

Alberto L. Siani. *Landscape Aesthetics: Toward an Engaged Ecology*. Columbia University Press 2024. 256 pp. \$140.00 USD (Hardcover 9780231213660); \$35.00 USD (Paperback 9780231213677).

Alberto L. Siani's book begins with a dual proposition: traditional aesthetics have typically ignored landscape as a locus of discovery except through artistic representation, and contemporary landscape and environmental studies often detrimentally eclipse an aesthetic aspect from their evaluations. Never has it been more critical, he asserts, to create a paradigm for assessing landscapes which holds an aesthetic modality in unity rather than differentiation from its political, social, cultural, and other senses, than in a time of already seen and further anticipated ecological collapse. Siani straightforwardly reminds that this is not a book of climate solutions, but an attempt to understand and address insufficiencies in the frameworks people and institutions employ when making climate-related decisions.

'Landscape' is not a universally cross-linguistic concept, though he argues (via Wittgenstein) that the 'language games' we play around the differences between habitats, landscapes, and environments (and the degree to which we believe humans act as agents in these different realms) show that 'landscape' describes a specific and ubiquitous kind of interaction between people and their lived environments. In many cases, however, these language games further our sense of what a landscape is. "What I am claiming is rather that our use of the word landscape does not simply reflect or express but institutes (or at least contributes to institute) the way we position ourselves in the world, inhabit it, experience it" (22). For instance, we already know too well the dangers of conceiving of landscapes instrumentally, prioritizing perpetual development against the health of ecosystems. That is because they are not objects with which we interact, but are "units of sense, patterns of the human ability and need to be situated in a meaningful, inhabitable space. They do not just bring nature and culture together: they are instantiations of the continuity between them" (26). Such a concept of landscape is not well-served by a Kantian theory of aesthetic judgment, where instantaneous and usually visual evaluations of a space are of limited use in understanding the complicated dance between humans and their immediate surroundings. For this reason, Siani suggests locating landscape not in the *a priori*, but in Kant's *a posteriori* notion of 'habitat', our manner of establishing provisional and contingent habits within a certain environment. Likewise, Siani is very partial to Dewey's shift in emphasis toward the aesthetic as a successful and complete interaction between people and situation. He intriguingly suggests that landscape is in effect a



better example of Dewey's theory at large than any of the other examples that Dewey provides.

The chapters of *Landscape Aesthetics* can be grouped into three overtures, the first of which deals with the pre-existing confines of both the aesthetic and environmentalist approaches to landscape. In the prologue, "Where are Landscapes?", Siani describes the current distance between these two academic domains and introduces 'habitat' as the more appropriate Kantian concept for landscape aesthetics. It is in the first chapter, "A Game of Landscapes: Methodological, Linguistic, and Conceptual Roles", that he defends landscape as a coherent topic, since it requires explanation that "a term found in only a few languages and polysemic even in those could point us toward a transcendental, objective essence" (16). He suggests that words like landscape or habitat show a chain of semantic meaning, akin to Wittgenstein's description of 'family resemblances'. It is also in this chapter that he offers a revised understanding of landscapes as "units of sense" (26). In Chapter 2, "Landscape and Aesthetics", Siani invites us to consider the relationship between the 'ocular' aesthetics of the beauty tradition's engagement of landscape through painting and the exploitative use of landscapes central to the European concept of it. It is here that he suggests Deweyan aesthetics as an overwhelmingly more suitable approach, on account of its avowed intention to be an "holistic, antidualistic alternative" (41) that does not remove the economic, cultural, and political from its interpretation. I think Siani's approach in this chapter invites comparison and potential conversation between landscape aesthetics and another sub-discipline in which questions of (dis)continuity and completion (as well as an overt Deweyan influence) already feature in its main discourses: namely, everyday aesthetics.

The second of these overtures involves consideration of which features of landscape should factor into its analysis, once the way-clearing of certain essentialist definitions has occurred. One of the arguments Siani makes in the third chapter, "Patterns of Encounter I", is that the presence of artistic 'intention' cannot be *the* structural difference between landscapes and artistic renderings of landscapes. To this end, he references Umberto Eco's theory of literary interpretation, saying: "[M]eaning coincides neither with a goal set by the author, nor with whatever the empirical reader sees in the text, but rather it needs to be conceived as an open yet not unlimited set of possibilities" (65). The artist draws on certain meanings in the landscape to create a "more univocal and traceable" (76) expression of some of its meanings. "Patterns of Encounter II" is a long but robust chapter, of which a stand-out section is the discussion of various kinds of temporality that shape our interpretations of landscapes. "Challenging the received...equation of landscapes with

(pictorial) artworks also means acknowledging the centrality of change for the former, which are not just static and timeless attempts to imitate a changing reality” (85). Again, Kant’s *habitat* can speak to an aesthetic phenomenon characterized by impermanence.

The last overture involves case studies of very diverse landscapes and the policies that are used in evaluating them formally. In “Building Common Ground”, Siani considers the understanding of landscape undergirding ‘landscape character assessment’ (LCA) and the similar definition held by the European Landscape Convention (ELC). He comments that while “traditional top-down imposition was built on political, economic, and cultural hegemony, today’s imposition is softer in that it presents itself as scientifically motivated” (127). Ultimately, as long as objectivist and subjectivist perspectives in landscape remain dualistically opposed, “isolated reform attempts might leave the core problems untouched” (*ibid.*). In the final chapter, he considers diverse landscapes through several lenses; “Lived Landscapes: Three Sketches” is an easy and stimulating read, comparing the Tuscan town of Valleriana to the German region of Münsterland and the metropolis of Istanbul in terms of the relationships between their ‘natural’ and urban spaces, their political and agricultural contexts, and the like. This chapter deftly performs the mixed approach to evaluation Siani has been promoting throughout the book.

Throughout *Landscape Aesthetics*, Siani steadfastly resists providing an essentialist definition of the aesthetic, because the aesthetic elements of landscape do not exist separably from other non-aesthetic constituents that make up its units of sense, such that we could ever identify an essence that is free from its instantiation with affordances of other kinds. “In fact, in each of them there is no assemblage and no dualism before the whole and the unity” (162). Instead, he believes “several definitions are possible, depending on the focus or objectives pursued” (163). Siani’s position, well argued, nevertheless points us toward another language game being played which I could not help but notice while reading. Especially in the chapter “Lived Landscapes”, pleasantness, beauty, and ugliness factor into his and others’ assessments about what life in Valleriana, Münsterland, and Istanbul has to offer, whether the environment produces a mood of alienation or embrace. An elusively unaccounted-for ‘taste’ influences our perceptions, as demonstrated by Siani’s example of windmills along coastlines being rejected on aesthetic grounds, despite wind being an integral element of the experience of coasts and beaches (99). Beauty and its surrogates are not satisfactory, but the self-reporting of the aesthetic experience of landscapes, like criticism of the placement of windmills, is not sufficiently captured by the ‘completeness’ of that experience. To where are we

relocating the phenomena the traditional models named ‘judgment’ and ‘preference’? This is not a criticism of Siani *per se*, but rather an issue that his book demonstrates secondarily, that such considerations—whether they are *a priori* or contingent—seem to feature strongly in our adoption of climate solutions, more broadly than those who eschew an aesthetic interpretation entirely or a reflective aesthetics specifically wish to allow. Excitingly for those who pick it up, Siani never intended the book to function as a “rhetorically closed argument... [but rather as] a sign of the intention to continue this research and the hope to receive challenging input from readers” (165). I was very convinced by Siani’s account of the insufficiency of previous aesthetic models for interpreting landscape or mediating in policy decision about ecological loss, and I came to appreciate his methodological resistance to a specific concept of the aesthetic when we might be better helped by a polyvalent approach; the urgent nature of the crisis demands we not settle too quickly out of intellectual pride, but maintain the epistemic ‘openness’ for which he advocates. I am similarly persuaded by his assertion that landscapes will bolster the theorizing of those whose aesthetic interest is more narrowly focused on fine arts.

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