

Unifying Art and Nature: Brady and Eco on Interpretation

di Alberto L. Siani

ABSTRACT:

The issue of interpretation is a fundamental one in aesthetics, whether we are dealing with artworks or with natural environments. Whereas interpretation of art is an established topic in philosophy, this is less the case for interpretation of nature. Emily Brady's article *Interpreting Environments* is an illuminating instance in this regard. While I mostly concur with the framework she proposes, in this paper I address two interconnected points that appear problematic and which derive from a postulated difference between artworks and nature as objects of interpretation. The first is the *ad hoc* introduction of a notion of respect for nature as an aim of our interpretive processes, juxtaposed to the pleasure we may gain from these processes themselves. The second is a still rather essentialistic or naively realistic conception of nature. I suggest that, by avoiding the above mentioned postulated difference, both points can be reformulated without prejudice to her overall approach and to its further development. To this aim I will establish a dialogue between Brady's paper and Umberto Eco's theses on interpretation in general and of literary texts in particular¹.

KEYWORDS:

Brady; Eco; Environmental Aesthetics; Interpretation; Pragmatism

1.

One of the most important distinctions between aesthetic experience and enjoyment in art vs. nature seems to be that, in the former case, aesthetic experience and enjoyment are somehow connected to the search for the artwork's meaning, whereas talking of the meaning of a natural environment does not seem to make much sense. This distinction plays a role also in Brady's discourse, though she underlines that it must be weighed against the type of

¹ I intended to present this paper at the 2020 annual congress of the SIE – Italian Society of Aesthetics and to discuss my theses with Emily Brady, who was invited as a keynote speaker. The congress should have taken place in Bologna in April, but had to be rescheduled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I had chosen to bring in dialogue Brady with Umberto Eco as an homage to “his” city. Hopefully a live dialogue will be possible soon.

environment we are interpreting:

[...] Artistic intention becomes the focus of debate on what is relevant [...]. Aesthetic appreciation of the environment involves interpretation to a greater or lesser degree, depending on several factors: the type of landscape – cultural or natural; the nature of the particular aesthetic object; and the situation of the individual and context of appreciation. With nature, which has no content, the boundaries of interpretation are less clear, and there is more freedom on the part of the interpreter in terms of what sources they draw upon for interpretation. (Brady 2002, p. 62)

However, already beginning with Barthes' assertion of the "death of the author", the role of the author's intention in the interpretation and appreciation of artworks has been more and more challenged, if not straight-out rejected in many theories. Brady herself notices this point, while at the same time remaining committed to the classic difference between art and nature in this regard:

Theories of interpretation in the arts are often distinguished according to the role of 'biographical studies' in guiding and justifying interpretation. Although this is a complex debate with many different positions, basically, 'intentionalists' argue that interpretation is tied to the artist's intention, where an actual or hypothetical intention determines a correct interpretation. 'Anti-intentionalists' cite problems associated with understanding artistic intention and they argue that the artwork is more free-floating, which allows for pluralism in interpretation. More radical views hold that appreciators have a hand in constructing the work through interpretations of it. The intentional distinction is not applicable to more natural environments where humans have a minor role. (Brady 2002, p. 58)²

I will argue that the persistence of a structural distinction between artworks and natural environments based on the presence vs. absence of intention leads to some problematic implications in Brady's argument, which can be avoided through a more consistently pragmatist reformulation. To this aim, I now refer to Eco's theory of the interpretation.

I begin by taking a look at Eco's 1990 Tanner Lectures. Eco's lectures and the ensuing debate with Rorty and Culler are illuminating for my topic, as we find there a broad spectrum of theories of textual interpretation. Eco, after advocating in previous works a broadly conceived reader's right to contribute to create the meaning of the text, is concerned in these lectures with contrasting an "anything goes" version of this right. To this aim, while still maintaining that the meaning cannot be explained in terms of the *intentio auctoris* (the intention of the author), he introduces the notion of *intentio operis* (the intention of the work)

²For a broader presentation of her point of view on the relationship between art and environment, and between culture and nature, including the issue of interpretation, see also the third chapter of Brady 2003.

as a counterbalance to an unlimited, relativistic right of the *intentio lectoris* (the intention of the reader). The claim is hence that meaning coincides neither with a goal set by the author, nor with whatever the empirical reader sees in the text, but rather it needs to be conceived as an open, yet not unlimited set of possibilities contained in the work itself. Rorty straightforwardly dismisses the whole idea of a meaning immanent to the text. He does so by rejecting the distinction between “interpretation” and “use”: all we do when reading a text is “using” it for any purpose we like, and the issue of an alleged correspondence between our reading and an inner meaning of the text should not concern us. Finally, Culler rejects both Rorty’s arbitrary criteria and Eco’s criticism of Deconstruction’s own arbitrariness by pointing out the constraints imposed by the given context on each textual interpretation, highlighting at the same time the potential infinity of contexts, as well as the meaningfulness of what the text does *not* say. He also points out the cognitive and critical value of investigating the mechanisms through which a text produces meaning.

It is clear already from these brief remarks that, despite their irreconcilable differences, none of the authors involved in the debate and covering a wide spectrum of positions in the philosophy of interpretation attributes importance to the author’s intention with regard to the discovery of the meaning of the text. In other terms, none of them believes that whatever the author thought or intended puts a constraint on our interpretation. The “death”, or at least the absence of the author in our interpretive practices seems to remove an apparently obvious difference between artistic and environmental interpretation and to put them in a similar situation. If this is the case, then, rather than focusing on this classic difference, it may make more sense to start with a fundamental similarity, and to look for philosophical positions on interpretation that seem plausible independently of their object. I suggest to downplay the difference in Brady’s discourse by showing how her “moderate anti-intentionalism” shows a significant similarity to Eco’s approach. Both authors attempt to design a middle ground between full relativism and full monism, i.e. between the thesis that every interpretation is acceptable and the one that only one interpretation is true. Eco writes, for example: “I have stressed that it is difficult to say whether an interpretation is a good one, or not. I have however decided that it is possible to establish some limits beyond which it is possible to say that a given interpretation is a bad and far-fetched one. As a criterion, my quasi-Popperian stricture is perhaps too weak, but it is sufficient in order to recognize that *it is not true that everything goes*” (Eco 1992, p. 144).

Brady supports

critical pluralism rather than critical monism. Searching for a single, correct interpretation, being guided by just one story, would be counterproductive not only to what environments themselves demand, but also to what we should expect from ourselves as engaged participants. Critical pluralism sits between critical monism and “anything goes”, the subjective approach of some post-modern positions. It argues for a set of interpretations that are deemed acceptable but which are not determined according to being true or false. (Brady 2002, pp. 64-65)

Besides, both authors develop this middle ground through the idea that an acceptable interpretation sits, again, somewhere in the middle between the unlimited right of the interpreting subject and the community’s established consensus. Eco writes:

C.S. Peirce, who insisted on the conjectural element of interpretation, on the infinity of semiosis, and on the essential *fallibilism* of every interpretative conclusion, tried to establish a minimal paradigm of acceptability of an interpretation on the grounds of a consensus of the community [...]. What kind of guarantee can a community provide? I think it provides a factual guarantee. Our species managed to survive by making conjectures that proved to be statistically fruitful. (Eco 1992, p. 144)

As for Brady, we read:

An interpretation must be defensible, it cannot be outlandish, irrelevant, or the whim of one person. Besides cohering with the aesthetic and non-aesthetic descriptions of the aesthetic object, the validity of interpretations must also be relativized to the background beliefs, values and cultural and historical context of interpreters. This will allow for flexibility, especially in respect of contrasting cultural meanings given to environments. (Brady 2002, p. 65)

Hence, both for Eco and for Brady, even though it is not possible to establish a univocal and universal criterion to assess, in each case, which is the correct interpretation, it is possible to evaluate the acceptability and defensibility of any given interpretation based on some minimal, weak, fallibilist standards. Both authors clearly employ a pragmatist strategy³, according to which we should no longer aim to find “strong” criteria for interpretations that are “true”, but rather “weak” ones for interpretations that are “acceptable” or “reasonable”. As Brady states:

Widening the scope of knowledge drawn upon does not, however, take away the problem of how we distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable interpretations of the environment. We have to pin down not those interpretations that are true, but those that are reasonable, given particular cultures and types of environments. (Brady 2002, p. 62)

³ Here I am not able to focus on Eco’s distinction between Peirce’s pragmatism and Rorty’s pragmatism.

This striking similarity between the two authors also seems to further support the idea of having at least a general theoretical framework in philosophy of interpretation, valid both for artistic and environmental aesthetics⁴. On the contrary, as I will show in the next section, holding on to the classic, intention-based difference between the latter may have problematic implications, as Brady's reflections on the aim of interpretation, in my opinion, show.

2.

As with the issue of meaning, also with regard to the issue of the aim of interpretation, positions are quite varied within philosophy of art, as Brady herself notices:

In debates about interpretation in the arts, philosophers have disagreed about the proper aim of interpretation, that is, what it is that we should be doing when we interpret works of art. Some argue that the aim of interpretation is to achieve an understanding of an artwork, and this is done by reaching a correct interpretation by reference to the artist's intention. Others argue that the proper aim is to maximize enjoyable aesthetic experience, and this is achieved through a range of acceptable interpretations of the work. Still others argue that there is no single proper aim, but many" (Brady 2002, p. 61)

But, she continues, "this issue has relevance to the environment too, where we need to ask what exactly is the point of interpreting the environment in the *aesthetic context*" (Brady 2002, p. 61). Once again, she opts for a middle ground between cognitivism and humanism/hedonism, while still underscoring a general difference between artefacts and environments:

Geographers and ecologists interpret landscapes to achieve knowledge. Indigenous people living in the land want to understand and give significance to the environment that is their home through spiritual, mythological and other means. Although I find it a little on the humanistic (or even the hedonistic) side, the second position is more appropriate to the environmental aesthetic context. When no longer dealing with straightforward artefacts, [...] the proper aim of interpretation is to enrich aesthetic appreciation in ways that enhance our aesthetic encounters with the environment. Interpretive activity ought to involve a variety of imaginative ways to discover meaning in our environment, ways that increase the value we find there. (Brady 2002, p. 61)

⁴I should clarify that I am not arguing for an undifferentiated, monolithic theory of interpretation. I am saying that we should aim for a unitary framework, and that differences are to be made not so much between artworks and natural environments, or between specific artistic forms/types of environments, but rather on a case-by-case basis.

She then further specifies that “this activity ought not be directed, however, at increasing our pleasure. Rather, we should hope for, as side effects to some extent, greater sensitivity to nature’s qualities and with that, greater respect for nature. This is more familiar ground to an aesthetic approach than seeking understanding through a single, correct interpretation” (Brady 2002, p. 61). While this approach seems consistent with Brady’s proposed “cultural pluralism”, one may ask why the interpretive activity should not be directed at maximising our pleasure and instead produce a greater respect for nature. After all, our pleasure and our respect for nature do not seem to necessarily contradict each other. In fact, in many cases, they may be seen as corroborating each other. In my understanding, Brady’s point is that our aesthetic pleasure should not be the only or ultimate aim of interpreting the environment, as this may lead, first, to a reductively humanistic or humanizing view of nature (and hence, to interpretations that would be “unreasonable”) and, second, to conceiving, shaping, and even destroying the environment, seen as a fully disposable human playground rather than a complex, independent, sophisticated organism deserving our respect.

These concerns are certainly cogent, but the way they are presented is, I think, problematic in two respects. First, the idea that the aim of interpretation is building a greater respect for nature, without further qualifications, seems to abruptly introduce a legitimate ethical concern whose systematic connection with the developed theory is however unwarranted. Second, this idea implies conceiving of nature in a rather essentialistic way, as an entity endowed with an internal essence and meaning independent of our relation to it, which is at odds with Brady’s main pragmatist interpretive tenet: “With environments that are mostly natural, this question would be odd since there is no meaning internal to landscapes. We bring meaning to them or assign meaning through cultural frameworks. There is still an attempt to make sense of something, but not in terms of searching for meaning that already exists” (Brady 2002, p. 58). As I will show in short, this apparent inconsistency has to do with the persistence, in Brady’s discourse, of the structural difference between artefacts and natural environments mentioned above.

I think it is possible to avoid these problems while at the same time preserving Brady’s philosophical intention, with which I concur. To this goal, I suggest we consider Eco’s answer to the issue of the aim of interpretation to see whether it may contribute to a reformulation. Following Peirce, Eco argues in general that the

issue of meaning involves some reference to a purpose. The notion of purpose marks the persistence of a realistic element in Eco's Peircean approach:

A purpose is, without any shade of doubt, and at least in the Peircean framework, connected with something which lies outside language. Maybe it has nothing to do with a transcendental subject, but it has to do with referents, with the external world, and links the idea of interpretation to the idea of interpreting according to a given meaning. (Eco 1994, p. 38)

This realistic element is then better qualified in a non-naïve, but rather conjectural sense, i.e. as "Habit":

The Habit is a disposition to act upon the world, and this possibility to act, as well as the recognition of this possibility as a Law, requires something which is very close to a transcendental instance: a community as an intersubjective guarantee of a nonintuitive, nonnaively realistic, but rather conjectural, notion of truth. (Eco 1994, p. 39)

The Habit is hence conceived as a disposition to act, external to the interpretive process, where the latter provisionally stops and reaches the intended meaning:

If for the pragmatic maxim [...] the meaning of any proposition is nothing more than the conceivable practical effects which the assertion would imply if the proposition were true, then the process of interpretation must stop at least for some time outside language at least in the sense in which not every practical effect is a semiosis one. (Eco 1994, p. 38)

Reconceiving meaning via the notion of habit allows to overcome the extreme relativism, or even solipsism of an infinite interpretive "drift"⁵, to reconnect the interpreting subject with the external world, and to make space for a conjectural notion of truth, which is not objectively, but at least intersubjectively established:

There is something for Peirce that transcends the individual intention of the interpreter, and it is the transcendental idea of a community, or the idea of a community as a transcendental principle. This principle is not transcendental in the Kantian sense, because it does not come before but *after* the semiosis process; it is not the structure of the human mind that produces the interpretation but the reality that the semiosis builds up. Anyway, from the moment in which the community is pulled to

⁵ The term "drift" designates in Eco the idea, that he criticizes, that interpretation can never reach an end, but rather floats endlessly and rather arbitrarily from meaning to meaning. He distinguishes two forms of drift, the contemporary one, associated with Deconstruction, and an older one, associated with Hermeticism: "Contrary to contemporary theories of drift [...], Hermetic semiosis does not assert the absence of any univocal universal and transcendental meaning. It assumes that everything can recall everything else provided we can isolate the right rhetorical connection because there is a strong transcendent subject" (Eco 1994, p. 27).

agree with a given interpretation, there is, if not an objective, at least an *intersubjective* meaning which acquires a privilege over any other possible interpretation spelled out without the agreement of the community.⁶ (Eco 1994, p. 40)

3.

There are, I believe, several points of contact between what Eco is saying here and Brady's overall intention, based on which it would be possible to develop the latter in a more consistently pragmatist fashion. First, Eco and Brady agree that even anti-intentionalist theories of interpretation should be conceived as realistic, in the sense that interpretation always entails the possibility of a reference to an object existing outside the interpretive process. Second, while Brady does not make specific reference to the concept of "habit", I maintain that the latter fits well with her idea "that the aim of interpretation ought to be one that sits easily alongside the spirit of aesthetic appreciation as an enriching encounter with the natural world" (Brady 2002, p. 62). Interpreting the environment for aesthetic purposes does not aim at an endless, self-sufficient interrogation about the possible net of references of every natural object in our interpretation, but at a provisionally satisfied, active disposition of interaction with and appreciation of nature, which could well be characterized as a habit in Eco's sense. Finally, the sense-making, sense-giving, and sense-confirming role of a community of interpreters is an obvious common tenet of the two authors. For both of them, the community acts as a kind of control device of the reasonableness or acceptability of interpretations. There is surely a "communitarian" element in both theories, which however should not be understood in a closed or even authoritarian sense: interpretive communities are construed in a broad, pluralistic, historically and culturally open fashion.

On the basis of this tight proximity between Eco and Brady, I would now like to suggest that some of Eco's points can contribute to ameliorate the above mentioned weak spots in Brady's discourse. First of all, in Eco, the pleasure we gather from interpretive acts and the respect toward the interpretation's object are not juxtaposed, but rather tightly connected. This is quite evident, among others, from Eco's answer to Rorty's theorized purposelessness of literary and linguistic studies:

Rorty asked for what purposes we need to know how language works. I respectfully answer: not only because writers study language in order to write better [...],

⁶ This is also the groundwork for what Collini calls Eco's "cultural Darwinism" (in Eco 1992, p. 16).

but also because marvelling (and therefore curiosity) is the source of all knowledge, knowledge is a source of pleasure and it is simply beautiful to discover why and how a given text can produce so many good interpretations. (Eco 1992, p. 147)

An increased respect for the object of our interpretation, be it a literary text or an environment, can be grounded in the pleasure and sense of marvel intrinsic to the interpretative effort itself. This answer, I believe, is fully consistent with Brady's general framework, but it avoids the *ad hoc* introduction of an external aim, i.e. of an increased respect for nature independent of our pleasure.

Second, Eco's Peircean and conjectural realism allows to think of nature as a real entity, not just the product of our interpretation, without however committing to an essentialistic or naïve conception of nature as already endowed with a meaning that our interpretive acts should simply be able to discover and correspond to. This is so because Eco blurs the distinction between natural objects and artefacts, which on the contrary, as anticipated, still plays a role in Brady's approach. Confronted with the assertion of a structural difference between texts and sense data from the point of view of interpretation, Eco states: "Such a distinction seems to me much too rigid. To recognize a sense datum as such we need an interpretation – as well as criterion of pertinence by which certain events are recognized as more relevant than others – and the very result of our operational habits is subject to further interpretation" (Eco 1992, p. 149)⁷.

Hence, for Eco, consistently with his pragmatist approach, each and every action entails an interpretive effort. Accordingly, when aesthetically appreciating an object, be it an artwork or a natural environment, interpretation necessarily comes into play. This idea is counterbalanced, as we saw, by the reference to the community of interpreters, which Eco conceives as a transcendental element, which however, unlike the Kantian one, is configured as a somewhat paradoxical, at any rate always provisional and conjectural, *a posteriori* established truth guarantor:

There is community because there is no intuition in the Cartesian sense. The transcendental meaning is not there and cannot be grasped by an eidetic intuition [...]. But if the sign does not reveal the thing itself, the process of semiosis produces in the long run a socially shared notion of the thing that the community is engaged to take as if it were in itself true. The transcendental meaning is not at the origins of the process but must be postulated as a possible and transitory end of every process. (Eco 1994, p. 41)

⁷ I think it is safe to say that what Eco asserts here concerning the need for interpretation of sense data in general applies, even more so, to sense data as objects of aesthetic appreciation.

The adoption of this consistent pragmatist framework overcomes the structural difference between artefacts and nature as objects of interpretation, avoids a naïve realistic conception of nature and the respect we owe to it as interpreters and aesthetic appreciators, and leaves ample space for a fruitful development of the notion of community, a central one in Brady's argument.

To summarize and conclude: Brady sees the artist's intention as the (main) content of an artwork and, based on this, she proposes a distinction between interpretation of art and interpretation of nature. This distinction then leads to the argument that the interpretation of nature is freer and less subject to contentistic constraints than that of art. In turn, this argument results in the assertion of nature as a more autonomous entity than artefacts, deserving recognition and respect independently of our interpretive pleasure. This assertion, I believe, is at odds, in the letter if not in the spirit, with Brady's general pragmatist framework. With the goal of avoiding a full-blown hedonistic relativism or solipsism, it risks introducing an element of naïve realism, whereas a Peircean conjectural realism, as Eco shows, would suffice to that goal. I think rephrasing the above mentioned "weak spots" of Brady's discourse in these terms would contribute to corroborate and bring forward her own framework.

References

- Brady E., *Interpreting Environments*, in "Essays in Philosophy", vol. 3, 1 (2002), pp. 57-67.
- Brady E., *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa 2003.
- Eco U., *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, with R. Rorty, J. Culler, C. Brooke-Rose, S. Collini (ed.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1992.
- Eco U., *Unlimited Semiosis and Drift: Pragmaticism vs. "Pragmatism"*, in *The Limits of Interpretation*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington-Indianapolis 1994, pp. 23-43.