

Bookmarks

## Ellen Dissanayake

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Ellen Dissanayake approaches philosophical aesthetics not from the standpoint of psychology, but from ethology and anthropology. Her *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes from and Why* (Free Press, \$24.95) is a wonderfully stimulating contribution to thinking about art. Dissanayake, who teaches at the New School, brings to her work fifteen years of life in Sri Lanka, Nigeria, and Papua New Guinea. It is not just broad cultural experience that informs her writing, but a knowledge evolutionary ethology. She advocates what she calls “species-centrism” in aesthetics, preferring to see art against a backdrop of four million years of human evolution. In a modified sense, she intends to construct a sort of sociobiology of the human aesthetic response, beginning with the implications of the brute fact that art makes people feel good. Art persists in all human societies, and it must do so for reasons. Among these is the pleasure it gives, and anything as strongly pleasurable and compelling as the arts probably in some way contributes to biological survival.

Art as a behavioral complex is “an inherited tendency to act in a certain way, given appropriate circumstances.” The behavior Dissanayake identifies as essential to art is what she calls making special. This requires the extension of the notion of art into quasiaesthetic or (normally) nonaesthetic realms — play, ceremonies, and rituals. Whether funerals in Sri Lanka, Spanish religious festivals, Thanksgiving dinner, or the ceremonial signing of a bill in the White House, such events tend to be (in her list of features) compelling, extraordinary, stylized, formalized, socially reinforcing, and “bracketed” or set off from utilitarian life. She insists that art be seen in this wider context, and is impatient with modernist European ideas of art, which she finds entirely too confining to help us understand what art is: “The radical position I offer here as a species-centered view of art is that it is not art (with all its accreted connotations from the past two centuries) but making special that has been evolutionarily or social and culturally important.”

The final evolutionary purpose for ritual is, according to Dissanayake, the familiar “social cohesion” idea of twentieth-century social anthropology. A standard rebuttal I’ve heard (and used myself) against this final purpose argument is that many works of art — paintings of Jackson Pollock, perhaps, John Cage’s dadaist experiments, violent movies — tend if anything to increase the sum total of human alienation, rather than promoting cohesion, yet they still

stand as paradigmatic art. Dissanayake recognizes this, but tries to focus her reader's attention on the tens of thousands of years of ceremonial drama and associated art that have preceded modernism. She claims that contemporary art theorists are like geologists trying to understand a deep layer of the earth's crust by analyzing the few millimeters of dust on the surface. The dust is real, and so are Duchamp and Warhol, but there's so much more underneath. The arts arose together with ritual life, which like the arts tends to emphasize and concentrate emotional responses. For the millenia in which human beings moved in small bands of twenty-five or so souls, rites, ceremonies, and making special — the focusing of attention of some ritualized, emotionally charged behavior — was crucial in keeping the group strong.

Homo aestheticus is thus characterized by “tendencies to recognize an extra-ordinary as opposed to an ordinary dimension to experience; to act deliberately in response to uncertainty rather than follow instinctive programs of fight, flight, or freeze in place; to make important things (such as tools, weapons, and transitions) special by transforming them from ordinary to extra-ordinary, often in ritual ceremonies; and to have a capacity to experience a transformative or self-transcendent emotional state.” This is the basis of aesthetic behavior, the universal, natural backdrop for the worldwide phenomena of art. Much of this ritual practice is devised to control an uncertain and threatening world through magical technology. Human beings evolved, of course, through the use of tools, but they went further, “making sure that their technology ‘worked’ by deliberately reinforcing it with emotionally satisfying special elaboration and shaping. Thus, in the history of the human species, it is not only the development of language or the invention of technological ‘means of production’ that has made us anomalous or unique. Our invention and application of what might be called the ‘means of enhancement’ or ‘means of refinement’ — for an infinity of possible objects and occasions — is equally impressive and equally deeply engrained in human nature.” Thinking back on an intricately carved Solomon Islands fighting club I recently encountered, I have to agree. Its designs did more than decorate or identify clan ownership; their magic made the weapon more likely to succeed in battle, which explained the meticulous care with which they were incised in the wood. The beauty of the club emerged from a whole way of life.

In her chapter, “The Arts as Means of Enhancement,” Dissanayake assembles examples intended to wear away at our “common sensical,” but narrowly European definition of “art” as that term has come to have meaning in the last two centuries. The Wahgi people of the New Guinea Highlands sport some of the most spectacular body decoration in the world: for them adornment and display aren't frivolous, but are deeply implicated in politics, religion, marriage, and morality. To be adorned is to be not only visually impressive, but “more real” than a person in a natural state. “In society after society,” Dissanayake says, “we find practices that indicate the esteem given to the the opposite over spontaneous and ‘natural’ behavior or appearance. Aristocracies all over the world distinguish themselves by public signs of self-control, complex systems of etiquette, and other unnatural elaborations of behavior and speech.” And on she goes, describing the intricate — and gorgeous! — hairstyling of the Temne of West Africa, the

polychrome painting of the Abelam people of New Guinea, the rhythmic vocal arts of Aboriginal Australia, the cairns of the Eskimos. In her piling on of examples in order to break down the lines of ink we imagine separate categories of life, Dissanayake resembles a writer she nowhere alludes to: John Dewey. He too wanted to show that art, though a special focus of attention, was not unique in its qualities, that a storm at sea, a Paris meal, or the climb to the top of a mountain could be a special, aesthetic experience. To this, Dissanayake adds an emphasis on the extent to which much of human cultural life is built around rituals that make aesthetic, emotional experiences possible.

But her emphasis on expression, adornment, decoration, and other aesthetically enhancing behavior also highlights a negative undercurrent to her discussion. Dissanayake describes attending the funeral in England of a friend where the mourners were herded into a chapel for an irrelevant hymn and a one-size-fits-all eulogy by a stranger who had not known the deceased. The coffin slid behind a polyester curtain and all had to vacate the chapel, for the assembled mourners for the next “ceremony” were milling about in the parking lot, just as Dissanayake and her fellows had been fifteen minutes before. She compares this empty occasion with a funeral she had attended in Sri Lanka, and writes, “I wonder whether others, like me, felt that we (and the deceased) had been shortchanged. Or like the music, books, entertainments, and arts that compose modern life, this was just one more experience to consume, hardly paying attention to or judging it because we had to get on with the next thing?”

Dissanayake is fed up with the state of contemporary European culture, including art, literature, and especially criticism and theory, which she discusses in her final chapter, “Does Writing Erase Art?” It is here that her graciousness finally evaporates. Current theory is infected with a “scriptocentric” viewpoint which overlooks or denies the eons of oral culture which has made human beings the evolved species they are today. She refuses to allow Darwinism to be dismissed as yet another metanarrative, no more “real” than Neoplatonism or Confucianism. There is an authentic-biologically given, and not entirely culturally constructed-human nature which underlies art and other aspects of our lives, and we ignore it at our peril-either for survival or for our understanding of art. At one point she quotes Gayatri Spivak (in the introduction to *Of Grammatology*) describing our reactions to nerve stimuli as a “need for power through anthropomorphic defining [which] compels humanity to create an unending proliferation of interpretations whose only ‘origin,’ that shudder in the nerve strings, being a direct sign of nothing, leads to no primary signified.” Dissanayake responds: “Nothing? Fire is hot. Hunger is bad. Babies are good.”

By amassing so much cross-cultural evidence and by going back to human prehistory, Dissanayake in my opinion achieves her aim of making the fixations of postmodern art and poststructural literary theory seem somehow trivial. I finished this book with both a renewed idea of the scope and variety of art and literature in human life and a diminished estimate of postmodern thinking. The overweening preoccupation of postmodern theorists with written

language, this hyperliteracy, “like mercury in fish or DDT in mothers’ milk, has insidiously permeated all twentieth-century Western thought and is in large part responsible for its excesses....It often seems to me that what we need to learn most from books is what life was like before books.” We must turn away from “language-mediated ideology,” as she calls it, and regard the affordances with which we evolved for millions of years: “stones, water, weather, the loving work of human hands, the expressive sounds of human voices, the immense, mysterious, and eternal.”

In recent years poststructural theory has adopted as central doctrines anticolonialism and the denial of the political and cultural hegemony to Western values. Despite this self-satisfied and superficially laudable stance, Ellen Dissanayake’s conclusions would seem to imply that poststructural theory is the biggest imperialist con job going. Its scriptomaniacal advocates do not even begin to see, let alone comprehend, the meaning art has had since the Paleolithic for the vast majority of human beings in their long, evolved history. *Homo Aestheticus* calls for a counter-revolution in our thinking about art. Its message is timely, provocative, and immensely valuable.

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