
Book Review

DENIS DUTTON. *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution*. Bloomsbury Press, 288 pp., \$25 hardcover.

Reviewed by Nigel T. Gully

Over the past fifteen years, Denis Dutton has been relentlessly working on numerous, but interlocking, research projects about the direct links between aesthetics and human evolution. The result is the author's latest book, *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution*, which argues that humans have shared interests in aesthetic universals that are, in turn, intrinsically linked to our maturation as a cogent, social species over several epochs.

Dutton espouses a Darwinian paradigm in order to deconstruct the central place that aesthetics holds in our individual and collective identities. This approach has not only unequivocally delivered demonstrable results in variegated research fields across the board but, more importantly, allows for a "naturalistic" approach to aesthetics through a discourse focusing on persistent cross-culturally identified patterns of behavior. By choosing a more holistic, pragmatic approach, Dutton succeeds in jettisoning the morass that has stifled progress in aesthetics for so long: an overemphasis on concocting rarefied thought experiments that hold little relevance to everyday issues (such as Danto's "Pot People" and "Basket Folk" narrative), and the relentless debates over drawing ontological lines between artifacts that seem to be perennially in question as legitimate artworks (Duchamp's *Fountain* being the most prolific example).

This very "naturalistic" approach, Dutton argues, can tell us a great deal about what our species values as art, where those instincts came from in the first place and how those artistic appreciation/creation traits help us to further thrive. For example, he dives into a lengthy analysis of a herculean research project conducted by Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, who effectively polled almost two billion people worldwide on their artistic preferences. The overwhelming majority chose realist paintings of lush landscapes as their favorite art, which were replete with everything our ancient ancestors could have ever needed to help them survive and reproduce: abundant water to drink and bathe, healthy plants to eat and build shelter out of, an elevated vantage point to spot game or to watch for predators, and so forth. This passage shows that it is not only possible, but natural to talk about art as a unified concept that is an innate part of who we are, and a roadmap of how we came to be the species we now are.

Instead of taking an analytical approach to defining what art is in a single sentence, Dutton opts for a Goodmanian method by providing a "cluster criteria" of twelve mutually inclusive symptoms, which offer a neutral basis for theoretical speculation. The signposts—like skill, creativity, and expressive individuality—most evident in art exemplify skills that science has shown are indelibly positive adaptations for helping us propagate. Dutton spends an entire chapter expounding on how the ability to create and communicate fictional stories was crucial in helping our species envision creative solutions to problems without having to actually empirically test them out. Since other animals lacked the imaginative capacity that

we had, they learned by a lethal game of trial and error, with the stakes sometimes as high as species annihilation. Possession of such adroit storytelling skills was a clear indicator that the artist was a highly desirable mate for the opposite sex. The arts, therefore, not only helped us as a species to survive but, furthermore, dictated which select evolutionary traits would be perpetuated throughout reproduction cycles.

Much credit is due to Dutton for utilizing an approach that many readers may have thought would have been counterintuitive to the study of aesthetics, and for making the integration of the two disciplines so fluid, accessible and seemingly intuitive. The author addresses a host of topics, including intention, forgery, ethics and smell as art, that are the focus of prominent academic discussions and literary works, proving the range and relevance of his Darwinian approach.

On the other hand, there are at least a few shortcomings in *The Art Instinct*. For example, Dutton is reluctant to establish a concrete definition of art, despite the fact that he elsewhere consistently espouses scientific procedures and research that champions specificity and precision. Another issue is that Dutton almost exclusively references classical artworks. By barely mentioning any works that would have been created during the lifetimes of undergraduate readers (such as Warhol, Banksy, Mapplethorpe, et al.), Dutton's work may fall short as a classroom text. He seems to be enthralled by classical pianists, an anachronistic genre that tends to hold very little, if any, interest to young people anymore. His argument could have been greatly strengthened by referencing contemporary artists to show just how far-reaching and relevant his argument really is. Lastly, the book often regrettably reads much less like a probing philosophical treatise and more like a *New York Times* bestseller that you would keep on your nightstand for lazy, Sunday morning reading.

On the whole, Dutton should be commended for laying the foundation and opening up the conversation on what Darwinian evolutionary theory can tell us about art and, in turn, ourselves. The author has a number of expansive, sedulous contributions on the book's website and on his own personal webpage that will be of interest to students and instructors, alike. His efforts to foster an inclusive, continuous dialogue demonstrate that he is genuinely invested in exploring where this novel approach can intellectually take us. For these reasons, and more, *The Art Instinct* is recommended as an introductory text for integrating scientific discourse into the classroom to give students of aesthetics a more well rounded understanding of the importance of art in the development of our species, and to challenge them to either defend or discredit the theory as developing philosophers.

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