Art, Aesthetics and Origins


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**Funny Ideas**

What art does to us – why, for instance, a certain piece of music may strike us as movingly beautiful – can it be explained with the methods of psychology? Ludwig Wittgenstein thought not. In fact, he dismissed the idea as ridiculous:

People often say that aesthetics is a branch of psychology. The idea is that once we are more advanced, everything – all the mysteries of Art – will be understood by psychological experiments.

This is very funny – very funny indeed. There doesn’t seem any connection between what psychologists do and any judgement about a work of art.

The sort of explanation one is looking for when one is puzzled by an aesthetic impression is not a causal explanation, not one corroborated by experience or by statistics as to how people react.


That aesthetic experiences cannot be exhaustively explained (“all the mysteries of art”) may be readily admitted. But why wouldn’t we be able to pinpoint some of the factors that cause, say, our perception of beauty and perfection in some work of music? Wittgenstein’s outburst may sound even odder if we realize that in its eighteenth century (Enlightenment) origin, between roughly 1735 and 1790, aesthetics was considered precisely “a branch of psychology” (as is implied by the word *aesthetics*, which relates to perception).

What maybe explains Wittgenstein’s view is the fact that aesthetic judgment (typically: *is it beautiful?*) is, like moral judgment (*is it good or bad?*), a matter of choice. Choice, but not arbitrary, and not entirely subjective. Exclaiming *How beautiful!* is not a reflex, it is an expression of the decision to credit a specific experience with a certain value (about which we may argue). The problem was most famously discussed by Immanuel Kant, and it may have been through his (unintended) influence that philosophers of aesthetics developed an abhorrence of psychology.

Nowadays, the sciences of mind are eagerly applied to questions of art and aesthetics. There are three main areas of research: the first focuses upon human cognition and behaviour; the second upon the possible evolutionary origins of our aesthetic behaviours; and the third, the neurological approach, studies what happens in our brains when we’re engaged with artworks. The subject is popular enough to foster
an industry of bestsellers and would-be bestsellers, particularly in the third (brain) division.

**Upgrading Mysteries: How Art Works**

*How Art Works: a Psychological Exploration* (2019) by psychologist Ellen Winner belongs in the first, cognitive-behavioural division. The title alludes, I presume, to Stephen Pinker’s *How the Mind Works* (1997), and, presumably, shares in that author’s irony. As Pinker put it, progress in psychology allows at least some baffling “mysteries” to be “upgraded to problems” that can be resolved (p. ix). And that implicitly answers Wittgenstein’s sceptical outburst.

Winner is very much aware of the philosophical complexities of the problems she has set out to resolve. Accordingly, she starts with the grand question *Can Art Be Defined?* To which she answers: most people, including philosophers, think not. Her interest is the question how people (preferably non-experts) behave rather than how, by some standard, they should behave.

Other long-standing conundrums include *Does Music Express Emotion to the Listener?* (“people agree on which basic emotions are expressed by music even in a culturally unfamiliar form”, p. 239); *Does Music Evoke Emotion in the Listener?* (it does, but “the emotions we feel from music feel somewhat different from emotions that have objects and that are evoked outside of music”, ib.); *Are Aesthetic Judgments Based on Anything Objective?* (perhaps); and *Does Art Make Us Smarter?* (there is little support for that).

One instance where aesthetic judgment is challenged by statistics of behaviour is the popular prejudice against abstract expressionist painting: “*my kid could have made that!*” (p. 243). As Winner shows in an interesting series of experiments, in about two thirds of cases people (non-experts) correctly distinguish an abstract expressionist painting from a superficially similar painting by a toddler or a chimp. The main factor in this seems to be intentionality: people recognize the work as successfully conveying human intention. But, Winner asks, does that mean that the glass is two-thirds full, or one-third empty?

Winner opts for *full*. But even if the evidence proves that people are *mostly* able to tell the difference between a Jackson Pollock and the work of a toddler or a chimp, there still is the disconcerting fact that many museum pieces could be exchanged with toddler’s art. (And, contrary to Winner, I think it would be interesting to put experts to the same tests.) Anyhow, seeing a difference does not by itself justify abstract expressionism’s status as art. All it shows is that a Pollock (along with a Kincade and a Bob Ross) carries a stronger intentionality than the work of a toddler. And how many people who exclaim that *their kid could have made that* actually believe what they say? It may just be a pointed way of expressing aesthetic disapproval.

The question of the origins of art and aesthetic practices arises only briefly as a conclusion to the chapter on *Who Makes Art and Why?*

While art serves many very important psychological functions from culture to culture, we cannot say that these functions are why art evolved, or that without art we would not have survived. Art making could well just be a product of our complex brains. […] Without art, Homo sapiens might have survived but we would be a very different kind
The question of the evolutionary origin of art may not even be a sensible one. As Winner acknowledges, “art” is not a natural kind, but a shifting cultural concept (p. 14). What is usually ignored is the fact that the concept of “art” is also of fairly recent origin (1750-1800). It arose as a generalization only after “the arts” or “the fine arts” in the modern sense had acquired encyclopaedic status, as an area of human endeavour specifically different from other pursuits such as the sciences.

The way Winner attempts to answer the question how art works does not depend however upon a strong concept of “art”. Her interest is in how people respond to various art forms and artworks. And these may have existed in the past without being “art”.

**Different Ball Games: The Aesthetic Animal**

Another recent aspiring bestseller from the same publisher (OUP), *The Aesthetic Animal* by the Danish psychologist Henrik Høgh-Olesen, is specifically devoted to the question of evolutionary origins. Høgh-Olesen’s intention is to “shine an extensive and important light on the big “why” of art and aesthetics” (p. 12). The “big why”, predictably, turns around survival and reproduction, and his tools are those of behavioural (rather than cognitive) psychology. In this pursuit, “[…] the goal is not to steal the ball from the humanities. The goal is to join the match” (p. 75). But, to extend the metaphor, it looks a bit like playing rugby on a tennis field. The author shows little interest in the game as it has been played by philosophers since antiquity, and particularly since the Enlightenment. Consequently, the author seems to have no interest in the definition, or definability, of these confusing concepts, “art” and “aesthetics”. They are interchangeably interpreted as modes of behaviour (p. 12, 144), or as an impulse that is “expressed” (p. 5).

The vagueness of the “art” concept is harmless in Winner’s book because she is interested mainly in specific artistic or aesthetic behaviours. With Høgh-Olesen it becomes more problematic because of his assumption that art, in all its variety, can be explained by recourse to an “aesthetic impulse”.

[…] all these forms of art stem from the same basic human impulse, and that is why it is this impulse we must understand first. (p. 11)

An impulse “is a natural, internal behavioral incentive that does not need external reward to exist”; it is an inherent part of human nature, and therefore a primary impulse in its own right […].” (p.7) The existence of this impulse is simply assumed. As an explanatory device it remains dubiously empty.

Even though this is a “primary impulse”, there are even more primary impulses or forces “behind it” (p. 8). One is what the author calls *neophilia* (literally, a craving for novelty); a second resides in the social hierarchy into which humans organize themselves; and a third in the human craving for symbolic meaning.

*Neophilia* is not, as in common usage, a personality trait that compels the fortunate owner to seek out novelty. It is simply a desire for stimulation, a desire so desperate that even unpleasant electric shocks may be preferable to 15 minutes of boredom (p.
Høgh-Olesen thinks that this sensual, stimulation-seeking aspect of aesthetics has been neglected (p. 5). In fact, it is a commonplace since the Abbé Dubos commenced his *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture* (1729) with a chapter on “the necessity of being occupied in order to avoid boredom” (*De la nécessité d'être occupé pour fuir l'ennui*).

It remains a mystery to me why different “aesthetic” behaviours should be reduced to one impulse. Take just music – it is recognized nowadays that our ability to make and enjoy music involves many diverse abilities, that may be involved in different ways in highly diverse kinds of music.

Many inaccuracies in this slim volume (167 p.) raise the suspicion that Oxford University Press has hastily produced it for a peak in arts-and-origins interest. A prehistoric gravesite in Sungir (Russia) is said to contain an incredible 10,177 “hand-carved pearls”. A quick internet search reveals that this wealth consists of beads. The ideal female waist-to-hip ratio of 0.7 is given in the figure (p. 57) as an absurd 0.7%.

An experiment that counts as a classic, *An Experimental Study of Apparent Behavior*, by Heider and Simmel (1944) is cited by Høgh-Olesen as an illustration of the fact that humans spontaneously construct “a narrative world of stories” (p. 117). The study reports on spectators’ interpretations of a short animated cartoon, in which geometrical figures perform “a random set of movements without meaning or purpose”, according to Høgh-Olesen (p. 117). It will be instantly clear upon watching this movie that the movements are far from random, but have been precisely scripted so as to suggest a story. In fact, Heider and Simmel do not claim that they are random. Their own version of the script outlines precise “situations and activities” (p. 244). If you observe something like two men fighting over a woman (p. 248) you’re reconstructing a story that was purposefully written into the work.

Aimed more explicitly than Winner’s book at a popular science readership, the book’s “entertaining” writing style approaches that of a script for Discovery Channel, and indeed several of its topics have been extensively televised. The colour illustrations (mostly stock images from the internet) and coloured chapter separators are merely cosmetic, and one image (2.6) is an inferior photocopy.

**Evolving Onward: The Artful Species**

I have argued that our category of art is culturally and historically bounded. This idea has been rejected by philosopher Stephen Davies in *The Artful Species: Aesthetics, Art, and Evolution* (2012). Davies extensively discusses the pitfalls that may occur when biological evolutionary theory is applied to the phenomena of art, aesthetics and culture. (The absence of his work among the references of The Aesthetic Animal is one of that book’s omissions).

Davies agrees with Høgh-Olesen in positing a biological origin of what he calls – following a long philosophical tradition – “the aesthetic sense”, a sense for beauty (or beauty and its awe inspiring variety, the sublime; p. 10).

Davies finds it “difficult to embrace the idea that Greek tragedy and the works of Michelangelo, da Vinci, and Shakespeare are not art” (p. 25). All that means, however, is saying that we, nowadays, are in the habit of calling those works “art”. It is another
matter whether Shakespeare or Sophocles, or anybody before 1750, did have that same concept, and shared our perspective on culture and human productivity.

Davies’ concept of art is “generous, far-reaching”, and includes decoration (p. 3). But this generosity seems to clash with his own intuitions. Addressing the question “What falls under the concept of art?”, he argues that:

It might be thought that the universality of art follows straightforwardly from the observation that all cultures have music, poetry, narrative, drama, dancing, and picturing. This argument would be too fast, however, if not all music, poetry, and so on should be counted as art. “Happy Birthday” and the catchy jingle that advertises the phone number of the local pizza parlor are music, but I’d be reluctant to count them as art, even assuming a humble view of what art is. (p. 26-27)

So, not all music is art, for no stated reason (what’s wrong with Happy Birthday?), but origami (folding little paper boats and swans) is (p. 27).

The question of what is or is not art is of little interest when we’re speaking of evolutionary origins. What counts is the cognitive faculties that are involved in our various abilities and propensities to create all kinds of things. The reason why Davies holds on to those timeless, general categories of art and aesthetics is that he endorses the theory of gene-culture coevolution, which allows that “culture can affect what adaptations are favored” (p. 230). Borders between history and evolution then become somewhat fluid: “evolution is ongoing and not necessarily separable from cultural process and change” (p. 149). Even “the form that modern art takes” (p. 134) – such as the novel, three centuries old – might be fitted into this evolutionary history. In this sense, the artful species is what we’ve only just become.