The Forest, the Trees and the Science of Scenery

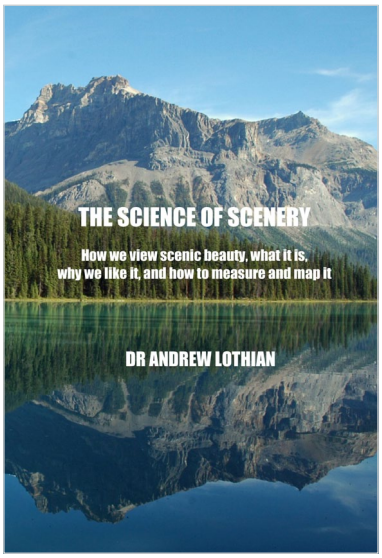
RUDI VAN ETTEGER

The Science of Scenery: How We View Scenic Beauty, What It Is, Why We Love It, and How to Measure and Map It, Andrew Lothian, San Bernardino, CA, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017,
ISBN: 978–1–534–60986–0 (paperback)

Rudi van Etteger is Assistant Professor, Landscape Architecture Group, Wageningen University, PO Box 47, 6700AA Wageningen, The Netherlands.
Telephone: +31–317–483–472
Email: rudi.vanetteger@wur.nl

It is not every day that you get to review someone's life work. Dr Andrew Lothian's *The Science of Scenery* certainly qualifies as a life work. It offers almost 500 pages on everything you wanted to know about scenic beauty, and then a few things besides that in its encyclopaedic approach to the issues of scenery and landscape quality. The subtitle, *How We See Scenic Beauty, What It Is, Why We Love It, and How to Measure and Map It*, leaves little to the imagination. In this review, I describe and evaluate the content of the book and place it in a wider context of philosophical thought on landscape beauty by confronting it with the work of environmental philosophers, particularly Canadian philosopher Allen Carlson.

In brief, the book opens with an outline of its focus, which is to offer a conceptual framework and an example of a project in the Lake District and measure its scenic beauty. In part 1, the mainstay of the book, Lothian offers a diverse set of 'eyes' through which to look at the issue of scenic beauty. From a glance through the eyes of the divine, the symbolic, the philosopher, the human, the inner, the sublime, the artist, the living, the explorer, the accountant, the doctor and the child, we get a kaleidoscopic view of scenic beauty. Part 2 describes scenic beauty and why we love it, part 3 describes how to measure and map scenic beauty and part 4 concludes with a prospective discussion on the future of scenic beauty.



Scenic overload

The book tries to be complete and describe everything. For each of the 'eyes', Lothian describes the basic principles and their application to the science of scenery. He shows all of the steps that he has taken to come to the insights he provides in the finale of the book. Though I am not denying that these may all be necessary and useful steps, it is questionable whether one should confront the reader with all of them or instead take some for granted and concentrate instead on the combination of insights.

It is an encyclopaedia on scenic beauty, but one is reminded of Borges' story about the fabled Chinese description of animals. This example is supposedly taken from an ancient Chinese encyclopaedia entitled *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*. As Borges describes it, the list divides all animals into

14 categories, such as Those that belong to the emperor, Embalmed ones, Those that are trained, Those drawn with a very fine camel hair brush and Those that, at a distance, resemble flies.

Though everything in *The Science of Scenery* is indeed connected to scenery and Lothian attempts to classify the topics into different 'eyes', the book contains repetition and areas of overlap while failing to confront and reflect on what it all leads to. Sometimes a chapter focuses on the perception of mountains, sometimes on the way psychoanalysis informs our understanding of the beauty of landscape. I think that this lack of focus arises because the book was published by the author himself. On the one hand, that approach has the advantage of giving the author total freedom and it is probably the only way to get such a book into the world. On the other hand, the razor-sharp skills of an editor are missing.

The structure of the book is also peculiar in that it gives one example on landscape quality assessment of the Lake District at the beginning and then dives deep into the history and ideas on landscape perception and landscape quality. A clearer structure might have been either to give an example and then defend it with only the necessary arguments or to build up from the ground to culminate in a model and finally an example.

The book abounds with information gathered from reading an immense number of publications on landscape quality assessment. Therein lies a great bonus of the book. Although the use of verbatim quotes without paraphrasing is somewhat demanding on the reader, for a beginning researcher in the field, the wealth of information makes this book the ultimate starting point. From a strict methodological perspective, it would have been beneficial if the author had set out his method in gathering the literature for his review, providing a reassurance that it is reliable and unbiased. The introduction to chapter 19 indicates that Lothian used Google Scholar, but it does not give details such as keywords used in the search.

As well as being a major benefit, the wealth of information is the major flaw of the book, in that the author does not impose order on this information. Much of the information is repeated without offering enough context to allow for evaluation of the findings in all these studies and how they add up. A consistent use of the model offered by Dearden and Sadler (1989), which is very similar to Bourassa's (1991), would have greatly improved the reader's ability to make sense of the many disparate findings from the literature quoted in the book.

The conflation of landscape quality and scenic quality

As a landscape architect and philosopher, I have some issues with the conceptual framework. For instance, in defining landscape quality, Lothian states that it is 'the human subjective aesthetic perception, both positive and negative of the physical landscape responding to its land forms, land cover, land uses, the presence of water, and other attributes' (p 6). This definition seems particularly geared towards the aesthetic component in landscape quality. Vitruvius (30 BC/1999) and Thompson (2000) offer a wider definition of landscape quality that is more generally used: it involves the aesthetic quality, but also the components of utility and firmness (these days often interpreted as sustainability). Within the aesthetic component, Lothian seems geared towards the beautiful or picturesque.

The discussion on good gestalt (pp 93–94) seems to be specifically describing something matching with Burke's beautiful, and thereby ignoring the qualities that can be found in the sublime in landscape.

Another issue I have with Lothian's definition depends on the interpretation of the term 'perception'. It is not an issue if the definition is broad enough to include the ability to see, hear or become aware of something through all the senses. However, often discussions on landscape quality in *The Science of Scenery* seem to limit 'perception' to the ability to see only. A good description of the visual quality of landscapes from a static point of view is welcome, but it becomes a problem when that specific form becomes the only way of appreciating landscape.

The issue of religion

Lothian opens the book with a psalm and makes his religious beliefs clear in his biography. Clearly, Christian beliefs are part of the way the author looks at the world. On the one hand, his openness about his background is an asset in that the author allows for a critical examination of his viewpoint. The idea of science as a completely value-free rational exercise is behind us. But, on the other hand, one has to wonder what place those beliefs – as opposed to cultural background – have in a purportedly scientific book on scenic qualities. At a certain level, quality judgements may be influenced by the particular religion of the individual making them. Lothian explores this issue, for instance, in considering how Australian Aboriginal beliefs about landscape affect their view of the landscape.

The influence of religion on the experience of landscape quality and attitude towards scenic beauty can be researched in a scientific manner and can offer valuable insights. But by being so clear about his own beliefs as religiously held, and given such belief systems can contain inflexible attitudes towards scientific arguments and reasoning, Lothian prompts questions such as: How unbiased is his treatment of other beliefs? How critical is his treatment of Christian beliefs and how does this subsequently influence, for instance, the methodology he offers for measuring landscape quality? While the methodology offered seems to be impartial, the author's emphasis on his beliefs jeopardises our acceptance that his book is a scientific endeavour.

Scenery as a free quality

Lothian stresses in his introduction that scenery is free to be enjoyed and not diminished by that enjoyment. Even in an introduction, this is cutting too many corners. The landscape is never there for free; landscape – as opposed to natural beauty – demands constant management. If someone does not put in the effort to maintain landscape, it will revert to a feral natural environment that does not always have the scenic beauty that the maintained landscape had.

Most scenic landscapes, furthermore, contain restraints that make the land use less profitable than other versions of that landscape that may offer less scenic quality. Many landscapes that have been improved for agricultural use and that offer a decent yield, rather than depending on tenuous subsidies from local and national governments, are no longer as scenic as they were before. This difference in profitability is all the more problematic if those who profit from the enjoyment do not carry those costs. Visitors can enjoy but do not contribute to

the management of the landscape. They might pay for part of it through their taxes, but in general that does not cover the costs. Hotels and other tourism-related businesses profit from the greater numbers of visitors, but again do not directly contribute to the quality of the landscape. What is more, their actions might even degrade the landscape; for example, walkers may increase erosion, and creating extensions and new buildings to house tourists in the landscape may be inappropriate. So the matter of freely available beauty and non-consumptive enjoyment seems to oversimplify many issues surrounding scenic qualities.

Editing and production issues

It seems an impossible task to discuss all of the topics suggested in the subtitle in one book but, after 480 pages, the reader is a lot wiser on most of the topics. However, the reader must be someone of real endurance to struggle through these 480 pages. The coherence and argumentative line have been sacrificed on the altar of completeness. The book diverges into theme after theme and passes by writer after writer, unfortunately without offering a clear narrative structure of its own, beyond summation. It names the different authors and theories without going into real depth and without a clear analysis of why some of this information is useful and some of it is just not. So for an introduction to a topic related to scenic beauty in landscape, this is a good book if you pick the part you need, read that and then explore the topic further on your own and make up your mind. A good editor would have stripped out at least half of the book, relegating large parts of the text to appendices or to the pile marked 'other books one should also write'.

In the process of production, one aspect certainly fails the reader: the quality of the printed photographs and maps. Some of the images were taken from the web and lack the quality to be included in a book on beauty. Many of the diagrams are low resolution and appear grainy at the edges and fuzzy. Many of the landscape photographs look like they were printed on blotting paper, lacking sharpness. If a reprint of the book is considered, this matter should be addressed. Also the superfluous use of the title *The Science of Scenery* on each page is annoying, especially in such a voluminous book; if a title on each page is desired, then the name of the part of the book or the chapter would have been a better choice.

A more fundamental philosophical critique

The book, though it speaks of the beautiful, concentrates on the quality of landscape in terms of the picturesque and, to its detriment, ignores the qualities as offered in descriptions of the sublime. These three subdivisions of the Beautiful (with a capital B) as the overarching principle, though mentioned in the book, are not part of the methodological framework, which seems firmly geared towards the picturesque. The method for measuring beauty is not used in, for instance, a context in which another concept of beauty might become apparent, including concepts of beauty from diverse cultures such as those of Wabi-Sabi, Yapha and Sundara, as offered by Sartwell (2004).

Although Lothian is thorough in his discussion of scenic landscape quality, his work is open to a philosophical critique. Recent philosophical literature on environmental aesthetics from philosophers Allen Carlson, Arnold Berleant and Yuriko Saito gives at least three points that severely limit the conflation of landscape quality and scenic beauty.

In analysing the discourse on environmental aesthetics, Carlson (2000) gives an overview of different viewpoints on the appropriate appreciation of environmental quality. He offers us the object model, the landscape model, the natural environmental model, the engagement model, the arousal model, the mystery model, the nonaesthetic model and the postmodern model.

Lothian's position fits with Carlson's landscape model, which corresponds with the tradition of the picturesque and forces us to see landscape as though it were a landscape painting. In a method that is consistent with this model, Lothian uses a photo as a stand-in for the landscape and equates the responses to the photos with the response to the landscape. Though Carlson does not rule that out, given the visual pleasure derived from viewing a scene from a static point is a part of appreciating a landscape appropriately, it is only one part of landscape appreciation. Carlson himself is a proponent of the natural environmental model in which all the senses play a role in landscape appreciation.

Landscape is not just in front of us in the distance; landscape is environmental and around us and involves all senses. It is not just the picture from the top that makes a landscape beautiful.

Adding to this analysis, Berleant (1997) argues that, beyond the picturesque appreciation of a landscape painting or photograph, some kind of engagement is involved in the appreciation of real landscapes. One enjoys the landscape as part of a walk, for instance. The view from the top is a moment in a flow of experiences and cannot be seen separately from these other experiences. Enjoyment of a landscape is more than a photo opportunity.

Finally, Saito (2007) makes us aware that this focus on the spectacular scenic view is not fair to our everyday experience of landscape. Focusing only on the top experiences and the race to be the most beautiful landscape, which underlies the methodology in *The Science of Scenery*, leads to a neglect of the ordinary, everyday world.

Does this philosophical critique diminish the truth about scenic quality as offered in *The Science of Scenery*? I do not think so, but it does put the book into perspective. Scenic quality is a part of landscape quality, which has many other aspects. The conflation of the two leads to a poor and diminished view of landscape quality. In that sense, the book may be a tool more for people in recreation, tourism and marketing than for landscape architects. Should landscape architects solely rely on this work for a description of landscape quality, they will be pushed into the corner of decorators or stage set designers, which I think is not a good place to be.

Conclusion

Those who are brave enough will find material in the current edition of this book that is well worthwhile; but be prepared that you may not find the forest for the trees. For the second edition, which I would love to see published, I recommend employing an editor to sharpen the storyline and halve its length, hiring a professional for the layout, being more modest about the reach of scenic beauty and dropping the religious connotations. What remains after that will be immensely valuable.

REFERENCES

Berleant, A (1997) *Living in the Landscape: Towards an Aesthetics of the Environment*, Lawrence: University of Kansas Press.

Bourassa, SC (1991) *The Aesthetics of Landscape*, London: Belhaven Press.

Carlson, A (2000) *Aesthetics and the Environment: The Appreciation of Nature, Art and Architecture*, London: Routledge.

Dearden, P and Sadler, B (1989) *Landscape Evaluation: Approaches and Applications*, Victoria, BC: Department of Geography, University of Victoria.

Saito, Y (2007) *Everyday Aesthetics* (1st edn), Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sartwell, C (2004) *Six Names of Beauty*, London: Routledge.

Thompson, IH (2000) *Ecology, Community and Delight: Sources of Values in Landscape Architecture*, London: E & FN SPON.

Vitruvius Pollio, M (30 BC/1999) *Ten Books on Architecture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.