

A large, leafy tree in a park with people walking in the foreground. The tree is the central focus, with its thick trunk and dense canopy of green leaves. In the foreground, a group of people is walking away from the camera on a paved path. The background shows a building and more trees under a bright sky.

Artificial Nature and the Transplantation of Trees

Jilles Rodenburg
4861809

*groooaannn.. crrrk creak- whiiiishhhh...crack groan- whoosh... creaaak
grooan whissh...*

The top of a Tree slowly moves into the distance, a group of people stand around, watching the Tree roll away on the back of a big driving machine. Their faces show a multitude of emotions, readable as various expressions of amazement and horror. An open sea, in the middle, a pontoon sails into the distance carrying a Tree. The rippling water marks the float's path. These are images from the documentary film 'Taming the Garden' by Salomé Jashi.¹ The documentary illustrates how the richest man in Georgia fills his privately owned dendrological park with the most beautiful Trees in the country. The process starts with buying the Tree from the families owning the land or claiming the Trees from the land of which families are not the official owners. Big machines come in to eat away at the ground around the Tree to unearth its roots. Different machines cut away at surrounding Trees and make broad paths to allow passage to the machines that uproot the Trees. The film shows the Trees on the back of transportation machines being moved on land and sea to the Shekvetili Dendrological Park on the west coast of Georgia.

The film's idea originated as I witnessed the first transplantation — the first time a tree "sailed." That surreal image pleaded to be contemplated upon. It was such a jiggle of consciousness, such a beautiful monstrosity, that I straightaway picked up the camera to understand it, to investigate it and depict it, this example of one person's unleashed desire.

Salomé Jashi, in Filmmaker magazine 2021²

To give words to the strangeness experienced while watching this documentary, with this essay I try to approach the question:

'How does human interference with nature influence a phenomenology of "natural" place?'

This essay will start by defining nature and artificiality and how nature is artificial, looking at how human interference redefines the notion of "nature". Then it will look into the way the environment and the objects within this environment impact the phenomenological experience of place. Focusing on the interplay of body feeling and context, phenomenology, the perception, of place refers to the subjective experience, the personal understanding of and reaction to a place, influenced by objects in this place. Finally, the notions of artificiality and perception are linked to the feelings of weirdness and eeriness.

¹ Jashi, S. (Director). (2021). *Taming the Garden* [Video]. <https://www.salomejashi.com/taming-the-garden>

² "It Was Such a Jiggle of Consciousness, Such a Beautiful Monstrosity. . .": Salomé Jashi on Her Sundance-Debuted Taming the Garden (L. Wissot, Interviewer). (2021). *Filmmakermagazine.com*.

artificial

nature *noun* (LIFE)

/ˈneɪ.tʃər/

*all the animals, plants, rocks, etc. in the world and all the features, forces, and processes that happen or exist independently of people, such as the weather, the sea, mountains, the production of young animals or plants, and growth.*³

Following the definition of nature above, the common conception held about nature is that it exists outside of human interference. In line with this conception is the dichotomy used in the term nature versus nurture, nature is all the characteristics you are born with before human interaction has changed them in any way, shape or form. A Tree that grows from a seed carried by the wind, watered by rain, and strengthened by the sun - should be nature. What then is a Tree planted from packaged seed and watered from a can, both by human hands?

Having defined nature, it is important to define artificiality. Artificiality is seen as more than made, it is people-made. A beaver building a dam, is constructed, but still “natural”. Human-made, human-interfered, artificial nature is nature that is not independent of people. It is nature that is intentionally or unintentionally curated by human hands. In his book *Delirious New York: a retroactive manifesto for Manhattan*, Koolhaas⁴ describes Central Park as a ‘synthetic Arcadian Carpet’. The park was created to preserve the ‘natural’ landscape of Manhattan Island and to ‘increase and develop’ this landscape. With this logic, the park ends up being a collection of artificial, engineered nature to make sure it is a working, aesthetically pleasing park. The supposedly natural landscape becomes, through human interference, a place made to be gazed at and used by humans, more than the original plan that the park would become a place to preserve nature and its natural functions. The “excellence” of the artificial over nature is something Koolhaas mentions concerning Coney Island (p.35).

‘A second annexation of nature is achieved with the creation of the Inexhaustible cow, a machine constructed to satisfy the insatiable thirst of the visitors, then disguised as a cow. Its milk is superior to the natural product in the regularity and predictability of its flow, its hygienic quality and its controllable temperature.’

This passage states artificial is superior to natural since artificiality can produce nature to be used at will and for the will of people. It is, I think, important to see that nature - not only at a small scale like a flowerpot on your windowsill but also at a large scale

³ Nature. (n.d.). In *dictionary.cambridge.org*. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/nature>

⁴ Koolhaas, R. (1978). *Delirious New York: A retroactive manifesto for Manhattan*. <http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BB1948634>

like Central Park- is regarded here as a purely static object, an object that serves the demanding gaze of its consumer. If we allow ourselves to see the influence and fluidity of the supposedly static and passive object, we can reflect on its suppressed dynamic properties.

The Anthropocene, or its critical revision the Capitalocene, marks the death of the natural world. A term coined by Andreas Malm and further explained by Jason Moore,⁵ 'Capitalocene' shows us that humanity, *Anthropos*, does not look at nature as that – being nature – but as a product. Nature is to be used for human advantage and progress. The fact that human⁶ activity has such considerable impacts on global environments that geological and ecological systems are changed, and still changing, all in the name of capital gain, characterises a modification in the definition of nature as such. The notion of “pure” or “non-artificial” nature turns out to be fiction. No environment remains untouched or unaltered – all is artificial, to some degree.

To account for the variances in how “natural” wor(l)ds are artificial – that is, inherently in relation to human modification – I want to propose the notions of active human interference and passive human interference as different ways of thinking about and with artificial nature. In this model, active human interference is the hands-on, the uprooting, the building, the designing, and the engineering of nature. Passive interference, then, is the – partly – unaware interference, interference from a distance, not a hands-on interference. It is hard to define exactly where to draw the line between active and passive. This because the variance is more so a spectrum than an either or. Differencing per situation perceived and experienced by a person. Artificiality is seen in this essay as the ways in which nature has been made controllable, as something that humans can tame, and that should behave according to human desires.

⁵ Moore, J. W. (2016). *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*. PM Press/Kairos. <https://jasonwmoore.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Moore-ed-Anthropocene-or-Capitalocene-Introduction-and-TOC-2016.pdf>

⁶ The term human is used here and throughout with the knowledge that within the post-humanist perspective the supposed universality upon which the category of the human relies, is questioned and criticised. For more see Rosi Braidotti's *The Posthuman* (2013)

perception

Donna Haraway challenges the notions of the Anthropocene and Capitalocene in her book *Staying with the Trouble*.⁷ Haraway suggests it is dangerous to think of our current age as these terms because they dangerously put humanity at the centre of what is happening around them. The Anthropocene implies that since the cause of the problem is human, the solution is also in human hands. Haraway introduces an alternative framework: *the Cthulucene*, and wants to apply 'tentacular thinking'. Tentacular thinking, is thinking of the world around us as part of ourselves, connected, and intertwined with our lives, our bodies. Embodied experience is living through the body. Experience and feeling is influenced through the place of the body. The body influences the context, but the context also influences it, therefore human and environment cannot be seen as separated from each other, they are always in relation. The Cthulucene is the age in which humankind stops looking at the world and objects around them as static and passive, awaiting human interference.

Thinking with the relational nature of human and environment, and how perception is an embodied experience, I want to bring forward Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work, which offers an understanding of being in the world that criticises 'pure perception'⁸ as a way of perceiving that is unadulterated by experiences. All we look at, we hear, we smell is not only translated through our understanding which is built up from all we know but also by its context – shadow, wind. Place – is not neutral, or objective. The place is made up out of the embodied experience of the subject. Emotions and feelings impact deeply how place is experienced. Haraway's tentacular approach to this view teaches us that perception is linked to the world around us. How we impact "nature" directly impacts us since humankind has a constant relationship with nature. Perception is actively shaped by the dynamic relationships and interactions between the subject and their context.

⁷ Haraway, D. J. (2016). *Staying with the Trouble*. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822373780>

⁸ Merleau-Ponty, M. (1982). Phenomenology of perception. In *Routledge eBooks*. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203981139>

weird and eerie

“Nature” is alive. The natural world around us is a system that existed before humans were on earth. Take a Tree; the Tree uses the chloroplast cells in its leaves to build glucose using the energy from the sun from carbon dioxide and water it absorbs from the ground. During the process, the Tree exhales oxygen, which is used by animals like us. Under the ground, the Trees share nutrients and other information via the mycorrhizal network. The Tree, just like all nature, serves its purpose in the natural cycle of life. When we decontextualise the Tree, transplant it to a place it did not originate from or a place where it cannot connect to its pre-destined natural system, the Tree is removed from its original function and environment, and instead becomes an aesthetic object meant for human consumption.

In his book *Dark Ecology*, Timothy Morton describes the awareness of the ecological working as a ‘weird knowing’.⁹ Being part of the human species during the Anthropocene is weird. Global Warming (‘global weirding’), as the result of humans inhabiting and exploiting the world, is changing the ecosystem, and being aware of our impact on this environmental system is weird. Mark Fisher¹⁰ defines a characteristic of ‘weird’ as ‘marked by an exorbitant presence, a teeming which exceeds our capacity to represent it.’ When acknowledging that human interference is the guiding force in much of the changing global ecosystem, bearing witness to an uprooted Tree becomes weird – it represents something misshapen, and unnatural, the uprooted Tree represents something larger than the viewer is able to comprehend. In line with the weirdness of the uprooted Tree is the idea of Hyperobjects, written about by Morton.¹¹ The Hyperobject informs why an object, place or thought are experienced as weird. In the case of “nature” or the uprooted Tree, the Hyperobject informing the experience of these objects is the presence of something larger, impossible to represent due to its grandness, such as global warming or deforestation. Global warming and deforestation are hidden, not fully graspable happenings that still influence the experience of the place.

Morton discusses an uncanny sensation associated with what he terms ‘weird knowing’. This uncanny feeling arises from the sense that something is fundamentally “off” in a particular space. This “off-ness” derives from the recognition that the surrounding ecology has been shaped by human intervention. Such a realisation can provoke not only a physical unease but also a phenomenological response—a reaction shaped by the interaction between the environment and the cognitive awareness of the observer.

⁹ Morton, T. (2016). *Dark Ecology: for a logic of future coexistence*. <https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BB27092780>

¹⁰ Fisher, M. (2017). *The weird and the eerie*. https://openlibrary.org/books/OL31595605M/The_Weird_and_the_Eerie

¹¹ Morton, *Dark Ecology*.

Fisher¹² defines the 'eerie' as 'constituted by a failure of absence or by a failure of presence. The sensation of the eerie occurs either when there is something present where there should be nothing or is there is nothing present when there should be something.' The way failure of presence differs from absence is the fact that there is a preconceived notion that there should be something, that is absent. In the case of "nature" as a whole, its natural state – pure, unchanged – is absent, even though there is an idea that it should be there. In the case of a Tree that has been uprooted and transplanted, it is its connection to the natural system it naturally is a part of that is absent. In the case of failure of absence, I would argue that human interference is the fact that is eerie. This also describes how the weirdness and eeriness in active human interference differs from passive human interference. The absence of presence is experienced stronger with the active interference, the active changing of the natural system.

¹² Fisher, *The weird and the eerie*.

conclusion

All nature is strictly seen artificial nature, since human interference has such a reach that all of nature has been interfered with in one way or another. I argue for a spectrum of artificiality when it comes to nature. On the one end of this spectrum stands passive human interference, in which nature has been interfered with in a non-direct way, on the other end of the spectrum stands active human interference in which nature has been consciously engineered to be a controlled space. This controlled nature becomes a predictable place, making it 'superior' to nature.

The perception of a place is deeply tied to the body and feelings of the observer, perception is always linked to the thought of the observer. Emotions and feelings are evoked by context. Thinking of the context as deeply connected to ourselves, it illuminates the impact environment has on lived experience and vice versa.

Knowledge is power, and the knowledge of human intervention has power over the perception of nature as a place. Nature can become a weird and eerie place. Weird because there is a sense of an incomprehensible presence, global warming, and deforestation, and it is eerie because the place misses the presence of the natural ecological system.

Now, I want to circle back to the question presented in the introduction of this essay: 'How does human interference with nature influence our phenomenological experience of a "natural" place? Humans have altered the global ecosystem to such an extent that the idea of nature outside of human interference does not exist. The Capitalocene explains how "nature" has become a static object, a commodity. Haraway proposes a change from viewing it as something aesthetic and passive to acknowledging that nature has a certain agential capacity. Realising the mutual relationality between humans and nature, or humans and environment, we can see how perceiving an environment is informed by body and feelings. Similarly, an environment influences body and feelings. Morton and Fisher give words to the feelings of weirdness and eeriness. Relating these to the different ways nature can be artificial, and thus the levels in which it is interfered with by humans, tells us how these places become, or are perceived as, weird and eerie. The place and the objects within this place have the agency to give us these feelings, impacting the experience of this place. The Tree moving on the back of the machine is weird because of the sense that this tree is part of, or should be part of something bigger, part of the ecosystem, part of a forest. The Tree moving on the back of the machine is an eerie sight because this connection to the ecosystem, to the forest is disrupted by human hands. The tree is actively made artificial.

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