

Adrienne Gálosi\*

## **“Post-nature” Sylvania. Dimensions of Aesthetic Judgment and Interpretation of Contemporary Parks<sup>1</sup>**

### Abstract

This paper establishes interpretative criteria for the aesthetic evaluation of contemporary gardens and parks, specifically focusing on a dendrological park. Initially, it examines the potential of a “contract with nature” as a foundational basis for such evaluation but subsequently challenges this notion. The paper posits that political and material-ecological aspects significantly influence aesthetic judgments in these spaces. It argues that these elements are integral to eliciting a direct aesthetic experience and necessitates explicit explication in their interpretation. This study further interprets gardens and parks as akin to works of art in that they represent, albeit without conventional subject matter, the nuanced relationships to the lives of individuals. The paper elucidates the more profound, often unspoken dialogues between nature, culture, and individual experience by viewing these spaces as representational mediums.

### Keywords

Modified Environment, Natural Contract, Earth Jurisprudence, Post-Nature, Representation

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\* University of Pécs  
Email: galosi.adrienne@pte.hu

<sup>1</sup> This paper was supported by the National Research, Development, and Innovation Office (OTKA), Project No. 143294, “Perspectives in Environmental Aesthetics” (2022–2025).

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When ages grow to civility and elegance, men come to  
*Build Stately* rather than to *Garden Finely*:  
As if *Gardening* were the *Greater perfection*.

Bacon 1625

They had conceived the idea of making in the espalier wall  
an archway, through which the prospect could be seen.[...]  
They had sacrificed the asparagus in order to build  
on the spot an Etruscan tomb...

Flaubert 2008 [1881]

## Introduction

However familiar and common the experience of walking in gardens and parks may be, these hybrid environments present considerable difficulties when evaluating and interpreting them. This paper outlines concepts and interpretive aspects essential in evaluating gardens, landscape gardens, and parks. I will use a recently opened park as an illustrative example to define these. It is not intended to be a case study, as I am not providing a detailed description and analysis of the park. However, the issues of interpretation raised by the site are possible examples of general questions that need to be answered for any other garden or park, although the evaluation is specific to each particular park or garden. Standard criteria for aesthetic judgment are not included in the paper, as it is impossible to establish a set of universal criteria for parks and gardens, as is the case for works of art. However, criteria relevant to the interpretation of parks and gardens are included to underpin the individual judgment.

This park was chosen because the owner/designer justified the park mainly on the grounds of sustainability and environmentalism, but at the same time, it provoked a backlash and negative judgments based on contemporary environmentalism. In other words, opposing interpretative frameworks lead to conflicting park assessments. This paper provides a conceptual framework for an expanded aesthetic judgment for interpreting parks valued primarily as aesthetic experiences. In the paper's conclusion, I will suggest that the different aesthetic perceptions and evaluations are based on different understandings of the relationship with the sustainability of life.

## 1. The Shekvetili Dendrological Park

The Shekvetili Dendrological Park in Georgia is a much-discussed park that opened its gates to visitors in 2020. It had to open its gates, as it is a closed private park on the private estate of former Georgian Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili. As its name suggests, the 60-hectare park is mainly distinguished by its unique trees.<sup>2</sup> The park was brought to the public's attention by Georgian filmmaker Salomé Jashi's documentary *Taming the Garden*, released in 2021.<sup>3</sup> The film has won fourteen prestigious awards and numerous nominations, and its critical acclaim has brought the park into the broader cultural discourse. What is so special about this park that it has become the subject of an outstanding nature film? It is the trees that make the park unique. There are hundreds of giant, majestic old trees. Only these trees have all grown old elsewhere.<sup>4</sup> So far, in Georgia alone, more than two hundred ancient trees have been uprooted from their original habitat and replanted in this private park. The film follows the uprooting, transporting, and replanting of a few giant trees, using poetic, elegiac images rather than narration or interviews to pass judgment on the practice.

## 2. Aesthetic Reflection as Expanded Context for the Judgment of Taste

How we evaluate this park is inseparable from how we interpret it. Aesthetic judgment, although specific, is a reflective judgment, which means, to use Kant's idea, that a concept must be found for the object. It is the process of

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<sup>2</sup> The park does not have a website, only a Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/Dendrologicalpark/>. In addition to natural curiosities, the park includes an artificial pond, a playground, a model city, and modern recreational areas. For more information on these and on how to visit the park, including pictures, see for example: <https://transfersgeorgia.com/tours/dendrological-park-tour-in-shekvetili/> [accessed: 25 July 2023].

<sup>3</sup> Salomé Jashi (2021), *Taming the Garden*, Mira Film, CORSO Film, Sakdoc Film, 01:30. For the reception of the film, awards and nominations, see <https://tamingthegarden-film.com/en/> [accessed: 25 July 2023].

<sup>4</sup> The 18 hectares of Shekvetili Park are predominantly occupied by native tree species. Additionally, the park hosts a remarkable collection of ancient trees, translocated from various regions across the country. This includes a notable contingent of over 200 trees that are over a century old, with some even reaching an age of 400 years. Expanding beyond this, an additional 42 hectares of the park are dedicated to a diverse array of plants and mature trees imported from international locales, contributing to a rich botanical diversity. This area also serves as a sanctuary for 58 endangered bird species, along with a variety of other exotic fauna, thereby enhancing the park's ecological significance and conservation value.

judgment itself, which is not simply the feeling of pleasure of a perceiving subject but takes place in the space of meaning opened up by the subject's response to the object. Without going into a detailed analysis of aesthetic judgment here, I assume that the reflective aesthetic judgment considers several aspects that are not aesthetic but are (also) aesthetically manifested and thus play a role in the aesthetic judgment as the meaning of form. Thus, the complex experience of gardens and parks is formed in what can be called, for want of a better word, a networked experience, in which different modes of aesthetic experience are interwoven—since the garden functions as both a natural and an artificial object—but at the same time this experience is not divorced from all the social, cultural and intellectual contexts that have played a role in the creation of the garden and which also manifest themselves in some aesthetic aspects.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. Parks at the Crossroads of Nature and Culture

The first conceptual difficulty, which applies to every aspect of thinking about gardens and parks, is that they are a hybrid of the natural and the artificial, both an experience of the natural environment and an experience constructed by a given creative intention.<sup>6</sup> Emily Brady describes gardens as

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<sup>5</sup> This paper does not endeavor to analyze reflective aesthetic judgment, nor does it seek to interpret Kant's view that taste evaluates an object independently of concepts and interests. Additionally, it does not aim to resolve the aporia inherent in taste judgments, which are at once subjective and universally necessary. Instead, the paper takes as its starting point the consistency within Kantian theory itself with the notion that aesthetic judgment is not formed in a meaning vacuum. While Kant asserts that aesthetic pleasure is conceptually independent, this paper argues that the involvement of concepts in judgment does not equate to their determinative role in defining beauty as a specific, given object. Concepts are involved, but they do not constrict the judgment to a finite understanding of beauty.

<sup>6</sup> The experiences offered by gardens and parks are very much linked to the geographical and historical location of the place, to its type, to the history of its genre, to its tradition of use and interpretation. Throughout history, different types of gardens have developed in different parts of the world, and they are so diverse that it is very difficult to offer a comprehensive typology. For this reason, the theoretical literature has had considerable difficulty in finding a definitive common denominator for gardens (gardens being the broad, all-encompassing term that includes landscape gardens and parks in their various forms) that would uniformly define, for example, the classical Japanese "dry garden", and at the same time the landscape garden of Lancelot "Capability" Brown at Blenheim, which was criticised (by Reynolds, for example, very strongly) because, as they said, the visitor could

modified environments in the space between nature and culture (Brady *et al.* 2018). Brady and her co-authors try to cover their field of study—the different forms of gardens and artworks in the landscape—with one term, the modified environment, and they try to define it not in the tension of counter-concepts or the dualism of the nature-culture dichotomy, but as a point on a continuum, with varying degrees of naturalness and artificiality.<sup>7</sup>

When we think in terms of dichotomies, we are dealing with relational concepts, because these concepts only acquire meaning in relation to each other. Not only culture, but also society and history, and even the city or the ideal can be counter-concepts to nature. In its most general approach, human or man-made vs. non-human, external nature are distinguished in these relational counter-concepts. The dissolution of dichotomies into a kind of hybrid continuum, where one does not speak of oppositions or counter-worlds but of degrees, can only be raised if one of the fundamental concepts of the relation, namely nature, is called into question. The views that hold this position do not speak of the disappearance of nature as the basis of human existence, but they raise the question of whether nature, whose elements are all permeated by humans, can still be understood as a counter-concept to humans. This understanding will be discussed later, but it is important to note that the traditional description of landscaped gardens and parks—namely that they combine the effort to cultivate and process nature and at the same time to preserve it as a landscape, that is, as a piece of nature that is only contemplated by humans and is alien to them—can be applied to most of today's gardens and parks, insofar as we replace the landscape with natural objects on a smaller scale. We see in the garden objects that, despite all domestication, something of the non-human is preserved in them. In other words, Shekvetili Park is also a managed environment,<sup>8</sup> somewhere be-

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not tell whether he was walking in the fields. In other words, the very general double experience formulated in the above sentence applies to certain types of garden only in its extreme values.

<sup>7</sup> Brady's term "modified environment" encompasses John Andrew Fisher's concepts of influenced and mixed environments, the former being influenced by human activity, e.g., pollution, but largely natural, and the latter including man-made objects, e.g., roads (Fisher 2003).

<sup>8</sup> This word comes to my mind, perhaps not by chance, because man often no longer cultivates the environment in the original sense of culture, where the cultivation of the land and the cultivation of the soul with philosophy were one and the same word (see Cicero: "Cultura animi philosophia est"), which is still preserved in language, in the word agriculture. Man no longer simply arranges the environment to make the chaos of nature transparent, but manages it, administers it, solves the "challenges" of the environment to suit their own purposes.

tween natural and artificial, but perhaps with its giant trees, it wants to express the dignity of nature, which far exceeds the limits of human existence. We are, therefore, starting from a position that does not draw a strict ontological line between nature and culture but sees in their intertwining the presence of nature as an inescapable condition that determines human existence from the outside.

It is easy to imagine that the park can provide the experience described above, but the fact that the enormous old trees have been transplanted here may cause discomfort and anxiety for many—and it does, as the film documents. The desire to create a private park with rare plants would not be sufficient justification, so there were also environmentalist arguments: the life of the trees can only be sustained in this protected area through expert care. I cannot judge the acceptability of this justification from the professional point of view of nature conservation, but I would ask if this practice could fall within the scope of a natural contract as Michel Serres (1995) understood the term.

#### **4. Natural Contract as a Possible Basis for Evaluation**

Suppose we imagine that this metaphorical contract is implemented. In that case, we can imagine that one of the signatories, the park's creator, undertakes to ensure the care, future flourishing, and sustainable life of the trees in a privileged location, even at the cost of removing them from their original, allegedly endangered habitat. The other signatory would be the trees or nature in general. Serres would vehemently object to his contract being taken literally—as he did in his letter explaining the incomprehension of his critics (Serres 2000). However, he emphasizes throughout that what was hitherto a global object—nature—now becomes an agent, and thus a subject, and then a subject of law, a legal entity. In Serres's analysis, the former subject-object relationship seems to be reversed, as both members acquire a new dimension by becoming global. So, the questions now concern how the collective subject becomes more and more an object: previously active, the subject now becomes a passive global object of forces and constraints responding to its actions; and how the status of the world object changes: previously passive, the object now becomes active, and as previously given, it now becomes our real partner (Serres 2000, 20-21). He believes that the legal conventions on the climate crisis mean that the subjectivization of the former object is already underway at the legal level.

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This tendency of treating nature as an active legal subject has been reinforced since the publication of Serres's writings, and although he believed that just as no one signed the social contract, it became a framework for thought and action and even a condition of possibility for the formation of society, so too the natural contract has no concrete signatories.<sup>9</sup> However, actual 'contracts,' signed legal documents, have been made in the name of nature since then. The emergence and implementation of Earth Jurisprudence is the recognition that all members of the planetary community are legal subjects and endows non-human life forms with complex forms of legal agency. New Zealand, for example, granted legal identity to the Te Urewera forest in 2014, which now has its property. India and Colombia have granted rights to rivers, and Ecuador granted constitutional rights to nature in 2008 (Demos 2015).<sup>10</sup> Such a contract is not only based on our self-interest in keeping the earth alive for survival. However, it is also a consequence of, among other things, the movement that began in the 1980s to advocate first for animal rights. As a result, the human and social sciences began to systematically investigate animal existence, consciousness, and forms of subjectivity, which now extends to plants, leading to a discourse of the 'plant turn' (Marder 2013).

Science increasingly supports the conviction that plants are not mere objects but must be seen as subjects with intentions. We can see them as living beings that shape their lives (Castro 2019). Listening to the dendrologists' research, we modify our simplistic image of old trees as solitary individuals, stoic organisms barely tolerating each other as they compete for space and resources. If we accept that a tree's habitat and environment are complex ecosystems,<sup>11</sup> answering whether the centuries-old oak would sign an otherwise apparently fair contract offer is challenging. The plant's intention, the 'language of nature,' still has to be 'translated' into our human language, and we know that these translations are always interpretations based on a set of social, historical, cultural—not natural—assumptions.

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<sup>9</sup> Bruno Latour also takes his metaphorical example from the field of law, saying that between the warring parties of nature and culture (he, like Serres, speaks of war) a "diplomat" must mediate, a "non-believer" but a mediator responsible for every word spoken, in order to work out a common ground that can produce a peace proposal deeper than a compromise (Latour 2004, 209-217).

<sup>10</sup> Also see: Burdon 2011.

<sup>11</sup> On forests as complex communities of life, characterized not only by interdependence but also by altruism, see, for example, *The Social Life of Forests* (2020).

We are witnessing a growing acceptance of the reference to the wild law of nature (Cullinan 2002). However, neither the concrete nor the philosophically posited natural contract is a 'natural' basis for our value judgments. In appealing to nature, we argue that we, as human agents, provide to the other party and draw from our understanding of nature.

However, before we begin to list the arguments that would lead to a negative judgment of the park created in this way, it should be remembered that replanting old trees to restore parks and gardens is a common, almost everyday practice. When a castle park is listed along with the building, which is often the case, the restoration work must include the park or garden. In such cases, the garden restorer must create an appearance that is (almost) identical to the original,<sup>12</sup> usually after a long research process. From our point of view, it is interesting that if the original appearance cannot be achieved with the original plant, mainly for safety reasons, that is, if the old tree in the original image of the garden could become dangerous for visitors, the garden restorer replaces it with a tree of the same age and species.<sup>13</sup> When we ascribe historical value to a modified environment and declare it protected, we are protecting the formal complexity, the intended effect of its materials, strictly speaking, the human creation, rather than the individual components of the creation, and we consider the individual plants to be replaceable. In other words, we do not object to the practice of displacing old trees when it is done in the name of a traditionally accepted value, historic preservation. In the case of Shekvetili Park, we would instead welcome a natural contract, whereas in the other case, we would refrain from doing so, and in both cases, we do so in the name of conservation, but we direct our protective gaze differently.

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<sup>12</sup> We need not go into the question of what is meant by original appearance in the case of a garden, since a garden, even the most meticulously designed French garden, which does not follow the forms of nature, never has a closed and definitive objectification, the materiality of the garden varies, and in many cases the garden designer themselves sees the moment when the garden reaches its intended formal completeness in the future.

<sup>13</sup> Old trees are available on the international nursery market and can, of course, be used not only for conservation purposes but also to enhance the historic atmosphere of private estates. The prerequisite for this, of course, is that there are nurseries around the world that have been in operation for hundreds of years, where the seedlings have had time to become veterans. The technology to transplant them has long been available, albeit expensive.



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## 5. The Risk of Earth Jurisprudence

Moving further in the direction of skepticism about the natural contract, we arrive at the argument put in its most extreme form by Alain Badiou: "[t]he rise of the 'rights of nature' is a contemporary form of the opium of the people. It is only slightly camouflaged religion [...] a gigantic operation in the depoliticization of subjects" (Badiou 2008, 139, quoted by Swyngedouw 2011, 69). With this statement, Badiou, as a political philosopher, concludes that the political dimension of what is summed up as the "end of nature" discourse. Although T.J. Demos and Emily Brady, for example, refuse to abandon the concept of nature, as does the post-nature discourse of recent ecological theory, and would instead call for a conceptual reinvention, they both acknowledge that the historically constructed concept of nature is capable of historically reinforcing patterns of ideological naturalization, of being used and exploited to ascribe to it a 'law' and normative force against which deviations can be identified (Demos 2015, 5; Brady 2018, 4).

Badiou's statement should, therefore, not be understood as a denial of the importance of politics from an environmental point of view but rather as a demonstration that we cannot rely on the law of nature to provide a normative basis for justifying our social practices. Since there is no normative force written into nature, since we cannot read nature itself, the ethical maxims that can guide our human actions, it is dangerous to base our environmental policies on something that is assumed to be beyond man since this ultimately means depoliticizing humans.

In thinking about the unconventional afforestation practice in Shekvetil Park, we wondered whether a natural contract could be the basis and framework for our judgment. Then, we found that the possibility of basing it on the rights of nature is not only uncertain but could be considered socially dangerous.

## 6. Possible Aspects of the Judgment

Moving beyond the 'contract with nature' theoretical framework, which proves inadequate for our purposes, this paper turns to practical considerations in gardens' aesthetic evaluation, as Shekvetili Park exemplified. This paper examines how everyday interactions and management influence our aesthetic perceptions of these spaces. Such practical engagement invariably raises normative questions, necessitating community involvement in forming aesthetic judgments. Far from irrelevant, these judgments have signifi-

cant implications in the social and moral spheres, underscoring the interconnectedness of aesthetics, ethics, and community values. Although aesthetic judgment is a subjective way of relating to the world, it presupposes a communal perspective; our judgments are calibrated collectively with those of others, even when facing a work of art as a solitary spectator or walking alone in a park. In the formation of aesthetic judgment, although there is no empirical basis in the form of a *sensus communis*, at least in terms of the reference conditions involved, we strive for consensus, and we also collectively shape the process of how we give and account for the reasons for our judgments.

When evaluating a garden, I propose considering political, material-ecological, and aesthetic aspects. Because the same aspects can be observed in all social practices, the question is which takes precedence in the experience and to what extent this is reflected in the evaluation. Moreover, as I pointed out at the beginning, the political and the material dimensions have aesthetic manifestations. So, when we make an aesthetic judgment, we infer from the aesthetic qualities of the work its politics or its relationship to materiality and ecology. Nevertheless, I would emphasize the interconnectedness of the aesthetic and the other aspects. If, for example, our knowledge of the political aspects of a particular work is crucial, it will affect how we evaluate its aesthetic qualities and how we perceive them.

### **6.1. Political Dimensions**

In the case of Shekvetili Park, it is undoubtedly known that people on both sides signed contracts. Through his lawyers, the Georgian billionaire essentially bribed local people all over the country, 'compensating' them for the trees by promising people in remote villages roads in addition to those that had to be built to transport the trees in the first place. Such a direct account of the exercise of power, while an essential element if we are to draw a complete picture of the work or park in question, must be confined to the margins of analysis; in the case of aesthetic evaluation, as I have stressed, the political must be detected in the aesthetic.

It is now a truism to say that when it comes to landscape, garden, or nature, the aesthetic and the political are inseparable, for the overt or covert orders of power lurk in all their aspects. Since Denis E. Cosgrove's famous book *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (1984), many have explored the thesis that landscape and garden are discourses through which particular social groups have historically framed themselves and their relationships to territory, land, and other groups and that this discourse is epistemically

and technically intimately linked to particular ways of seeing and framing the world as an image. This view has meant that the focus of garden history research has shifted from the purely visible to the symbolic and social. In speaking of eighteenth-century English landscape gardens, Stephen Daniels (1988, 43-82) describes 'the duplicity of landscape,' that is, its simultaneous appeal as subjective experience and pleasure and its role as a social expression of authority and property. The author gives many examples of how the landowner might use the different species of trees to express, for example, patriotism or the social values to which he was committed.<sup>14</sup> However, the texts on the garden as a symbolic representation of power always seem to speak of a planter, that is, the owner or designer of the land, who selects the species of trees to be planted and needs the 'prophetic eye of taste' to see the subsequent 'magnificent grandeur' of the garden (Daniels 1988, 52). Most contemporary gardens and parks do not have such iconography for visitors to interpret.<sup>15</sup>

Seeing old trees evokes a fundamental aesthetic-existential experience, namely the interconnectedness of time and place. The transplantation of trees breaks this link and is very much in keeping with the image of today's mobile society, a global nomadic society where everyone can be relocated to perform their tasks in a new place. Where the principle of selection is size (and feasibility), the 'task' of each plant is likely to be nothing less than to induce a sense of the sublime. The sublime experience of landscape is always linked to the experience of the existential limits of man, contemplating the universe as a totality, which, as a spiritual experience, can elevate the spectator to the creator of the universe. Irresistible is the interpretation that the landowner who transplants trees of sublime size wants to see himself as the creator of the objects that give rise to the sublime experience.

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<sup>14</sup> The elm, for example, was planted and highly appreciated as a park tree, but culturally it was most closely associated with agriculture and was used to indicate the owner's agricultural interests (Daniels 1988, 50).

<sup>15</sup> There are, of course, many contemporary exceptions. To take just three very different examples from different countries, Isama Noguchi's (1982) *The California Scenario* (Costa Mesa), follows the Eastern tradition of the garden as imitative art, a miniature collage of the surrounding landscape. Charles Jenks' (1989) *Garden of Cosmic Speculation* (Dumfries, Scotland) invites an explicitly intellectual reception, with the natural elements mostly modelled on contemporary art forms. A stepped waterfall, e.g., tells the story of the universe, while a terrace depicts the distortion of space and time caused by a black hole. Michel Pena and François Brun's (1997) *Le jardin Atlantique* (Montparnasse, Paris), a modern version of the Babylonian hanging garden, brings our mythical images of gardens into play, while at the same time, like its Babylonian predecessor, depicting a landscape of distant places.

If we were to give a detailed account of the park using the method of “descriptive aesthetics”, to use Arnold Berleant’s (1992, 25-26) phrase,<sup>16</sup> we could list at length the variety of technologies of power and possession, exclusion and control, which regulate not only the behavior but also the aesthetic experience of visitors: strictly marked footpaths, with an alarm to warn walkers if they stray onto the lawn. Cameras keep an eye on walkers, and barriers block off prohibited areas. The garden employs a unique form of plant mediatization, integrating technology with the natural environment. As visitors approach certain trees, motion-sensing technology activates hidden loudspeakers, enabling these trees to ‘speak’ by delivering short fictional narratives. This innovative use of technology personifies nature, creating an interactive experience for visitors. This technique exemplifies “hypermediation,” a concept described by Bolter and Grusin (1999), which refers to a media-rich environment that creates an illusion of non-mediation, or immediacy, enhancing the visitor’s engagement with the narrative and the natural setting.

## 6.2. Material-Ecological Dimension

Among the material and ecological aspects, some directly influence aesthetic experience, but I can only give one example here: The only way to dig a deep enough planting hole for the trees with their enormous roots would have been to plant them quite far apart, which would not have made it possible to create the image of a single grove. So, the trees cling to the ground on small mounds. On the one hand, this surface corresponds to the fiction associated with organicity, our image of the harmonious surface of the hilly ground, but at the cost of anchoring most trees with metal straps. Aesthetic interpretation must consider that the dilemma in designing the park must have been whether to create the image of a vast meadow with old trees scattered throughout or to form a grove, even if this is only possible with visible technological assistance. The latter’s choice is a sign that the broad cultural and symbolic meanings of the wooded grove are not diminished by technological mediation for the contemporary viewer, who can no longer see these devices as alien elements.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Arnold Berleant makes distinctions between substantive aesthetics, metaaesthetics, and descriptive aesthetics; the third concept refers to “accounts of art and aesthetic experience that may be partly narrative, partly phenomenological, partly evocative, and sometimes even revelatory” (Berleant 1992, 26).

<sup>17</sup> Explicit knowledge of these symbolic, cultural meanings is not necessarily available to either the landscape architect or the visitor; they are, I believe, embedded in our cultural visual un/preconscious.

### 6.3. Aesthetic Dimensions

The most comprehensive aspect of the analysis should address all the more narrowly defined aesthetic issues that would examine the park in the context of the landscape garden tradition. It is necessary to ask how contemporary gardens and parks relate to their historical predecessors in type and genre and their ideas of beauty and functionality. What formal and compositional principles do they apply? Are these principles derived from a historical tradition of gardens, or do they draw on the vocabulary and syntax of other contemporary visual arts or practices?

Shekviteli Park's space is thoughtfully divided into geometrically shaped plots, centering around a rectangular pond, with footpaths winding serpentine, intricately traversing and connecting each plot. This meticulous layout is connected to landscaping traditions, wherein different park sections symbolize distinct environments or serve as conduits for various narratives. Such design choices may reflect an intention to create a space that is not just visually engaging but also rich in symbolic meaning, evoking different themes or stories in each uniquely crafted area. However, this dual formal organization—abstract geometric and organic—may also mean that practical considerations, especially maintenance, favor regular plots, while a walk in nature is associated with the image of irregular paths. Therefore, the park satisfies both requirements simultaneously and with equal weight. It does not try to hide the sphere of practice. It does not conceive of the park as where it should, if not disappear, at least be discreetly relegated to the background because this is how it can satisfy the desire that makes people want to go out into the park.

These points bring us back to whether we should regard the garden as a work of art. At the one end of the scale, perhaps, is Horace Walpole's conviction that "Poetry, Painting, and Gardening, or the Science of Landscape, will forever be regarded by men of taste as three sisters, or the three graces that dress and adorn Nature."<sup>18</sup> On the other end—on the side that denies gardens' status as works of art—are generally those who consider the garden's functionality incompatible with the notion of autonomous art.

Even if we do not want to decide on this point, either in general or in the case of Shekviteli Park, it is possible to approach the question from the point of view of the concept of representation. A garden or a park is never simply

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<sup>18</sup> Horace Walpole, MS annotation to a collection of William Mason's (1926, 46) *Satirical Poems* (Oxford), quoted in Hunt (1971, 294).

a modified, shaped environment but always a mediation of the environment; that is, in addition to its material, natural elements, and forms, it also mediates and represents how the designer or his client sees the environment. In other words, the question is not about what a garden or a park represents as an external reality since we can say that it represents nature with nature,<sup>19</sup> but how it does so. In this sense, the garden is always self-referential. What it presents as a landscape, as a picture, is nothing more than what it is: trees, paths, groves, lakes, etc.—but these “contents” are only visible because they have become objects of representation as a part of a garden. In this sense, the garden must always show its art, and the visitor must walk the narrow path between objectification and representation of nature in the garden.<sup>20</sup>

### **7. The Representation of Gardens, the “Meaning” of Shekvetili Park**

Finally, the question can be asked: in this mode of representation, what is it that the Shekvetili Park represents? Gardens, like other forms of art, have materials and means. The materials of painting, for example, are tempera, oil, or canvas, and its means, for example, are shapes and lines. Can the two be separated in the case of horticulture? The gardener’s materials are living plants apart from inanimate elements such as stone and rock. When the gardener composes the form and color of the plants, he sees them as the material of his work and treats them as such. Think of the gardener as the guardian of even the most humble flower and an expert in pruning, cutting, and uprooting. However, the means of his art are not only the colors or the shape of the leaves but also the life of these plants (Ferrari 2010). In other words, garden design materials are living plants, and its means are the lives of plants. When the gardener works on the composition of the place as a whole, the individual plant, in its materiality, is there to create the specific

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<sup>19</sup> The ways in which this was done also lie between extremes in the cultural history of the garden; e.g., while Chinese gardens can be described as mimetic, recreating the great landscapes of the empire in miniature within enclosed walls, some forms of English landscape gardening sought to conceal the artificial until it was unrecognisable. See footnote 4. But the characteristic of Brown’s gardens was to give each plant, especially the trees, such attentive care that they could give the best of their capabilities (hence Brown’s nickname: Capability). By perfecting nature in this way, he was interested, like the antiquarian virtuoso, in the individuality of the plant’s particular form, drawing attention to its individual beauty.

<sup>20</sup> I am indebted to Hunt (2000, 78-85), who, drawing on Foucault, writes about the possible use of the concept of representation for gardens.

atmosphere of the place. Of course, these two elements are also interrelated since the plant form used as a compositional element is the quality of a living organism, but what the gardener uses to create the place is life, concrete, real life. Hence, the unpredictability of the garden means that the gardener can never know exactly how life will unfold. If they are unhappy with the stunted growth of a plant, they will, of course, replace it with a new one. No (other) art uses life as a means in this way,<sup>21</sup> for although theatre and dance are built on the gestures, voices, and movements of living people, the choreographer can only force the dance's body to perform strange forms, not manipulate his whole life.

Ultimately, then, it is the politics of the relationship to individual life that the park represents. The "post-nature" park, I believe, is an accurate representation of the intersection at which we stand, not only in the park but also outside the park fence: at the beginning of the entanglement of biotechnological power—that we are able not only to move stationary organisms, but also to radically transform life forms beyond what we have done so far, for example, by breeding, by selection—and economic-political power, that there is a concentration of economic and financial power capable of using its means to bring about this transformation according to its own will. The question is, who, which actors of our world will sign and which contracts when the next step of biopolitics will be to "manage" their natural life?

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<sup>21</sup> Though we could consider bioart an exception, interpreting it as a possible new revision of the boundaries between science and art. I call it new, which means that the changing identities of both science and art have always been defined by where the boundaries of the other lie. Without citing here the long and complex history of the art-science relationship, let me just state that I consider bioart a new multidisciplinary area. Art has become so flexible that it can take the form of any object, and even any practice or discipline. The question is whether art behaves like a parasite on the host body of science, or bioart can create a lasting genuine new artistic medium and practice.

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