

INSTINCT AND EGO: The dialectic of the aesthetic and extra-aesthetic. Is there more?

Daniel Shorkend

Weizmann Institute, Haifa, Israel

ABSTRACT

In this essay I develop a model of the history of art as the mechanism through which the instinct and ego manifest and they do so through the operation and dialectic between the aesthetic and extra-aesthetic. I argue that this manifests in various proportions through the history of art and usually throughout history the image is the slave of ideology that masquerades as spirit or culture or in premodern times, as religious and or as empire. This may have changed significantly with the rise of modernism and the subsequent deconstructive tendency of post history in contemporary times – yet the model still holds – ego and instinct are the driving forces. This essay ends on a reflection on whether there is anything beyond such a mechanism and I answer both yes and no.

KEYWORDS: art; instinct; ego; spirit; nature; culture; aesthetic; extra-aesthetic

1. INTRODUCTION:

If one considers the underlying and fundamental forces that impinge on the human being, one could perhaps distil the essence as the operation of the instinct and the ego. The instinct is provoked by sensory input, the portal and connection to the external world as well as the operations of the human body. The ego is “higher consciousness” where instinct assumes the form of imagination, intellect or reason. Emotions in this model links ego and instinct. In general, humans are dominated by instinct and an ego built by years of conditioning, environmental stimulus, social interactions, personal narratives.

One can go further and equate the instinct to the aesthetic and ego would then correspond to the extra-aesthetic. Thus, the immediate impulse of attraction or repulsion is an instinctual orientation to the world. Aesthetic proclivities are immediate, evocative and experiential (that is, preceding any analysis) and this is precisely an instinctual drive. Reverie, enjoyment, pleasure or pain – this is the aesthetic or instinctual body. The ego, on the other hand, is a construction, not simply sensation. It is second order – the immediate say visual experience is then translated into definite impressions in the form of verbal content and identity: “I like this”, “this makes me sad”; “perhaps this might be interpreted as meaning x...”; “this confirms my idea that...” and so on – such reflectivity includes imagination, intellect or reason and is the basis for identity, so-called education, personal narrative and life-world formation in the construction of self. Most people do not have a very developed or original ego-formation and fit into the statistical model of common beliefs, general lack of education, and often not even going beyond instinct/aesthetic pleasure or pain and certainly not analyzing it, other than simply building up a life history and the psychological weight of experiences. Others may be very clever, even unique in developing new ideas and interpretations and even theories, yet this usually simply confirms a strong sense of identity and healthy ego-formation if not one of arrogance and superiority in the guise of the so-called educated and having status. Or in well-known terms by Foucault – “knowledge is power”.

In this brief essay, I analyze the power of both instinct and ego in the appreciation of visual arts. I argue that it is this very dialectic that is at work in the operation of both a personal oeuvre and collective and historic unfolding in the history of art. I then ask the question: Is there anything beyond ego and instinct. I answer both yes and no. Yes, but this aspect “beyond” cannot be known; and “no” in the sense that humans are just various operations of selfish genes, mere innervations of atoms and molecules. I give various reasons for these answers and conclude with a reflection on nature and culture.

1) Instinct and the aesthetic: attraction and repulsion, the body.

What moves us about a visual work of art? Preceding analysis and knowledge, how is it that a work of art evokes an immediate response, an aesthetic experience? Is it as the bee is drawn to the flower, an instinctual reaction and pleasure in beholding the beautiful and potentially useful. Or repulsed by the very opposite: the ugly, the abject, the potentially dangerous. Such responses are hard-wired survival mechanisms. It is mediated by the body where eye, brain, heart palpitations, even the skin sensors react to the world around one.

A work of art, however, is not nature, but a cloistered make-believe world where reality is suspended. Yet, as symbolic creatures, pictures tell stories or through the various elements of art evoke emotional responses and an intuition of beauty or not. The power of art then lies in its magical formulation of a body-object quo the artwork that holds the imagination of the masses: huge statues of Pharaoh's, emperors, Caesars; large foreboding architecture that speaks of power and control, images that express personal anguish, love or sorrow and so on. Humans are wired to read non-verbal cues, hence we speak of the transcendence and universality of art, beyond verbal language and symbolic thinking, like the ease with which one person can communicate to another via a smile.

There is something comforting about images and pictures. As babies we learn through pictures, are mesmerized by movement, colour, shape, texture and so on, so that art is a kind of numbing of the viewer in reveries, dream-like, intensely aesthetic and pleasurable as the case may be. Accordingly, one might interpret huge swaths of historic time and the corresponding art, as a kind of dream lullaby, where aesthetics dominates, and knowledge or analysis recedes. Thus, art is not so educational and didactic, as it is a muscular philosophy, confirming identity and culture through mass delusion and control. This interpretation would render the history of art and the history of mass coercion, blindness and sub-conscious dominance through the very aesthetic that is to creatively enact a lifeworld.

However, as we grow older, this reverie may not dominate, and the extra-aesthetic assumes significance. In other words, pictures represent and have a meaning or the great bulk of humanity at a given time and place are taught what to think and how to interpret images or simply consume them as entertainment as secularism took root and mythologies appeared to recede.

2) Ego and extra-aesthetic: correspondence theory, meaning.

One might interpret the history of art as the tyranny of images according to a specific grand narrative or paradigm. In this sense, in the West for example the Christian narrative dominated the history of images/art for close to 1600 years. Art was (is?) precisely the tool of the grand narrative whether conceived as religious, the building of nation or Empire or the expression of prevailing ideologies. Aesthetics then is a tool to lull the masses into certain belief systems and ways of seeing the world. Modern art in say the late 19th century onwards in the West attempted to subvert that with the rise of individualism, secularism and subject matter that seemed to not conform with the traditions of the past.

With modern art and the rise of secularism and individualism meant that the artist, no longer subservient to the state or religious institutions, developed their own language and ways of perceiving the world. All such movements: the abstract; dadaism, surrealism, expressionism, cubism, fauvism and so on offered a new perceptual language and means of artistic creation. In this sense there is less of a hierarchical and ideological motivation that characterizes art before this paradigm shift.

The development of an art form or style that coheres with a pattern of thought or narrative is a consolidation of the ego – the way mind and spirit impose meaning in the forms of its age and a particular aesthetic that is said to correspond with such meanings. In this sense, art is not so much a reflection of the times but a partner in creating the outlook and belief systems of that time. In this sense aesthetics itself is politicized. In post modernism art is also a tool of institutions of power and while religion appears to have lost its power, art itself is a mechanism to establish certain belief systems, social structures and forms of coercion. Liberal democracies play a game called “identity politics” with warped notions of colonialism, racism and gender, often denying history and fact and ironically, having the same bigoted views of the forebears of colonialist imperialists of the past even in their claim of the moral high ground and deconstructive critique. Art itself has perhaps lost definition and the aesthetics of the everyday pushes the envelope of what counts as art.

While instinct motivates an immediate reaction to the external world, the ego mediates between mind and reaction, directing how and what one should think and feel. Hence the history of images is also the history of ideas. Ego builds formations of self and abstract spirit formations so that the material embodiment of spirit in the form of artworks has often been associated with the sacred.

3) The dialectic: the instinct and ego feed off each other

According to the definitions, it would appear there is duality. On the one hand, one responds favorably or with distaste to an artwork based purely on immediate, sensuous repour with the art object. On the other hand, the mechanism of culture (masquerading as “spirit”) gives to that artwork a certain meaning, function and associated ideas. Yet this is not dual, but in most cases direct correspondence. Middle Ages icon painting is both beautiful and corresponds to the Christian narrative and the power of the Church in Europe at that time.

However, this mimetic-like correspondence paradigm is too simple. Looking back at history from the vantage point of the present-day perspective, one can see the history of art, which is itself a subset of history proper, as the illusionary construction of image-meaning correspondence. Yet in its place is no longer a dominant aesthetic or grand narrative – hence this is an era already dubbed as post history and post truth. The is subsequent to a creative outpouring during modernism, where new frontiers both in art-making and in the history of ideas (the Enlightenment, for example) evolved, yet as pop art won the day and two world wars ensued it appeared to prove that man’s freedom brought only destruction, so as an obvious counter, there is no longer an overarching grand narrative and aesthetic, unless it is precisely this lack of meaning and direction, that is the aesthetic.

One would also do well to recall Conceptual art in its eschewing of sensual embodiment to some degree, but art always has some visible content, some sensuality, and even in its absence there is a trace: the aesthetic and extra-aesthetic are always in some kind of dialogue. The question is who controls that dialogue. Whose purpose or ego does it serve and how does it sublimate the instinctual and underlying forces that motivate behavior and ultimately even ideas - the extra-aesthetic itself. In other words, the material and immaterial are not easily separated and the history of images coded as the history of art is more an idea and construction which we call knowledge in the form of text and edifices of institutional power, where aesthetic (irrational) and extra-aesthetic (rational) processes are in some kind of arbitrary dance serving both instinct and ego.

4) Is there anything beyond? Yes, but one cannot know it. Soul-myth narrative and the artist/dreamer. No. selfish gene. Reason, materialism.

One might ask the question whether this animalistic albeit sophisticated dance of instinct and ego, the aesthetic and extra-aesthetic can be transcended? I would argue that there is something more than simply power and politics of aesthetics. There is possibly a spiritual provenance to art (making) that is impervious to institutional, state, religious control and even the fragile, physical existence of the artist. The artist draws on what might be termed mythological soul thinking (I am not talking of many popular contemporary artists who see little spirit in art and artmaking and are part of the industry embroiled in its politics and assertion of ego). Mythological soul thinking entails the idea that the microcosm mirrors the macrocosm and transcends logic, living in a world of imagination where messages speak through things unconfined by time and place – it is a portal beyond linear logic and rational considerations. Surrealism was an example of this in the history of art as is the abstract revolution wherein metaphysics was contained not in representation and narrative, but rather in the open-ended free expression of the elements of art. In what way does mythological thinking find a space beyond instinct and ego, aesthetic and extra-aesthetic?

Instinct is rooted in the body; mythological thinking is the light and energy that pervades all bodies. Ego is about asserting self and identity; mythological thinking is about all identities and no identities. Even if there is some truth in this alternative modality, one cannot know it for knowing something one limits it in terms of the rational, and this kind of thinking or being defies rational analysis and understanding. However, one might say that even such intrepid souls are not free, that the biological is the dominant paradigm and thus even at the cellular level, the human struggle is concerned with survival – an instinct to preserve itself and respond in a certain way because of the very mechanism of the body, and then a sophisticated system of psychology and social influences that assert the ego, and thus there is no spirit as such beyond such forces. The highest pursuit then is simply the rational, secular and material abundance, rather than anything that is above and beyond. There is no absolute spirit that manifests in a kind of evolutionary unfolding of history that Hegel may have envisioned, rather a more Marxist struggle between material forces and power relations. In this sense, there is no escape from material embodiment and mind is simply the effects and limits of the human brain and nervous system.

5) Conclusion: humans are sophisticated animals, living as and within nature and yet generating culture. There could be something beyond, but it is closer to dream than reality perhaps.

The considerations in this essay concern a theoretical model for the history of art as the dialectic between the aesthetic and extra-aesthetic underpinned by the instinctual and ego-formation in individuals and society at large often on a grand scale and prolonged swaths of time. I mentioned in cursory form both how such terms are defined and how they interrelate. I have not elaborated on the mechanism precisely in any great detail, but simply outlined

a theoretical substrate, a lens with which to perceive the history of images, a subset of the field of historical truth in itself.

One could certainly hold that if this model is accurate then humans are simply sophisticated animals, of which art is just some curious epi-phenomenon; on the other hand I intimated that there might be a space beyond instinct and ego, where the mythological soul thinking of the artist and dreamer is motivated by a spiritual source whose origins are not simply biological or conditioned by society. In any event, it seems this kind of thinking is more consigned to that of dreams than reality – and art is an illusion, a dream, a fantasy – even as culture might even come to dominate nature in the human lifeworld.

REFERENCES

1. Foucault, M. 1976. This is not a pipe. Translated by J.Harkness. Los Angeles: University of California Press
2. Gombrich, E. 1962. Art and illusion: a study in the psychology of pictorial representation. 5th edition. London: Phaidon.
3. Greenberg, C. 1961. Art and culture: critical essays. Boston: Beacon
4. Hess, H. 1975. Pictures as arguments. Sussex: Sussex University Press.
5. Powell, J. 1998. Postmodernism for beginners. New York: Watts & Readers.
6. Wittgenstein, L. 1958 [1953]. Philosophical investigations. 2 nd edition. Translated by GE. Anscombe. Oxford: Basil Blackwell