Landscape and Jay Appleton – An alternative approach- by Lewis Brady

‘Hour by hour the plains shall grow more yellow with ripening corn, the blushing grape shall hang on the uncouth bramble, and the sturdy oaks drip with honey-dew.’ (Publius ‘Virgil’ Maro, Eclogue IV, lines 28-30)

Landscape is a kind of backcloth to the whole stage of human activity and has been instrumental throughout literary history. By the time of Homer in c.800 BC, the practise of referencing man’s exploits within the environment they take place had become well established and, from the birth of Christianity, invoking emotions of pleasure of fear through landscape had become common place. Today, whilst we have strong opinions on what environments we like, we rarely ask ourselves: what do we like about landscape, and why do we like it? When published in 1975, Jay Appleton’s The Experience of Landscape sought to investigate those landscape configurations that might incite universal aesthetic responses in humans. Seeking to bridge the gap between theoretical aesthetics and the detailed and practical analysis of actual landscapes, his concepts and theories are still widely used today, in the books 40th anniversary.

Building his thesis upon the work of the American philosopher, and founder of functional psychology, John Dewey, Appleton takes us on a humbling yet pragmatic path of reason through behaviour and environment. In order to grasp the sources of aesthetic experience argues Dewey, “it is necessary to have recourse to animal life below the human scale”. Of course, suggesting that aesthetic manifestations in humans represent an animal drive motivated by survival will always have its critics. Some argue that as a race, vestiges of territorial behaviour may remain in humans however these are quickly overlaid by learning. Nevertheless, we must not forget that the aesthetic behaviour of the adult human has emerged out of an evolutionary process lasting millions of years and Appleton strongly argues that this alone suffices to explain that our preference in landscape lies in biological conditioning.

Straightforward and tidy, the thesis consists of what the author calls “habitat theory” and “prospect- refuge theory”. The former is founded upon well-known empirical work of ethologists who have observed that each animal species seeks optimal environmental conditions (shelter), primarily in terms of fixed behaviour patterns, with learned patterns being secondary. When a habitat corresponds more or less with inner needs, a pleasurable sensation results, which Appleton believes to constitute in humans the basis for an aesthetic sensibility in regard to the landscape. When Vigil looked out upon the ripening corn of Campagna, was his love for the fields of Italy based upon the intrinsic drive for man to acquire food, or bread in this case? Refining the theory, Appleton goes further to postulate that a landscape need only have the appearance of satisfying survival needs. Using Konrad Lorenz’s notion of “to see without being seen”, the later thesis serves to suggest that an optimal environment is one in which man can retreat in safety (not be seen), while at the same time find it possible to observe the surroundings for potential danger or sustenance (to see). Together these theories propose that the degree of aesthetic satisfaction is therefore directly linked with the potential of environmental conditions to satisfy a biologic drive.

Locating Appleton’s work locally, we can begin to question why we like some of Cornwall’s most loved environments. Famed for its spectacular coastline and rich history, perched on the rugged cliffs of Wheal Coates lies the well-preserved Cornish engine houses of the St Agnes Mining District. Attracting 70,000 visitors a year from all around the world and having UNESCO World Heritage status, there can be no doubt that this is a much treasured landscape and yet, by using Appleton’s theory, we can begin investigate why. With its rolling expansive land, perhaps our intrinsic animalistic instincts are telling us that the landscape is bountiful in potential for agriculture and with its scenic view over the northern coast, perhaps we are subconsciously attracted by the ability to observe danger from afar. Jay Appleton’s approach to the aesthetic qualities of landscape are certainly raw and hard to fathom yet allude to a strange conclusion. Perhaps the beauty of a landscape isn’t as subjective as some may believe but rather just an evolutionary trait founded on our very essential need for survival.