

Barbara Maria Stafford. *Echo Objects: The Cognitive Work of Images*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007, 281 pp. ISBN: 978-0-226-77051-2

The latest book by Barbara Maria Stafford seems to be an example of what the author herself calls a 'compressive composition'. It comprises an enormous diversity of views, thoughts, reminiscences, and arguments from various branches of philosophy, aesthetics, cognitive science, and the natural sciences, and is supplemented with descriptions and interpretations of mostly visual works of arts ranging from new media to cave paintings. The author thus seeks to meet the two objectives stated in her introduction: first, 'to look at the core concepts of our field [the humanities] against the backdrop of the questions being posed by our colleagues in neuroscience' (p. 1); and, second, earnestly to engage artists in this humanities-sciences debate. After reading the whole book, however, the reviewer is left with certain doubts as to whether such a composition is truly 'compressive', that is, whether the bits of knowledge are employed in a synthesis, and are not merely veneer.

Drawing artists seriously into the debates about the mind and its operations, which are held in philosophy and neuroscience, Stafford continues in a project called 'neuroaesthetics' established by Semir Zeki, Professor of Neurobiology at University College London. Zeki famously called painters neurologists 'who have experimented upon and [...] understood something about the organisation of the brain, though with techniques that are unique to them'.¹ In a similar manner, Stafford claims that 'certain [...] kinds of artwork [...] render visible neural cooperation and normally invisible operative forces of the central nervous system' (p. 45). In comparison to Zeki's *Inner Vision* (1999), *Echo Objects* is more ambitious, casting its gaze not only on the understanding of visual perception, but also venturing into the darkest room of cognitive science and philosophy of mind – the problem of consciousness. Stafford, however, follows yet another tradition, her own. 'Imagining', she famously claims in her 1996 book, 'remains the richest, most fascinating modality for configuring and conveying ideas'.² She thus presents a 'cognitive history of images', which challenges the history of ideas traditionally considered as the history of literature.

The volume comprises six essays. The first of which, entitled 'Form as figuring it out', focuses on diverse kinds of forms occurring in the brain, the mind, and the world, which all signal the way to understanding – confronting chaos and

¹ Zeki, Semir (2003). *Inner Vision: An Exploration of Art and the Brain*. Oxford: Oxford UP, p. 2.

² Stafford, Barbara Maria (1998). *Good Looking*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, p. 4.

suspending a constant flow. Stafford believes that we are able 'to deduce significant correspondence between our internal biological mechanisms and external configurational practices' (p. 11). She thus endeavours to explain object recognition – a process that is pertinent to perception, memory and consciousness – by means of interpretation of 'diagrammatic images', which are supposed to depict fundamental pre-linguistic symbols 'common transhistoric ground between human beings' (p. 19). Among other works, she mentions those of D. P. G. Humbert de Superville (1770–1849), whose *Essai sur les signes inconditionnels dans l'art* (1827–32) she considers more extensively in her first book, *Symbol and Myth* (1979), and refers back to Enlightenment and Romantic enquiries into the beginnings of human thought. Especially the Romantics, she argues, in their search for evidence of mind in different cultures and eras, 'revealed something essential about how the brain generates reality' (p. 38), something which certain contemporary neuroscientists are struggling to express again – namely, that 'the other world is always also the inner world' (p. 25).

The second chapter, entitled 'Compressive compositions', discusses 'how the brain-mind cobbles together conflicting bits of information' (p. 43). Stafford's central interest is emblems and other syncretistic art forms, characterized by combining objects and meanings from different realms. She explains that examined symbols are as 'connection-seeking' and 'binding' as the brain itself. Mental processes, in addition to the artworks in question, thus represent the 'old desire to compact information' (p. 52) and 'struggle to cohere' (p. 72).

While the first two chapters are concerned mostly with nonmimetic symbols, the third chapter, 'Mimesis again!', goes directly to the heart of representation, choosing its 'arguments' primarily from amongst conspicuously mimetic artworks (for example Gainsborough's *Squire John Wilkinson*). Philosophically, Stafford seeks to explain cognition – of the outer world, other minds, as well as ourselves. She inquires into the philosophical consequences of the recent discovery of mirror neurons (which fire both if we – and macaque monkeys – perform a certain movement, and if we see someone performing it), arguing that the pivotal role mimesis plays in both cognition and the emotions has thus been scientifically proved. Furthermore, mirror neurons (in the incarnation of 'echo objects') support her own potentially mystical *Weltanschauung*, that everything is reflected in everything else: mind in the world, world in the mind, science in art and art in science.

The fourth chapter, 'Primal visions', links neurological research on altered states (hallucination, meditation, drug use) to rock art (and, later, virtual reality), interpreting it as an image of awakening consciousness, the 'birth of spatial

arrangement' (p. 106). Palaeolithic caves are thus presented as echoic images of the 'cave in the mind' (p. 120), the depths of unconsciousness, where the secret of self-organization, embodied in primal images of simplest forms, is hiding. While 'Primal visions' is more interested in what we see with our eyes closed, the following chapter, 'How patterns meet', investigates mental representations, that is, how we obtain our visual images of the outer world. This is the most controversial chapter in the book and will certainly attract much attention in the field of neurophilosophy. Stafford, in sharp contrast to the tradition established by Gilbert Ryle (1900–1976), seeks to bring images back to the mind (even defending British empiricists), calls into question the 'description view' of representation, that is, the 'hypothesis that we pick out and refer to objects solely in terms of their categories or encoded properties' (p. 146), and supports disruptive, non-narrative description of self-awareness.

The last chapter, called 'Impossible will?', concerns the predominance of research into automatic behaviour, and criticizes its excessively positivistic spirit, which would ultimately condemn man to utter determinism. Stafford identifies ironical reflection of this tendency in the neuroaesthetics of Zeki and V. S. Ramachandran (b. 1951), the former of whom sees art as centred on illusion while the latter sees it centred on caricature, and both thus make art experience blindly subject to laws governing our visual system. Stafford, by contrast, seeks to draw the attention of scientists to the processes of intentional and attentive vision – the remaining ten per cent of freedom – and thereby initiate research that would comply more both with the diversity of art and complexity of awareness.

The brief outline I provide here, though fairly illustrating the versatility of the author, may cast some doubt on whether such a book ultimately belongs to the field of aesthetics. Should we not heed the 'father' of neuroaesthetics and admit as he did: 'This is not so much a book about art; it is more a book about the brain'³? To try and answer this question, I shall focus on what I believe to be the central aesthetic motif of Stafford's polyphonic book: the rehabilitation of the forms commonly considered *mere* decoration. Her predilection for nonmimetic and non-narrative symbols, emblems, intarsia, and gapped or patched images determines her understanding of the experience of visual art generally.⁴ These

³ Zeki, Semir (2003). *Inner Vision: An Exploration of Art and the Brain*. Oxford: Oxford UP, p. 1.

⁴ From this perspective, one sees why the author avoids employing the word 'mirrors' in the title of the book, though she talks solely about image – not sound – reflection. Mirrors, being a venerable metaphor of art, are associated with mimetic, representative theories, whereas Stafford wants to consider images presentations, expositions of mind. Furthermore, choosing an acoustic model for visual reflections, she challenges the Platonic view of mimesis as inferior reflections of what already exists. Since she treats images, the world, and the mind as 'echo objects' constantly mirroring each other, the reflection is without origin.

forms are understood as a 'prototype for how we integrate sensation and concept' (206); they reveal what is normally hidden – namely, the constant ordering and re-ordering interaction between the world and the mind. These processes take place in art perhaps more conspicuously than in any other 'normal' perceptive situation, though no differently.

Echo Objects thus clearly brings aesthetic matters into the very centre of neurophilosophical and neurological debates on consciousness. Treating aesthetic experience as a more concentrated or explicit form of daily experience, Stafford reminds us of a seminal work in aesthetics – John Dewey's *Art as Experience* (1934), for whom experience 'at its height [aesthetic experience] signifies complete interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events'.⁵ The emphasis that Stafford puts on 'continuous interaction with the changing environment' (p. 195) whenever she speaks about mind is very close to Dewey's conception of experience (though Stafford never refers specifically to Dewey, and only occasionally to William James).

In some parts of Stafford's book, however, one detects another, rather different, underlying aesthetic tradition. In Chapter Four she discusses 'certain types of phenomenologically immersive artworks' that 'permit us to see ourselves seeing the world' (p. 128). The reference to the 'holistic beholding experience', as Stafford calls it, borrowing the term from religion, is closer to those who understand aesthetic experience as an autonomous field and contrast it with cognitive and practical experience. This tone is most noticeable in the last chapter, with its stress on conscious, self-reflective visual experience, which one encounters in some artworks that 'incite the perceiver to discover relations between herself and aspects of the environment' (p. 191). Thus understood, aesthetic experience is no longer a continuation or intensification of common visual perception or display of brain structures.

As her critique of neuroaesthetics reveals in the last chapter, Stafford is well aware of the conflicting approaches. Unfortunately, she does not tackle the problem in a direct manner. Rather, she keeps piling up references and allusions to other recent pieces from science, the humanities, and the arts. The dazzling ease with which she moves from one author to another can easily cause intellectual vertigo, especially in a reader unfamiliar with the wide range of the latest concepts. Coming from disciplines ranging from aesthetics to neuroscience, evolutionary biology and mathematics (to name but a few), these concepts, which Stafford echoes and re-echoes, tend to lose their significance and threaten to become but empty shells. They are thus able to

⁵ Dewey, John (1980). *Art as Experience*. New York: Perigee Books, p. 25.

reflect everything else, but only because they – much like mythic Echo – have lost their own voice.

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