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Wilderness, the Wild, and Aesthetic Appreciation

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Wilderness, the Wild, and Aesthetic Appreciation

Wild nature is a source of wonder and inspiration in part because of its aesthetic value. This paper gives an account of the aesthetic value of wilderness and argues that wild nature is especially likely to give rise to what it will call the transformative aesthetic experience. This account satisfies three criteria John Fisher suggests for a good account of nature's aesthetic value that might provide reasons for preservation. First, it retains a credible connection with canonical aesthetic theory. Second, it allows us to make a general distinction between our appreciation of nature and art. Third, it avoids the 'the human intervention' or 'positive value' dilemma.¹ It explains what is especially important aesthetically about undeveloped nature, nature that is free from human intervention, without making 'the appreciation of nature in mixed and influenced environments inexplicable.'²

*Wilderness, the Wild, and Aesthetic Appreciation*³

I. Introduction

Wild nature is a source of wonder and inspiration in part because of its aesthetic value. This paper gives an account of the aesthetic value of wilderness and argues that wild nature is especially likely to give rise to what it will call the *transformative aesthetic experience*. This account satisfies three criteria John Fisher suggests for a good account of nature's aesthetic value that might provide reasons for preservation or conservation (henceforth *preservation*).⁴ First, it retains a credible connection with canonical aesthetic theory. Second, it allows us to make a *general* distinction between our appreciation of nature and art. Third, it avoids the 'the human intervention' or 'positive value' dilemma.⁵ It explains what is especially important aesthetically about undeveloped nature, nature that is free from human intervention, without making 'the appreciation of nature in mixed and influenced environments inexplicable.'⁶ The next section says a few words about wilderness and the wild. Section III sets out the account. Section IV explains how it allows us to make a *general* distinction between our appreciation of nature and art. Section V illustrates how the account allows us to avoid the positive value dilemma. Finally, section VI considers and responds to objections.

II. Wilderness, and the Wild

There is no clean distinction between wilderness and mixed or influenced environments. Rather, there is a continuum of influence and wilderness. So, this paper will reserve the terms 'wild nature,' 'wilderness,' or 'uninfluenced nature' for the extreme end of the spectrum. Pure wilderness would be made up only of things that were not the result of human influence and, especially, attempts to control - 'what takes place without the voluntary and intentional agency of man.'⁷ Air pollution from cars, then, is not wild as it is clearly a result (though unintended) of human attempts at controlling the energy resources of the world for transportation. Trimmed bushes, too, are attempts to shape nature into our vision of it, though they are much closer to wilderness. Unmanaged forests are as close to pure wilderness as we can get.

The idea of wild nature or wilderness is different than a more general conception of the *wild*. Objects are wild in this broader sense insofar as they fall in the realm between complete familiarity and utter strangeness; wild objects do not fit into our conceptual categories very easily, but they are objects for which we have such categories. Unlike ball bearings and many other human creations that -- for aesthetic

or practical reasons -- approximate a single ideal object, individual wild objects often have a unique form and ways of developing and changing over time.⁸

Wild, here, is used as a technical term. I cannot think of a better term that captures things in the middling-realm between that which is utterly ordinary and that which is simply incomprehensible. Be that as it may, the important point for this paper is just that *wild* objects do not fit into our conceptual categories very easily, but they are things for which we have such categories.

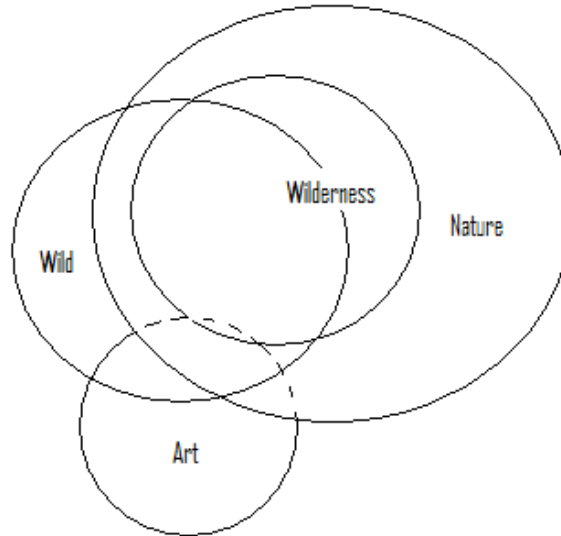
The idea of wild nature or wilderness is connected with this broader conception of the wild. Those things that are created free from influence and especially intentional attempts to control are usually wild in this sense. Perhaps the perception that something is outside the sphere of (at least easy) human control is essential to this conception of the wild. This may be explained by the fact that wild things fall in the realm between complete familiarity and utter strangeness.

The connection between wilderness and the wild in the broader sense is, however, contingent. What is wild to one person may not be wild to another. If someone who has spent his or her whole life living in a jungle visits a McDonalds in New York, that person may find it an extremely wild place. While, even if the average person in New York has never seen that McDonalds, they will probably fail to find it wild at all. What follows presupposes that most people do find the wilderness to be wild. It will suppose that, for most people, those things that are created free from influence and especially intentional attempts to control are *usually* wild.

On this account, art objects, like natural objects, can be more or less wild, though art objects will mostly be less wild than air and bushes which are not human creations. Art, since it is the result of human influence, will usually be wilder insofar as it is created indifferently, free from intentional attempts at control.⁹ So, many abstract paintings are, for instance, wilder than many highly realistic ones.

It is beyond this paper's scope, however, to defend the above claims about the relationship between art, wilderness, and wildness. Those who are not convinced by these claims can view the arguments that follow as conditional upon their turning out to be veridical. The paper's main contribution is to provide an account of wilderness' aesthetic value taking these observations as given. It will do this by arguing that wild objects are most likely to give rise to the transformative aesthetic experience. On the assumption that wild nature is more likely to be wild than art, it should follow that wilderness is more

likely to give rise to the transformative aesthetic experience than less wild nature or art. Though nothing this paper will say will depend on the claim that all equally wild objects have the same aesthetic value. Other factors may be relevant as well. There may even be other kinds of aesthetic value in nature (and art). The diagram below illustrates some of the relationships this paper will suggest obtain. The line between art, wilderness, and nature is dotted. For this paper says nothing about whether some parts of nature can be (e.g. found) art.



The next section will start by setting out this paper’s account of transformative aesthetic value. It argues that the account retains a credible connection with aesthetic theory by illustrating it with several canonical examples of aesthetic objects.

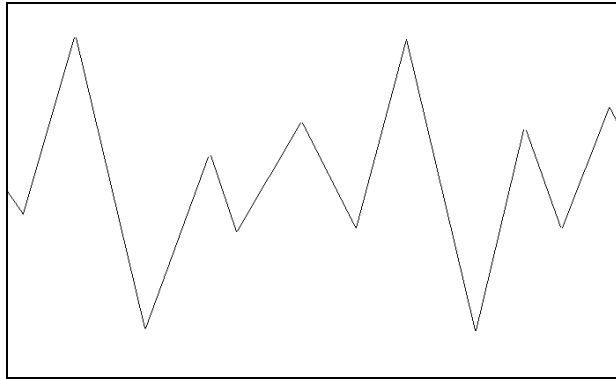
III. The Transformative Aesthetic Experience and Canonical Aesthetic Theory

In “Representation in Painting and Consciousness” Keith Lehrer argues that representation reconfigures or reforms experience and leads to what this paper will call the *transformative* aesthetic experience. Lehrer suggests that in order to grasp the content of an aesthetic object one must attend to its sensory surface without trying to control or shape the experience into what one wants it to be. It can also help to take appropriate contextual features of the object into account. When one does this, Lehrer argues, the content of an artwork allows ‘something like a gestalt phenomenon that occurs in... perception...’.¹⁰

This paper will suggest that this re-patterning or transformation of experience is especially likely to occur in an aesthetic experience of wilderness. The reconfiguration transforms the content of the

aesthetic object and can also transform our experience of the world, model, or referent of the aesthetic object as we can come to see it in a new way.

Lehrer illustrates the transformative aesthetic experience with an example. Suppose that one is sick in a hospital after having heart surgery and is presented with the following picture as a get-well gift:



One might be inclined to think that it was a gag-gift. Suppose, however, one suddenly recognizes the artist as a famous Japanese painter of landscapes, or is told that this is a minimalist portrayal of the Appalachian Mountains. Then, the way that one sees the painting may change.¹¹ A similar reconfiguration, hopefully, happened in the reader's experience of the picture. Furthermore, if one is lucky enough to see the Appalachian Mountains after viewing the picture, the way that one views the model for this particular drawing may likewise be transformed.

Another good example is Dali's painting *Metamorphosis of Narcissus*.¹²



<http://funwavs.com/posters>

Most people find that while attending to the figures in the foreground they come to see a person or a hand with an egg and flower. The title of the painting helps bring about this transition. For, according to Greek mythology Narcissus fell in love with his own reflection in a pool. He remained by the pool but was unable to embrace his own image, so the gods immortalized him as a flower. Yeats' *Men of Destiny*, too, may serve as a particularly useful illustration. Figures emerge from the background when one attends carefully to the sensory content of the painting.



<http://www.artofeurope.com/jackyeats/jac3.htm>

In the case of nature, the transformative aesthetic experience may often be sublime. Looking at a tall tree, I may not at first see the whole thing. When I realize it is a tree, I may make the shift from looking at its lower half or its upper half independently, to seeing it all at once, and have the transformative experience: I may come to feel my size in relation to it. I may feel small compared to the tree, or I may feel that the tree is great compared to me. When this shift is large enough, many have called it an experience of the sublime and have associated this kind of experience with natural objects.

The Grand Canyon provides a good example of a wild part of nature that is likely to bring about a sublime transformative experience. Once one recognizes that one is looking at a crack in the Earth, the canyon's sheer size and depth is enough to bring about this experience.

When one reflects on the natural history of the canyon and compares it to the history of man, one may have an even more transformative experience that is also, in part, conceptual. For the Grand Canyon has a way of making us appreciate the proportion of things. The canyon was formed by erosion and one can see the tiny ribbon of water from the cliffs' edge that is the mighty Colorado River. The river has curled its

way through millennia of rock, the wind has helped. It is possible to study the exposed layers of sediment, red, blue, green, and brown to unveil history. About 10,000 years ago people were living in the canyon and it was home to hunter-gathers until about 1000 BC. Then Pueblo tribes settled in the area. They grew corn and left their homes in the national park. Today the Hualapai and Navajo nations live along the rims of the canyon. The Canyon also contains many minerals and silently sleeping tales of lead, zinc, asbestos, and copper mining misadventures. Considering that each of these stories, and even the sum of them all, is but a blink the history of the canyon gives us a sense of our smallness and the vastness of time, as well as space. The canyon is, as Paiutes said, “The Mountain Lying Down.”¹³

Or consider an example from nature that illustrates how the transformative aesthetic experience can have both cognitive and sensual components. To use an example from R.W. Hepburn’s “Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty”, walking on a wide plain of sand and mud one may have a sense of “wild, glad emptiness”.¹⁴ Later, if one realizes one is walking on a tidal basin, and the tide is out, one may see one’s self “as walking on what is for half the day sea-bed. The wild glad emptiness may be tempered by a disturbing weirdness”.¹⁵ As Hepburn suggests, “an aesthetic view of an object will strive to shake free from conventional and deadening conceptualizings”.¹⁶

That said, when one has an aesthetic experience, the sensory experience is *essential* to the *content* of the aesthetic experience. The transformative experience may be primarily conceptual or emotional but the relevant kind of experience has an essentially sensual component. A change in sensation is necessary for one’s experience to be truly aesthetic, but that may be the result of, or may result in, greater cognitive understanding.

Furthermore, one must attend to the sensory surface of an object to have an aesthetic experience of it.¹⁷ One cannot have an aesthetic experience of an object without using one’s senses. The key to attending to the sensory information is not that one needs to attend only to the object’s intrinsic properties,¹⁸ but it helps to experience the object without trying to control the experience or shape it into what one would like it to be.¹⁹ As the instructions for some of the most famous “Magic Eye” gestalt illusions suggest, one should focus on the surface or reflection of the image and relax to let the shift happen. If one tries to control the image as it starts to emerge it may fade, though it takes practice to develop the capacity for this kind of aesthetic appreciation.

Contextual features of aesthetic objects can also help bring about a transformative aesthetic experience. Contextual features are, as Peggy Brand puts it, ‘nonexhibited, relational properties’ without which it may be ‘impossible to fully appreciate or understand the object’.²⁰ Unlike intrinsic features of an object, they are external and extrinsic. Sometimes we have to do more than establish cognitive contact with the world via perception, in order to attain a full and deep aesthetic experience. Although it rarely helps to try to shape or control the aesthetic experience, our aesthetic appreciation ‘is in many cases a function of our sensitivity to the broader contexts – artistic, stylistic, historical, and cultural...’.²¹ In fact, the aesthetic experience may only arise when one attends to the context of the aesthetic object.

The point that context is important for appreciating art is well rehearsed in the literature so does not require much defense.²² Consider just a few examples. Recall, for instance, that it was learning that the get well gift was a minimalist representation of mountains that was likely to change the way one viewed the drawing. Or consider *The Wretched of the Earth*; this acknowledged masterpiece about slavery and oppression in Algeria would be completely impotent in a world free from such oppression. Many literary and theatrical pieces are famous just because of the powerful way that they were able to capture and illuminate the cultural context of their creation. Nor has this been isolated to the genres of literature and theatre. Many musical and visual masterpieces have been appreciated as social commentary or religious expression, and it is widely held that such pieces give rise to an important aesthetic experience partly because of their cultural commentary, or how they are historically situated.

Context can also be relevant for appreciating nature. Learning about what went on in the Grand Canyon provides one example. Or consider an example from Aldo Leopold who explains how seeing cranes at a salt marsh can bring about a transformative experience, if one attends to the cranes and the marsh carefully and learns a bit about their history.

Yearly since the ice age it has awakened each spring to the clangor of cranes. The peat layers that comprise the bog are laid down in the basin of an ancient lake. The cranes stand, as it were, upon the sodden pages of their own history... An endless caravan of generations has built of its own bones this bridge into the future, this habitat where the oncoming host again may live and breed and die... our appreciation of the crane grows with the slow unraveling of earthly history. His tribe, we now know, stems out of the remote Eocene. The other members of the fauna in which he originated are long since entombed within the hills. When we hear his call we hear no mere bird. We hear the trumpet in the orchestra of evolution. He is the symbol of our untamable past, of that incredible sweep of millennia which underlies and conditions the daily affairs of birds and men.²³

Reflecting on what makes up the peat beneath the bog, one may see the marsh as made up of the bones of the birds and the birds as the kinds of things that are transformed into marsh. One may take comfort in the slow procession of natural change or view the birds as akin to a short season in the swamp's natural evolution. If one learns enough about ecology one may, like Leopold and some deep ecologists, even come to see the world as a community and ecosystems as deeply akin to living things.²⁴

IV. The Difference between Art and Nature and Connection with Canonical Aesthetic Theory

Contextual features provide one way of distinguishing between our appreciation of nature and art.²⁵ Contextual features add to our understanding of an object by introducing its origin, effects, social, historical, or psychological contexts.²⁶ While some contextual features influence both our appreciation of art and the environment, some only pertain to art and some only to the wild natural environment.²⁷ Part of the context of art objects is a context of *human* creation – the fact that it was created and the intentions of the artist influence its aesthetic value. The context of wild natural objects is the natural world or environment; the wilderness.²⁸ Such features are usually irrelevant to our appreciation of art objects.²⁹ Finally, even the way that one must appreciate context can be different for wild nature than for some art objects. Appreciating wild nature often requires integrating the experience of all of one's sensory modalities (listening to the birds while feeling the sun on one's skin etc.).³⁰ Rarely must one use *all* of one's sensory modalities to appreciate art objects (even in performance art, smell is usually unnecessary).

This does not entail that an aesthetic experience of art is categorically different from an aesthetic experience of nature. The differences between the aesthetic experiences art objects and natural objects produce are less pronounced than that. Still, this account allows us to make a *general* distinction between our appreciation of nature and art.

This paper's account should also retain a credible connection with aesthetic theory. It is composed of components from canonical aesthetic theory and has been illustrated with many canonical examples of aesthetic objects. This paper draws on a theory of representation defended by Keith Lehrer. There is also more than a hint of this kind of account R.W. Hepburn's work. Though, Lehrer's account has not been applied to the case of wilderness and Hepburn's account differs from this paper's account in some important respects.

Consider just a few ways Hepburn's account differs from this paper's account. Hepburn seems to think, for instance, that the paradigmatic aesthetic experience is not a case where someone sees an aesthetic object as something. He also seems open to allowing us to manipulate the aesthetic experience more than suggested in this paper's account. Hepburn writes that "when we contemplate a natural object, we may see it not as sand-dune or rock but simply as a coloured shape. If this is difficult, we can look at the world upside down, with our head between our legs".³¹ Though, he points out that "that is not to say that *all* interpretations, all 'seings as ...' are lapses to the non-aesthetic".³² We may have an aesthetic experience of a rock or dune precisely when we see it as a rock or dune for the first time instead of seeing just shapeless forms and colors or individual grains of sand. Finally, one could easily draw on other parts of Hepburn's lovely article to sketch a very different account of nature's aesthetic value. For, he points to many differences between our appreciation of art and nature. He points out, for example, that we are more involved in nature and interact with it differently than art and that we are more attached to it than art objects.

Still, Hepburn highlights some key features of the transformative aesthetic experience. He says that in experiencing nature we can "experience an expansion of the imagination" that changes our view of how the world really is.³³ Hepburn even emphasizes the importance of not trying to shape an aesthetic object into what we would like it to be in order to have a transformative experience and one can draw on his writing to explain why nature may be more likely to bring about this experience than art. Hepburn says though "we are *in* nature and a part *of* nature; we do not stand over against it as over against a painting on a wall"; we are in some way detached from it.³⁴ We are "not *using* nature, manipulating it or calculating how to manipulate it".³⁵ One is "both actor and spectator, ingredient in the landscape and lingering upon the sensations of being thus ingredient, rejoicing in their multifariousness, playing actively with nature, and letting nature, as it were, play with" one and one's sense of one's self.³⁶ To have the aesthetic experience one cannot just attend to "those features of a natural object or scene that most readily come together in a familiar pattern or which yield a comfortingly generalized emotional quality".³⁷ Hepburn also says that nature challenges our creativity because "a landscape does not minutely control the spectator's response to it".³⁸ Finally, Hepburn suggests that although we must deal with the fact that our experience of nature is not

as stable and determinate as our experience of art, nature offers amazing “unpredictable perceptual surprises”.³⁹

This paper might fruitfully be viewed as extending and cashing out one account of nature’s aesthetic value implicit in Hepburn’s article. Subsequent sections will argue that wilderness is more likely than other parts of nature (and art) to bring about a transformative aesthetic experience.

V. The Positive Value Dilemma and Reasons for Preservation

So far, this paper has given an account of the aesthetic value of nature that retains a credible connection with canonical aesthetic theory and allows us to make a *general* distinction between our appreciation of nature and art. But this paper must still show that this “transformative” aesthetic experience is most likely to be enabled by contact with wilderness. So, the rest of this paper will argue that wild objects (and, so, wild aspects of nature), are especially likely to re-pattern or reconfigure one’s experience and enable the transformative gestalt shift in perception. This will resolve the positive value dilemma: It will explain why wilderness is the more likely it is to bring about this kind of experience than mixed or influenced environments though we can have (often less intense) appreciation for mixed and influenced environments.

Making the case that the wildest objects are most likely to bring about the transformative aesthetic experience is also important, if the account is to provide a reason for preserving wilderness, in particular. Though there are also many other (e.g. prudential) reasons to preserve wilderness as well as mixed and influenced environments. The account already provides at least a *prima facie* reason for preserving many natural objects. For the content of the aesthetic experience of an object essentially involves that object. One can make paintings of paintings (or of trees) but this will not suffice to replace the aesthetic object. So, one can give the same argument for preserving wild objects that is sometimes given for preserving particular paintings. At least, if one has the conservative impulse to value the mere existence of valuable things, there is reason to preserve these wild objects.⁴⁰ Still the aesthetic value of wild objects is essential to this argument for the conservative impulse is only to value the existence of (in this case aesthetically) valuable things.⁴¹ The preceding line of thought tells against ecosystem restoration, for instance. If wild trees were replaced not with plastic ones but with other trees that (for that reason) were less wild, something would still be lost – the content of the aesthetic experience of the existing ecosystem. Perhaps in time, something

valuable would also be gained. The new ecosystem may eventually become just as wild a place. Still, the aesthetic value of the existing ecosystem may help justify the claim that wild things have mere existence value. Until there is something else of value around, at least those who feel the conservative impulse, have reason to preserve existing nature.⁴²

The rest of this section will try to make the case that it is the wildest objects that are most likely to bring about the transformative aesthetic experience. Recall the assumption this paper started with – that wild nature is more likely to be wild than modified nature or art. On this assumption, the following arguments should provide particularly strong reasons to value wild elements of nature. So, when we must decide whether we should replace something wild with something completely artificial, there are particular reasons for preservation.

Wild aspects of nature have aesthetic value qua wild, because one's experience of the uninfluenced natural world usually re-patterns or reconfigures one's experience in more ways than does an experience of nature that is brushed and pruned by human hands, forced into the mold of convention. The results of some cognitive attempts at human control – e.g. the utter destruction of war – can be completely transformative. Usually, however, we exercise cognitive control over our environment in ways that make it less likely to bring about this kind of experience. The wild aspects of nature because they are *wild*, free from this kind of control, take one into the unknown, something entirely new, not into consideration of the imprints left by humans. There are a few reasons to think this.

Consider first a, purely speculative, reason to think that wild nature is more likely to bring about a transformative experience than convention that derives from observation of aesthetic practice. Art schools do not often pick stereotypical fashion models for artists to look at.⁴³ Rather, the models that are chosen are wilder, they do not look like typical models brushed and primed in the usual way. It is the genuineness that is important to inspiration and creation. If typical fashion models were used, then the artist might well stay within the realm of the customary, the fashion magazines, the pornography, and the cultural stereotypes with which they are familiar. Perhaps it is the wild, unaffected models that inspire us and enable us to move away from convention rather than toward it. Experiencing the wild may encourage artists to see the world in new ways and seeing wild aspects of nature as wild may engender a unique re-patterning of experience. One may learn through these experiences how to see the world differently.⁴⁴

Despite this inspirational impact, wilderness is not the only way one can get reconfigurative aesthetic value. Good art works (especially upon their first discovery) may likewise fail to fit easily into our conceptual categories. Many conceptual and avant-garde art works are difficult to conceptualize. Some ‘profound’ and ‘sublime’ art is characterized as ‘beyond us’ and might, in that way, be transformative.

Some aesthetically powerful objects are wonderfully stylized and completely artificial, and some human art can give us wild experiences; convention can even take us toward wildness. It was Marilyn Monroe, for instance, (a woman fitting the western cultural ideal of beauty) who inspired wildness in De Kooning’s painting.⁴⁵



<http://www.usc.edu/schools/annenberg/asc/projects/comm544/library/images/435.html>

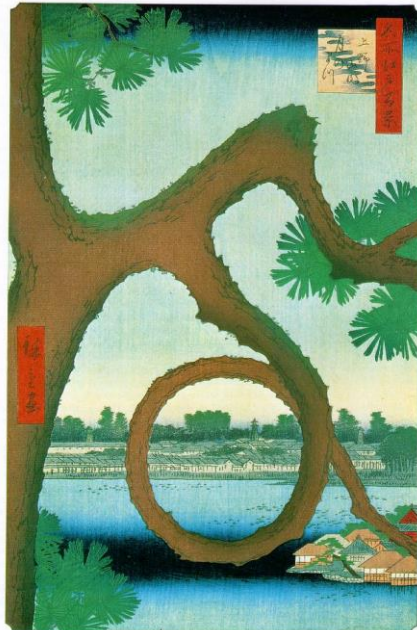
Or consider Gauguin’s work. Gauguin’s wild picture *Fatata Te Miti* was clearly inspired by Hiroshige’s work, and Hiroshige was, primarily, a conventional painter.



<http://www.artofeurope.com/gauguin/gau4.htm>

Fatata Te Miti portrays a deep appreciation of the wild inspired by convention.⁴⁶

The conventional and the wild can also function beautifully side by side, and even enhance each other. Consider, for instance, the work of Hiroshige himself: Coexisting along side the conventional objects in his picture *Pine like a Full Moon in Ueno Park*, is a truly wild tree.



<http://www.artchive.com/artchive/H/hiroshige/moonpine.jpg.html>

An exception can sometimes prove a rule.

Nevertheless, something would be lost without the wildness. Drawing conventional still lifes can be very important in helping students hone their skills of observation and imitation, and practice imitating the conventional may provide students with the time to perfect their technique. I believe, however, that doing so is not likely to inspire the students or change the way the students see things. The important point is not that the uninfluenced itself is necessarily an aesthetic ideal, but that it often enables the aesthetic experience in a unique way.

There are some reasons non-aesthetic reasons why one may fail to have a transformative aesthetic experience in the wilderness. It may be difficult to have such an experience, for instance, if one is extremely uncomfortable. The desert is beautiful at night but hard to endure on a mid-summer afternoon or if one has just fallen into a Saguaro cactus. The flies may be so distracting that one fails to attend to the red earth and pale green of Australia's sublime (if not beautiful) hills.

Nevertheless, at least in the absence of such confounding factors, wild nature is more likely to bring about the transformative aesthetic experience than modified nature (never mind most art). The playgrounds made for humans at the forests' edge may pale once one realizes they are not really wilderness. Even if one never knows that one is looking at a fake, one is still less likely to encounter things that take one away from the expected, the conventional, the post-card pictures of nature. Wilderness' transformative potential is usually greater than more mixed and influenced environments'.

In the absence of confounding factors, another reason wilderness is especially likely to engender the transformative aesthetic experience stems from this fact: To have a transformative aesthetic experience, it helps to attend to the object without trying to control the experience or shape it into what one would like it to be. Wild objects are harder to control. They do not fit into our conceptual categories as easily as many art works. So, they are more likely to bring about the transformative aesthetic experience than most art. On the assumption that wild nature is more likely to be wild than modified nature or art, wild nature is more likely to bring about the transformative aesthetic experience.

There is some psychological evidence that things that do not fall easily into our conceptual categories, but for which we have such categories, are most likely to bring about the gestalt shift in perception. For, there is evidence that it is neither the completely familiar nor unfamiliar which is most likely to bring about the shift. Consider first, how people respond to the completely unfamiliar.

Writing to John Locke in 1694, William Molyneux raised the following puzzle:

Suppose a Man born blind, and now adult, and taught by his touch to distinguish between a Cube, and a Sphere of the same metal, and nighly of the same bigness, so as to tell, when he felt one and t'other; which is the Cube, which the Sphere. Suppose then the Cube and Sphere placed on a Table, and the Blind Man to be made to see. Quaere, Whether by his sight, before he touch'd them, he could now distinguish, and tell, which is the Globe, which the Cube. Or Whether he Could know by his Sight, before he stretch'd out his Hand, whether he Could not Reach them, tho they were Removed 20 or 1000 feet from Him?⁴⁷

In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke said that experience would be necessary. Berkeley agreed, while Leibnitz, Lee, and Synge disagreed.⁴⁸

As it turns out, people who are first able to see late in life have trouble making sense of most of their visual experiences. The newly sighted cannot even perceive objects as objects. In *An Anthropologist on Mars*, Oliver Sacks explains the phenomenon. When the man called S.B. was first able to see he was “struck by how objects changed their shapes when he walked round them... He would look at a lamp post, walk round it, stand studying it from a different aspect, and wonder why it looked different and yet the same.”⁴⁹ Sacks suggests:

All newly sighted subjects, indeed, have radical difficulties with appearances, finding themselves suddenly plunged into a world that for them may be a chaos of continually shifting, unstable, evanescent appearances. They may find themselves completely lost in this flux of appearances, which for them is not yet securely anchored to a world of objects, a world of space.⁵⁰

Nor can the newly-sighted see the kinds of optical illusions that cause a gestalt shift in perception in normal subjects (even though some monkeys experience these shifts).⁵¹

Similarly, Sacks says that when “people who have lived their entire lives in a dense rainforest, with a far point no more than a few feet away, are brought into a wide, empty landscape, they may reach out and try to touch the mountaintops with their hands; they have no concept of how far the mountains are.”⁵² Young children, too, take a long time to learn to see objects.

Sometimes newly sighted subjects can experience the gestalt shift required to see things as objects by familiarizing themselves with their various dimensions. When another congenitally blind man regained his sight and went to the zoo he was unable to see the gorillas. But after exploring a life sized statue of a gorilla with his hands he reported being able to see them. Soon, the man collected toy objects of all sizes to explore with his hands, which helped him see many everyday objects.⁵³

What is perhaps more remarkable (though perhaps so obvious that I know of no one has found it worth remarking upon) is the fact that most of the time normal adults used to seeing objects as objects cannot see them any other way. We cannot see things as anything but unified objects.⁵⁴

It is not only sight that works this way. Those who are first able to hear later in life often “find themselves, at least initially, in a world of auditory chaos, or agnosia.”⁵⁵ While those of us who hear voices as voices, music as music, and so forth, cannot easily experience sound any other way.

Or, consider a less extreme example. At first, when people are given glasses that make the world appear upside down or sideways people can only see the world as upside down or sideways. Eventually, they can see the world as right side up. After weeks with the glasses, they can no longer see the world as upside down or sideways. Then, if they remove the glasses, the world appears to be sideways or upside down even without glasses.⁵⁶ The completely familiar, it seems, is as unlikely to bring about the gestalt shift as the completely unfamiliar.

Rather, it is plausible that the gestalt shift occurs most easily with wild objects that are not completely unfamiliar or completely conventional. For, wild objects just are those that fall in the realm between complete familiarity and utter strangeness. Again, this paper is assuming there is a contingent connection between wilderness and the wild and wild nature is usually wilder than art objects. So, wild nature is more likely than other natural objects and art to bring about this experience.

Most people have had some experience with parts of wild nature, we have seen wild trees and bushes, but rarely venture beyond the city to see the gnarled, twisting forests of untrimmed wilderness.⁵⁷ Most are relatively unfamiliar with the wilderness itself, though they are not as unfamiliar with the wild as those who have never seen or heard are with objects or voices. The psychological evidence suggests that it is in the realm between complete familiarity and strangeness, in the realm of wild(er)ness that people are most likely to experience the gestalt shift in perception that is essential to the transformative aesthetic experience.

If these arguments are right, they may help explain why we tend to find that our appreciation of natural environments increases with the number of wild elements they contain. I believe many people find more aesthetic value in golf courses than in parking lots, and more aesthetic value in nature reserves than in parks. If so, this paper may help explain this fact.

The preceding arguments do not give us a metric for all aesthetic value. There may be other sorts of objects with aesthetic value in mixed environments that natural ones lack, like glorious sculptures or designs. Some natural things may completely lack aesthetic value or have negative value. Furthermore, it seems false that it is *just* the number of wild things in a given area that increases that area's value. Both rarity and diversity probably have a role to play in enhancing our aesthetic appreciation, and some wild things may have more aesthetic value than others.

This paper has only tried to establish that wilderness, because it is wild, is especially likely to bring about the transformative aesthetic experience. Natural objects can be artifactualized in pleasant ways (as in Japanese gardens and parks).⁵⁸ Still, this section has argued that the wild elements of nature are especially likely to give rise to this kind of aesthetic experience.⁵⁹

Nature's transformative aesthetic value gives us (one) reason to preserve wilderness. This is so even if these other objects can give rise to different kinds of aesthetic experiences. We value a variety of different sorts of aesthetic experience. We would lose much of this value if many wild natural objects were destroyed. At least, if one values the mere existence of valuable things, this paper gives one reason to preserve wilderness.⁶⁰ Wild nature's aesthetic value is not necessarily enough to warrant preservation in a particular case of conflicting interests and values, but it counts for something.

VI. Objections and Responses

One might object that influenced environments have at least as much aesthetic value as wild ones. So, one might argue, our reasons for preserving non-natural things outweigh our reasons for preserving wild things. If this is true, more needs to be done to provide a basis for protecting the environment than simply appreciating its wild elements.

In order to ground this objection, however, one would have to provide an argument to the effect that the aesthetic value of influenced environments is at least as great as wilderness'. One must at least argue for one of the following propositions: 1) Influenced nature has a sort of value wild nature lacks and these values are commensurable, or 2) the aesthetic experience of influenced environments is at least as likely to yield transformative aesthetic value as the aesthetic experience of wild environments. Some influenced objects give rise to transformative aesthetic value. In light of the above arguments, however, there is little reason to think that influenced objects are as *likely* to yield transformative aesthetic value as

wild objects. Since most wild natural objects are wild, uncontrolled, unique, and have their own way of developing, they are more likely than most influenced objects to yield transformative aesthetic experiences. This gives us at least a *prima facie* reason to protect wild nature. So, if the objection is to go through, there must be another sort of aesthetic value in influence. Even if it is possible to give a convincing account of aesthetic value that is more applicable to influenced than wild environments, however, there is little reason to think that all value can be captured on a single quantitative scale. Not all value is substitutable, and this paper has explained this. The differences between aesthetic objects are qualitative. If a wild object is destroyed, the content of the aesthetic experience of that object is lost, for that aesthetic experience essentially involves that object. One can make paintings of paintings (or of trees) but this will not suffice to replace the aesthetic object. For, the content of a particular aesthetic object involves that object.

Another objection is that the above account cannot explain the reason why we value ecosystems. For, on this account, the content of the aesthetic experience involves sensory information, and one cannot have a sensory experience of most ecosystems. So, one might argue, the account of transformative aesthetic value cannot provide a reason to preserve ecosystems. This is particularly worrying because many environmentalists have found aesthetic value in ecosystems. In fact, one of the most famous quotes in the environmental ethics literature is Leopold's contention that 'a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and *beauty of the biotic community*. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.'⁶¹ Speaking of ecosystems, environmentalists as diverse as Bryan Norton, Henry Thoreau, and Aldo Leopold have argued that we should put 'faith in the power of observation and experience to transform worldviews.'⁶² So, any theory that cannot explain this value is inadequate.

The objection supposes however, that aesthetic appreciation is static. It is possible to avoid this worry as long as an aesthetic appreciation can contain a temporal dimension. Though one cannot view the whole of most ecosystems at once, the sensory content of an ecosystem can be processed over time. A temporal dimension of aesthetic experience is necessary for most aesthetic theories to be plausible. This is obvious as long as one is not fixated on the visual arts. A temporal dimension is necessary, however, even for appreciating paintings. Consider Vic Muniz's paintings of chocolate people.



http://www.renabranstengallery.com/Muniz_Descent.html

In order to see the people in this painting one must stand back away from the surface, but to see that the people are really made out of chocolate, one needs to get close to the surface. To appreciate works of art like the chocolate people one must experience the painting over time. Furthermore, it is necessary for any plausible theory of the aesthetic experience of wilderness to allow aesthetic experience to extend over time. For, it was already noted that wild objects are special, in part, because they develop in their own ways. To use an idea from Kate Rawles, wilderness has its own ethos of development or natural unfolding and this contributes to its aesthetic value.⁶³

The transformative account of aesthetic value may also help to arbitrate an important debate in environmental ethics. While some environmental ethicists have tried to extend the realm of rights to non-human individuals, others have argued that ‘extensionism is hopelessly atomistic and individualistic,’⁶⁴ the transformative account of aesthetic appreciation of nature may provide us with a way of seeing value in both individuals and ecosystems. It may provide a way to ‘combine the holistic view with individualistic considerations, taking each into account...’⁶⁵⁻⁶⁶ We value wilderness as the context of wild objects. Wild objects likewise make up the wilderness. By realizing this, one may learn to appreciate both the regional and global properties of the wild world because they are in part constitutive of our aesthetic experience of wild nature.

1 J. Fisher. 2001. 'Aesthetics,' in *A Companion to Environmental Philosophy*. D. Jamieson ed. Blackwell Publishers: Massachusetts, 275.

2 Ibid, 275. While this would be necessary to justify environmental preservation on the basis of aesthetic value alone, this paper will only argue that we have a reason to value wild nature.

3 Acknowledgments with-held.

4 One will see this as an argument for conservation if one only values the existence of things of aesthetic value because one cares about humans' experience. I will, however, follow Fischer in using the term preservation throughout as I think that it is enough to say I value beauty in the world.

5 Fisher, 'Aesthetics,' 275

6 Fisher actually claims that a good theory must be good at 'explaining why undeveloped nature is aesthetically superior to developed nature' Ibid, 275. While this would be necessary to justify environmental preservation on the basis of aesthetic value alone, I will only argue that we have a reason to value wild nature.

7 While this is the definition of 'wilderness' given in the 1964 Wilderness Act, see: M. Woods. 2001.

'Wilderness' in *A Companion to Environmental Philosophy*. D. Jamieson ed. Blackwell Publishers.

Massachusetts) it is also the definition of 'nature' given in: J. Mill. 1874. *Three Essays on Religion*. Longman. London. 3-65 and is cited as the most common sense 'nature' in K. Soper. 1995. *What is Nature?* Blackwell.

Oxford, 15. To avoid confusion, it bears repeating that I will use the term ‘wild nature,’ ‘wilderness,’ or ‘uninfluenced nature’ so that ‘nature’ can be used in its wider sense. For more on the idea of wilderness see: M. Oelschlaeger. 1991. *The Idea of Wilderness from Prehistory to the Age of Ecology*. Yale University Press. London. For discussion of the importance of wilderness in environmental ethics see E. Katz. 2002. ‘The Call of the Wild’ in *Environmental Ethics: What Really Matters, What Really Works*. D. Schmidtz and E. Willott eds. Oxford University Press. New York. For another account of the aesthetic value of wilderness see: Glenn Parsons. 2008. *Aesthetics and Nature*. Continuum Press. London.

8 This sort of account may also provide a way to distinguish our aesthetic appreciation of organic and inorganic nature although this is a place for fruitful further research. For motivation see Glenn Parsons. 2004. ‘Natural Functions and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Inorganic Nature.’ *British Journal of Aesthetics*. Vol. 44, No. 1: 44-56.

9 E. Hargrove. 2002. ‘Carlson and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature,’ in *Philosophy and Geography*. No 2: 213-223.

10 K. Lehrer. 2004. ‘Representation in Painting and Consciousness,’ in *Philosophical Studies*. 117, 3.

11 Before seeing the picture as a picture of mountains it might enhance one’s appreciation of EKG machines. The important point is that the transformative aesthetic experience involves seeing aesthetic objects differently, and this transformation can sometime be initiated by contextual information.

12 These examples were suggested to the author by Lehrer in conversation.

13 Arizona Leisure. 2010. “Grand Canyon History” Available at: <<http://www.arizona-leisure.com/grand-canyon-history.html>>.

14 R.W. Hepburn. 1966. ‘Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty,’ in *British Analytical Philosophy*, B. Williams and A. Montefiore (ed.), Routledge and Kegan Paul. London. 295.

15 Ibid

16 Ibid

17 This is part of what Kant had right; one needs to attend to what one is experiencing to have an aesthetic experience rather than trying to shape or control the experience, and as noted above, this can help explain why wild things can be especially powerful as aesthetic objects.

18 The term ‘disinterested’ has been used in many different ways but nothing here hangs on the use of that particular term. For discussion, see: Norman Kreitman. 2006. “The Varieties of Aesthetic Disinterestedness.” *Contemporary Aesthetics*. Available at:

<<http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=390>>.

19 Yuriko Saito. 2007. *Everyday Aesthetics*. Oxford University Press. Oxford. Esp. Ch. 3.

20 P. Brand. 1993. ‘Feminism in Context: A Role for Feminist Theory in Aesthetic Evaluation.’ *Contemporary Philosophy of Art: Readings in Analytic Aesthetics*, J. Bender and H. Blocker eds. Prentice Hall. New Jersey, 116.

21 Ken Walton. 2004. 'Categories of Art.' *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art. The Analytic Tradition*. Peter Lamarque & Stein Haugom Olsen eds. Blackwell Philosophy Anthologies. Massachusetts.

22 The contextual component of this account has deep roots in aesthetic theory as many aestheticians including Ken Walton, George Dickie, Marcia Eaton, Peggy Brand, and Arthur Danto stress the importance of context in evaluating art. These authors have argued that a crucial dimension of aesthetic appreciation can be found only by considering aesthetic objects in context. Dickie, for instance, claims that 'Some poems simply are or contain social criticism, and a complete reading must not fail to notice this fact.' G. Dickie. 1993b. 'The Myth of the Aesthetic Attitude,' in *Contemporary Philosophy of Art: Readings in Analytic Aesthetics* J. Bender and H. Blocker eds. Prentice Hall: New Jersey, 378. For more on context see: Walton, 'Categories of Art.' Also see: A. Danto. 1993. 'Aesthetic Responses and Works of Art,' in *Contemporary Philosophy of Art: Readings in Analytic Aesthetics* J. Bender and H. Blocker eds. Prentice Hall. New Jersey. Also see: G. Dickie. 1993a. 'Instrumental Cognitivism,' in *Contemporary Philosophy of Art: Readings in Analytic Aesthetics* J. Bender and H. Blocker eds. Prentice Hall. New Jersey.

23 Aldo Leopold. 1949. *A Sand County Almanac with Essays on Conservation from Round River*. Balantine Books: New York. pp. 101-103.

24 The importance of context for Leopold, and the crane example are discussed in J. Baird Callicott. 1989. *In Defense Of The Land Ethic: Essays In Environmental Philosophy*. State University of New York Press: Albany. Also see: A. Carlson. 1979. 'Appreciation and the Natural Environment,' in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 37, pp 267-7. In some instances, however, considering context can limit our aesthetic appreciation. To use another example from Hepburn, if "you see the full moon rising behind the silhouetted branches of winter trees, you may judge that the scene is more beautiful if you think of the moon simply as a silvery flat disc at no great distance from the trees on the skyline" Hepburn, 'Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty,' 306.

25 Insofar as there is a categorical difference between art and nature, the content of our aesthetic experience of art objects and natural ones will also be different. For sensory experience (or information) is part of the content of the transformative aesthetic experience. So the content of a particular aesthetic object essentially involves that object. If a forest is replaced with plastic trees one's aesthetic experience will be different. Something will be lost even if the replicas are very good. So, we can distinguish between the aesthetic experience of wild objects and the aesthetic experience of art objects by reference to the content of the experience.

26 The kind and extent of the knowledge relevant to the aesthetic appreciation of nature is discussed in a number of articles; for example, see Patricia Matthews. 2002. 'Scientific Knowledge and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature.' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. Vol. 60: 37-48. While I cannot hope to give an exhaustive list of relevant contexts for all natural objects here, I will motivate the importance of a few in what follows.

27 While a few of these features may be more relevant to how we approach the object, our approach may shape our experience, and these features are all relevant to our appreciation and view of the object.

28 Understanding that nature is the context of wild natural objects also has the potential to enhance appreciation of wilderness and nature. Without the wilderness we could not appreciate wild nature in quite the same way.

29 There is some indication of a picture like this in Carlson, 'Appreciation and the Natural Environment,' 267. He suggests that we need to perceive the natural environment 'as what it is,' not as a prospect or fixed scene Ibid, 271. Carlson extends this idea by saying that the environment must be considered in relation of 'self to setting' where we are a sentient part of our environment, which is supposed to be unobtrusive background in: A. Carlson. 2000. *Aesthetics and the Environment*. Routledge. New York, 51. We gain our knowledge of nature from all of our sensory modalities. One way my theory differs from his 'natural environmental model of aesthetic appreciation,' is that I believe that one can have valuable aesthetic experiences of parts of the natural world and that this is not superficial or inappropriate. While having an aesthetic experience of the larger natural environment may be very important, I do not believe anything is lost in seeing the parts as well as the whole, adding context or perspective may just add value. For discussion of the aesthetic value of landscapes see S. Bourassa. 1991. *The Aesthetics of Landscape*. Belhaven. New York.

30 Since wildness is in part uniqueness of objects, this also serves to illustrate how appreciation of context is not simply recognizing that something falls under a certain concept or natural kind (appreciating context is more than just recognizing something as a rose or a cardinal). Furthermore, while I doubt that perceiving objects in the correct scientific categories is always necessary for making correct aesthetic judgments about them, this contextual information can (almost certainly) influence our aesthetic experience of nature in positive ways. See Carlson, 'Appreciation and the Natural Environment,' 259 and Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment*. He argues that natural kinds are important to aesthetic appreciation and evaluation of natural objects. Also see: H. Rolston III. 1995. 'Does Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature Need to be Science Based?' in *British Journal of Philosophy*. 374-386.

31 Hepburn, 'Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty,' 295

32 Ibid

33 Ibid, 291

34 Ibid, 290

35 Ibid

36 Ibid

37 Ibid, 295

38 Ibid, 287

39 Ibid, 291

40 G.A. Cohen. 2004. "A Truth in conservatism: Rescuing conservatism from the Conservatives", Oxford Working Paper. Available:

<<http://sites.google.com/site/politicaltheoryworkshop/GACohenConservatism.pdf?attredirects=0>>.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

43 By this I mean people who fit the stereotype that media images propagate of the ideal in a culture, not necessarily the people who are paid to appear in media images.

44 While part of this experience may be enjoyment or appreciation -- simply liking the experience, there is more to it than that. The aesthetic experience of the unaffected natural world necessarily transforms the way one sees the natural world. For, the sensory surface that is transformed is the sensory surface of the world, and this changes how we see our natural environment-- not just a canvass. Furthermore, in changing the way we view the world the aesthetic experience of nature has the ability to change preferences. This is the transformative value to which Andrew Brennan refers. See A. Brennan. 2002. 'Moral Pluralism and the Environment' in *Environmental Ethics: What Really Matters, What Really Works*. D. Schmitz and E. Willott eds. Oxford University Press. New York.

45 Furthermore, even Marilyn was wild in her way, and it is unclear what exactly provided the inspiration this portrayal of Marilyn.

46 Even some art works which are not created indifferently may be wild if their creators attend carefully to and manage to capture wild aspects of nature. Some of Lucian Freud's paintings and Ansel Adam's prints may provide particularly poignant illustrations here. What is special about Lucian Freud's art is the authenticity to aspects of creation that are normally ignored in our culture. He does not thin his models or obscure their blemishes, he conveys the wild natural aspects of his subjects, and it is the originality and wildness that are necessary for the reconfiguration evident in his works. Likewise, the aesthetic value of Ansel Adam's prints comes primarily from the fact that his prints reflect the grotesque-forms of nature, tangled and twisting. The wild and uncontrolled permeate his prints. It is the amazing and awe inspiring forms of Adam's trees, that would have been clipped by human hands had the hands had access perhaps hundreds of years before, that so inspire us, the jagged cliffs, the vast expanses of untamed wilderness that we find so aesthetically valuable. Perhaps, as K. Simonsen suggests, Adam's prints retains their wildness in part because 'photography is limited in the control it can exercise over its subject matter.' K. Simonsen. 1981. 'The Value of Wildness,' in *Environmental Ethics*, 261. Also see H. Rolston III. 1985. 'Valuing Wildlands,' in *Environmental Ethics*. 23-4. But, whatever its genesis one can see the wildness in Adams' pictures. R. Wollheim. 1980. *Art and Its Objects: With Six Supplementary Essays*, 2nd Edition. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.

47 William Molyneux. 1694. Letter to John Locke. March 2, 1694. Published in: John Locke. 1689. *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Second ed. 1975. II, ix, 8.

48 Marjolein Degenaar. 2005. 'Molyneux's Problem.' *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available at: <<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/molyneux-problem/>>.

49 Ibid, 128

50 Ibid

51 Oliver Sacks. 1995. *An Anthropologist on Mars*. Picador: London.

52 Ibid, 119

53 Similarly, those previously unfamiliar with distances may, with time, experience the shift necessary to perceive distances. Normal children learn to see objects, distance, and space.

54 As a child I remember watching the earth spin under the clouds rather than watching the clouds move. I now find it impossible to see the earth spin but could, perhaps, learn to do so again. I do not see how I could learn not to see objects as objects, but perhaps it is worth noting that some artists seem capable of doing so. Cézanne, for instance, once wrote, 'The same subject seen from a different angle gives a subject for study of the highest interest and so varied that I think I could be occupied for months without changing my place, simply bending more to the right or left.' Sacks. *An Anthropologist on Mars*, 128

55 Sacks, *An Anthropologist on Mars*, 142

56 It is also interesting to note that our retinas actually receive an upside down image and our brains correct the distortion. One wonders what children see when they are first born. Perhaps they too have to learn over time to see the world as right side up. 'Vision,' *Gale Encyclopedia of Psychology*, 2nd ed. Gale Group, 2001. Available at: http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_g2699/is_/ai_2699000350

57 This is probably true globally as even rural farms are not wild but it at least applies to those in the Western world.

58 A. Carlson. 1997. 'On the Aesthetic Appreciation of Japanese Gardens' *British Journal of Aesthetics* vol. 37 pp. 47-56) gives an analysis of the value of Japanese gardens. Carlson says that the tension we usually feel when viewing nature and artificial things together is resolved in Japanese gardens because the artificial is made subservient to the natural. The gardens use artifice to emphasize the essential qualities of nature. However this account has a very unintuitive consequence: Altered nature is, in some cases, better than unaltered nature at displaying nature's essence. For more on the aesthetic value of Japanese gardens see Yuriko Saito. 1985. 'The Japanese Appreciation of Nature.' *British Journal of Aesthetics*. Vol. 23, pp. 239-25.

59 Something like this may be what Kenneth Simonsen was trying to express in his article 'The Value of Wildness' when he says that '...wild things have inherent value because of their wildness' Simonsen, 'The Value of Wildness,' 259. Features of wild things such as their form and sublimity may explain for Simonsen how such objects can yield an aesthetic experience. He focuses on authenticity as one of the main attributes of wild nature. Ibid, 259

60 Cohen

61 Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*. 262.

62 B. Norton. 2002. 'Fragile Freedoms' in *Environmental Ethics: What Really Matters, What Really Works*. D. Schmidtz and E. Willott eds. Oxford University Press. New York, 501.

63 K. Rawles. 2002. 'Letting the World Grow Old: An Ethos of Counter-modernity' in *Environmental Ethics: What Really Matters, What Really Works*. D. Schmidtz and E. Willott eds. Oxford University Press. New York, 2002.

64 R. Elliot. 2001. 'Normative-Ethics' in *A Companion to Environmental Philosophy*. D. Jamieson ed. Blackwell Publishers. Massachusetts, 180.

65 Ibid, 181

66 M. Beardsley. 1993c. 'Regional Qualities,' in *Contemporary Philosophy of Art: Readings in Analytic Aesthetics* J. Bender and H. Blocker eds. Prentice Hall. New Jersey, 239.