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Art and Human Nature

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of human nature unavoidably implies the existence of nearly universal regularities across the human species—regularities, like language use, most probably explicable in terms of biology and evolutionary psychology. Thus, linking the arts to human nature implicitly promises to connect the arts to long-term, enduring, nearly universal features of the human frame. That is, if art is rooted in human nature, then it is a response, at least in part, to elements of our evolved cognitive, perceptual, and emotive architecture that are either necessary for social life, or conducive to it, or that are side-effects from features that are.

For some, this will sound scarcely exceptionable, since we are prone to say that virtually every known human culture has what we call arts, including narrative (oral and written), image-making, carving, whittling, sculpting, chanting, dance, song, decoration, acting, mime, and so on.¹ And inasmuch as this is a feature of human societies, exemplified across the species, we would expect to find that its explanation—like the explanation of our linguistic capacities—goes rather deep, to something inherent in human nature.

Although every known culture appears to possess art, it is improbable that this can be explained in terms of art's originating in a single location at one time and then being disseminated gradually therefrom. Rather, art seems to have sprung up independently in different locales and at different times, often apart from outside influences. But if the world-wide distribution of art cannot be explained by cultural diffusion, then the alternative that recommends itself is that art has its origins in something

common to humankind, something bred in the bone, so to speak.

The reasoning here is straightforward, namely, that the same global effect is apt to have the same cause. If that cause is not ultimately cultural diffusion from a single source, then we must look elsewhere—to enduring features of the human organism as it has evolved to engage recurring adaptive challenges.² Or, to put the matter more simply, we must look to human nature as at least part of the explanation of why we have art as we know it.

Moreover, it is not just the fact that we find art distributed globally that suggests a consideration of its evolutionary heritage. There is also the related phenomenon that people of different cultures are able to recognize, at rates that are hardly random, the products of other cultures as artworks. As Stephen Davies notes, "I am impressed by how accessible to Westerners is much sub-Saharan music, Chinese painting, and woven carpets from the Middle East."³ And the same sort of cross-cultural recognizability can be observed of non-Westerners in regard to our art; Western mass culture could not be so easily exported were it otherwise.

This, of course, is not to say that the citizens of disparate societies grasp the significance in their full cultural complexity of artworks from other societies. Rather, the point is that, to an arresting degree, Europeans can recognize a statue of Ganesha as an artwork without being able to know its symbolic import. Appreciating the meaning of such a figurine, needless to say, requires contextual or background knowledge of the sort that is available to the untutored Westerner only from a participant of the relevant culture, or by way of an anthropologist, or an art historian. Nevertheless, it remains a

striking fact that we can recognize—to a perhaps surprising extent—the artworks of other cultures, as other peoples can recognize ours, even where we are unable to decipher them or discern their historical significance.⁴ But how is this possible?

Again, a very attractive hypothesis is that we have an inbred capacity to detect the expressive behavior of our conspecifics as it is inscribed in the sensuous media of the traditional arts. We may not know what a tribal decoration means, but we know that, by means of it, its maker intends to communicate something special, something that is worth remarking on.⁵

Of course, it is not my contention that every artwork is recognizable as such by anyone from any culture. We would not predict that just anyone from anywhere could recognize many of Duchamp's readymades as artworks. Many from our own culture have been tripped up by these examples, though, it should be noted, that their manner of display ought to have given onlookers food for thought.

Still, to a rather surprising degree, the artworks of foreign societies are cross-culturally recognizable as artworks and that calls for explanation. And since the phenomenon is cross-cultural, and not readily explicable in terms of merely cultural diffusion, the invocation of human nature appears irresistible. Moreover, since this recognizability, where it occurs, seems most likely with what can be called the traditional arts, the suggestion that human nature plays an important role in our explanation here appears apposite, since the relevant, enduring features of our cognitive, perceptual, and emotive architecture were in place when the more traditional forms of art and expression emerged.

Nevertheless, despite the *prima facie* case that can be made that art has something to do with human nature—conceived of in terms of our enduring, evolved cognitive, perceptual, and emotive architecture—it is also true that for over two decades, researchers in the humanities have resisted universalizing modes of analysis, such as evolutionary psychology and cognitive science, preferring, almost exclusively, to historicize artistic phenomenon in the conviction that, as they say, “it’s culture all the way down.”

In contrast, in this essay I want to stress that biologically informed research and cultural-

historical research on the arts need not be seen as locked in a zero-sum struggle. Both kinds of research have important contributions to make to our understanding of art and aesthetic experience, not only in the sense that sometimes one of these perspectives is better suited than the other to explain certain aspects of the phenomena, but also in the sense that sometimes these perspectives can mutually inform one another. Indeed, I hope to show that in some cases psychology, including evolutionary psychology, may enrich historical explanations. In order to motivate this claim, I will try to indicate how aspects of the development of certain mass art forms, such as film and TV, can be fruitfully discussed psychologically in terms of the ways in which they address human nature.

II. THE CASE AGAINST HUMAN NATURE

Before attempting to substantiate the usefulness of discussing art in relation to human nature, it will perhaps be instructive to review briefly some of the reasons that specialists in the humanities have had for resisting this approach.⁶ Here my purpose is not to reject the many deep insights that cultural-historical approaches have yielded. Nor is it to urge that cultural approaches be supplanted across the board by ones informed by evolutionary psychology and cognitive science. Rather, my point is that cultural-historical approaches may be profitably supplemented, especially in the explanation of *certain* artistic phenomena, by talking about human nature.

Earlier I claimed that the appeal to human nature seems unobjectionable on the face of it, since it appears that almost every known culture possesses art. Undeniably, this art comes in many different forms. However, the diversity of art across different societies should no more discourage us from looking for a common cause here than the diversity of different languages deters us from attempting to locate the human capacity for language in our common human nature. That is, where we are dealing with cognate phenomena, it pays to look for a common cause.

But many in the humanities today are apt to question my first premise. They will deny that art is universal, thereby vitiating the grounds for an appeal to human nature. They may point out,

for example, that many cultures lack a word for “art” that is equivalent to our usage. However, this is not a very compelling consideration, since, though certain cultures do not have a word for “economics” in their vocabulary, this does not encourage us to think that the pertinent societies lack economies. Nor should the fact that art shows such astounding cross-cultural variation overly impress us, since, as already noted, the diversity of different languages does not lead us to suspect that the nearly universal capacity for language is not a biological endowment.

A perhaps more sophisticated way of denying that what we call art is universal, or nearly so, is to allege not that other cultures lack a word for art, but that they lack a concept for it, or, at least, that their concepts are so wildly different from the Western concept that they mark different phenomena. That is, once we recognize that the concepts that underwrite different artistic practices in different cultures are wildly non-converging, we will realize that the phenomena we boldly suppose belong to the same class—and for that reason, we say, call for the same explanation—are really only a series of disjunct practices, best explained culturally and historically with attention to local detail, rather than something global, like our purportedly common humanity.

For example, it might be said that what we call art is very different from what we find in many other societies. What we call art is putatively designed for disinterested contemplation, a source of pleasure divorced from the prospect of practical or utilitarian advantage, including social or religious benefit. This conception of art has been especially influential in Western culture since the eighteenth century, notably due to certain interpretations of the aesthetic theories of Immanuel Kant. However, this is not how the comparable expressive, decorative, and representational artifacts of many other cultures are regarded. For those cultures, the artifacts in question are often practical.

The designs on the shields of Sepik highlanders are intended to frighten off their enemies, not to invite them to savor their expressive design. Likewise, what we would regard as representations of the gods in many cultures are not representations in our sense—that is, statues that *stand for* the gods—but rather are taken to be the very gods themselves, incarnate in stone

or wood in whose presence worshipers avow their reverence and advance their desires. That we place these objects in our museums where we contemplate them in a supposedly disinterested manner is a matter of wresting these objects out of their cultural context and using them for our own purposes. It is a matter of projecting our concept of art onto artifacts that belong to an entirely different category altogether.

For, it is said, art in our sense is not universal. Indeed, art in our sense is parochial. It is historically specific, as are the ostensibly comparable practices of other cultures. Thus, there is not a single class of behaviors here that warrants an explanation in terms of generic human nature. There is rather a series of nonconverging practices best accounted for in light of the histories of the cultures in which they obtain.

Though admittedly seductive, this argument is not finally conclusive.⁷ For it rests upon identifying an arguably skewed concept of art as the canonical one in Western culture. Though there is a tradition that has been influential for just over two centuries in Western culture that identifies artworks as things designed for disinterested, nonutilitarian contemplation, this a controversial view. It is not universally endorsed, even in the relevant precincts of Western culture. It is a *theory* of our concept of art, often called “the aesthetic theory of art” or sometimes “aestheticism,” but it is a theory that many, specialists and nonspecialists alike, reject, even in Western culture. One reason for this rejection is the observation that this theory does not encompass all the objects and performances that *we* are prepared to categorize as art in our own culture. For even in our own culture, we are happy to classify works designed, intended, and used for their practical consequences as artworks.

For example, much Western art was created to serve religious and/or political purposes, rather than for the sake of disinterested contemplation. The stained glass windows of churches were originally, first and foremost, vehicles for teaching articles of faith and doctrine to the illiterate. So many war monuments and victory arches are intended to commemorate historic events and to remind the populace of their political heritage and civic responsibilities.⁸

That is, despite the cultural authority of the theory that art is an occasion for disinterested contemplation, the theory does not really track

even the way in which Westerners, as a group, actually categorize things as artworks. And when we look at how we in fact go about doing this, we notice far more correspondences between what other cultures count as artworks and what we do, which, of course, suggests that our prevailing, *de facto* concept of art is not as different from theirs as we have been asked to believe.

Like the Sepik highlanders, we too consider armor designed to intimidate and terrify the enemy to be art.⁹ And it should be noted that within our own tradition the notion of representation has not always been parsed in terms of something like the relation “x stands for y” (as in “the portrait of Wellington stands for Wellington”). We too find in our own heritage artworks where the operative notion of representation is better understood as akin to incarnation. It was, for example, believed that Byzantine icons put one in the presence of the saints, and, as well, one of the celebrants of the Eleusinian mysteries, from which Greek tragedy is descended, was thought to become the embodiment of Dionysus himself. Moreover, both these conceptions of certain types of representational art were, of course, in the service of larger purposes than art for art’s sake. Thus, once we cease to allow ourselves to be misled by the eighteenth-century theory that art is exclusively an affair of disinterested contemplation, we find that our operative conception of art coincides approximately to what we find elsewhere in other cultures.

In short, those who complain that other cultures do not share our concept of art and, therefore, that art, so-called, is not universal err because they take an impoverished view of what counts and has counted as art in Western culture. They have uncritically accepted a blinkered conception of art, hypostasizing it as *the* Western viewpoint, and this has led them to ignore the fact that many of things categorized as art within Western culture have unequivocal correlates in the supposedly incommensurable art of other cultures. The contention that Western art is essentially different in kind from the art of other cultures is fundamentally the result of not looking closely enough at what we count as the art of our own culture and of how we are prepared to count it. For once we look closely at the art of our own culture and that of others, it

seems that a great many of the relevant practices are universal, or nearly so.

This, of course, is not to say that every sort of art can be found transculturally; we do not expect to find conceptual art flourishing in tribal cultures. Nevertheless, there are certain very frequently recurring features in a great deal of what are called artworks across cultures, including their embodiment in a sensuous medium that calls for an imaginative response to their decorative, representational, emotive, and symbolic properties. Also, these things are typically the product of the application of skills, acquired from a tradition, and they address both feeling and cognition, often affording pleasure. Though there may be artworks that elude all these criteria, at the same time, things of this sort are to be found in every culture, and, to that extent, art is universal. Moreover, it is exactly this dimension of art that warrants being thought about in terms of human nature.

Another reason that contemporary representatives of the humanities resist talking about art and human nature is that they do not think that there is such a thing as an enduring human nature. Or, if they do, they believe that it is the nature of human life at any rate to be utterly plastic or malleable. From Hegel and Marx, they have inherited the idea that it is the nature of humankind to create itself through its practices, especially the practices through which humans secure their means of existence, notably their material existence. Moreover, as liberals, many humanists have learned to distrust the language of human nature, since it has often been invoked to resist social change, while talk of biological endowments gives them the shivers, because it raises the specter of racism. In order to stave off these undesirable political consequences, they are disposed to regard humans as open to the permanent possibility of improvement.

It is hard not to be sympathetic to these very humane concerns. However, it is not clear that these legitimate worries mandate a complete blackout of reference to human nature and obliviousness to cognitive science and psychology. With regard to the discussion of art and our biological endowment that I have broached, the issue of racism does not arise, since I am talking about universal or nearly universal features across the *entire* human species, and not about

invidious contrasts between different racial groupings.

Furthermore, though talk of human nature is always worthy of suspicion for its potential reactionary bias, it does not seem realistic for people committed to improving social conditions to ignore the possibility that the space in which they operate may be constrained by our biological make-up. Surely, in designing public policy with regard to social problems, like obesity, it is more socially enlightened to realize that many are afflicted with this disability because natural selection, in certain locales, favored those who were capable of storing large amounts of fats and sugars, rather than thinking it to be simply an issue to be solved by counseling, motivation, and willpower.

We are bodies, and our bodies were shaped by an evolutionary history in response to environments often very different from the ones presently inhabited in the industrial world. Much of our cognitive, perceptual, and emotional make-up, including our associative dispositions, are legacies of that process. Hegel and Marx were correct in observing that, in large measure, humans create themselves through their cultural and material practices, but we do not start from nowhere; we are not empty receptacles; we come onto the scene with certain biological endowments. (It is certainly a great irony that contemporary “cultural materialists” in the humanities—who relish speaking of the “body” metaphorically—seem to have a genuine aversion to talking about the actual bodies produced by natural selection.)

There is a diversity of cultures because we bring our endowments, our biological resources, to diverse environmental challenges, and because these initial differences themselves then generate diverse histories. But cultural diversity does not entail the utter plasticity of the human frame, since that variation occurs within the parameters of possibility set by our biological make-up—which includes the evolved cognitive, perceptual, and emotive hardware that we share cross-culturally. This is not a plea for political conservatism, but only a reminder that the emancipatory projects we pursue need to be adjusted to the human materials we hope to improve.

It is not “culture all the way down” then, because the living, human stuff from which culture is, in part, woven is a product of the

evolutionary process of natural selection, which invests us with a certain cognitive, perceptual, and emotive architecture. That this is so is especially significant in coming to understand important features of art and aesthetic experience. For much art, especially of the traditional, transcultural variety, addresses our evolved sensibilities, feelings, emotions, and perceptual faculties in a fairly direct manner, while also depending on activating relatively basic cognitive and imaginative capabilities, such as the ability to follow narratives and to entertain fictions.

Art involves more than this, of course, and much of that “more” may be best explained in light of cultural history. But that art addresses these transculturally distributed human powers as well, in fairly straightforward and important ways, indicates that we would be remiss in neglecting the contribution that thinking about human nature can make to our understanding of art and aesthetic experience.

III. ART AND EVOLUTION

So far the discussion has been extremely abstract. I have been trying to defend the plausibility of thinking of art, or, at least, of some art, in terms of human nature. But apart from defending this as a conceptual possibility, I have not given the reader much reason to think that this is a promising line of inquiry. Let me try to do that in two ways: first by suggesting how certain of the recurring features of art as we know it may serve universal adaptive purposes that account for the emergence and continuance of art; and second by showing how certain forms of historically specific art, such as film and TV, have become mass art forms because of the ways in which they engage our evolved cognitive, perceptual, and emotive architecture.¹⁰

Though there is a tradition that holds that art and aesthetic experiences are only valuable for their own sakes, this is open to dispute on at least two fronts. On the one hand, as a matter of fact, the arts seem to have emerged primarily from unquestionably purposeful cultural practices, such as religion, ritual, the transmission of social and political values and mores, the reinforcement of cultural identities, the reproduction of

social relations, and world views, the dissemination of ideas and understanding, the mobilization of sentiment, and so forth. On the other hand, for millennia, people transculturally have invested a great deal of time and energy in producing and consuming art, often making genuine sacrifices to do so; it is difficult to explain adequately why this could be the case were art only valuable for art's sake.

That is, art taxes human resources. One wonders how societies, especially where life is arduous, can afford to pay the price, if art really has no adaptive benefits.¹¹ Were that truly so, would not we expect to find history littered with cases of societies swept away because they had too much art? Of course, it could be just dumb luck that societies that have lavished sizeable subsidies on artistic activities have never been called upon to pay the piper. But, given the extent of the investment by so many societies over so much history, that would be an amazing run of good luck.

At the same time, the notion that art is valuable simply for its own sake does not provide a very satisfactory explanation for its emergence and continuance. The idea that art and aesthetic experience are valuable for their own sakes does not fit neatly within our best theoretical frameworks for understanding nature, including human nature. That art could be a universal or nearly universal feature of human societies but afford no adaptive advantages would be a mystery. It would be as if art were not at all part of the rest of the mechanism, a wheel that neither turned anything else nor was turned by anything else. To say that art is only valuable for its own sake sounds less like an explanation than a confession of ignorance.

Furthermore, it is unlikely that the universal or nearly universal distribution of art across time and place can be explained in virtue of its diffusion from a single source. Artistic practices appear to have sprung up independently in isolated societies where the possibility of outside cultural communication seems remote. Thus, it is natural to hypothesize that in all likelihood the appearance of artistic practices across the board negotiates certain recurring human exigencies. What could that involve? Here are some speculations.

One generalization that is uncontroversial is that art and aesthetic experience have something to do with feeling, at least in an astronomically

large number of cases. Much art, in other words, addresses feelings. Moreover, the feelings engendered by artworks are very frequently shared by audiences.¹² That is, art standardly elicits converging feelings among viewers, listeners, and readers.

Sitting in a theater, in the best of cases, we all laugh at the same time, for roughly the same reasons. Sitting in a concert hall, the audience anticipates the crescendo at approximately the same rate of expectation and then thrills to its arrival all at once. The flight of the ballerina makes us simultaneously forget the pull of gravity momentarily, and, even when reading a novel at home alone, we generally do so with the confidence that others will weep at the same parts we do.

Artworks, in this respect, coordinate feelings; they attune audience members to each other. In this regard, one might say, along with Tolstoy, that artworks cultivate fellow-feeling; artworks have the power to build communities of sentiment in their audiences and/or participants. In this, artworks have the capacity—at a fairly elemental level—to promote cohesion among groups.¹³ Among other ways, they do this by engendering cognate feelings amongst spectators in response to the same subject, which may be of especial cultural, political, or religious significance. But even where the subject is not of the utmost importance, the social cohesiveness borne of fellow feeling is still functional. It still supplies social cement.

Quite clearly this is an aspect of the aesthetic experience of artworks of value to any human group. Furthermore, it is a potential that we see exploited everywhere—people bound together in feeling by religious ritual, images, and architecture, by folk songs, patriotic songs, and even by the songs of their youth; people bonded together in movement in national and ethnic dances, and often, quite literally, marching to the same drummer, perhaps around the same commemorative monument; and also there are the people gathered together to hear or to see the same stories and to share common feelings with regard to their cultic origins (Indian villagers gathered to hear the *Ramayana*) or to the plight of contemporary society (e.g., us viewing a performance by the San Francisco Mime Troupe or maybe an evening of *West Wing* or *Law and Order*).

Not all art does these things, but so much of it does that it is difficult to think that this is not

one of the reasons that art is universal, since every society benefits from social cohesion.¹⁴ Art, of course, can also promote dissension and cohesion simultaneously—pitting one group against another. However, from inside the relevant groups, the capacity of art to quicken the social glue of fellow feeling is an advantage that has no obvious substitute. Art is a lever on human nature that enhances sociability. If humans are social beings, it is, in part, because art is conducive to this. And insofar as art promotes social cohesion, it has adaptive value. Nor is this an advantage that belongs only to the group, since it is also an advantage to individuals enfolded emotionally in social entities.

Though art is not universally expressive, the possession of expressive properties and the appreciation thereof is a feature of art across cultures. Expressive properties are the anthropomorphic qualities that we attribute to artworks when we say that the music is sad or that the architecture is majestic. They are the human profiles we find in artworks that remind us of emotive states, like joyfulness, or character traits, like nobility. Detecting properties like these occupies a large part of our traffic with artworks. We work hard at trying to discern the plaintiveness of the dancer's gesture or the ire in the actor's voice.

But if this is so, then it seems reasonable to suppose that artworks enable us to refine and enhance our sensitivities for discriminating the emotive states of our conspecifics, which, among other things, is advantageous to us, since scoping out the emotive states of others is a living necessity for social beings such as ourselves. Likewise, many artworks call for interpretations, thereby exercising our abilities for deciphering the intentions of others, which is a related skill for conducting human affairs. Art, in short, is one of the most important cultural sites we have for training our powers for detecting the emotions and intentions of others. And in this regard it would appear to be unquestionably adaptive. For "mind-reading" is the cornerstone of human sociability—one modeled and refined by artworks.

In addition, much art addresses the imagination. This is no more apparent than in the practice of fiction, which receives its fullest elaboration in the realm of art. From the earliest stories that we hear as children, art teaches us to think counterfactually—to think of how things

might be otherwise than they are. Our capacity to imagine is, of course, an inestimably valuable adaptive asset.¹⁵ It enables us to plan, to envision alternatives, to take heed of warnings of dangers not immediately at hand, to run in our minds, so to speak, cost-free trials of future events, and to configure chains of events into meaningful wholes.¹⁶ The practice of fiction, especially narrative fiction, augments the range of our imaginative powers, including, notably, our capacity for empathy—the imaginative understanding of others—which like the ability to detect the emotions and intentions of our conspecifics is an aspect of mind-reading that is indispensable for virtually every sort of human intercourse.

Undoubtedly, there are more ways than these that art serves the exigencies of human nature.¹⁷ But mention of these selected few should at least lend succor to the hypothesis that there is a connection between art and human nature that can begin to limn the reasons why art is universal. For these are the kinds of reasons we would have had, were we cosmic engineers, for designing human life in such a way that art is a component of virtually every human culture. By reverse engineering, that is, we may postulate that these are the kinds of factors that abetted the survival of societies with art through the blind processes of natural selection.

Of course, evolutionary scenarios, like the ones canvassed above, often provoke the worry that they are "just-so" stories, unconstrained by any canons of proof. In order to ensure that one has not simply concocted a just-so story or a whole series of them, some, like Elliott Sober, have suggested that for any instance where one claims that such and such an attribute is adaptive for a group, one should be able to point to a contrasting group that lacks the attribute in question and that did not survive.¹⁸ I am not persuaded that we always need to find such a contrasting group in order for an evolutionary hypothesis to be satisfactory. Is not common sense enough to assure us that an organism's faster speed relative to all the available predators is a naturally selected adaptation? And might not the same be said with respect to the features of artistic and aesthetic experience that foster social cohesion? That is, is it not, analogously, pretty much a no-brainer?

However, if a skeptic rejects this appeal as too facile, we might nevertheless be able to

satisfy him or her by producing the desired contrast-group. Cro-Magnon peoples possessed art; the Neanderthals, it appears, did not. Neanderthal social units were small, whereas Cro-Magnon social units were much larger, enabling Cro-Magnons to engage in more ambitious economic activities and a greater scale of warfare. Whether by more effectively exploiting the environment or by conflict, the Cro-Magnons bested the Neanderthals in the competition for survival. Cro-Magnon social organization was undoubtedly an important ingredient in how this came about. Insofar as the experience of art contributes to social cohesion, as conjectured above, it is probably an evolutionary plus, permitting, as it would, more extensive social organization. Consequently, the anxiety that ours is merely a just-so story may be alleviated somewhat by pointing to the contrasting case of the Neanderthals who do not appear to have had the advantage of the aesthetic experience of artworks and who, therefore, lacked an important means for fostering and expanding social cohesion.¹⁹

Needless to say, to postulate the operation of such factors does not conclusively prove their relevance to the emergence and continued existence of art, though it does alert us to the kinds of things that we need to think about confirming or disconfirming in arriving at an explanation of art—its emergence and its persistence on a global or nearly universal scale.

Art celebrates human powers. We all move, but dancers test the limits of human movement possibilities.²⁰ We all speak, but poets and dramatists refine verbal communication exponentially. We are interested in artists because they show us things about what we all do at higher levels of accomplishment and, by doing so, they inspire us to do better, thereby enhancing our capacities for expression, communication, representation, and signification²¹ (talents, all of which contribute to more effective sociality). The exemplary feats that artists perform undoubtedly occur in culturally specific contexts, but it is important not to lose sight of the fact that these cultural variations are rooted at base in recurring human exigencies, albeit modified, as responses to concrete and diverse situations and environments.

Possibly all this talk of human nature and natural selection in relation to art will sound too

deterministic for some. In contrast, it may be urged that the great diversity of art and art forms across cultures and within cultures attests to art's freedom. Indeed, in our own culture, art is often taken as the very emblem of freedom. Nevertheless, the link between art and human nature is consistent with the cultural diversity of art, since that diversity is a matter of so many local responses, culturally specific responses, to the enduring, regularly recurring claims of human life on organisms like us, including the benefits of social bonding, planning, and mutual understanding, both cognitive and emotive.

Different cultures, responding from different contexts, including the availability of different materials, arrive at different artistic adaptations, just as they evolve different ethos and world views, which, moreover, are often—to an important extent—conveyed by art. In fact, perhaps nothing transmits cultural values better than art, for inasmuch as art may engage feeling, emotion, perception, imagination, and cognition all at once, it encodes, so to say, cultural information redundantly across a number of faculties, thereby embedding it more deeply in memory and making it more readily available for retrieval than it would otherwise be. Thus, it is the way in which art engages our cognitive, emotive, and perceptual architecture—our human nature—that makes it so serviceable for culture. This is the reason why art is the preferred currency for dispensing the shared understandings of a society. Nothing else is as effective in inculcating the individual in the byways and main thoroughfares of his or her folk. Culture, art, and human nature, in consequence, are indissolubly intertwined and will continue to be, unless and until evolution takes a radically unexpected turn.

IV. MASS ART AND HUMAN NATURE

The considerations advanced so far suggest that human nature may have something to tell us about why art has emerged and taken root cross-culturally. However, it may be thought that once art becomes a going concern, human nature has nothing else to add to the story. Societies may have and sustain artistic activities for some of the reasons given, but understanding the inner workings of those activities once they

are in play is a matter of cultural history, not natural history. There is little cause to refer further to human nature—to our enduring cognitive, perceptual, and emotive architecture. Art history and cultural studies rather than cognitive science and psychology are all we know and all we need to know.

This may be in large measure true. Nevertheless, although art is primarily a cultural affair, aspects of its history may still be elucidated by reference to human nature and the disciplines that study it. For the specific, historically motivated projects that a culture elects for artistic development may succeed exactly because they *exploit*, and not merely presuppose, some of the cognitive, perceptual, and emotive capacities bequeathed to us by human nature. That is, at specific historical junctures, artists may turn to human nature to find solutions to their problems. In order to evaluate this conjecture, let us take a brief look at film and TV.

These art forms were not destined to arise by a process of natural selection. They emerged at specific points in history, due to social processes, such as urbanization (and then suburbanization), in order to perform a social function, the entertainment of large numbers of disparate people, often with very different cultural backgrounds. That is, history supplied the opportunity—large numbers of people with growing amounts of leisure time in search of aesthetic amusement. The problem was how to exploit this opportunity. Film, which later passed its achievements on to TV, was one solution to the problem. Moreover, its solution, along with the historically contingent discovery of the requisite technologies, to a surprising degree, involved taking advantage of our cognitive, perceptual, and emotive make-up.²²

One way to appreciate this is to recall that the basic symbol in film and TV is the moving image. Though a symbol, the moving image is not the sort of symbol upon which semiologists dote; its relation to what it is a picture of is not arbitrary. The word ‘dog’ is arbitrarily correlated with dogs. But a picture of a dog, say, Lassie, is the result of a causal process in which Lassie actually pranced before a camera, and, more importantly for our purposes, the moving picture of Lassie will be recognized as an image of a dog by any sighted human being familiar with dogs. That is, anyone capable of recogniz-

ing a dog in, as they say, “real life,” will be able to identify a moving image of a dog.

There are at least two reasons to believe this. The first is that children not raised with pictures are able to recognize what pictures are pictures of at rates well above random without prior training. This indicates that whatever hard-wired perceptual capacities are engaged in object recognition are also engaged in picture recognition, including moving picture recognition. And second, moving pictures are understood cross-culturally with amazing alacrity, at least in terms of people’s ability to comprehend at the level of the recognition of what is represented, the basic symbols of the art form, that is, the moving images. Unlike language, the basic symbols in film and TV do not require a protracted process of learning in order to decode or decipher them. We simply look at a picture of a bearded man, and we recognize what it is a picture of without any subtending processes of inferring, translating, decoding, or deciphering. Moving pictures access our natural recognitional capacities, capacities shared across the species, and this is one reason that they are able to engage mass audiences around the world, audiences often lacking common cultural backgrounds and any special training in how to determine what a moving image is an image of.²³

This is a simple fact, but it is important not to underestimate its significance. The moving image is the sine qua non of film and TV as we know them. It is the fundamental symbol in these art forms. That it operates on innate recognitional capacities implies that, at a certain level of comprehensibility, these art forms are accessible to nearly everyone without background training. Thus, though the project of engaging mass audiences was a historically specific one, its success, to a significant degree, relied upon capitalizing on nearly universal cognitive and perceptual features of human nature of the sort best elucidated by cognitive/perceptual psychology. Had film and TV been used only to project words, rather than pictures, they would not have succeeded as mass art forms on a global scale. Nor is this merely a fanciful, cooked-up counterfactual, since part of the technology that would become television was developed with the intention to communicate information across the Atlantic Ocean by

wire.²⁴ Had film and TV developed simply as delivery systems for script, their aesthetic best would have been as some sort of language-bound literary art. But, in fact, they were able to travel cross-culturally, to the extent that they do, in large measure because they tap into our common human nature.

Moreover, a related aspect of the success of motion-picture communication has to do with the fact that not only are we able to recognize automatically the objects moving pictures portray; from infancy, we are also able especially to recognize human faces *and* the basic emotions they express, including (most probably): enjoyment/joy, surprise/startle, distress/anguish, disgust/contempt, anger/rage, shame/humiliation, and fear/terror.²⁵ This nearly universal, evolved capacity is, of course, extremely adaptive, as it enables us to derive information from and about our conspecifics. But also, to a large extent, a striking amount of the basic information that we derive about the characters in moving-picture narratives is communicated facially. This is why the close-up (of faces) and point-of-view editing are such staples of film and TV.²⁶ We know that the gun shown in the first shot is threatening, even without further narrative contextualization, because it is coupled with a close-up of someone's terrified visage—rather than with the face of one of those folks who laugh at danger. We know that one character has said something very stupid, even if this is not immediately obvious, because there is a reaction shot of someone else looking contemptuous.

As early as the 1920s, the film theoretician Béla Bélasz announced the centrality of the face to film communication, claiming that, through the close-up of the face, the new medium afforded special access to the soul. But, of course, it did not take an explicit theory to alert filmmakers to the power of facial close-ups. They had already discovered that in the previous decade, perfecting the point-of-view shot, the reaction-shot, and the glamour close-up to a degree that the passage of decades has added little to what was already available, formally speaking, in the period of silent filmmaking whence these devices continue to impart indispensable narrative information about what characters are feeling and that sometimes even facilitate empathy with them. Moreover, the facial close-up remains essential to television

and not simply because the talking-head fits so neatly into the box (after all, the box is getting bigger and flatter), but because the way in which natural selection has designed the human frame, as has been revealed by contemporary psychological research, makes the human face one of our greatest sources of information about others—indeed, sometimes a source that we value over the spoken word when we mobilize our capacities to track the telltale signs of lying as manifested by dissembling conspecifics.

There are, of course, many debates among psychologists about precisely what is involved in our attributions of emotional states on the basis of facial displays.²⁷ Are such displays best understood as a means of social communication or as eruptive expressions of fundamental emotions?²⁸ Which emotional facial expressions are recognized nearly universally and which are merely very pervasively identified, and, if so, at what frequency? At this stage, far more research is needed. However, there does seem to be consensus that some facial displays of emotion elicit nearly universal attributions. This, of course, allows that certain emotional displays are culturally idiosyncratic—it is said the Chinese stick their tongues out when surprised—while others are generic: the disgust reaction, for example, would appear rooted in a physiological strategy for rejecting offending smells and tastes. Moreover, it is the emotional displays on the generic side of the ledger that the mass arts gravitate toward—such as fear, elation, sadness, anger, surprise, lust, and so on.²⁹ This is the stuff upon which mass art thrives, as a quick review of the most popular motion picture genres attests. Moving-image mass art is able to convey, to a significant degree, this emotional information so effectively to large and diverse audiences of heterogeneous backgrounds because of its reliance on close-ups of faces, something that within a certain range of emotional expressions, ones particularly germane to the territory mass art cultivates, audiences can comprehend in large part by dint of their innate biological equipment.

This is not to say that filmmakers realized the close-up would secure uptake in the way it does because they held a certain theory. They tried it and it worked, and it worked because many of the emotions that mass art motion pictures represent are identifiable by viewers transculturally

as a consequence of evolutionary processes of natural selection that favored the humans biologically prepared to suss out automatically conspecifics along certain emotional dimensions. In this regard, the people who popularized the close-up of faces for motion pictures were intuitive experimentalists. And their experiment paid off by augmenting the reach of visual mass narration because of the way in which it intersected felicitously with our biological make-up. So, once again, we see that, to a perhaps unexpected extent, a rather fundamental level of communication in film and TV transpires by activating elements of our innate cognitive, perceptual, and emotional equipage. And, furthermore, to a significant degree, it is because these media, in terms of their very structure, engage our shared human nature, that they have become the dominant mass art forms of the twentieth century, and now the twenty-first. They are able to elicit mass uptake, in large measure, just because they trigger evolved capacities.

Of course, what has been said so far is hardly the whole story of what is involved in understanding film and TV. And much of the rest of that story requires close attention to culture and history. But the point that I wish to underline now is that human nature is also part of that story. I have indicated two ways in which it might figure in an account of the rise and dissemination of film and TV; there are others that could be discussed. But, in any event, this much should be clear: though art has a history and though it is probably through studying that history, and the pertinent cultural contexts, that we come to most of our deepest understandings of art, this does not preclude the possibility that, in certain cases, human nature and natural history, as studied by naturalistic disciplines like cognitive science and psychology, may also afford insight into art. The reason for this, as our brief look at some of the fundamental structures of film and TV indicates, is that sometimes historically and culturally specific projects succeed by mobilizing components of our evolved cognitive, perceptual, and emotive architecture.

V. CONCLUSION

Though for over two decades there has been a de facto moratorium in the humanities regard-

ing the relation of art to human nature, it is time to break the silence. Adverting to human nature is not the answer to every question we have about art—maybe it is not the answer to most, or even to most of the important ones. But it is not a resource that should be neglected altogether. It is unlikely that the story of art is art history all the way down. Explanations of the emergence and continued robust existence of art may profit from evolutionary considerations. And, sometimes, the history of art, as the cases of film and TV suggest, could be amplified by noticing the ways in which culturally and historically specific artistic problems may be successfully addressed by activating our nearly universal, evolved, cognitive, perceptual, and emotive capacities. That is, sometimes art history and human psychology may work hand in hand; art history may tell us what to look for, and then psychology may help us find it. It is time for the two cultures—the humanities and the sciences—to come together.³⁰ And there may be no better meeting place than the topic of art and human nature.³¹

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1. Stephen Davies, "Non-Western Art and Art's Definition" in *Theories of Art Today*, ed. Noël Carroll (University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), p.199.

2. Of course, even if art was diffused culturally from several different *independently* arising sources, the resort to evolutionary explanations would still recommend itself.

3. Davies, "Non-Western Art and Art's Definition," p. 199.

4. It may be said that some cultures have no concept of art and, therefore, their members will not be able to recognize our artifacts as artworks. The view that some cultures have no concept of art is usually advanced where it is said that they do not have *our* concept of art. I will deal with this objection shortly. Where it is alleged that cultures lack any concept of art whatsoever, I speculate that they will nevertheless be able to recognize matchings between much traditional Western art and the products of comparable practices of representation, decoration, and expression in their own societies. This, of course, is a speculative response. We will need actual empirical studies here if indeed there are cultures without anything remotely akin to the sorts of globally recurrent concepts of art limned by Davies and Dutton.

5. Ellen Dissanayake, *Homo Aestheticus* (New York: Free Press, 1992), chap. 13.

6. In this essay I am concerned with the rejection of human nature by academics in the humanities. Resistance to the notion of human nature in the social sciences has been

documented and attacked by: Leda Cosmides, John Tooby, and Jerome H. Barkow in "Introduction: Evolutionary Psychology and Conceptual Integration," in *The Adapted Mind: Evolutionary Psychology and the Generation of Culture*, ed. Jerome H. Barkow, Leda Cosmides, and John Tooby (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 3–15; and Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (New York: Viking, 2002).

7. Both in setting out and refuting the arguments about the nearly universal reach of the concept of art, I have benefited greatly from Denis Dutton's "But They Don't Have Our Concept of Art" in Davies's *Theories of Art Today*, pp. 217–238.

8. See Noël Carroll, "Art and Recollection," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* (forthcoming).

9. Some might argue that in our culture if the armor in question were designed solely with the intention to intimidate the enemy, we would not count it as art. However, I think that if it were a truly frightening expression of menace—which presumably is the means by which it terrifies the enemy—then we would count it as art. Certainly, skilled, intentional expression is a characteristic and prevailing purpose of art in our culture.

10. Which, in turn, makes them ripe for naturalistic analysis in terms of cognitive science and psychology.

11. The proposition that art has no adaptive benefits, of course, becomes even more curious once one recalls that many of the animating functions of art listed above, such as the reinforcement of cultural identities, are still operating at full throttle after thousands of years.

12. Ellen Dissanayake, *Art and Intimacy: How the Arts Begin* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000).

13. *Ibid.*

14. In this regard, it is interesting to consider the relation of art to religion. Many early religions derive their identity through ritual rather than theology. Religions that are ritual rather than theological obviously serve to coordinate their followers—quite literally they do the same things and are, consequently, apt to share the kinds of feelings the relevant rituals are designed to promote, often through the deployment of artistic processes like representation, figuration, expression, emotional arousal, enactment, song, music, dance, and so on. Especially where the artistic dimension of the ritual is participatory, shared feelings are predictable. But even where rituals are observed by audiences, the common effect on them can still be quite strong. In this way, ritual religions and religious rituals contribute to social cohesiveness. It is probable that artistic processes both as originally components of religious rituals and then descendants of ritual discharged, still continue to perform the generative functions of ritual.

15. Though skeptical of the adaptive value of art in general, Steven Pinker appears to concede that narrative fiction has adaptive benefits. He regards the consumption of such fictions as a training regime whereby we familiarize ourselves about what to do and what not to do in myriad life situations. Just as a chess player studies the scenarios of a great many games in order to gain knowledge about what works and does not work in a wealth of concrete board situations that he has not yet encountered but may, so we consume fictions in order to store up a repertoire of possible moves and countermoves for the game of life and, in the process, refine our understanding of how to maneuver in

diverse social and personal circumstances. We read *bildungsromans*, for instance, in order to garner a sense of how lives might go. Perhaps the notion that narratives provide a way of mulling over responses to life situations finds support in the activity of early Greek choruses who comment by drawing multiple comparisons between the circumstances of central characters and parallel cases from the lives of the gods. What seems to be going on is the development of a catalogue of recurring situations along with information about reactions to them; these detail-sensitive scenarios can then be stored for possible future use. Narratives (written and spoken) might, in this regard, be thought of as virtual conversations—virtual information transfers—about problems, situations, and strategy. For Pinker on narrative fiction, see his *How the Mind Works* (New York: Norton, 1997), pp. 538–543.

16. This last item, configuring chains of events and states of affairs into wholes, is the capacity to make narratives, which, of course, is logically independent from the capacity for fiction, even though many of the most important cultural narratives are fictional. As well, the kind of imaginative activity required by narrative per se and that required by fiction—both in terms of production and reception—differ. One is the power to construct or to configure wholes, the other to suppose counterfactually. Nevertheless, both tend to find their most elaborate and best-known manifestations in artworks and, for this reason, art may be designated a primary tutor of both sorts of imagination, each of which brings with it its own adaptive advantages.

17. Though I have been emphasizing the adaptive value for social existence of artworks and the experience thereof, it should also be noted that significant benefits may accrue to the individual as well. By exercising certain of our powers of perception, association, comparison, contrast, and so on, interacting with artworks enhances cognitive fitness by tuning our organizational powers. Characteristic experiences of art help develop the mind's capacities for organization and discrimination, while also sharpening and refining them. See John Tooby and Leda Cosmides, "Does Beauty Build Adapted Minds? Toward an Evolutionary Theory of Aesthetics, Fiction and the Arts," *SubStance* 30 (2001): 6–27.

18. S. Orzack and E. Sober, "Adaptation, Phylogenetic Inertia, and the Method of Controlled Comparisons," in *Adaptationism and Optimality*, ed. by S. Orzack and E. Sober (Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 45–63; and E. Sober, "Intelligent Design and Probability Reasoning," *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 52 (2002): 65–80.

19. The information about Neanderthal and Cro-Magnon social organization and art is derived from Steven Mithen, *The Prehistory of the Mind: The Cognitive Origins of Art and Science* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990). Marshaling that information so as to claim that art and aesthetic experience can be seen—by contrasting the Neanderthals and the Cro-Magnons—to be an evolutionary bonus is my own doing.

20. Alan Lomax has hypothesized that the dance movement of a given culture is actually a celebration of the kinds of work-movements that are essential for the material existence of a society. Fancy stepping, for example, correlates with agricultural cultures that demand swiftness and dexterity moving through furrowed fields. And so on. In this

regard, virtuoso dancers would be exemplary movers with respect to culturally exemplary movements of a sort engaged by most of the workers in a particular society. See Lomax's film *Dance and Human History*.

21. Paul Hernadi, "Literature and Evolution," *SubStance* 30 (2001): 56.

22. Noël Carroll, *Philosophy of Mass Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), chap. 3.

23. Noël Carroll, "The Power of Movies" in *Theorizing the Moving Image* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

24. David E. Fisher and Marshall Jon Fisher, *Tube: The Invention of Television* (Washington, DC: Counterpoint, 1996), chap. 1.

25. Paul Ekman, *Emotions Revealed: Recognizing Faces and Feelings to Improve Communication and Emotional Life* (New York: Times Books and Henry Holt and Company, 2003), chap. 1.

26. See Noël Carroll, "Film, Attention, and Communication: A Naturalistic Perspective" in *Engaging the Moving Image* (Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 10–58; and Carl Plantinga, "The Scene of Empathy and the Human Face on Film" in *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion*, ed. Carl Plantinga and Gregg M. Smith (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), pp. 239–255.

27. James A. Russell, "Is There Universal Recognition of Emotion from Facial Expression? A Review of the Cross-Cultural Studies," in *Human Facial Expression: An Evolutionary View*, ed. Alan J. Fridlund (San Diego: Academic Press, 1994), chap. 10.

28. Alan J. Fridlund, "Epilogue," in *Human Facial Expression*, p. 316. Fridlund, pace Ekman, favors the social communication model. But either perspective is compatible with what we wish to say, since we are postulating a hard-wired *recognition* capacity; whether it is detecting messages or symptoms or a combination of the two is really irrelevant to the point we are trying to make.

29. Furthermore, the fact that converging, cross-cultural responses to the pertinent emotional displays grows statistically when the photos of the faces in question are posed, strengthens rather than weakens our claim of the relevance of this capacity for mass market motion pictures, since the close-ups in the vast majority of films and TV programs are posed.

30. A similar sentiment is shared by Denis Dutton in his "Let's Naturalize Aesthetics," *ASA Newsletter* 23 (Summer, 2003): 1–2.

31. I would like to thank Elliott Sober, Jerrold Levinson, and the audiences at St. Norbert's College and Wayne State University for their helpful comments in response to this paper. Of course, only the author is responsible for any errors herein.