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The Garden — Between Art and Ecology

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University of Warsaw

Abstract. A widely held opinion is that the aesthetic attitude toward nature is a step leading to an ethical perspective. Such an approach results in the belief that people should change their attitude toward nature and start to treat it with respect, to care for it, or in other words to see it as a partner who has an intrinsic value which does not stem from human attitude or interests. The non-anthropocentric approach is one of the possible and highly debated ingredients of ecological thinking. What is more, such a perspective is often backed up by the idea that we should acknowledge nature's agency. Very seldom – if ever – does anyone analyze a phenomenon that fits within this approach quite well, namely the garden, so the aim of my paper will be to analyze the intersection of the aesthetic and the ethical which is an essential feature of every garden as well as of gardening. I understand gardening as a cultural practice oriented towards nature, a practice whose *differentia specifica* lies in its aesthetic as well as ethical dimension.

The past few decades have sparked a growing interest in the natural environment for the fields of aesthetics and ethics. This trend has been accompanied by an analogous interest from the art world and as a consequence genres such as land art, eco art or sustainable design have emerged.

Although art is not a major field of interest for the exponents of environmental aesthetics or ethics, they do not neglect it, focusing either on land art or environmental art and showing how the aesthetic dimension and the ethical one overlap in these projects in a variety of ways (Carlson, 2000; Parsons, 2008, Boetzkes, 2010). It is noteworthy that it has been recently pointed out that art is a perfect means to promote the concept of sustainability as a quest for a balance among environmental, social, economic, and aesthetic concerns (Kagan, 2011; Naussauer 2008; Prigan & Strelow & David, 2004).

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A widely held opinion is that the aesthetic attitude toward nature is a step leading to an ethical perspective which can be defined as, among other things, treating the elements of nature as subjects (e.g. Carlson & Linttot, 2008).

Such an approach results in the belief that people should change their attitude toward nature and start to treat it with respect, to care for it, or in other words to see it as a partner who has an intrinsic value which does not stem from human attitude or interests. Such an approach is present in aesthetics as well, for it is claimed that we should get rid of the traditional way of aesthetic experiencing and appreciating of nature, because it is based on artefacts and as such it "artefactualizes" nature to some extent, making it impossible to approach nature "on its own terms" (Saito, 2008). It is only when we experience nature aesthetically as nature, the argument goes, that we can grasp for example its emotional values which are objective and are not mere projections of human states of the soul.

Thus, the non-anthropocentric approach seems to be one of the possible and highly debated ingredients of ecological thinking. What is more, such a perspective is often backed up by the idea that we should acknowledge nature's agency. Thus, nature should not be regarded as a passive realm which only patiently accepts our efforts and has no influence on the results we obtain, so its share in them cannot be dismissed as it is traditionally done (Jones & Cloke, 2002).

However, very seldom – if ever – does anyone analyze a phenomenon that fits within this approach quite well, namely the garden. This may strike one as odd because contemporary literature on gardens is abundant. Gardens are studied in terms of cultural history and art history, aesthetics, phenomenology of Being, social and gender issues, language, literary and philosophical motives, ecostystems, *etc.* (see e.g. Leslie & Hunt, 2013). In one way or another these perspectives assume that gardens are places between nature and culture, or to put it differently: they are places where nature becomes culture, and culture becomes nature. Despite the fact that the ethical dimension of gardens is not totally neglected it seems to be somewhat precluded by their aesthetic aspects – gardens are, after all, places, where we somehow experience nature aesthetically. Nevertheless it is precisely the aesthetic attitude which is inherent to gardens that makes one approach nature present in them in ethical terms, as well.

The aim of my paper will be, then, to analyze the intersection of the aesthetic and the ethical which is an essential feature of every garden. For the sake of the argument I assume that gardening is everything that people do in gardens either as gardeners or as mere visitors. In other words, I understand gardening as a cultural practice oriented towards nature, a practice whose *differentia specifica* – as I will try to show – lies in its aesthetic as well as ethical dimension. What is more, I contend that gardens are places which make people approach nature both in an aesthetic and ethical way.

Even if it may sound as a gross oversimplification, for the scope of this paper let us assume that nature is present in gardens solely in the form of plants, and as a consequence anything gardeners do is aimed at making plants follow their projects whatever shape they may take: from excessive pruning generally associated with French or formal gardens, to loving care so typical for amateur gardeners described by, for example Karel Čapek in his *Gardener's year* (Čapek, 1961) or Michael Pollan in his boook *Second nature* (Pollan, 1991). Gardens are, then, places where nature is not pristine, but influenced by culture.[1] Thus, I suggest that we treat gardens as a sort of "laboratories" in which we may observe – as active gardeners or as visitors – a spectrum of aesthetic and ethical issues concerning the relationship between people and nature.

As far as plants are concerned we may note (following Michael Marder, the author of the book entitled *Plant-thinking* [Marder, 2013]), that contrary to Eastern cultures and so called primitive cultures – Western culture has always tended to see plants as uninteresting and their existence as unproblematic. Although we encounter them on a daily basis in many ways, we usually overlook them and treat them as an inconscpicous element of our predominantly urban lives. In a word, even if we look at them, we somehow are inclined to look "through" them as if they were transparent. This is so even where they come to the foreground as economic resources – on such occasions, for example on farms, they are seen mainly as possesing only instrumental value and not a intrinsic one (Marder, 2013, p. 4).

Not only are "plantcapes" invisible for they are either a background of

[1] I would like to avoid plunging into the debate over the status of the culture/nature dichotomy, although, I eagerly admit that gardens are places where it is at stake.

our cultural activities or sources of material energy, but they are invisible as well in the sense that we do not feel any kinship with them: our highly biologically and socially organized life has nothing to do with plants' supposedly simple existence. Plants, more than anything else, are our "other". Marden, thus, asks if there is any way to handle this otherness in such a way as to appreciate plants and respect the fact that they are so different from us and at the same time not to fall into idolatry? Given that it is not only a theoretical issue (as instrumental thinking is not a pure theory for it has deep practical consequences that can found for example in industrialized agriculture), Marden suggests that we let plants be what they are, but nevertheless we should acknowledge that we use the botanical world for our purposes. In other words, we should care for them, respect their time, processes of growth *etc.* and even if we have to use them we should not treat them as something whose existence is solely justified by our consumption. On the other hand we should not treat them as subalterns for whom we should speak. We had better set up a dialogue with them in which we treat them as equal partners. One would add that if we were to look for a place of such a dialogue and co-existence, no doubt that it would not be a natural park understood as a place beyond culture and human influence – but rather a garden.

Similar ideas may be found in Matthew Hall's book *Plants as Persons* (Hall, 2011) in which he states that we should treat plants as *autonomous, perceptual and intelligent*, (p. 13) underlining the fact that paradigms of such an approach are given by primitive cultures. Hall is well aware that our human interests and those of plants may conflict as they are contradictory, nonetheless people realizing their aims should reduce to the minimum their activities that may harm botanic life. Again, this perspective does not opt for pristine nature as an ideal which we ought to pursue – leaving nature alone is not a good strategy, it comes too late for nature is something to be cared for. And this care should be based on a dialogue – one would say: a cooperation – that is on listening to what nature tells us, which, according to Hall, results in a dissolution of the dualism humans *vs* nature.

Marder's theory as well as the one offered by Hall seem to correspond to what Thomas Heyd calls the „culture of nature", or „culture affirming nature" which consists of methods of action and perception which discover particular values of nature (Heyd, 2007, pp. 123-137). "Culture

of nature" is then, according to a typology offered by Gisli Palsson, an Icelandic anthropologist, a form of communalism. Palsson states that there are three models of how people relate to nature: "orientalism", that is a domination over nature based on a strict division between society and nature; "paternalism", likewise based on a division between society and nature which, nevertheless, treats nature as its "other" which is to be protected; and finally "communalism" in which – as in primitive cultures – the division society/nature is not clearly defined and, what is more, society and nature cooperate with each other in no other than dialogical way (Pálsson, 1996).

On the one hand, for Heyd an example of the „culture of nature" is offered by national parks in which, according to him, culture does influence nature but in such a way as to promote its spontaneity. On the other hand, a similar role is played by botanical gardens, albeit the bias of culture, here understood mainly in the etymological sense as "cultivating", is much heavier. Botanical gardens are for Heyd places which show how human art, conceived more as technique or skill, may cooperate with nature's dynamics: people and plants are interactive subjects there.

A similar theory which, however, stems from a different perspective and does not explicitely assign agency to plants or nature in general is offered by Gernot Böhme, a German philosopher, who directly associates gardens – not so much botanical as English or landscape ones – with ecological aesthetics (Böhme, 1989). For Böhme nature is always socially constructed in the sense that it is always conceptually and physically defined by human ideas and activities. Ecology, then, according to him, must neither limit itself to sheer acceptance of nature as it supposedly is, nor create new environments. As such it should follow in the footsteps of landscape gardening which consisted of creating within a culture a place for nature as nature.

This is not a place to discuss whether Böhme does or does not fall for a romantic illusion which makes him overlook the huge amount of human art and labour indispensable for making nature look naturally – in reality in landscape gardens there is much less place for nature as one may think. We should, however, notice that for him a landscape garden is aimed at nature's intention, that gardeners adjust themselves to nature which is not a sheer medium of their art, but due to its autonomy and spontaneity is

at least a co-creator of gardens. Gardening is then an art stemming from, as Böhme writes, a "covenant" between humanity and nature according to which a gardener lets plants be, that is grow, and as a result creates a particular quasi-objective atmosphere. According to Böhme just the opposite is offered by French or formal gardens (again it is debatable to what extent this juxtaposition is justified) where plants are heavily pruned because it is regarded as the only way to mantain gardens, i.e. to preserve the desired shape from nature's revindication. A French garden may last only thanks to a constant human fight against nature's dynamics and as such, Böhme states, is the main modern paradigm of the approach to nature which is seen as something which we should control.

In a formal garden plants are reduced to the level of a material upon which certain social forms are imposed and therefore it cannot be a model for an ecological aesthetics. It seems then justified to state that Böhme's landscape gardens are examples of Heyd's "culture of nature".

Botanical gardens and landscape gardens are not the only ones to be associated with ecology: Arnold Berleant, for examples, describes Chinese gardens as embodiments of the principles of ecological aesthetic (Berleant, 2012, pp. 131-146). Now, given the quite wide range of cited sorts of gardens, it seems legitimate to ask whether it is possible to treat any garden – including the exluded ones, such as formal gardens or even gardening allotments in which vegetables are grown – as ecological laboratories?

A garden can be defined as a place where nature is subject to cultivation, the term "cultivation" meaning all the human activities that are somehow in a commonseniscal way external to nature but at the same time are a continuation of processes going on in it. Despite that cultivating nature in a garden is a practice which people undertake in their own interest – and this may vary a lot: it can be pleasure, health, eating, giving oneself the desired social status etc. – as they do in many other places, this kind of cultivation is different from other ways of doing it because it considers nature's interest as well, even if it has only a biological dimension. Thus, gardens may be thought of as places of a particular harmony between culture and nature, which, by the way, follows a very long tradition of seeing gardens as earthly paradises.

Without falling prey to the illusion of such a harmony, one can state – and this is my opinion – that this partnerial relationship is based on our

aesthetic approach towards plants. Gardens are places which – contrary to all others places, including national parks – make us experience nature in an aesthetic mode: on the one hand we pay attention to nature as such and so it can give us some aesthetic satisfaction – no matter how we understand it – and on the other hand simply because we start to notice nature, its formal qualities as well as biological conditions and processes, we can focus on and appreciate its otherness. It is the aesthetic approach that Marder, for example, sees as a perspective inciting one to let plants freely be (I will come back to the issue of the limits of this freedom later on) (Marder, 2013, p. 4). And this is the core of Böhme's argument as well.

In other words, gardens make us look at nature – or engage in it, as Berleant would have it – in a disinterested way. Disinterestedness is not, however, to be understood here as an indifferent, disengaged contemplation of formal qualities, but more in the way suggested by Malcolm Budd for whom disinterestedness means considering nature "in itself", getting other satisfaction than the one "of the subject's desires that the world should be a certain way" (Budd, 2002, p. 15). Such a disinterested perspective does not exclude, then, a body of knowledge that may be useful or even indispensable for someone to know what he or she has in front of or around him or her.

In other words, nature in a garden may have different functions, may convey different meanings, but is always cultivated and experienced as an object of aesthetic appreciation. Certainly, it does not mean that outside of the garden one cannot take such a standpoint. There is little doubt that it is possible, but nonetheless it is not necessary: neither a crop field nor a wild wood are *per se* objects of aesthetic experience, while a garden and all that is inside is in fact an object of aesthetic experience. To put it another way, if people, for some reason, happen to neglect the aesthetic dimension of plants growing in a garden, they do not grasp them as what they really are, namely as nature-in-a-garden, and thus they do not perceive the garden as a garden. In such a case, they might treat it in the same manner as they would treat a farm field – for example, they treat fruit trees only as producers of fresh consumption goods or they appreciate bushes of lavender only for their scent or to be precise, not so much for the aroma that actually comes to their noses from the flowers but for the future fragrance which will be produced and used in parfums. On the other hand they may

very well treat a garden as a particular ecosystem whose only value is biodiversity.

My first contention is, then, that every garden is a place where we experience nature aesthetically. This results from, so to say, the essence of the garden, which obviously should not be understood in an idealistic or platonic vein but rather in a phenomenological manner: I just cannot think of any other way of defining a garden which would distinguish it from other spaces where we encounter nature, such as farms or national parks, to mention only the two extremeties. This is its *differentia specifica*.

Given that gardens in one form or another have always been present in all the cultures and they have been conceived of as particular places other than what was outside of them (Foucault calls them "heterotopias" [Foucault, 1986]), there must be a reason for that. One – in my opinion plausible – explanation is that people have tended to change their attitude toward plants within the garden's walls. No matter what meanings people associated with flowers, trees, fruits and so or what uses they would put them to, I think they enjoyed them "in themselves", that is in their materiality, they took delight in their colours, tastes, smells, and at the same time they admired the complexity of botanical life. In other words, nature in a garden has always been, so to say, opaque, has always received people's attention. Of course, one of the reasons why it was possible, was that nature in a garden was domesticated and as such could be freely contemplated. What is more – and this is my second contention - the aesthetic experience enables one to discover the agency of nature and so to treat it plants as subjects, or non-human persons as Matthew Hall would say.

Any garden, then – be it botanical, Renaissance, formal, landscape or even a vegetable one – is a result of the "technique of the covenant". This covenant does not stem, however, from human good will or a particular concept of nature as it was the case in the 18 century, but it is imposed by nature itself. The pruning mentioned by Böhme, or *ars topiaria* as it was called, which may indeed appear as an example of a brutal domination is not so much an autonomous human practice whose aim is to destroy nature's resistance, as it is an activity which is always contained within the field of possibilities offered by nature, or to be precise – by the plant being pruned. "Trees have shaped pruning just as much as, in the end, pruning shapes the tree" – write Owain Jones and Paul Cloke, the authors of the

book on the non-human agency of trees (Jones & Cloke, 2002, p. 68).

Even if one may think – as Böhme presumably does, just asthe visitors of the French garden, but maybe not the gardeners who are more likely to feel the resistance of nature – that a geometrically pruned hedge is a proof of human total control over nature, were it not for the plant's consent for the pruning and its "will" to define the limits of this action, any attempt at showing how people can master nature woud necessarily fail – the plant would simply die. Moreover, it can be said that if people did not believe that nature can stand up against their plans, *ars topiaria* would not prove human's ability to domesticate wild nature. The difference between French and English gardens – if we stick to this dychotomy – lies, then, not in dominating nature or not, but in showing or hiding nature's agency.

The agency of nature is probably felt by all those who garden themselves. The two mentioned authors, Karel Čapek and Michael Pollan describe very well how nature – even in the highly reduced form of a yard – resists their efforts of cultivation, sometimes shows them what to do and what not to do. In his book *The botany of desire* Pollan takes – as he writes – "seriously the plant's point of view" (Pollan, 2001). The change of perspective is due to a question that one day he asked himself: "did I choose to plant these potatoes, or did the potato make me do it?" And he answers: "In fact, both statements are true." He writes: "Gardeners like me tend to think such choices are our sovereign prerogative: in the space of this garden, I tell myself, I alone determine which species will thrive and which will disappear. I'm in charge here (...) Even our grammar makes the terms of this relationship perfectly clear: I choose the plants, I pull the weeds, I harvest the crops. We divide the world into subjects and objects, and here in the garden, as in nature generally, we humans are the subjects." (Pollan, 2001, *Introduction*). What he suggests is, then, to treat plants as subjects, that is as beings which can act in the light of their own interests.

And here we arrive at the issue of supposed "freedom" of plants which we acknowledge whenever we experience them aesthetically. The question is, then, how the aesthetic and ethical approaches combine?

It is only when we treat plants as subjects possesing their own interests, we may evaluate human actions in terms of whether they correspond to nature's goals or not. On one hand, Pollan rightly notes, a garden needs

constant care based on nature's needs, but on the other hand – this care involves violence. Gardens are artificial – or we could say: cultural – places, which nature wants to reclaim as it is proved by the ubiquitous weeds. However, whether a plant is qualified as a "weed" or not does not depend on its essence but on whether it endangers other plants. A gardener, then, defends the plants which he or she sees (or is made to see) as valuable. Therefore, a garden is not at all a harmonious paradise, at least if we take into consideration the plant's point of view. If we were weeds, we would undoubtly have to state that there is nothing worse then growing in a garden for it is only within the limits of a garden that we turn out to be weeds. This is why, contrary to what Böhme seems to imply, the atmosphere in a landscape garden is far from bucolic – power and violence are hidden, but not absent. In this regard French gardens are more "frank" as they patently admit their absolutist character.

However, we may ask what would happen to a garden if we did not set up a covenant with particular plants at the expense of others? Such a garden would rather quickly become wild. In other words, a garden needs a constant cultivation because otherwise it ceases to be a garden. This shows that the violence is inherent to garden, but that it stems not only from human agency but also from the one of nature. What is more, it shows that despite that gardener's activities as cultural practices are somehow different from nature's own actions, they all form a continuum and as a result the perspective which sees gardens solely in terms of either culture or biology cannot grasp what really is going on in a garden as a garden.

Certainly, one could object here by stating that in this regard gardens are not very different from other places, for example from even the most industrialized farms as even there nature has agency (even if we tend to deny it) and human actions are only a continuation of natural processes. Indeed, but gardens as such make this agency visible for they turn nature into the object of aesthetic experience and contrary to national park or crop field they are places where we enter into a dialogue with nature and start to treat nature as a partner on a par with us and not someone only either to use or to protect. The fact that we take into account nature's interests does not mean that we treat them as idols – after all, gardeners care for their plants because they want to get cultural aesthetic satisfaction, but they do not think of what they get in terms of a product, but

more in terms of a gift as David Cooper in his *Philosophy of gardens* writes quoting Pollan (Cooper, 2006, p. 73).

This is why, following in the footsteps of Böhme and Berleant, but in a much broader dimension, we may state that a garden, any garden, is a paradigm for ecological aesthetics. Given that it is not possible to leave nature alone, the question is what form our relationship with nature will take. It may be orientalism, paternalism and communalism, and it seems that the last one is the most profitable for both parties: society and nature. And it seems that gardeners – at least those described by Čapek and Pollan – are human subjects who treat plants as non-human persons and are sensitive to plant-thinking and thus form with them communities which are not, however, devoid of tensions. Therefore such gardeners are aware that the power and the violence are inherent to their gardens – and so they are very much like those who prune geometrical hedges – but this is why they at the same time try to mitigate them, letting nature act on its own – and so they are very much like those who take care of landscape gardens.

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