Art

On the Evolutionary Foundations of Art and Aesthetics

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Introduction
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Until only a few centuries ago, most people, scientists and scholars alike, took it for granted that human beings were special, and in no way to be compared to (other) animals, and if they were asked about why they had this conviction, they most probably would have pointed to the Bible or some other holy script. Early Enlightenment (dated by Jonathan Israel (2001) to the middle of the seventeenth century) sustained, and Charles Darwin finally brought home, the idea that the culture and history of human beings are very much connected to the evolution of all animal species on earth. This certitude, once recognised, has prompted a series of endeavours, the most recent of which is Mainstream Evolutionary Psychology (also known as Socio-biology), to reduce the history of humanity to just another ethogram of an animal species staking out its life in its more or less unvarying niche. Nevertheless, such undertakings do not obviate the necessity of finding out why human beings alone have created a culture that is inherited over numerous generations, and thus a history. Viewed from an extra-terrestrial position, the observation that human history has occasioned numerous, and far-reaching, changes of habitat may not appear too remarkable. However, already the fact that human beings have been able to write down the history of all these changes (and, before that was possible, no doubt reflected on it and, by oral means, gave these reflections in heritage to later generations) should be sufficient to make us special, even from such an otherworldly perspective.

Perhaps nobody has been more acutely aware of the contradiction between the evolutionary point of view, and that of the common sense world, than Darwin, but, unlike his contemporary Herbert Spencer, and unlike latter-day evolutionary psychology, he never found an easy way out. If, as we have suggested above, human behaviour, including human cultural production, is different from that of other animals (which is not to deny that there are intermediary cases, notably in case of the apes) in being a kind of

Michael Ranta

Chapter Five

Art: On the Evolutionary Foundations of Art and Aesthetics

Traditional attempts to define aesthetic key concepts such as "art," "aesthetic value," and "beauty" have frequently meant finding their core characteristics or necessary and jointly sufficient conditions. At the same time, the history of art has been one of more or less radical creativity that has challenged and often departed from suggested essential features of these concepts, and this conceptual openness has become even more acute during the twentieth century. Moreover, art-related concepts such as "beauty" and "aesthetic value" are highly problematic anyway, given their broad applicability within and outside art, and sometimes based on other controversial notions, e.g. "disinterested pleasure" or "aesthetic experience."

Now, despite some lack of conceptual stability and continuity of aesthetic notions, one might still reasonably look for underlying generative mechanisms,[1] that is, mechanisms that on a rather fundamental level seem to be crucial for the emergence of aesthetic activities and discourses (though by keeping in mind that they do not have to be exclusive in these respects). In this chapter,[2] I extend Noël Carroll's (2001) suggestion that preceding and current art activities have *a narrative connection*, giving events and objects significance by situating them within an explanatory (causal and teleological) historical framework. But when and why did this aesthetic "storytelling" begin? In opposition to aesthetics as a philosophical branch relying primarily on art critical practices or language uses, I also claim that one must take account of empirical studies from e.g. evolutionary theory,

1 It should be noted that that this term, employed by Noël Carroll in the work referred to below, doesn't have the same meaning as given to it by Husserl, to which other chapters of this book refer, nor, it would appear, as it is currently given in linguistics (Editors' note).

2 This chapter is a revised version of a paper given at the XIX[th] International Congress of Aesthetics, "Aesthetics in Action" (Kraków, Poland), July 21–27, 2013.

cognitive semiotics, and from a first-person or phenomenological perspective. Such studies may contribute to a fuller, more supportive understanding of arts' narrative connectedness from a cultural evolutionary point of view. In the following, I shall outline some general approaches within the history of aesthetics as well as some proposals concerning the prehistoric origins of art (mainly the visual arts). In particular, it will be argued that mimesis (or imitation), one of the key notions within classical aesthetics, indeed constitutes one of the foundational ingredients of art-making practices, seen from an evolutionary point of view.

5.1. The Emergence of an Aesthetic Discourse

What exactly does "art" mean and how is this concept related to e.g. "beauty" or "aesthetic value?" These are some of the most central questions that have preoccupied philosophers and aestheticians since at least ancient Greece, attempting to elucidate the nature of these concepts, though sometimes in a quite perfunctory manner. It is certainly questionable whether any *art-specific* considerations were discussed or had any explicit significance for the production of cultural artefacts in the West before the fifth century BCE. During the Palaeolithic and Neolithic periods, mainly pragmatic and magical-religious interests seem, at a first glance, to have been the dominant aspects of any cultural production. In ancient Egypt, for instance, the economic value of used metals and other materials, the everlastingness of buildings and other objects, and religious or political concerns appear to have played a far more important role than what from our perspective would count as explicit aesthetic purposes, i.e. having a more self-sufficient value. Of course, this does not necessarily mean that aesthetic intentions had no importance at all or did not exist. Despite the fact that we have no knowledge of an art-specific discourse or terminology, the cultural production in, say, Egypt may nevertheless have been influenced by aesthetic considerations, i.e. by efforts to give their products qualities which – according to present standards – works of art may also possess.

In Greece, however, a different interest in functional or inherent properties distinguishing paintings, sculptures or dramatic performances from other objects or activities seems to have emerged during the Classical period (c. 480–323 BCE). Admittedly, in texts from this period no concept of art

is used that exclusively denotes the "fine arts," nor were clear-cut theories of art elaborated. The ancient Greek umbrella term *technê* (which includes what nowadays would be categorised as art) has a broader extension than our modern use of the concept of art, referring to any rational production or activity based on teachable rules, and could perhaps be translated as "organized knowledge and procedure applied for the purpose of producing a specific preconceived result" (Pollitt 1974, p. 10). This included the fine arts (i.e. sculpture, painting, music, poetry, and perhaps architecture) as well as the crafts and sciences. Furthermore, the concepts of art and beauty were not always correlated, at least not before late Antiquity. Beauty was neither considered to be a sufficient nor a necessary condition for something to be a work of art, i.e. objects which we nowadays would include among the fine arts. Finally, pre-Hellenistic writers such as Plato and Aristotle were rather interested in clarifying the concept of image (and mimesis-related expressions, such as the activity to imitate something else), not of art per se (cf. Sörbom 1966, pp. 11–21).

It has frequently been maintained that the eighteenth century brought some significant changes to Western aesthetic discourse, or even, to be more exact, gave birth to aesthetics as a separate discipline, a more "unified philosophy of art and beauty," as envisaged by scholars such as Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, Immanuel Kant, and Francis Hutcheson (cf. Beardsley 1985, pp. 156–163). While some fundamental (and still persistent) ideas and notions may be traced back to Antiquity, other central aesthetic concepts such as "beauty" or "art" undergo quite radical alterations, which assume a more precise shape and develop into the modern system of the "Fine arts" (or "Beaux Arts"). Thus, as e.g. scholars such as Paul Kristeller have claimed, the "system of the five major arts, which underlies all modern aesthetics and is so familiar to us all, is of comparatively recent origin and did not assume definite shape before the eighteenth century" (Kristeller 1951, p. 498). "Beauty," which traditionally was regarded as a property inherent in objects, is also increasingly seen as an idea in the mind (or emotional response, feeling of pleasure, or the like) of a percipient. Though the search for objective properties in artworks that participate in constituting their beauty does not disappear completely, the focus becomes now also directed towards an analysis of human nature. The attitudes and responses of percipients receive growing attention, and notions such as

"aesthetic experience" or "disinterested pleasure" are placed side by side with, or even replace, earlier concepts of beauty. This tendency seems to be especially notable and influential during the British Enlightenment with its regular emphasis on beauty as a subjective reaction of the perceiver, and its general interest in human psychology.

We should note, however, that most attempts to demarcate classical from modern aesthetics appear in several respects to presuppose or imply significant connections. Ancient and modern theories are commonly assumed to be at least partially coreferential, that is, some of the concepts used are seen as referring to the same types of objects or activities. The concepts used are not treated as completely incommensurable, and a relative ontological or functional stability and theory- (or concept-) independence of the objects or activities under consideration is taken for granted. Thus, the existence of some kind of foundational continuity between ancient and modern views on art is regarded as almost self-evident. For many centuries certain texts from Antiquity have de facto been used and interpreted as theories of art, and their influence on modern aesthetics can hardly be denied. Third, a common trait in those ancient texts that deal with objects or activities such as dance, theatre, music, painting, and sculpture is the stress on their imitative or mimetic function. Although being mimetic is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for something to be a work of art (antique or modern), numerous artworks have actually been created with the intention of imitating (or representing by means of similarity) something and they have been used and evaluated accordingly.

5.2. Analytic Aesthetics and the Concept of Art

Indeed, one of the historically most persistent views on art is that the function and value of artworks consist of their capacity to *imitate* or *represent* (i.e. having a relation in which it is said to be of) something else, not least by means of (visual) resemblance. However, this idea – or rather cluster of ideas – is far more complex and multifaceted than some contemporary debates concerning e.g. pictorial representation reveal, tending to focus upon something like straightforward copy theories, which unfortunately often have received something like a paradigmatic status. Pictorial mimesis as such does not necessarily involve the depiction (or visual "imitation") of

particulars or of real-world objects or subjects. Throughout history, pictorial works of art have quite regularly been created in order to represent typical, ideal, or fictional entities. That is, imitation in a wide sense might also be conceived as the rendering of universals, abstractions, essences, or types, and imitation theories may also describe – or prescribe – imitative representation as rendering certain idealisations, e.g. in terms of morality or beauty (see Ranta 2000, pp. 41–43, 249–255). Apart from innumerable examples in the history of art where the exact and literal imitation of reality seems to not have been intended, certainly modern developments from the nineteenth century onwards have increasingly made such copy theories untenable, due to their very restricted applicability.

An alternative attempt to define art has been to focus upon its emotional properties or its expressiveness. Also such expression theories of art might in a wider sense be regarded as mimetic, i.e. by stressing the representation (i.e. imitation) of emotional properties inherent in a work of art (such as gaiety, melancholy, aggressiveness, or serenity) or emotional states attributed to the artist (e.g. at the moment of creation, or his usual state of mind). Even these attempts have, for various reasons, faced serious difficulties, not least because numerous counter-examples could be mentioned where acknowledged works of art (at least superficially seen) seem to have no expressive properties at all, or where the manifestation or elicitation of emotional states are not artworks (such as a smile or hitting someone).

Now, confronted with these problems, a number of scholars have come to suggest that attempts to find distinctive functional or institutional constituents of art might be more promising, rather than focusing upon (straightforward) perceptual or semantic features (cf. Davies 1991, for an account and discussion of such attempts). According to, for example, Monroe C. Beardsley (Beardsley 1981 [1958], pp. 524–532; 1982, pp. 298–315) a work of art is an object that belongs to a certain function-class and is dispositionally efficient for fulfilling a certain desirable aesthetic function (which here is supposed to be the capacity to provide aesthetic experiences or aesthetic enjoyment). However, it might very well be doubted whether a distinct aesthetic quality (having context-free, ahistorical, and cross-cultural stability) can be attributed to certain experiences or states of enjoyment, as pointed out by a number of philosophers, such as George Dickie (1965, 1974; Davies 1991, pp. 62–64). As a consequence, Dickie proposed an

institutional or procedural definition of art according to which an object is conferred the status of candidate for appreciation as a work of art by representatives of the so-called "artworld" (Dickie 1974, 1984). Thus, briefly put, a work of art (in a classificatory sense) is (i) an artefact upon which (ii) some person or persons acting on behalf of a cluster of certain social institutions (the artworld) has conferred the status of candidate for appreciation. Now, apart from the charge of circularity brought against this definition (the crucial notions "artworld" and "art" seem to be logically and semantically interdependent), the lack of criteria, or accounts of what features artworld members rely on when conferring the status of being "art" on something, has been regarded as a serious deficiency (cf. Davies 1991, pp. 109–114).

All these attempts, then, to define art in essentialist terms by referring to distinctive, common, and all-embracing perceptual, functional, or procedural factors which members of this category are supposed to possess are quite obviously more or less unconvincing. Moreover, if we consider some twentieth-century movements in art (such as Dada, conceptual art, minimalism, ready-mades, happenings, Land art, and so forth), it seems that the proposals outlined earlier have become even more problematic. Numerous further examples could of course be mentioned in order to illustrate how the category "art" has expanded radically, it seems, during the last century. Indeed, we have no reason to assume that this category will not expand even further in the future.

Similar lines of thought have been put forward by a number of scholars theorising about the arts. Morris Weitz, one of the first and most widely cited proponents of an anti-essentialist position concerning the concept of art (others are, for instance, William Kennick, Haig Khatchadourian, Władysław Tatarkiewicz, and Paul Ziff), regards past attempts to define art as rather evaluative and stipulative than descriptive and classificatory (Weitz 1959; Kennick 1958; Khatchadourian 1969; Tatarkiewicz 1971; Ziff 1953). According to Weitz, there is no pervasive property shared by all objects that we are inclined to call art, and, moreover, any attempt to specify such a property would foreclose on future creativity. As he puts it: "the very expansive, adventurous character of art, its ever-present changes and novel creations, makes it logically impossible to ensure any set of defining properties" (Weitz 1959, p. 152). The history of art is a history

of a more or less radical creativity – despite the fact that art under certain limited sociohistorical circumstances has been regarded as a quite clear-cut category – which has challenged, altered, and departed from pre-existing concepts of art (we may ask, though, whether the very characteristic of alterability wouldn't qualify as an essential property).[3] Thus, as Weitz suggests, inspired by Wittgenstein's remarks on the nature of games and language, art ought to be thought of as an open concept without necessary and sufficient conditions for its application, thus being like a family whose members resemble each other in some, but not in all or in commonly shared respects, i.e. being joined by *family resemblances*.

This line of reasoning – and narrative outline of an aesthetic debate as here presented – is of course quite familiar to those who are acquainted with the analytic aesthetical tradition prevailing among Anglo-American scholars. In the next section, I shall discuss an interesting proposal put forward by Noël Carroll, focusing upon the narrative aspects of the concept of art, which in itself could be regarded as part of and continuation of a (meta-)narrative of aesthetics.

5.3. Noël Carroll on Narrative Connections

Referring to this discourse, Carroll argues that art indeed seems to have a necessary or core condition for its existence, namely its historical dimension with regard to its production as well as to its reception and evaluation (Carroll 2001, pp. 86–95).[4] The reception of art on part of the audience, for example, is guided by traditions of interpreting and appreciating art. Such traditions or the knowledge of historical antecedents provide means for orientation towards contemporary art. Historically preceding art activities and present ones have, as Carroll further claims, a *narrative connection*. Now, a narrative can be characterised as the representation of at least two (real or fictive) actions, events, or situations with a temporal link on the

3 This seems to be basically the same idea earlier suggested by the Russian formalists and the Prague school of semiotics (see Sonesson 1999, 2011) (Editors' note).

4 Outside the analytical tradition, similar lines of thought have also been put forward by proponents of the Prague school, such as Roman Jakobson and Jan Mukařovský. More generally, Carroll's proposal is of course reminiscent of classical hermeneutic approaches (see Sonesson 1999, 2011) (Editors' note).

content side (i.e. concerning the represented world) (Prince 1982, pp. 1–4). Quite frequently, a narrative seems to consist of a beginning (or an equilibrium), a middle (possibly with a disturbance or disequilibrium) and an end or closure. When it comes to historical narratives, the same structure likewise appears to occur frequently, though, in contrast to fictional narratives, the reported sequences of events and states of affairs are claimed (or presupposed) to be true or at least accurate (Carroll 2001, p. 88). The incorporated events are usually situated within an explanatory pattern that gives them significance by delineating their causal roles and teleological contributions to certain goals or outcomes. Art historical narratives show, according to Carroll, a similar pattern. Some historical narratives function as *identifying* narratives, that is, they are used to establish the art status of contested or disputed works (Carroll 2001, p. 113).

Thus the beginning of these narratives includes a description of a set of historical circumstances, of previous art practices, which are generally undisputed with regard to their art status. This background thus introduces a context which is adequate or sufficient for making the further development plausible and narratively intelligible. Artists or art schools can simply decide to adhere to such traditions; in that case the produced objects would count as mere *repetitions*, although not exact duplications, of previous artworks with regard to genre conventions, formal styles, themes, and so on. Examples of artistic movements that are indeed characterised by a high degree of (programmatic or stylistic) repetitive patterns are, for example, ancient Egyptian art, Greek classicism, or Romanesque art.

Artists may also decide to modify existing artistic means and subjects. These deviations or *amplifications*, as Carroll calls them, seem especially to occur when preexisting art is regarded as problematic or obsolete, in one way or the other, and the artists attempts to solve this problem (or problems) by introducing new themes or techniques, for example regarding the rendering of light, space, ontological/metaphysical concepts, and so on, or even radically dismiss earlier traditions. We should keep in mind, however, that such works are not completely alien to or incommensurable with earlier traditions. Actually, far from being made in a radical aesthetic vacuum, they are created as a response to and as a conscious negation of prevailing art practices. The artists in question are usually very well aware of the historical background, they have a conventional training and education, and

they are, by means of social and economic networks, linked to established art institutions. The very production and existence of their works is thus dependent on a wider aesthetic context, and within this context identifying narratives are of crucial importance. Their role is to establish a link between more or less controversial works to intelligible and recognisable preceding art-making practices; they function as arguments or explanations making use of supporting historical evidence (thus epistemic criteria of truth or plausibility play a vital role) presenting the artworks under debate as some kind of conclusion.

For example, Clive Bell and Clement Greenberg presented historical identifying narratives in defense of Modernist avant-garde art, arguing that earlier works of art with representational aspirations had reached a deadlock which could only be overcome by adhering to art's formal, non-representational aspects (Bell 1958; Greenberg 1984). But we might certainly also take historically more remote cases into consideration, where similar identifying narratives seem to have been at work. Giorgio Vasari, for example, in his book *Le vite de' piú eccelenti architetti, pittori e scultori italiani* (The Lives of the Artists, 1550/1568), outlines a historical narrative beginning with artistic practices from the early Renaissance, or late Middle Ages (though with a glance backwards to Antiquity and the early Middle Ages), with representative artists such as Duccio or Giotto, culminating with the works by Raphael or Michelangelo. Another example that could be mentioned is Johann Joachim Winckelmann's *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* (The History of the Art of Antiquity, 1764) which argued that Greek art should be considered as an indisputable aesthetic ideal to strive for, with its love of the good, the beautiful, and the true, or – as he put it – with its "noble simplicity and calm grandeur." Basically, Baroque and Rococo art is seen as a tradition in decline, having reached a deadlock, while the purer classicism, represented by Jacques-Louis David, Antonio Canova, and Anton Raphael Mengs, is supposed to be a radical revival of a true classic ideal (cf. Potts 1994, p. 21).

5.4. When and Why Did It All Begin?

Carroll's proposal is certainly worth considering and is indeed compatible with certain practices within art history and art criticism. Furthermore, it avoids many of the pitfalls that traditional essentialist definitions have

suffered from, for example the charge of circularity brought against Dickie's institutional theory of art. As Carroll puts it, "circularity is a real defect in real definitions, and the narrative approach to identifying art does not entail definitions. Narratives are not definitions" (Carroll 2001, p. 85). Still, this line of reasoning necessitates the existence of prior-established works of art in order to shed light on succeeding art discourses and practices. And we might still reasonably ask how and for which reasons (or causes) these discourses and practices emerged in the first place.

Most aesthetic theories have more or less considered (or been influenced by) existing artistic practices or objects, historically significant aesthetic theories, and experts' and other people's beliefs or language uses concerning aesthetic theories or concepts. Put in another way, they have (at least implicitly) taken empirical data into account. However, a deficiency of numerous aesthetic theories consists of the rather narrow and somewhat arbitrary selection of empirical data considered relevant. Sociological, historical, art historical, psychological, neurophysiological, anthropological, or other "empirical" studies have sometimes to a regrettable extent been neglected or even completely ignored. Most notably, analytic aesthetics has been described as a second-order discipline, a "philosophy of criticism" (as conceived by Beardsley), which is more preoccupied with the language used by art critics or art historians than directly with works of art themselves. As for aesthetics, and philosophy in general, we may further doubt whether its scholars have given sufficient attention to the historicity of its traditional issues and concepts. Within philosophical discourse, there is an unmistakable tendency to disregard any socio-historical complications. Indeed, a salient feature of philosophy has commonly been a striving for basic and eternal "truths," abstracted from cultural contingencies. A similar tendency may likewise be noted within aesthetics. Its accounts of the nature of art, aesthetic value, expression, or representation have frequently been remarkably ahistorical.

In this respect, then, Carroll's proposal certainly opens up a historically more dynamic approach towards aesthetic theorising. But, once again, when and why did it all begin? Are there any proto-aesthetic activities or discourses that could fruitfully be taken into account and which successively seem to have evolved into more fine-grained, specific aesthetic theories? These are still open questions and certainly worth investigating in order

to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of aesthetic activities (and their accompanying narratives). Despite the inconclusiveness of essentialist definitions of art outlined earlier, generations of scholars and artists have nevertheless taken them very seriously, and they certainly still point to some crucial aspects which disjunctively or conjunctively have participated in establishing the category "art." Indeed, these definitions are not unreasonable at all (although they do not provide necessary and sufficient conditions), but hint at some characteristics that frequently, even nowadays, at least from a common sense point of view, are associated with the core of art. Thus imitation and expression (in all the senses indicated), functional efficiency with regard to states of enjoyment, institutional approvals, and so on are factors which have significantly contributed to the demarcation – as well as (together with other characteristics, not least narrative connections in Carroll's sense) to the extension – of this category.

First, as to the "imitative" functionality of certain artefacts, already Aristotle claimed that the recognition of likenesses is a cognitive activity that gives humans enjoyment; it is natural for human beings to feel pleasure when encountering mimetic representations (due to the fact that all cognitive activities are supposed to be pleasurable). As he claims in the *Poetics*:

> the habit of imitating is congenital to human beings from childhood [...], and so is [...] the pleasure that all men take in works of imitation. A proof of this is what happens in our experience. There are things which we see with pain so far as they themselves are concerned but whose images, even when executed in very great detail, we view with pleasure. Such is the case for example with renderings of the least favored animals, or of cadavers. The cause of this also is that learning is eminently pleasurable [...]. [In] the process of viewing they find themselves learning, that is, reckoning what kind a given thing belongs to: "This individual is a so-and-so" (Aristotle 1967, 1148 b, p. 20).

Interestingly in this context, according to the cognitive psychologist Merlin Donald's view on the development of human semiotic resources through evolution, mimesis is indeed a cognitive capacity quite unique to hominines that has evolved over the past two million years (Donald 1991; see also Chapters 2: Mimesis and 6: Narrativity in this volume). A turning point arose when hominines successively became able to function as "sign-producing" cultural beings, presupposing "mimetic skills" required to rehearse and refine the body's movements in a systematic way, to remember those

movements, and to reproduce them at will. *Homo erectus* became able to integrate and reconceptualise events, thus creating various prelinguistic semiotic activities such as rituals, dance, and craft. This stage was then superseded by mythic-narrative cultures that arose as a result of the acquisition of speech and the invention of signs, which was a major cognitive breakthrough for the externalisation and spreading of memory. Also present in mythic culture, though, as Donald claims, seemingly appearing later than speech, are mimetic and (convention-based) symbolic pictures like those found in southern European caves. Donald argues that these hunting and fertility images were used "to explore and develop the mythic ideas that were already the governing cognitive constructs of human society" (Donald 1991, p. 282). In accordance with this proposal, it seems quite likely that hominines at an early evolutionary stage must have developed and sustained a deep-rooted interest in various forms of preservable, mimetic representationality (see Donald 2006 for his view on art). And here we might find some of the evolutionary roots and causes for more full-fledged aesthetic theories that emerged later on in ancient Greece.

Also worth considering from this perspective is Ellen Dissanayake's work, which has focused on the ethological and anthropological exploration of art and culture and likewise might give us some clues as to the beginnings of aesthetic behaviour. Basically, art is defined as "making something special;" that is, art making involves taking something out of its ordinary use and context and making it somehow special. The emphasis is hereby put on the activity of demarcating objects or actions from everyday environments or circumstances, often conjoined with ceremony and ritual behaviour, rather than on the resultant artefacts themselves. This activity has also been named "making the ordinary extraordinary," "elaboration," or "artification." As she states in her book *Homo Aestheticus* (1995):

> At first glance, the fact that the arts and related aesthetic attitudes vary so widely from one society to another would seem to suggest that they are wholly learned or "cultural" in origin rather than, as I will show, also biological or "natural." One can make an analogy with language: learning to speak is a universal, innate predisposition for all children even though individual children learn the particular language of the people among whom they are nurtured. Similarly, art can be regarded as a natural, general proclivity that manifests itself in culturally learned specifics such as dances, songs, performances, visual display, and poetic speech (Dissanayake 1995, p. xii).

She argues that in making things special we draw on those aspects of the world that evolution has led us to find attractive and to prize, such as visual signs of health, youth, and strength (according to mainstream evolutionary psychology; see Section 1.4.1), but also repetitive patterns, balance, geometrical shapes as well as more complex forms arising from thematic variations, or the absorbing of asymmetry and difference within a wider, encompassing framework. The arts are not simply significant qua (static) packages of perceptual stimuli, characterised by beauty, originality, or (evolutionarily seen) by adaptive features related to e.g. healthy mates, nutritious food, or resolved conflict. Instead, the operations/manipulations of stimuli are also important, as well as these signals being made salient, given prominence, or emphasis. Further, this gives rise to emotional responses when there are discrepancies or changes provoking an interest. Artists in all media, so Dissanayake claims, simplify, formalise, exaggerate, elaborate ordinary materials, body movements, tones, beats, etc. – hereby sustaining emotional interest. In her approach, Dissanayake has focused upon proto-aesthetic, prelinguistic, and affective communicative mechanisms in early mother-infant interaction as well as their adaptive consequences during human evolution. General adaptive advantages of artification, phylogenetically, as well as ontogenetically, involve e.g. the reinforcement of social bonds as well as neurophysiological, emotional, and social coordination. As to the interaction with infants, mothers tend to use techniques such as simplifying, repeating, exaggerating, and elaborating affinitive facial expressions, utterances, and body movements ("baby talk") that they use casually and unremarkably with adults. As to adult social groups, strategies such as ritualisation, ceremonies, and other means of artification are claimed to have been evolutionarily advantageous (cf. also Dissanayake 2006). Artification, so Dissanayake maintains, is a universal behavioural disposition whose components are ancient and influential features of human cognition and as important to human evolution as tool making, speech, as well as the making/use of signs.[5]

5 It is difficult not to associate this with the definition of art as "making strange," first suggested by the Russian formalists, and then incorporated into the Prague school notion of art, although, to these authors, this operation took place in historical time, not at the origin of art (see Sonesson 1999, 2011) (Editors' note).

Thus, as I would like to suggest, the story of aesthetics and art could and should be considered on a much earlier stage than Carroll so far has outlined. By studying humans' very early evolutionarily significant adaptive processes and preferences we might trace the emergence and the foundations of more elaborated aesthetic theories and activities, manifested in various modalities, where e.g. beauty (and its manifestations in objects or activities) is understood in terms of harmony, symmetry, measure, order, pertaining to the arrangement and proportion of parts, and so on (as, for example, the Greeks did).

The category "art" and related concepts such as "beauty" or "aesthetic value" certainly should be thought of as categories with fuzzy boundaries, which we have all reason to expect to be extended and altered in the future. Perhaps art indeed is peculiar in the sense that narrative links in Carroll's sense seem to have played a particularly crucial role in its formation. However, this doesn't mean that anything goes. And we might still reasonably ask how the (historically) very first works of art (and proto-aesthetic artefacts or activities) did come into being. Genealogically speaking, we might assume that at earlier stages of human development quite broad and more-inclusive categories (including ancient conceptions of mimesis) have existed from which increasingly specialised subcategories have emerged. Beardsley once criticised Arthur C. Danto's proposal according to which theories of art are necessary for constituting works of art:

> Arthur Danto must be mistaken in his well-known view that it is theories that make art "possible." Danto says, "It would, I should think, never have occurred to the painters of Lascaux that they were producing art on those walls. Not unless there were neolithic aestheticians." Perhaps so; but it does not follow that they were not producing art. An art theory may make the concept of art possible, but that's not the same as making art possible. Unless there were neolithic microbiologists, it would not have occurred to the cave dwellers that their illnesses were caused by micro-organisms; nevertheless they died from them (Beardsley 1982, p. 308).

Maybe Beardsley's analogy is a little bit misplaced; a more appropriate comparison could rather be made between linguistics and its relationship to language and (proto-) linguistic behaviour. But Beardsley's remark still has a point, I think. The existence of aesthetic and proto-aesthetic activities certainly does not presuppose a full-fledged aesthetic discourse. As to Carroll's narrative on the narrative connections within aesthetic discourse, its (historical-evolutionary) prologue still waits for being investigated in more detail.

5.5. A Closer Look at the (Mimetic) Roots of Art and Aesthetics

But where and when should such a prologue begin? Traditional attempts to focus upon "history" in a traditional sense, i.e. concerned with the last 5,000 years or so, and to disregard "prehistory" (as revealed by fossilised and artifactual, nonverbal remains) would seem to be quite narrow-minded. As to history in a very wide sense (i.e. "deep history"; see Chapter 1 in this volume), we might, of course, say it started with the Big Bang about 13.7 billion years ago, a history which rather occupies astronomers, physicist, chemists, and – with the emergence of life as we know it – biologists. Such a broad perspective would seemingly exceed the scope of an inquiry into aesthetic phenomena and activities. Nevertheless, a thorough aesthetic inquiry would certainly profit from taking at least the evolution of our hominine ancestors as well as modern, though not necessarily literary, human beings into account, as envisaged within Donald's broad chronological model for example (cf. also Collins 2013, p. 8). In some sense, we would hereby strive for some kind of explanatory aesthetic narrative, where art historical narratives in Carroll's sense should be regarded as the tip of an iceberg, as *one* of the (preliminary) end results of humans' general cognitive and perceptual interaction with an external environment.

However, such an attempt is admittedly also quite risky, as the empirical evidence needed for confirming (or falsifying) suggested explanatory hypotheses, compared to our more recent history, is absent, instead of which rather speculative hypotheses might come into play. Evolutionary psychologists have frequently argued that aesthetic activities could be regarded as the result of, or correlated with, adaptive processes within our evolutionary past. A general problem with those approaches is their reductionist tendency as they try to find overarching general theories and adaptive foundations of art, thereby neglecting the wide differences within this category (as already pointed out at the beginning of this chapter). It has further been argued that the arts are by-products of adaptive mechanisms, e.g. "the hunger for status, the aesthetic pleasure of experiencing adaptive objects and environments, and

the ability to design artefacts to achieve desired ends" (as suggested by Steven Pinker, quoted in Davies 2012, p. 123) or as sexual courtship adaptations (as suggested by Geoffrey Miller; cf. Davis 2012, pp. 123–126; and Chapter 1.5 in this volume). But these mechanisms may also give rise to a number of activities which clearly seem to be non-artistic, such as technological or other achievements in general. Numerous further evolutionary approaches on similar lines could be mentioned, as reviewed (and criticised) by the philosopher Steven Davies in his work *The Artful Species* (2012, pp. 121–135).

There is one approach, however, which Davies discusses at some length and considers to be one of the most nuanced theories, namely Dissanayake's idea of aesthetic behaviour as "making something special." The selection of items for their unusualness and the addition of decorative patterns (from c. 100 ka onwards), followed by the emergence of more clear-cut art-making activities, accompanied by religious rituals (40–20 ka), may have been universal, innate sources of pleasure among humans, providing social advantages as well as the feeling of having control over nature. And herein we might find some of the basic foundations and evolutionary advantages of aesthetic behaviour.

Still, as Davies claims, also her concept of "making special" seems to be too broad, seemingly including anything which humans experience as interesting, for example "a video of our child's university graduation or of a horse we've heavily backed winning a major race" (Davies 2012, p. 131). But perhaps even more troublesome is Dissanayake's lack of concern with the semiotic (cognitive, representational, symbolic, etc.) aspects of art or aesthetic activities. As she explicitly states, here quoted at some length:

> my own ethological viewpoint does not treat content – the actual thoughts, wishes, or images inherent in the actions or objects that are being made special (shaped and embellished) [---]. This does not mean, however, that I see "content" in some way as less important than making special, just as I do not see food as being less important than the behavior of food preparation and utilization [---]. While one can study the raw material in order to understand its essential nutrients, or investigate how an individual person or culture prepares it for consumption, an ethological view wishes primarily to establish and emphasize that the transforming, treating or making special itself has been of crucial significance in the evolution of the human species [---] I am not particularly concerned with the symbolic character of art: I find its presymbolic sources much more crucial to understanding its nature as a biological endowment (Dissanayake 1995, pp. 85–86, 94).

However, such restrictions concerning the origins of art seem to be rather odd and counter-intuitive. Admittedly, artification practices as here outlined may undoubtedly have played a considerable role as preconditions for clear-cut artistic practices as manifested in more recent human history. But certainly efforts (and the ability) to represent, and thus in some sense preserve/reproduce, the "outside world" by various semiotic means – by bodily mimesis, by speech, and not least by pictorial representations – seem to have been especially crucial for the cognitive evolution of the hominine species, clearly surpassing mimetic activities of other animals, including non-human primates (see Chapter 2: Mimesis in this volume). This very specific human capacity should for obvious reasons be taken into account in order to investigate the origins of art. We may concur that an investigation of, for instance, pictorial renderings of *specific* contents (such as bulls or horses) might be less relevant for understanding the evolutionary foundations of art making, but certainly the manifested and regularly occurring "behaviour" of creating visual resemblances seems to be crucially significant. To be sure, although ancient theories on image and mimesis neither address art as such, nor are satisfactory as all-embracing aesthetic theories, they still point to aspects that have been of considerable interest throughout, and indeed permeate, earliest human "art-making" practices.

Some of the earliest *abstract and non-figurative* visual configurations have been documented at southern African (e.g. Stilbaai, South Africa, c. 75 ka) and European sites (e.g. El Castillo, Spain, c. 41 ka), which seem to be clear examples of artification efforts in Dissanayake's sense. But examples of *figurative* representations can likewise be found at relatively early stages of the hominine evolution. Well-known are for example the cave paintings from Lascaux (c. 17 ka) and Chauvet, France (c. 30–32 ka); outside of Europe, figurative paintings have been found in Arnhem Land, Australia (c. 40 ka), in the Apollo 11 cave, Namibia (c. 27.5–25.5 ka), and recently in Sulawesi, Indonesia (35–40 ka; see Aubert et al. 2014).

Moreover, all over Europe, as far as Siberia, quite a large number, about 100, of small Palaeolithic Venus figurines have been discovered, that is, statuettes of women with relatively similar physical attributes carved in mammoth ivory, bone, soft stone, and even made of burned clay (cf. Conard & Kölbl 2010, pp. 39–61). Most of them have small heads, wide hips, and legs, where the abdomen, hips, breasts, thighs, or vulva are exaggerated;

arms and feet are often missing, and the head is normally small and faceless. The most famous of these statuettes is probably the *Venus of Willendorf*, discovered in 1908 in Austria and dated to 25–28 ka. Due to this and other discoveries, it was commonly assumed that three-dimensional female depictions did not develop before the Gravettian, i.e. 28–22 ka.

Figure 5.1. Top-down, front, and side views of the Venus of Hohle Fels *(© Venus von Hohle Fels. Photo: Hilde Jensen. Copyright: Universität Tübingen).*

However, in 2008 a remarkable finding was made which necessitated a revision, namely the discovery of the so-called *Venus of Hohle Fels* in the Swabian Alps, Germany, dating to at least 35 ka (see Figure 5.1). This statuette would thus be one of the earliest examples of figurative representations worldwide. Also in this case sexual attributes such as the breasts and the vulva have been exaggerated ("made special"?), which suggests that this figure, as Venus figurines in general, was intended to be an expression of fertility, life, and reproduction (and perhaps used within magic-religious rituals). But apart from such a possible meaning function, a number of

further, more or less convincing interpretations have been put forward (cf. Conard & Kölbl 2010, pp. 31–38, 61–65). Thus it has been suggested that Venus figurines also could have been used as:

- Representations of female ancestors
- Self-portraits of women, that is, seen from a first-person perspective (large breasts, thick stomach, shortened thighs, small feet)
- Representations of various stages of pregnancy or of ages
- Creations of ideals of beauty
- Decorative amulets, talismans, toys, and/or props in hunting rituals
- Devices for increasing male sexual drives by emphasising the vulva, breasts, and hips
- Naturalistic depictions of women suffering from Iodine deficiency (!), with symptoms such as shortened limbs and a thick torso.

Furthermore, these possible meaning functions/purposes of Venus statuettes do not necessarily have to be mutually exclusive; they may of course have had multiple, coexistent functions. And perhaps no general sociocultural uses existed, but specific ones could have been prevalent within certain tribes, geographical regions, and cultural domains, while not in others. But in the end, we cannot know for sure what these statuettes were intended to signify or what practical purposes they were fulfilling; there is simply no empirical evidence available that can pinpoint exactly how our Palaeolithic ancestors themselves understood and used them. However, one fact is striking and undeniable, namely the obvious intent to create representations of real-world objects by means of visual resemblance (admittedly with varying degrees of accuracy), and which we also nowadays clearly can recognise and identify as such.

During the last few decades, the idea that pictorial representation somehow depends on (natural) resemblance has come under attack, and various scholars in the humanities have suggested that the experienced relationship of similarity between pictorial representations and the represented objects is wholly determined by cultural and historical frameworks and internalised codes, conventions, or habits of representation. Indeed, mimetic (or iconic) pictures should be regarded as arbitrary signs, more or less comparable to linguistic items. Among the most well-known proponents of this position – which might be called call *pictorial conventionalism* – are, for instance,

Nelson Goodman, Umberto Eco, and Norman Bryson (Goodman 1976; Eco 1979; Bryson 1983). The common sense view that visual representation presupposes some kind of correspondence between picture and object in terms of (natural) resemblance or similarity is explicitly rejected. I shall not be concerned here with a detailed discussion of the arguments used against this latter view. My point is rather that to a considerable extent these arguments include rather artificially constructed examples, while empirical and Lifeworld evidence from disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, or psychology is largely omitted.

It should be mentioned, though, that another kind of empirical support sometimes has been used to defend pictorial conventionalism. According to this line of reasoning, humans' experience of pictorial fidelity, or their ability to comprehend pictures, have *de facto* varied historically and culturally (e.g. Eco 1979, pp. 204–205). The question arises, however, as to what extent or degree such variations have occurred. Despite our culture-specific limitations we have, apparently, no doubts that some Palaeolithic cave paintings represent horses, bulls, and so on, and that the Venus figurines represent women. We have no serious problems in recognising the represented objects of numerous pictures or sculptures from pre-Columbian, Sumerian, or other ancient cultures – despite the fact that we are not acquainted with their codes or conventions of depiction. How do we know that it is horses or bulls which are actually depicted, and not something completely different? Indeed, we could not be sure that these visual configurations are representations at all (and not just formal and purely decorative patterns, which by sheer coincidence resemble pictorial conventions that we are accustomed to). Pictorial conventionalism in its most radical form leads to the absurd conclusion that we have no rational or well-founded means of comprehending and making comparative investigations of pictures (*qua* representations) belonging to remote cultures.

There are, in fact, numerous empirical studies that indicate that the radical and rather counter-intuitive claim put forward by pictorial conventionalists is simply wrong. For instance, investigations with congenitally or early blind adults (and who thus are unacquainted with recognition codes, or any other pictorial codes) have shown that these persons are capable of producing drawings in much the same way as sighted people do (see e.g. Kennedy 1980, pp. 158–161). These configurations (which are admittedly quite simple)

have been intended to depict, for example, faces, human bodies, emotional gestures, wheels, tables, and so on (sometimes even perspectivally distorted) which sighted people are able to recognise as such. We have historical examples where people (for example, from eighteenth-century Japan) who had hitherto only been accustomed to domestic ways of pictorial representation not only could comprehend foreign (in this case Western) pictorial styles, but also experienced the latter as more realistic or faithful (Tormey 1980, pp. 69–71). These examples contradict, of course, the pictorial conventionalist's claim that the comprehension of pictures, or one's experience of pictorial fidelity, is entirely culture-bound or simply a matter of habit. We have empirical evidence that children who have grown up without previous familiarity with pictures, and thus without training in how to interpret them, were still able to recognise and identify objects portrayed by both photographs and drawings (cf. Hochberg 1972, pp. 69–70).

These and a number of further empirical findings and arguments appear to contradict the radical version of pictorial conventionalism (for fuller discussions, cf. Ranta 2000, pp. 90–101; Sonesson 1989, pp. 220–251). It may be admitted that the comprehension of pictures may depend on the beholder's previous learning and his cultural or historical presuppositions insofar as the interpretation of visual configurations is concerned. Thus facial or body movements, postures or events, implied metaphysical, religious, or political assumptions, to mention some examples, might be interpreted differently by different viewers. But this rather trivial insight does not permit the conclusion that the understanding of pictorial representations is completely contingent upon cultural-historical circumstances. If there are physical and biological constraints (i.e. due to features of our perceptual system on the one hand, and of objects on the other) on our ability to recognise depictions of certain types of objects and to experience relations of visual similarity, this ability cannot be explained with reference to mere conventions or habits. Of course similarity cannot be referred to in an unspecified sense; if this notion is defined as something like "shared (visual) properties," an additional account of which properties are relevant to pictorial representations seems to be necessary. Still, the *experience of relevant similarity* appears to occur quite spontaneously and obviously with remarkable historical and cross-cultural stability. Similarity, as seen from a phenomenological perspective, has to be explained by considering the nature of human mind and human

perception. Accordingly, it might be fruitful to give greater attention to those biological/perceptual as well as evolutionary preconditions that appear to be significant in this context. It is far from unreasonable to suppose that hominines have developed some kind of visual input system (among other perceptual systems) that, to a considerable extent, functions independently of conventionalised frameworks and which has emerged because of its survival value. Iconic or mimetic pictures are visual artefacts that have been adapted and developed – along with other cognitive abilities and due to changing environmental circumstances – in order to correspond to our perceptual presuppositions.

5.6. Artification and Mimesis on the Background of the Sign Function

In concluding this chapter, I thus argue that any attempt to understand art and aesthetics should not only take into account historical and aesthetic narratives as suggested by e.g. Carroll. The story has to begin at a much earlier stage, including the evolutionary and phylogenetic development of the hominine species. And within this development, our species' deep-rooted concern with, and our highly evolved capacity for engaging in mimetic activities of various kinds, such as gesture/bodily mimesis and the subsequent acquisition of speech, language, and other symbolic means of communication, has played a crucial role. Mimesis, so it seems, indeed constitutes as one of the key foundations of art-making (probably together with other aspects such as "artification" attempts), and the production of iconic images is clearly one of the earliest manifestations of this general predisposition contributing to the hominine evolution. Ancient theories of art (or image production) with their stress on mimesis should certainly not be easily dismissed.

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Chapter Six

Narrativity: Individual and Collective Aspects of Storytelling

Within the humanities, narratology has been a standing research area during the last 50 years, notably among literary analysts, linguists, and semioticians. Most of the time, narration has been associated with verbal discourses, whether written or oral, where, briefly put, events or situations are represented as temporally ordered. Moreover, within cognitive science, narrative-like structures have figured prominently in two ways. Probably inspired by the notion of memory schema propounded by Bartlett (1995 [1932]), early cognitive science introduced notions such as frames, scripts, or event schemas (e.g. Schank & Abelson 1977; Mandler 1984). According to this view, we acquire through previous experiences a large amount of culturally based stereotypes of events and scenes (along with idiosyncratic variations), either due to direct familiarity with instances of events, or due to our acquaintance with written, oral, and of course pictorial descriptions of them (e.g. religious or mythological tales). More recently, it has been claimed that narratives play a key role in human evolution and child development. Donald (1991) sees narrativity as prominent during the penultimate "mythic" stage of human cognitive development, and as a key factor in the evolution of culture and language. Nelson (2003, 2007) and Zlatev (2013), in their discussions concerning language acquisition and narrative, present the latter as a significant factor in child development. Moreover, it has been argued that narratives play a substantial role as to the establishment of human personal identity and self-consciousness (cf. Bruner 1990; Neisser & Fivush 1994; Fireman et al. 2003) as well as in the constitution of group identities (cf. Bartlett 1932; Schank 1995; Pennebaker et al. 1997; Hutto 2008, 2009).

There are many reasons for taking narratives into account in the study of human cognitive specificity, notably as it emerges in ontogeny, phylogeny, and history. In this chapter, we outline and discuss some proposals having to do with the role of narratives from an individual human, as well as from