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Attracting investment in green cultural capital through aesthetic differentiation

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Abstract: Certain voices in environmentalism stress a harmonious aesthetic connection with nature, and believe that doing this may have a beneficial effect on moral environmentalism. However, there is also a fair sprinkling of opposing voices that think difference and striving over of sameness and harmony. In alliance with them, and because I am poststructurally inspired, I have taken upon myself the task of thinking aesthetic differentiation and its implications for environmentalism. My hypothesis is that the performative act of constructing and discerning surface differences effectively creates meaning, and that we should not underestimate the degree to which the desire for meaning in general and aesthetic meaning in particular, impacts, for better or for worse, on the natural environment. Optimistically, I champion investment in green cultural capital through aesthetic differentiation.

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The philosopher Jacques Derrida famously suggests that meaning is not a matter of discovering some pre-existing meaningful entity—for the purpose of this essay, a pre-existing meaningful nature—but, instead, a matter of differentiating between surface signs. To explain: we humans create meaning by distinguishing differences; differences such as this from that, high from low, pristine from developed, happy from sad, and love from hate. By contrast, to this way of conceptualizing meaning, dominant voices in environmental aesthetics stress a harmonious aesthetic connection with and emersion in nature. In this essay, I side with Derrida by harnessing philosophical and other forms of differential thinking to argue that the act of constructing and discerning differences effectively creates meaning, and that we should not underestimate the degree to which the desire for meaning in general and aesthetic meaning in particular, impacts, for better or for worse, on the natural environment. Optimistically, I champion investment in green cultural capital through aesthetic differentiation for attaining moral environmentalism.
1. Introduction

Historically, there is a tendency to associate the aesthetic with a positive, life-enhancing attribute. This was especially prevalent in ancient Greece, expressed in the triad of truth, goodness and beauty, and which, arguably, culminated in Friedrich Schiller and the German Bildungs ideal, where a pivotal role was assigned to the aesthetic for cultivating, civilatory, emancipatory reforms. It was argued that beauty is a timeless, universal language that has a reconciliatory, humanizing social effect. Schiller (1954, 138), for instance, writes that “only the communication of the Beautiful unites society, because it relates to what is common to them all”.

Although the notion of a humanist aesthetic and of causality between beauty and morality tout court has lost currency, one should not, however, underestimate the transformative efficacy, for better or for worse, of aesthetic expression and experience. Fascist aesthetics understands this particularly well, and that is why it respects art and the aesthetic, while at the same time it will use all means to control it. And, on a more homely front, many domestic squabbles, even break-ups, result from disparate aesthetic preferences.

Most aestheticians concerned with the environment are thus vigilant not to describe causality between aesthetic delectation and moral environmentalism. Saito (2001), for instance, makes the realistic claim that our aesthetic preferences have far-reaching consequences. Regarding the environment specifically, Eaton (2013, online) suggests that “sound environmental policies have no chance of being widely adopted without a change in aesthetic preferences”. In this regard, one prominent direction is to research the impact of consumerist lifestyles where, according to Soper (2008), it is generally accepted “that the pursuit of consumerist lifestyles is the major contributor to ecological crisis”.

Although causality between an aesthetic appreciation of nature and a moral disposition towards the environment—such as adopting green lifestyles, rejecting conspicuous consumption, suppressing unsustainable desires, limiting one’s carbon footprint and supporting sound environmental policy—is questionable, there is nevertheless considerable conviction that some sort of aesthetic connection with nature results in allegiance to environmental conservation. Many working in the fields of environmental ethics and aesthetics, and environmental education continue drawing attention to the importance of humans possessing and thinkers modelling a “positive” nature aesthetic (Carlson, 1984). They do this in the pursuit of curtailing, possibly even reversing, planetary denigration.

For instance, Daniel Dutcher and co-writers (2007, 474) hypothesize that “environmental values derive from a sense of connectivity with nature”. They tested this hypothesis by conducting a comprehensive survey among Pennsylvanian landowners to arrive at a positive conclusion (474). Similarly, Stephens (2009, online) notes that numerous surveys conducted in a variety of locations, indicate that “direct experience of nature in childhood, at the stage when individuals are developing their cognitive, aesthetic and ethical capacities, has been shown to be the single strongest influence on an adult allegiance to environmentalism”.

Arne Naess’s “deep” ecology defines itself against so-called “shallow” ecological movements by arguing that the latter, in Luke’s (2002 178–186) words,

... fail to challenge the existing institutionalized worldview of advanced industrial society. Such “shallow” ecologies ... adhere wrongly to an “anthropocentric” view of nature by taking a view that separates humanity from nature, deadening the latter.

Both so-called “shallow” and “deep” ecological movements are, of course, earnestly concerned about the denigration of the natural environment, but take opposing positions: “shallow” wants to protect it for instrumental reasons—for what it can do for us. This aligns nicely with the British National Consumer Centre’s definition of sustainability: “Sustainable consumption is a balancing act. It is
about consuming in such a way as to protect the environment, use natural resources wisely and promote quality of life now, while not spoiling the lives of future consumers" (in Evans & Jackson). Although “deep” ecology would probably not out rightly oppose this, it nevertheless maintains that the moral high ground actually belongs to those who want to protect nature for itself, for its intrinsic worth. This suggests turning away from a nurturer-nurturee relationship, to a non-hierarchical, harmonious relationship or connection with nature. To develop this approach, Naess (1973, 99) created the neologism “ecosophy”, which means a philosophy of “ecological harmony or equilibrium”.

Berleant (2013, online) also develops an aesthetic that attempts not to distance humans from nature. He calls it an aesthetic of engagement, which he defines against the modern Kantian aesthetic of disinterestedness. He specifically rejects perceiving nature as art, as a picturesque landscape, writing as follows:

Moreover, aesthetic engagement lends itself particularly well to the wide interest in environmental aesthetics, where engagement offers a more appropriate description of environmental appreciation that has descended from the contemplative distance of a scenic outlook to tramping along a woodland trail or paddling a meandering stream.

So, it is fair to say that there is a broad camp, who through concepts such as “connectivity”, “direct experience”, “harmony”, “equilibrium”, “aesthetic engagement” and “non-dualism” (Dussault, 2016) have, in the pursuit of securing allegiance to conservation taken on the task of uncovering a humanist-like, aesthetic natural environment and describing harmony or equilibrium between it and humans.3

This broad approach has a strong, ingrained history, with one famous signpost being Leopold (1968) proclaiming that “conservation is a state of harmony between men and land”. So, in sum, there is an ingrained conviction that humans who engage or connect with nature aesthetically, are likely to support environmentalism and adopt sustainable lifestyles. Henceforth, I will refer to this as the essentialist-sameness approach.

However, there are also dissident voices: Against the broad essentialist-sameness approach, and specifically Berleant’s aesthetic of engagement, Donmez, 2015, 172) champions an aesthetic that “accepts the ‘otherness’ of nature”. He opposes what he calls the immersion-of-self-in-a-bigger-Self hypothesis, by writing as follows: “We have to accept the duality of nature and humanity, i.e. nature is an “other” to us. This will create a space for “respect in environmental ethics” “ (179). Another role-player, Godlovitch (1994), takes an even more radical position by developing what is sometimes referred to as a mystery model of nature. He describes this aesthetic as being “indifferent to human scale and perspective” (15), and, furthermore, he writes that “Nature is, for us, fundamentally inaccessible and ultimately alien” (19)4.

Perhaps it is because I am poststructurally inspired, that I am attracted to the general direction that Donmez and Godlovitch suggest, which, in poststructural terms, and in opposition to humanism, is to think difference and striving over of sameness and harmony. However, they do not engage directly or in any sustained manner with Jacques Derrida’s “différance” or with any other form of differential thinking. Although I did find a fair sprinkling of poststructuralism in environmentalism (Gough & Price, 2004; Scoones, 1999; Weiner, 2005), I could not find any focused discussion or review of difference as such; what I did find were some marginal remarks and observations (two of which I will turn to later). So, I posit that bringing the thinking of difference into environmental aesthetics and ethics in a focused manner may fill a gap—this is the task I have set myself to accomplish.

Preliminarily stated, I propose a generative, process-driven aesthetic for procuring allegiance to environmentalism. In Nietzsche’s (1967, 298) struggle against foundationalism, he writes as follows:

“Truth” [meaning for our purpose] is therefore not something there, that might be found or discovered—but something that must be created and that gives a name to a process, or
rather to a will to overcome that has in itself no end—introducing truth, as a processus in infinitum, an active determining—not a becoming-conscious of something that is in itself firm and determined.

Following Nietzsche and a broad poststructural approach, I suggest that the effort that is currently expended on discovering and describing essentialist harmony or equilibrium between humans and nature, should be augmented by inventing and performing a sustainable environmental aesthetic. I refer to this as the construction and accumulation of green cultural capital (apologies to Bourdieu, who will later receive fairer treatment). This, I argue, would be best facilitated by the interminable process of constructing surface aesthetic differences. My hypothesis is that the performative act of constructing and discerning surface differences effectively creates meaning, and that we should not underestimate the degree to which the desire for meaning in general and aesthetic meaning in particular, impacts, for better or for worse, on the natural environment.

2. Poststructural aesthetic differentiation and meaning

Degenaar (1986, 108) sums up the broad poststructural position with regard to meaning as follows: “man (sic) is a meaning-giver who cannot disengage the meaning he (sic) creates from the process which brings it forth”. Two issues are important here: firstly, we should be wary of equating meaning, including a meaningful nature aesthetic, with “deep” models alone (such as the essential-sameness approach does) because, secondly, as I will argue, the process of distinguishing and constructing surface differences can be extremely meaningful indeed. Coming from a poststructurally inspired position, the environmental historian, Weiner (2005, 407) issues the following warning:

If we turn our backs on the notion that we socially construct science and nature, we risk buying into a delusory, uncritical, received picture of the “real world.” If we fall silent in response to the challenge of continually destroying and producing new pictures of “reality,” then we abandon the field to those who are not as squeamish or self-conscious.

His position aligns with the structural and poststructural position that we have no access to a reality that is not, beforehand, mediated by systems of signs (of which language is oftentimes held as exemplary). But how do we humans continually destroy and produce new pictures of “reality”? The short answer is that we do so by distinguishing, constructing, destroying and forgetting, differences; differences like this from that, hot from cold, high from low, pristine from developed, happy from sad, love from hate, pretty from ugly, friendly from unfriendly, etcetera.

Derrida’s polysemic neologism “différance” is, of course, of paramount interest here. Degenaar (1987, 5) explains its three meanings as follows: (1) “[A] ‘passive’ difference which has already been made and is available to the subject; (2) an act of differing which produces difference as it succeeds in situating signs differently; and (3) an act of deferring which refers to the provisionality of distinctions and to the fact that the use of language entails the interminable interrelationship of signs”. In short, différance means “difference-differing-deferring”.

2.1. Difference

Derrida’s first meaning of difference, echoes Ferdinand de Saussure (1986), who deconstructs the notion of one-to-one correspondence between the material signifier (e.g. a sound), and the signified (what the sound means), through the insight that “[l]anguage is a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others” (162). He qualifies this further as follows: “Even more important: a difference generally implies positive terms between which the difference is set up; but in language there are only differences without positive terms” (167). According to this, meaning cannot be understood as an entity that corresponds in an unmediated, direct, one-to-one fashion with a pre-existing authenticity, for our purpose, an original, humanist-like nature aesthetic.
Furthermore, because Saussure realizes the lability of language, he attempts to make the study of language manageable by making three reductive moves: His first reduction is to focus exclusively on *langue* (the underlying structure of language) as opposed to *parole* (individual speech acts); the second is to focus on the synchronic dimension as opposed to the diachronic or historical development of language; and the third is to take spoken language as being exemplary of language—hence the fact that spoken language seems more present than writing. Saussure thus focuses exclusively on the first meaning of différance, namely “a ‘passive’ difference which has already been made and is available [or present] to the subject”.

2.2. Differing

Derrida, of course, rejects Saussure’s reduction on all three counts, but I will only briefly discuss Derrida’s complication of Saussure’s phonocentrism as this affords me the opportunity to make two points, namely that Derrida’s second difference (differing) does not discount materiality and that it is generative or constructive.

Certain ecologists suggest that all poststructurally inspired thinking denies materiality and nature (Salleh, 1997, xi; Merchant, 2003, 201; Spretnak, 1999, 64 – 65). However, the accusation that poststructuralism boils down to self-referential linguistic entrapment does not apply to Derrida’s poststructural deconstruction. When George Steiner speaks of the “autistic echo-chambers of deconstruction” (in Degenaar, 1986, 111), he is mistaken, because Derrida’s poststructurally inspired deconstruction is a broad theory of signs and meaning, a theory that complicates Saussure’s strategic reductions by suggesting that material differentiation is a major factor in the interminable construction of human language and meaning. Commentators on Derrida’s speaking/writing distinction often omit to draw attention to the fact that Derrida, by underscoring writing, is in fact highlighting the materiality of language. In Of grammatology (1976, 30–73), Derrida argues that the inscribing and interpretation of physical, mark-like signs is a major signpost along the way that language and meaning go. Derrida (1976) calls this proto-linguistic language “arche-writing”, suggesting that it is physically inscribed signs that summon meaning to appear: think, for instance, of the materiality and the differentiational skills that are required for an early human to follow the spoor of an animal, or to make and contemplate a handprint, or to lay out a trail by stacking stones atop one another. It is because of the materiality of arche-writing that Degenaar (1986, 93) comments on deconstruction as follows: “Writing now becomes a term which refers to a fundamental way of producing meaning by means of making differences.” The term language should thus be extended to include any activity in which we humans make marks, scribe and make footprints, sounds, grunts, moans, scratches and so on—in other words, where we generate meaning by drawing material and phonetic distinctions.

Thus, one can conceptualize the creation or construction of meaning as a process whereby both linguistic and material signifiers are, potentially, interminably involved in differential processes. I submit that for a significant part meaning is subject to language, but this does not exclude the fact that the diachronic, differential inscribing and interpretation of materiality is a collaborator in the construction of new language and meaning. In short, there exists strong reciprocity between materiality and language in the creation of meaning. When Derrida (1976, 201) thus says “there is no outside-text [adapted translation]”, he is not denying a reality out there—what he is saying, is that there exists no meaningful, unmediated, original material or conceptual presence to which we have direct access.

So, deconstruction does not deny the existence of materiality or reality, or for that matter, direct perception, but maintains that it is inchoate until we make it meaningful by interpretation or, more specifically, by distinguishing differences. Derrida’s poststructural deconstruction thus represents a shift from the notion of discovering aesthetic meaning through correspondence to the celebration and invention of new aesthetic meaning through the differential interplay between material and linguistic signifiers. This perspective underscores the lability and transformability of meaningful aesthetic experience. Poststructuralism will thus be wary of the manner in which the
essential-sameness camp tend to think sameness, harmony and equilibrium over differentiation, mediation and the constructive act of “situating signs differently”, as Degenaar(1987, 5) puts it.

2.3. Deferring
I am not going to spend much time on the third meaning of Derrida’s difference, “deferring”, except by pointing out that it can be interpreted as an admonishment of essentialist thinking and differentiation itself. Whereas Derrida’s first and second meanings draw attention to differences that have already been made, those that have been forgotten and those that are still to be drawn or inscribed, his third meaning of différance warns that no difference or distinction is intrinsic, essential, a-historical or a simple one-to-one binary. In short, all differences are conditional and provisional—in other words, they are only valid within a certain frame of time and place.

3. Other forms of differentiation and meaning
I now briefly discuss five other areas of differentiation: learning, emotion, ethical, social and branding. This is obviously a broad field with many accomplished researchers drawing much finer-grained distinctions, many through experimentation and statistics, than my space constraints and expertise in these fields allow. Nevertheless, my accounts compound into evidence that the first part of my hypothesis holds water, which is that the efficacy of differentiation to satisfy the human desire for meaning, including aesthetic meaning, should not be underestimated.

3.1. Learning differentiation
Long before Derrida’s philosophical différance (I will not go as far back as Plato and Aristotle), differentiation was a hotly researched topic in learning theory. In 1940, the educational theorist, Gibson (1940), tested the following hypothesis about the learning process in learners to arrive at a positive conclusion: “The hypothesis asserts that a major necessity of verbal learning is the establishment of discrimination among the items to be learned, and that this process of discriminating is actually a fundamental part of what is called generally the learning process” (197). Accordingly, learning is a process that progresses from broad categorization to fine-grained differentiation. Goldstone (1998, 600), a more recent researcher, concludes that contemporary evidence from a number of areas, of which neuroscience is especially noteworthy, supports Gibson’s hypothesis.

However, there is a platitude that our focus, namely aesthetic appreciation, is more a matter of unmediated perception (a subjective “I know what I like”) than cognitive learning. Gibson and Gibson (1955) overturn this assumption when they arrive at the conclusion that perceptual development is in essence a matter of learning to differentiate. They specifically discuss the perceptual skills of the wine-tasting connoisseur who, as we know, can classify wines significantly better than non-experts. Why? Do connoisseurs perceive and classify better because of their superior senses? No, according to them a “good nose” is the result of having “learned to taste and smell more of the qualities of wine, that is … [to] discriminate … more of the variables of chemical stimulation” (Gibson & Gibson, 1955, 35). The important point here is that the ability to perceive subtle perceptual differences improves with practice and experience. Or, put differently in relation to aesthetic perception, aesthetic perception and appreciation are learnt and enhanced through discrimination.

Apart from wine-tasting connoisseurs, another field in which experts demonstrate exceptional perceptual skills over non-experts are chicken-sexers. In this regard, Goldstone (1998, 599), following Biederman and Shiffrar (1987), notes that college students, after receiving instructions describing shape-based differences in day-old chicks, were nearly as good as the experts in “sexing” photographs of such chicks. The conclusion Goldstone (599) reaches is that cognitive differentiation facilitates sensate perception. If this is true (and I maintain it is), it straightforwardly means that if you are told or instructed what to look for, you are more likely to perceive it.

Let us return to our wine-tasting connoisseur who, according to Gibson and Gibson (1955, 35), “can consistently apply nouns to the different fluids of a class and … can apply adjectives to the
differences between the fluids". Similarly, according to Melcher and Schooler (1996, 601), wine connoisseurs, more so than novices, consistently relate perceptual stimuli to the terminology used by the wine-world. Although neither Gibson or Melcher and Schooler develop the relationship between sensate perception and language to any degree, I mention their observations because I will return to this later on.

3.2. Emotion differentiation
Research in emotion differentiation suggests that the better one differentiates between emotions, the better one is equipped to cope with them. Or, stated more precisely, people who differentiate between their emotions to a finer-grained degree than people who generalize them into broad categories are better at regulating them. This is referred to as "emotion-regulation abilities" (Kashdan, Barrett, & McKnight, 2015, 12). Furthermore, Todd Kashdan and co-writers (2015, 12) explain that emotion differentiation is not about intensity but about subtlety. They supply evidence that intensely felt broad emotion categorization affects emotional functionality and amelioration negatively, whereas less intensely felt, subtle, fine-grained differentiation has a positive effect.

Considering this along with the previous point in learning differentiation that differentiation facilitates sensate, aesthetic perception, I now posit that the more subtly we learn to differentiate sensate perceptions, the more complex and refined a field of aesthetic perception becomes and the more meaning we are likely to derive from it. This is supported by Fayn, Silvia, Erbas, Tiliopoulos, and Kuppens (2017, 2) and co-writers, who propose "that the ability to differentiate between different emotions in response to the arts should be related to more complex and nuanced aesthetic experiences". I cannot see why this does not also apply to our aesthetic responses to the natural environment as well.

As with learning differentiation, there are strong indications that the ability to subtly differentiate emotions and perceptions and to reap emotional amelioration and meaning is enhanced by emotion vocabulary. It is telling that experiments have shown that the social behaviour and academic performance of learners improve markedly after spending just 20 to 30 minutes a week learning new emotion words (Brackett, Rivers, Reyes, & Salovey, 2012). Following on this and additional evidence, Kashdan and co-writers (2015, 14) propose that "emotion differentiation depends on the development of emotion concepts". In addition, I propose that broad sensory perceptions, or undifferentiated aesthetic stimuli, stand to turn into something meaningful through fine-grained discursive differentiation. I will return to this later.

3.3. Ethical differentiation
Emotion differentiation refers not only to individuals differentiating between their subjective emotions, but also to intersubjective, emotional attachment to significant others, which, of course, immediately places it in the sphere of ethics. This is referred to as "differentiation of self" (Johnson, Buboltz, & Seemann, 2003; Bowen 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). I take this as meaning that mature, meaningful, caring, ethical relationship with a significant human other entails differentiating oneself from that person—of overcoming unresolved issues and emotional dependency.

However, does the above count for significant non-human others as well? I think so, but I am not sure. However, I did discover two tangential remarks that suggest that it does. In a discussion of human/animal relationships in zoo-keeping, Vining (2003, 96) writes as follows:

Finally, the idea of healing the human-nature split is complicated by the possibility that such a split may function in a variety of ways to simplify and order our relationship with the physical environment. For example, affection for animals (and perhaps the environment) may be enhanced more by the idea that they are separate from us. Is nature more likely to be on a pedestal, and perhaps protected, if we view it as a special "other" rather than a part of ourselves?
Another commentator, Krebs (2014), writes about how our appreciation of landscape makes us feel at home in the world. However, she makes it clear that her “at home in world” does not amount to immersion in the landscape by writing as follows: “Adults differentiate between themselves and the world and still they experience ‘Stimmung’ [mood, atmosphere, ambiance]” (1258).

These remarks (which both sound poststructurally inspired to me) put a question mark around the essentialist-sameness approach, or what Damla Donmez, as previously stated, calls the immersion-of-self-in-a-bigger-Self approach to environmental aesthetics and ethics. I previously noted a similarity between such an approach and a humanist aesthetic, and where it might appear that this camp because of its humanist-like nature aesthetic holds the moral high ground, structural and poststructural thinkers would, I suggest, argue for its moral bankruptcy. With reference to humanism in general, although I posit that this applies to the humanist-like approach to environmental aesthetics and ethics as well, West (1996, 11) writes that humanism can be criticized as a “denial of the ‘other’ [and a] reduction of difference to a devalued otherness for the sake of the security of our own identity”.

Poststructural differentiation, then, suggests that we should be wary of models that claim that differences have or can be permanently harmonized, and rather learn to live with never-ending contestation, of “continually destroying and producing new pictures of reality”, as Weiner, as previously quoted, puts it. As with an intersubjective human relationship, a strong case can thus be made that a caring, ethical relationship with a non-human other also entails a certain distance. In fact, I suggest that one can only care for nature if one is not at the mercy of or subjected to its vagaries. Or, seen from a different perspective, the notions of aesthetic appreciation, oneness and nurturing, only arise once humans have achieved some independence from nature, some distance from necessity.

Yet, the idea that some aesthetic, harmonious connection with nature is beneficial somehow persists, and even a poststructuralist like me cannot dismiss this outright. I thus posit that a degree of aesthetic connection with nature is a necessary, but, unfortunately, insufficient condition for moral environmentalism—what is additionally required is some cognitive agency independent of objects of unmediated (as far as this is possible) aesthetic perception and desire. One does not change one’s aesthetic preference, say, from cultivating an environmentally deleterious alien lawn to allowing indigenous shrubbery to take its course, exclusively and entirely on the grounds of an aesthetic appreciation of nature; what is additionally required is a complex process of intersubjective, cognitive, differential mediation to be persuaded that it is the morally correct thing to do.

### 3.4. Social differentiation
Because consumerist lifestyles are strongly implicated in ecological crises, I start this part with late 19th early 20th century theory of conspicuous consumption as it was developed by Veblen (1899). In short, his theory posits that people, especially the so-called “leisure class”, conspicuously overspend in a wasteful manner to distinguish themselves from less affluent classes, thereby enhancing their social standing. However, because those lower down the order attempt to emulate this, they, in fact, are guilty of the same wasteful, consumptive desire. “The result is that the members of each stratum accept as their ideal of decency the scheme of life in vogue in the next higher stratum, and bend their energies to live up to that ideal”, writes Veblen (in Trigg, 2001, 101). Veblen thus describes a process of social mobility and class distinction through wasteful, conspicuous consumption.

Although Veblen does write about how art and intellectual activities occupy some of the time of the leisure class, his theory is predominantly one dealing with economic social distinction. By contrast, Bourdieu’s theory of social distinction focuses on taste, or, for our purpose, how identity formation and class distinction are often aesthetically predicated. With specific reference to Immanuel Kant’s times and his theory of taste, Bourdieu (1984, 11–96) identifies an artistic and intellectual elite. Although this elite does not possess material capital (inherited wealth or commercial and industrial profit), they do possess a certain cultural capital that sets them apart from
materialistic, superficial bourgeois values. Cultural capital is thus symbolic and produces status distinctions based on hierarchical taste formation.

Furthermore, cultural capital, in distinction from conspicuous consumption, is predominantly accumulated subconsciously. Bourdieu calls this ingrained, subconscious process “habitus”, which, according to Trigg (2001, 113), is a “set of principles that influence unconscious decisions within an uncertain and changing environment”. Habitus thus describes taste formation, in other words, aesthetic and lifestyle preferences that are not subjective but intersubjective, and are unconsciously formed. Charles Harvey and co-writers (2011, 7) sum this up as follows: “Lifestyles give practical expression to the symbolic dimension of class identity. Tastes stem not from internally generated aesthetic preferences, but from the conditioning effect of habitus.”

By exploring philosophical, learning, emotional, ethical and social differentiation, I believe I have gathered sufficient evidence to claim that the first part of my hypothesis holds water, which, in short is that the efficacy of differentiation to satisfy the human desire for meaning, including aesthetic meaning, should not be underestimated. However, I have not yet sufficiently explored the second part, namely whether or not such processes impact significantly on conservation. To this end, I now explore branding differentiation, which is without doubt a significant factor in perpetuating unsustainable consumerist lifestyles.

3.5. Branding differentiation
Where Gregory Carpenter and co-writers (1994) research the branding strategy of product differentiation, they suggest that while meaningful differentiation distinguishes “a product or brand from competitors on the basis of an attribute that is relevant, meaningful, and valuable to consumers (339)”, by contradistinction, they find “that many brands also successfully differentiate on attributes that appears valuable but, on closer examination, is irrelevant to creating the implied benefit (339)”. They call this meaningless differentiation, and surprisingly find that consumers tend to pay substantially more for such products.

It is clear that according to the epistemology of these writers, meaning is predicated on the maximization of functionality, whereas there are, following the theories of Veblen, Bourdieu and others, strong indications that the authority of non-instrumental values such as aesthetic meaning often outweighs the authority of the former. Simply put, commercial product differentiation oftentimes, perhaps even mostly, does not “sell” functionality or utility, but, instead, a kind of aesthetically predicated symbolic cultural capital.

With reference to consumer culture, Dobers and Stannegard (2005, 324) draw the following related conclusion:

In market economies characterized by profusion, corporations engage in activities filling their offerings with aura, aesthetics, symbols and meaning. In such lands of plenty, conspicuous consumption becomes a thoroughly expressive activity and highly problematic for actors with ambitions to design a sustainable future. Our conclusion is that sustainability must ultimately be seen as intertwined with social processes such as fashion, identity and identity construction.

What Dobers and co-writer are saying is that consumption patterns are predicated on aesthetic product and lifestyle differentiation, and that this form of cultural capital stands the danger of impacting negatively on sustainability. They have laid a finger on the dark side of my hypothesis, because if it is true that the construction of surface aesthetic differences can satisfy the human desire for meaning, then, surely, harmful consumptive desire can also be constructed through such processes. In other words, if consumer culture through the construction of surface aesthetic differences delivers on un-green cultural capital—in other words, social distinction through unsustainable consumption—can nature compete? Unfortunately, there are strong indications that nature, despite her being an awesome “commodity”, is not winning. However, there may still be something positive to
take from this, because if unsustainable desires are constructed through differentiation, then, logical-
cally, one should also be able to construct desirable, sustainable aesthetic lifestyles; one where
humans invest in green cultural capital on a scale that would make a difference.

3.6. Misgivings
Not everyone accepts the heartfelt platitude that if each individual does her or his bit, so to speak,
it will compound into substantial ecological benefit. Those who question the efficacy of individual
lifestyle choices, broadly suggest that energy should rather be concentrated on international
macroeconomic policy and on ensuring adherence to sound policy (Hill, 2008; Karlsson, 2012;
Wapner & Willoughby, 2006). One telling point made by Paul Wapner and John Willoughby, is that
one should not assume that not having children, for instance, will necessarily benefit the environ-
ment. This is because the money saved is often spent on “unkosher” investments and other
unbeneficial activities such as travelling to distant tourist destinations, which results in CO₂
emissions of enormous magnitude. In this scenario, and if one lives in an affluent country, one
now has to weigh up leaving a lineage of children who consume disproportionate amounts of the
planet’s resources, against leaving the dubious legacy of a gigantic carbon footprint.

Although it is necessary that we, like Wapner and Willoughby, treat platitudes with suspicion,
in my opinion, they are mistaken. Firstly, when those working in the field of environmental
aesthetics draw attention to the impact of aesthetic lifestyle preferences on the environment,
they do not do so at the expense of policy—both are important—and, secondly, so-called
individual lifestyle choices do not in fact exist. This is because lifestyles, as I have indicated, are
fashioned on intersubjective social processes—in other words, they are predicated on identity
formation and differentiation through symbolic and aesthetic cultural capital. Optimistically,
I champion investment in green cultural capital and I hope that this happens on a scale that
will make a difference.

Another misgiving is advanced by Lundahl (2014), who argues against what he calls the “fash-
ionalizing” of green household products. He rather cynically (or perhaps realistically?) suggests
that so-called “green” products have become a fad, and that this has the effect of appeasing
individual conscience and consequently of stifling significant environmental action and sound
policy. Put differently, the “fashionalizing” of green products has a cathartic effect that suppresses
green activism. It is for this reason that I previously wrote that moral environmentalism requires
some cognitive agency independent of objects of aesthetic desire; in this case, independent of
aesthetically predicated “green” consumer hype and hypocrisy. We require sound research and the
dissemination of information on what are fads and what are not.

4. Differential performativity

4.1. A hedonistic aesthetic
Similar to my proposal of constructing green cultural capital through aesthetic and symbolically
predicated meaning, Soper (2008) champions the construction of a hedonistic aesthetic and
imagery, “a new erotics of consumption (571)”, as she puts it. She suggests transforming the
perception that sustainable lifestyles equate to deprivation and frugality, when it could, in fact,
mean avoiding stress, congestion, pollution and ill-health (567). She writes that “the chances of
developing or reverting to a more ecologically sustainable use of resources are dependent on the
emergence and embrace of new modes of thinking about human pleasure and self-realization”
(571). She suggests that “[a] turn to ‘other pleasures’ [is] not against the grain of desire but fully
consonant with it (582)”. I agree in the sense that instead of withdrawing into a subjective, greener
than thou, frugal, ascetic aesthetic, we should work on constructing desirable, sustainable inter-
subjective aesthetic lifestyles—in my terms, green cultural capital.

Furthermore, Soper, citing the German artist Yves Klein as a forbearer, draws attention to the
contribution that artists can make in constructing a hedonistic, anti-consumerist aesthetic.
Whereas her examples are from high or advanced art, I like to draw attention to popular media culture where excellent programs on eco-friendly lifestyles are escalating. Perhaps this is an indication that investment in green cultural capital is on the rise?

4.2. Differential aesthetic discourse

In a number of places in this essay my interlocutors drew attention to reciprocity between differentiation and language. I now wish to extend this by suggesting that one avenue for attracting investment in green cultural capital, is through aesthetically predicated differential discourse. Or, as I have previously suggested, if you are told or guided what to look for, you are more likely have a meaningful aesthetic experience. This might come across as somewhat contradictory and cerebral, considering that the magic of aesthetic experience and expression resides in its ineffability. However, the impossibility of fully articulating aesthetic experience does not mean that in real-life performativity a negative, unproductive relationship exists between these spheres.

I posit that real-life interplay between ineffable aesthetic sense perception and effable language, wherein one can include popular media, potentially promotes infinite expansion and regeneration of meaning in general and of the aesthetic sphere in particular. Consider, for instance, the follow arenas of intersubjective, aesthetic engagement:

In the arena of gardening, professional horticulturalists differentiate in words more subtly than amateur gardeners, and this increases the aesthetic appeal of gardens for many. Or, consider the arena of wine-tasting, where connoisseurs use words to sensitize people to distinguish subtle flavours, which draws people’s attention to those specific flavours and enables them to enjoy the wine more. In the artworld, consider the task of teaching observational drawing, where generations of teachers have guided learners to improve their drawing ability by using language to draw attention to subtle differences that would otherwise have gone unnoticed and, therefore, undrawn and less meaningful.

Consider the following nature-related area of aesthetic engagement: During guided bushwalks, guides use verbal differentiation to assist us city-dwellers to perceive phenomena that we would otherwise not notice. For example, when bush guides draw our attention to the fact that we can differentiate between the white and black rhino by noting that the latter has smaller, hook-shaped lips, they heighten and transform the aesthetic appeal of the bush.

In short, the more subtly or finely-grained we learn to differentiate, the more complex and refined a field of aesthetic perception becomes and the more meaning we are likely to derive from it. This is why I suggest that one avenue for attracting investment in green cultural capital, is through nature and environment oriented, aesthetically predicated differential discourse.

5. Conclusion

By exploring different forms of differentiation, it transpired that through finely-grained differentiation, elements such as chaotic perceptual stimuli, unregulated emotional triggers and especially broad undifferentiated aesthetic perception, can be transformed into something meaningful. It also came to the fore that the ability to differentiate can be learnt and improves with practice and exposure. I thus think it is fair to conclude that there is substantial evidence and sound argumentation that my hypothesis holds water, namely that the performative act of constructing and discerning surface differences effectively creates meaning, and that we should not underestimate the degree to which the desire for meaning in general and aesthetic meaning in particular, impacts, for better or for worse, on the natural environment.

One issue, however, that I have not addressed is whether humans are likely to take care of an object of aesthetic desire; or, considering our focus, are people likely to nurture a meaningfully differentiated natural environment? In the case of the arts, the answer is affirmative, because
people who have learnt to perceive subtle distinctions do tend to derive more meaning from art and are therefore likely to become patrons. Does the same apply to the natural environment? I think so, but at this time I have no theory or evidence to back this up.

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Notes
1. In some sense this does hit a cord; think for example of taking a country drive and to happenstance on a breath-taking landscape; surely one would be taken aback if others do not share one’s delight. This indicates that one presupposes that the landscape possesses a universal aesthetic essence that can be shared by all alike.
2. Also see Timothy McCune (2016).
3. This broad tendency also came to the fore in a recent special edition of The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 76(4) named “The good, the beautiful, the green: environmentalism and aesthetics”. It in concepts such as “sense-of-place” (Nomikos, 2018, “respect” (Parsons 2018) and “love” (Jamiesson 2019) were developed and scrutinized.
4. Interesting parallels can be drawn between this approach and the art aesthetic of the sublime.
5. Derrida’s deconstruction is, in the first place, a method for critically exposing the aporias in philosophico texts, but has acquired considerably wider application.

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