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POPULAR  

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**NEGATIVE / POSITIVE:  
WOMEN IN ACTION**

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# NEGATIVE / POSITIVE: WOMEN IN ACTION

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**Abstract**

Care theory is concerned with invisible and undervalued social practices that reproduce the world in all of its ordinariness, such as taking care both of people and the environment. As regards the environment, environmental care practices highlight the strength of ordinary environmentalism and how it is rendered invisible. In this article, the denial of care corresponds to effacing ordinary environmentalism in its aesthetic and productive dimensions. The women in charge of this environment tend to experience it in this way, i.e. as a space devoid of qualities that does not warrant aesthetic attention.

**Keywords**

Care, Materialism, Ecofeminism, Negative Commons.

I first met Arnold Berleant, philosopher of environmental aesthetics<sup>1</sup> and then editor of *Contemporary Aesthetics*, in 2008, while I was conducting a survey of ecological art, with which he was not familiar. Since then, we have had the pleasure of meeting on several occasions, and I would like to dedicate this article to him as a way of expressing my gratitude and esteem. Arnold Berleant himself has not actually dealt with gender or the place of women in environmental aesthetics. I would like to use this article to illustrate the importance of this theme.

Care theory is concerned with invisible and undervalued social practices that reproduce the world in all of its ordinariness, such as taking care both of people and the environment. As regards the environment, environmental care practices highlight the strength of ordinary environmentalism and how it is rendered invisible. What is ordinary environmentalism? I will define it here as the set of social practices and representations that lie at the heart of given socio-political cultures and contribute to the transformation of the environment and of environments. In the field of the environment, the ordinary has recently been qualified as a body of unremarkable animal and plant species that populate territories<sup>2</sup>. This ordinary environmentalism also forms part of the social philosophy of Proudhon or Kropotkin's mutual aid, i. e. a certain idea of productive activities before they have been captured by capital, in the sense of ownership, as well the ability of third parties to subordinate productive labour. It gives a certain idea of emancipation in the sense of having control over the conditions of existence and reproduction. This question should also urge us to examine how the ordinary is simultaneously a by-product of capital, leftover or waste, or the ignored or invisible part of production which, itself is visible in what is monetised. This means according appropriate importance to numerous experiments or practices or events rooted in concrete practices, materially anchored in the territories. It is also about

embracing the spirit of an environmental aesthetic that is not content with spectacular gestures, but incorporates all of the multiple sensitive links to the environment.<sup>3</sup>

In this article, the denial of care corresponds to effacing ordinary environmentalism in its aesthetic and productive dimensions. In a constrained manner, women who take charge of the local environment as part of a process of extended domesticity in many countries, particularly in the South, try to improve this environment by focusing on issues bound up with ecology and collective subsistence. It should also be noted that women are more amenable to the policy of “simple reflexes” and responsible behaviour, to the point that ecology is perceived as feminine, which actually devalues male engagement in this domain. A study published at the end of 2016, headed up by Aaron R. Brough and James E. B. Wilkie, even advocates “masculinisation” of ecological advertisements and objects<sup>4</sup>. In our opinion, the important thing is not the policy of “simple reflexes”, but broad consideration of all phenomena and productive dynamics that impact ecosystems. It is also about promoting politics that takes charge of these environments – particularly in the name of ecosystem dynamics – and promotes them as something worth preserving. The issue is undoubtedly to examine to what extent the dynamics of negation (or denigration) inherent in the development of our societies concern both the environments and the people who live in them, generating a negative aesthetic perspective.

### **1 Ordinary environmentalism and negative care**

As we stressed in the introduction, due to the structuring effects of gender division of labour, women are often “at the coalface” managing the day-to-day activities of reproducing life and, consequently, they are required to manage the negative consequences of predatory activities. Take, for example, the struggle against the construction of dams. In both India and China, women have played an important role in this combat as water shortages in the local environment forced them to deploy costly solutions for getting water to their households. Vandana Shiva, a leading figure in the Indian feminist movement, believes that water is an essential part of ourselves and our environments. She uses the concept of Earth Democracy to stress the idea of the Earth Family and recognise the intrinsic rights of natural elements such as rivers. The idea of the law of return is also very important, whereby what is extracted from the Earth must be returned. Today, the extractivist mindset means that the economy destroys but does not give anything back. While the idea of caring for the Earth goes hand in hand with a dynamic of obligation and responsibility, women are often directly confronted with the deleterious effects of environmental destruction and development. Conversely, because of this same division of labour, ordinary environmentalism allocated to women – consisting of caring for the reproduction of the environment with a view to handing it over to future generations – is largely underestimated.

So how then should we think of this ordinary environmentalism? In my opinion, an analysis of ordinary environmentalism needs to cover devaluation and structural division of labour and authority according to the materialities and material flows involved. More generally, in an aesthetic

perspective based around ‘sharing the sensitive’, extensively developed by Jacques Rancière, the ordinary environment produced by the activity of people who are accorded little value in the community is itself subject to systematic devaluation. ‘Sharing the sensitive’ is defined from a philosophical perspective as follows<sup>5</sup>:

To me, sharing sensitive experience means this system of sensitive proof that simultaneously depicts the existence of something in common and the boundaries that circumscribe the respective places and parts. (...) Politics is about what we see and what we can say about it, about who is qualified to see and to say, and about the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time. (our translation)

Therefore, the ways in which societies assign different values to people and to things are a function of interacting positivity and negativity. In her article *Masculin/Féminin* written from a structuralist perspective, F. Héritier claimed that the androcentric thinking that assigns a lesser value to women when compared to men is a mechanism that is reproduced regardless of the objects concerned<sup>6</sup>. She terms this structural mechanism ‘gender differential valence’. The problem is not merely the relegation of women, but the ways in which a hierarchy of values is produced in society.

In a materialistic economy of symbolic production, Pierre Bourdieu describes *Masculine domination* as a process that produces power and domination in capitalist societies<sup>7</sup>. Indeed, this analysis is confronted with the denunciation by ecofeminism of the alliance between male domination and extractivism<sup>8</sup> at the heart of a social and environmental crisis. Bourdieu describes the polarities of gender construction as they relate to the constructions of nature, i.e., the moon is feminine, cold and passive, the sun masculine, warm and radiant. He writes that “gender division is present both – in the objective state – in things (in the house, for example, every part of which is ‘sexed’), in the whole social world, and – in the embodied state – in the habitus of the agents functioning as systems of schemes of perception, thought and action”<sup>9</sup>.

In brief, we may think of the mechanics of relegation (or discrimination) as underpinning the valuation and recognition phenomena at the heart of our societies. Therefore, liking something or finding it beautiful is, by opposition, declaring that it is not worthwhile or has no value in deeply hierarchical societies. This construct is similar to that of the place and role of women throughout history.

This is particularly true of everyday experience of the environment, which is often considered much too ordinary to be aesthetic, a term applied instead to extraordinary phenomena. The women in charge of this environment tend to experience it in this way, i.e. as a space devoid of qualities that does not warrant aesthetic attention. More generally, even women tend to mask the environmental tasks they perform, relegating them to the background of what is worthy of attention. Thus, they are often entrusted with a dual burden: that of wife and mother, and environmental caregiver.

These observations give rise to three remarks. First, there is an aesthetic of familiarity which broadly refers to care of the domestic environment or management of local public spaces, or even

private spaces whose resources help smooth the routines of everyday life. Second, negatively perceived spaces are just as much a part of our everyday universe as positively perceived ones and cannot be excluded from any proposed solution for emerging from the social and environmental crisis. Third, ideas of differences and related values form part of the exercise of authority that naturalizes the production of hierarchies.

Such a position calls for a reflection upon the values we collectively associate with the idea of sustainability. For example, we need to include more broadly what is still negligible today in our life experiences and reflect upon the desire to agree upon what is good, beautiful and good for the future. Psychoanalysts believe that this collective desire for the future is thwarted by the self-destructive impulses of humans. And what about ecologists' view of humans as an invasive species which, like all such species, destroys its environment before collapsing and beginning again?

First, let us come back to the aesthetic of familiarity and the negative aesthetic. Everyday things and everyday environments are frequently devalued due to their familiarity, which does not engage our perception and makes us insensible to their qualities. This is not always true as there is a tradition of painting the ordinary and even the simple things in our environment, however an aesthetic perspective often accords major importance to exceptional events. In this sense, the importance of sensitive experience in day-to-day living is forgotten about. Moreover, environmental aesthetics writers have played a role in defending this aesthetic of ordinary things. By identifying aesthetics as 'the theory of sensitivity', Arnold Berleant rejects the general association between aesthetics and art along with its connotation of good or great art.

Second, there is a negative aesthetic perspective based on the idea of objects being inherently beautiful or ugly. For example, certain environments are devoid of any positive aesthetic value due to their complete blandness. And yet these objects, environments and processes are an integral part of how we live our lives. According to Arnold Berleant, examples include: "the many forms of environmental pollutions, among them, smog, noise, water, spatial pollution [...] High levels of sound, or noise, bad air, excessive visual stimulation and overcrowding are aesthetically as well as physically damaging."<sup>10</sup> He refers to these as examples of 'aesthetic deprivation' because 'deprivation can become so complete that it actually extinguishes our capacity for sensory experience'<sup>11</sup>. Nevertheless, this aesthetic approach contradicts the aesthetic tradition, which is primarily a theory of good taste rather than a theory of beautiful objects. However, this negative aesthetic raises other questions. For example, various forms of intrusion and pollution harm not only the environment and health, but our sensibilities as well. Examples include noise, the destruction of whole environments or elements of the environment such as trees and waste. In any case, there are a series of largely invisible negative experiences of the environment, corresponding either to the 'ruins' of our ordinary activities, such as waste, or to the destructive processes of the latter – primarily extractivist-type dynamics.

Thirdly, we wish to stress that there is a negative aesthetic not because of the quality of the objects or environments in question, but because of the manner in which the people who live in them or contribute to their production are rendered invisible. Regardless of whether these are objects, environments or people, we stress that the very idea of negative aesthetics or negative environmental care is bound up with the idea of the destruction of our world or negative commons<sup>12</sup> as well as with that of ordinary environmentalism, i.e. people who are rendered invisible in production flows, even though their labour is essential to the process of capital accumulation. This concerns a hierarchy of people and processes at the heart of the production of 'lifestyles'.

These three negative aesthetic polarities invite us to consider that waste externalised in the economic process is a negative commons that cannot be assimilated into the living matter reproduction loop that underpins our current economic system. We therefore need to factor in the ecological and territorial responsibility of negative commons production processes by admitting that these are part of the ecological living matter reproduction process. The destructive dynamic currently at work leads to equally destructive behaviour due to the violence involved – particularly of a psychological nature. The challenge is therefore to render visible and political what was not previously so, namely everyday productive dynamics that generate destructive flows.

Take faeces for example, which are treated in a way that renders them invisible, but removed from the cycle of living matter and from the Earth and therefore not recycled, even though biogeochemical cycles are severely impacted by the use of artificial fertilizers. What is the position of women in this regard? Here, 'care' refers to a theoretical corpus for revaluing the reflexes involved in the production of the ordinary. Care emphasises the importance of rendering visible everything that contributes to the production of our reality as being at the heart of our societies. So how then should we think about care? We wish to press the case for an analysis of care that overlaps with devaluation and structural division of labour and authority according to the materialities and material flows involved. First, let us revisit the whole notion of care.

## **2. Environmental care**

Since the 1970s, care theory has evolved from Silvia Federici's Marxist analysis of reproductive labour into Virginia Held and Carol Gilligan's feminist moral theories and Sara Ruddick's concept of maternalism.<sup>13</sup> In 1991, together with Berenice Fisher, Joan Tronto developed a definition of care: "On the most general level, we suggest that caring be viewed as a species of activity that includes everything we do to maintain, contain, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web".<sup>14</sup> The increasing importance of these reflections goes hand in hand with austerity and the dismantling of social protection which have intensified public debates over the place of health, education, culture and housing in the political arena. These upheavals have

led the neo-liberal state to withdraw from a whole series of activities that underpinned social protection and to fail to invest in appropriate solutions for tackling the current social and environmental crisis. They have rekindled protests calling for social and environmental justice and for environmental care, particularly among women and feminist movements. To take a simple example, in the region of Toubacouta, Senegal, women have been active since the 1990s in the fight to preserve mangroves. “Human lives depend on the environment, and I understood from a very early age that the environment was sacred”, explains Yandé Ndao from Soucoutha. Nicknamed “Mère Yandé”, she set up a Female Economic Interest Grouping (*GIEF* in French) in 1998. As well as protecting mangroves and raising awareness, the *GIEF* empowers women by providing them with a source of income. It comprised 44 women when it was first set up and now has 94 members, 32% of whom are young women<sup>15</sup>. What is now needed is more in-depth reflections around materialist care that factor in the value of women's contributions to environments that go beyond mere activism. The aim is to analyse the spaces and temporalities involved and how these ordinary activities and practices contribute to the reproduction of the human species.

I reiterate that this work remains relevant today for two reasons: on the one hand, we need to factor in the ecosystemic reality of processes that produce earthly materiality, otherwise we risk overlooking the destruction at work.

On the other hand, we need to contribute to *de facto* equalities and understanding a socio-environmental justice concerned with the diversity of phenomena of exclusion from circles of justice. Furthermore, the technical and even technocratic nature of environmental issues, as well as the ranking of environmental causes tend to discredit the role of women and push them to one side of a policy of simple reflexes through ignorance of the structural problems at work. An ordinary environmentalism perspective tends to reflect possible overlap between social justice and environmental justice.

In France today, the idea of environmental care<sup>16</sup>, i. e. the care given to both near and faraway environments, is based on the premise that the environmental crisis requires broader individual and collective responsibility. Care of the environment requires environmentally friendly individual or collective practices (whether with regard to living species and local natural areas, or to consumption practices for water, energy, waste, food, fossil fuels, etc., and lifestyles). Whereas the environmental movement has focused primarily on “iconic” spaces and species, women around the world are confronted with the protection of this ordinary environment<sup>17</sup>. It is essential to think about the issues of environmental care in terms of justice. Indeed, women are inventing ecologies that enhance food security and the conservation of stocks of plant material and seeds for both current and future production. We know that the mechanisation of agriculture, the large proportion of inputs (pesticides, fertilisers, etc.) and changes of scale in productive agriculture have marginalised smallholders engaged in subsistence agriculture. Similarly, women's role in creating and enhancing productive agricultural environments (agricultural diversity, plant selection, pest control and ecosystem management and resilience) is insufficiently recognised

and under-paid. Moreover, women frequently have less access to and control over land and forests than men (often due to customary laws and social norms). This problem is exacerbated by the increasing over-exploitation of forests for commercial purposes based on practices such as land grabbing, logging and the illegal trade in wild animals. A study carried out by Khadka and Verma (2012) in Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal shows that biodiversity is preserved when women have a certain degree of control over forest management. Both knowledge of and interest in conservation are differentiated by gender. In Bhutan, the women responsible for collecting and preparing yam tubers in the forest protect wild yams and regulate both their use and the cutting of trees. These conservation strategies have helped to regenerate wild yams and yam vines in the forests.

In Bangladesh, women play a key role in seed production and storage and in maintaining genetic diversity. Know-how and techniques, such as using marigolds (*Calendula sp.*) as a barrier against certain insects, are passed on from one generation to the next. Because women are responsible for feeding the family, they grow a much wider variety of crops than men. Women in the region generally attach great importance to the nutritional, cultural and social aspects of forests whereas men value their commercial aspects (valuable timber and non-timber products). These differences can be attributed to gender-based division of labour, especially the multiple roles of women in the production and reproduction domain in the communities studied<sup>18</sup>. We need to reflect upon the internalisation of ecological practices within the diverse cultures and practices of nature based on the structural division of labour by gender, class or race.

While possibilities for accessing various resources are gender-based and highly restricted for women, the same is true of environmental reflexes which are often under-valued, except in the case of iconic spaces and species. It is as if ordinary things are not worthy of attention as this would mean having to transform lifestyles. Examples include care for the environment in the form of formal or semi-formal collective commitments to air and water quality, urban agriculture, biodiversity protection, preservation of parks and forests, waste management and recycling, and food and energy consumption patterns. The collectives involved have emerged from investments in the public space based on collective needs (i. e. recreational, food, nature, social) and they are primarily involved in local initiatives related to preservation, management, monitoring, advocacy and education concerning the local environment and the quality of urban life. Moreover, despite the modest and banal nature of their initiatives, these groups collectively construct the meaning of places and influence the development of local communities, based on alliances with elements of the environment that lend them a political dimension. And, although women are very present in these collectives, they are often headed up by men. However, a lot of research has shown that women are more environmentally aware<sup>19</sup> because of their potential impacts on others, the biosphere and themselves<sup>20</sup>. They display more environmentally friendly behaviour and attitudes<sup>21</sup> and are more likely than men to be conscious of and to practice sustainable consumption<sup>22</sup>. All of this research bears out the relevance of

an environmental policy that tackles gender discrimination. However, without gender-sensitive policy intervention, a greener economy will do little to reduce these deep-seated inequalities and may actually make them worse to the detriment of global sustainability<sup>23</sup>. As workers, women may be excluded from the growth generated by the green economy due to gender-based job segregation and discrimination. As consumers, they are more aware than men of the need to buy eco-friendly products but their purchasing power is limited. As citizens, women are essential to sustainable economy governance, however they have little influence, as very few women hold senior management positions in the public and private sectors<sup>24</sup>.

### 3 Conclusion

Indifference to how ordinary environments is reproduced has masked what forms the very basis of human activities and how they are perpetuated. In particular, conceptions of morality and justice have long focused on societies and individuals by introducing a nature/culture divide between spaces that has escaped the sphere of ethical considerations because they did not concern the human community, apart from their exceptional components and heritage aspects, and social organisations and their victims and heroes, who are increasingly being turned into icons.

An ecofeminist approach to the environment is essentially concerned with what needs to be cared for in order to reproduce the universe around us and that of living matter, not only on the temporal scale of individuals, but on a human generation scale, which involves a considerable shift in ethical and political thinking. Regardless of how problematic it is, an approach based on the contributions of nature focuses on this very nature that generates essential relationships in the organisation of lives on an everyday scale.<sup>25</sup> However, by ignoring the cultural dimensions of lives within society, this approach, which extrapolates the ecosystem services approach, remains a reductive one.

The real urgency is to reverse this decades-long denial of human 'services' which ignored and wasted the natural and human resources that underpin societies. Research into the role of women in farm work, resource and biodiversity management, or the preservation of "workaday" lives are all potential avenues for clarifying the issues of justice associated with socio-ecological transitions and deconstructing a development concept that is essentially focused on preserving western lifestyles at a cost of over-exploitation or destruction of natural habitats and dominated populations. All studies agree that women's empowerment contributes to food security and responsible land management. It is therefore essential to combat the way in which care work is rendered invisible and support the active presence of women in decision-making bodies at all levels, especially as studies show that, because of their role in managing ordinary environments, women are often the people most likely to be severely affected by social and natural disasters.

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1 Cf. Arnold Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Environment* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992). Arnold Berleant is an internationally published philosopher of aesthetics whose works have been translated into several languages. He has focused on extending the content of aesthetic experience into the relationship with the environment. He has been influenced

in particular by John Dewey and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. He strives through his writing to describe the aesthetic richness of the relationship to the environment without which human beings are meaningless. He makes this the core of a commitment that is itself a driver of social or community environmental mobilisation. Americans use the term “stewardship” to refer to this type of commitment.

2 For example, Catherine Mougenot accords considerable importance to “ordinary nature”. It is “a cross-cutting nature that is increasingly ill-adapted to specialisation or sectorisation of space and cannot be satisfied exclusively with the attention of specialists, who used to be the sole guarantors” (our translation) (Mougenot, *Prendre soin de la nature ordinaire*, Paris: Éditions de la Maison des Sciences de l’Homme, Institut national de la recherche agronomique, 2003, 16).

3 Nathalie Blanc, *Nouvelles esthétiques urbaines* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2012).

4 Aaron R. Brough, James E. B. Wilkie, Jingjing Ma, Mathew S. Isaac, David Gal, “Is Eco-Friendly Unmanly? The Green-Feminine Stereotype and Its Effect on Sustainable Consumption”, *Journal of Consumer Research*, Volume 43, Issue 4, December 2016, 567–582.

5 <https://www.multiplicités.net/le-partage-du-sensible/>: Accueil » Archives, etc. » Alice » Alice 2: Été 1999 » La fabrique du sensible.

6 Françoise Héritier, *Masculin, Féminin. La pensée de la différence* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1996).

7 Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, translated by Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

8 Extractivism refers to a mode of wealth accumulation based on the extraction of natural resources, often for export (oil as well as forests, etc.).

9 Bourdieu, *op. cit.*: 8.

10 Arnold Berleant, *Sensibility and Sense. The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World* (St. Andrews Studies in Philosophy and Public Affairs, Saint Andrews: IA, 2010), 162 sq.

11 *Ibid.*: 164.

12 A. Monnin, “Les «communs négatifs». Entre déchets et ruines”. S.E.R. *Études* 2021/9 Septembre, 59-68.

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17 Nathalie Blanc, “From ordinary environmentalism to the public environment: theoretical reflections based on French and European empirical research”, *Ecology and Society*, vol. 24, no 3, 2019, Resilience Alliance, <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-02318060>.

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