



## Book Review

*Evolutionary Aesthetics* edited by Eckart Voland and Karl Grammer. Heidelberg: Springer Verlag, 2003.

Reviewed by Adele Tomlin

The question “Why do we find certain things beautiful?” is familiar to any student of Aesthetics. Many philosophers have struggled with the question of where beauty resides – in the object, the beholder’s mind, or the interrelationship of object with mind. The question many philosophers fail to address, however, is *why* do humans have aesthetic preferences (e.g. beauty)? It may well be true that our aesthetic preferences are based on the mental pleasure produce by certain features of things but why do we get pleasure from these features? Furthermore, if we understood why humans have aesthetic preferences, perhaps we would be in a better position to postulate what our preferences are (and thus what beauty is). *Evolutionary Aesthetics*, is a collection of articles that attempts to answer these questions and explain aesthetic experience from an evolutionary perspective. The aesthetic preferences of human beings and their spontaneous distinction between “beauty and “ugliness” are posited in a Darwinian framework as a biologically adapted ability to make important decisions in life. The contributors to this collection are a mixture of psychologists, anthropologists and art historians and the book is divided into four sections which cover the evolution of human perception and perceptual biases, and the particular aesthetic preferences in human sexuality and reproduc-

tion, landscape, smell, and bodily motion.

The first article, *Darwinian Aesthetics Informs Traditional Aesthetics* by Randy Thornhill, is particularly illuminating on the topic. Thornhill argues persuasively that aesthetic judgement is a manifestation of a psychological adaptation. According to evolutionary psychologists, psychological adaptation causally underlies many human feelings, emotion, arousal, creativity, learning and behaviour. Adaptations are engineered to process environmental information and to guide feelings, emotions, learning and behaviour towards ends that were fitness-enhancing in human evolutionary history. As Thornhill states: “Beauty is a promise of function in the environments in which humans evolved i.e., of high likelihood of survival and reproductive success in the environments of human evolutionary history. Ugliness is the promise of low survival and reproductive failure.” The feelings that are associated with aesthetic judgements (e.g. pleasure, repulsion, inquisitiveness) arise from the processing of information and provide ancestral cues as to how our ancestors felt about aspects of their environments. The fact that we often experience pleasurable or strong feelings when making aesthetic judgments is the physiological reward for having processed ancestral cues of promised evolutionary function as well as hav-

ing promoted the further acquisition of information. The fact that the aesthetic judgments we make today may no longer positively affect survival or offspring production does not weaken the claim that such adaptation did positively affect survival in human evolutionary history. For example, when we judge a work of art to be beautiful we do not necessarily notice any utility or usefulness to our survival in the work. However, it is the utility that is present to the extent that we judge it to be beautiful. This claim is discussed further in the second section of the book in articles that look at human perceptual biases and its relation to our aesthetic preferences in art and nature.

The diversity of individual tastes is one of the central unresolved issues of aesthetics. According to Thornhill, Darwinism may resolve this issue by explaining why there is cross-cultural and individual variation in aesthetic taste and yet why there also are universal preferences in taste. Although adaptations are often species-typical i.e., possessed by all members of the species, and demonstrate certain universal preferences (e.g., habitat preferences) an adaptation can also vary according to factors such as sex, age, cultural environment and habitat. Thornhill ends his article by arguing that the traditional topics of interest to aestheticians can be re-evaluated into a number of distinct psychological adaptations using the principles of evolutionary psychology. These adaptations explain why humans have aesthetic preferences in relation to the perception of landscapes, animals, the acoustics of animals, daily or seasonal environmental cues, the human body, status symbols, social scenarios, human skill or talent, food and ideas. There are, of course, some aesthetic experiences that we think are more valuable than others, e.g., great art. According to Thornhill, it is the job of Darwinian aesthetics to “determine the cues in great art that make it great – that is, determine the actual information that human aesthetic mechanisms process during aesthetic evaluation of art”.

The second section of the book aims to do

precisely this. It contains three articles, on the topic of human perceptual biases and how these inform and limit our aesthetic preferences in art as well as nature, all of which are very thought-provoking and well-argued. The claim here is that our evolved perceptual and cognitive capacities dictate to some extent what we prefer aesthetically. The world does not fit our perception or cognition, rather we try to get the world to fit our mental and linguistic abilities. This claim uncovers why we find certain formal properties such as symmetry and regularity aesthetically pleasing. However, it does not follow that we like bland and boring regularities. The human mind enjoys discovering the hidden order in apparent complexity or chaos (hence our love of abstract and modern art). The third section of the book focuses on human aesthetic preferences in sexuality and reproduction. It is not that interesting for the philosopher but makes for an informative and sometimes amusing read for the general reader and anyone interested in finding out what is attractive to prospective sexual partners and why (e.g. see the section on men’s beards)! The fourth section, which considers some of the particular aesthetic preferences humans have, contains an article on habitat preference which was particularly interesting. My view on landscape appreciation has been fundamentally altered since reading it.

Although I found all the articles in the book to be stimulating and thought-provoking (and a must-read for any serious student or teacher of aesthetics), the book leaves a lot to be desired in terms of philosophical analysis and rigour. Many of the articles were overly technical (unless one is a biologist) and often presented a summary of the research without necessarily questioning the results or methodology. My main criticism of the book, however, is its implicit suggestion that human aesthetic experience can be reduced to a scientific explanation without needing to discuss the significant “meaning” we attach to such an experience and our interpretations of it. Here, as in many other areas of philosophy, two areas of understanding

appear to be in conflict with each other. There is the scientific mode of understanding, which aims to explain appearances, and the “intentional understanding” which aims to interpret them – i.e., to describe, criticise and justify the human world. The Kantian philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) coined the term *verstehen* to refer to this second kind of understanding – and the term has entered sociological usage through the writings of Max Weber. Intentional understanding engages directly with the world as we perceive it, it aims not so much to explain things, as to make us at home with them. The concepts of our intentional understanding are not easy to analyse. They are embedded in feeling and activity, and difficult to bring into focus. Nevertheless, there are genuine, objective truths about the human world which can only be discovered through philosophical analysis. This analysis involves exploring the public language of appearance, through which we understand the world as a sphere of action and an object of response. This conflict between these two modes of understanding can be seen clearly in the matter of sex. Human sexuality has often been understood through ideas of love and intimacy. Many works of art have protected and confirmed these conceptions of sex. The evolutionary sexologist then comes forth to clear this messy stuff away and reveal the scientific truth of things: the animal organs, the un-moralised impulses, and our unconscious desires for survival and reproductive success. The meaning of the experience plays no part in the scientific experience. In our increasingly science-worshipping world, the meaning comes to be viewed as a fiction. Many people accept this conclusion and lapse into a state of cynical hedonism, scorning the old fogeys or romantics who believe there is more to sex than biology. The scientific attempt to explore the ‘depth’ of human things, therefore, is accompanied by a significant danger – it threatens to destroy our response to the surface. Yet it is on the surface of the world that we live and act: it is there that

we are created, as complex appearances sustained by social interaction which we, as appearances, also create. A reckless desire to scrape this surface away – a desire which has inspired the ‘sciences of man’ – deprives us of our consolation, for it is the surface on which human happiness and relations are dependent. The classifications which inform and permit our actions, cannot be replaced with anything better than themselves, for they have evolved precisely under the pressure of human circumstance, and in answer to human needs: in particular our need for meaning. Philosophical analysis of the surface can uphold and makes sense of those more elusive classifications which form the background to personal life: classifications relative to emotions (the fearful, the lovable, the disgusting) and to aesthetic interest (the ornamental, the serene, the graceful); it gives sense to our interpersonal attitudes and it explores the meaning of the world, in moral and religious experience.

Despite this weakness, *Evolutionary Aesthetics* certainly made me reassess my own thoughts about human aesthetic experience and response. Furthermore, in my opinion, the evolutionary analysis has the potential to add another layer of meaning or value to our aesthetic experiences. As Thornhill eloquently states: “We can conclude with great confidence that beauty and ugliness were important feelings in the lives of the evolutionary ancestors of humans...A beautiful idea of evolutionary psychology is that the discipline allows discovery of how human ancestors felt about various aspects of their environments; the discipline allows discovery of our emotional roots”. A beautiful idea indeed, and one which I also found to be extremely moving.

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