

Purification of Landscapes

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Introduction

Purification, or, to be more exact, becoming purified, is a universal phenomenon of the living world, one of the basic functions of self-regulating animate nature. According to Sigmund Freud (1994), it is also one of the basic requirements of civilization, along with order and beauty. Purity is not only biologically rational, but has also had a symbolic, and often also standard, value in economic, political, religious, cultural, or some other social, context. Purification as a universal and recurrent social process has, in its historical special forms, been aimed at, besides the human body, very different physical and spiritual environments, and for very different purposes. Purification has been one of the methods and results of exercising power, establishing order and regulating a way of life, leading to economic profit, or spiritual and sensual/aesthetic pleasure. Here I will confine myself to two spheres of problems: purity and comfort, and purity and holiness. Order, cleanliness and beauty have, in their historically changeable forms, been the triplet nucleus of all concepts of comfort. Symbolic purification is, in its different ritual forms, a component of all religious practices. Purity is inseparable from holiness.

Pure and holy

In all religions of the world there is a contrast between the pure and impure, a stress on the difference and the boundary between the profane and sacred, both in a social and metaphysical sense. In Judeo-Christian culture, the one considered holy is also always pure, but in archaic cultures, the sacred is also separated, forbidden, dangerous and impure. Veikko Anttonen distinguishes positive and negative holiness (Anttonen 1992: 2515).

The Finnish and Estonian words *pyhä/püha* ('holy, sacred') date back to the Bronze Age. According to Anttonen, this word has a meaningful connection

with being on the border of heat, the sun and moon perceived by the senses (sunrise and sunset), which includes shining, baking and burning. Fire as a primitive element, and the smoke associated with it, are age-old agents of purification. Besides sacrificial rituals, there is the semantic connection between holiness and burning interpreted also from the point of view of assart culture, which has been the basic form of economy since the early Iron Age. 'Holy' in assart culture meant that a woodland area had been cleaned and burned for cultivation.

Ancient times were characterised by an ecology-centered ontology – the value of landscapes is not anthropocentric. Both the human body and the borders of territories are sacred, as well as border areas connected with seasons, age periods, birth and death. 'The borders of the commonplace are the center of religious behavior: the preservation of value in territorial and corporal borderlines is the basic assumption of the continuity and vitality of whatever culture.' (Anttonen 1992: 2529.)

The characteristic features of a sacred place are anomaly and liminality (Anttonen 1992: 2526). A place different from the everyday and an element considered exceptional in the landscape – plant, animal, man, thing or phenomenon – are anomalies. Stones, rocks, trees of extraordinary shape, but also cavities, openings and holes disrupting the surface of the earth – caves and springs can be territorially anomalous. Also growing in natural processes and in topography – groves, hillocks, mountains and heights as a 'grown land' are sacred. This sacredness has a purifying effect. A decaying dead body is dangerous and impure, but when laid in the grave or burned, it becomes purified. The earth should be sacred for this purpose.

Liminality is the ritual expression of anomaly, sanctification and recognition of being sanctified. Pure and sacred landscapes are separated from ordinary ones, and the border or threshold between them must be ritually overcome. Any activity in a sacred place is always a ritual. In actualising the human body and the borders of territories, the objects on the border and near the border are sacred. Liminality means a ritual state of transformation, a transition from profane to sacred. Ritual crossing of the border brings about purification.

The different contexts of the 'sacred' are collectively defined borders in accordance with the events of social value: season, period of work, etc. These borders, in which people live and on which human and natural resources of the collective fate and fortune depend, are created and defended by these rituals (Anttonen 1992: 2527).

For Mircea Eliade, the sanctification of a place, whether cleaning of uncultivated land or occupying foreign territories, is always the repetition of cosmogony. Sanctifying has a close connection to cosmofication – changing into ‘own world’. It is an extension of one’s own world at the expense of chaos, establishing the new border (Eliade 1992: 57–58).

The distinction between the holy and everyday, or sacred and profane space, is valid not only for a religious person. Even the serious atheist has his or her own ‘private universe’ and sacred places. Eliade claims that there is no pure profane existence; we can see in the behavior of modern man a ‘de-sacralising’ of old values and their preservation in a changed way. The purification of landscape is not always associated with turning it into a sacred place, or even with reverence for nature. Mostly it is domestication and occupation (Eliade 1992: 55).

The difference between the everyday and ‘not-everyday’ still exists in our culture. Days off from work are called *pühad* (‘holy days’) by the Estonians, as is also the case with the last day of the week *pühapäev* (‘holy day’). The cleansing ritual before holidays is still there, except that its content and purpose have changed. The political and economic meanings have become prevalent, while the religious one has receded. National and political leaders, borders, events and symbolic objects are ‘sacred’. The cleaning of landscapes has also acquired politically and economically symbolic meanings. It is associated with the way and style of life, with the established image of comfort.

Comfort and symbolic purity

The concept of comfort has continuously changed, both from a historical and geographical standpoint. Comfort is dependent on numerous factors: biological, ecological, social, economic, political, religious, philosophical and demographic situations and convictions. Factors in the history of civilization, such as art styles, aesthetic ideals and methods of creation, have been of importance. All these taken together shape the way of life, the style of which is expressed in comfort.

To realise the variety of concept of comfort, it is good to compare comfort with its two extreme opposite ways of life and style, those of asceticism and luxury.

The religious form of asceticism was the conceptual basis for the monastic life-style. It is believed to have been in existence as early as the first century BC in the Qumran Monastery. Asceticism was widespread in Buddhist communities

in central Asia, in the Holy Land at the time of the birth of Christianity, and in the third century in Egypt, from where it spread into European Christianity. Asceticism is based on the contrast between spiritual and corporal benefits. In the name of spiritual purification, the needs of the body were minimised. In its extreme forms this led to mortification. Examples can be found in Proto- and Early Christianity: the hermits in the deserts of Egypt, dendrites in the cavities of trees, or saints in columns (Simeon in the year 384).

In secular forms of asceticism, the alienation of mental activity from the body is preserved. The 19th century myth of a poor starving poet, artist or scientist in the attic is still in circulation. The creative spirit is free from Mammon and does not care about material well-being. Ascetic austerity is also widespread in collective establishments dealing with such areas as labor, reformatory-medical treatment and detention. Relative asceticism here is a means of exercising power in order to influence people in the desired direction; sometimes it is also a punishment. Complementing Michel Foucault, modern offices, schools, hospitals, prisons and asylums are sometimes, in their ascetic and sterile discomfort, surprisingly similar to one another (Foucault 1997: 356–367).

Luxury has historically been the expression of social and economic privilege. The basis of luxury is also the contrast between spiritual and corporal values, in which the corporal takes the lead. Luxury presupposes both the excessive quantity and the supreme quality of objects and environment. Luxury is an excessive comfort, which in its extreme variants can turn into discomfort.

Excessive consumption can be debilitating and can lead to the ruin of a civilization, or to ecological disaster. On the other hand, it is precisely the luxurious way of life which has been an assumption and stimulus for the creative shaping of the objective and spatial environment, and for the development of the arts. Spare time as a feature of a luxurious way of life makes possible, in addition to bodily pleasures, dedication to aesthetic pleasures.

Balance and harmony in a person's life, that is to say, a comfortable way of life, is possible if we surrender a dualistic conception of the world – the contrasting of body and spirit, mind and intellect, man and nature. In the extreme, both asceticism and luxury are uncomfortable, and therefore hostile to life; they are suicidal life styles, which give rise to chaos instead of order.

Purification of landscapes

The ideal landscape for a religiously ascetic way of life is un-peopled. It is outside of everyday life, a desert, mountain, cave, tree, or any other anomalous place in nature.

Spiritual purification is carried out through opposition to nature, both in a human being and in his surroundings. It is a passage from the cosmos to chaos, the purpose being the spiritual re-birth through agony of the body, through individual purgatory. The location of a saint can become a purified and sacred place. The landscape itself remains untouched externally in its wild state; it becomes purified and sacred in a spiritual, thus symbolic, sense.

Liberation from the everyday creates an emptiness of mind. The desert as an empty and borderless landscape is the best place to empty the mind, to have a mystical and irrational experience. Emptiness dominates the earth and heavenly peace fills up the soul. Emptiness is a precondition of purity.

The institutionalised way of life in monasteries has, since the late Middle Ages, been considerably more rational, yet sensually limited, but never totally negative. Joint purifying rituals are directed at the mind, body and environment. The everyday is opposed to the sacred, whereas sensual pleasure is a means of achieving spiritual purification and ecstasy. Lent alternates with church holidays. Going to the monastery is not a moving into chaos, but an acceptance of a new collective and purposefully arranged way of life through ritual purification in an already sanctified place. The monastery and temple, together with their gardens and cultivated lands, are both managed by man and are sanctified lands amidst the chaos of earthy life; they have their own certain borders, both topographical and spiritual. They are not empty, but are still an environment filled minimally.

Luxury is revealed in old cultures and feudal society in the abundance of things and in numerous rooms filled with them. The luxurious way of life presupposed an excess of food, clothes, weapons, consumer goods and adornments, but also of land, castles, animals, servants, slaves and other Mammon. While the ideal landscape for asceticism was an empty desert, a luxurious way of life proceeds in a richly filled space, in the earthly Garden of Eden, where aesthetic norms and design principles derived from art culture also have an important place in the management of accumulated property.

The management of the landscape and its symbolic purification is in the service of sanctification, the exercising and expressing of power, be it the rules

of rational Classicism, irrational Baroque, or any other code. Nature is domesticated, managed, subjected and cleaned of everything which does not correspond to privileged social status, or to the norms of style expressing them. Castle is opposed to village, court and town to country and peasantry.

Agricultural land has been conservative in its symbolic meanings. Here the pragmatic basic value of land – fertility – has since ancient times maintained the relationship of man with nature. Immediate contact with land and its cultivation are, in the eyes of the court and townspeople, dirty and earthy, thus both directly and symbolically impure. In the experience of a farmer, decay and manure are preconditions for fertility and the natural metamorphosis of nature, the natural phase of the life circle. For townspeople or for a courtier isolated from nature, decay and manure are but dirt, which makes a peasant and all those doing dirty work impure. Low social status is associated with dirt, while a higher one is automatically associated with purity.

Managed landscape, be it sacred (temple, monastery) or profane (castle, town) is in both cases domesticated, symbolically purified, with a territory separated by borders. It is the world of life, which is opposed to nature. From the viewpoint of relations between man and nature, these two contrasting ways of life meet in their extreme forms – both either ignore, or overcome and subject, nature to their anthropocentrism. The more luxurious or ascetic the way of life and the environment shaped or chosen for this purpose, the stronger the tendency to alienation from the natural environment.

In the contemporary concept of comfort there is often a tendency to combine historical opposites: the outer features of an ascetic way of life are intertwined with luxurious ones, and they have acquired the meaning of luxury. A trendy striving for ascetic luxury is, in essence, paradoxical and this life-style is ambiguous. The same applies to the myth of health and purity accompanying it.

Purity as a social value was one of the essential problems of the Enlightenment. It is not an exaggeration to call this period the Age of Purification. The problem was connected with the over-population of towns during the Industrial Revolution. Hygiene as an environmental issue in the industrial towns of 18th and 19th century Europe was a challenge to medicine, chemistry, the economy, technology and politics.

The density of the population and speed of life in big cities also created the problem of a lack of privacy. Continuing suburbanisation, the clearing of city

centers, and vertical growth have been attempts to solve it. Vertical separation from the roar of the city in a luxurious apartment in a high-rise building, or in an office amidst empty clean airspace, the luxuriously large volume of private space, emptiness and minimalism in design, and a private house in the outskirts in the middle of separating greenery are all attempts to recreate a private environment. Privacy and the boundaries of private space are protected by electronic alarm systems. Empty space, which is filled with high technology devices and new artificial materials, minimal design elements and few objects, is high quality according to established social norms. These are the main features of ascetic luxury, which provide a healthy life-style: peace, cleanliness, light and well-being of the body and entertainment.

Cleansing methods and agents

Each type of landscape has its own scale and ecological peculiarity, which should be considered when operating in it and shaping it. Marcia Muelder Eaton, a well-known American environmental aesthetician, divides landscapes according to the degree of their management into six types:

1. Landscape Art
2. Parks and Gardens
3. Managed Urban/Suburban Landscapes
4. Managed Rural Landscapes (primarily farms, but also mines or other 'worked' non-urban areas)
5. Relatively Pristine Managed Landscapes
6. Relatively Pristine Unmanaged Landscapes (Muelder Eaton 1995: 55).

Different degrees of management are essential also when selecting cleansing methods and agents, and above all in the choice of purpose. From an ecological-aesthetic point of view, they cannot be transferred automatically from one landscape to another. At the same time there is an analogy between our domestic means of cleansing and those of outside landscapes. Some of them, the traditional ones, are relevant both in a direct and symbolic sense, whereas others are paradoxical and problematic.

The oldest agents of cleansing are water, fire, air, and soil, as well as different states of those basic elements, by-products and compounds. The myth of the cleansing effect of water is so strong that the efficiency of the real result is frequently blurred. Water is a paradoxical substance. Ritual washing is practical

from a hygienic standpoint, suggesting at the same time the belief in spiritual purification.

Baptismal water is, in Christianity, a ritual agent of purification from paganism. At the same time, washing with this water is also a purification from alien religions. With Christianisation, there were very often double washings in the Estonian territory.

Sacred rivers such as the Nile, Euphrates, Tigris, Ganges, Indus, etc. carried fertilising soil and dirt, thanks to which prosperous local cultures came into being. The floods of these rivers have, up to the present, been disastrous natural phenomena, which also demand victims. The waters of sacred rivers are clean and sacred thanks to the simultaneous effect of fertilising and killing. Actually the water of these rivers is polluted.

In the cultures of Nordic countries, a stereotyped idea of the purifying effect of snow and ice, thus the combination of water and cold air, has prevailed. The freezing of foodstuffs has been, since time immemorial, one of the ways of preserving them. The paradox of snow lies in that it restrains and stops the processes of life in nature, while at the same time a snow blanket protects the lives of those plants and animals who have adapted to the cold. Snow is both sterilising and revitalising. Hot water has a sterilising effect, but it has been used also as a weapon and is dangerous.

Fire also has a double effect: as a source of warmth and light it is purifying and life giving, but it also kills. In assart, the woodland was cleared and then burnt to create a cultivated area; ash purified and improved fertility. This old method is still in use to cleanse forests of pests. Fire does not destroy completely but renews life as do snow and frost. We remember this experience of our ancestors imperfectly: we cannot burn away fog or even make a campfire without setting the place on fire.

Emptying is also one way of cleansing; it is an optional removal of useless plants, animals or things from the landscape. Weed control is an old practice. The Estonian national flower – the cornflower – is a weed. The result of chemical weed control is a supreme cleanliness: not a single field flower is left, and the cornfield is magically monochrome.

Mono-cultural beauty is a toxic one; it is a token of sterile soil and contaminated food, and is quite sly. Microbiologists seek means of soil resurrection. Organic agriculture has become a trend.

Biological variety is of ecological-aesthetic value in the field, in the woods and in the human environment in towns and in the country. Microbiologists have proven that a totally sterile cleanliness in a living environment is harmful and damages the natural immune system. Roland Barthes was, as early as the 1950s, ironic about cleansing detergents such as Omo, Persil, etc. (Barthes 2000: 36–38). The myth of a detergent which kills dirt, luxuriously foaming and rescuing like a total fire, still exists, spread by commercials, and still, in the same way, protects the business interests of Procter & Gamble.

Sterility is a relative claim from the point of view of technological processes. The same applies to medical technology and the corresponding production and health environments. But the cult of empty and transparent rooms, easily cleaned materials, of the ‘dazzling-white’, has moved out of the world of technology and has spread as a standard of comfort to other environments, where it needn’t have a biological value, and represents only the symbolic cult of cleanliness.

When cleansing agents pollute nature, the human body and its living environment, the cleansing of landscapes turns out to be the opposite, a self-contamination, and as such hostile to life.

The cleanest and emptiest landscapes are the ice fields of the polar zone. These are extreme landscapes where life is still possible. Totally clean and empty landscapes are lifeless.

Conclusion

The cult of cleanliness has become a part of our contemporary concept of comfort. Mythologised cleanliness is a sign of alienation from nature. The domestication of landscapes has led to so-called chemical cleansing and sterilisation, aggressive emptying and dangerous regulations. It may lead to a global aesthetic standard, to a decrease in both natural and cultural diversity (including anomaly and liminality) and, as a result, to the problems of ‘placelessness’ and loss of identity, endangering human ecology and creativity.

Every type of landscape needs special methods and degrees of cleaning. The forest is not a park, the field is not a garden, and the street is not a bathroom.

Chemical agents in the home and in the fields have become the agents of pollution. The pollution of ancient agents of purification – water, air, earth and fire – force us to re-clean them of the pollution of previous cleaning, to rinse out all the toxic chemicals.

The only way out is to rid ourselves of the myth of cleanliness and just keep our landscapes as clean as we can.

A natural landscape does not need cleaning, it will manage itself if human activities do not exceed their limits. If we have the wisdom and understanding to preserve nature intact, to move through different environments without spoiling their peculiarity and balance, to limit our ‘ascetically’ luxurious way of life and declare the value of aesthetic-ecological principles in our living environment, there is hope for the preservation of life on Earth. Earth is looking forward to re-sanctification and positive ethical-aesthetic purification.

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