The Aesthetics of Rivers (Working Title)

By Peter Ha Advised by Daniel Pinkas Master's in Media Design HEAD—Genève 2025

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"We have ourselves become foreign to our everyday" — Ronald W. Hepburn

Introduction



Since moving to Geneva in September 2024 for this master's program at HEAD-Genève, I've walked over the viaduct in La Jonction over 400 times. This is the perfect spot to view the confluence of the Rhône and Arve rivers. Standing high above from a bird's eye view and seeing this natural phenomenon for the first time, I was immediately in awe. My first encounter with the confluence was on a sunny afternoon, bringing out the teal of the Rhône and the white, milky qualities of the Arve. The waters of the rivers swirled before merging downstream.



SEPT 10, 2024 | FIRST PHOTO TAKEN

SCREENSHOT FROM GOOGLE MAPS WITH LABELS

¹ HEPBURN, Ronald, 2004. Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty. In: CARLSON, Allen and BERLEANT, Arnold, eds. The aesthetics of natural environments. Peterborough, Ont.; Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, pp. 49–66. ISBN 978-1-55111-470-5.

After walking over this bridge many times, I've witnessed the confluence in different conditions. On some days, there's an imbalance of the rivers where one extends over the other, or a grey, cloudy sky dulls the colours. Looking back, I was lucky with my first impression of this sight. By walking this path repeatedly, I am able to appreciate my first experience because I have a frame of reference to compare it to. Walking was not only a means of getting from one place to another, but it also helped me connect with this place.

In the context of art, walking has been explored as a medium of expression. Richard Long, a British land artist, creates artworks with nature. He performs with nature through the simple act of walking. His piece from 1967, "A Line Made by Walking" shows a visible straight line in the grass field of Wiltshire, England. The end result is a black and white photograph of the field with no animals or humans, just the landscape and a trace of the path. There's a stark contrast between the wild and the line. Although there is no one visible in the photo, it serves as a reminder that a human was present. As time passes, we can imagine the line fading away and nature persisting.

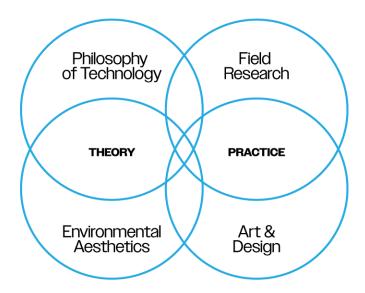
As Spanish philosopher Marta Tafalla notes, "[Richard Long]'s relationship with nature is that of one who passes through it, who recovers old, little-used paths or who opens up new ones." This points to our need to create our own paths, metaphorically and physically. Even in a built environment like a city, there are countless examples of paths designed by urban and landscape designers that are subverted by their walkers. We will look for the quickest and shortest path to our destination, often referred to as a "desire path". You can see this right outside HEAD—Genève, where paths are created in the landscaped area around the main building. In contrast to Long who wanders in nature, these desire paths in an urban environment are a by-product of our need to efficiently arrive at our destination. We are trying to save time, but Long is taking his time.

I'm somewhat in the middle. I walk across the bridge as a means to arrive at my destination, but I am also there to enjoy the rivers intermingling and Mont Salève and the Jura Mountains in the distance. I try to strike a balance between getting there and taking it in. Walking along the Viaduc de Ia Jonction, I have no option but to go in a straight line, but this does not mean I cannot appreciate what surrounds me. Although I have to admit, as time goes on, my initial fascination with the confluence blunts. The honeymoon fades and as I start to live my life in Geneva, it becomes part of my everyday. Occasionally, my romance with the site is rekindled.

This is my starting point and the inspiration for my thesis. I want to explore this relationship I have with this location and understand why I'm drawn to it, despite having no prior connection to Geneva before my arrival. An underlying and more general concern I want to examine is how we can connect, re-connect, and stay connected with nature in our built environment and have a deeper appreciation for it.

² TAFALLA, Marta, 2010. From Allen Carlson to Richard Long: The Art-Based Appreciation of Nature. . Vol. 2.

Intersections of Methods



My methodology integrates two core principles: theory and practice. I will briefly explore the philosophy of technology to bring attention to how we view nature through interventions and inventions. However, the primary focus will be on environmental aesthetics. This makes sense considering the context of this Master's program, as design can offer aesthetic experiences. But more importantly, this sub-branch of aesthetics aligns with the concept of mediating between nature and art. Environmental aesthetics will provide a framework for analyzing my research and guiding my practical outcomes. Furthermore, by interviewing artists and designers and examining relevant case studies, it will de-centre my perspective and allow me to take a broader view of approaching this concern of how to appreciate nature.

I have produced a collection of photos which will serve as a basis to examine the visual aesthetic of the rivers, and I have been mapping the soundscape of La Jonction to understand the acoustic and sonic characteristics of the place.³ My goal is to understand how to appreciate nature through various media and to develop my practice of field documentation and recording.

I've narrowed down on a specific site for my field research. I purposefully want to work with a location that is close to home, literally. The confluence is around the corner from me and is accessible to me at any time of day. Besides this being a convenient location, this contributes to

³ A collection of field recordings hosted on Aporee. This is a sound map project created by German artist Udo Noll as a way to document the soundscapes of places around the world. There's a standard and quality they uphold to ensure a good listening experience and to represent a location's soundscape accurately. https://aporee.org/maps/work/user.php?u=3849

my goal of building a situated practice. I want to be able to interact wholeheartedly in the site of investigation to understand it, to embody it, to thoroughly grasp its variations and nuances. I have tried to approach my interviews in a similar spirit. In a world where everything is accessible by a mouse click, we can conduct interviews online with anyone around the world. However, spontaneity and magic are lost when we are not face-to-face, and just as when we view nature only through the mediation of a screen.

Before exploring the appreciation of nature through the lens of environmental aesthetics, I would like to start with a few remarks about our relationship to technology and its connection to the natural world. I think it's essential to set this context, especially because of technology's ambivalence: while it can help us appreciate nature, it can also be detrimental to it.

Three Models of Technology to Nature

There is a contrast between technology and nature. One being of human invention and everything else that is not human. One that feels rigid and the other organic. One that is orderly and the other wild. However, this dichotomy, separation, and distance have contributed to our current problematic state of the Earth. But what if we thought about our relationship differently?

Mimesis

From the perspective of the ancient Greeks, they understood technology to be a form of mimesis, that is, "technology learns from or imitates nature". This positions nature as a teacher, helping us find solutions to our human development. We can see instances of this with biomimicry and our desire to be in the air. From the first attempts of flapping our arms to studying the aerodynamic properties of birds. By learning from nature, we improved our flying techniques.

Reserve

According to Martin Heidegger, traditional or pre-modern technology is poeisis (bringing something into presence). For example, the windmill draws on wind to produce energy. We are not controlling the wind but instead using the wind as is to produce energy. On the other hand, modern technology forcefully attempts to reveal nature through extraction, and in this sense,

⁴ FRANSSEN, Maarten, LOKHORST, Gert-Jan and VAN DE POEL, Ibo, 2024. Philosophy of Technology. In: ZALTA, Edward N. and NODELMAN, Uri (eds.), Tha windmill harnessese Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy [online]. Fall 2024. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. Retrieved from: https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2024/entriesechnology/ [accessed 24 April 2025].

⁵ PRIMROSE, S. B., 2020. *Biomimetics: nature-inspired design and innovation*. Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley. ISBN 978-1-119-68334-6.

⁶ Heidegger: The Question Concerning Technology, [online]. Retrieved from : https://www.english.hawaii.edu/criticalink/heidegger/quide5.html [accessed 6 October 2025].

nature is seen as a standing reserve. The world is subjected to the grip of technology and is reduced to a reserve of raw material. We are challenging what nature is capable of. For example, we have altered the landscape of rivers and figured out that we can produce energy through hydroelectric power plants. There are 24 dams in total along the Rhône, with 19 located in France and 5 in Switzerland, which regulate the river's flow while generating electricity. The one in Geneva, located at Seujet, accounts for 1% of the city's electricity consumption. In comparison to large hydrodams, this is a relatively small amount as it primarily serves as a way to regulate water flow. However, this small amount illustrates that technology will maximize a resource while revealing what it can do for us.

Prosthetic

The last model is based on the idea that technology comes from within us. For Ernst Knapst, he viewed technology as "organ projection". In a similar claim from Marshal McLuhan, technology is an extension of man. Where Knapst refers to organs, McLuhan means our senses. These distinctions perhaps convey the same concept, because if we say 'our eyes,' we are referring to the organ and our sight. The way that cameras, telescopes, and microscopes are all technologies that enhance our sight. Even though Knapst and McLuhan arrive at the same idea, I prefer Knapst's concept of "organ projection" because it has a relationship to the body and connotes vitality.

I would like to propose that we rethink our relationship to nature through this model. What if we saw nature through this lens, and instead of extraction, we are trying to view non-biological entities like a river as full of life with their own internal organs? The concept of viewing nature with organs dates back to ancient mythologies, where natural entities are personified. This personification is a human projection, and any understanding we have of the world will always be a projection of our human experience.

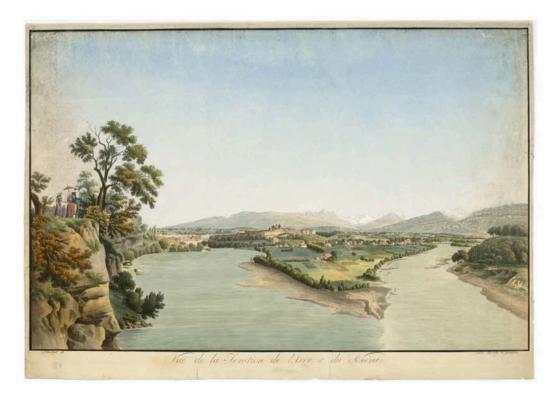
The difference between personification and seeing rivers with organs is slightly different. The act of personification is an attempt to empathize with nature, while viewing a river with an organic perspective is to understand it and to engage with it in a way that amplifies its function. What I propose is to see nature as it is. This line of thought also led to the creation of the field of environmental aesthetics. To view nature for what it is and to find ways of appreciating that is not related to art.

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⁷ KAPP, Ernst et al., 2018. *Elements of a philosophy of technology: on the evolutionary history of culture*. Minneapolis (Minn.): University of Minnesota press. Posthumanities, 47. ISBN 978-1-5179-0226-1.
⁸ MCLUHAN, Marshall and LAPHAM, Lewis H., 1995. *Understanding media: the extensions of man*. 2nd printing. Cambridge (Mass.) London: The MIT press. ISBN 978-0-262-63159-4.

The Picturesque View of La Jonction

GENÈVE, JONCTION DU RHÔNE ET DE L'ARVE



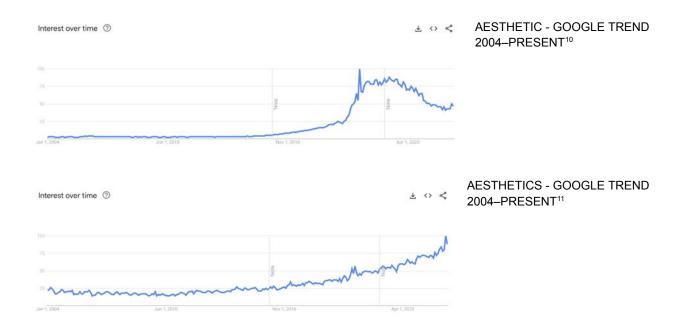
CARL LUDWIG HACKERT (1740 - 1796), DESSINATEUR FRANÇOIS MONTY (1778 - 1830), ÉDITEUR 4E QUART 18E S. (AVANT 1796)

That's So Aesthetic

The word "aesthetic" has been co-opted by people on social media to refer to something stylish or pretty, reducing what we see to the pure visual. Instead of saying, "that looks nice", we have now replaced it with "that's so aesthetic". The colloquial usage within a social media context involves finding the best way to present a moment and reducing an experience to its purely visual aspects. At worst, when pointing to an object and saying this, it is devoid of any true meaning. Language changes and words shift, but as Gabriel E. Lipkowitz has noted, "the central problem with our present usage of 'aesthetic,' ... is its omission of nearly all meaning traditionally associated with the otherwise very meaningful term." While I agree with this

⁹ NASSAUWEEKLY, 2019. The Problem with Calling Something "Aesthetic." Nassau Weekly [online]. 3 March 2019. Retrieved from: https://nassauweekly.com/the-problem-with-calling-something-aesthetic/ [accessed 30 September 2025].

statement, this reduction can also provide insight into how we've previously judged what is beautiful.



Nature's Beauty

In the 18th century, beauty was understood objectively through formalism. This approach focused on observable qualities in paintings. A key concept was "disinterestedness," where the perception of an object's beauty was independent of personal self-interest.¹² Meaning, a person had nothing to gain personally by identifying an object as beautiful. It also provided a common language for people to be on the same page.

¹⁰ Google Trends, Google Trends [online]. Retrieved from:

https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&q=aesthetic&hl=en [accessed 30 September 2025].

¹¹ Same parameters as the previous one. The term here is not referring to the field of study of "aesthetics" but instead the colloquial usage. Google Trends, Google Trends [online]. Retrieved from: https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&g=aesthetics&hl=en [accessed 30 September 2025].

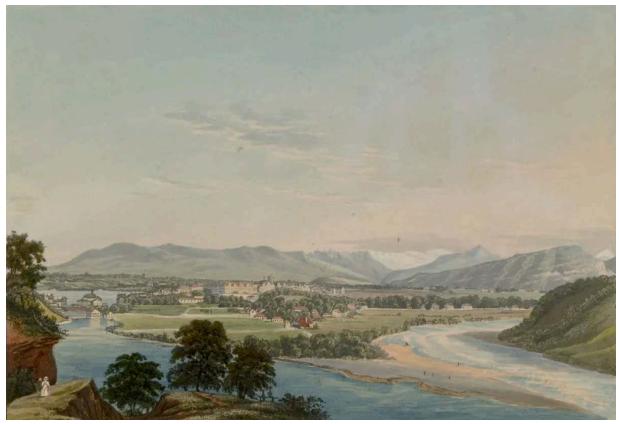
¹² PARSONS, Glenn and CARLSON, Allen, 2024. Environmental Aesthetics. In: ZALTA, Edward N. and NODELMAN, Uri (eds.), The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy [online]. Fall 2024. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. Retrieved from:

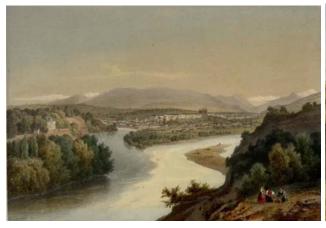
https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2024/entries/environmental-aesthetics/ [accessed 15 June 2025].



VIEW OF GENEVA FROM THE CONFLUENCE OF THE RHONE AND THE ARVE ENGRAVED BY FRIEDRICH SALATHE (1793-1860) (COLOURED ENGRAVING) ORIGINAL BY JEAN DUBOIS

This framework allows for an analysis of the visual qualities in the painting "Geneva From The Confluence Of The Rhone And The Arve." For instance, its composition utilizes the rule of two-thirds to balance the sky and ground. There's a contrast between the vast sky and the detailed foreground. The soft colours and yellow undertones create a warm morning atmosphere. The inclusion of people in the painting also serves to establish a sense of scale. By now, we are familiar with formal descriptions and their legacy in art and design.







Perception of nature's beauty also extends beyond mere description. The quest for the picturesque positions nature's existence as one that is here to please us and serve us.¹³ This is evident in scenic tourism, where the allure of natural beauty motivates travellers to destinations near and far.¹⁴ Historically, this is reflected in paintings featuring people in the foreground

 ¹³ This is a point from R. Rees who Carlson quotes. CARLSON, Allen, 1979. Appreciation and the Natural Environment. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. Vol. 37, no. 3, p. 267. DOI <u>10.2307/430781</u>.
 ¹⁴ PARSONS, Glenn and CARLSON, Allen, 2024. Environmental Aesthetics. In: ZALTA, Edward N. and NODELMAN, Uri (eds.), The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy [online]. Fall 2024. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. Retrieved from:

https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2024/entries/environmental-aesthetics/ [accessed 15 June 2025].

against natural backdrops, and today, in selfies taken in natural settings. While nature's beauty is viewed objectively and we can all agree on what is beautiful in nature, it is still within our self-interest of pleasure. And so the question persists: what can nature do for us?

Landscape Model

Landscape paintings helped our understanding of concepts like beauty and the picturesque, and contributed to the development of art theory. They also served as important aesthetic objects that helped us grasp our perspective on nature. Allen Carlson noted that the way we appreciate landscape paintings is similar to how we appreciate nature:

When aesthetically appreciating landscape paintings ... the emphasis is not on the actual object (the painting) nor on the object represented (the actual prospect); rather it is on the representation of the object and its represented features. Thus in landscape painting the appreciative emphasis is on those qualities which play an essential role in representing a prospect: visual qualities related to coloration and overall design. 15

For example, in the landscape paintings of La Jonction, we can't see the leaves on trees, blades of grass on the ground, or the rocks along the riverbanks. When we view a landscape from a distance, we reduce it, first and foremost, to colour and form. Carlson suggests that we are not appreciating the objects themselves (leaves, trees, grass, rocks), but rather their visual properties.

This model also brings up another key point by Ronald Hepurn: art is framed and nature is unframed.¹⁶ Paintings and other art forms are framed because they are bound by their dimensions, selection of scene, descriptions and curation around the art. In contrast, nature is unframed because it's constantly changing from moment to moment, season to season, year to year. In other words, art is contained, and nature is wild.

Given this brief historical context, we can now examine how to move beyond the picturesque and the frame, which can be particularly challenging within a visual culture that is increasingly shaped by social media. Hepburn and Carlson, along with many others in the field of environmental aesthetics, have answers to this question. I'll apply their claims to discuss works produced by myself and other artists and designers with the goal of arriving at new models of appreciation.

¹⁵ ibid.

¹⁶ HEPBURN, Ronald, 2004. Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty. In: CARLSON, Allen and BERLEANT, Arnold, eds. The aesthetics of natural environments. Peterborough, Ont.; Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, pp. 49-66. ISBN 978-1-55111-470-5.

A Photographic Study of the Rhône and Arve Rivers



Over the three-month period from April to June 2025, I documented the Rhone and Arve rivers with a Nikon Z 6II with a 24-70mm f/4 S lens. The photos are of the rivers from various vantage points around the confluence, primarily from the viaduct. Initially, the photos served as image documentation and field research, but after printing and viewing them outside of a screen, I was able to reflect on the medium of photography and how it can facilitate an appreciation of nature.





Format and Display

A photograph immediately frames nature. Jonathan Friday states, "the photographer has at her disposal a wide range of techniques and materials that can be employed to exert control over the appearance of the final image". ¹⁷ This is everything from the hardware to post-production. I would also add, first and foremost, it starts with the person directing their attention and choosing when to press the shutter button.

¹⁷ FRIDAY, Jonathan, 1999. Looking at Nature through Photographs. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*. Vol. 33, no. 1, p. 25. DOI <u>10.2307/3333733</u>.

With this exercise, my attempt is to address the frame. The photos printed are 12.6 cm x 9 cm on regular printer paper. The quality of the paper was less important since I was concerned with how to organize the photos in a coherent display. The focus was on how to present the final image once it is produced. By presenting multiple photos, the viewer can see beyond just one moment; more specifically, they can see a season in its entirety. This is similar to David Hockney's photographic collages, where he arranges photos from different vantage points and assembles them to create a new scene. In contrast, I've created an orderly display to represent what the location of the confluence is like. There's a clear horizontal axis with the viaduct, and a vertical axis with the dyke separating the rivers while leading to the lookout point.

The dimensions of the individual photos are small. Therefore, so is the overall display. While there are close-ups to see details, scale could contribute to the appreciation of the rivers by making them appear larger. This would make the images confrontational, as if you were there in person. One key aspect of nature is that we move through it. We are immersed in it which brings us closer to nature and reduces the distance that is present in art. However, is it necessary to replicate nature as if you are there to appreciate it through photos?



Collection of Evidence

With digital photography, we are no longer constrained by the economic limitations of film. This allows us to document over a period of time and enables us to create a series of photos at ease. There is an aesthetic experience occurring when we see a collection of photos that belong together. This is evident in Instagram carousel images, which allow users to post a series of related photos, as well as in monolithic coffee photo books that highlight one object, or a

¹⁸ PARSONS, Glenn and CARLSON, Allen, 2024. Environmental Aesthetics. In: ZALTA, Edward N. and NODELMAN, Uri (eds.), The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy [online]. Fall 2024. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. Retrieved from:

https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2024/entries/environmental-aesthetics/ [accessed 15 June 2025]. ¹⁹ Friday answers with a no and more in depth than what I am able to do within this thesis context. FRIDAY, Jonathan, 1999. Looking at Nature through Photographs. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*. Vol. 33, no. 1, p. 25. DOI 10.2307/3333733.

museum curating a collection. This can be extended to a series of photos of the same subject matter in nature. It's the diversity and variation that draw us in.

This diversity of photos informs us of the landscape. This implies that we appreciate learning about the environment, whether it's the changes within a season or the appearance of the water's surface at different times of day. As Hepburn puts it, "Nature is not a 'given whole,' nor indeed is knowledge about it".²⁰ This suggests that nature cannot be aesthetically experienced as a whole but instead its parts. It also implies a cognitivist view that we appreciate nature through knowledge about it.²¹

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²⁰ HEPBURN, Ronald, 2004. Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty. In: CARLSON, Allen and BERLEANT, Arnold, eds. The aesthetics of natural environments. Peterborough, Ont.; Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, pp. 49–66. ISBN 978-1-55111-470-5.

²¹ PARSONS, Glenn and CARLSON, Allen, 2024. Environmental Aesthetics. In: ZALTA, Edward N. and NODELMAN, Uri (eds.), The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy [online]. Fall 2024. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. Retrieved from:

https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2024/entries/environmental-aesthetics/ [accessed 15 June 2025].

Expressive Qualities



Even though a photo flattens a 3D environment to a 2D visual, we are still drawn to it. Why is that? This suggests that we do not need to be immersed in nature. With photography, it is possible to capture aesthetic qualities of a river beyond what we can perceive with our eyes. Through long exposure, we can depict the flowing quality. And as with any long-exposure photography, it's about motion and light. In this example, the attempt is to capture the aesthetic quality of movement. In person, you get a sense of movement from the shimmering light on the waves, but you do not see the continuous lines moving in different directions. It is only apparent through photography and can only be experienced through a photo, not in person.

When we are viewing a photo of nature that we are not able to experience in person, Friday argues that this is photography's ability to capture nature's expressiveness. This goes beyond documentation and not presenting exactly what we see in person. For example, the long-exposure image conveys the confluence's power, and if caught, we could be swept up in it. It could also express the fleeting moment that is inherent to nature. To perceive nature's expression is to feel an emotion towards it and not just recognize its beauty through visual properties.

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²² FRIDAY, Jonathan, 1999. Looking at Nature through Photographs. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*. Vol. 33, no. 1, p. 25. DOI <u>10.2307/3333733</u>.

Expressive contrast in the photo also contributes to our aesthetic experience. In design, we know that contrast helps us discern visual information, but what about in nature? For Hepburn, it's a "paradoxical union" of a natural object to perceive it as calm but yet energetic.²³ There's a tranquillity with the soft teal colour of the confluence, yet excitement through the movement of the water. This suggests that we appreciate the different aspects of nature, and when captured in a photo, it triggers our aesthetic appreciation of both the photo and nature.

Quantifying an Image

Just thoughts here and not sure if I should include.

Talk about how there's been a study about creating an equation to quantify scenic beauty. I'm trying to find a way to transition into the next chapter, which will focus on the cognitivist view. The point I wanted to make is that dissecting an image using mathematical or scientific methods detracts from the aesthetic experience. An idea that has been expressed by Hepburn already.

Although, I do want to make a connection that NEM (natural environmental model), can contribute to our deeper appreciation of nature once we've moved beyond the aesthetic appreciation. However, then the question is, how does NEM relate to aesthetics, and rather aligns with science?

The study is from here SHAFER, E. L. and MIETZ, J., 1970. *It Seems Possible to Quantify Scenic Beauty in Photographs*. Upper Darby, PA: USDA Northeastern Forest Experiment Station.

²³ HEPBURN, Ronald, 2004. Landscape and the Metaphysical Imagination. In: CARLSON, Allen and BERLEANT, Arnold, eds. The aesthetics of natural environments. Peterborough, Ont.; Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, pp. 127–140. ISBN 978-1-55111-470-5.

Rivers through Numbers

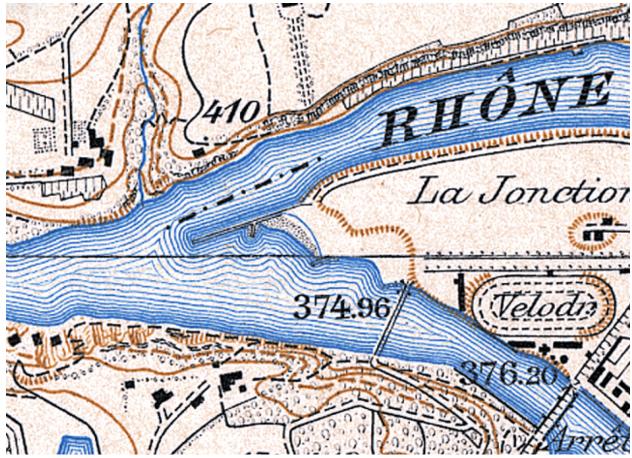


Literally through numbers, a phone number, I've been receiving data about the Rhône and Arve rivers to my mobile on a daily basis.

Cognitivist lens, producing knowledge about the rivers, well in this example data, but the data could lead to knowledge. For example, seeing the increase of temperature relates to climate change. Not necessarily NEM because it's not about natural history or the origins of the rivers. So maybe the title of the chapter needs reconsideration.

Thought this could be a good lead into cartography because it's a way to try to objectively look at the land. It's a different type of image of the landscape.

Mapping La Jonction

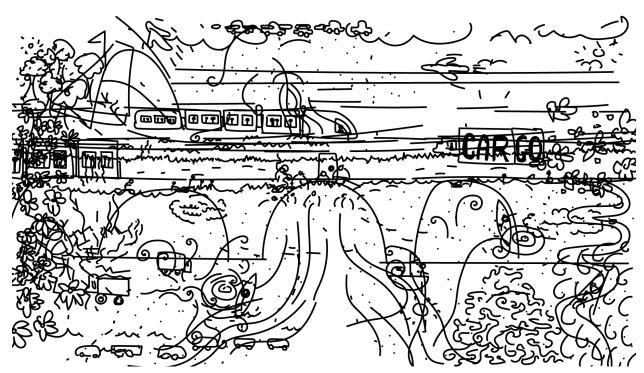


FROM GEO.ADMIN.CH

Making sense of an environment through mapping. This requires being in the space and being immersed. It's another way of understanding a place that goes beyond just the formal qualities because you can embody the location. And with this, it can lead to psychogeography, opposed to cartography.

In contrast to the satellite and cartographic maps, psychogeographic maps are personal and objectively incorrect. Instead, they try to capture the essence through the line drawings or compartmentalize the location into its individual components. This is my individual experience not just from this exercise, but from a culmination of going along this path on a daily basis.

Here can reference Nicolas Nova's observation exercise on psychogeography and Aesthetic Appreciation And The Many Stories About Nature by Thomas Heyd.



SOUND + LANDMARK + VEHICLES AND PEOPLE + ODOUR MAPS OF THE CONFLUENCE AREA

Giving Voice to Rivers

With sound, there's also the idea of a voice. Personifying/humanizing rivers and referencing Ronal Hepurn on his ideas of humanizing nature. Support with projects such as Natural Networks by Six:Thirty x Matteo Loglio and The Ecological Intelligence Agency by Superflux which uses a poetic tone for personifying the rivers.

Escaping Soundscapes and Re-Attuning to Them

We've been disconnected from the natural world. By going inside, we have blocked out the sounds from nature and when we are in the city, we are going from Point A to Point B with a mission to arrive at our destination. We have technological devices to distract us and headphones to disconnect us from our fellow humans and more than human.

Field Recording Practice

Conclusion