard properties) among varied natural objects or phenomena. The more specific the categorization, the fewer differences (variable properties) remain. For example, if we categorise a dandelion under 'flower,' it has many variable properties. If we categorise it specifically as 'dandelion,' we find fewer variable properties. If the most specific category is, as Carlson says, aesthetically privileged, we may make aesthetic judgments about dandelions based on standard properties because fewer variable properties remain under 'dandelion.' For categories of artworks, a certain number of variable properties can be a basis for aesthetic judgments comparing things that belong to the same category. The more accurate scientific categories are, the less variable properties will remain for aesthetic judgments. Thus, we may not compare things that belong to the same category under the most scientifically accurate categories. In this respect they are essentially different from categories of art.

Glenn Parsons, who agrees with Carlson though revises his statement to some extent, proposes another strategy: correct categories are "scientific categories in which it [the object] truly belongs and which maximise the aesthetic appeal."¹³ Supporting this statement, Parsons reconsiders the importance of Walton's circumstance (ii).¹⁴ He uses the Venus flytrap as an example. The flytrap's jaw-like features are contra-standard for flowers, and if we see it as a 'flower,' we may appreciate it as grotesque. However, such features are standard for the category 'carnivorous plant,' and by seeing the Venus flytrap as such we appreciate it as harmonious.

Which categories are correct for aesthetically appreciating the Venus flytrap? According to Parsons, we can choose one that

¹³ Parsons, p. 292.

¹⁴ Carlson doesn't admit the importance of (ii). He claims that it is not a constructive element of correctness of categories (See Carlson 1981, p. 27.)

maximises the beauty of the object. That is, ‘carnivorous plant’ is a more accurate category than ‘flower’ because it permits an aesthetically better assessment of the Venus flytrap. However, Parsons’ revision of Carlson’s statement is unsuccessful in terms of supporting Unified Aesthetics because of Parsons’ intuition that aesthetic judgments of nature should always be aesthetically positive.¹⁵ The analogy to art collapses because artworks can be judged as aesthetically unimportant or mediocre. Neither Carlson nor Parsons successfully constructs an analogy with art in terms of categories.

However, I don’t deny that those categories that are more scientifically accurate can be relevant to the aesthetic appreciation of nature. Consider roses, instead of dandelions. In the case of a rose, ‘rose’ would be a more scientifically accurate category than ‘flower’. We often hold exhibitions of roses and compare their variable properties under the category ‘rose.’ However, I think even in this case being scientifically accurate is not the most important factor. Rather, the reason why we use ‘rose’ for our aesthetic judgments of those flowers depends on our culture. Compared to other flowers, roses are frequently admired and criticised in terms of slight differences from others. This cultural practise makes ‘rose’ a more important category than ‘flower.’

2 Differences in Objectivity

Now for the second problem—i.e., common sense and scientific categories are not objective bases for aesthetic judgments in the way that categories of artworks are. Carlson claims we can make some aesthetically objective judgments regarding nature based on common sense and scientific knowledge.¹⁶ However, in contrast to categories of artworks, common sense and scientific categories do

¹⁵ Parsons intends to defend Carlson’s positive aesthetic statement: all virgin nature is aesthetically good.

¹⁶ Cf. Carlson 2009, pp. 46–49.

not provide an objective basis for aesthetic judgments. I refer to common sense categories to support this claim.

Carlson defines common-sense categories as ‘the normal classifications that we employ in our common sense conceptualization of the world,’¹⁷ and says that, ‘scientific knowledge is simply an extension of common knowledge.’¹⁸ Carlson finds this kind of categorization more universal than categorizations tied to specific cultures (historical, literary, or mythological). According to him, this categorization can lead us to more objective aesthetic judgments.¹⁹

However, this claim can be doubted, for even the names of common sense categories differ according to the meanings set by cultural contexts. As Emily Brady says: “it may be the case that common (and even more local vernacular) names for flora and fauna originate in conversations about the aesthetic or other qualities of individual plants and animals.”²⁰ Brady argues that local knowledge can be a type of common-sense knowledge—knowledge ‘based in the experience of a place and local practices in relation to the land’.²¹ In her example, the name ‘Queen Anne’s Lace’ derives from a lacy appearance. It also can be called ‘cow parsley’ because it grows in or near pastures. This example indicates that local images are important.

More broadly speaking, common-sense categories differ according to cultures. Consider the case of ‘jellyfish’. In English, the term means ‘a fish that resembles jelly’. In Japanese jellyfish is called ‘海月’ (pronounced ‘ku-ra-ge’), meaning ‘the moon of sea’. Thus, Japanese viewers aesthetically appreciate ‘jellyfish = 海月’ by categorizing it as a creature that resembles a moon in the sea. In this way, even common categories are less universal or objective than Carlson hopes. At the very least, common-sense categories have

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 111.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 112.

¹⁹ Cf. Ibid., p. 51.

²⁰ Brady, p. 184.

²¹ Ibid.

different meanings in different cultures. Moreover, I think this argument is valid for scientific categories because we cannot delineate common-sense categories from scientific categories using Carlson's definition. Insofar as no border is possible between them, the names of scientific categories are also derived from our culture. For example, on Carlson's definition, names of specific types of jellyfish (e.g. box jellyfish) may be names of scientific categories and maintain a relation to everyday terminology.

Thus, we cannot avoid a degree of cultural relativism in the aesthetic appreciation of nature. This situation is unlike that of appreciating artworks. Japanese viewers can make appropriate aesthetic judgments regarding *Guernica* by learning about Cubism, and Europeans can make judgments regarding Kathushika Hokusai's prints by learning about about *ukiyo-e*. However, the meanings of jellyfish or 海月 are influenced by culturally determined perspectives on nature, which are more difficult to acquire than different perspectives on art.

This difference may arise because nature is contiguous with everyday life, whereas artworks are usually not. Admittedly, many genres of art provide counter examples for my claim. Public art and environmental art are two such genres; relational art and community art may be even stronger counter examples. These artworks enter the spaces we live in, or even directly influence our everyday life. However, Carlson considers aesthetic appreciation of nature to be analogous to that of traditional artworks, so here I consider traditional artworks alone (or works following the conventions of traditional artworks).

Traditional artworks are separated from our life conventionally or institutionally. They are exhibited in museums. However, it is more important that we understand their ontological status or features according to the conventions of the art world. In other words, we apply frameworks different from those that capture our daily life. If we learn these frameworks, we can appreciate artworks external to our own culture in appropriate ways. However, nature is contiguous with our lives, and names of common-sense categories are generated

from it, as Brady has suggested. Their names reflect our perspectives on nature, which differ among cultures. In other words, we use frameworks that capture our daily life when we appreciate nature; that is, our perspectives on nature coincide with our everyday lives, and we cannot easily change these, for they may depend on where we grew up or live.

As a result, we cannot make aesthetic judgments as objectively as Carlson wishes, even given more precise knowledge about nature. Cultural relativism appears to be unavoidable.

3 Conclusion

The two objections I have presented indicate that categorizing artworks and categorizing nature are markedly different undertakings despite their similarities. The differences defy a unified theory that explains aesthetic appreciation of both artworks and nature by employing categories. Allen Carlson's attempt to do so fails to yield a unified theory of aesthetics.

Indeed, we perceive natural phenomena within common-sense and scientific categories, and we can appreciate them in the sense that we know them as objects of appreciation. However, I do not accede entirely to Carlson's claim, and I think we must reconsider this idea by more carefully attending to their differences.

We should not rely on a unified theory to explain the appreciation of art and nature, as we usually appreciate nature and artworks in different ways. We can select other theories to explain our appreciation of nature by considering this fact. In particular, my second objection to Carlson highlights an important difference between artworks and nature. The relationship to everyday life is especially important for theories that confront the aesthetic appreciation of nature or the environment. Within our daily environment, objects of appreciation are not disconnected from our daily lives. We appreciate them not as 'viewers' but as ourselves,

much as one may appreciate her hometown as a resident but London as a traveller.²²

Carlson thinks that people with sufficient scientific knowledge can be experts when it comes to the aesthetic appreciation of nature, as art critics are. However, that his analogy is dependent on categories is problematic. Rather, we appropriately appreciate nature from the perspective of our own cultural background. Admitting this intuition will dismiss his unified theory in aesthetics.

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²² See Sparshott, p. 12.

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