
Book Reviews

Tuan, Yi-Fu. 1993. *Passing Strange and Wonderful*. Washington, DC: Island Press, ISBN 1-55963-209-7, \$25.00 cloth, 288 pp.

Yi-Fu Tuan is a professor of geography at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. His vast work links together the landscape of nature with the landscape of the human mind. His thinking is philosophical in its depth and his writing contains the flair of poetry. Perhaps the best known of Tuan's eight other books is *Topophilia*.

Passing Strange and Wonderful, as the subtitle of the book reveals, is about aesthetics, nature, and culture. While Tuan does not ignore human folly, he does not dwell on the dark side of things—exploitation, greed, pollution—as many recent works on environment and society do. He summarizes, “By contrast, the outlook presented here is predominantly sunny.”

Conventional research, such as that by Abraham Maslow, suggests that aesthetic experiences are sought only after more basic needs have been met. In this far-reaching book, Tuan advances the idea that beauty is *essential* to individual life and is the driving force and ultimate goal of culture.

The pervasive role of the aesthetic is reflected by its root meaning of “feeling” and is suggested even more by its opposite, anesthetic, “lack of feeling.” Tuan reminds us, “The more attuned we are to the beauties of the world, the more we come to life and take joy in it.”

Passing Strange and Wonderful is divided into five parts. The chapters of Part I lay a foundation for the book. The aesthetic impulse is rooted in nature (biology), but it is directed and colored by culture. The aesthetic mode is “a mood, a feeling, an emotion.” However, it cannot take extreme forms like drowsy indolence or visceral states such as rage.

Aestheticism, ultimately, is a sophisticated response. It is a cultivated posture toward life and the world. Tuan explains, “Every society nurtures this impulse in its young, encouraging it to grow in scope, power, and subtlety.” Of course, expressions of the aesthetic range widely from culture to culture. Less varying are the developmental stages of aesthetic competence and appreciation. Children, in general, tend to dwell in an expansive, timeless present. They are open to sensory delight and have an immense capacity for wonder. Preschoolers are enthralled by bright colors and things that sparkle, while older children begin to “apprehend the world more fully and discriminately, discerning in it a subtleness and range of beauty, an expressiveness, an emotional and psychological depth that lie beyond the competence of the young child.”

Part II is titled “Sensory Delights” and the chapters consider the different human senses—smell, touch, taste, hearing, and sight—the building blocks of aesthetic experience. This section of the book is similar in format and content to Diane Ackerman's *A Natural History of the Senses*.

Tactile aesthetics contribute to the pleasures of being alive and to our sense of well-being, especially for children. Tuan laments that people are literally losing touch with nature. Although children still strive for intimate contact with the land, adults mostly enjoy nature by simply looking at it. The account of taste aesthetics includes a discussion of Chinese cuisine and etiquette where harmony in food is the desideratum, as it is in others areas of Chinese life—extremes and excess are to be avoided. Next, Tuan explores the olfactory sense: “Robbed of scent, life and the world become gray and passionless.” He addresses fragrances in nature, the countryside, and the city. In a similar format, Tuan considers the sounds in our lives. He provides a relatively long discourse on music which “in its exalted form, elevates the soul.” The last chapter in this part is about visual delight and splendor. Although a good deal of territory is covered from composition and pattern to color, the section on “ice” is especially intriguing while revealing the broad scope of the book. Tuan notes that of the polar explorers, Fridjof Nansen and Richard Byrd were perhaps the most introspective and philosophical. Both were captivated by spectacular beauty, yet they turned their geographic voyages into odysseys of self-discovery—reflections on nature, cosmos, and the meaning of life.

In Part III, Tuan explores how the capacity of the human senses to organize the world may take on diverse forms which are shaped by the larger cultures in which they operate. To guide the reader, Tuan describes the aesthetic qualities at the core of four widely disparate cultures in space and time: Australian Aboriginal, Chinese, medieval European, and modern American.

The Australian Aboriginal world derives from the centrality of its belief in “dreamtime” when powerful beings walk the land, establish the topographic features, call all the natural species to life, and institute rules of group and individual behavior.

The idea of landscape for the Chinese is manifest in poetry, painting, and garden design which suggest certain enduring values and beliefs. One such value, Tuan notes, is the association of livelihood in landscape art; that is, some ordinary human activity nearly always appears in a landscape. Other themes include fertility, nature as generative power, and sexual symbolism.

People in medieval Europe enjoyed nature close at hand rather than from a distance, and, at quite another level, they rejoiced in heaven. The middle scale was relatively unimportant. The discussion is extended to the medieval cathedral and the mystique of light. “Presented with light and color, medieval people were filled with the joy of life.”

In America wilderness has been celebrated for its grandeur as well as its contribution to the national character. This chapter is a quick survey of ground covered in Roderick Nash’s *Wilderness and the American Mind*, although Tuan concludes with an inquiry into the cultural meaning of the commercial strip, complete with neon lights.

In Part IV Tuan examines the ways in which symbolic space is integrated into a larger and more complete whole—the state. The purpose of state rites and ceremonies, according to Tuan, is to formulate with all the powers of

art a credible image of an idealized self, with public good at its core. "In the formulation, the moral and the aesthetic are inextricably mixed: the arts, including ceremony and architecture, present and dramatize the good." Tuan illustrates the point with several examples: Renaissance Venice, the France of Louis XIV, and the democratic ideal of the United States. The American frontier carried a moral tone, but also a glamor unique to the nation. The vast open space offered its own exhilarating and magical beauty. "When fused with the ideals of simple manners and love of liberty, it turns into a sort of geographic-aesthetic-moral icon."

The contents of the book thus far provide a guide to the splendors of the earth and of the human creations on it. In Part V Tuan poses difficult moral questions: The artifacts are wonderful, but at what expense to nature? What are the human and social costs of large scale constructions? Dark shadows are common in all complex societies in which artifacts of culture can also serve to distinguish hierarchical standing. The shadows cast are a matter of degree and may be a consequence of complacency, vanity, greed, or evil. At the extreme Tuan points to Hitler who used art and show, ritual and ceremony, to create a monstrous state.

However, Tuan returns full circle to the individual where moral beauty exists, just as physical beauty may, in certain acts of courage, generosity, genuine modesty, and selfless love. Tuan concludes that moral beauty is more likely to flourish in societies that appreciate and encourage it.

Passing Strange and Wonderful is an engaging book. It is useful as a guide to the wonders of our senses. The contents invite a more contemplative examination of the world around us. But this is only the beginning as Tuan expands the analysis to include the most elaborate of human constructs—art, philosophy, and politics.

This book would be useful to leisure scholars, educators, and students. Given the broad scope of its contents, it could be used as a supplemental text for any number of courses at the undergraduate or graduate level. It would also be a worthy addition to personal libraries.

LARRY BECK, San Diego State University

Schleien, S., McAvoy, L., Lais, G., and Rynders, J. 1993. *Integrated Outdoor Education and Adventure Programs*. Champaign, IL: Sagamore Publishing, ISBN 0-915611-59-7, \$37.95, hardcover, pp. 270.

Do you know how to accommodate a participant in a canoe or kayak who uses a wheelchair? Does your staff know how to work with people with varying abilities? Do you know how to assess the capabilities of your participants and encourage the building of a cooperative integrated environment?