

## NON-HUMAN AESTHETICS

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(First published November 30, 2018)

It. *Estetica non umana*; Fr. *Ésthetique non-humaine*; Germ. *Nicht-menschliche Ästhetik*; Span. *Estética no humana*. The concept of animal (non-human) aesthetics is part of an effort to place the human in a larger than human context, taking into account the (non-central) place of humankind in the cosmic and natural environment. The thesis of a non-anthropocentric aesthetics has enjoyed a certain popularity in recent years, developing in various directions, opening up new areas of research and discussion (such as “animal theory”, “animal turn”), and raising new questions on the role of art and experience in general. The growing attention for the connection between the sciences of life and aesthetological issues (Pinotti, Tedesco 2013) has re-opened the anthropological (and post-human) question, and various disciplines have become involved in the debate on animalness, from a neuro-scientific perspective or in the context of the similarly variegated field of evolutionary aesthetics (Davies 2012; Grammer, Volland 2003; Portera 2015). Studies on non-human aesthetics, still in a pioneering phase, play a crucial role in questioning and revisiting traditional views of the aesthetic experience, and thus in redefining the very image of the human and transhuman. What is at stake is the possibility of a non-human origin of aesthetics (Aiken 1998; Desideri, Dissanayake 2015), or better the possibility of conceiving a global aesthetics, that is an aesthetics capable of overcoming the human/non-human dichotomy (Bartalesi 2012; Bartalesi, Consoli 2013; Desideri 2013 and 2018). An aesthetic attitude of sorts might also be present within the animal domain, and may have ultimately influenced human aesthetics. In other words, the question is whether human aesthetic standards may or not be the development or continuation of animal aesthetic preferences.

### THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

Among the authors who have dealt more extensively with these questions, treating traditional humanistic themes from a scientific perspective, Winfried Menninghaus, and Wolfgang Iser are of particular relevance in the field of aesthetics. As for the first, his work can be ascribed largely to the area of the newly founded “evolutionary aesthetics” (Richter 1999) or in any case to sectors which are generally considered

to be more scientific than traditional humanities (such as psychology and neurosciences), but on occasion he departs from it, returning to the humanities, and in particular to thinkers like Aristotle and Kant, or to disciplines such as archeology and anthropology.

Starting from the Darwinian theory of aesthetic selection, Menninghaus elaborates his theory of animal beauty, departing from the 20<sup>th</sup> century Darwinist model, which tends to explain generative impulses on the basis of adaptive functionalism and the chain of evolution (Menninghaus 2008 and 2011). For Menninghaus, the anti-finalistic tendency in selection is not only at odds with the adaptationist logic of the survival of the fittest, but also with the aesthetic logic of sexiness. Menninghaus uses Darwin's theories as a starting point also for his research on the evolutionary perspective on human art, in which he adopts a model for singing, dancing and multimedia representations derived from the animal domain. For Menninghaus, there is no doubt that Darwin is a true proposer of a serious model of animal aesthetics, in spite of the accusations of reductionism or biologism levelled against his theories. Menninghaus's ambition is to demonstrate that a Darwinian evolutionary analysis of arts does not blur the distinction between human and non-human arts, but rather opens up a new perspective that helps us productively reconsider this distinction. Unlike other neo-Darwinists, Menninghaus is concerned not only with the content of literary and artistic works, but also with their form, the "how" as opposed to the "what." For him, human aesthetics cannot be explained solely through animal evolution, given that there are specific anthropic traits that separate human animals from other kinds of animals and enrich their aesthetic attitude. An evolutionist analysis of arts does not blur the differences between human and non-human "arts," but rather allows us to explore the meaning of those differences. It should be evident from the above that Menninghaus occupies a peculiar interdisciplinary position, which is not centered on an attack on traditional methods, and yet manages to avoid the limitations of traditional scientific sectors (Menninghaus 2007).

A more radical critique of anthropocentrism characterizes Welsch's stance. In his view, the evolutionary aesthetic conception is still based on an aesthetic prejudice according to which humanity can only be understood on the basis of humanity. Welsch's investigation has as its starting point the question of the preeminence of the anthropic principle in modern philosophy (Welsch 2012). He contrasts this with the underlying principles of art, especially 20<sup>th</sup> century art. Contemporary art, according to him, is reactively oriented towards the inhuman, or in its more radical version, towards the transhuman. In his most recent view, human beings are involved in and modified by the aesthetic event they experience. The central motif of his research is therefore that of going beyond the columns of Hercules of what is labeled as anthropic, overcoming the dualism between humans and the world, which for Welsch is obsolete. Humans – as Welsch points out – are not extraneous entities, separate from the world, but are part of it. This makes it necessary to adopt a new route, going from the assumed exclusiveness of the human to the close connection between the human and the rest of the world. Welsch's anti-anthropocentric move is articulated in two directions: on the one hand, by reconstructing Darwin's aesthetics, and on the other hand by using it against certain trends in neo-Darwinism and in contemporary evolutionary aesthetics. Starting from a close reading of Darwin's thought, Welsch advances two theses: on the one hand the impossibility of reducing sexual selection to natural selection; and on the other hand the impossibility of

scaling down the appreciation of beauty to an evaluation of fitness. In line with Darwin, according to Welsch too, the nucleus of human aesthetics is already present in other animals. More specifically, certain forms of beauty (such as those tied to the criterion of proportion) can be explained from a biological-evolutionary perspective. Beauty, in this case, occurs solely as a physiological effect, without involving any aesthetic function. In the case of more complex relations of proportion (such as for example the golden ratio, found in both art and nature), the basis of the appreciation is also cognitive. This type of beauty, which, on an evolutionary scale represents its most ancient stage, is valid also for non-human animals.

#### APPLICATIONS AND OPEN QUESTIONS

After almost twenty years in the new millennium, aesthetics is still in search of a *tertium* that will allow it to overcome the duality between subjectivity and objectivity in beauty. This is the framework of Stephen Jay Gould's ideas on the theory of evolution (Gould 2002), or Ellen Dissanayake's idea of the "making special" (Dissanayake 1999 and 2006), closely tied to the cognitive theory of the notion of relevance elaborated by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson (Sperber, Wilson 1995). This research implies a radical shift in the axis of our reflection, a change of paradigm: from that which is human to that which is not human, from the human to the non-human or transhuman. Aesthetics could benefit from a closer connection with sciences while also joining in an emerging line of thought, acquiring a new and significant role in the cultural scene (Armengaud, Dubus, Saison 2001; Mazzocut-Mis 2003; Ulrich 2012). One of the main challenges faced by aesthetics in its effort to free itself from the bondage of the anthropic prejudice is that of avoiding the tendency to explain all artistic and aesthetic phenomena in terms of some assumed evolutionary advantage of building a common space of reflection and investigation, starting from the intersection between biological phenomena and cultural phenomena without reducing the ones to the others, and, moreover without confining them to the human sphere (Ciocan, Diaconu 2017).

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#### HOW TO QUOTE THIS ENTRY

M. Latini, *Non-Human Aesthetics*, "International Lexicon of Aesthetics", Autumn 2018 Edition, URL = <https://lexicon.mimesisjournals.com/archive/2018/autumn/NonHumanAesthetics.pdf>, DOI: 10.7413/18258630041.

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