

## REVIEWS

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**Denis Dutton. *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution*. New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009, 280 pp. ISBN 978-1-59691-401-8**

*The Art Instinct* is a terrific book and it is a great loss that Denis Dutton, an American philosopher of art who taught at New Zealand, passed away less than a year after its publication. The book belongs to a string of recent publications that promote a naturalistic – specifically, Darwinian – refashioning of topics traditionally treated in the humanities in lofty isolation from the sciences of nature: politics, morals, religion, and art. *The Art Instinct* differs from these other books. On the one hand, some of the most famous of them, such as Steven Pinker's *How the Mind Works* (1997) and *The Blank Slate* (2002), and Edward O. Wilson's *Consilience* (1998), consider art and aesthetics only in passing and what they say about these topics is not flattering. On the other hand, there are scholarly books specifically on matters of Darwinian aesthetics, such as *Homo Aestheticus* (1992) by Ellen Dissanayake and *The Literary Animal* (2005) edited by Jonathan Gottschall and David Sloan Wilson, but their impact has remained largely confined to academic circles. Dutton is now as big on the market of popular books on the new evolutionary humanities as Pinker or E. O. Wilson but, unlike them, Dutton was a trained philosopher who succeeded in bringing the Darwinian approach to bear on the key issues in the philosophy of art in a manner attractive to the educated layman.

Unlike other reviewers that I have read, I should like to highlight Dutton's principal theoretical contentions by contrasting his approach with that of a leading contemporary philosopher of art, Arthur C. Danto. Dutton himself engages Danto on a number of points, and while *The Art Instinct* offers perceptive criticisms of other past aestheticians – including Kant – I believe that the novelty of Dutton's program is best seen when compared with a contemporary theory, rather than a theory from the distant past. And, after all, Danto's type of theory has also been quite influential during the last two decades in Central Europe, so it provides a useful backdrop for a local reader as well.

The first point at which Dutton departs from Danto is in downplaying the issue of the definition of art. The development of post-World War II academic aesthetics may be seen in terms of the rehabilitation of this key concern of the classic philosophy of art. In the 1950s, many philosophers, under the influence of the later Wittgenstein, convinced themselves that the project of defining the concept of art is hopeless. Art is just too multifarious, lacking in any essence, so that all the things and activities that fall under this concept share nothing but

'family resemblances'. In his *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (1981) and elsewhere, Danto famously charged that the failure of Wittgensteinian aesthetics to supply a definition of art was caused by its assumption that any such definition could feature only the perceptual properties of candidate objects and activities. According to Danto, all the works of art, no matter what they look like, share certain conceptual features: they are all representations of a certain very special sort. We can leave the details of Danto's definition aside, although it was precisely the disagreements about those details that propelled much of the discussion in philosophy of art since the 1970s.

In Dutton's view, the prioritization of definition is motivated by a misguided choice of samples. Danto and his followers concentrate on highly refined, avant-garde artworks, such as Duchamp's *Fountain* and Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* that appear indistinguishable from ordinary objects. It is precisely due to this perceptual indiscernibility that Danto rejects the perceptual properties of candidate artworks as their art-making properties. For Dutton, this conclusion constitutes a *reductio* of this elitist, Manhattan-centered view of art. Art includes much more than the items on display at MoMA or the Leo Castelli Gallery. Art is everywhere, and has been throughout the history of our species. We may never know its exact origins, but the practice of art-making goes back tens of thousands of years at least. Given that the artistic output of cultures distant in both time and place is now more available to us than ever before, the concentration of recent aesthetics on marginal cases is almost paradoxical.

We can study and enjoy sculptures and paintings from the Paleolithic, music from everywhere, folk and ritual arts from all over the globe, literatures and visual arts of every nation, past and present. Against this glorious availability, how odd that philosophical speculation about art has been inclined to endless analysis of an infinitesimally small class of cases, prominently featuring Duchamp's readymades or boundary-testing objects such as Sherrie Levine's appropriated photographs and John Cage's *4'33"*. Underlying this philosophical direction is a hidden presupposition that is never articulated: the world of art, it is supposed, will at last be understood once we are able to explain art's most marginal or difficult instances (p. 50).

Accordingly, rather than adjusting our notion of art to the Western avant-garde, we should start from a shared intuitive understanding of the concept. In Chapter 3 of the book under review, Dutton offers a list of twelve criteria on the basis of which we spontaneously recognize works of art. Some of them – such as the fact that artworks in some sense represent the world, or that they are placed within traditions and institutions – might be approved of by Danto or Dickie. Others, such as skill or virtuosity, would be rejected by these leading

aestheticians – precisely because the avant-garde works these authors favour do not require any apparent skill. Dutton's criteria of art are 'its traditional, customary, or pretheoretical characteristics' (p. 59). Hence they include features that come to anybody's mind when confronted with an artifact – Does it show skill? Is it pleasurable to look at or listen to? Does it express emotion? – and not features known to experts, such as form. We are likely to recognize the items from Dutton's list as familiar. He then goes on to solve some puzzles. For example, are sports events artistic performances by Dutton's criteria? He thinks not, since the crucial point for sports fans is who *actually* wins the game, whereas a work of art – or its performance – is a vehicle of imaginative experience, which is 'perhaps the most important of all characteristics' on Dutton's list (p. 58). On the other hand, Duchamp's readymades, while not providing much by way of imaginative experience either, satisfy most of the other criteria – including, surprisingly enough, skill. However, it is a special kind of skill: 'knowing exactly what unusual, however minimal, act will be admired by a sophisticated art-world audience' (p. 197).

A natural accompaniment to a view like Danto's, which gears the concept of art to the recent Western avant-garde, is the notion that other cultures lack our concept of art. First off, such a notion hardly does justice to the Western aesthetic experience itself: is it possible to take seriously that the aesthetic interests of Europeans were ever limited to a special, tiny class of glorified objects (painting and sculpture, once seen only in palaces, today mostly surviving in museums of fine arts), which were given rapt, disinterested attention only by a privileged elite? Most of us conceive of art and aesthetic experience as a broad category that encompasses the mass arts (popular forms such as Attic tragedy, Victorian novels, or tonight's television offerings), historical expressions of religious or political belief, the history of music and dance, and the immense variety of design traditions for furniture, practical implements, and architecture. Far from being a small, rarefied class of objects, in the European imagination back to the Greeks, art includes a staggeringly vast range of activities and creative products (p. 66).

Secondly, we have evidence that in all times and places people looked at certain things with amazement and pleasure, admiration for their style and skill, and so on. Dutton then considers Danto's thought-experiment in which two imaginary tribes both manufacture pots and baskets, but one of the tribes treats pots as artworks and baskets as utilitarian objects, while this practice is reversed in the other tribe. And this despite the fact that pots produced in both tribes are perceptually indistinguishable from each other, and likewise for baskets. Danto uses this thought-experiment in support of his theory that an

ordinary object is turned into an artwork by an interpretation. Dutton charges that this might work in the case of Duchamp's *Fountain*, which is after all an ordinary urinal turned into an artwork by the interpretive act of an artist. However, if extended to whole art traditions, this idea is preposterous. That 'a whole art tradition might in the real world be indiscernible from a utilitarian artifact tradition seems to me as about as likely as a monkey typing *Hamlet*' (p. 79). Such a proposal could come only from someone with no direct experience with the non-Western, tribal art. (Dutton also tells us that, unlike Danto, he did acquire such ethnographic experience in New Guinea.)

If art is not a metaphysically mysterious practice confined to our culture, but rather a pleasurable yet costly activity shared across ages and cultures, then aesthetics could receive a fresh start from taking these facts more seriously. Evolutionary biology teaches that traits that are universal, pleasurable, and costly are often adaptations. The question of whether art is a genuine adaptation has been debated by biologists for some time now. Stephen Jay Gould famously argued that the arts, together with other intellectual talents that humans have, are merely 'spandrels' – non-functional by-products – of the single genuine adaptation that there is – namely, our large brain. Unlike Gould, Pinker does not dismiss all our intellectual traits as so many spandrels, but it is true that he thinks of the arts as just by-products – a sort of 'cheesecake for the mind': harmless and pleasurable, but not serious.<sup>1</sup> Dutton reviews these positions in Chapter 5 and, rather than developing a theory of his own, questions the applicability to the arts of any easy contrast between adaptations and by-products. He suggests a metaphor of his own: 'the internal combustion engine' (p. 97). The engine produces excess heat, which is a pure by-product. But this excess heat can be utilized by a heater that heats the driver/passenger compartment. Here, then, something which is a by-product (excess engine heat) is used in something else which is purposefully designed for the benefit of the passengers. Art can be thought along these lines, as serving genuine human interests.

Neither writing, nor reading, nor cheesecake, nor Cadillac is a Pleistocene adaptation. But no adequate grasp of their genesis and popularity can be achieved by ignoring the evolved interests and capacities that they serve or extend. Human beings derive pleasure from travel, the 'freedom of the open road'; they are a social species that likes to communicate, and a relatively omnivorous species that enjoys sweet and fat: such factors explain technologies and cultural forms both prehistoric and modern (p. 99).

<sup>1</sup> For the art-as-cheesecake metaphor, see Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 525.

Dutton then applies this idea of art as adaptive to the particular case of literature. Fictional stories – whether oral story traditions in the ancestral environment, or modern novels, plays or movies – seem to provide three kinds of adaptive advantage (p. 110). First, stories provide us with low-cost, low-risk surrogate experience. We don't need to battle an enemy ourselves in order to experience the emotion of fear. Second, stories are sources of factual information. And third, they teach us to empathize with the perspective of a fellow human being, which promotes our sociality. Dutton suggests another adaptive hypothesis at the very beginning of *The Art Instinct*, in Chapter 1. The pictures of landscapes in calendars sold around the world look very much the same: low grasses interspersed with groups of trees, flowers and fruiting plants, animals and birds, and gently rolling hills. What explains this uniformity? This gives Dutton yet another opportunity to contrast his Darwinian approach with Danto's culturalism. For Danto, the near-universal preference for a certain type of landscape is a product of Western cultural imperialism, among whose emissaries we must also count calendar-makers. In Dutton's Darwinian explanation, people around the world like the kind of landscape that most resembles the savannas of East Africa that our ancestors inhabited in Pleistocene. Given the amount of time our species spent in that environment, no wonder we like it best.

In addition to the theory of natural selection which explains the origin of adaptations, Darwin also came up with an alternative theory of sexual selection, in order to explain costly features such as the peacock's tail. In his book *The Mating Mind* (2000), the evolutionary psychologist Geoffrey Miller appealed to this mechanism, rather than natural selection, to explain the arts. Artworks are costly displays designed to impress – primarily females. Dutton enthusiastically adopts this alternative hypothesis in Chapter 7. He believes it can make sense of certain obvious features of artworks, such as their often being made of expensive materials; their production is time-consuming; even if quickly executed, the skills this requires are difficult to acquire; artworks are often all the more impressive if they are useless; some artworks are even more appreciated if they do not last very long; in addition to time, artworks require special intelligence or creativity to make (p. 157). Also by an appeal to the hypothesis of sexual selection, Dutton can expose the strict distinction between costliness and beauty that has haunted modern aesthetic consciousness ever since Kant as so much mythology.

In the remainder of his book, Dutton applies the elements of both Darwinian mechanisms to such traditional puzzles of the philosophy of art as, for example, our aversion to forgery, the place of authorial intentions in art, the distinction between art and craft, and the relation between art, religion, morality, and

politics. Very briefly, if art is a means of seeing 'into another human personality' (p. 235), it is not surprising that we feel cheated upon discovering that we were looking into the mind of van Meegeren rather than Vermeer. Given that a key function of language in social life is testing the cleverness or banality of our fellow humans, the intentional fallacy is no fallacy; we cannot help inquiring into the intentions of the artists. Although both are exercises in skill, art and craft differ in that there is no foreknowledge of the end state in the arts. And art can be naughty or downright immoral, because its point is not that its fictional characters be good, but that they be interesting.

As I said at the beginning, *The Art Instinct* is a terrific work, opening new vistas in the philosophy of art. Rarely do we see a work so original, although its originality results from synthesizing a lot of disparate sources, rather than from a single new idea. In conclusion, we should notice that this synthesizing approach has its own drawbacks. I mentioned that Dutton applies both of Darwin's theories – natural and sexual selection – to the arts. Yet he seems to gloss over an apparent incompatibility between these two types of explanation when applied to a single feature. If art is an adaptation, how can it be at the same time a costly display, which is strictly speaking non-adaptive? If art is something like the peacock's tail, should we think that it started off as something adaptive in the distant past, but metamorphosed into a mere signifier of sexual prowess later? This reading would be inconsistent, though, with what Dutton says about the adaptive value of literary arts, for example. Yet he does not suggest that some arts (literature?) are adaptations, while others (painting?) are mere costly ornaments. I expect that Dutton's followers in the field of Darwinian aesthetics will work on these issues, as well they should. Dutton has opened up a fertile perspective on the arts that is fully worthy of further development.

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