

International Conference
The aesthetic Mind and the Origin of Art
Firenze, 23-25 January 2014

Promoted by:

Scuola di Studi Umanistici e della Formazione (Università di Firenze)

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Conference Programme

Thursday 23 January

Session 1 **Aesthetic Origins (Chair: Filippo Fimiani)**

Fabrizio Desideri - *Epigenesis and Coherence of the aesthetic Mechanism*

The paper moves from the proposal of a theoretical paradigm able to overcome the dualism between an internalist and an externalist model of the specifically "human" aesthetics. This proposal is related with the need to define the development of an aesthetic attitude in humans beyond the paralyzing opposition between an innatist and a historicist perspective. The new paradigm of «aesthetic» is then outlined in the terms of an expressivist model with epigenetic characters. Understood as an expressive synthesis, the conceptual realm of the «aesthetic» is then conceived as a dynamical interplay between emotion and cognition. From a neurobiological point of view this model of aesthetic can be also considered as a multimodal and multilevel interaction between cortical and subcortical areas of the brain activity. This very model allows an explanation of the peculiarity of the aesthetic mechanism with reference to Kant's notion of the «free schematism» or «indeterminate rule». Finally, the aesthetic mechanism is defined in its internal coherence focusing its relationship with Wittgenstein's image of «grammatical mechanism».

Ellen Dissanayake - *Some Conceptual Tools for formulating a naturalistic Aesthetics*

Over the years, my work has been increasingly concerned with articulating fundamental elements of participating in the arts as makers and experiencers. I have sought and identified elementary and universal principles ("aesthetic primitives") in aesthetic perception, aesthetic behavior, psychobiological needs, and emotional responses that arise from our pre-symbolic biological, animal, infant, and prehistoric past. I propose that as a species, before we were *symbolicus* or *sapiens*, we were *Homo aestheticus*. The paper engages, necessarily briefly, with related topics in current fields: neuroaesthetics, environmental aesthetics, cognitive aesthetics, and paleoarchaeology - particularly as it conflates "art" and "symbol".

Fabio Martini - *Making 'Art' in the Prehistoric Age: Signs and Figurations of the metaphoric Man*

L'esperienza figurativa ("arte") sorge improvvisamente in Europa attorno a 40.000 anni fa, in uno stadio culturale cruciale per la storia dell'umanità pleistocenica. Il fenomeno figurativo, che da allora fa parte dei saperi immateriali dell'Uomo, nasce come esperienza metaforica che rende reale ciò che reale non è, capace di dare forma e corpo - grazie all'invenzione della linea - a figurazioni animali, antropomorfe, geometrico-lineari. I grandi temi sono quello della caccia e della fertilità femminile, ai quali si aggiungono tematiche meno rappresentate come le immagini teriomorfe che rimandano alla trasfigurazione del soggetto umano.

L'arte paleolitica si presenta come un sistema organico e codificato di comunicazione non verbale che interagisce con altre forme espressive (danza, musica). Si possono riconoscere diversi stili ma il sistema di comunicazione eidetica che si esplica nei cosiddetti "santuari" mediante un codice condiviso è omogeneo. La valenza eidetica delle figurazioni è documentata per la maggioranza dei complessi iconografici parietali paleolitici che sono stati pensati, progettati e realizzati in rapporto ad uno spettatore. Ma esiste anche un'altra chiave di lettura dell'arte paleolitica, collegata alle immagini che sono state realizzate in anfratti, cunicoli e gallerie anguste e di difficile accesso, talora con sovrapposizioni di segni che rendono le immagini incomprensibili e che rimandano ad esperienze che escludono lo spettatore. Figurazioni non eidetiche, dunque, derivate da gesti e azioni grafiche del tutto individuali e non legate all'immagine realizzata, interpretabili come risultato di azioni performative individuali che si dipanano lungo un percorso interiore.

Friday 24 January

Session 2: Aesthetic Brains (Chair: Salvatore Tedesco)

Roberta Dreon - *Aesthetic starting points?*

Nel recente dibattito interdisciplinare sulle origini delle arti emergono molte voci che pongono la questione del che le pratiche artistiche hanno svolto e possono svolgere nei nostri rapporti con l'ambiente naturale e sociale. Nella maggior parte dei casi, tali interpretazioni consentono di avvicinare le esperienze artistiche in una chiave continuistica rispetto al resto delle nostre esperienze.

In quale cornice "teorica" collocare questi contributi? Alcuni di essi sono interpretabili come una ricerca anti-riduzionistica del radicamento biologico del culturale e del sociale fino alla tesi di una retroazione di questi aspetti sul naturale. Per queste ricerche è auspicabile un orientamento pluralista nel quale comportamenti come l'*artifying*, il *fictionalizing* o il *symbolizing* vengono pragmaticamente interpretati come intrecci di volta in volta caratterizzati da un determinato accento preminente, piuttosto che attraverso il ricorso a un ordinamento gerarchico, ontogenetico e filogenetico. Un punto delicato è come vengono intese le connessioni tra aspetti significativi e aspetti qualitativi, affettivi (appunto estetici), sia del linguaggio sia delle altre pratiche vitali.

Secondo alcuni dei protagonisti del dibattito, i comportamenti alla base delle pratiche artistiche mostrano al fondo una dimensione comunicativa, strutturalmente partecipativa. Ma fondarli nella comunicazione non comporta una nuova forma di fondazionalismo? La risposta può essere negativa se si recupera l'idea che la comunicazione, ovvero forme quantitativamente e qualitativamente molto raffinate di comunione e di azione cooperativa, sono necessarie a organismi come quelli umani in cui la dipendenza da un ambiente sociale per la sopravvivenza raggiunge livelli e forme inaspettate. E' una mancanza, un bisogno e non una presenza o un dato che sta alla base del comunicare umano e delle sue peculiarità. In questo contesto mi pare opportuno recuperare – sulla scorta di Dewey - un significato dell'aggettivo 'estetico' diverso da 'artistico', legato alla dipendenza strutturale o all'esposizione costitutiva all'ambiente che è pertanto di volta in volta avvertito come accogliente o temibile, favorevole o dannoso non solo per la nostra sopravvivenza, ma anche per la nostra prosperità.

Edmund T. Rolls - *The brain, evolution, and aesthetics*

A theory of the neurobiological foundations of aesthetics and art is described. This has its roots in emotion, in which what is pleasant or unpleasant, a reward or punisher, is the result of an evolutionary process in which genes define the (pleasant or unpleasant) goals for action. To this is added the operation of the reasoning, syntactic, brain system which evolved to help solve difficult, multistep, problems, and the use of which is encouraged by pleasant feelings when elegant, simple, and hence aesthetic solutions are found that are advantageous because they are parsimonious,

and follow Occam's Razor. The combination of these two systems, and the interactions between them, provide an approach to understanding aesthetics that is rooted in evolution and its effects on brain design and function.

Giuseppe Vitiello - *The aesthetic Experience as a Feature of the Brain dynamics*

We have devised a thermodynamic model of cortical neurodynamics expressed at the classical level by neural networks and at the quantum level by dissipative quantum field theory. Our dissipative model is based on features of cortical activity newly revealed by high-density electrode arrays. We have incorporated the mechanism and necessity for so-called dark energy in knowledge retrieval and postulate that the extremely high density of energy sequestered briefly in cortical activity patterns can account for the vividness, richness of associations, and emotional intensity of memories recalled by stimuli.

The dissipative quantum model enables an orderly description that includes all levels of the microscopic, mesoscopic, and macroscopic organization of the cerebral patterns. By repeated trial-and-error each brain constructs within itself an understanding of its surround, the knowledge of its own world that we describe as its Double. The relations that the self and its surround construct by their interactions constitute the meanings of the flows of informations exchanged during the interactions. In such a dialog of the self with his Double resides the act of consciousness. The perception-action arc in the Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception finds its representation and formal description in the frame of the dissipative model. In the dialog with the Double, the continuous attempt to reach the equilibrium shows that the real goal pursued by the brain activity is the aesthetical experience, the perfect "to-be-in-the-world", the aesthetical dimension characterized by the "pleasure" of the perception. The aesthetical experience arising from the search of the perfect fitting of the self in the world through the "active response" of the self to the world and the reciprocal action of the world on the self, continuously renews itself since the dialog of the self with his Double is of dynamical origin, never concluded or terminated, always opening new horizons to be explored. Active responses imply responsibility and thus they become moral, ethical responses through which the self and its Double become part of the larger social dialog. Aesthetical pleasure unavoidably implies disclosure, to manifest "signs", artistic communication. An interpersonal, collective level of consciousness then arises, a larger stage where again the actors are mutually dependent, each one bounded (entangled) in his very existence (including any sort of physical needs) to the other ones, simply non-existing without the others. The coherent structure of the brain background state, or minimum energy state, manifests itself in the auto-similarity properties of fractal structures which are observed to occur also in a large number of natural phenomena and systems. This leads us to a unified physical understanding at the ecological scale. The conception of Nature split in closed, separated domains is replaced by the vision of Nature modulated and unified by laws of form implied by the underlying quantum dynamics of the coherent vacuum. Any distinction or antinomy between structure and function is dissolved in such an integrated ecological vision.

Session 3: Aesthetic animals (Chair: Roberta Dreon)

W. Tecumseh Fitch & Gesche Westphal Fitch - *Evolutionary Aesthetics: A Comparative and Cross-Cultural Approach*

Winfried Menninghaus - *Naked skin and the emergence of the visual arts*

Darwin's hypothesis that human nakedness evolved "for ornamental purposes"—i.e. as a trait driven by sexual choice for "capricious" bodily features deemed „beautiful”—ranks among the less favorably received parts of his work. The lecture presents arguments as well as experimental evidence in support of Darwin's model. It moreover suggests that the prime biological ornament of naked skin was among the factors that drove the evolution of aesthetic "imagination" and of the human visual arts.

Salvatore Tedesco - *Compositional Homology and Creative Thinking*

The concept of homology is the most solid theoretical basis elaborated by the morphological thinking during its history. Today the enucleation of some general criteria for the interpretation of homology is today a fundamental tool for life sciences, and for restoring their own opening to the question of qualitative innovation that arose so powerfully in the original Darwinian project. The aim of this paper is to verify the possible uses of the concept of compositional homology in order to provide of an adequate understanding of the dynamics of creative thinking.

Lorenzo Bartalesi & Mariagrazia Portera - *The Evolution of Aesthetic Preferences: A Darwinian Chiasmus*

Human aesthetic preferences towards a certain landscape type, a certain bodily trait of the opposite sex, a figurative style rather than another, are embedded in what we call «aesthetic experience», a complex network of instinctive reactions, emotions, feelings, thoughts and judgments. How did these aesthetic preferences evolve? Are they continuations or remnants of aesthetic preferences in animals? Are they adaptations forged by natural selection in the course of human evolution or are they instead cultural traits, whose production and diffusion depends on social learning? To answer, we follow Charles Darwin's theory of aesthetic instinct, as it is outlined in Darwin's metaphysical Notebooks.

Saturday 25 January

Session 4: Aesthetic Naturalism (Chair: Giovanni Matteucci)

Elisabeth Schellekens - *Thinking Aesthetically: Philosophizing about Psychology*

Jean-Pierre Cometti - *John Dewey et la naturalisation de l'esthétique : un essai de clarification et d'actualisation*

The "Neuronal man", as Changeux has called him, is now credited with an aesthetic mind. This mind is not the "Geist" of the philosophical tradition. The cognitive sciences have taken over from philosophy and deal with art and aesthetics as they do with any other aspect of human thought, experience and activity. Philosophers like Kant were interested in the empirical sources of beauty, but for him empirical features of its development did not change anything at all to its very essence. The naturalism implemented in the philosophy of mind and brain sciences has completely changed the matter, so that the main point in discussion is whether aesthetic experience can be explained in terms of brain and/or computational processes or whether it should be considered as irreducible to whatever empirical or physical facts. These debates can be seen as new and interesting, but they drive directly to an aporia without any exit door. They remind us the old debate between the "Sons of the ground" and the "Friends of ideas".

Despite the appearances, the project of naturalizing aesthetics preceded the emergence of cognitive sciences and computational models. In philosophy, empiricism opened the way for the first time, and Darwinism allowed to make a step more, as Dewey showed it in *Art as Experience*. This way of naturalization has little to do with the naturalization of mind as it is understood in the main trends of cognitive sciences. Nevertheless, I think it is not very interesting to oppose one theory to another, and so to continue the same kind of debate. It is probably better to try to understand what is at stake in it, and perhaps to take another path, in order to see if we could not preserve what is worth expecting from aesthetic experience, without be afraid from the "aesthetic mind". There is no description - in this area as in any other one - that can be taken or deserve to be taken as exclusive. It is only when things become such that thoughts become confused, that spirits warm up, and that the most familiar experiences appear suddenly so very odd that we feel unable to recognize them.

Elio Franzini - *Phenomenology and Neuroaesthetics*

The discovery of a mirror neuron system has been dealt with in connection with phenomenological studies and has triggered a philosophical trend which encourages the application of some paradigms to the field of philosophy as a whole. More in particular, the field of aesthetics shows a peculiar attitude to investigate the interactions between mind and brain in the production and reception of works of art. This paper tries to outline the limits of such a perspective, pointing out its contradictions and flaws, with particular reference to the application of those paradigms to phenomenological studies.

Poster Session (coordinated by Mariagrazia Portera)