

# THE SECOND MODERNITY OF NATURALIST AESTHETICS

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## 1.

In the historical development of aesthetics there existed two separate intentions within naturalist approaches. The first was to establish a naturalist explanation of aesthetic phenomena and the second the “scientification” of aesthetics following the model of the natural sciences and their experimental methods. Although intertwined, their purpose was different. The naturalist explanation insisted on a continuity between nature and culture, whereas scientification started to sever aesthetics’ ties with philosophy and aimed at a systematic and complete scientific understanding of aesthetic phenomena. Both of them were important during the nineteenth century, but were strongly criticised afterwards and have almost disappeared from philosophical aesthetics.

The idea that everything in existence, including the human being and his or her abilities, can be explained and understood from natural causes only, without any use of metaphysical forces or religious presumptions, belongs to modernity and modernism no less than the idea that the human being, especially its Christian white male race, exceeds anything natural in principle. Postmodernism with its second “cultural turn” did not bring about a change in direction, but it brought a new accent. In Scott Lash’s *Sociology of Postmodernism* the distinction between modernism and postmodernism is that *modernism conceives of representations as being problematic, whereas postmodernism problematizes reality*.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Scott Lash, *Sociology of Postmodernism*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 13. In Stuart Hall’s interpretation, we get a very similar account of “cultural turn”: “The conventional view used to be that ‘things’ exist in the material and natural world; that their material or natural characteristics are what determines or constitutes them; and that they have a perfectly clear meaning *outside* of how they are represented. Representation,

What remains of “reality” is a cultural pluralism of games with different rules, not a realm of necessity with strict laws of nature. From this aspect, postmodernism announced a triumph of culture over nature, which means that the project of modernism was successfully carried out. Nature does not count any more. In the new edition of his *Culture as Praxis*, Zygmunt Bauman puts things in perspective. At first, he argues, culture was what humans were able to do, and nature was what humans were subordinated to. The nineteenth century experienced the naturalisation of culture: culture functions as something natural, a fact with a necessity of its own. In the second half of the twentieth century, we witnessed a culturisation of nature: what used to be nature two centuries ago is reduced to the invisible.<sup>2</sup>

Today, the situation of aesthetics may be summarised by juxtaposing two recent books on its relation with art, those of Donald Kuspit (*The End of Art*) and Michael Kelly (*Iconoclasm in Aesthetics*). The thesis of Kuspit’s book is that contemporary art is an art of the end of art, which means that within contemporary art, called postart following Allan Kaprow, art’s end ceased to exist: “Postart is completely banal art – unmistakably everyday art, neither kitsch nor high art, but an in-between art that glamorizes everyday reality while pretending to analyse it.”<sup>3</sup>

When Kuspit discusses whether masterpieces of art can be created within contemporary art, his discussion proceeds in a direction similar to that of Erich Fromm on the possibility of love in the capitalist cosmos of money: yes, in principle, but only where artists are free of financial pressure, free of their own interest in success and popular glory, and free of the entertainment industry and mass taste.<sup>4</sup> Before he wrote *Iconoclasm in Aesthetics*, Michael Kelly was editor of the *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*.<sup>5</sup> When collecting papers for the *Encyclopedia*, he was astonished to discover how many contem-

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in this view, is a process of secondary importance, which enters into the field only after things have been fully formed and their meaning constructed. But since the ‘cultural turn’ in the human and social sciences, meaning is thought to be *produced* – constructed – rather than simply ‘found’. Consequently, in what has come to be called a ‘social constructionist approach’, representation is conceived as entering into the very constitution of things; and thus culture is conceptualized as a primary or ‘constitutive’ process, as important as the economic or material ‘base’ in shaping social subjects and historical events – not merely a reflection of the world after the event.” (Stuart Hall (ed.), *Representations. Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*, London: Sage, 1997, pp. 5–6.

<sup>2</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, “Introduction”, in Zygmunt Bauman, *Culture as Praxis – New Edition* (London: Sage, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Donald Kuspit, *The End of Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 91.

<sup>4</sup> Donald Kuspit, “Postscript: Abandoning and Rebuilding the Studio”, *op. cit.*, pp. 175–192.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Kelly (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, 4 Vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 5.

porary scholars declined his invitation. Puzzled, he asked himself: “What is it that you don’t do when you don’t do aesthetics?” and “What is it that you do do when you don’t do aesthetics?”<sup>6</sup> The answers, which mentioned mostly the insistence of aesthetics on universalism and the ahistoricism of art and beauty, led him to analyse the aesthetic theories of Heidegger, Adorno, Derrida, and Danto. When he determined they did not succeed in touching art at all, he sought deeper reasons and found “*iconoclasm*, by which I mean a combination of *disinterest and distrust in art* that stems from a tendency to inscribe a deficiency into the very conception (or ontology) of art.”<sup>7</sup>

On one hand, in Kuspit, we have this disinterest and distrust in contemporary art, clearly expressed, and on the other, in Kelly, we are given a possible cause for such a deplorable philosophical image of art. These are extreme positions, of course, but not uncommon, strange, or just a curiosity. What, however, seems to be uncommon, strange, and just a curiosity is the second modernity of naturalist aesthetics. By calling its developments in our own time the “second modernity”, I intend to locate it in the context of the disillusionment with art and aesthetics.

To explain my case, I will first explain what I have in mind by “second modernity”. Second, I will discuss the naturalist aesthetics of the past and the present, and analyse different conditions and features of past and present naturalist aesthetics. Finally, I will conclude with an explanation of why Kelly’s “iconoclasm” fits contemporary naturalist aesthetics so well.

## 2.

In the year 1940, when the Second World War was in its initial phase, it was evidently France’s turn to become the next target of the *Blitzkrieg*, and Walter Benjamin composed his last, very short thesis on the notion of history. One of his central tenets is that the state of exception has become a regular state of history. In order to go against the grain of the progressivist notion of history, Benjamin pleaded for a new notion. “Amazement that the things we are experiencing are ‘still’ possible in the twentieth century is not philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge – unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Kelly, *Iconoclasm in Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xi.

<sup>8</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, in Hannah Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), p. 259.

As far as we know, the last versions of this short text were written in the spring of that year, and left with a friend in Paris. Benjamin, a German Jew in France, went with a group of refugees to the French-Spanish border. There they had to wait one night. The following day they crossed the border – without Benjamin. He committed suicide, which we may understand as his last thesis on history.

At a time when, according to Benjamin, this permanent state of exception had historically begun, René Descartes left Holland, where he mostly studied physics and mathematics, to become a soldier and take part in the final European chaos of the Thirty Years' War. Due to a snow storm, he lost his way, and spent several days and nights in a hut alone in the middle of white nowhere. There, a French soldier in Germany, he had a dream, and this dream answered his most fundamental dilemmas. Now he had a mission, and he followed this mission with unshaken determination ever after.

In two similar and not uncommon situations for modernity, at its beginning and at its end, we find two very different reactions. Descartes arrived at a certainty, Benjamin at a state of exception. Benjamin was widely used by postmodernists to prove that modernism is over.

Is modernism over? Should we speak of its *end*, instead of its *crisis*? After approximately thirty years of debate we have to change the manner of discourse if we want to get out of the labyrinth. The need for change is felt in aesthetics as well. In fact, aesthetics was one of the philosophical pillars of modernity, and, initially, its own product. Many products of aesthetic progressivism, including its image of Art, perished together with progressivism. What to do now with aesthetics? We have already mentioned two options. One is to go beyond postart, another is to go beyond aesthetics. There is yet another: to naturalize aesthetics, and to understand the stable foundations of art in terms of evolutionary genetic impulses and the structural conditioning of human cognition. To put these kinds of proposals in perspective, I intend to use the concept of second modernity. It seems handy: at first we had the naturalization of aesthetics during the pioneer times of the first modernity, and now we have the second wave of naturalization. "The second modernity" was a name given to our epoch by Ulrich Beck, following his previous attempts at designations such as "the risk society" and "the reflexive modernity". His notion of the risk society addresses a social response: in different parts of society, there has been a mobilisation against the risks, hazards, and insecurities brought about by victorious modernism. Reflexive modernization is distrust and disillusionment with the mechanisms and institutions of modernization which traditionally (should) take care of our safety, security, and certainty: The State, Science, Police, Art, Church, Army, Academia, and

Progress itself. According to Ulrich Beck and Christoph Lau,<sup>9</sup> the post-modern presumption that modernity is over, is wrong. What we have, in fact, is a transition from the first to the second modernity. The first modernity, with the nation-state, social relations, networks, and communities, was a territorial regime – a successful one, because reflexivity is not a result of its crisis but its victory. Victorious modernity brings about new kinds of problems, such as “the very idea of controllability, certainty, or security – so fundamental to first modernity – collapses.”<sup>10</sup> The strategies of the first modernity are the marginalisation of deviations, temporal deferment (transferring certainty to the future), ontologisation (social facts represented as natural), and monopolisation (a state monopoly on the use of violence, etc.). During the second modernity all these strategies still function, but without the previous efficiency. The new structural logic of the second modernity steps in with the principle of inclusive differentiation: the development of pluralism specific for a particular sphere, plural compromise without clearly cut and exclusive solutions, hierarchically organised pluralism, unstructured plurality, the intermeshing of alternatives, the dissolution and synthesis of boundaries, and similar practices. All of these add to ambiguities, a lack of clarity, and the erosion of boundaries – a situation unthinkable during first modernity’s clear differentiation.

The state of art and the state of aesthetics confirm this diagnosis.

### 3.

Darwin’s evolutionary hypothesis is a still contested triumph of the scientific approach. He defined two intrinsic natural forces: the struggle for survival and sexual selection. The first is a universal law of nature, which turns market competition and Malthusian human population laws into natural facts. The second makes the evolution of sexually divided species dependent upon aesthetic sense, which belongs to the female side of this division, and adds to the first evolutionary principle a second one: a principle of taste. Darwin’s guiding idea in *The Descent of Man* was to prove a case against racism,<sup>11</sup> but some of his followers and later evolutionists nonetheless defended racism with evolutionist arguments. Furthermore, Darwin’s half

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<sup>9</sup> Ulrich Beck and Christoph Lau, “Second modernity as a research agenda: theoretical and empirical explorations in the ‘meta-change’ of modern society”, *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 56, No. 4 (December 2005), pp. 525–557.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 526.

<sup>11</sup> Karl Vogt, for instance, a well-known “vulgar materialist” who defended the in-

cousin, Francis Galton, a founder of eugenics, obviously distrusted female aesthetic taste in the human race, and proposed the scientific management of human breeding to prevent the decadence of species. During the first half of the twentieth century, eugenics was one of the most popular sciences. The influence of eugenics on politics and state legislations while most visible in Germany, extended all over the world.<sup>12</sup> Herbert Spencer turned the laws of nature into social laws again, and the expression “survival of the fittest” was in fact coined by this liberal philosopher, turning liberal competitive society into a natural phenomenon.

Darwin’s ideas were quite popular among German philosophers, art historians, and scientists. Moritz Wagner developed his own kind of geographic evolutionary theory based on migrations and struggle for territory. The decisive moment of survival is isolation on a secure territory, and migrations influenced by the struggle among individuals of the same species.<sup>13</sup>

Under the influence of human activity, natural selection is losing ground and artificial selection is taking place. This includes human beings:

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dependent origin of different human races, suggested translating Darwin’s book into German, but was turned down by the author because of his support for racism.

<sup>12</sup> In Germany, Erwin Baur and Eugen Fischer wrote a popular compendium of eugenics entitled *Human Heredity and Racial Hygiene*, first published in 1921, a combination of genetics, anthropology and racial hygiene. (See: Heiner M. Fangeran, “Making Eugenics a Public Issue: A Reception Study of the First German Compendium on Racial Hygiene, 1921–1940”, *Science Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (2005).) After the Second World War, eugenics was a prohibited and invisible science, but it is again gaining in popularity. This brings out some extremely controversial situations, as that of Germany, where research in eugenics is legally restricted, seeking help from Israel, where there are no restrictions of such kind: “Isn’t it a traumatic experience of the German past, the breeding fantasies of the Nazis, and the killing of six million Jews, which poses a particular load on Germany’s shoulders in the (bio)ethical debate? And now it is Jewish reproductive medicine practitioners who evidently have no scruples with regard to delivering these controversial embryonic stem cells to the University of Bonn, thereby provoking the violation of a taboo.” (U. Schnabel, “Ohne Mutter keine Menschenwürde”, *Die Zeit*, No. 24 (2001), p. 32; translated in Barbara Prainsack and Ofer Firestone, “Genetically Modified Survival: Red and Green Biotechnology in Israel”, *Science as Culture*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (2005), pp. 355–356.) If we put this in the context created by Peter Sloterdijk’s lecture to Jewish intellectuals which developed into a great German scandal on eugenics and other issues, the traumatic meeting of German and Jewish genetics acquires the flavour of a comical controversy. (See Peter Sloterdijk, “Regeln für den Menschenpark. Eine Antwortschreiben zum Brief über den Humanismus,” <http://menschenpark.tripod.com>.)

<sup>13</sup> Moritz Wagner, *The Darwinian Theory and the Law of the Migration of Organisms* (London: Edward Stanford, 1873). (“In the continual struggle between individuals of the same species for food and reproduction, some must always be endeavouring to cross the limits of their respective stations. The extreme boundaries must therefore be continually changing, according as some individuals find means, either by voluntary or passive migration, to pass the station of their species.” – *Ibid.*, p. 27.)

New races of men will no longer arise, but only *bastard ones*, through the frequent intercourse of existing races. Perfect isolation of single stocks during a long series of generations is now no longer possible on account of the present state of universal intercourse and of the stream of emigration arising out of the overpopulation of the civilized countries of Europe and Asia; so that the fundamental condition for the formation of new races is lacking.<sup>14</sup>

His ideas attracted attention in art theory circles, and were instrumental in the rise of national art histories and art theories.

Human geography (*Anthropogeographie, la géographie humaine*) found followers in art geography (*Kunstgeographie*). Friedrich Ratzel combined Darwinian survival-of-the-fittest with Wagner's occupation of the territory, and arrived at the concept of life-space, more ominous sounding in its German original: *Lebensraum*. Ethnic blood and virgin soil dictated the mapping of art, with its centre, periphery, and the boundaries of its influence. This became one of the most distinguished preoccupations of art history and art theory. It revealed the power and energy of particular cultures while they spread over territory, conquering weaker and annihilating decadent cultures. On their boundaries and limits exists a constant struggle over *Lebensraum*, creating border-space, divisions between inside and outside, and tensions between the central place of emanation with its borderline frontiers.<sup>15</sup>

During the first modernity there were two main streams in the interpretation of the relationship between nature and culture, both struggling with each other. One tendency wanted to explain culture and society as the result of natural laws; another tendency was oriented towards a strict demarcation between nature and culture. Beneath this visible conflict common and contradictory practices continued on both sides of the divide. Social and cultural models and ideas of the capitalist market, nation-state power, and imperialist colonization invaded the natural sciences. Yet another tendency was to use these natural scientific fundamentals as a re-confirmation of existing political, social, and cultural relations. Brutal and direct naturalism in aesthetics, art history, and art theory were just extreme cases. They were dismissed twice: the first time with a conceptual division between "soft" hu-

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 63–64.

<sup>15</sup> See Friedrich Ratzel, "Der Lebensraum. Eine biogeographische Studie", in *Festgaben für Albert Schäffle* (Tübingen: Verlag der Laupp'schen Buchhandlung, 1901); "Beim Kampf um Raum entsteht immer ein Gegensatz zwischen innen und aussen der Erbe, zwischen dem Kern des Gebietes und den Rand- oder Grenzgebieten." (*Ibid.*, p. 165.)



man and “hard” natural sciences during the *fin-de-siècle*, and the second time after the Second World War with the suppression of Nazi sciences.

#### 4.

At the XVI International Congress of Aesthetics in Rio de Janeiro (2004), named “Changes in Aesthetics”, the presence of naturalist aesthetics came as a surprise. Was this surprise really so unprecedented? The naturalist approach to political, social, and cultural sciences and philosophy reappeared before 2004, more or less at the same time as the “cultural turn” which opened, softened, and deconstructed traditional concepts in the humanities and aesthetics. Evolutionary psychology, for instance, is today already a well developed branch of psychology. Its general statement is simple: science succeeded in revealing how our body is organized and how it functions, and Darwinism can explain how and why it developed in that way. Why shouldn’t we explain human psychology with the same instruments, those of evolution, adaptation, and the struggle for survival? The human psyche is not just a cultural product, and human brains are not an empty space or a dark room. Evolutionary ancestry is present therein at birth. In fact, brains are not an organ at all. Brains are a collection of adaptational psychic skills, like a Swiss army knife. Our psyche is a result of collected survival experiences, embedded in our genes, conditioning our brains with numerous emotions and instincts. Evolutionary psychology is just one substance in the cocktail called “cognitive science”. Jerrold Levinson introduced cognitive science as an agenda of the project “Art, Mind, and Cognitive Science”: “By cognitive science was understood all scientific disciplines seeking to explain the nature and workings of the human mind, including but not restricted to cognitive psychology, neuroscience, linguistics, and evolutionary biology.”<sup>16</sup>

One of the backbones of these sciences, important for aesthetic dispositions and the artistic taste of humans, is the evolutionary formation of the genetically supported psychic condition, a process which lasted two million years, reaching its final natural state some 10,000 years ago, at the beginning of the Holocene period, when cities emerged, first agricultural activities developed, and when we can with certainty locate the use of metal tools and the first writings. From then on we can speak of the finalized process of the formation of the *Homo sapiens sapiens* species. Our mind and its inclina-

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<sup>16</sup> Jerrold Levinson, “Introduction”, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 62, No. 2 (Spring 2004) – Special Issue: “Art, Mind, and Cognitive Science”, p. 89.



tions reflect the conditions of adaptation from two million years before the Holocene period. Culture is significantly conditioned by natural adaptation and its genetic memory. This also includes art.

Another field of naturalization is sociobiology. The new wave of the biologisation of the social sciences began in the 1970s. The title of founding father may go to Edward O. Wilson, with his books *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (1975), and *On Human Nature* (1978).<sup>17</sup> Theories of war and violence have always attracted naturalistic explanations. Barbara Ehrenreich, for instance, in her *Blood Rites* (1997) explains the origins and history of the passions of war, obviously connected with men, from the same Pleistocene period of the formation of the human species. At that time men were not just proverbial hunters. Humans, still weak and incapable of sufficient defences, were prey for beasts. Sociality first emerged in order to satisfy defensive needs. Blood rites as well as wars were born from this situation.<sup>18</sup> Martin van Creveld agrees that culture is a continuation of nature: "So elemental is the human need to endow the shedding of blood with some great and even sublime significance that it renders the intellect almost entirely helpless."<sup>19</sup>

There were older contributions to the naturalization of aesthetics as well. One of most notorious is that of Camille Paglia's *Sexual Personae*, with her attack against the feminist assumption that everything connected with sex is actually gender, i.e. a social construction: "Sex cannot be understood because nature cannot be understood."<sup>20</sup> Art, consequently, is born of men's anxiety as an effective weapon against nature. "Art is form struggling to wake from the nightmare of nature."<sup>21</sup>

New forms of the naturalization of the human and social sciences, together with aesthetics, expressed criticism and the negation of the postmodern "cultural turn" which turned cultural reality into arbitrary construction, and installed unsurpassable fences between nature and culture.

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<sup>17</sup> More on this topic, together with a bibliography of sociobiology, in Dirk Richter, "Das Scheitern der Biologisierung der Soziologie. Zum Stand der Diskussion um die Soziobiologie und andere evolutionstheoretische Ansätze", *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, Vol. 57, No. 3 (September 2005), pp. 523–542.

<sup>18</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich, *Blood Rites. Origins and History of the Passions of War* (New York: Metropolitan Books: Henry Holt and Co., 1997).

<sup>19</sup> Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), p. 166.

<sup>20</sup> Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae. Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

## 5.

Denis Dutton published “Let’s Naturalize Aesthetics” and “Aesthetics and Evolutionary Psychology” in 2003, presented a paper on “Darwinian Aesthetics” at the XVI International Congress of Aesthetics in 2004, and has posted these and some other articles (“The Pleasures of Fiction,” a review of Joseph Carroll’s book *Literary Darwinism*, and “Darwin and Political Theory,” which develops his idea of social and political Darwinism) on his home page.<sup>22</sup> All these writings repeat the same argument. To the already mentioned evolutionary results of the Pleistocene period in the Holocene period, Dutton adds two additional ideas: that art forms are found universally (which strongly suggests that art is connected with ancient psychological adaptations) and that art provides people with pleasure and emotions, often of an intense kind (which therefore must have an adaptive relevance according to the postulate of evolutionary psychology). Aesthetically, the most important of Dutton’s idea reaches beyond the limits of evolutionary psychology: “While evolutionary psychology may have a capacity to shed light on the existence of art and art’s persistent qualities, it cannot pretend to explain everything we might want to know about art.”<sup>23</sup>

What escapes evolutionary psychology is the Kantian distinction between the agreeable and the beautiful.

The agreeable are the straightforward subjective sensations of things that we like in direct experience: the taste of sweet, for example, of the colour blue. The pleasurable experience of such sensations, Kant held, contains no intellectual element: it is a brute feeling, often seeming to satisfy a desire (such as hunger), and as such must be carefully distinguished from the experience of the beautiful, in which the imagination combines with the rational understanding in the experience of imaginative object.<sup>24</sup>

Here, philosophical aesthetics demands its own right: the disinterest-

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<sup>22</sup> Denis Dutton, “Let’s Naturalize Aesthetics”, *ASA Newsletter*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Summer 2003), pp. 1–2; “Aesthetics and Evolutionary Psychology”, in Jerrold Levinson (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook for Aesthetics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); “Darwinian Aesthetics”, paper presented in the XVI World Congress of Aesthetics, Rio de Janeiro, July 20, 2004; “The Pleasures of Fiction”, *Philosophy and Literature*, No. 28 (2004), pp. 453–466; “Darwin and Political Theory”, *Philosophy and Literature*, No. 27 (2004), pp. 241–254; all these texts are available also at <http://denisdutton.com>. For those with a further interest in the more general ideas on evolutionary aesthetics, see Eckhard Voland and Karl Graumer (eds.), *Evolutionary Aesthetics* (Heidelberg: Springer Verlag, 2003).

<sup>23</sup> Denis Dutton, “Aesthetics and Evolutionary Psychology”, <http://www.densidutton.com>.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

ed “pure” aesthetic judgement has to remain out of reach of evolutionary naturalist explanations. Strictly speaking, with this division Dutton denies the competences of evolutionism, as it can explain minor points of aesthetics only. By this he misses the target: any evolutionary theory of aesthetics should be able to explain the natural source of art as an activity which is not useful and perhaps not even pleasurable and desirable in any ordinary sense of these terms. It should be able to touch the evolutionary usefulness of the unuseful and disinterested “pureness of pure art”.

Wolfgang Welsch approached evolutionary aesthetics on the basis of his previous project of transhuman aesthetics, in which he rejected most Western aesthetics as anthropocentric, and not just Eurocentric: “Instead, we ought to conceive of the human in a larger than human context, taking into account, for instance, our place in the cosmic and natural environment, or our primordial connectedness with the world, or the non-human layers of our existence.”<sup>25</sup>

One of the possible consequences of the transhuman aesthetic orientation is to embrace the evolutionary approach. Admitting that there is a vast literature on evolutionary aesthetics already, Welsch also argues that all of it has serious shortcomings. First, Darwin advocated the existence of a genuinely aesthetic sense in most animals, while “most contemporary evolutionists reduce the aesthetic to mere survival value.” Second, evolutionism addresses human, not animal aesthetics, demolishing the most important Darwinian idea of the continuity between the animal kingdom and the human species. Animal aesthetics challenges our belief that we are unique, and (from an understanding of pre-human aesthetics) opens a perspective on transhuman aesthetics.

To prove that there is an aesthetic attitude in the animal kingdom, Welsch would have to provide an insight into “aesthetic revolution” at a certain point in animal evolution. He points to some possible extensions of Darwin’s approach which would be necessary for such an aesthetic turn in the animal kingdom, but what he comes up with are animal “standards of taste”, which, not stimulated by mere survival, are initiated by desire and oriented towards pleasure. While it is possible to search here for a continuity with human taste and earthly pleasures, this can hardly figure as the aesthetic attitude, in particular of the kind that could point in the direction of art.

How the evolutionary aesthetic approach misses the point, when it treats

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<sup>25</sup> This and the next quotation are from Wolfgang Welsch’s “Animal Aesthetics”, see his home page at <http://www.2.uni-jena.de/welsch>.

contemporary art, is evident in Dutton's interpretation of a project by two expatriate Russian artists, namely Komar and Melamid.

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In his writings on evolutionary or Darwinian aesthetics, Dutton presents Komar and Melamid's project "The Most Wanted Paintings" and "The Least Wanted Paintings"<sup>26</sup> as a proof for his case.

The idea of a pervasive Pleistocene taste in landscape received support from an unusual project undertaken by two Russian émigré artists, Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, in 1993. They hired a professional polling organization to conduct a broad survey of the art preferences of people living in ten countries in Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas. Blue turned out to be the favourite colour worldwide, with green in second place. Respondents expressed a liking for realistic representative paintings. Preferred elements included water, trees and other plants, human beings (with a preference for women and children, and also for historic figures, such as Jomo Kenyatta or Sun Yat-sen), and animals, especially large mammals, both wild and domestic. Using the statistical preferences as a guide, Komar and Melamid then produced a favourite painting for each country. Their intent was clearly ironic, as the painting humorously mixed completely incompatible elements.<sup>27</sup>

There was also a serious side to the project; for the paintings, although created from the choices of different cultures, tended to share a remarkably similar set of preferences. They looked like ordinary European landscape calendar art, both photographic and painted. It is the calendar industry that has, by meeting market demands, discovered a Pleistocene taste in outdoor scenes. Being a result of evolution inscribed in our aesthetic sense, this taste prefers "savannah", as a safe and nutritious environment for proverbial hunters and gatherers.

Komar and Melamid, the well-known post-socialist artists,<sup>28</sup> certainly did not have in mind an experiment in Fechner's manner, to find universal features of human taste for the sake of evolutionary psychology. Their aim

<sup>26</sup> Their project is available on the web; see <http://www.diacenter.org/km>.

<sup>27</sup> Denis Dutton, "Aesthetics and Evolutionary Psychology", <http://www.denisdutton.com>. Published in Levinson, *The Oxford Handbook for Aesthetics*.

<sup>28</sup> Among other writings on their pre-emigrant work in the Soviet Union, see Boris Groys, "The Other Gaze. Russian Unofficial Art's View of the Soviet World", in Aleš Erjavec (ed.), *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition. Politicized Art under Late Socialism* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 55–89.

– from Dutton’s point of view, the more ironic side of the project – was not to mix incompatible elements. Their ironic idea was to search for people’s art through the transition from a totalitarian concept of socialist realism – where the leader decided what people wanted, and addressed the people’s demands to artists – to a democratic concept of people’s art, which has to be executed as a new kind of populism. Komar and Melamid noticed that the difference between Stalinism and democracy in politics was that democratic leaders followed public opinion measured by the public opinion polls. They thus intended to submit their artistic practice to poll results regarding what people like and what they dislike in order to create a democratic art. Representative polls from different countries, and from the web poll, gave results which were taken by the artists as a commission, and paintings were made.<sup>29</sup> Figurative painting was preferred over abstract painting (not overall, but still in most countries), and basic ideas about beautiful colours and shapes did not differ very much. Additionally, and missed by Dutton, there were typical national(ist) differences in taste: the most wanted figures and persons were chosen according to national ideologies. On the other hand, it might come as a surprise that some prevailing national traditions were put aside in favour of a more global popular taste, as in the case of Turkey, where a typical Western style landscape was the most wanted, not the local tradition of ornamental painting. Obviously, there were many possible ways of interpretation,<sup>30</sup> not only that of evolutionism. But nearly all interpretations missed the irony of ascertaining the people’s wishes by means of polls, as in democratic politics, and similarly ironic criticism of elite art. Erected on positions of elite art, these interpretations offered an explanation for “poor” popular taste, and found it in Pleistocene evolutionary aesthetic traditions.

Why is “kitsch figurality” globally the most popular kind of painting?! We can examine “popularity” as the people’s choice through polls, as the method chosen by Komar and Melamid to express a social commission instead of the totalitarian Party, or an Elite Art commission. The method itself constructs popularity as a statistical result. While inclinations to see a “blue sky” or a “savannah environment” as beautiful may be interesting from an evolutionary aspect, this average and prevailing taste includes many other elements which belong to the popular painting which emerged during European and Western art production when new customers outside the elites began to buy art in the past few centuries and transferred its pat-

<sup>29</sup> All of these paintings are also available on the web at: <http://www.diacenter.org/km/painting.html>.

<sup>30</sup> Some of them can also be found in JoAnn Wypijewski (ed.), *Painting by Numbers. Komar and Melamid’s Scientific Guide to Art* (New York: Ferrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1997).

terns and models to all other new media of image production, starting with photography. Of course, this kind of art is more popular than elite art: it was always meant to be on the market for popular taste. It was also there as Western taste against local taste. Why on earth would, for instance, the Chinese or Japanese masses prefer this kind of art to their traditional mass art? Surely not for Pleistocene reasons, because these Pleistocene reasons cannot explain why this is so, before colonization and globalization. Their own popular art was not of the Pleistocene kind. On the other hand, Dutton should take into account the oldest still living artistic tradition, that of the Australian Aborigines, which is very far from the paintings executed by Komar and Melamid's. Both in its more abstract and its more figural appearances, this art, some 45,000 years old and thus much nearer to evolutionary genetic origins, is completely different from the results of Komar and Melamid's project. Perhaps they adore similar "kitsch figurality" like everybody else today, but landscape watercolour painting was introduced to Aborigines by their white teachers and civilizers, to make them able to support themselves by selling paintings and other items, and make them thus appear as civilized as any other human being. From this, and from the proposal that they paint in an abstract and symbolic way as their ancestors had, two kinds of Aboriginal tourist kitsch developed, one which belongs to figurality and another which belongs to an amalgam of symbolic and abstract painting. Whoever has visited Australia has collected something from this visual menu. Which part of it is connected with Pleistocene taste, and its genetic consequences? To project contemporary popular taste to the beginnings of humanity is a gesture which cannot account for what is contemporary in popular taste. You cannot get "genetically conditioned" results from polls. What you get are results conditioned by historically produced taste in the arena of a cultural industry, with a prevalence of models of beauty taken from the average popular taste of the dominant cultures of the West. The taste shown through this project and its painted results is not "natural", even if some of its psychological elements may originate from much older layers. With the same reasoning as in evolutionary aesthetics, we could say that the emotional genres of the melodramatic or of the comical in our popular culture can be explained by the original hunters' and gatherers' situations in which these emotions were useful for survival.

All this put aside, we are still confronted with the artistic project of Komar and Melamid, which is completely misunderstood and misinterpreted by the evolutionary naturalist interpretation. In such an interpretation, it appears as if these paintings were painted by "the people" as a kind of ethnology of *Homo sapiens sapiens*, a proverbial collective creativity of folk art.

Quite the contrary, this is a typical contemporary art project with its special features, such as those connected with the Soviet politics of art, with the elitist ideology of the Artist, and with the public opinion management typical of democracy. To put its artistic existence completely aside and see in it an illustration of genetic taste is a mistake that is neither unique, nor typical of evolutionary aesthetics only. As Michael Kelly proves, it is something which bursts out even from the most sophisticated and seemingly “iconodulic” philosophies of art.

With all due respect for the aesthetic evolution of mankind, and as much respect for transhuman cosmic visions, there is no hope for aesthetics if it does not start to respect, and even before that, enjoy contemporary art, postart, or whatever art you wish to call it.

## 7.

The recent revival of naturalist aesthetics occurred at a time when the universal presence of art was challenged and criticized. To speak about the universal characteristics of different cultures became even politically incorrect, an act of intellectual colonialism and of insensitivity to differences. Marx’s proverbial geologist was the universalist’s ideal figure: he went from one rock to another proclaiming it to be – a mineral. With the help of Hegelian witchcraft, he might be able to show how minerals progressed from one existence to another, finally arriving from different existing minerals to its own essence – the Mineral. The methodology of contemporary human sciences is radically different. You have to go from one rock to another, deconstructing not rocks but the essentialist idea of the Rock, to arrive at the conclusion that “the rock itself”, as an oppressive universalist idea, has no sense any longer. An authentic difference emerged through deep layers of universality, to claim its own rights. This satisfactory result of the liberation of the difference, alas, was able to last just a moment; thereafter we have been stuck with relativism, a monster no less harmful than universalism. This is the second modernity, stuck with similar ambiguities and controversies as the first one, but much less certain of its own power to surmount all obstacles. In aesthetics, as elsewhere, this situation cannot be healed with another “back to Antiquity” type of criticism because this gesture would be immediately interpreted as biased Eurocentric universalism. Support cannot be found in aesthetic utopias because all utopias are under suspicion, and the victory of beauty over ugliness has already happened, hasn’t it? What else can be done about it other than returning to the only universal source of



the human race, that of “human nature”, and perhaps even to use it as a platform for launching another utopian project of – transhuman nature? This, I believe, is the main reason for the renewal of naturalist aesthetics, and for naturalism in other social sciences and the humanities.

Otherwise, new naturalism does not deliver very much. Only the fact that we can identify something on the cusp from nature to culture (this cusp being itself a construction of modernity and its binaries), and interpret it as pre-historic, natural art. A century and a half after Darwin, it does not help much if we only repeat what he already claimed, namely, that we all belong to the same species with all our abilities born out of evolution. If we were not troubled by relativism, we would not go into discovering universality in the animal world, human nature, ancient Greece, or anywhere else. What we should ask ourselves is why universality is always so important for aesthetics, why it appears constantly in spite of all criticism, and why contemporary art is dismissed so easily in favour of any construction of it. For aesthetics, art is its only certainty.