



*The Art Instinct* in Its Historical Moment: A Meta-Review

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*The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution*  
by Denis Dutton. Bloomsbury, 2009.

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EVOLUTIONARY AESTHETICS HIT THE BIG TIME

*The Art Instinct* is a major publishing phenomenon—with a book tour featuring sell-out crowds at Ivy League schools, radio spots on prominent talk shows, and even a rambunctious interview on *The Colbert Report*. Some of Dutton’s colleagues felt that the Colbert bit lacked the dignity to which evolution is entitled. It offended their feeling that “There is Grandeur in this View of Life.” Well, no, Colbert doesn’t do Grandeur. But he does do publicity, and while exchanging good-natured wisecracks with Dutton, he also held the book up to the camera, with a finger delineating the title—a gesture as close to “product placement” as any eager agent could wish. And indeed, Dutton’s agent might well be looking at retirement condos in posh sections of Miami or San Diego. *The Art Instinct* has been high on the best-seller list at Amazon for months, and it has received mostly rave reviews reaching the broadest sectors of the educated lay public—*Newsweek*, *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *The New Yorker*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *TLS*, *The Washington Post*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *New Scientist*, *The American Scholar*, *The Wilson Quarterly*, and others. (For links to reviews and interviews, see <http://theartinstinct.com>.)

For evolutionists eager to demonstrate the comprehensiveness of “this view of life,” all this is very good news. Evolutionary books on human cognition and behavior have been best sellers for many years. In 1975, E. O. Wilson’s *Sociobiology* elicited howls of rage from the Marxists, but Wilson was undaunted, and in 1978, he received a Pulitzer for *On Human Nature*—a book still in print after three decades. Starting in 1994 with *The Language Instinct*—the namesake for *The Art Instinct*—Steven Pinker’s books for the educated lay public have helped make evolutionary psychology a household word, at least in educated households. Frans de Waal, Matt Ridley, Richard Dawkins, Nicho-





las Wade, David Buss, Daniel Goleman—all these writers must also have agents driving up prices in Miami and San Diego. But no one before Dutton has had anything like this kind of popular success with an evolutionary book in the humanities. The Gottschall and Wilson collection *The Literary Animal* (2005) was a success with critics outside the postmodern establishment—in scientific journals and the lay press—but was not a blockbuster at the box office. Things seem to have changed, rather suddenly. Brian Boyd's *On the Origin of Stories* (also reviewed in this volume), is now vying with *The Art Instinct* for sales success.

Before Dutton and Boyd, the closest any studies in evolutionary aesthetics had come to major popular success were in two books that devoted just a chapter each to the arts: Pinker's *How the Mind Works* (1997), and Wilson's *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (1998). Despite Dutton's affiliation with *The Language Instinct*, Pinker came not to praise the arts but to bury them—to relegate them to the realm of idle self-indulgence largely irrelevant to the serious purposes of life. Wilson, in contrast, came not only to praise the arts but to identify them as integral, functional parts of the adapted mind. The contrasting views of art offered by Pinker and Wilson involve very different concepts of human cognitive evolution. Readers seeking a trenchant analytic account of these differences will not find it in *The Art Instinct*. Dutton does not dwell on theoretical conflicts within the evolutionary camp. Like Pinker, he is essentially a synthesizer. He takes what seems most constructive from many evolutionary thinkers and integrates them with concepts from the philosophy of art—his own home field. In the most theoretically probing part of his book, Dutton offers incisive arguments against rigid distinctions between “adaptations” and “by-products” (90–102). Still, arguing for a “middle ground” seldom solves the deepest theoretical problems. Beneath the middle ground, there is almost always some seismic fault likely at any time to shift and topple the buildings above it. If Dutton sometimes leaves nagging theoretical issues unanswered, he offers, in compensation, a full, rich account of art in all its multifarious aspects, high and low, popular and elite, appealing to all the senses, engaging the deepest passions, absorbing cultural conventions, and fulfilling the most fundamental human needs.

Given an intellectual climate in which one or another kind of “sophistication” sets itself off strenuously against the common understanding, formulating some broad, basic home truths about the nature of our aesthetic experience is in itself a signal accomplishment. And to do it within a serious meditation on the evolutionary context—well, very few have managed that, certainly not in the full and sustained way Dutton has. Dutton's closest competitor and chief antecedent is Ellen Dissanayake, an evolutionist whose arguments on the evolutionary origins and psychosocial functions of the arts have won dedicated audiences among specialists in art and music education, art and music therapy, art and craft theory, ethnomusicology, and evolutionary aesthetics. Dissanayake's first two books, *What Is Art For?* and *Home Aesthetics*, adopt an ethological perspective on the way the arts are integrated into ritual and religion in modern societies. In her third book, *Art and Intimacy*, she locates the origins of art in mother–infant interactions.

Dutton handsomely acknowledges Dissanayake, but he concentrates more on the high arts of advanced civilizations, and he casts new evolutionary light on issues that have often exercised theorists of modern aesthetics. Scholars and scientists can read his book with profit and pleasure, but his genial and conversational manner is pitched in the first place to the educated lay reader. Little wonder then that his book has been such a success. There must be many people who have a taste for the arts, who avidly consume popular books in evolutionary psychology, and who have been frustrated at not being able to bring those interests into conjunction. Dutton accomplishes this aim splendidly.

Though he recounts few incidents from his personal life, Dutton's book has an indirectly autobiographical aspect. He is a genuine connoisseur, especially of classical music, but also of the visual arts, and as founding editor of the journal *Philosophy and Literature*, he has a patent claim to an insider's knowledge about literature, too. Through all his multifarious references to particular works of music, painting, sculpture, and literature, he gives a strong, vivid impression of what it's like to have lived his life in absorbed, delighted responsiveness to the arts. That's something neither Pinker nor Wilson, for all their virtues, could possibly have conveyed. Nor did it come through much in the rather academic





essays, most geared toward narrative theory, in *The Literary Animal*. Dutton's personal responsiveness to the arts protects him from a danger to which many evolutionists, discussing aesthetics, have succumbed—formulating general ideas that fall short on the side of common aesthetic experience.

Many evolutionists, even in the humanities, tend toward a naïve realism. They look at art as merely a source of adaptively relevant information, or they consider it, half consciously, as a direct, realistic imitation of common, average experience. Not Dutton. He intuitively understands that art creates and articulates “meaning,” that it gives imaginative shape to things, and that imagination has no necessary fealty to ordinary reality. He lucidly conveys the ideas of tone or mood as the emotional continuum in a work of art, and he conveys also the central importance of “point of view,” the individual perspective as a locus of experience, a little different for every artist and for every reader, listener, or viewer. As commonplace as such ideas are in conventional literary study and aesthetic philosophy, some evolutionists have been slow to grasp and integrate them with ideas about human nature.

#### FROM THE OLD TO THE NEW SCHOLASTICS

Creationists don't figure very largely in debates on evolutionary aesthetics. They are out of it, below the level of serious discussion. But Dutton picked up at least one devotee of medieval religiosity among his critics. Maureen Mullarkey declares that “Grace of mind—a signal to the old Scholastics of the beauty of moral harmony—is not explicable in physical terms” (30). A contemporary writer who makes appeal to Scholasticism—virtually a by-word for sterile speculative abstraction—seems to be cloistering herself within an antiquarian enclave. And yet, Mullarkey has contemporaries among the most modern practitioners in the humanities. Like both traditional humanists and postmodern adherents of “Theory,” she is essentially a metaphysical dualist, cordoning off the world of imagination or spirit from the world that can be explained “in physical terms.”

I have sometimes envied Darwin because he had such an easy foil: the creationist view of species. His “one long argument” in *The Origin* is an argument for “descent

with modification through natural selection.” The only real alternative to “descent with modification” is that each species was specially created. That view does not stand up to scrutiny, but it provides a wonderful frame on which to weave all the contrary evidence—geographical, anatomical, ecological, embryological, paleontological—that supports the idea of descent with modification.

I see now that there is no need to envy Darwin. Though creationism is, intellectually, dead and gone, evolutionists in the humanities and the human sciences can still find an easy foil in the metaphysical dualists. In current mainstream literary study, dualism most often takes the form of “cultural constructivism”—the idea that culture has autonomous causal force and is not constrained by innate dispositions. Cultural constructivists say things like “all identity is culturally constructed,” and “biological sex has no relation to socially constructed gender roles.” Such statements are close kin to declarations that “grace of mind is not explicable in physical terms,” “consciousness can never be reduced to neurological events,” and “there is no evidence of any connection between the brain and mind.” This final statement is a direct quotation from one of my postmodern literary friends, a Jamesonian/Althusserian Marxist, who thus makes himself a bedfellow, strange enough, with the old Scholastics.

As a scientific proposition, the declaration that the mind and brain have no connection can be disconfirmed by a simple experiment conducted at home, with no special equipment, except a hammer. As soon as your postmodern friends utter such phrases, whack them in the head with the hammer, not too hard, and then ask them if they experienced any mental event concordant with the blow to the skull.

#### IS THE BRAIN A SEXUAL ORGAN?

If God is generous, He is also just, and there is a kind of back-handed, evil-humored justice in His decision to hypnotize some of Dutton's reviewers so as to get them to fixate on Dutton's arguments in favor of “sexual selection” (Boyd, “Art”; Nehamas; Onians; J. Q. Wilson). Dutton has a higher opinion of Geoffrey Miller's causal hypothesis in *The Mating Mind* than most evolutionists in the humanities





have had, and he mingles his own arguments for the adaptive functions of art with Miller's argument that the arts are merely forms of costly display designed to attract members of the opposite sex. The equivocations that attend on this effort of synthesis are a weakness in *The Art Instinct*. I can myself forgive that weakness since I regard it as peripheral to Dutton's central concepts, merely a wrinkle in a broad exposition of all the different functions art fulfills. Forgive, but not overlook. We'll have to give a little attention to the boggle at the heart of this issue.

Insofar as "sexual selection" can be basically distinguished from natural selection, it means costly display, the selection of traits *that have no primary adaptive value*. Dutton repeatedly invokes Miller's notions, but he does not ultimately argue that the arts have no primary adaptive value. Miller does argue this, sometimes, just as he argues, sometimes, that the enlarged human brain itself has no primary adaptive value (17–18). In this most extreme form of his argument, Miller joins company with Steven Jay Gould, with whom, on that very issue, Dutton explicitly disagrees (92–94). What Dutton actually argues is that the arts have primary adaptive cognitive and social value and that they are then picked up as attractive features—*attractive because they are adaptive*—and driven into overdrive by males and females selecting one another for those specific features.

There is more than one confusion latent in all this. The peacock's tail is an instance of costly display only because it is driven to an extreme. Tails, in their original form for the ancestors of peacocks, had adaptive utility, just as they had for other birds. They become non-adaptive—costly, dangerous, dysfunctional—through "runaway" selection. In their hypertrophic form, they are genuine instances of "costly signaling"—non-functional features selected precisely as a signal of underlying vigor. Does Dutton argue that the arts are non-functionally hypertrophic features that give evidence of underlying vigor? Ultimately, he does not. With respect specifically to narrative, this is what he argues instead:

The features of a stable human nature revolve around human relationships of every variety: social coalitions of kinship or tribal affinity;

issues of status; reciprocal exchange; the complexities of sex and child-rearing; struggles over resources; benevolence and hostility; friendship and nepotism; conformity and independence; moral obligations, altruism, and selfishness; and so on. These themes and issues constitute the major themes and subjects of literature and its oral antecedents. Stories are universally constituted in this way because of the role *storytelling can play in helping individuals and groups develop and deepen their own grasp of human social and emotional experience* (118, emphasis added)

The same basic argument applies to the other arts. They cultivate emotional intelligence and refine powers of qualitative judgment—the judgment of "values" in their broadest sense. "The arts intensify experience, enhance it, extend it in time, and make it coherent" (102).

#### ADAPTIVE FUNCTION, YET AGAIN

Evolutionists concerned with the humanities have focused obsessively on the question of adaptive function. Pinker believes that is because evolutionists in the humanities are concerned with the honorific status supposedly conveyed by the term *adaptive* ("Towards"). I think there is more to it than that. The concept of the arts formulated by Pinker is concordant with a specific vision of human cognitive evolution and human cognitive architecture—the version that derives from the early EP notion of "massive modularity." In this conception, the mind consists in a mechanical bundle of automatic cognitive processes geared exclusively to a Pleistocene ecology (Tooby and Cosmides, "The Psychological Foundations" 113). Art is tacked on to this mechanical bundle as a non-functional side effect. (In "Does Beauty Build Adapted Minds?" Tooby and Cosmides modify their own earlier view that the arts are non-adaptive side effects, but they do not modify the underlying conception of mental architecture with which that earlier view is concordant.)

The alternative conception of human cognitive evolution that has been emerging in recent years recognizes the singularity of human cognition—recognizes that humans





occupy virtual imaginative worlds, form long-term plans based on mental representations of complex relationships, engage in collective enterprises requiring shared mental representations, and thus produce novel solutions to adaptive problems. On the face of it, this latter vision is inherently the more plausible of the two; it answers better to common observation, and it also accords better with evidence about the actual trajectory of human evolution (Boehm; Cochran and Harpending; Klein; Mellars and Stringer; Mellars et al.; Mithen; Richerson and Boyd; Wade; D. S. Wilson).

Dutton observes that dispositions for the arts are universal, that they arise spontaneously in all normally developing children, and that humans display cognitive adaptations—for instance, sensitivity to pitched sounds and capacities for fictional representation—that seem specifically “designed” for the purposes of the arts. (On cognitive aptitudes geared toward the arts, see as well Boyd, *On the Origin*; Dissanayake, *The Art Instinct*; Scalise Sugiyama; Tooby and Cosmides, “Does Beauty Build?”) If the arts have also, as Pinker argues, co-opted or “exapted” cognitive powers designed for other purposes, that is within the normal course of evolution, no more remarkable than the exaptation of lungs for swim bladders, forelegs for wings, or the bones of the reptile jaw for the inner ear of mammals. The real question is whether these exaptations actually fulfill functions that help people live their lives—help them develop normally, assimilate the values and beliefs of their cultures, and thus form parts of social groups that are themselves adaptive units (D. S. Wilson). Do the arts help people get oriented to the world, emotionally, morally, and conceptually? Dutton not only answers this question in the affirmative; he gives a detailed, evocative account of just how the arts accomplish these ends.

#### WE EVOLVED—SO WHAT? KISSING OFF THE ART INSTINCT

There is one review that I would imagine Dutton would find more disturbing than any other. Unlike the few overtly hostile reviewers, Sebastian Smee professes himself in sympathy with Dutton’s evolutionary world view, and indeed, claims that it is all so uncontroversial, so self-evident, as to

be nugatory. That’s the trick. And there is a trick. Behind the velvet tongue, there is a two-pronged dagger.

One prong is just the well-nigh universal disposition of all reviewers to one-up the reviewee. Smee is better at it than many people are. He understands that the most effective putdown is the putdown that gives the appearance of disappointed sympathy, as if the reviewer is saying *I have no reason at all to disparage this person; I am not threatened; I have no temperamental aversion; indeed, I rather like this person. All the greater the pity, then, that he is such a lightweight, that his arguments are trivial and insignificant. It’s fine fluff. If you have nothing better to do, you might spend a pleasant hour in this chap’s company, shooting the breeze; just don’t expect it to amount to anything.*

The second prong of the dagger just slightly shows its steel with an early reference to Gould and Lewontin, followed by a concession that, like the duo of San Marco, Dutton rejects (supposedly) “hyper-adaptationism”: “It’s wrong, in other words, to see the arts as adaptations of a process of natural selection in the same way that our eyes, our spines, or our inner organs are” (17). Smee evidently knows very little about evolutionary theory, and what little he knows he got from Gould and Lewontin. He is, consequently, deeply confused about what “adaptation” means. And, be it said, Dutton feeds into this confusion. His own equivocal formulations about the supposed contrast between natural and sexual selection create just enough of an opening for Smee to insert his spandereled foot.

Smee’s chief line of attack has now become familiar in the humanities, where scholars often proclaim themselves “post-theory.” Deconstruction and Foucauldian cultural critique supposedly disenchanted us all with “meta-narratives”: the belief that any general explanatory system could account for our experience. Post-theorists are thus aficionados of the particular, the odd bits of lore to be picked up in archives, treasured for their qualitative singularity, and offered as evidence against the validity of general ideas. In this curious move, the post-theorists presuppose the validity of the “Theory” that they think they have left behind, and despite all their professions of non-theoretical antiquarianism, they do reach general conclusions, the same conclusions their elders reached more explicitly when announcing the Death of the Author, the all-pervasiveness of “discourse,” the tran-





scendent force of “power,” and the reduction of science to rhetoric and ideology.

In the move to post-theory, one grants the general validity of evolution, at least in its Gouldian forms, but also then declares that it is irrelevant, that it changes nothing, that it alters not one jot the way we would read this or that text or describe this or that historical cultural moment. Such particulars, we are to understand, even if they are in some remote way concordant with evolutionary theory, operate on such a rarefied level of “emergent” particularity that invoking evolution can have no more impact for us than affirming, without quite understanding it, Newton’s theory of gravity, or Einstein’s theory of general relativity. The only relevant categories, if we invoke any categories, are those of specific cultures. In reality, then, “post-theory” is just the latest incarnation of cultural constructivism. It avoids culturalist transcendentalism—the idea that culture is a first cause or unmoved mover—only by paying lip service to the reality of biology.

A hostility to general ideas is not the exclusive property of the post-theory people. It belongs as well to a certain brand of traditional humanistic thought. Among Dutton’s reviewers, the most explicit defense of traditional humanism comes from William Deresiewicz. Denouncing *The Art Instinct* in company with works by Brian Boyd, Jon Gottschall, and the present writer, Deresiewicz envisions a desolate future landscape in which all aesthetic responsiveness will have been replaced by ontologically vacant generalizations emitted by humanoid statisticians wearing white lab coats. Defending humanity against that dystopian future, he argues that literary study, unlike the social sciences, “is not concerned with large classes of phenomena of which individual cases are merely interchangeable and aggregable examples. It is concerned, precisely, with individual cases, and very few of them at that: the rare works of value that stand out from the heap of dross produced in every age” (30).

The idea that commentary on the arts concerns itself only with particular instances and not with general categories and large-scale themes is of course false. Humanists both number the streaks of the tulip and also try to understand the general properties of flowers. They characterize the particular qualities of individual works and also consider genres,

historical trends, common themes and forms, artistic traditions, and the relations among multiple works and historical conditions extending over decades or centuries. They register specific aesthetic qualities but at the same time try to increase the sum of valid general knowledge. The old opposition between the particular and qualitative on the one side and the general and impersonal on the other is a remnant of metaphysical dualism—the evolved cognitive bias toward dividing the world into inanimate physical things and animate agents (Slingerland). Physical things, the bias leads us to believe, can be measured, manipulated, reduced to elements, and explained by appeal to causal laws. Animate agents, in contrast, are spiritual beings, and it is the nature of spirit that it could never be reduced to its elements or explained by causal laws. It is a mystery that manifests itself in almost magical moments of poetic inspiration. In cognitive science, such moments are called *qualia*, and even in cognitive science, they are sometimes the objects of occult mystification.

Commentaries like those of Smee and Deresiewicz have no constructive intent and offer no substantive propositions that could be used for developing a full and adequate understanding of literature and the other arts. Their chief virtues are performative and rhetorical. As contributions to knowledge, they have at best a negative, symptomatic value. If they are useful at all, it is only to remind us of the challenges we face in constructing a progressive, comprehensive program of study.

#### THE COMPONENTS OF EVOLUTIONARY CRITIQUE

To generate adequate interpretive commentary from an evolutionary perspective, we must construct continuous explanatory sequences linking the highest level of causal explanation—inclusive fitness, the ultimate regulative principle of evolution—to particular features of human nature and to particular structures and effects in specific works of art. It is never enough to say, for instance, that people seek survival, sex, and status, or that artistic works depict people seeking those things. A comprehensively adequate interpretive account of a given work of art would take in, syntactically, its phenomenal effects (tone, style, theme, formal



organization), locate it in a cultural context, explain that cultural context as a particular organization of the elements of human nature within a specific set of environmental conditions (including cultural traditions), register the responses of readers, describe the socio-cultural, political, and psychological functions the work fulfills, locate those functions in relation to the evolved needs of human nature, and link the work comparatively with other artistic works, using a taxonomy of themes, formal elements, affective elements, and functions derived from a comprehensive model of human nature. Dutton understands all this, and he thus joins a cadre of advanced theorists that is still rather small. *The Art Instinct* should do a good deal to increase the size of that cadre.

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