On Brady's Imagination and the Aesthetic Experience of Nature

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ABSTRACT: In front of cognitivist models of appreciation, Brady's account of aesthetic appreciation of nature is built upon imagination linked to perception. Brady considers imagination as consisting in four kinds of activities: exploration, projection, ampliation, and revelation. For imagination being safe from irrelevant contents, she imposes on it two limits: disinterestedness, and the guide of the "imaging-well", as an analogy with a practical virtue. I will propose an extended interpretation of her account by questioning the limits of her auto objection. Through four given examples, I will try to show the accuracy that a less restrictive account of imagination may have within her own model.

In her *Imagination and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature*, Emily Brady proposes a model of aesthetic appreciation of the natural world in which the leading role in our aesthetic experiences of nature is held by imagination along with perception. Brady introduces herself as having a neo-Kantian position delimited by two general borders. On the one hand, knowledge is not required as a necessary condition for the aesthetic judgement and, on

1 Brady, E., (1998), “Imagination and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature”, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 56, nº2, pp.139-147; p.142: “My non-science-based model draws on our perceptual and imaginative capacities to provide a foundation for aesthetic appreciation of nature. The model is loosely Kantian, for it also includes disinterestedness as a guide to appropriate appreciation.”

2 Brady, E., (2003) *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*, Edinburg: MPG Books, p. 122: “It can be shown that while non-cognitive, there is room in his theory for indeterminate concepts and the very basic organising concepts needed for experience of the world. While still maintaining the predominantly non-cognitive nature of appreciation in the integrated aesthetics, I shall go beyond Kant to some extent by suggesting that it is sometimes appropriate to feed in background knowledge.”
the other hand, she appeals to disinterestedness as a guide for aesthetic appreciation, choosing for its application the Stolniz’s reformulation of the concept. Brady calls her account *Integrated Aesthetics*, conceiving the aesthetic appreciation as characteristically guided both by the subject and the object: “appreciation comes about through the subject’s appreciative capacities –perception, imagination and so on, coupled with open, sympathetic attention to the qualities of the aesthetic object.” Perception is described as principally having an active role. Imagination, as being composed, among others⁴, of four principal kinds of activities: exploration, projection, ampliation, and revelation. Despite her emphasis on imagination, Brady does not believe that “imagination is a necessary condition of aesthetic experience, for in some cases aesthetic objects will not evoke imagination and “we may simply rely on perceptual capacities and just engage the senses.” At the same time, she argues that perception together with imagination alone cannot accurately regulate the correctness of appreciation. With the aim of preventing her account of possible irrelevant uses of imagination, Brady raises an objection by means of which she imposes on it two limits: disinterestedness and what she calls as the “imagine-well”. I will try to put into question those limits, challenging her account with a less restrictive account of imagination within her own model.

1. On Perception

Although Brady mentions there is sometimes spontaneous activity in perceiving nature, she principally conceives it as an active function we can fruitfully improve through effort. “Using all the senses takes an effort. Nature calls for active perception and sensuous participation, rather than passivity or laziness.”⁵ My aim is defending that effortful perception is not always necessary for having better aesthetic experiences of nature. Nöel Carroll’s arousal account has shown how “one very costumary appreciative

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³ Brady, (2003), p. 120
⁴ In her 2003, she includes a paragraph for metaphorical imagination, which was not previously considered in her 1998.
⁵ Brady, (2003), p. 147
⁶ Brady, (2003), p. 128

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response to nature is a matter of reacting to it with the appropriated emotions.” That is the case, for example, of the towering cascade, presented by Carroll as a pretheoretical form of appreciating nature. According with him, we are emotionally conformed to aesthetically appreciate reacting towards Nature. So, often, we aesthetically appreciate her without effort. Following him, I do not believe that effortful perception could be a requirement for an always-good aesthetic experience nature.

Furthermore, I think making an effort in fully perceiving also poses a problem of attention associated with the intensive use of each of our senses. For, to deal with attention to all of the information grasped by them with effort, we must proceed one by one or on parts, choosing among the data, temporarily cancelling the attention we pay to some of them, and composing it all. In this vein, effortful perception would also keep us distanced from what I think is another important element of environmental aesthetic experiences. In my view, we cannot only consider attentive perceptual activity. Non-intentional contents of perception, which usually remain unnoticed, and the contents of our own past experiences should be taken into account as determining stimulus for our actual imaginings.

In principle, Brady’s suggestion has a general character but afterwards it gains a different shade drifting towards the convenience of making an effort when appreciating unsenic nature.

“Appreciation of aesthetic qualities through sensory engagement is directed to a great degree by qualities perceived, but what is picked out for appreciation depends to some extent on the effort made with respect to engaging perceptual capacities. With art, a lot depends on the ability of the artist to create an engaging and imaginative work of art. With nature, the character of the natural object significantly determines how much perceptual effort is required. It may take less effort to see the beauty of a particularly grand landscape compared to a wasteland. However, un-scenic nature also has aesthetic value, and perceiving that is dependent upon the effort of the individual.”

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8 Carroll, N., (2001), p. 373
9 Brady, (2003), p. 127
Two questions remain open to me from this second point. The first concerning the grounds on which we should agree with the need or convenience of making an effort when aesthetically appreciating an environment and if that effort should necessarily be extensible to unscenic cases. The second engages a common point for perception and imagination: how do perceived-objects evoke imagination. As disinterestedness is for Brady a guide for the correctness of the appreciation, let us see the objection in which she proposes her guides for correctness before confronting these two questions.

2. The Objection

“To what extent should imagination play a role in appreciation? It might be argued that the use of imagination is likely to cause incorrect or inappropriate responses by trivializing the aesthetic object. (...) I do not think that all imaginative responses are appropriate. (...) Problems arise if we depend solely on the connection between imagination and perception. (...) To remedy this, I suggest two guidelines; the first is disinterestedness, while the second is characterized by comparing imagination to a virtue, so that we “imagine well” when we use imagination, skilfully and appropriately, according to the context of aesthetic appreciation. (...) But how exactly would such a use sort relevant from irrelevant imaginings? An important aspect of virtue provides an answer to this question of the moral problem (using practical reason), as well as practice, provides the foundation of the appropriate virtue. In the aesthetic context, imagination is mobilized an exercised according to the demands of the aesthetic object. (...) “Imagining-well involves spotting aesthetic potential, having a sense of what to look for, and knowing when to clip the wings of imagination.”

(i) Effort

Describing the significance of our aesthetic effort in perceiving, Brady gives an example of her own experience, determining for the appreciation of an unscenic environment:

10 Brady, (2003), p. 144-145
“The local government where I live has been working with the local community to decide how to manage a landscape of an oil refinery. (...) After spending some time exploring the place, I discovered that what appeared to be a dull landscape was in fact aesthetically interesting. Through careful attention to various aspects of that environment, I discovered the graceful flight of birds, the soft fragrance of various wildflowers, and an elegant pair of swans in one of the ponds. My delight in these aspects of the place was heightened by my background knowledge of the debate and this history of the place (and that knowledge led me to explore it in the first place), but the aesthetic value I found there did not depend upon such knowledge, rather it depended on perceptual interest and immersion in the landscape.”

I may say, firstly, that I do not see why the graceful flight of birds, the soft fragrance of wildflowers or the elegant pair of swans in the pond could be taken as a clear example of appreciating with effort an un-scenic environment. To me, they are paradigmatic examples of beauty in nature, which may had passed overlooked, and now could have been somehow isolated from their surroundings. Secondly, if they were not, if they have been given as beautiful new features of an old refinery, also considering the rest of aesthetic appearances and conditions of the place as a whole environment, why do we need extra information? Brady suggests that the alleged background knowledge of the place triggered her initial interest and afterwards the appreciation was aesthetically fulfilled without dependence on that knowledge. Nevertheless, if her delight of the place was heightened by background knowledge of the debate and the history of the place, her appreciation should have been guided by that knowledge. I agree at this point with Eaton’s criticism¹¹ and Carlson’s observation¹², when they say that, in this case, knowledge directs imagination, being, then, required.

¹¹ Eaton, M., (1998), “Fact and Fiction in the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature”, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 56, p. 152: “Knowledge does not simply deepen the experiences that imagination provides; it directs them... Concepts such as imagining well make no sense unless one knows what the object is that one is talking about, something (in fact, as much as possible) about the object, and something (in fact, as much as possible) about the context in which the object is found.

¹² Carlson, A., “Budd and Brady on the Aesthetics of Nature”, *The Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 55, nº 218, pp. 110: “(Brady) appeals to three ways in which our imaginings are to
Finally, if we accept her claim: “it may take less effort to see the beauty of a particularly grand landscape compared to a wasteland”, we may reflect on whether there is actually a need or not of making an effort in appreciating unscenic nature. If we agree with her, we would face, then, a last but not least difficulty: the one of finding aesthetic grounds for supporting that need.

(ii) Perceiving Qualities/Directing Imagination

Brady presents two general cases for directing imagination’s activity. The first form of guidance is carried out by perception: “the perceptual qualities of the aesthetic objet guide imagination by giving it direction, and through suggestion by sensory cues.” Here, perception spots on and shows the most relevant aesthetic information to imagination, while she follows the lead. But, as mentioned above, Brady argues that imagination is not a necessary condition for aesthetic appreciation of nature, for there are cases in which objects are not evocative to imagination, cases in which we just rely on perception. In her reflection on how do objects evoke or not, Carlson detects a second point in which knowledge would be required for evocative and non-evocative objects or cases. For us to know which are perceptually and imaginatively relevant or irrelevant properties in an aesthetic object, we need of its concept, so that the result of our appreciation, its correctness, is determined by the necessary adjustment of the aesthetic properties we perceive to the concept of the object. As I see it, Brady seems to prove him right when she argues we sometimes trivialize or sentimentalize nature transforming it into something it is not. This is the case of her example on the lamb dressed up in baby clothes. Despite the fact that it really is a corny imagining, I think we do not fail to imagine the lamb accurately. If we imagine a lamb dressed up in baby clothes guided: (i) the way object’s qualities evoke and direct imaginings; (ii) disinterestedness; (iii) imagining well, which [we do] when we use imagination skilfully and appropriately according to the context of aesthetic appreciation. These guidelines may well be useful against subjectivism; but the trouble at least with (i) and (iii) is that they seem to require knowledge in order to be effective.

Brady, (2003), p.158

Carlson, A., opus cit., p. 110: “Imagining well requires knowledge about the object of appreciation and the context of that object. If that object is a natural object or environment, the relevant knowledge is scientific knowledge.”
clothes, we do not transform the lamb into something it is not. This way of imagining a lamb belongs to a cultural tradition, we all recognize it and, in my opinion, should be accepted. The problem with it is that it is an artistically bad imagining from the beginning and remains poor if we use it as a resource in our aesthetic experiences of nature. But it can happen differently with other similar cases. Thus, we can think, for example, of the white rabbit from *Alice in Wonderland*. He is also dressed up in a funny way for an animal, in Victorian clothes, and similarly it could be thought of as irrelevant if we only focus on that feature. But, despite the clothes, it is an artistically good imagining of a rabbit. It keeps permanently in touch with non-imaginary rabbits in several relevant ways and it may help us to focus on actual natural information of the rabbit we now have in front. So, I think this kind of imaginings could be accepted as imaginatively accurate in our aesthetic experiences of nature, being it much more evident when we deal with artistically good imaginings that they are not disrespectful with nature as it is, and that we do not necessarily transform nature into something it is not when we appeal to them. As I see it, even though there could be some distance between these imaginings and what we take as the core perceptual information, artistic imaginings of natural objects or environments may reveal fruitful relevant properties that could, in turn, be considered as a source of accurate data in our aesthetic experiences of nature. And I take this fruitful contribution from artistic imaginings to be something different from merely considering nature artistically. With the upstanding aim of securing the correctness of our aesthetic appreciation, I think Brady restricts imagination too much; and so, her approach has the undesired effect of giving priority to scientific or conceptual information at the cost of the products of the imagination.

Secondary forms of guidance would be needed for cases in which our imaginings “will be only tentatively tied to perceptual qualities of the object”. Namely, disinterestedness and what she calls as the imagine-well.

“Disinterestedness specifically addresses the concern that the use of imagination leads to self-indulgence, while the second guideline has more to do with training imagination, as a skill, where we try to keep imagination in line with relevant features of the object. It requires

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15 Brady, (2003), p. 159

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a more active role by the appreciator in that she or he is expected to “imagine well.”

Brady poses here the example of someone appreciating a high cliff on the south coast of England, and its pleasure being heightened by the knowledge that this place is a suicide spot. For Brady, by thinking on blood and the fallen bodies, our imagining becomes distanced from the qualities of the cliff. In my opinion, the wrong thing in this case is that the background knowledge convened is incidental to our aesthetic experience, resting the irrelevance on the kind of information that has facilitated our imagining more that in the imagining itself. What if I think of the cliff as a point for doing hang-glider? The association now is aesthetically relevant. The information is not conceptually constraining and at a time the imagining does not become distanced but closer to the properties of the cliff enhancing my appreciation: my multisensuous perception and, without challenging its correction, it increases possibilities for imagination. I can imagine myself softly flying, gaining visibility of some inaccessible parts of the cliff, etc.

At another point in her text, she divides the responsibility for the activity of imagination among the aesthetic object, the subject and the situation:

“While in most cases imagination (working along relevant lines) enhances appreciation, aesthetic qualities may be appreciated in many cases without using imagination. The degree to which imagination is active depends upon individual appreciator, the nature of the aesthetic object and the aesthetic situation itself.”

I feel more comfortable with this tripartite liability, since I think we are not aesthetically compelled to regard the object’s actual properties as the only aesthetic source of our imaginings. We could also draw aesthetic coherent material from our cognitive and cultural background, from our past experiences of similar situations, not being needed for they to be coherent always to be determined as scientifically friendly. In comparison with her previous more restrictive proposal, I think this more comprehensive

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16 Brady, E., (2003), p. 159
17 Brady, E., (2003), p. 151
framework would not commit Brady with a weaker notion of correction, only with a broader one constrained not just by the object’s properties somehow linked to its concept, but also open to relevant secondary aesthetic information supplied by the appreciator. In my view it would open the door to actual realistic uses of imagination in our aesthetic experiences of nature at the time that it would fit better with her non-cognitivist general position.

Brady suggestively presents “imagination’s activity (as) choreographed to some extent via the perception of qualities in objects”.18 Let us attend now her worry of how do we know that our imagination has gone too far from the objective evocative capacity of objects as to become irrelevant for us “to clip its wings”.

3. On Imagination

Brady accounts for four principal activities of imagination19: exploration, projection, ampliation, and revelation. The first is the closest to perception and follows its lead, sometimes searching for unity; the second involves the ability of “seeing as” and also the leap of “projecting ourselves into natural objects or scenes”; the third reaches the imagination’s inventive powers an is also linked to transitory qualities of natural objects by the inclusion of narrative images, within which we connect past, present and future appearances; by means of the fourth, we reach new-revealed understanding through aesthetic experience.

Imagination, firstly, should be disinterested and, secondly, may do well its job. To accomplish these tasks, Brady imposes a second limit to imagination, a sort of mechanism called the “imagining-well”. Described as analogous to a practical virtue, we acquire it through habit and it is provided to target against irrelevant uses of this kind of activity. “The second guideline has more to do with training imagination as a skill, where we try to keep imagination in line with relevant features of the object.”20 The proposal leads us to two questions that must be thought separately.

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18 Brady, E., (2003), p. 151
19 In her 2003 she adds a specific paragraph for metaphorical imagination.
20 Brady, (2003), p. 159
On the one hand, imagining well is described as constrained by the object, and particularly by its perceptual properties; on the other hand, imagining well is described as the skilful practice on imagining, thus related to the properties of the activity of imagining—its coherence, vivacity, powerfulness, profundity, etc. My content is that Brady may be giving primacy to the first component of the notion of imagining-well at the expense of the second.

Putting the accent, as Brady does, in the demands of the object, successfully ensures the correctness requirement tied to the object21, but I think it may ask for clipping the wings of imagination too early. For Brady, discriminations on which are relevant and irrelevant properties are not something “easy to make nor by any means clear-cut, but through practice it is possible to develop this skill of keeping imaginings on track.”22 But the track Brady seems to have in mind is the aesthetic concordance between the properties of an object and its scientific definition or, more or less, its area of influence. In my view, an undesirable consequence of this is that she may be unnecessarily sacrificing a range of imaginative possibilities of our aesthetic experiences, which, being related but not so strictly tied to the object could be considered valuable.

On the other hand, regarding the practical side of the “imagining-well”, I briefly want to argue that, aesthetic experiences while not always are guided in practice by requirements of correctness, should be regulated by pleasure, which ultimately is a necessary component of the aesthetic experience. Following Brady, I will defend that, over time, the exercise of imagining enables us to increasingly achieve more sophisticated and, therefore, more pleasurable experiences. Aesthetic pleasure would guide our practice making us discern relevant from irrelevant properties, attending to its subjective rewarding character. The same could be applied for disinterestedness. Over time, practice leads us to know, paradoxically, how our interested aesthetic experiences are poorer in pleasure and less free in the use of imagination, may we say shorter in path and diversity than our disinterested ones. We get to know by practice how irrelevant and self-indulgent uses of imagination are a poorer source of aesthetic pleasure, while rel-

21 Brady, (2003), p. 159: “the second guideline has more to do with relevant features of the object. It requires a more active role by the appreciator”.
22 Brady, (2003), p. 160
evant are richer. Free use of imagination within a wider understanding of phenomenological concordance between imagination and perception plays a determining role in the achievement of aesthetic experiences of nature.

To analyze my proposal, I would like to bring forward three different examples. I present them here orderly, beginning with the one, which has more relation to the present object and appearances to the one with the less.

(i) A Child Imagining to Be Small as an Ant

My first example wants to present a child of about ten years old imagining he being the size of an ant. He realizes that many in exciting creatures and places in nature have a different scale and he wants to appreciate them better. Thus, he delights himself imagining how would it feel to be smaller in his natural environment. He imagines feeling the song of birds louder, the sound of wind over the leaves and its load, the great power of a of raindrop if it falls over him, the many places he would have to hide, behind stones, in a hollow of tree trunk, the different touch of the earth in his different kind of skin, having six feet and antennas, wondering if ants feel cold in winter. He also imagines how fragile his life would be and remembers how innocently cruel children are when they step on the rows of ants or when they block the entrance of anthills without any feeling of doing something wrong. Also, in a given moment, he may imagine himself doing something that ants do not do, speaking with a cockroach, for example. Does he trivialize nature? Does it turn his aesthetic experience into an irrelevant one? I do not think so.

If we now apply on it Brady’s limitations on correctness, we could take this imagining to be disinterested and well imagined. On the one hand, the boy does not pursuit any utilitarian or self-indulgent (understood as hedonist) end. On the other hand, his aesthetic experience of nature is being technically well imagined, that is, he has not built an imaginary universe, he is being concordant with the perception of the object, and the question left for debate would be the relevance or irrelevance imagining of him being an ant or the size of an ant and doing things that ants scien-

\[23 \text{ Brady, (2003), p. 149: When talking about the division between productive and} \]

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tifically do not do. I think fables are culturally relevant narratives of the natural world for kids as to be included in their aesthetic experiences of nature, without challenging with it nature’s general description.

(ii) My Childhood Garden Without the Big Tree

Brady admits the inclusion of narrative imaginings in ampliative imagination. Quoting Kenko through Saito, she admits that: “In particular, we appreciate the exquisite contrast between the present condition and the imagined condition of the previous or following stage.”

My second example, somehow challenges this narrative aim because, being valid as an imagining from the past, will not be valid in the future. However, it is determining for the appreciation.

The situation takes us now to the place where I lived in my childhood. My parents’ house had a huge garden where I played and spent most of my days until I left to University. Almost ten years have past since the last time I was there, and I feel very excited with my return home. When I finally arrived, I found that the old oak-tree that lived and gave life to my garden was not there, and everything had lost its place. The garden was not the same. The dogs did not rest under its shadow, plenty of herbs, small flowers and insects, the big table where the family sat for breakfast and the swings beside it were still there, but they did not seem to form part of the place, they seemed to have been abandoned under the sun. The place look deserted and I just kept on imagining the old-oak for my garden being what it was. Although everything but the missing tree is exactly the same and in the same place, the whole garden with all their present objects and corners of charm has not enough aesthetic strength to compensate for the absence of the tree. Now I do not have any sign but an absence to demand from me this imagining which I need as necessary for perceiving.

creative imagination, Brady says: “Imagination enables us to reach beyond the given by bringing together the elements of the experience in novel ways so that we can, for example, imaginatively transform ourselves into a tree swaying in the wind...(...) Disclosing the value of creative imagination in aesthetic experience requires not that we condemn its very powers, but that we distinguish between the imaginative and the imaginary, relevant and irrelevant imaginings, and find the right balance between the serious and the trivial. (...) Imagination depends upon our beliefs about the world... Having a false belief and accepting it as true are distinct from entertaining a false belief through imagination.”


Although I have my imagination focused on a missing object, I think we may consider this example as being disinterested and well imagined. I think I do not claim for it interestingly, looking for my own personal enjoyment. Now I do not have any sign to perceive but an absence to demand from me this imagining. Am I wrong, aesthetically speaking, when I endeavour to imagine something lost? Do we not look behind natural cycles for something that remains being the same as our life changes and passes by?

(iii) On the Beach: What's the Time?

My last example wants to be the farthest to Brady’s limitations. It is summer and I am lying on the beach. While sunbathing, I almost fell asleep but I did not; I just lost track of time. At one point, I wondered what the time was and, without getting up, I groped for the watch in my bag. Bringing it near of my face, I slightly opened my eyes to look at it when, overrun by the warmth of my drowsy rest, I saw the watch like if it was, so to say, a Dali’s watch, softly bent, like the heat and the sand, like me resting, but it striking the hour. I was not dreaming, neither was it the product of an optical effect. I also was not having an illusion or a hallucination. I was experiencing a pleasant rest in the intense heat of August, all having consequences in my slightly deformed perception, imaginatively completed. I was completely aware of my here and now, just wondering about the time. Although the watch, of course, is not a natural object, I take this hypothetical case to be an aesthetic experience of natural environment because it principally comes defined by myself being affected by the environment. I experience the heat, the beach and also the passing of time, aesthetically, and my seeing the watch bended is in complete concordance with the rest of my sensations. And so are my sensations and imagining consistent with the idea of nature being what it is: I know I am on the beach, I know it is hot, and I know the watch is not bended. Although I know the image does not match with the one I would have if I decide myself to open my eyes and simply look, I delight myself on this soft and sudden imagining of the watch in the sand, as a beautiful and fruitful aesthetic figure of rest, of time and of this precise environment, without loosing the notion of reality.
4. Conclusion

Brady presents her account as a non-cognitivist model of aesthetic appreciation of nature. Considering herself as loosely Kantian, she argues for the relevance that background knowledge may have in our appreciations, being that knowledge not responsible for directing our appreciations. However, I have tried to show that she offers examples in which knowledge is not just acknowledged as a possible source, but required as leading information in our aesthetic experiences. In my view, this is due to her strict account of aesthetic correction. Brady’s characterization of what is relevant for correctly appreciating nature and the role of imagination is excessively marked by a scientific or naturalistic approach to the object of appreciation. In addition, she gives a more prominent role to background knowledge that what she seemed ready to accept when she attributes to it the ability to enhance our aesthetic pleasure. Then, we can say that knowledge directs our appreciation. All these aspects feed my suspicion that her ‘Integrated Aesthetics’, although presented as a balanced model between object and subject, embodies an overt preference for a view of nature’s appreciation strongly guided by a naturalistic paradigm, something that can also be seen in her emphasis on perceptual effort, supported by the new idea of disinterestedness.

Secondly, and in contrast to it, I have defended that effortful perception cannot be taken as a condition for a better appreciation, since the lack of attention also generates valuable aesthetic experiences of nature. Whether that effort could be promoted for cases of unscenic nature should be considered in more detail too, because I think Brady’s example fails to establish a direct aesthetic link between the two.

Moreover, in my defense of non-effortful perceptual cases, I have tried to show how many diverse contributions of the appreciator can also add valuable contents to our aesthetic experiences of nature. In comparison with Brady’s more restrictive proposal, my aim has been trying to show through the three examples spelled out above that a broader notion of correction, combined with aesthetic pleasure taken as practical ruler of the activity of imagination, brings with it more possibilities for imagination, fitting well with her non-cognitivist position.
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**References**


