

Æsthetic Effects and Determinism

Ronald Shusterman*

Université Jean Monnet — Saint-Étienne

ABSTRACT. Several new schools of æsthetics connect art to materialism, formalism, and to some sort of natural or physiological determinism. One approach, based on evolutionary theory, tries to show that art as we know it is the product of natural selection. A second approach, more specifically cognitivist and neurological, attempts to link the arts to universal features of the brain. Behind both of these related approaches, one will perceive the conviction that art is based on some undeniable foundation of human nature. To base art on such a foundation would be to eliminate, once and for all, the hermeneutic and axiological chaos in which we live — or so one surmises upon reading some of these authors. Can the artist simply rely on brain structure and evolution to produce some magical effect? Can we as readers and spectators be satisfied with this sort of automatic process? What are the limits of this materialism of effect? My goal is to underline the dangers of any radical materialism or determinism in art.

1. Power of the Material Effect

The vogue of the “iconotext”, or more generally, our current interest in intersemioticity — both in theory and practice — may be directly linked to a vaguely felt need to increase the material and automatic effect of art, and especially of literary art. One of the reasons for reinforcing the word-image relationship may indeed have been to increase the material dimension of literary art, and thus to augment its power. However, an æsthetics of the effect can swiftly become an æsthetics of determinism, and I will argue here that, though the material dimension that is thus emphasised does

* Email: ronald.shusterman@orange.fr

increase the power of art, the conclusions and procedures of any strict aesthetic determinism are a dead-end for both practice and theory.

On the other hand, I have also often protested against what I call the *tyranny of reference*, the obsession with narrative and figurative “content” that dominates both art and theory. By constantly alluding to artists such as Anish Kapoor or Olafur Eliasson, I have myself tried to show that much art has more to do with *effect* than with content or reference. Eliasson’s famous slogan — “See yourself sensing” — is an attempt to put representation aside, to get the spectator to forget about *historia* and to concentrate on the percept itself. We need, however, to situate this emphasis on effect and percept in the context of several new schools of thought that connect art to materialism, formalism, and to some sort of natural or physiological determinism. One approach, based on evolutionary theory and represented by Denis Dutton and Ellen Dissayanake, tries to show that art as we know it is the product of natural selection. In their view, artistic practice is regulated by inalterable laws and necessities, and one could thus say that the strengthening of the word-image relationship is just an application of these laws. A second approach, more specifically cognitivist and neurological, attempts to link the arts to universal features of the brain. Contemporary specialists such as Barbara Stafford take up where thinkers like Rudolf Arnheim left off in order to show how art must obey certain perceptual and cognitive laws. Behind both of these related approaches, one will find the same implicit or explicit rejection of relativism; one will perceive the conviction that art is based on some undeniable foundation of human nature. To base art on such a foundation would be to eliminate, once and for all, the hermeneutic and axiological chaos in which we live — or so one surmises upon reading some of these authors.

Can the artist simply rely on brain structure and evolution to produce some magical effect? Can we as readers and spectators be satisfied with this sort of automatic process? What are the limits of this materialism of effect? Without abandoning my critique of the tyranny of reference, I would like to underline here the dangers of any radical materialism or determinism in art.

2. *See Yourself Sensing..*

In the early 20th century, a new science of experimental psychology thought it would soon be able to analyse causality and define all mental structures; it was confident in its power to *reduce*, to *naturalise* and to *translate* all mental phenomena into physical and material terms. As an artist, Olafur Eliasson is very interested in causality and perception, but one cannot accuse him of leaning towards materialism. On the contrary, in both his practice and his writings, he is more of a phenomenologist:

I first became interested in phenomenology when I was an art student, as it seemed to offer a means for understanding subjectivity and the ways in which one could engage with one's surroundings. But I have sensed a danger in phenomenology's being presented as a kind of truth... it is a more dynamic conception of phenomenology... that has been a source of inspiration in my work. To me the greatest potential of phenomenology lies in the idea that subjectivity is always susceptible to change. I like to think that my work can return critically to the viewer as a tool for negotiating and reevaluating the environment — and that this can pave the way for a more causal relationship with our surroundings. (Eliasson in Grynsteyn 2007: 52)

It is indeed this attachment to phenomenology that is behind the aforementioned slogan: “to see yourself sensing” or “to experience yourself experiencing” — Eliasson's goal is not materialism *per se* but our conscious experience of the material world. *Seeing yourself sensing* (2001) is the title of one of his works, and he elsewhere claims that it is via this “experience of experience” that art can have a significant impact on both society and the individual.¹

Not surprisingly, one can find a similar stance in the writings of James Turrell:

When I work with light it is important to me that I create an experience of wordless thought, shaping the quality and sensation of light as something real, something tangible. The quality of the substance of light cannot be touched, but it can be rendered physically visible.

¹ See Olafur Eliasson 2006: 74.

[...] My work deals with light to the extent that light is present in it: My work is not a treatise on light or even a kind of documentation. It is light itself. [...] I form light to the extent that this material allows me to do so — and in a manner that allows you not only visually but also physically to experience the substance of the light that fills a room. [...] By absorbing a room in your perception you can watch yourself seeing. The act of seeing, that conscious perception, fulfils the room with awareness. (Turrell in Weibel 2006: 222)

Note that Turrell ends up with more or less the same slogan: “you can watch yourself seeing”. To be interested in light itself, to value optics and experience in this way, is to value the percept and the effect over and above the referent. This is not an art of reference or recognition, but rather an art of direct effect.

One of Eliasson’s lesser known works was presented at *La Confusion des sens*, an exhibition held at the Espace Louis Vuitton in Paris in 2009. Eliasson quite literally provides access to the exhibition itself. Entrance to the show was by means of a work intitled *Your Loss of Senses*. This “work” was in fact the lift that takes you up to the top floor of this fancy gallery, and Eliasson’s installation was designed to deprive the spectator/traveller of all sensation, all light and sound, during the trip up or down. Indeed, total sensorial deprivation is perhaps the best way of fighting against the tyranny of reference, since without sensation, one cannot give in to that idiotic reflex which makes us want to *identify* or *label* abstract works of art — “Oh, that looks like a sausage” or “Oh, that resembles a bell.” To be deprived of sensations is to be deprived of any possible referent; it is to be deprived of any possible screen on which to project our fears or our fantasies.

Why would one wish to succumb to a “confusion of the senses”? Why should artists try to emphasise an art of the effect? Among other things, escaping the tyranny of reference also means escaping centuries of what might be seen as intellectual snobbery. No need to be a fine practitioner of iconography in order to ride through total darkness. The effect of the experience is an end in itself, and as Frank Stella put it back in the days of Minimalism, *What you see is what you see*, or, to take an even earlier American slogan, *A poem should not mean/But be* (MacLeish 1926: 341). This emphasis on effect, on phenomenology and on existence is an attempt to

transform the art object into the source of a potentially universal and direct experience. If the iconotext is based largely on purely phenomenological grounds, then the spectator/reader doesn't need all the erudition that goes into traditional art and literature in order to appreciate the work.

3. *Avatars and Atavisms*

According to Alain Badiou, the value of a film such as *The Matrix* comes from "its power to render visibly uncertain the certainty of the visible." "The visible," writes Badiou, "as an apparent figure of what is certain... is in fact only a haphazard index of the real" (Badiou 2003: 120).² *The Matrix* (which after all is only a modern adaptation of the *Malin génie* as imagined by Descartes) offers us a vision of a universe of automatic effects with no connection to reference and thus no link to the real. However, as the film itself points out, the brain and the effect must be compatible; you can't get the brain to accept absolutely anything.

This is indeed the main argument of certain evolutionary and/or cognitive approaches to art. According to Ellen Dissayanake, author of *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes From and Why*, art is a fundamental element of human nature determined by evolution.³ Just as the capacity for language is a universal feature of humanity (even though individual languages vary), the need for art is equally universal, despite the diversity of artistic practices (see Dissayanake 1995: xii-xiii). For Dissayanake, art can only be understood by keeping in mind the total history of the species:

...it is necessary to frame one's thought within an understanding of human nature as it has evolved by natural selection over the past three or four million years. Only by knowing where art comes from biologically will we know what it is and what it means. (xix)

This kind of statement can hardly be invalidated; at a certain level of analysis, it is no doubt true that we are defined by our biological past. But how far back do we really need to go? With the same kind of reasoning,

² My translation.

³ See the preface: "art is a biologically evolved element in human nature" (Dissayanake 1995: ix).

one might just as well claim that without a perfect mastery of Proto-Indo-European, one cannot grasp all of the nuances of Shakespeare.

The history of what we call “civilisation” is but a brief moment as compared to the hundreds of thousands of years that our species spent wandering on the plains in search of plants and prey. Obviously, our biological past is deeply rooted in us, both physically and mentally. Dissayanake reminds of this fact with a rather brutal formula: *You can take the species out of the evolutionary milieu, but you can't take the evolutionary milieu out of the species* (Dissayanake 1995: 4). I find this statement brutal because of the vague trace of racism that someone of my generation cannot fail to see in such an expression. For it resembles a common slogan of the 1960s, an insulting and fatalistic statement about the Black population that one often heard back then: *You can take the boy out of the ghetto, but you can't take the ghetto out of the boy*. All in all, it is not surprising to find vague (though probably unintentional) hints of racism in such writings, since the evolutionary and genetic approach is based on the kind of determinism that makes racism possible in the first place.

In any case, Dissayanake wishes to reformulate aesthetics according to evolutionary and ethological principles: “It is time to recognize that art is as normal, natural, and necessary as other things that people do, and to try to approach it ethologically as a behavior” (33). For her, a “core behavioral tendency” was naturally selected during the period of protohumans. “The biological core of art,” she adds, “the stain that is deeply dyed in the behavioral marrow of humans everywhere, is something I have elsewhere called ‘making special’” (42). It is this act of “making special” that is universal, she claims, and it is this universality that allows us to ignore the particularities of the various artistic practices that happen to exist:

...it is not art (with all its burden of accreted connotations from the past two centuries) but making special that has been evolutionarily or socially and culturally important. (56)

In other words, it is for biological reasons that we felt the need to ‘make special’, and this action of ‘making special’ has become an instrument for survival reinforced by natural selection.

Similar theses have been presented in an even more recent work by Denis Dutton, *The Art Instinct. Beauty, Pleasure and Human Evolution*,

published in 2009. The blurb on the back cover, composed by Steven Pinker, makes the ambitions very clear: “This book marks out the future of the humanities — connecting æsthetics and criticism to an understanding of human nature from the cognitive and biological sciences.”⁴ Yet the initial claims that Dutton makes are relatively modest: “While it is true that the arts, and the cultural worlds out of which they arise, are immensely complex, they are not isolated from evolution” (Dutton 2009: 2). The next step is to argue that, since we are all determined by the same heritage, by the same aeons of evolution, it is possible to postulate a fundamental “human nature” that can provide the basis for “a naturalistic, cross-cultural definition of the concept of art” (3).

Dutton hopes to provide a concrete definition of the art instinct without committing himself to any flagrant essentialism:

...the art instinct proper is not a single genetically driven impulse similar to the liking for sweetness but a complicated ensemble of impulses. [...] There is no reason to hope that this haphazard concatenation of impulses, pleasures and capacities can be made to form a pristine rational system. (Dutton 2009: 6)

But he believes nevertheless in certain regularities of the art instinct, as can be seen in his analysis of *America’s Most Wanted*, the famous artistic joke carried out by Vitaly Komar and Alex Melamid. In this project, they composed a series of farcical paintings based on statistics as to what people liked in various countries, what colours they preferred, what scenes they enjoyed, and so on. The results are surprisingly homogenous; many of the paintings have almost exactly the same features. Why are the statistics so similar for such different countries? Dutton’s conclusion is the opposite of Arthur Danto’s:

People in very different cultures around the world gravitate toward the same general type of pictorial representation: a landscape with trees and open areas, water, human figures, and animals. (ibid., 14)

For Danto, this gravitation towards landscapes with trees, water and so on, is simply the result of the West’s cultural hegemony over the past few

⁴ See Dutton 2009, back cover of the original hardback edition.

hundred years: if the most wanted painting in Kenya resembles the most wanted painting in France, that is because Kenyans have learned what art is supposed to be from their contact with the West. For Dutton, on the other hand, this taste is the result of our common evolution. The argument is based on natural selection: individuals attracted to such elements had a better chance to survive and thus a better chance to be fruitful and multiply. There is thus something innate about our artistic preferences; they are part of the history of the species. Replying to one of Pinker's more provocative comments, Dutton makes it perfectly clear: "Cheesecake speaks to innate pleasure preferences, but so does Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, though in ways that are rather more emotionally and intellectually complex" (Dutton 2009: 99). Further on, he invokes the biologist E.O. Wilson to remark:

...the arts in general, and perhaps most especially storytelling and literature, serve a particular adaptive feature for a species that, thanks to its huge brain and the complex situations it came to face (particularly in dealing with other human beings), has risen well above the more simple, routinized responses to the environment characteristic of other animals. (ibid., 120)

The arts exist for their survival value; there is even a sexual dimension to all this that would take too long to explain (suffice it to say that, surrounding the art object, there is an odour of wealth which is worth its weight in pheromones for its lucky owner). Dutton refuses to make any sort of value judgement on this point: "Approve of them or not, these values persist because they represent our deeper, innate nature" (Dutton 2009: 153). One might be tempted to quote Mill in protest: "...the duty of man is the same in respect to his own nature as in respect to the nature of all other things, not to follow but to amend it" (Mill 1874: 26).

In Dutton's system, all of these innate preferences, fashioned by natural selection, anchored in our genetic make-up, constitute a causal network that can provide the basis of a fully materialist and determinist æsthetics. The contemplation of a pretty lake or of a clearing in a forest will give me pleasure because in my veins flows the blood of my ancestors, hunters, gatherers and fishermen of yore. (Those who know me more personally

will surmise that my family tree must include a fair share of Inuits, explaining my attachment to polar regions where survival is so unlikely...). Dutton is willing to admit that cultural elements get added on to this biological foundation, but he maintains that the biological is what counts. This brings him to quote the famous anecdote, related by Sancho Panza and mentioned by Hume, about two wine connoisseurs who taste a barrel of wine: One expert says that it has a strange taste of iron, the other says it has a strange taste of leather, and when the barrel is emptied, they find a key on a leather thong.⁵ This kind of example involves a relation of pure causality: the “work of art” *equals* the effect that it has on you. It is easy to see the dangers of such an approach, for the concept of an “effect” is both simplistic and complex. For example, it is well known that *foie gras* can increase your cholesterol; that is one of its “effects”. But that kind of effect is not part of the “work of art” in the required sense. The gourmet is interested in taste, not in digestion. How can evolutionist æsthetics, based on some “art instinct”, distinguish between relevant and irrelevant effects?

The work of Barbara Maria Stafford is much more technical and deserves more detailed analysis than I can provide here. For my purposes, I will only mention one volume, *Echo Objects*, where she explicitly bases many of her demonstrations of visual thinking on the art of Olafur Eliasson. Like Dutton and Dissayanake, she adheres to the biological approach, but augments it with more specific arguments concerning cognition. That is why Eliasson is so useful for her:

Eliasson urges us on to explore the recursive nature of our deepest self-organizing processes. [...] Eliasson sums up his intention as ‘exposing and integrating our movements into the exhibition in a way that enables you to sense what you know and to know what you sense.’ (Stafford 2007: 132)

To watch ourselves seeing is to become conscious, via the effect of the percept, of our cognitive capacities. Like Dutton and Dissayanake again, Stafford posits her own form of universal human nature:

⁵ See Dutton 37.

...the kinds of formal order human beings have invented — visible in the varieties of symbolism, ritual, dreams, the emotion-suffused compositions of the arts and sciences — are only intelligible to us because other human beings made them. (ibid., 18)

Note that this idea resembles the “principle of charity” as defended by the philosopher Donald Davidson. The principle holds that all humans share a modicum of rationality and thus we are all able to understand each other despite the variety of contexts.⁶ Davidson was speaking about logic and language; Stafford is concerned with visual interpretation, and her argument is that the realm of the visual is regimented by inherent laws. For her, images are “cultural symbols with which to reach our biological selves” (5); she underlines the existence of a “graphic grammar” (20) and claims that certain fundamental forms affect us in an immediate way:

...such summary forms can bypass focal attention to strike the amygdale directly. This is the organ located deep in the brain that interprets the emotional content of an experience. (ibid., 23)

Her conclusion is that we ought to resign ourselves to the fact that art is a realm of necessity: “We are going to have to admit that there are lawlike aspects to art” (209). We seem to be meant to understand that, in the long run, fundamental laws of cause and effect determine all artistic practice.

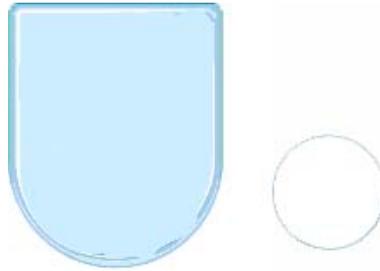
It would be futile to deny the existence and the operation of laws, of constraints, of deterministic relationships between causes and effects. It would be futile to deny that a good part of our existence is determined by such rigidities. In one sense, it is undeniably true that certain laws define what art can do, just as certain laws of dynamics and mechanics determine what an automobile can do. If there is an air of “family resemblance” between most automotive designs, it is because certain physical facts are inescapable for all models. However, this tells us very little about the more specific choices that remain open to designers, and it is perhaps in the detailed application of the laws that the true interest lies. Stafford’s analyses become surprisingly explicit, surprisingly concrete and outlandishly deterministic at times. In one curious passage, she goes so far as to suggest that

⁶ We recall that the “principle of charity” is a response to W.V.O. Quine’s arguments on the impossibility of translation.

certain geometrical forms remind us, subliminally and thanks to our genetic heritage, of the creation of the Solar System.⁷ For Stafford, these reactions and effects are inscribed in our nature.

4. Consciousness

It is perhaps time to take a stance on all this, so I would like to offer you a concrete counterexample of my own device. The example is inspired by my initial reactions to Rudolf Arnheim's *Art and Visual Perception* back at the end of the 1970s. Let us imagine an experiment where a group of subjects are asked to place the following circle somewhere inside the form on the left:



One might imagine that most subjects would try to place the circle somewhere in the middle of the figure in order to achieve a minimum of symmetry, such as here:



⁷ See Stafford, 31: "Upward or downward-inclined lines, upright or inverted isosceles triangles, circles, and squares schematize the sublimated violent tale of the formation of the solar system and suppressed recollection of the battle-to-the-death for the survival of the fittest."

I would like to argue, however, that if you conducted the experiment with a group of British students and professors back in the 70s, you'd get a quite different result, more like this:



Perhaps some of you have already recognised a logo that one doesn't see as often today as back then — though it still exists. Back in the 70s almost all of my textbooks had the logo of the Open University printed on them, and it still can be found on the Net:



In other words, the cultural element, in all its contingency, can often outweigh the biological, and thus so much of our lives involves so much more than acting on impulse. Certain schools of thought are in quite a hurry to dismiss the age-old debate between nature and nurture. I find their haste unwise, for if it is an old debate, there may be substance in it.

Evolutionary determinism goes even further than Freudian determinism. Where Freud informs me that I am determined by the traumas of my early childhood, evolutionism claims that I bear in my soul all the trauma and the cataclysms man has endured since the dawn of time. Such claims can't be entirely true, nor can they be entirely false. Obviously, any art based on effects that are in some way linked to our genetic composition will gain in strength. All sorts of examples of this can be found in art

and literature, starting with Carroll and the Mouse's tale. This tail can't help but provoke a physical reaction of some sort, and Carroll is probably banking on that. We must indeed admit that materialism is at the core of art, simply because it is at the heart of all things. Materialism and science will determine what forms and materials will affect us; they will define the outer limits of artistic practice. If Gaudi had been an Inuit living on the ice floe, rather than a Catalan who using plaster and stone, the *Sagrada Familia* would have been a radically different work of art. Matter imposes its structure on art, but that does not mean that matter is where art takes place.

Stafford herself admits (see 27) that increase in brain size over the millennia has enabled man to escape the reflex mechanisms dictated by a simple relation of stimulus and response. Indeed, intelligence seems to involve the suppression of automatic responses; intelligence seems to involve distance, and, in that case, art can never be totally neurological.⁸ This is why I would claim that "acting on impulse" can never be a solution for art. Even Dutton is ready to concede the point: "great works of music, drama, painting, or fiction set us above the very instincts that make them possible" (9). Artists often *play* with intersemiotic effects in order to transcend the habitual cognitive mechanisms that dominate our day to day lives.

To conclude with a concrete example, when the experimental novelist B.S. Johnson dreams of having us read his manuscript stained with butter, when he dreams of a total transmission of his own experience, he knows quite well that such iconotextual dreams can never be.⁹ But he also knows that, in the absence of a fully realised material effect, there is the *intellectual* effect produced by our recognition of his intention. For he knows that we know that he knows — in Searlian fashion — that no such transmission will ever take place, and that the smell of the butter staining his ms will never be ours to enjoy. It is this *conscious* dimension that is missing from these materialistic theories of art, for if it is instinct that makes art possible, it is consciousness that makes it worth our time.

⁸ On the connection between intelligence and distance, see Shusterman 2010.

⁹ "What a pity it is not possible for you all to read the ms!" exclaims the narrator of this posthumous novel. See Johnson 1975: 28. On the impossibility of such total transmission, see Shusterman 2005.

References

- Badiou, Alain. (2003), « Dialectiques de la fable, » *in* Badiou, Alain, Bena-touil, Thomas, During, Elie *et al*, *Matrix: Machine Philosophique*, Paris, Ellipses.
- Dissanayake, Ellen. (1995), *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes From and Why*, Seattle, U of Washington P.
- Dutton, Denis. (2009), *The Art Instinct. Beauty, Pleasure and Human Evolution*, New York, Bloomsbury.
- Eliasson, Olafur & Irwin, Robert. (2007), 'Take Your Time: A Conversation,' *in* Grynstejn, Madeleine Grynstejn (ed.), *Take Your Time: Olafur Eliasson*, SFMOMA, London, Thames & Hudson, 2007.
- Eliasson, Olafur. (2006), *Your Engagement has Consequences. On the Relativity of Your Reality*, Baden, Switzerland, Lars Müller.
- Johnson, B.S. (1975), *See the Old Lady Decently*, London: Hutchinson; New York: Viking.
- MacLeish, Archibald. (1926), "Ars Poetica", *in* Williams, Oscar (ed.), *A Little Treasury of Modern Poetry*, NY, Scribners, 1970.
- Mill, John Stuart. (1874), *in* Schneewind, J.B., ed., *Mill's Ethical Writings*, New York: Macmillan, 1965.
- Shusterman, Ronald. (2005), « Plasticité du livre, textualité de l'image : Quelques réflexions à partir de B.S. Johnson, Richard Long et d'autres rêveurs... », *Texte/Image*, Actes du Colloque de Cerisy, Rennes, P.U. de Rennes, 2005, 69-90
- (2010), "The Art of Light and the Light of Art: Epistemology in Contemporary Sculpture," *in* Agazzi, E., Giannetto, E., Guidice, F., eds., *Representing Light Across the Arts and Sciences: Theories and Practices, Accume 2 / Socrates Erasmus*, Goettingen, V&R Unipress, 2010, 213-32.
- Stafford, Barbara Maria. (2007), *Echo Objects: The Cognitive Work of Images*, Chicago, U of Chicago P.
- Weibel, Peter & Jansen, Gregor. (2006), *Light Art from Artificial Light / Lichtkunst aus Kunstlicht*, Ostfildern, Allemagne, Hatje Cantz.