

Book Reviews

DUTTON, DENIS. *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2009, vii + 269 pp., \$25.00 cloth.

Denis Dutton's *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution* is not the first recent work to recognize our need for a new theory of art. But the theory it presents is probably the most ambitious and far-reaching, seeking to connect our cravings for art and our repeatedly astonishing—"unimaginable" is his word—successes in artistic production, appreciation, and theorization on the one hand, with physical survival as a species, personal success on the individual level, and evolutionary theory (both biology and psychology) on the other.

In doing this, of course, Dutton takes on a number of Herculean tasks. He sorts out any number of familiar problems in aesthetics, often case based, such as the comparison of art and language, why plots exist, intention in the arts, communication and expression in arts and language, the role of freedom in art, the nature and importance of representation and of craft, kitsch, forgery, and plagiarism, theory of conspicuous waste and consumption, and irony. He attempts to wean us from our seemingly insatiable fascination with modernism and Duchamp's *Fountain*.

He attacks our unswerving devotion to cultural constructionism. It is not so much that cultural constructionism is wrong, for cultural variation is irrefutable (he provides any number of examples from all sorts of cultures, chapter 4 and *passim*). But the social constructions, he argues, are theoretically subordinate to and historically derivative of larger, and far far deeper, similarities, and it is these similarities, amounting to dimensions of human nature, to which theory of art must attend. From the standpoint of an appropriate level of abstraction, twelve cluster criteria can be identified that define art as a universal, cross-cultural category (pp. 51–52). He concludes that "at the heart of [social constructionism and many modernist] arguments lies a fatal non sequitur: while it is true that culture sanctions and ha-

bituates a wide variety of aesthetic tastes, it does not follow that culture can give us a taste for just anything at all" (p. 205). "Human nature, so evolutionary aesthetics insists, sets limits on what culture and the arts can accomplish with the human personality and its tastes. 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" (p. 206).

He sketches a new theory of mind (including continuing the monstrous job of sorting out conscious dimensions from unconscious) that is based on sexual selection (pp. 150–151) and in which art and aesthetic preferences have essential and fundamental roles: "From the Greeks through the Enlightenment and on into the computer age, every prevailing analogy for the mind has captured some important aspect or function. But none even begins to explain the mind as the creative, exuberant, imaginative, romantic, wasteful, storytelling, witty, loquacious, poetic, ideology-inventing organ it also is. Darwin's *Descent of Man*, by regarding the mind as a sexual ornament, presents us with a first step toward explaining those features of the human personality that we find most charming, captivating, and seductive. Adding sexual selection to natural selection, we begin at last to see the possibility for a complete theory of the origin of the arts" (pp. 151–152).

His project demands that he wrest the philosophy of art from the strangleholds of Plato and Kant, though he retains, and makes much of, Kant's "disinterestedness" as what he terms "special focus." This is Characteristic 7 on the list of twelve: "Works of art and artistic performances tend to be bracketed off from ordinary life, made a separate and dramatic focus of experience" (pp. 55–56).

Along the way, he corrects a number of persistent errors in interpretation (of Veblen, for instance), all the while providing the most amusing examples (theoretical and empirical, from a number of disciplines), trenchant statistics, and penetrating insight into both the arts and the human condition. He raises more

questions than he answers, of course, but that is to be expected. It will take quite some time—and work in a number of disciplines in addition to philosophical aesthetics—to answer his intriguing questions and to work out the implications and ramifications of the new theory.

He's no Kant (thank heaven). Yet disappointment in his lack in rigorous systematization is more than made up for by his elegant, easy-to-read style, full of lively examples and vivid insights from personal experience. The downside of this is that he has not traced out the full implications of the work, much less given us full proof. Most professional readers will be frustrated, especially within the areas of their expertise. Aestheticians must take this frustration in stride and do much of the dirty work ourselves, exploring, testing, and filling out the theory as it applies to the various subareas. And, of course, we will look forward to further explication by Dutton himself.

Dutton's project is complex: first, the outlining and justification of a new theory of aesthetic preference and art and their roles in human life (conscious and not), a theory that integrates these forces with the theory of evolution and shows how they are adaptive, and second, "the elucidat[ion of] general characteristics of the arts in terms of evolved adaptations" (p. 236). In the process he also establishes cross-cultural criteria for art (in chapter 3). Within "art" he includes both "what might be dismissed as low-end popular art" (p. 236). In the process he also establishes cross-cultural criteria for art (in chapter 3). His argument, which draws on an extensive literature in evolutionary biology, evolutionary psychology, anthropology, economics, and linguistics as well as philosophy, has three major parts: natural selection, landscape preference, and the arts; sexual selection and the arts; and exploration of some of the implications of natural and sexual selection for philosophy of art (including but not limited to traditional problems).

Following the body of literature on experiments on aesthetic preference for landscape (developed largely during the 1990s), he shows (in chapter 1) "how innate interests and emotional reactions to natural landscapes impinge on tastes many people have assumed to be merely cultural. The Pleistocene heritage affects landscape painting, calendar choices, and the design of parks and golf courses [and gardens, one might add]. It is wrong, however, to regard these modern phenomena as by-products of prehistoric impulses or emotions: rather, they directly address and satisfy ancient, persistent interests and longings" (pp. 100–101). The importance of natural selection is developed in relation to other aesthetic preferences, to arts, especially fiction, and to language in chapters 5 and 6. Chapter 5 tackles the question, Are "the arts in their various forms adaptations in their own right, or are they better understood as modern

by-products of adaptations?" (p. 86); Dutton concludes they are actual adaptations.

But natural selection alone cannot account for the arts. For that we need the theory of sexual selection, which accounts for the evolutionary elaboration of individuality and personality, as well as for cross-cultural preferences for originality and individuality (chapter 7) and interest in artistic intention (p. 170). It is at this level that biology, arts, and society become mutually reinforcing: "the qualities of mind chosen and thus evolved in this process of human self-domestication made for enduring pairings, the rearing of children who themselves might survive, and thus the creation of robust social groups" (p. 151). "How does resource-demonstration work in courtship?" (p. 153) becomes, perhaps for the first time, a vital question for philosophical aesthetics.

Data—the biological distinctions between male and female and the differences between masculine and feminine—that in others' hands have constituted an attack on feminism, or women, are contextualized in such a way that feminists need not gag. Dutton avoids reductionism. Nor does his emphasis on evolutionary biology as the source of mind lead him to determinism. As he puts it: "[T]here is no reason to accept that we are doomed forever to respond to art in terms of costliness, conspicuous waste, or its bearing on social status. Pleistocene landscape preferences are just as innate but need not control our tastes in landscape painting or even our choice of a calendar. Once we understand and know an impulse, we can choose to go along with it or we can resist it. There are elements in the art world as described by Veblen—for instance, the intimate association of art with money—that ought to disturb us. But better we should know this devil than deny it or pretend it is but a product of capitalism" (p. 161). Dutton's claim (in the context of a discussion of Veblen's theory) that the choice we have as to whether to follow blindly either biologically or culturally induced aesthetic or artistic preferences is ultimately liberating—and crucial to making this a useful theory.

The final chapter returns to four of the original twelve cluster criteria, examining how they reveal themselves "in the very greatest works of art, the masterpieces that have withstood Hume's Test of Time and show every indication of maintaining their hold on the human imagination . . . four primary properties that we tend to find in the greatest art: high complexity, serious thematic content, a sense of insistent or urgent purpose, and a distance from ordinary human pleasures and desires" (p. 236).

This is not to say that there are no criticisms. Although extensively referenced, particularly in regard to the classics of philosophy, Arthur Danto, and evolutionary theory and psychology, his references

regarding the relations between evolutionary biology, evolutionary psychology, and environmental-preference aesthetics include nothing more recent than the references I used sixteen years ago for a similar argument regarding environmental aesthetics in *The Garden as an Art* (SUNY Press, 1993); Jay Appleton's essential *The Experience of Landscape* (John Wiley, 1975) and the work of John D. Balling and John H. Falk, Roger S. Ulrich, Stephen and Rachel Kaplan, and Gordon H. Orians and Judith H. Heerwagen. (The bibliography on more common aesthetics issues is more up-to-date.) There is no mention of the recent work on palaeolithic art, like David Lewis-Williams's *The Mind in the Cave: Consciousness and the Origins of Art* (Thames and Hudson, 2004), or theory about the selective advantage conferred by Stone Age campsite selection.

More troublesome, Dutton does not mention, much less analyze (nor even cite in the bibliography), the deep body of work by new philosophers over the past fifteen years that is directly relevant to his topics and arguments. This includes not only work on evolution and landscape preference such as *The Garden as an Art* and Stephanie Ross's *What Gardens Mean* (University of Chicago Press, 1989) but also Emily Brady's *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment* (University of Alabama Press, 2003; reviewed *JAAC* 62 [2004]); Malcolm Budd's *The Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature* (Oxford University Press, 2002; reviewed *JAAC* 62 [2004]); *The Aesthetics of Human Environments*, edited by Arnold Berleant and Allen Carlson (Broadview Press, 2007); and the essays in *JAAC*'s "Special Issue on Environmental Aesthetics" 56 (1998), with John Andrew Fisher's "What the Hills Are Alive With: In Defense of the Sounds of Nature" (this last highly relevant, given Dutton's relatively extensive discussion of sound and music). A happy exception is Larry Shiner and Yulia Kriskovets's "The Aesthetics of Smelly Art," *JAAC* 65 (2007), which Dutton challenges (p. 205). Taking into account at least some of this recent work would have served his arguments well—and in addition been a service to the discipline, which is here misrepresented. And even unwitting erasure of scholarly work damages the field: careers languish, while eventually other scholars unwittingly waste energy and time reproducing their work.

Further amplification of his own research among the artists of the Sepik Valley would have been welcome. (I searched in vain among his website bibliographies for indications this had been thoroughly dealt with elsewhere. His article on tribal art is not fully satisfactory in this regard!) His cursory dismissal of symbolism as an "explanatory fifth wheel" (p. 130) is slapdash and uncharacteristically reductive, particularly in this context, as is his underestimation and even misinterpretation of Jung, who could be singu-

larly useful in explaining symbolism, narrative, and a number of other issues. Joseph Campbell's elaboration of Jung's theory of the symbolic significance and functioning of mandalas for preliterate, hunting-gathering peoples would seem to be directly to the point. It is something of a surprise in someone as visually astute and sensitive as Dutton to find such a strong preference for language over visual art, first as offering "the best picture we can have of the human soul" (p. 162; *pace* Wittgenstein, who argues for the body), and second as a precisely cognitive resource.

Given the importance Dutton (rightly) ascribes to emotion in evolution, human life, and philosophy of the arts, his cursory treatment of emotions does his argument a disservice. Simply referring to Paul Ekman's list of allegedly universal human emotional expressions, from his *Emotions Revealed* (Henry Holt, 2003), covers up too many issues. There is no final agreement as to the number or identity of even the very limited list of allegedly universal emotions such as fear and anger, even within the Western scientific community, much less across cultures. And Ekman's and Dutton's approach, in which emotion is identified with biological events and states, which he adopts explicitly early in the book, appears insufficient to account for the role he attributes to emotion in the arts. If all there is to emotion is the biological reaction to the perception of a threat or inducement to survival, why does art have to get involved at all?

This approach to emotion also ignores the profound differences cross-culturally in the interpretation of the biological emotion (yes, everyone is capable of feeling biologically defined fear, as are mammals in general—but we understand timidity differently from terror or horror or ordinary fear, even if an aroused adrenal system and fight-or-flight response characterize all four). It also overlooks differences in the values ascribed by different cultures both to the various shades of the "same" biological emotion and to their manifestation under different circumstances (or by individuals of different categories). The Japanese philosopher Yasuo Yuasa, in his *The Body, Self-Cultivation, and Ki-Energy* (SUNY Press, 1993), lists seven basic emotions (which he derives from Eastern medicine), including anger, fear, surprise, joy (presumably Ekman's happiness), and sorrow (Ekman's sadness), but the last two are completely different: anxiety and longing, rather than Ekman's "disgust or contempt" (p. 190). There is a literature on this. Robert Solomon is a good place to start. Paolo Santangelo's edited volume *Expressions of States of Mind in Asia: Proceedings of the INALCO-UNO Workshop Held in Naples, 27th May 2000* (Università degli studi di Napoli L'Orientale, 2004), which focuses on the

interpretation of emotion and relies heavily on analysis of arts, provides a valuable introduction to the issues as they appear in Asia. Although the idea that emotions, or at least our experience and understanding of them, vary cross-culturally might seem to argue against Dutton's argument that emotions—and the arts he finds so closely related to them—are adaptive, in fact recognition of the variability of emotion cross-culturally paves the way to recognition of the powerful role arts have in shaping our understanding, experience, and valuation of emotion within a given culture. (Dutton, of course, is not arguing for cultures all being the same.)

There are a number of mistakes, some based on overgeneralization of Euro-American to all experience. Chess is not the only model for “how the human mind engages the strategic teleology of life” (p. 112); the Japanese board game *Go*, while equally competitive, individual-based, and strategic, works out in fundamentally different ways, given that there is *not* a “single check-mating purpose.” The ability “[t]o understand, intellectually and emotionally, the mind of another” may “emerge spontaneously in [most] children around the age of two,” but it is emphatically not “fully developed by the age of five” (p. 119); for many adults the cultivation and expansion of one's capacities for compassion and understanding, whether deliberate or enforced by raising a teenager, are lifelong projects, possibly close to infinite in their capacities. The notion that fictions “can also be understood as pleasurable fantasies” may trace back to Freud (p. 121), but it is also found in medieval Japan. It is simply untrue that “there is no living artistic tradition where . . . [the] art is produced with no regard for the individuals who do it” (p. 233); the decorative and performing arts especially are full of glorious and expensive productions in which the artists were forced to live in circumstances of utter penury and degradation. The anonymous and brilliant Buddhist caves at Dunhuang as well as Atlantic Records' treatment of famous African American musicians both come to mind. Yet these are overexaggerations, and not seriously troublesome—although getting some of them right would lead the investigator down more interesting paths regarding the arts and human nature.

Much of the information and even the various partial subtheories have been around a long time. And some of them were originally his, published in *The Forger's Art: Forgery and the Philosophy of Art* (University of California Press, 1983) and “Tribal Art and Artifact” (*JAAC* 51 [1993]). It is their collection and integration within the theoretical context of the theory of evolution that is new. Overall, this is one of the most exciting and far-reaching philosophy books to reach the public in some time. As either an enjoyable reading experience or an instigator of further

philosophical investigation (by Dutton and others), it could hardly be improved upon.

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