

Doreen Triebel and Dirk Vanderbeke

**The Art Instinct: or,
All is Fair in Sexual Selection and the Survival of the Fittest**

- Denis Dutton, *The Art Instinct. Beauty, Pleasure, & Human Evolution*. London et al.: Bloomsbury Press 2009. 282 pp. [Preis: EUR 20,99]. ISBN: 978-1-596-91401-8.

Denis Dutton's book is not easy to review. On the one hand some of the chapters offer a very useful and productive account of the present state of research on the evolutionary origins of the arts, music and literature. However, on the other hand some of the arguments and suggested scenarios for the evolution of an art instinct fail to convince us; some evaluations of previous research, and also of specific works of art, music and literature remain unsubstantiated; and, in consequence, some of the conclusions are insufficiently validated and require a serious critique.

In consequence we have decided to split the review into two parts. Doreen Triebel, who looked more favourable on Dutton's achievements, focuses on the positive aspects of the study and on the productive account of evolution and the origins of art. Dirk Vanderbeke, who was less convinced and saw various flaws and biases in the book, then investigates those problems and their consequences for the general arguments.

We want to stress, however, that we are both firmly convinced that the evolutionary approach to literature is very promising and that the research done in this field over the last decades demonstrates, to all who are willing to see, the significance of our biological inheritance for our present culture, the arts, music and literature. The critique, thus, is never directed against a Darwinian perspective but only at some of the arguments offered in Dutton's book, and we see this review as a contribution to the ongoing discussion, not as a rejection of its premises.

The Achievements

Doreen Triebel

Denis Dutton's *The Art Instinct. Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution* is a highly readable, thought-provoking and ambitious contribution to the field of evolutionary aesthetics. It offers a thoroughgoing discussion of the subject with far-reaching implications not only for the philosophy of art but also for anthropology, cognitive science or literary criticism. Dutton's main argument – that »[t]he arts in all their glory are no more remote from evolved features of the human mind and personality than an oak tree is remote from the soil and subterranean that nourish and sustain it« (2) - establishes a close connection between our impulses and our drives to create and consume art in various forms, our aesthetic perception and the theory of evolution. Since in this view the human achievements of art are ultimately grounded in (but, as Dutton emphasises, not solely determined by) biological factors, it follows that a Darwinian approach can offer new insights into their origins, their significance and their characteristics. Indeed, after numerous fruitful studies that have illuminated concepts of language, psychology, sociology, etc. from an evolutionary perspective, the idea to apply that theory to the arts is a very plausible, albeit not completely new, one.¹

The title of Dutton's book, alluding to Steven Pinker's well-known study on language, already suggests that he considers artistic creativeness to be hard-wired into our brains and evolutionarily advantageous but he does not commit the error of reducing all aspects of art to innate behaviour. Rather, he acknowledges that »great works of music, drama, painting, or fiction set us above the very instincts that make them possible. Paradoxically, it is evolution – most significantly the evolution of imagination and intellect – that enables us to transcend our animal selves« (9). Dutton does not deny the existence of divergent cultural constructions of art but, based on his practical experience with both Western and non-Western aesthetic traditions, he dismisses the idea that there are radical, insurmountable intercultural differences concerning the concept and understanding of art. Strongly opposing the idea of cultural relativism, he argues that beneath the superficial differences there are essential similarities, which can be traced back to mechanisms of evolution and thus to innate features of the human mind. Dutton supports this point with vivid examples, the most striking being human landscape preferences, which can be attributed to the adaptation of our Pleistocene ancestors to their natural surroundings. A conclusion of the Darwinian approach taken here is that there must be cross-cultural standards specifying what the category of art includes and what cannot be classified as such. However, Dutton does not attempt to define art by offering a set of necessary and sufficient features, which would be far too rigid and exclusive and could not do justice to the artistic understanding prevalent in different eras or societies, but, inspired by Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblance, outlines a very useful cluster-criteria approach, which is characterised by a high degree of flexibility. This definition can account equally well for objects and activities from different cultures or periods, for prototypical examples and for borderline cases. Dutton does not have a narrow understanding of the term ›art‹, which would limit the category to a certain point in time, a genre or the tastes of an elitist group. His conception of art is rather broad, including very diverse instances and, as he stresses, »I can write of art in this manner and expect to be understood not because my readers and I have checked the dictionary to determine the meaning of ›art‹ but because we share a much more vague and broad pre-theoretical understanding of what art is« (66).

The arts are considered to be beneficial for us in various ways but Dutton is aware that this alone would not justify the Darwinian approach he is taking. Partly concurring with Pinker's ideas of art as expressed in *How the Mind Works*, he argues that it is not their capacity to please us, provide us with food for thought or to promote social interaction as such that makes an evolutionary explanation acceptable and useful, but the connection that can be drawn between the advantages of art and our species' fight for survival and reproduction.

In the following Dutton offers an insightful and illuminating discussion of the question whether art should be considered as a genuine adaptation (i.e. a feature that offers an advantage in terms of survival and reproduction and has evolved as the result of natural selection), an accidental mutation or the mere by-product of an adaptation. He argues against ›art as adaptation‹ as well as against ›art as a by-product of adaptations‹, thereby also dismissing Pinker's view of the arts as ›mental cheesecake‹ without any adaptational value. Arguing for a middle ground position Dutton comes to the conclusion that instead of just exploiting adaptive pleasure circuits, the arts, just like sweet and fatty foods, are phenomena that directly satisfy ancient human tastes and preferences and he adds, »Neither writing nor reading nor cheesecake nor Cadillacs are Pleistocene adaptations. But no adequate grasp of their genesis and popularity can be achieved by ignoring the evolved interests and capacities that they serve or extend« (99).

Taking a closer look at fiction, Dutton attributes three adaptational advantages to this specific form of art: (1) stories can help us deal with novel situations, because they inspire us to en-

gage in counterfactual thinking, (2) stories can convey factual knowledge and (3) stories allow us to explore other people's points of view, thereby exercising our mind-reading abilities. Dutton concludes that fiction (and he expands this argument to include art in general) can be regarded as a product of natural selection, because those Pleistocene hunter-gatherer bands which made the composition and reception of narrative an integral part of their culture had an invaluable advantage over other groups that did not. The model suggested here thus supports group selection as an important aspect of human evolution, but Dutton also affirms that storytelling and the cognitive abilities that are connected with narrative can directly enhance the fitness of human individuals. He furthermore stresses one of the central functions of narrative – to rationalise and make sense of the experiences we undergo in our daily social lives:

the features of a stable human nature revolve around human relationships in every variety: social coalitions of kinship or tribal affinity; issues of status; reciprocal exchange; the complexities of sex and child rearing; struggles over resources; benevolence and hostility; friendship and nepotism; conformity and independence; moral obligations, altruism, and selfishness; and so on [...] these issues constitute the major themes and subjects of literature and its oral antecedents. Stories are universally constituted that way because of the role storytelling can play in helping individuals and groups develop and deepen their own grasp of human social and emotional experience. (118)

Storytelling, Dutton points out, mirrors our familiar social world but it can also take us beyond what we know and in this way broadens our mind.

Nevertheless, the question remains why humans across the various cultures have persistently created and consumed art in spite of the immense costs involved. Seeking for an answer, Dutton, inspired by Geoffrey Miller's *The Mating Mind*, turns to sexual selection, a mechanism fundamentally different from natural selection. Whereas the latter favours colours that match the surroundings of an animal in order to protect it from the eyes of predators, the first promotes adornments in bright, flamboyant colours to attract potential mates. In this line of reasoning art functions as a fitness indicator and a means of courtship, which, according to Dutton's rather speculative argument, also accounts for an inherent connection between aesthetics and the costliness of pieces of art. It should, however, be noted that he attempts to avoid the mistake of arguing along the lines of a deterministic view in this discussion:

There is no reason to accept that we are doomed forever to respond to art in terms of costliness, conspicuous waste, or its bearing on social status. Pleistocene landscape preferences are just as innate but need not control our tastes in landscape painting [...]. Once we understand and know an impulse, we can choose to get along with it or we can resist it. (161)

He goes on to discuss three hotly debated issues of contemporary aesthetic theory, the artist's intention, forgery and Dadaism, and ends his study with a rather subjective view of what he considers to be great art.

The Art Instinct is a notable work providing a solid discussion of many topics essential to evolutionary aesthetics. It is entertaining, imaginative, eloquently reasoned and invites reflection as well as controversial discussions. Dutton is a connoisseur and ardent lover of the arts and his passion for various artistic achievements inform large sections of his argumentation in the book. All this makes *The Art Instinct* a good and recommendable read.

The Problems

Dirk Vanderbeke

Before I enter on the critique of Dutton's book – a critique that will occasionally be harsh – I want to stress once more that it is not the evolutionary approach that is rejected but some of the arguments raised by Dutton and some of the evaluations of art offered in the course of the investigation. Indeed, as must have become clear in the first part of this review, Dutton's book serves very well as a survey of the work that has been done by both others and himself in recent years. To show where the arguments miss their point or go astray it will be necessary to go into detail, and while it will not be possible to address all the relevant cases here, I think that a selection of problematic issues will serve to demonstrate the shortcomings of Dutton's study.

In 1882 Matthew Arnold wrote an essay on »Literature and Science«; in this text he described our prehistoric ancestors in some phrases borrowed from Darwin and suggested that imbedded in their nature there must already have been a desire for the arts and for the later achievements of culture:

The ›hairy quadruped furnished with a tail and pointed ears, probably arboreal in its habits‹, this good fellow carried hidden in his nature, apparently, something destined to develop into a necessity of humane letters. Nay, more; we seem finally to be even led to the further conclusion that our hairy ancestor carried in his nature, also, a necessity for Greek.²

Arnold despaired over the culture of his own time, which had, as he writes in »The Function of Criticism at the Present Time«, »undergone a long benumbing period of blight and suppression in the epoch of concentration which followed the French Revolution.« Against this decline, which was also the decline of religion as the repository of social and cultural values, Arnold proposed a cultural turn very different from its descendant in the late 20th century. Culture was to fill the gap left by religion, and, in *Culture and Anarchy*, Arnold writes:

culture has one great passion, the passion for sweetness and light. It has one even yet greater! – the passion for making them *prevail*. It is not satisfied till we *all* come to a perfect man; it knows that the sweetness and light of the few must be imperfect until the raw and unkindled masses of humanity are touched with sweetness and light.³

Culture can bring humanity to perfection because it offers us »the best which has been thought and said in the world« (ibid; Dutton attributes this great gift not to culture but narrows its source down to classic literature, [126]).

Reading Dutton's book one can hardly escape the notion that he fully endorses the Arnoldian vision, and that he also suffers from the decline he observes in his own time in the aftermath of another revolution, this time the revolution of modernism and postmodernism. In consequence, the hope for perfection through culture that Arnold entertained has now been frustrated, and a deep nostalgia for the arts, literature and music from the Renaissance up to the late 19th century pervades Dutton's jeremiad about the present loss of a culture that really spoke to the people – or at least the educated people. And if Arnold saw a desire for culture in the earliest human nature, Dutton suggests that evolutionary processes, natural and sexual selection, acted on our predecessors and produced in us the creative talents and the delight in the various forms of artistic beauty that can be found all over the world.

Of course, every critic working on evolutionary origins of the arts will agree that selection, natural or sexual, will have played a significant role in this development, but the extremely close link Dutton draws between essential humanity and the formation of an ›art instinct‹ leads to several problems. Being central to our humanity, the production and appreciation of art can of course not be any kind of by-product or an exaptation of more basic adaptations but has to be an instinct, hard-wired into our brains, and alternative suggestions by Stephen Jay Gould and others are rigidly excluded (cf. 92-94). On the one hand, however, this strictness requires cross-culturally very similar expressions of creativity and also analogous responses to art to demonstrate that they are, indeed, human universals, and on the other hand it is necessary to define the specific agents that in an integrated process made us the humans we are today and also gave us the arts. In both of these endeavours Dutton's arguments ultimately turn to dogmatic proclamations and to the construction of highly speculative scenarios and thus miss their point.

In chapter 4, ›But They Don't Have Our Concepts of Art‹, Dutton discusses the production of artefacts in cultures very different from ours and forcefully rejects suggestions that the Western concept of art and aesthetics could be fundamentally different from those of various tribal peoples. Among those anthropologists whose observations and conclusions are dismissed are Joanna Overing and Susan M. Vogel. Overing concludes from her field work among the Piaroa people of the Amazon region that their sense of beauty is irreconcilable with ours, as beauty ›cannot be removed from productive use‹ and ›objects are beautiful for what they can do‹: in the published version of her lecture she adds two important examples which Dutton does not quote: ›without artistic production there could be neither food nor babies‹.⁴ Dutton bluntly rejects this argument with the statement: ›either beauty for the Piaroa is a recognizable form of beauty – a distinctly Piaroa beauty, to be sure – or it is not. If it is not, then Overing ought not to call it ›beauty‹ in the first place‹ (67). This, of course, demonstrates a failure to grasp one of the most fundamental problems in anthropological research: the incommensurability of cultural concepts and the resulting difficulty in their translation. If an anthropologist, facing this problem, stresses that a word is used differently from its normal meaning and also offers striking examples showing the divergence from our usage, it is absurd to proclaim that the very use of the word shows a basic similarity to our common understanding.

Similarly, Dutton dismisses Susan M. Vogel's claim that ››Art‹ in our sense does not exist in the Baule villages‹ (quoted 70). She argues that the Baule, an African ethnic group, do not produce their masks or sculptures to be aesthetically experienced; these objects gain their importance not from their artistic quality but chiefly from their spiritual essence. Against this view Dutton simply states that

Religion, though often intermingled with art, need not be confused with it. So it is perfectly valid for an art historian to discuss those aspects of Giotto's work that form part of art history – technique, formal excellence, modes of representation – rather than religious or social history. The aesthetic qualities of Giotto's paintings and frescoes are not accidental by-products of religion: they fuse high skill, artistic expression, and religious tradition. The same goes for Baule masks and figures. (71-72)

This, however, is no more than an unsubstantiated claim, and the fact that religion and art intermingled in a particular way in a specific historical context in Western Europe does not indicate that similar aesthetic and theological perspectives, including the distinction between art vs. artisan or religious art vs. religious artefacts, existed or still exist on the Ivory Coast.

In the course of this argument, Dutton invents a thought experiment along the lines of ›imagine a tribe ...‹ to demonstrate that there is not really any categorical difference in the encounter with art in the most diverse cultures, and ›that trained perception, the ability of tribal peo-

ples themselves to see systematic differences between expressive art and utilitarian artefact – and the ability of the informed eyes of Westerners also to learn to perceive differences – is fundamental« (83). But the tribes he asks us to imagine are ultimately only constructions and projections to prove his point – and it is not easy to see how thought experiments can have any heuristic value in this context. Dutton proclaims that African and other artists of tribal societies »create works for the eyes as well as the mind. That these tribal objects are intended to amaze, amuse, shock, and enchant is part of the artistic interpretation that constitutes their very being works of art« (83-84). The argument is ultimately circular and dogmatically states that as art is universal, fundamentally different views cannot exist, and as the perspectives of all other cultures must in consequence be basically similar to ours, this proves that art is universal. I am not a specialist in anthropology and cannot judge the various aesthetics or the lack thereof in other ethnicities and cultures, so my point here is not about the validity of the anthropologists' description but about the argumentative logic used by Dutton. In fact, this nivellization of differences and the easy claim that tribal and Renaissance art are ultimately similar may well be a form of cultural imperialism.

Be that as it may, the most serious problems in Dutton's arguments arise when he addresses sexual selection as one of the major agents not only for the evolution of an art instinct but also, as he puts it, for human »self-domestication«. ⁵ Admittedly, in his new afterword Dutton points out that this topic is not quite as central as it seems to be in his book; as he expected sexual selection to be »less familiar to most readers than natural selection«, he gave it »a more detailed, striking description, especially as it would have contributed to the present-day make up of the human body and personality« (244). Still, this detailed description deserves a serious assessment and critique, even if other factors may have been more significant for Dutton's view on the evolution of the arts.

Dutton points out that »evolution remains a kind of natural history – in truth, an unrecoverable history – with twists, turns, and genetic bottlenecks we shall never know about« (217). His argument, however, that sexual selection contributed to the development of the ›art instinct‹ aspires to very precise knowledge of pre-historic life and hinges on the strict prerequisite that our predecessors in the Pleistocene, the time span of roughly 1.6 million years in the course of which »our modern intellectual constitution was probably achieved ... about fifty thousand years ago« (42), lived monogamously. The basic idea here is that »Monogamy demands assortative mating by pairs, rather than winner-takes-all, harem-building scenarios. This means that men and women tend to choose the highest-quality, highest-status mate attainable for them according to a variety of criteria« (139-140). In addition Dutton proclaims that »mate choice in courtship is dominated by females, and especially in *Homo sapiens* by female feeling and discrimination« (140). Other possibilities are rejected and classified as unnatural when he states that

the very idea that one man might, elephant-seal style, control hundreds of women in a harem is a reminder of how far some religious and political structures of the last ten thousand years have drawn us away from the prehistoric scene in which hunter-gatherer sexual preferences evolved. The small mobile bands of human beings that came to flourish in the Pleistocene developed mate preferences based on their conditions, not ours. (141)

Indeed they did, but these conditions did not necessarily require or favour monogamy, and while pair bonding as a dominant form of sexual reproduction among our predecessors is strongly supported by many scientists, the last word on the specific origins and in particular on the social consequences has certainly not been spoken in the relevant research. Almost all human cultures practise polygamy to some extent, and the alternative to strict pair bonding is not necessarily a single male controlling hundreds of women but possibly also a small band of

humans with an alpha male, a group of females, and adolescents plus some less happy males, a form of social grouping that exists among other primates and social mammals. Sarah Blaffer Hrdy points out that »although here is a tendency to assume that early hominids lived in nuclear families the way married people do today, or perhaps in small harems«, no one knows how they lived«. ⁶ More recently in an interview the Palaeontologist Friedemann Schrenk pointed out that while pair-bonding among early humans is a distinct possibility, all our concepts about their social life and communication are conjectures based on indirect evidence. ⁷ In consequence, it may be fallacious to tie any theory too closely to one particular scenario. The simple fact that the most draconic laws against adultery and the strictest prohibitions of divorce in the course of history and in some present societies never really managed to control the centrifugal forces in human relationships indicates that our instincts are probably not fully geared to sexual monogamy and in particular to the harmonious life of loving couples that Dutton suggests.

Moreover, in his vision of Pleistocene life, permanent sexual monogamy is linked to happy social monogamy (»the qualities of the mind chosen and thus evolved in this process of human self-domestication made for enduring pairings«, [151]), and he writes in a tone reminiscent of the Christian marriage vows about the »crucial choice often faced by our ancestors: whether to choose this man or woman as a mate with whom to rear children and share a life of mutual support« (165), probably for the better or the worse. Do we really have to imagine the first tribal communities on the African savannah as a group of nuclear families in which a father and a mother raised their children and spent their evenings chatting and necking in separation from the other couples? Leaning heavily on Geoffrey Miller's book *The Mating Mind: How Sexual Selection Shaped the Evolution of Human Nature* Dutton presents pre-historic courtship according to patterns reminiscent of an American high school dance (»sexual selection is best seen as a gaudy overpowered Pleistocene home-entertainment system, devised in order that our Stone Age ancestors could attract, amuse and bed each other«, [151]), but this construction is certainly very much at odds with the most diverse forms of mate selection in most non-Western cultures or even Western cultures earlier than the late Renaissance. Did men and women in hunter-gatherer societies really spend their leisure time as nuclear families, and if so, why were there so many institutionalised male communities and all those men's houses? Did husbands and wives really raise their children together or did the women care for the younger children and the girls while the men taught and trained the adolescent boys? All these questions are never mentioned in Dutton's account of pre-historic partnership and his vision of a »vivid intellectual and creative life« in the Pleistocene that »would have found expression in song, dance, and imaginative speech« (150).

Women, according to Dutton were free to choose the lucky male on whom they would then bestow their graces and sexual favours, and they selected men who were kind and generous and witty and possibly also able to come up with some romantic poetry »as a kind of cognitive foreplay« (149). And as a result of this continuous process of self-domestication, our human nature evolved: our kindness, our generosity and our poetic talents. The self-domestication of sexual selection »was about living the richer sociality that would carry on the human species and allow it to flourish. That too defines success, for survival not just of the physically strongest but of the cleverest, wittiest, and wisest« (163). One may, of course, ask, why after thousands and thousands of generations the average poetic talent of humans is negligible, but even more why in the course of such a long process of selection women did not quite manage to breed males that indeed are clever and witty and wise and kind and generous. Such males would, for example, treat their wives as equals and not as inferiors, and they would not readily have turned to domestic violence on a more or less regular basis throughout history – no enthusiasm for romance should let us forget that until not too long

ago husbands were free to discipline their somewhat childish wives by physical chastisement. The laws against wife beating in the Western world are a very late achievement, and it is taking a long time for these laws to be enforced. And if men over almost countless millennia managed to pretend to be kind, generous and poetic only to drop their masks and reveal themselves as the usual disgustoids after they got what they presumably wanted, something must be seriously wrong with the human cheater detection system as described by various researchers in cognitive studies.

In Dutton's pre-historic world there is no violence, no sexual coercion or harassment, there is no parental or social pressure on women choosing their mates and neither are there any forms of arranged or forced marriages or the complicated rules of exogamy which in later stages of the cultural development may have limited the number of eligible suitors considerably. In fact, Dutton's Pleistocene is a feminist dream come true. How then did it happen that women were far more often than not marginalized and deprived of equal rights in historical times? Why is it that mate selection was, and in many places is, hardly ever left to ›female feeling and discrimination‹? Of course, it is possible to argue for a resurrection of Rousseau, for a blissful state of nature in the Pleistocene before the corruptions and evils of culture and social contracts, when not only natural but also sexual selection worked »solely by and for the good of each being«, and »all corporeal and mental endowments [tended] to progress towards perfection«.⁸ But this view would not quite match up with Dutton's idea that evolution led to the best that culture could possibly offer, and it also does not quite agree with the relevant anthropological research. Menelaos Apostolou, for example, writes: »In light of the fact that parental control is the typical pattern of mate choice among extant foragers, it is likely that this pattern was also prevalent throughout human evolution«,⁹ but such a bleak possibility is never raised by Dutton, and it would, of course, be rather detrimental for his argument. His line of thought requires free choice of mates, unrestricted by any external pressures as the central aspect is that mate selection was based not only on provision and protection but also on the fun and happiness that might be expected for the life in mutual love and respect. Historically, this is a rather modern view of marriage, raising the question whether Dutton sees the Western modes of modern life as ›natural‹ and all other cultures as deviations from this ideal?

A bias for the Western world can also be found in Dutton's presentation of the most favourable conditions for self-domestication. He concedes that the

lives of many Pleistocene people were doubtless brutal and short. But for others, especially in Europe in the period of the receding glaciers and global warming at the end of the last Ice Age, there was abundant food and leisure – free time that was spent not only painting caves but presumably singing, telling stories, making jokes, improvising poetry, dancing, and making love. (150)

We may, thus, assume that art, music, and literature first flourished in Europe about 12,000 years ago and it must have been from here that sweetness and light spread to the less favoured regions of the world, to Africa, Asia Minor and Asia where the local humans must obviously have been just a little bit less developed and not quite as domesticated. It seems as if the White Man's Burden has a long pedigree.

But let us for the sake of argument follow the logic of the book and see in which direction humans developed in consequence of the sexual selection and self-domestication that Dutton assumes to have been at work in prehistoric times. As women enjoyed entertainment and preferred a man of wealth and taste, they chose husbands who could also impress them with a good command of language. In consequence, Dutton argues that the vocabulary size of languages is a result of sexual selection. Based on the number of words known to the average speaker of modern languages he writes:

It is clear that no more than a couple of thousand words at most would have been adequate for communication in the Pleistocene. The excess vocabulary of sixty-thousand-plus words is explained by sexual selection: the evolutionary function of language is not only to be a means of efficient communication but to be a signal of fitness and general intelligence. (147)

This, of course, neglects the fact that ancient languages certainly did not have the vocabulary size of their modern descendants – Biblical Hebrew, for example had around 8,000–10,000 words and thus not much more than the 5,000 words that Arthur Sigismund Diamond recorded for present day Food Gatherers in *The History and Origin of Languages*. The development of modern vocabularies, then, was definitely not caused by sexual selection, as female choice of mates was not a distinctive element of the cultures from antiquity way to the Europe of the 19th and even 20th century, and for reasons already given it is highly questionable whether it was in pre-historic times. But Dutton becomes even more specific:

In terms of sexual selection, vocabulary size – competently using not just the words ›green‹ or ›blue‹ but being capable to employ ›navy‹, ›jade‹, ›azure‹, ›ultramarine‹, ›cerulean‹, ›sea green‹, ›lime‹, ›turquoise‹, ›chartreuse‹, ›cobalt blue‹, ›forest green‹, ›sapphire‹, ›aquamarine‹, and so on – is an ornamental capacity analogous to the peacock's tail. Such enhanced decorative language use was pointless for Pleistocene survival, but it is as intrinsic to human life as other mental traits that have been created and enhanced by sexual selection. (148-149)

This sounds almost like a parody of evolutionary studies, and one can just see Fred searching for the *mot juste* in his desperate attempt to impress Wilma with his knowledge of Pleistocene *haute couture*.

Hidden in Dutton's account is a deeply Victorian ideology, according to which boys will be boys, and so the moral and spiritual values of the nation were to be transmitted and preserved by the women. Their choice and their moral fibre were considered to be formative for their husbands who had to spend their lives out in the jungle of the public sphere and in competition with other males, and arriving back at their homes and hearths they were comforted and spent their evenings with all kinds of cultural activities and recreations in the bosom of their families. This, of course, fails to explain the existence of social clubs and lodges and bars and other all-male spheres where men chose to spend their time rather than at home with their wives – the descendents of the men's houses of tribal people in modern times are probably easier to demonstrate than the predominance of happy marriages.

If Dutton's arguments about sexual selection and its role in human self-domestication are dependent on a very specific construction of our Pleistocene past, a construction that may well be at odds with the actual conditions experienced by our predecessors, his views on art itself, including literature and especially music, are very much dependent on his own taste and critical assessment. On the first pages he offers a very convincing ›democratic‹ outlook on the human appreciation of artistic imagery when he describes the universal preference for pictures showing the kind of landscape that must have been most promising for our prehistoric ancestors. But the rest of the book hardly ever again looks with any kind of favour on those forms of art that speak to the vast majority of their human audience. Art in this book is high art, or, even better, great art. Film as one of the most important art forms of the 20th century is only mentioned in passing, pop music is similarly omitted almost completely from the book. Instead, the reader is told over and over again which music ought to be listened to with delight, which books have to be read with abandonment, and what has to be dismissed as unacceptable to the developed taste of the human art instinct.

The problems begin in the chapter on forgery and ›our‹ appreciation of the role of the artist. The argument is firmly based in the assumption that ›we‹ are cheated by art forgery because ›we‹ cherish and admire the skill and achievement of the artist as a person. In consequence, a perfect forger of Vermeer must necessarily fail because ›our interest in Vermeer lies in wanting to know how that particular Dutch genius saw his seventeenth century world, including the human beings that peopled it‹ (193). Similarly, a forgery of Rembrandt could ›never be Rembrandt's loving vision of his son: it would just be one clever criminal's attempt to convince us that this is how Rembrandt saw his little boy‹ (ibid.). This is the worst kind of biographical criticism, assuming that the emotions and thoughts in a work of art must necessarily be the true feelings of the artist. Who knows whether Rembrandt loved his son deeply or whether he ›forged‹ that emotion in his picture? The view on art presented here would ultimately require us to know whether there actually was a dark lady that Shakespeare loved. Just imagine that he might have just invented those high emotions for his sonnets – would he not have been cheating his audience's desire for authenticity and committing a serious artistic fraud?

Dutton in these passages insists on the significance of the artist for the assessment of the work, because he needs the admiration of the exceptionally skilled individual for his argument of human self-domestication. But the examples Dutton chooses are almost exclusively from the centuries since the late Renaissance, and, in fact, he might have had problems with earlier eras because we simply don't know the respective artists of those times. Over long periods of human history the artist or poet was not especially relevant. In the middle ages, for example, authors were not expected to create something authentic, and the works were more often than not passed on anonymously. Artists were admired in some eras but not in others. In Europe we can find some aspects of it in the classical age, but the concept of the artist as genius grew out of the Renaissance and is chiefly a heritage of Romanticism. It is only then that the artist turned into the ›hero‹ of his or her own work – one might have expected that artists, coveted by women and thus favoured in the process of sexual selection, had written a few works in which this role was emphasized or at least mentioned, but in myth and legend the bard is hardly ever noticeable while sexual success is almost invariably granted to the traditional warrior hero. For Dutton, however, the adoration of the individual creator is the norm as inscribed into human nature by our Pleistocene inheritance in the course of sexual selection, and while in places like China ›artistic individuality has in different times be relatively played down by a rhetoric of modesty and self-effacement‹ (233), he insists that there is ›no living tradition‹ in which this seems to be the case. And now we get the knock-down argument: ›The whole Western performance tradition is one of powerful personalities producing performances that are uniquely their own. We call those people stars‹ (ibid.). Once more a recent cultural phenomenon of the West is projected back in time and turned into the norm, deviations from which are to be dismissed as exceptions.

In the last chapter Dutton unabashedly turns to a praise of high art, and it is here that Matthew Arnold's presence can be felt most deeply. Arnold in *Culture and Anarchy* concedes that there is some intellectual food for the masses in the form of popular literature used for indoctrination by various interested factions and parties, and he stresses that he does not condemn this, but ›culture works differently‹. Similarly Dutton points out that he has ›written with every intention of including in the analysis what might be dismissed as low-end popular art‹. Indeed he has, but the reader is hardly ever allowed to forget that this is indeed just the low end, even if, when needed, Dutton will drag pop stars from the cultural dustbin to describe them as ›powerful personalities‹ and hail their performances as ›uniquely their own‹ (see above). Throughout the text, Dutton constantly informs his readership with chiefly unsubstantiated statements as to which art is acceptable and ›great‹ and which products fail to meet seemingly

universal standards. And now on the last pages we learn that »open-mindedness about including low-end amusements under the rubric of art ought not to distract us from paying attention to the rare but persistent qualities of art's most demanding, top-end excellence« (236).

The view on art presented in this chapter is not only elitist in the extreme, but also highly conservative and almost absurdly idiosyncratic. Dutton has no problem with Christopher Booker's assessment that »the ambiguities and cynicism of modernism have driven literature away from the moral edification seen through most of storytelling history« (129), even though literary history can offer myriads of stories, many of them canonical, that are not particularly morally edifying but rather hail warfare, slaughter, and various forms of atrocities. In fact, Dutton much later in the book unexpectedly stresses that great art need not be morally edifying at all (230-231), but still insists that »the best art is produced in societies that believe in something« (239) and diagnoses »the decline of great art in cynical, ironic ages, such as our own« (240). Modernists, according to Dutton, hoped that »we would all become free to enjoy pure abstraction in painting, atonality in music, random word order poetry, *Finnegans Wake*, and readymades, just as we enjoy Ingres, Mozart, or Jane Austen« (205). However, »contingent facts about human nature ensure not only that some things in the arts will be difficult to appreciate but that appreciation of them may be impossible« (206). But who is this strange ›we‹ that obviously shares all of Dutton's tastes? What does this rhetorical construction of an in-group indicate about those who do not particularly like Mozart or think that Ingres' picture of »Napoleon on his Imperial Throne« is an artistic atrocity? Have such misguided observers failed to reach the pinnacle of humanity, and are they still stuck in some pre-human mental condition? And have those who actually enjoy *Finnegans Wake* and who prefer Beckett to Dickens and Schönberg to Rachmaninoff abandoned their human nature? Quite obviously they are not part of ›us‹.

Art as it is seen by Dutton has developed to a particular point when it reached its highest achievements at some time in the late 19th century, but now it is sadly dropping off and can no longer excite and capture the true devotee; it is, of course, Dutton's very personal taste that defines this highest point, and his dislikes strangely coincide with the loss of artistic value or, even worse, with kitsch. For example, »Hermann Hesse's pretentious mysticism and Khalil Gibran's little messages dressed up in pseudo-biblical cadences count as kitsch. And let us not forget glitzy Broadway productions that mimic serious opera (so boring!) but offer instead a morass of bad music, loudly miked, and dramatic clichés« (241). On the other hand, with »Shakespeare, Beethoven, Hokusai, and Wagner we have artists for whom the art itself is the transcendental good and not a reflection of anything else – an articulated religious or ethical ideal, of even a theory of beauty« (240). How, in God's or Darwin's name, does he know what those artists thought and felt when they produced their respective works? For all we know, Shakespeare may chiefly have wanted to make a lot of money, which he did. And for whom are those Broadway musicals ›a morass of bad music‹? Certainly not for the many, many people who love them and who would probably prefer paying for not having to listen to a Wagner opera. If the arts »draw us into them in order to yield up the deep, intricate imaginative experiences« (237), what about those who remain untouched, who willingly listen to ›bad‹ pop music rather than to Beethoven's sonatas, who prefer Barbara Cartland to Leo Tolstoy or, hardly imaginable, Roy Lichtenstein to Dutch masters. And think of all those people who put Richard Bach's story about *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, here simply dismissed as »bad art« (171), on the New York Times bestseller list for more than half a year. Are they simply unable to appreciate true emotions and great art, and could it be that as human beings they are not quite as developed as Dutton and ›we‹?

It does not matter here that Dutton's taste occasionally coincides with mine. After all, we are the product of the same tiny cultural niche: white, male, Western, and with an academic education, and so it is not particularly surprising that we have learned to appreciate the cultural markers of our direct social environment. But to suggest that ›our‹ love for the classics and ›our‹ admiration for canonical art and music prior to 1900 marks the high point of an evolutionary process just before it began to decline into modern cynicism and postmodern kitsch is not only elitist but also downright reactionary.

Of course I do not want to suggest that Dutton really wants to propose any categorical distinction between those who appreciate ›great‹ art and those who prefer the lighter muses and relish the »cheap sentimentality [of] emotions that are everybody's« (235), but in the present intellectual climate, which is still highly suspicious of evolutionary explanations, biological concepts tied to elitist views invite not only far too easy rejections from those ›we‹ (!) want to address, but also applause from unwelcome and possibly not particularly savoury quarters.

Frequently Dutton's tone becomes almost religious; authenticity in art is »at the most profound level a communion with another human soul« (193), while kitsch cannot change our »bright shining soul« (242) – whatever that may mean in Darwinian terms. If Leslie Fiedler in his famed essay »Cross the Border, Close the Gap« spoke about a »Culture Religion of Modernism«¹⁰ that had to be overcome by a new and more democratic literature, Dutton re-installs Arnold's notion that great art embodies, transmits and preserves ›our‹ moral values, spiritual virtues and »sweetness and light«. But to offer art once more as an equivalent of religious elevation and spiritual glory runs directly against the common-sense approach and the democratic view on cultural production that characterize the best parts of Dutton's book.

In the course of his dismissal of ›kitsch‹, Dutton writes: »Literature and philosophy too can offer kitsch by way of undemanding analysis of life's problems through trite insights into the secrets of the universe« (241). But while large portions of Dutton's book are fully convincing and informative, there are also quite a few chapters that cannot escape his own verdict. This is a pity, because the dogmatism, the implausible scenarios and the elitist visions are not doing Dutton's cause any favour, and I want to repeat once again that it is also my cause.

Doreen Triebel and Dirk Vanderbeke
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Notes

¹ To name only three more recent examples: Eckart Voland/Karl Grammer (eds.), *Evolutionary Aesthetics*, Heidelberg 2003; Jonathan Gottschall/David Sloan Wilson (eds.), *The Literary Animal. Evolution and the Nature of Narrative*, Evanston, IL 2005; Brian Boyd, *On the Origin of Stories. Evolution, Cognition and Fiction*, Cambridge, Mass. 2009.

² R.H. Super (ed.), *The Complete Works of Matthew Arnold*, vol. X, Ann Arbor 1972, 53-73, here 72.

³ Matthew Arnold, Culture and Anarchy. An Essay in Political and Social Criticism [1867-69], in: Stefan Collini (ed.), *Matthew Arnold. Culture and Anarchy and other writings*, Cambridge and New York, 1993, 53-211, here 78-79.

⁴ Joanna Overing, Aesthetics is a Cross-cultural Category. Against the Motion (1), in: Tim Ingold (ed.), *Key Debates in Anthropology* [1996], London et al. 2001, 260-266, here 265.

⁵ For a critique of Dutton's view of sexual selection that addresses different problems, see Brian Boyd's review »Art and Selection« in *Philosophy and Literature* 33 (2009), 204-220.

⁶ Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, *Mother Nature. Natural Selection and the Female of the Species*, London 1999, 215.

⁷ Cf. Bernhard Epping, *Porträt Friedemann Schrenk: Evolution des Menschen. »Alle Stammbäume sind Schall und Rauch«*, *Spektrum der Wissenschaft* 9 (2010), 69-73, here 72.

⁸ Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species* [1859], London 1995, 428.

⁹ Menelaos Apostolou, *Sexual Selection under Parental Choice. The Role of Parents in the Evolution of Human Mating*, *Evolution and Human Behavior* 28 (2007) 403-409, here 403.

¹⁰ Leslie Fiedler, *Cross the Border, Close the Gap* [1969], in: Leslie Fielder, *Cross the Border – Close the Gap*, New York 1972, 61-85, here 64.

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