
Following the author's publicity for the book, The Art Instinct has been roundly praised in reviews in major magazines and newspapers worldwide. As stated in its first sentence, the book's goal is confrontational and dialectical: to 'offer a way of looking at the arts that flies in the face of most writing and criticism today' (1). This is accurate; readers ought to take it to heart. The book does not primarily collect data, weigh evidence and draw conclusions on behalf of clearly articulated hypotheses about the evolutionary origins for an art instinct. Rather the book represents a variety of interesting studies, conveys fascinating aesthetic facts and trends, and appeals to evolutionary psychology in a case against cultural theories of art. Though engaging and entertaining, and written with wit and verve, Dutton does not deliver a cogent argument for his conclusion, and at several points Dutton appears to misunderstand or misuse key features of evolutionary theory. Nonetheless, I greatly enjoyed reading this book because it gives the reader much food for thought and because the project – to do what can be done to account for aesthetic preference in terms of evolutionary psychology – is laudable, though limited. Given that the book has received such widespread praise from such a large number and diversity of publications (see http://www.denisdutton.com/), I will use the limited space available to make critical points about which the bevy of positive reviews are silent. I won't do this at the expense of giving readers an account of the contents of the chapters of the book.

Chapter 1 summarizes the results in Komar and Melamid’s ‘People’s Project’ (Wypijewski et al., 1999) and Appleton’s The Experience of Landscape (1975) to argue from the univocality of aesthetic preference to its evolutionary origins. In both books aesthetic preferences were found to be remarkably uniform: across the world people from different physical, social and cultural environments exhibited strong preferences for landscape painting with water, people and animals. The case made in Chapter 1 is that the best explanation of this particular uniformity in aesthetic preference is an art instinct shared by everyone through a common evolutionary history on grasslands in the African savannah. But Komar and Melamid themselves do not take their polling data to justify attribution of an evolutionary art instinct. As conceptual artists they appear to take their polling activities (and the paintings they created on the basis of the results) as a grand joke, as holding up a ‘funhouse mirror’ to the artistic establishment (Wypijewski et al., 1999: 17). Here reading Dutton’s project as polemical rather than strictly argumentative makes sense: Dutton appeals to Komar and Melamid’s paintings at the outset of the book would be odd unless his intention is, like theirs, dialectical. Dutton also appeals to Appleton’s hypotheses about landscape preferences as the other primary source of data in Chapter 1, which Dutton describes as ‘original’ and ‘compelling’. But no discernible psychological evidence is given for Appleton’s ‘prospect and refuge’ or ‘habitat’ hypotheses, though Dutton cites the psychological work of Stephen and Rachel Kaplan on related but distinct issues.

In Chapter 2 Dutton argues from “the universality of art and artistic behaviors, their spontaneous appearance everywhere across the globe and through recorded human history, and the fact that in most cases they can be easily recognized as artistic across cultures” to the hypothesis that there is an art instinct (in much the same way as others argue for the presence of an innate language module). Dutton’s sources for remarks about the presence of a language instinct are restricted to citations of Pinker’s 15-year-old mass-market writings.
He conveys none of the criticisms or counterevidence recently made against the language instinct hypothesis. Dutton proceeds to a tour of aesthetic theories in the history of Western philosophy. As a method, opening the chapter with the forceful claim that the art instinct is relevantly similar to the language instinct then romping through historical aesthetic theories is perhaps odd. The chapter's conclusion points the way to his intentions: Western philosophers have sought universal generalizations about folk aesthetic preferences in contrast to the 'institutional theory of art', which Dutton (rightly) opposes. As evidence for universality Dutton lists a dozen or so "innate, universal features and capabilities of the human mind" (43–44). Of course we have a dispositional ability to adorn our bodies with tattoos (44), but the explanatory value of saying that this is produced by an 'innate, universal' capacity of the mind is left unclear. A dispositional capacity of the human mind is quite different than an adaptive, evolved module with neural correlates in the brain.

The subject of the third chapter is the definition of 'art'. Dutton says the philosophy of art has shifted its focus to accommodate culturally dominant artistic practices. In this he is surely right, and it is a point worth making. Rather than attempt to define 'art' to include or exclude cases such as Duchamp's 'readymades' or Cage's 4'33" Dutton proposes a dozen 'cluster criteria' (51) with which to proceed. These criteria are not counted as individually necessary and jointly sufficient criteria for the application of the term 'art'; they are for purposes of identifying family resemblances. But why these criteria and not others? Dutton proposes these criteria a priori and they seem based on Dutton's intuitions about what art is, despite the fact that (in Chapter 1, about landscape painting) he availed himself of some empirical research. This raises questions about the aims and methods of Dutton's project. What's worse, we have considerable data about cross-cultural aesthetic preferences, which will be familiar to readers of this journal, to which Dutton turns a blind eye. For instance, Masuda et al. (2008) contains new data about the diversity of aesthetic preferences across cultures and a generous bibliography of related research, nearly all of which would have been available to Dutton prior to the publication of The Art Instinct.

Dutton redresses the challenge of cross-cultural differences in aesthetic preferences in Chapter 4, but his case is unconvincing because he attacks straw men. Dutton does not wrestle with psychological research that directly challenges his hypothesis, e.g., research by Masuda, Kitayama or Nisbett, whose names do not appear in the book. These researchers have revealed systematic cross-cultural differences in aesthetic preferences, and corresponding systematic differences in cross-cultural cognitive and affective responses to works of art.

One more direct means to this issue is to decide on the question of whether art, or artistic enjoyment, is an adaptation or merely a by-product of our evolutionary history. Dutton's discussion of this issue in Chapter 5 is interesting and his missteps are understandable and instructive since the differentiation between adaptation and by-product is theoretically difficult even for trained evolutionary biologists and psychologists. His discussion is equivocal because he never identifies clear definitions for 'adaptation' and 'by-product'. After a tour of contested adaptations sure to titillate the popular reader – the incest taboo, the female orgasm – Dutton introduces his own examples. But rather than clarifying the debate, his examples blur the line between adaptations and by-products. He concludes that the arts are adaptive and are not 'cheesecake for the mind' (Pinker, 1997: 534).

The next chapter continues this debate as it is focused on story-telling and literature. Dutton primarily uses research from literary theory (Sugiyama, Carroll, Zunshine) as a kind of evidence for the hypothesis that story-telling and literature are adaptive. Here too