

ANCIENT ART VERSUS MODERN AESTHETICS: A NATURALIST PERSPECTIVE

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Debates over the status and legitimacy of ancient art history have much in common with recent discussions among scholars of ancient literature and religion concerning the applicability of modern concepts to ancient materials.¹ Underlying all these discussions is an interest in, or anxiety about, the universality of the very topics and procedures that define our disciplines. As a result, reflection on ancient art history can be enriched by considering recent developments both in the study of ancient literature and religion, and—perhaps more controversially—in revisionist accounts of the natural or biological foundations of human cognition, perception, and action.

Whether we care to admit it or not, all claims about aesthetic processes and values entail assumptions about human nature, even if the assumption is that such nature is indefinable, constructed, or a mirage. As a result, it is perfectly appropriate to reflect on those assumptions and test them against the findings and premises of disciplines such as biological anthropology, evolutionary studies, and neuroscience—especially in view of their shared understanding of human thought as a reciprocal process linking the individual organism with its broader environment. Attention to recent scientific developments in the study of cognition and perception can

1 I am happy to express my thanks to Verity Platt and Michael Squire for letting me participate in their excellent symposium at the APA-AIA in January 2009 and for their thoughtful responses to my ideas; to the outside reader for careful consideration of a very different first draft of this paper; and to Hector Reyes for inspiration, insight, and, when needed, resistance. Needless to say, none of these individuals should be held responsible for the limitations or excesses of this paper.

also serve as an important corrective to all too common appeals (explicit or implicit) to transcendent or immaterial entities, processes, and values to justify otherwise suspect approaches to cultural production. In this paper, then, after briefly reviewing the state of the question as to the validity of the categories “literature” and “religion” in the ancient world, I consider the extent to which all three disciplinary subfields, but most especially ancient art history, are compatible with present understandings of the operations of the human mind. My argument, in brief, is that while art, literature, and religion are defensible categories that, with certain allowances, can facilitate discussion across cultural and historical boundaries, aesthetics is not. Although, as my title suggests, the perspective adopted here is that of a “naturalist” (i.e., someone who accepts the possibility of explaining the seemingly immaterial in terms of natural, material processes), I do not regard “nature” and “culture” as oppositional terms. Indeed, it is human nature to construct cultural diversity, and what we call culture alters the biological “nature” of both the individual and the species.

With respect to ancient literature, students of surviving texts recognize that antiquity lacked the social, institutional, and ideological underpinnings of modern literature such as widespread literacy, universal education, mechanical printing, and certain notions of human subjectivity, yet have up to this point retained the broad general rubric of literature, with provisos appropriate for particular subsectors of antiquity, chronologically and culturally.² Evidently the advantages of being able to place classical texts in a comparative relationship with verbal artifacts from other cultures are regarded as outweighing the limitations stemming from a lack of exact equivalence in definition or social significance. In addition, the skills entailed in analyzing verbal forms (grammar, rhetoric, meter, etc.) are easily transferred from one type of verbal artifact, such as an epic that emerges from a process of oral composition, to another, for example, a learned poem composed by an individual or collective author with access to newer technologies of reading, writing, cross-referencing, etc., and thus subtend disciplinary coherence. To be sure, application of the same skills to different objects can and does lead to misrecognition of the very instances in which different skills or different bodies of knowledge should be brought to bear, but the possibility of mis-

2 See Cameron 1995, Valette-Cagnac 1997, Dupont 1999, Ford 2002, and Habinek 2005 for different views as to the timing, success, and relevance of the category “literature” in the ancient world.

use hardly delegitimizes the skills themselves. Finally, the construction of a system of reference between and among verbal artifacts—in effect, by the artifacts themselves (or their producers)—invites a comparable clustering on the part of the interpreter; hence the widespread interest among classical scholars in allusion, intertext, implicit genres, and the like. Again, the identification of systematicity, like the exercise of formal analysis, can be—and often is—misapplied in order to close “literature” off from other related cultural practices and products or to restrict analysis of verbal artifacts solely to the identification and categorization of forms. But such abuse does not in itself disprove the historicity of the system so established or invalidate the interpreter’s skills. It merely requires that the constructed system and the analytical skills associated with it be continually situated in relationship to other practices, texts, and techniques of interpretation.

The same trio of considerations—comparability across time and space, distinctiveness of skill set, and internal cross-reference—would seem to explain the persistence of the field of ancient religious studies despite the recognition that the category of religion, like that of literature, like that of art, may well be anachronistic when applied to much of antiquity.³ The advantages obtained by comparison with other cultures; cultivation of the skills of reconstruction and analysis of “religious” practices, spaces, representations, and discourses; and internal cross-reference (e.g., early Christians positioning their practices and beliefs in relationship to those of pagan cults) outweigh the disadvantages of less than perfect commensurability and possible misuse of either method or matter.

From a naturalist (or, if one prefers, biomaterialist) perspective, it is not accidental that the three fields of art, literature, and religion both invite and resist the application of allegedly universal definitions and disinterested techniques of analysis. For all three speak to species-specific human capacities and the challenges created thereby as they have been discussed and analyzed by our colleagues in fields such as evolutionary biology, neuroscience, and anthropology. Let me emphasize from the outset that by invoking natural science, I am not endorsing an alleged “art instinct” or inborn “aesthetic faculty,” nor appealing to a universal, essential form

3 Cf. Beard 1986. Várhelyi 2010 emphasizes the need to defamiliarize contemporary models of religion in studying antiquity and to focus on “discourses and actions” that “aim at other-worldly matters with a special attitude in addressing them.”

of stories or artworks or religious beliefs and practices.⁴ On the contrary, what the contemporary science of human nature (with plenty of antecedents throughout the history of thought) makes clear, at least in my view, is that human beings are by nature social constructors. Human biology co-evolves with human culture(s); human psychology is and must be a social product, as the very features that differentiate humans from other species, such as language and other imitative and communicative practices, only emerge in social or intersubjective contexts.⁵ There is no such thing as human nature without culturally mediated interactions with other humans, although this does not make it less natural. The human nervous system is plastic—at birth and beyond—to such an extent that even patterns of neural activity loosely understood as biological are, in fact, largely determined by experience in a distinctive environment that includes natural phenomena, language and other symbolic systems, and social relations and institutions.⁶ The deconstruction of barriers between mind and matter, or nature and culture, or science and the humanities requires the scientist to become a historian (of art, literature, and a lot of other things) as much as it requires the scholar of humanities to pay attention to science. Art, literature, religion (to which we might add music, dance, cookery, etc.) are not natural in the sense of being inevitable or universal in any particular manifestation; rather, the phenomena clustered within these terms are the outcome and expression of differential strategies generated by the nature of human interaction with the rest of the material universe, including other humans. Given neural plasticity and continuity or connectivity between the outside and inside of the human organism, we should not be surprised that something like art (or literature or religion) shows up in all known human contexts; nor should we be surprised that art,

4 “The Art Instinct” is the unfortunate title of Dutton 2008. Dutton’s study, and others in the vein of “evolutionary psychology,” routinely fail to respect two lessons from the “science” they claim to promote: first, human evolution did not stop one day, thus forming “human nature” but is, in fact, an ongoing process of co-evolution with the environment (hence the need for historical study); and second, the human mind is not coextensive with the biological brain but implicated in a wider web, including other humans (hence the need for ecological study, including cultural and social analysis). For a more responsible use of natural science to ground, without determining, cultural study, see, for example, Gamble 2007 and the essays in Hurley and Chater 2005.

5 This point has been made by numerous scholars and scientists, e.g., Donald 2001, Deacon 2006, Spivey 2007, Clark 2008, Noë 2009, but unfortunately has had little impact on popular understanding of the “science” of human nature.

6 For a basic discussion, see Donald 2006 and Onians 2007. For a more detailed discussion of the underlying science, see Edelman 2004 and Metzinger 2003.

literature, and religion are so different from context to context, so much in need of precise historically and culturally grounded analysis.

The case of literature is perhaps easiest to understand from this vantage point. Every culture known to us has a category of special speech, that is, speech distinguished from everyday verbal communication through addition, deletion, or intensification of ordinary linguistic features.⁷ Pitch and rhythm may be heightened and stylized, melody added or taken away, vocabulary restricted or expanded. The specific differentiating features are in no sense naturally determined, but the evolutionary advantages gained by making some sort of distinction are evidently widespread. Why? Because the capacity to communicate representationally via language also carries with it the opportunity to deceive, resist, or otherwise undermine the social cohesion that allows a given group of humans to enjoy the benefits of cooperative action. Marking certain utterances or utterance types as special enables the construction and transmission of group identification and social knowledge, with all the advantages that ensue for the group in question and, ultimately, for the species as a whole. In other words, we can hypothesize that failure to belong to a group that ritualizes utterance diminishes an organism's reproductive fitness to the extent that its genes are not transmitted to succeeding generations. Put differently, the human capacity for language is a double-edged sword: it gives the individual organism access to off-line storage, i.e., knowledge concentrated in and by a socially generated linguistic community, but it also gives him or her the opportunity to disrupt the relationships that sustain the community. Even scholars who try to view the process of cognition from the inside out, that is, from the vantage point of the individual thinking and perceiving human being, speak of the need for value systems to channel and organize the activity of multiple sensory modalities—and such value systems can only be constructed and maintained through ongoing interaction with an environment.⁸

7 See Nettl 2000.435: "All societies . . . have a type or kind of stylized vocal expression distinguished from ordinary speech. Most commonly it is something readily called or associated with singing, but 'chanting,' elevated speech, stylized utterances consisting of vocables, screaming, howling, weeping, or keening may all be included." See Nagy 1990a and Habinek 2005 for application of the distinction everyday/special to Greek and Roman verbal culture respectively. More generally, my argument in this and the following paragraph relies heavily on the posthumous magnum opus of anthropologist Roy Rappaport (1999). Also helpful is Donald 2001.

8 Edelman 2004.25–26, 72–73, 114, 138.

Literature as we know it, and as perhaps some in antiquity knew it, can thus be understood as one outcome of an ongoing process of ritualization of everyday speech, one version of specialness among many, one way of structuring value systems, not in the sense of transmitting ethical propositions but as training the reader/listener in certain patterns of attention and channeling his interaction with the external world along certain pathways.⁹ The mechanisms through which specialness is achieved and maintained are precisely the mechanisms that ground and legitimize the study of literature in relationship to other products of special speech (song, chant, prayer, orating, keening, etc.) in other places and times. They are—or at least are susceptible to analysis as—formal features, even if the form they take is that of a particular bodily practice.

Surely something similar can be said about the objects of art-historical analysis. Artifacts made special through the addition or deletion of features are found in all known cultures.¹⁰ Those artifacts may take any of a number of forms, as may the features that characterize them. The objects themselves may be parts of the human body (e.g., tattooing, trepanning, Jericho skulls);¹¹ everyday utensils transfigured, embellished, or otherwise ritualized (painted vases, embroidered fabrics, etc.); reworked geological features; or new types of products, such as painting and sculpture, that involve the reworking of naturally available substances. The difference between the first group and the latter two may seem to some to open up precisely the problem of non-art versus art, or material culture versus art history, but I would disagree. Just as with special speech, where the need for ritualization

9 The term ritualization was first used by ethologists to describe the formation of sign systems among certain animal species. See Bell 1992 for a discussion of its applicability to human practices. Note that the term need not be limited to practices specifically understood as religious, i.e., with an underlying sense of a relationship to the transcendent. If we follow Rappaport's evolutionary model, ritualization is a necessity in all contexts of human interaction. Dissanayake 1992 uses the term "making special" to describe the creation of artistic artifacts, but her evolutionary account is less rigorous than that of Rappaport. On evolution and ritualized language, see also Mithen 2006. For examples of miniaturized everyday objects such as razors and loom weights used in ritual contexts in Iron Age Latium, see Bietti Sestieri 1992.

10 For an interesting defense of this position, see Gell 1995, who rightly notes that what I am loosely calling "artifacts" may, in fact, be animate or vegetable in nature.

11 On the last mentioned, see Belting 2003.187–97, Kenyon 1981. Gamble 2007 provides numerous examples of bodies and body parts used as expressions of material culture; cf. Tarlow 2008. Gell 1998 on tattooing is well known. Dubois 2010 has a useful but brief discussion of tattooing in Greek and Roman antiquity.

is determined by the chaos-inducing potential of multiple and conflicting utterances, so with special material artifacts, the need for ritualization or making special is driven by the chaos-inducing potential of communicating, representing, or imitating in more than one way. Like bodily imitation and speaking, the production of potentially signifying extrinsic objects would seem to carry evolutionary advantages and disadvantages. The former are enhanced, the latter restrained by the ritualization, or channeling into specific pathways, of visual and material processes and products. What we call form can be understood as the visible trace of this process of ritualization, and as one means through which the artifact effects the necessary ritualization of the biological processes of perception—or, in Gerald Edelman's terms (2004), the value systems necessary for specifically human cognition. Without such ritualization, there is no telling how a given individual might convert sensory input into percepts, and thus no guarantee that he and his conspecifics will gain the advantages conferred by the synchronization of attention and sharing of knowledge of the external world. Whether that ritualization entails transformation of material objects construed as extensions of the human body or creation of new types of material production may be a matter of great significance in a given context, but does not in itself alter the process of perceptual habituation that ritualization serves.¹² Human beings sense what experience has conditioned them to sense—a characteristic that gives the ritualization of the visual and material environment (i.e., art) its necessity and its power.

Despite the inevitably compressed and simplified argument of the preceding paragraphs, two basic points would seem to warrant general agreement—or at least serious consideration: first, the widespread, even universal use of ritualized artifacts gives legitimacy to the cross-cultural application of terms such as “literature” and “art,” provided those terms are understood as carrying a whole host of caveats and qualifications pertaining to specific contexts; second, the need for the process of ritualization (although not necessarily for any given product thereof) is generated by the dynamic interplay between the plasticity, or susceptibility to change, of the individual nervous system, exteriorization of thought, and selective pressures for shared representational frameworks that characterize the ongoing history of the species *Homo sapiens sapiens*. To put it another way, “art”

12 On artifact production as a metaphorical extension of the human experience of embodiment, see Gamble 2007, Malafouris 2008, Joyce 2008.

as studied by ancient art history is a secure category that can be defended on both evidentiary and theoretical grounds without dependence on notions of a fixed, universal subjectivity or ideological privileging of one set of historical practices or one historical period over another. One can safely be a monist materialist (not to mention cultural relativist) and still study art—even ancient art.¹³

A similar approach to the category of aesthetics produces the opposite result. I see nothing in current thinking on human evolution or neurobiology that requires or even allows for the isolation or modularization of a distinct aesthetic faculty as part of the psychological makeup of either producers or observers of ritualized artifacts—verbal, visual, and otherwise. This is not to say that individuals or groups are incapable of hypothesizing the existence of such a faculty and putting that hypothesis to productive use—any treatise on aesthetics proves otherwise. But what such proponents of the aesthetic are doing is not grounded in necessity the way ritualization is, and therefore cannot be taken for granted as applicable to different contexts. In other words, regardless of disagreements over some or all of his conclusions, the project of Jeremy Tanner's *Invention of Art History in Ancient Greece* is sound and legitimate. It is perfectly reasonable to try to ascertain what constructed notions of the aesthetic obtained in any given historical or cultural context and why. Whatever conclusions such inquiry leads to, including the possible absence of any notion of the aesthetic in certain settings, they cannot, in themselves, invalidate the category of art—after all, the objects are, or were, still there—although they may well challenge the historical validity of certain ways of viewing, studying, and evaluating those objects.

Of course, much of the difficulty in discussing the aesthetic stems from the diversity of ways in which the term is used, often without discrimination or clear definition. Claims made to justify a narrow use of the term are all too often then applied to a much broader range of concepts, beliefs, and practices that are swept together under the rubric “aesthetic.” Even among the essays published in this volume (or at least the drafts I had the opportunity to see), the term aesthetic is used with a variety of significations: as a quality or characteristic of an object under analysis, as a characteristic

13 Of course we might also say that what we study is the ritualization of perception or the ritualization of speech, but those terms carry their own disadvantages, chiefly the potential for an exclusive association with cult.

or talent of the producer of such an object, as an innate faculty of some or all human perceivers, as an innate faculty of some or all human perceivers of some objects, as a non-innate skill cultivated by some producers or perceivers of some objects or some perceivers of all objects, as the ability to discriminate one form from another, as the ability to judge or rank the forms thus discriminated (an ability perhaps innate, perhaps learned). This multiplicity is not surprising, since a similar range seems to characterize the history of aesthetic discourse virtually from its invention as such by Gottlieb Baumgarten and others in the eighteenth century and, in certain ways, to characterize the dominant strands of ancient thought on imitation, representation, perception, and cognition. Indeed, some might argue that the murkiness of the term aesthetic, especially in the modern era, is intentional, since it allows a given aesthete to move unnoticed from a plausible claim (e.g., all humans have the capacity to perceive, most humans show a preference for some objects in a class over others), to an implausible one (e.g., the capacity to discriminate value in the forms of perceived objects is a universally applicable mark of an enlightened subject).

From a naturalist perspective, application of the term aesthetic to *objects* may have a certain legitimacy. If every culture gives evidence of the production of artifacts that have been made special, then we can safely denominate the qualities that allow us to identify such an object in a given context as “aesthetic.” The aesthetic features of an artifact would thus be those perceivable characteristics that differentiate it from the everyday and/or adapt it to a system of meaning-making through form in a given context. And it may well be that only a certain kind of observer is equipped to identify those characteristics, especially if the object dates from a distant time or place, so that we might safely say that she or he engages in a process of aesthetic (or formal, or stylistic) analysis.

But how can we define the practice of such an observer—not to mention of observers who make stronger claims about the aesthetic faculty—as distinct from his or her broader interaction with the external world and without resort to transcendent or immaterial categories and concepts? The answer is that we can’t. For with the current state of biological knowledge, there is no way in which perception (the etymological referent of the term aesthetics and an aspect of every use with which I am familiar) can be isolated from other aspects of communication between interior and exterior or identified as a purely natural, in the sense of internal biological, process. In standard neuroscientific accounts, perception is understood as synthesized or constructed from simple sensory input and, as such, it is part of a

dynamic, up-and-down, in-and-out process that includes mutable, culturally constructed aspects of the external world. As one neuroscientist writes with respect to vision, “a representation is synthesized [i.e., from multiple bits of sensory information] rather than determined by a pure analysis of the retinal image.”¹⁴ Features from different submodalities must be “bound together to segregate figures from their surround and to create object representations”;¹⁵ as a result, “factors such as attention and expectation gain importance even for the very first steps of visual pattern analysis.”¹⁶ Language can serve as one of the factors that is not just produced by but also productive of perception. In the so-called McGurk effect, “individuals are presented with two syllables . . . simultaneously, one in the auditory and the other in the visual modality. When the syllable presented in one modality does not match the one presented in the other modality, the individual may perceive a syllable different from both those presented. There is no reason to doubt that both visual and auditory stimuli are correctly analysed (that is, the sensation is correct), yet the percept is different.”¹⁷ Indeed, some students of mind would discard internal representations altogether, describing perception as a process of exploring the world, a means for gaining access to the aspects of the world that matter to us.¹⁸ And of course, on that model as well, the aspects that matter or the value systems mentioned above are specific to context and experience.

What is true of perception in relation to sensation is also true of other types of cognition in relation to perception. What we might wish to conceive of as a distinct process of thinking is just one aspect of a dynamic trajectory uniting brain, body, and environment. It cannot help being shaped by sensory experience and perceptual habit any more than it can help shaping them in turn through the binding of multiple inputs, focusing of attention, identification of salience, and so forth. No homunculus providing a program for a computer, no mini-god sitting in judgment, no Platonic forms awaiting recollection, no magically endowed pineal gland does the work for us. What might appear to be distinct mental subsystems in fact

14 Fahle and Greenlee 2003.xii; cf. Stafford 2007.135–74.

15 Fahle 2003.179.

16 Fahle 2003.193.

17 Rizzolatti 2006. Fahle 2003 notes that the distinction between sensation and perception is relevant to all senses.

18 Noë 2009.140–47, building on Noë 2004, 2007. For similar reservations about the usefulness of the term “representations,” see Spivey 2007.5–6.

exhibit “richly interactive functioning” (Spivey 2007.137). Expanding on his account of thought as a continuous probabilistic trajectory through multidimensional state space linking brain, body, and environment, Michael Spivey observes that “although different types of mental trajectories may be segregated into different classes for descriptive convenience, it must be recognized that the full . . . range of the state space is always available to the system” (2007.6).

The notion that perception is a distinct process is thus at best a fiction—useful, perhaps, for studying different aspects of embodied cognition. But in practice, perception is never limited to a single modality, and never occurs in the absence of sensation, thought, feeling, emotion, language, history, etc. And thus to use it as a privileged criterion for discussing artifacts or grounding a discipline can only be considered an act of radical exclusion, even mystification. That this act of exclusion has been used to support certain elite practices and beliefs is a reasonable basis for rejecting it, as many before me have noted. What I am arguing here is that the best contemporary accounts of cognition offer even broader grounds for treating with suspicion *any* appeals to the aesthetic, even if we could imagine such appeals purged of ideological content and force. In dealing with visual as with verbal artifacts, we are far better off observing their formal features, identifying the signifying systems of which they form a part, relating them to other elements of the culture of their formation, researching their potential historical significance and impact (including on the shaping of perception), and bringing them to a certain level of comprehensibility for contemporary viewers and audience by acting as interpreters or translators between past and present, than pretending that they arise from and appeal to a faculty that does not and never did exist as such.

In light of my argument thus far concerning the faculty of perception, it should go without saying that I view with equal suspicion attempts to claim a transhistorical understanding of any particular formal characteristic, such as figuration, symmetry, imageness, framing, and so on. Such patterns and processes may indeed be widespread, but that does not make them any less the result of interaction between brain, body, and environment, and thus subject to dynamic processes of emergence, decay, and reconfiguration. As Alva Noë has recently noted (2009.111–17), even the capacity for facial recognition, which might, of all perceptual skills, seem a candidate for innateness, is almost certainly the result of an infant’s experience—it just happens to be an experience that most infants, thankfully, share. So too, the recognition and use of images, although grounded in biological

capacities and constrained by biological limits, are nonetheless culturally and historically specific practices. The process of saying “this is like that” (Aristotle’s description of *mimesis*) is as much a construction of as a reaction to resemblance.¹⁹

As for material artifacts, some naturalist interpreters have gone so far as to suggest that the only thing natural about style is that it must change: in Per Age Brandt’s account, the stabilization of a form or style ends up undermining its ability to signify anything but its own social power. Only the invention of new forms makes it possible to avoid such “semiotic consumption”—hence stylistic change is an inevitable part of the ritualization of objects that I am here calling art (Brandt 2006). Brandt thus offers an implicit rebuttal of Whitney Davis’ claim that what is distinctive about “aesthetic objects” is their ability to block or resist Alfred Gell’s “abduction of agency”—in other words, to halt or resist the circulation of energy between brain, body, and environment.²⁰ Davis’ is an interesting and no doubt valid observation about the aims of certain kinds of artistic production. It might even allow us to understand some kinds of art as an exploration of the homogeneity and intensity that Thomas Metzinger identifies as the ground of our experience of phenomena as such (Metzinger 2003.185–95). But it cannot serve as a defining characteristic of art (how would we know that such blocking had occurred? What would it even mean?); and in any event, to whatever extent art blocks perception—or “agency” sticks to the artifact—it doesn’t do so for long. More defensible from a naturalist perspective is the social history of art’s emphasis on objects seeking “to synthesize elements threatening always to fly apart,”²¹ its exploration of how, “in the production of art, exceptional quality can be the condition of its own undoing” (Crow 1999.64). Such a project matches the naturalist’s recognition of both the need for ritualization and the impossibility of any given style or formal characteristic serving the function of ritualization

19 On the historical specificity of concepts of “the image,” see Belting 1990, 1994, 2003. For a balanced discussion of the preexistence vs. construction of resemblance in the formation of “pictures,” see Costall 1990. Research on the mirroring properties of certain neurons would seem to confirm the role of experience in establishing resemblance; see, e.g., Hurley and Chater 2005.

20 Davis 2007. On the other hand, Davis’ earlier work on replication (1996) strikes me as being of the utmost importance for its description of how an outside observer determines that a formal characteristic has crystallized into a signifying style.

21 Crow 1999.66–67. For an ancient example, see Stewart 1997, esp. 86–97 on the Polykleitan *Doryphoros*.

indefinitely. Far from undermining historical analysis, naturalism brings us right back to it.

Indeed, an understanding of perception as ecological and multi-modal would seem to pose a particular challenge to those who might be tempted to replace art-historical analysis with study of “the visual.” No doubt, how a given culture represents vision as taking place, how it uses ritualized objects or processes to channel and habituate perception, are important aspects of the historical analysis of works of art, as numerous studies have demonstrated.²² But to isolate “the visual” from the cognitive more generally or neglect the specific history of forms and their ritualization would seem to contradict our best understanding of the processes of perception. Without a grounding in history, visual studies runs the risk, paradoxically, of losing any connection with nature while depriving itself of the resources to develop a trenchant critique of present-day culture, visual or otherwise.²³ The “everyday” visuality studied by proponents of visual culture is perhaps better understood as a diffusion of the process of ritualization within the contemporary context of new media and global interaction.

Given the indefensibility of the category of the aesthetic except as a highly variable and contingent articulation of the beliefs and tastes of a given individual or group, we may well wonder why it has had such staying power. Jeremy Tanner offers one answer in relating it to the formation of a system of Beaux Arts in the eighteenth century, albeit with antecedents in later antiquity. James Porter argues that aesthetic processes are treated as distinct in a wide variety of ancient contexts, and seems to suggest thereby that debate over their institutionalization is beside the point. Personally, I subscribe to the view that aesthetic discourse persists to the extent that it serves the interests of certain sectors of society in mystifying their own privileged position, and have argued as much with respect to literary studies at some length elsewhere (Habinek 1998). But I do not think that any of these approaches can supply the whole story, and I have been impressed by the neuroscientist/philosopher Thomas Metzinger’s reflections on the issue. Metzinger argues (2003.383–84) that myths of the distinct metaphysical or ontological status of thinking and perceiving, versus feeling, sensing, and

22 E.g., Nelson 2000, Platt 2002a, Elsner 1995, 2007b.

23 Mitchell 2002 indicates some awareness of these problems, but it is unclear that his description of visual studies as supplement rather than replacement for other modes of inquiry is being observed in practice.

doing, persist because they correspond to our phenomenal experience—or in the case of thinking and perceiving, lack thereof. We have phenomenal experience of various sensations—heat, cold, brightness, dimness—corresponding to neurological events. We even, at least at times, have localized, bodily experience of emotions—churning stomach, pounding heart, shortness of breath—in this case corresponding to proprioceptors (that is, features of the nervous system that respond to other internal organs). But the nervous system itself supplies no proprioceptors (brain tissue, you will recall, is notoriously impervious to pain); hence humans lack and have likely always lacked phenomenal experience of the stages of cognition we call thinking and, depending on how we define it, perceiving, judging, discriminating. Thus it is not just because he sensed certain advantages in the separation of intellectual from emotional and bodily experience that Plato invented the separate metaphysical realm of the cognitive: he and the countless others who have persisted in his view (or one like it) could have found at least some authorization for their position in experience.

Metzinger's generous explanation of our predecessors' errors, however, does not legitimize our own. It does not allow us to apply Platonic, or Aristotelian, or Philostratan, or Kantian theories wholesale to the art of their times simply because that is what certain people believed then. First, whatever Plato and his followers believed, it was not what was happening. Platonic or other theories of art may help us to elucidate the semiotics of particular objects or give us indirect evidence for the social use of texts, artifacts, etc., but they cannot tell us what art was actually doing. The writings of ancient philosophers and rhetoricians are interesting instances of the ritualization of certain modes of thought, not privileged prototypes for our own practice.

In addition, even if we choose to grant ancient notions of cognition and its subdivisions privileged status in the interpretation of ancient artifacts, we would have to acknowledge that such ancient notions were far from uniform, particularly on the key issue of the separability of the aesthetic from the intellectual or the embodied. For example, my own point of entry into art history, aesthetics, and naturalistic philosophy and science is the physical system of the ancient Stoics, which stands in sharp contrast to that of Plato and Aristotle.²⁴ It is worth recalling the Stoic insistence on

24 On the distinctive features of Stoic physics, see Sambursky 1959, White 1992 and 2003, Habinek in press.

the materiality of the entire universe and all processes carried out within it. In the Stoic view, only bodies exist; even the boundaries between them are fictional approximations of the inevitable interpenetration of various sources of energy. For the Stoics, what we call perception is a physical transformation (*alloiōsis*, in one account) of the life-breath, or *pneuma*, of the perceiving subject. Vision, hearing, and smell reach outward to explore the material world, shaping it and being reshaped by it in turn. The Stoic mind is a spider web, vibrating to the movement of the universe, or an octopus, squiggling its way along the sea floor, never assuming a single fixed shape, always responding, always interacting through multiple interrelated senses.²⁵ Stoic vision connected observer and observed through a process akin to touch—the cone of *pneuma* circulating between them vibrating like a blindman's walking stick.²⁶ For the Stoics, *aisthēsis* more generally was the substance linking the “commanding faculty” and the senses, another term for “cognition [or grasp] by means of them.” As with contemporary accounts, so with the Stoics, perception is a physical process inseparable from the continuum that joins exterior world, sense organs, and the rest of the human psyche.²⁷ In their reading of literature, the Stoics were attuned not just to semiotic content but to the materiality of language, the shape and order of letters, the long sequence of causation recoverable from a single word.²⁸ The Stoic does not use reason to sit in judgment over the external

25 For the spider web, see Chalcidius *Commentary on Timaeus* 220. According to the same source (237), the Stoics also likened vision to the movement of a charge from “electric” fish through the fishing line and pole to the body of the fisherman. For the mind as an octopus, see *SVF* 2.836.5 = Aet. *Plac.* 4.21. The emphasis in the passage from Aetius is on the coordination of the multiple senses of the *hēgemonikon* or “controlling faculty,” but it hardly seems accidental that the octopus relates to the external world through tentacles, i.e., through a process of touch or, in Stoic terms, direct physical contact between bodies.

26 The Greek term *baktēria* found in the Stoic sources (Diog. Laert. 7.157 = *SVF* 2.867, Galen *de Hipp. et Plat. Plac.* 7 = *SVF* 2.865) is often translated “rod,” but the word is used elsewhere in Greek literature for the walking stick of a blindman. Descartes seems to have understood this, for it is the image he uses to describe vision: see *Oeuvres des Descartes*, eds. C. Adam and P. Tannery (Paris 1964–76) 6.83–84. See also Noë 2004.1 for “a blind person tap-tapping his or her way around a cluttered space” as the paradigm of human perceptual engagement with the world. For Stoic theories of vision more generally, see *SVF* 2.863–71, translated into French and analyzed by Dumont 1989. Morales 2004.1–35 situates Stoic theory in relationship to other ancient accounts of vision and discusses the implications of the “dematerialization” of vision in early modern thought.

27 *SVF* 2.71 = Diog. Laert. 7.52.

28 As recognized by Most 1989, drawing chiefly on the Neronian-era writer Cornutus. Cf. Ramelli 2003.

world and the objects contained within it, but seeks instead to align herself with the order immanent within the universe of which she is an inseparable part. The Stoic seeks to make more and more of the universe his home through active engagement, of which perceiving is but one dimension. Unlike Aristotle, who famously defines art as “a disposition to produce, accompanied by reason,” Stoic definitions focus on the use of sense presentations (*phantasiai*, in their terminology) and understand *technē* as “a system of jointly practiced graspings (*katalēpseis*), aiming at some positive outcome for the affairs of life”²⁹—in effect, a “ritualization” of the extended mind’s capacity to “explore what matters in the world.”

The Stoic approach to perception, reason, and materiality has a pre-history in certain aspects of pre-Socratic thought and an afterlife among at least some of the iconophile Christian fathers (once you set God to the side as an incomprehensible uncaused cause, the created world is free to operate much like the Stoic continuum), and various modern writers and artists who elected not to bow before Aristotle, Newton, or Kant (indeed, even Kant sounded much like a Stoic physicist, until he read Newton).³⁰ It remains to be seen whether and to what extent such alternative conceptions of the relationship between matter and mind affected artistic and literary practice in specific contexts, although it would be hard to believe that they did not. But the more important question is whether and to what extent a recognition of the immanent order of the material universe, ourselves included, and of the continuity of brain, body, and environment shapes our own relationship to the objects of our study. Do we stand in transcendent judgment over them, like many a rationalizing intellectual throughout history, or do we instead recognize and articulate their struggle to contain the chaos-inducing potential of human consciousness? Is art an object with determinate boundaries or a means of exploring what matters in the universe—for the individual and the group—and grasping it once it has been found?

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29 Further details in Mansfeld 1983. For a wide-ranging, if inconclusive, discussion of Stoic interest in artistic production and observation, beauty, form, and matter, see Zagdoun 2000. Translations are my own of Aristotle *EN* 6.1140a.9–10 and *SVF* 1.73, following the analysis of Mansfeld.

30 For the arguments of the Eastern Christian iconophiles, see especially Mondzain-Baudinet 1989 and Mondzain 2005. On the earlier Christian association of vision with touch, see Frank 2000. For early Kant, see Schönfeld 2007.