



AESTHETIC UNIVERSALISM AND ANALOGY

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Homo sum: humani nil a me alienum puto.
"I am a man, and nothing human is alien to me."

Terence, 163 B.C.

On the last page of his splendid overview of the state of linguistics today *The Language Instinct*, Steven Pinker concludes with words that echo Terence's dictum: "Knowing about the ubiquity of complex language across individuals and cultures and the single mental design underlying them all, no speech seems foreign to me, even when I cannot understand a word." For Pinker, "The banter among New Guinean highlanders in the film of their first contact with the rest of the world, the motions of a sign language interpreter, the prattle of little girls in a Tokyo playground-I imagine seeing through the rhythms to the structures underneath, and sense that we all have the same minds."¹ The truth of Pinker's general claim about the universality of language and the linguistic capacities of the human mind is indisputable.

But what of the universality of art? Is it also true that, even though we might not receive a pleasurable, or even intelligible, experience from art of other cultures, still beneath the vast surface variety, all human beings have the essentially the same art? I wish to approach this question by considering two aspects of it. First, what might a universalist aesthetics look like, and second, what is the role of analogy in aesthetic universalism?

I

Julius Moravcsik is the contemporary philosopher who has given the most systematic thought to the first of my questions. He begins by stressing a fundamental logical point: a

transcultural investigation into art as a universal category of human experience must be distinguished from trying to determine the meaning of the word "art."² This distinction between two kinds of question is confused, intentionally avoided, or just ignored in much of the anthropological writing on the subject. "Art" is a word in English, the history and vagaries of which can be profitably studied. "This might be an interesting semantic exercise," Moravcsik says, "but it is not directly related to the many phenomena we can we can examine" by broadening attention to art as a universal category. Consider again the analogy of language. It too is both a concept and, with the addition of quotation marks, a word in English. We can argue at length about the meaning of the word "language," how it ought to be defined, and whether, given a particular definition, computer codes are "language," music is a "language," or the song of a mockingbird is a "language." But the focus on such disputes, which take us to the outer borders of a meaning, does not necessarily have any bearing on whether Greek or English or Iatmul are languages. These latter are what analytic philosophers used to call "paradigm cases," examples which no linguistic investigation into the meaning of "language" will cast into doubt. The discovery, if such a thing were possible, that any of the marginal cases, music or birdsong, is or is not a language could no more disprove that Urdu is a language than the discovery that atoms are mostly empty spaced disproved that a blacksmith's anvil is solid.

An investigation into the universality of language, or of art, Moravcsik insists, seeks lawlike generalizations which are neither trivially definitional nor accidental. An example of the former would be the claim that "every culture exhibits social organization," where a human grouping without social organization would be ruled out as being considered a culture by virtue of its very lack of a social organization; the claim is a mere tautology. On the other hand, equally to be avoided is the reduction of a universality claim to the status of contingent empirical generalization or the form "all coins in my pocket are

copper." This is merely accidental (it does not follow that if a new coin is placed in my pocket it will either be or become copper as well). A culture equivalent of such an accidental generalization might be, "all cultural groups are sometimes overflowed by jet aircraft" (even if this were true in the world today, it would be an accidental truth, because if we discovered an out-of-the-way group that lived beneath the flight paths of no jets, it would not follow that the group did not constitute a cultural group). What is wanted in an investigation of the relation of art to culture and the general features of each are a non-analytic lawlike generalizations of the sort, "beavers build dams." Dam-building is not part of the definition of "beaver," nor is it even true of all existing beavers. What this means, Moravcsik says, is that "under normal circumstances a healthy specimen of this species will build a dam." If true, such a generalization is worth knowing because it tells us something significant about beavers. Even if marginal cases might require attention to terms used ("heathy," "normal"), such hypothesizing, seeking neither analytic (definitional) nor accidental attributes, is most desirable in empirical inquiries into the features of widespread social phenomena.

Moravcsik's concerns about the non-analytic, non-accidental nature of the universality claim is a central issue in contemporary debates about the presence and status of art in small-scale societies. When the anthropologist Sidney Kasfir writes of African masks and carvings, "That from an African perspective, these objects are not art in the current Western sense is too well known to discuss here,"³ she is precisely denying that they are "art." The reference to "the current Western sense" indicates that, first, she is aware of the distinction between "art" and art, and that, second, she believes the carvings in question are art, even as she rejects the notion that they are "art." Confusions such as these depend on conflating the idea of art with the culture-specific meaning for "art", and can be more easily seen by stepping back for a larger view of the question. If we consider something like the classic treatise by Jun'ichiro Tanizaki on the rich, highly-developed aesthetic sense and traditions of Japan.⁴ That Japanese arts are subtly different from those

of the Western world is the emphatic point of Tanizaki, but it is also immediately recognizable that Japan possesses an intellectual tradition capable of debating both the autonomy of the arts and their interrelationship with daily life. But we do not need to reach culturally as far as Japan, for even in Europe long before Kant the question of artistic autonomy was fiercely debated by the Greeks, some whose music, painting, and drama was as autonomous from social or ideological content as most modern painting, drama, and music. Most of us today conceive of art and aesthetic experience as a broad category which encompasses the mass arts (popular forms such as Attic tragedy, Victorian novels, or tonight's television offerings), historical expressions of religious or political belief, the history of music and dance, and the immense variety of design traditions for furniture, practical implements, and architecture. Far from being an elite, rarefied class of objects, in the European imagination art includes a staggeringly vast range of activities and creative products.

I can write of art in this manner and expect to be understood not because my readers and I have checked the dictionary to determine the meaning of "art" or jointly stipulated some definition for it, but because we share a much more vague and broad pretheoretical understanding of what art is. There may be any number of hard cases, from Lascaux to Duchamp to Dinka cattle markings, but there are also enough indisputable examples to give discourse about art an intelligible place to begin. In this respect, art-talk is like physics, linguistics, or medicine, to cite three of Moravcsik's examples. As mature disciplines these latter may develop theories which cover phenomena remote from common-sense encounters with physical objects, ordinary speech, or having a headache, but they nevertheless begin with such mundane experience, and in the end hope to explain it. There

was, for instance, human awareness of good health and physical well-being, and with it a contrasting acquaintance with pain, disease, and death, long before there was a germ theory of disease, double-blind placebo testing, or any theory of health at all. Medicine began from pretheoretic notions of health and disease; as a developed discipline medicine has evolved theories and effective cures, but it has not in ten-thousand years abolished the ordinary distinction between robust good health and being too nauseated to keep down food.

II

Many of these observations will strike aestheticians as quite uncontroversial. However, in anthropological approaches to aesthetics this is a highly contested area. We live in an age in which there has been a sustained academic attack on what are stigmatized as "hegemonic," "universalist," Enlightenment attitudes. Without directly responding directly to these views, I want now to engage in a negative, brush-clearing project. My question is: "How do you get a foothold in understanding a foreign aesthetics anyway?"

Faced with a problem in ethics, metaphysics, or aesthetics, it is a standard strategy in philosophy in the Wittgensteinian mode to begin with a thought experiment: "Imagine a tribe...." Wittgenstein's own philosophizing sometimes involves appeals to oddly alien scenarios--think of the builders used to initiate the examination of language in the *Philosophical Investigations*.⁵ Peter Winch has remarked that for Wittgenstein "when we get into philosophical difficulties over the use of some of the concepts of our language, we are like savages confronted with something from an alien culture."⁶ Winch cites that striking example from *Remarks on the Foundation of Mathematics* in which we're to imagine a society where timber is sold in the following manner: wood is piled "in heaps of arbitrary, varying height and then [is] sold...at a price proportionate to the area covered by the piles....And what if they even justified this with the words, 'of course, if you buy more timber you must pay more'."⁷

How could we ever understand such a practice? Here are some possibilities: the locations of some of the piles of timber are sacred sites and wood purchased from those stacks will build houses more resistant to fires, infestation by malevolent spirits, termites, etc. Or: the word translated "more" in this society's language actually means both "more" and "of better quality" and the appearance of arbitrariness comes about because the foreign observer doesn't realize that the piles consist of different kinds and grades of timber.

Or: timber that is piled higher tends to be light timber, and in terms of density there is simply less of it. What seems arbitrary and incoherent, therefore, might be actually rational.

Winch's target is a behaviorism which contends that the criterion for understanding what the timber merchant is up to consists in the ability to make accurate predictions about the behavior of buyers and sellers. Valid understanding, Winch says, is a matter of "grasping the point or meaning of what is being said or done," which is "far removed from the world of statistics and causal laws: it is closer to the realm of discourse and the internal relations that link the parts of a realm of discourse." Yet knowing how ideas are internally related to one another in an alien field of discourse isn't in itself enough to amount to understanding for us, unless we can be brought to grasp the point of those internal relations. What we need is an analogy which provides us with something we can understand in terms of a more familiar story. Failing that, we still need a further explanation that makes sense in a completely new way an alien behavior, beyond simply allowing us to predict it.

The idea that the timber is heaped on varying areas and is sold at prices according to area irrespective of height can still make sense until the merchant says, "Of course, if you buy more timber, you must pay more." If the merchant means it is only a question of quantity of wood, then we have come against a wall. But maybe that isn't exactly what he means, so we continue to seek a rationale: perhaps this transaction is no more a

matter of "buying and selling" than putting money in the plate at Mass and later taking the Host is a matter of purchasing a snack. If so, trading money for timber might be a kind of expiation and what we take to be a timber merchant is actually something like a priest or holy man. Alternatively, maybe it's a trick: the timber merchant is running a protection racket, and the payment for timber is actually a payment to make sure the buyer's house isn't

burned down in the night. In this case, "If you buy more you must pay more," is ironic and sinister. Either this behavior makes sense to us or it doesn't. If it does, and we reasonably feel we can confirm our plausible interpretation, then we have achieved our aim; if it doesn't, and the behavior is nevertheless continues as patterned and consistent--and therefore presumably cultural, social--then then we're facing a problem. The dilemma which threatens is this: if we jump too fast to an interpretation of alien behavior patterns, we risk imposing a false or ethnocentric reading, and missing actual meaning; if we give up as hopeless the attempt to interpret the pattern as an intelligible human procedure, we might as well regard the people who provoked our curiosity as insects, perhaps, or Martians.

It is dangers of the first kind of error that have pushed some anthropologists to espouse an extreme agnosticism about whether we can ever understand the arts of other cultures, or even say with any confidence that they have "arts." A poignant illustration of this revealed itself in a published debate held among anthropologists at the University of Manchester, mooting the declaration, "Aesthetics is a cross-cultural category."⁸ One of the speakers, Joanna Overing (whose presentation helped persuade the audience by a two-to-one vote that aesthetics is not cross-cultural), argued that the West's conception of art is incommensurable with the sense of beauty of the Piaroa, a people of Venezuelan Amazonia. It is clear, she claims, that "the Piaroa view of beauty and its relation to everyday production cannot be understood within our category of aesthetics." Her argument is two pronged: first she asserts that Western art's conception of aesthetics dates

only back to the seventeenth century: "the 'aesthetic' is a bourgeois and elitist concept in the most literal

historical sense," she says, "hatched and nurtured in the rationalist Enlightenment."

Europe, she insists, has "disengaged 'the arts' from the social, the practical, the moral, the cosmological," and has made artistic activity "especially distinct from the technological, the everyday, and the productive." Other cultures see things differently: "Art and beauty are not so decontextualized in other societies."

These dubious generalizations about the arts and the aesthetic in European history are contrasted with her apparently more precise account of the "highly developed sense of artistic production" of the Piaroa, and with this the Piaroa sense of beauty. In this second part of her argument she claims that for the Piaroa, "forms of art" possess a meaning that is "socially, politically and cosmologically contextualized. Their 'art' is not something that stands alone, outside the context of life." Beautification, for example, means for the Piaroa making tools beautiful, giving them a carefully designed form which carry distinctive patterns: "Cassava boards carry the design of their potency painted in dark red resin; as do canoe paddles and blow guns. Quivers and basketry carry their distinct woven designs." The effectiveness of tools is closely tied to their beauty, and the same goes for effective (productive, creative) people, in such disparate fields as tool-making, having babies, hunting, and healing. Conversely, the created object--child, cure, or tool--"contains the potency of its creator." In this conceptual fusion of beauty and utility, "both objects and people are beautiful because of what they do":

A person's "life of thoughts" confers beauty on both self and object.

Beauty, thoughts, and the products of work are conceptually linked, and they also have the same linguistic root--a'kwa. The body is beautified by its "life of thoughts." The productive, but dangerous, forces of the "life of thoughts" are safely stored within the body:

there, they design the internal self with their beauty. In turn, Piaroa

ornamentation (their necklaces, leg and arm bands, their face and body painting) makes manifest on the surface of the body the beauty--and thus the potency--of the productive capacities within. Similarly, the designs and forms of the cassava grater, and of the basket, make manifest their beauty, and hence the potency or the productive capacities of these objects.

In Overing's view, although the Piaroa have a "highly developed tradition of artistic production," ranging "through what we would call the verbal and poetic, the visual, the musical and performative arts," nevertheless, "our aesthetics will not help us to understand what these 'arts' are for the Piaroa."

At this point you may be wondering, why not? I have quoted Overing at some length in order to indicate both the strangeness and familiarity of Piaroa aesthetics, at least on her telling of the story, though familiarity is the one thing she's at pains to deny. That for Piaroa the "life of thought" can "design" the internal self seems obscure, but perhaps it is not so far from the Aristotelian idea that excellent action produces over time an excellent soul, or even the adage that pretty is as pretty does. Moreover, Overing's insistence that our own "bourgeois and elitist" aesthetic conceptions are no help, but rather a positive danger "to the task of understanding and translating other people's ideas about the beautiful," is wildly exaggerated, if not incoherent. First, if the lives and ideas of the Piaroa are as remote from those of the West as she claims, then what is her justification for referring to their sense of "beauty" and of describing their verbal, poetic, decorative, and cosmetic "arts," let alone as "a highly developed tradition of artistic production"?

Either

the Piaroa have a sense of a kind beauty and pursue recognizable arts, though of a Piaroa kind, in which case there is a cross-cultural link between the arts of the Piaroa and the West, or the Piaroa do not have arts or aesthetic ideas, in which case Overing has no business describing them as she does. It is only by characterizing Western aesthetic life in

terms of a special, tiny class of glorified objects (presumably precious paintings and sculptures, surviving in fine arts museums), which are enjoyed only by a small, privileged elite, that Overing can mount her implausible case for the lack of any cross-cultural connection between Piaroa and Western art. In reality, nothing could be more intelligible to the Western mind than the impulse to decorate weaponry, which extends back through the

Middle Ages, to the Greeks and even the Upper Paleolithic, and in the present includes fighter aircraft decorated to look like birds of prey. The treating of utilitarian objects as having a life of their own, or as intimately involved with our psychic lives, is not alien to the West, and it would be a mistake even today to insist that, say, a truck driver's embellishment of his machine is wholly devoid of magical significance or connections with efficacy. In Europe, tools have for millenia been formed and decorated as potential objects of beauty. Piaroa arts may be as different from ours as the arts of the Sung Dynasty are from the arts of Georgian England, there are arts all the same, and analogies with arts we are familiar with are a start toward understanding.

Overing's claim that the Piaroa notion of beauty "cannot be understood within our category of aesthetics" therefore fails: "we"--anthropologists or any other Westerners, bourgeois or not--do not have "a category" of aesthetics, but access to a staggeringly vast number of interwoven aesthetic forms, types, and traditions: graphic arts from Lascaux to computer-generated art, narrative literatures (oral and written), sculpture, popular drama from Attic tragedy to tonight's television, an enormous variety of musics, popular and folk genres, personal cosmetics, decorated furnishings, architectures, and so forth. While it would be foolish, or at least hasty, to suppose any of these offers a simple key to unlock the puzzles of the Piaroa aesthetic life, against this vast tradition there is no reason Overing provides to portray Piaroa art as wholly Other. Overing's strategy of intentional mystification is as undesirable as the ethnocentrism it attempts to avoid.

Yet the tendency to want to construe non-Western or tribal arts as without analogy

in European experience remains widespread in the literature on tribal arts. Often, I suspect this tendency results from ethnographers, sometimes fresh out of graduate school, being simply unfamiliar with European and other world artistic, dramatic, and musical traditions: the first art anyone studies in serious depth may seem more extraordinary than it actually is. Lynn M. Hart has written of large jyonthi paintings made by women in Uttar Pradesh.⁹

She describes the artists in their working environment, choosing to call the artists "producers" and their products "visual images" instead of "works of art." Otherwise, you see, readers might get the wrong idea, not realizing that "the images and patterns" of the jyonthi paintings "are based on religion, ritual, and mythic themes and derive their meaning-and their power-from the religious contexts of their production and use." The aesthetic principles of this Indian village art are therefore "different from standard Western aesthetics." The excellence of the works from an indigenous perspective "is seen to lie in the closeness of the central symbol's approximation to an ideal image, with special attention paid to the style, technique, and materials used. It is important to re-present the symbols used in an adequate way, not to improve upon them, though at the same time the image on the wall should be as beautiful and pleasing as possible"-and on it goes, all "quite distinct from Western aesthetic canons."

And how distinct is it? Has Hart compared the jyonthi tradition with the history of European art in the Middle Ages? Religious folk arts (such as the tradition of Russian icons) and women's arts of Europe for the three centuries prior to the present one, or the "visual images" of the Greeks, for that matter? The theology might be different, but I cannot detect a single aspect of the artistic practice and aesthetic appreciation she describes which cannot be plainly found in "Western aesthetics."

If the Western understanding of tribal arts is as remote from indigenous understanding as these anthropologists suggest, it is really no understanding at all: so-called appreciation would under such conditions be no more than a Rorschach test for the

Western mind. The anthropologist Edmund Leach has suggested that tribal art excites us as driftwood does:

I consider these ethnographic objects, if they do not come from European culture, as far as we are concerned, "found objects." I recollect an exhibition of Graham Sutherland's work some years ago in which he showed among his pictures bits of driftwood because they had stimulated him in painting some of his pictures. In the same way these objects of what we call primitive art are exciting to us. They stimulate us as "found" objects, not because we perceive in them qualities already there.¹⁰

Here we have a key to the great popularity among anthropological writers on art of Arthur Danto's essay about the Pot People and the Basket folk, which plays perfectly to the social constructionism which increasingly infects anthropology.¹¹ Briefly, Danto's story is this:

Imagine two tribes, the Pot People and the Basket Folk, both of whom produce what are to European eyes indistinguishable pots and baskets. In these peoples' minds, however, there is an enormous difference between Pot People pots and Basket Folk pots (and conversely with baskets), for the pots are works of art, embodying deep symbolism for the Pot People, whereas their indistinguishable counterparts are mere utilitarian artifacts for the Basket Folk. Since this is for Danto a conceivable situation, it follows that for these imagined tribes, and possibly generally as well, the status of an artifact as work of art results from the ideas a culture applies to it, rather than its inherent physical or perceptible qualities. Cultural interpretation (an art theory of some kind) is therefore constitutive of an object's arthood.

If supportable, Danto's thought experiment would have vast implications for the Western encounter with tribal arts, for it would follow from it that knowledge of the

cultural context of, say, an Oceanic ancestor figure was not merely an enriching support to the immediate aesthetic impact of the object. Rather, its original culture would exhaustively determine whether the object was art at all; appreciation of formal aesthetic qualities in the absence of considerable cultural knowledge therefore risks being completely delusive--just like (guess what!) the tribal person's reaction to a Brillo box in a New York gallery would likely miss the point entirely.

In the real world of dusty villages, it is difficult to imagine circumstances where something like Danto's example could exist. Those works of tribal art which embody dense cultural meaning are in small-scale societies normally ones into which are invested the greatest care, craft, and critical discernment. In Danto's example, even though we can well imagine Europeans might find it difficult or even impossible to distinguish between Basket Folk baskets (works of art) and Pot People baskets (utensils), it is hard to envision the situation where the basket weavers of the Basket Folk would not be able to tell the difference (I might mistake a Terborch for a Hals, but it is unlikely Terborch or Hals ever did so).

Danto's essay is wonderful, even if in my opinion it's highly misleading to naive anthropologists, because it takes to the logical extreme precisely the position anthropologists such as Overing, and by implication the others I've mentioned, are attracted to. If Danto is right, here's what follows: you look at a tribal artifact, and, not knowing anything of the concepts of that culture, it gives you aesthetic pleasure, you call it "beautiful." If it so happens that the people who made it or their original audience find it beautiful, well fine--but the fact that you and these tribal peoples find the same thing beautiful is really just a coincidence. That's the implication for the modernists who "discovered" African art around the turn of the century: maybe they were right about African art, but if so it was only by accident.

The appeal of Danto's example to anthropologists of a social constructionist--some would say "historicist"--stripe goes hand-in-hand with its anti-naturalism. The rejection by

writers such as Overing and Hart of analogies in our familiar experience to throw light on alien art forms seems to me so misguided as to be ridiculous. It is not that analogies cannot be very misleading; of course, they can. But when they are carefully devised, they connect the stuff of human experience at such a basic level that they are undeniable.

Relations

between mothers and their children are everywhere affected by culture, but that doesn't mean that somewhere there's a possible culture in which mothers generally relate to their children as, say, I relate to my chainsaw (another fraught, love/hate relationship, I must add). Maybe this is what the Sudanese aesthetician Mohamed A. Abusabib is getting at when it asks why it is that anthropologists and art theorist like to ask of tribal peoples, "Are those carvings really art?" but would never think to ask, "Is that jumping around really dancing?" or "Are those sounds really language?" or "Is that group really a family?"¹² What's going on, he wants to know. So do I.

Notes

1. Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct* (New York: William Morrow, 1994), p.430.
2. Julius Moravcsik, "Why Philosophy of Art in an Cross-cultural Perspective?", *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 50 (1992): 233-49; "Art and 'Art'", *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 16 (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991).
3. Sidney Littlefield Kasfir, "African Art and Authenticity: A Text Without a Shadow," *African Arts* 25 (1992): 41-53.
4. Jun'ichiro Tanizaki, *In Praise of Shadows*, trans. Thomas J. Harper (Stony Creek, Connecticut: Leet's Island Books).
5. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 2nd ed., trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1958), p. 3.
6. Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy* (London:

Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), p.84.

7. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1956), p. 44.

8. James Weiner, ed., *Aesthetics Is a Cross-cultural Category* (Manchester: University of Manchester, 1994).

9. Lynn M. Hart, "Three Walls: Regional Aesthetics and the International Art World," in *The Traffic in Culture*, George E. Marcus and Fred R. Myers, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 127-50.

10. Edmund Leach, "Themes of Discussion," in *The Artist in Tribal Society*, ed. Marian W. Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961).

11. Anthur C. Danto, "Artifact and Art," in *Art/Artifact*, ed. Susan Vogel (New York: Center for African Art, 1988).

12. Mohamid A. Abusabib, *African Art: an Aesthetic Inquiry* (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1995), p. 41.

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