

*Wolfgang Welsch*

## **In Praise of Wind Turbines**

Finally, they appear. I had been expecting them for a long time. The highway stretched along monotonously – no ups, no downs, no variety, just wasteland. Then they finally become apparent, filigree and in great numbers, like a colony of spurge: wind turbines as far as the eye can see. They glitter, dance, swirl, sweep away the boredom. High spirits, cheerfulness, merriment – at last.

Others, however, feel and talk quite differently. They speak of the landscape's transformation into asparagus, of greed for profit, of bird shredders, of disease-causing machines and of an aesthetically unbearable destruction of the environment. They speak of violence against nature, violence against animals, violence against people.

I want to discuss only one point in this conflict. Everybody knows that we urgently need wind energy in our present and future situation. But everyone also knows the fluctuation and storage problems of this form of energy. Environmental damage and the evocation of illness can be hotly debated or reasonably argued. Proponents and opponents bash each other's heads or approach the idea of the common good. None of that is at issue here. Rather, the only question is whether wind turbines are an aesthetic disaster or could represent aesthetic fortune. The question is eminently important. Because the rejection of wind power is based far and wide on aesthetic aversion.

Decades ago, when I first saw wind turbines in California, I thought: what a strange new species to enter our planet: huge, gravitational, sovereignly reaching out and powerfully spinning. Beings as if from another star, which now suddenly populate the earth. The impression has not faded in the meantime, but has intensified. I see the wind turbines like giant insects, or gigantic proud spiders, shining metallically and winking at us or blinding us. Is a new species, a new population taking over the earth – from the seas to the plains to the mountains? They have a differ-

ent measure of time, a different rhythm than we hectic humans. They are slow, powerful, and stable in themselves. What wonderful new beings, unexpectedly appeared and so beautiful in everything! Fascinating and admirable new figures – filigree and powerful at the same time.

In the twenties and thirties of the last century, Max Ernst painted pictures which one can see as representations of a new species that will populate the earth after the end of human civilization – mixed creatures with zoomorphic aspects. The windmills of today are similar and yet different. They, too, can appear like a new species spreading across the earth. But they are more technical than carnal. Yet they seem organic and animated. They may be stationary, but they turn, they can change direction, and they sometimes act faster, sometimes slower, or sometimes not at all. The impression of living beings is undeniable.

But what can one say to those contemporaries who only recognize matchstick crucifixes and asparagus monsters in wind turbines? Is this disparaging view not equally justified as the aestheticizing one?

Perceptions are historical products, and they can change. A particularly noteworthy example is the change in the aesthetic evaluation of mountains. For centuries, the mountains were considered to be terrible. In the late 18th century, however, they were ennobled by aesthetics (Kant) and shortly thereafter by art (C.D. Friedrich). The mountains became paradigmatic instances of the sublime. This brought them closer to people, so that in the 19th century they were soon no longer depicted and regarded as sublime, but as beautiful and pleasing. This led to modern mountain tourism. What a change! What once caused only fear and terror became the El Dorado of alpinists and a playground for tourists. – Shouldn't a similar change in perception also be possible with regard to wind turbines? Especially since they, similarly towering as the mountains, are much more filigree and organic and aesthetically more attractive and, compared to the massiveness of the mountains, seem almost intellectual.

One objection would be: mountains are nature, whereas wind turbines belong to technology. Therefore, they inevitably appear as troublemakers in nature. – Is that really so? Is it that simple? Is nature (and especially aesthetically pleasing nature) really just nature? When we walk along a country lane or a forest path, are we simply walking through nature? No. We walk through culture at least to the same extent. Our ancestors cleared these areas and created fields and paths through them; they cultivated the primeval forest – the woods we encounter today are forests. Field paths and forest paths are paths through cultivated land.

But this is not how they are generally understood; they are taken as paths through nature. One ignores the de facto cultural imprint of this nature and mistakenly takes it to be pure nature. And it is precisely this domesticated nature that appears to us as ‘pleasant’, ‘lovely’ or ‘beautiful’, while ‘rough’ nature is rather perceived as repulsive. The landscapes we cherish are lands long worked and altered by humans. When we enjoy the ‘soft’ image of a landscape, we refer to the harmonious relationship between forestation and cultivated land, the pleasing proportions of agrarian land that ‘nestle’ against the hills, or the seemingly natural, but in reality long since regulated course of a river that creates a harmony of landscape and settlement. We fade out the civilizational imprints and praise a distorted image of supposedly pure nature. Of course, the mistake is not to love and praise this nature, but to consider it as pure nature, i.e., to fade out and deny the civilization achievements inscribed in it. The nature we appreciate and praise is de facto not pure nature, but an *amalgam* of nature and culture.

Incidentally, already Karl Marx pointed out almost 200 years ago that nature is long since shaped by man; he rebuked Feuerbach’s belief that we live in a nature unaffected by human history; such a nature, Marx declared, exists nowhere today. In the present at the latest, in the age of the Anthropocene, it should have become clear to everyone that nature is shaped by human activities right down to its foundations.

This then is the great illusion, the great misunderstanding: that nature, which we love and appreciate, is simply nature – in contrast to all that is attributed civilization and culture. No, this beautiful and lovely, this pleasant and restful nature has been shaped to a great extent by human civilization, is a common product of nature and civilization. To overlook this is one of the most widespread and biggest mistakes of the present time. And it has massive consequences: One does not feel responsible for a nature that one is not responsible for. It can be abused – and indeed is abused on a gigantic scale.

Against this illusion of a purely natural nature, wind turbines are a wonderful antidote. For with them, the technical character is unmistakable. A nature shaped by wind turbines can no longer be falsified as pure nature. The civilizing aspect is all too obvious here. One cannot look it away. Therefore, the wind farms disturb our idyllic image of nature. They do so even in a double sense. Firstly, on the level of appearance: the wind turbines disfigure the landscape, they are aesthetic disturbances – ugly, disgusting, an insult to God’s creation and to Christian man. But secondly – and this is even more important – they disturb our image of

nature on the conceptual level. For they reveal the technical character of an environment that is everywhere shaped by human intervention. This, I believe, is what makes them really offensive: that they expose as a mistake our erroneous belief that nature, which we value so highly, is simply nature and not largely man-made. They torpedo our idyllic illusion of nature. They are disturbing because they are enlightening. They force us to revise our image of nature. They shatter one of our dearest illusions. That is why they are so unloved.

From there, let's take a final look at the megatopic of our time: climate change, energy supply, saving the environment. Aren't wind turbines both literal and metaphorical instances of a better future? Their energy supply, on which we depend, is by far not everything. Rather, the wind turbines show us that the old opposition of man against nature was an illusion – a dangerous, an almost fatally dangerous illusion. In contrast, what is needed is an interplay – of people and nature, of technology and environment. It will take technological sophistication to heal the wounds inflicted by a brutal technology. “The wound is only closed by the spear that struck it.” Wind turbines could be pioneering pinpricks in the service of such healing.

## In Praise of Wind Turbines

Are wind turbines an aesthetic disaster or could they represent aesthetic fortune? Couldn't we perceive them as a fascinating species newly populating our planet? Wind turbines make it clear that the idyllic nature we love is in fact not pure nature but deeply modified by civilization. Wind turbines are enlightening in revising our accustomed perception of nature.

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