The Peacock Problem

What does evolution say about why we make art?  

Review by Alexander Nehamas

Asked what he thought of the idea (often attributed to Freud) that what every artist wants is money, fame, and beautiful lovers, the underground cartoonist R. Crumb was unequivocal: “Beautiful lovers I would put at the top myself. . . . I couldn’t live without the beautiful lovers,” though, he went on, “the trick is you can’t get the beautiful lovers unless you get the fame if you’re a guy like me. I just didn’t have what it takes. I was a wimpy, nerdy nothing.”

Denis Dutton should love Crumb’s reply, for it fits perfectly with one of the central claims in his spirited and polemical book. Dutton, editor of the Web site Arts and Letters Daily, is tired of “academic” aesthetics and the view that artistic activities and values are purely cultural products. His sweeping thesis is that the arts are grounded in “a universal human nature” and that only an evolutionary account, a “Darwinian”

(continued on page 122)

Joan Roughgarden in The Genial Gene does not challenge Darwin’s theory of evolution or its explanation for how species evolve mainly through natural selection. Instead she opposes “sexual selection,” the standard explanation (frequently stated simply as fact, as in, the earth is round) for the mechanism through which natural selection works. Roughgarden points to an impressive catalog of biological studies of particular species that show, for the case under consideration, that the facts do not support the ideas of sexual selection. In her words, “Continuously widening sexual-selection theory converts it into a system that becomes increasingly hard to test and possibly easier to falsify, and so sexual selection slowly morphs from a scientific theory into a doctrine or ideology.” She proposes that we discard sexual-selection theory, and she exhaustively details an alternative hypothesis—“social selection”—

Priscilla Long’s “Genome Tome” (Summer 2005) won the National Magazine Award for best feature story. She is the author of Where the Sun Never Shines: A History of America’s Bloody Coal Industry.
The Art Instinct (from page 118)
aesthetics, can explain their origins, their features, and their significance.

The book opens with a discussion of Painting by Numbers, a more or less conceptual work by Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, who, on the basis of a series of polls, claimed to determine the works “most” and “least” wanted in 10 different countries—and proceeded to paint them. Remarkably, every country’s “most wanted” painting was a naturalistic landscape with an open vista, a body of water, trees, ani-

Heart of the Andes (1859) by Frederic Church: a call from our ancient past, a longing for “the savannas and woodlands of East Africa where . . . much of early human evolution occurred.”

mal and human figures, and distant mountains suffused in blue; “least wanted” was in every case a particular sort of abstraction. (A later survey, not mentioned here, established that Holland’s most wanted painting is abstract, its least wanted a domestic scene with many of the landscapes’ features.) And though he is aware of Komar and Melamid’s parodic intentions, in their kitschy landscapes Dutton discerns something very serious indeed—a call from our ancient past, a longing for “the savannas and woodlands of East Africa where hominids split off from chimpanzee lineages and much of early human evolution occurred.”

For Darwinian aesthetics, the large disparities between the art forms of different cultures are not the end of the story. They are surface manifestations of a single underlying structure produced by the conditions of life during the Pleistocene Era (1.8 million to 10,000 years ago), when “we acquired the tastes, intellectual features, emotional dispositions, and personality traits that distinguish us from our hominid ancestors and make us what we are.” Painting by Numbers, Dutton argues, confirms both the universality of human tastes and the persistence of Pleistocene preferences.

Like Steven Pinker’s The Language Instinct and Marc Hauser’s Moral Minds, The Art Instinct is inspired by Noam Chomsky’s vision of a universal grammar that underlies every spoken language, whatever its differences from every other. Chomsky himself placed his “Cartesian linguistics” in the tradition of philosophical rationalism, which drew a sharp line between animals and humans; perhaps ironically, his recent followers are using Chomsky’s ideas to establish continuity between the two. But “continuous” doesn’t mean “identical,” and Dutton doesn’t want to reduce artistic activity to noth-
Natural selection, though, is not nearly enough to account for the pervasiveness and complexity of art, for its profiliacy and lushness. To account for its costs in energy, time, and resources, Dutton turns to sexual selection. The features that sexual selection produces tend to be irrelevant and even unfavorable to survival. And while natural selection pushes different organisms toward convergence, favoring the same low-cost solutions for the same environmental problems, sexual selection magnifies divergence. Members of the same sex compete with one another for the best (or the most) mates, and competition favors those who can signal their superiority over their opponents. The most famous example of such a signal is the peacock’s tail, whose extravagance distinguishes its owner from less showy birds and functions as a fitness indicator, proclaiming his health and strength to potential female partners. Similarly, works of art, which require hard work, superior intellectual and creative abilities, and often the squandering of material and psychological resources, are designed to attract their audience to their makers by showing that they have enough of such adaptive advantages to afford to throw them away on objects with no immediate usefulness. Artistic ability, Dutton concludes, signals exceptional intelligence, wit, wisdom, dexterity, imaginativeness, and the rest of the qualities that (health and attractiveness aside) proclaim their owners’ superiority—the very features that have worked so well for R. Crumb.

So far, so good. But along with his engaging speculations about the origins of art, Dutton uses evolutionary psychology for his second purpose—in order, that is, “to throw light on issues and paradoxes that have bedeviled theoretical aesthetics since the Greeks” and to evaluate specific art forms and artworks by an appeal to Darwinian considerations. The Art Instinct has a definite art-critical agenda, and it involves an attack on modernism: “A determination to shock has sent much recent art down a wrong path. Darwinian aesthetics can restore the vital place of beauty, skill, and pleasure as high artistic values.” But it is one thing to believe that our most general and, for that matter, elementary attitudes toward the arts may be descendants of
attitudes that served us well in the distant past; it is quite another to think that what pleases us today does so because “it had adaptive value in the ancestral environment” or, conversely, that “if there was adaptive survival value in ancient, Stone Age storytelling, it ought to extend to our own time and explain somehow the pleasure we get from any fictions.”

Dutton chides those who, though willing to attribute the structure of the inner ear to evolution, deny that evolution “might be linked to the paintings of Albrecht Dürer or the poetry of Gérard de Nerval.” Right—but only if to be “linked” to evolution means simply that, had our evolutionary history taken another path, as it easily could have, our arts would have been radically different. Dutton is very good on the contingency of aesthetic values, acknowledging that nothing is inevitable in the development of our species or our instincts, including “the art instinct” itself: under minutely different conditions, Homo sapiens might never have existed at all.

On this general level, Dutton seems to me unquestionably correct; I was particularly drawn in to his discussion of the unsuitability of our sense of smell as the basis for a developed art form. But his assault on modernism depends on a much closer connection between art and evolution. Their “link” now means that Darwinian terms, supplemented perhaps by cultural considerations, can be used to explain, praise, or criticize features specific to the work of Dürer, Nerval, or other artists. That is a much more debatable view.

Dutton associates modernism with social constructionism and both with a relativism he considers an “inevitable” outcome of the Enlightenment’s interest in the accomplishments of exotic cultures. All three assume that human audiences are infinitely elastic and that our ability to understand or appreciate new kinds of art has no limits. They therefore overlook the fact that “contingent facts about human nature ensure not only that some things in the arts will be difficult to appreciate but that appreciation of them may be impossible.” For that reason, modernist art is often incapable of moving us, and some iconic modernist works are, in fact, not works of art at all. Can Marcel Duchamp’s most famous ready-made—an ordinary urinal, signed “R. Mutt” and given the title Fountain—possibly be a work of art? “Of course not,” Dutton replies, whatever “the experts” who admire it may say. The ready-mades “challenge our evolutionary response-system for art: where’s the emotion, the individuality, the skill, the beauty? Duchamp set himself . . . against the adaptive structure of art.” Fountain is not an artwork but “an art-theoretical gesture . . . of incandescent genius.” If the philosopher Arthur Danto, who believes that it is both, is right, “any stimulating book on aesthetic theory would be a work of art.”

Regarding fiction, Dutton agrees with the critic Christopher Booker (though not with his Jungian orientation) that premodern literature embodies a small number of elementary plot structures that correspond to “the deep themes that fascinate us in fictions.” Contemporary literature, by contrast, has “lost the plot”: “By offering up too many antiheroes and focusing on the moral ambiguities of life, modern fiction has . . . lost its moral bearings.” But if one of fiction’s main adaptive advantages, as Dutton claims, is that it is a “rich instructive [source] of factual . . . information,” we might actually think that modernist fiction is more accurate and, in that respect at least, superior to its forebears.

Here and elsewhere, Dutton is sometimes too quick to appeal to evolutionary considerations in defense of his substantive philosophical views. He argues, for instance, that the “prehistoric” function of art as a fitness indicator makes it psychologically impossible to disregard the skill, craft, talent, or genius that any work of art displays. Whether a work manifests such features depends essentially on the inten-
tions of its maker; therefore no work of art can be understood without appealing to the intention with which it was created. In that way, the venerable debate over “the intentional fallacy” is resolved in one fell swoop.

The problem, though, is that Dutton, along with most of his opponents, assumes that an artist’s intention refers not to what a work of art actually manifests but to what its maker thinks the work manifests. Otherwise, for example, he could never have claimed that Jonathan Livingston Seagull, a sugary bestseller in the 1970s, would have “had greater value and significance” if we had some evidence that its author had “meant it as a lampoon, a send-up of inspirational literature” and not as a serious work of fiction. But although it is possible, Dutton claims, to read the book as a lampoon, it would be wrong to do so, because we know that its author meant it seriously. Whether the book is a lampoon or not, then, depends not on the actual words on the page—since the same words could support either interpretation—but only on its author’s attitude toward them. If Richard Bach had thought of his book as a lampoon, his words would have indicated his talent and wit; as it is, they are merely “bad art.” The fitness indicator, then, is not the work itself but what its maker takes it to be. And if that is part of our evolutionary history, Homo sapiens is lucky to exist at all, for relying on one another on the basis of what each one of us thinks of himself seems to me the surest path to extinction.

Dutton’s effort to use Darwin to go beyond the origins of art and to evaluate its forms and resolve its philosophical ambiguities is animated by the desire to find the “human universals that underlie the vast cacophony of cultural differences through history and across the globe.” But why think of these differences as a cacophony? Why not celebrate them as a proliferation of human possibilities? Because the overvaluation of unity, an avatar of Platonic idealism, which lurks within Dutton’s naturalism has impelled him to write, in effect, two different books—one of which, on the prehistory of art, is better than the other, a novel and important work. Here, he is on solid ground—if, of course, we can speak of solid ground—if, of course, we can speak of solid ground where speculation and theory are still impossible to distinguish. The evolutionary psychology of art seems to be living through its own Pleistocene Era. But to concede as much is also to suggest that, at least, it has a future. The Art Instinct is taking some of the very first, if uncertain, steps toward it.

A quarter century after the death of George Washington in 1799, Rembrandt Peale, one of the foremost painters of his era, was still trying to create what he called a “Standard National Likeness” of the first president. Peale was a man driven. He had completed at least 16 composite likenesses of Washington, all of them praised by the picture-buying public, but he still felt like a failure. Finding him in his studio, overwrought and despairing, Peale’s wife begged to know what was wrong. “When I told her,” Peale recalled, “she burst into a flood of tears, & exclaimed with great emotion that Washington was my evil genius,

~ Fergus M. Bordewich is the author of Washington: The Making of the American Capital.