

Art and Human Nature

Some Thoughts on Steven Pinker's Critique of Contemporary Art

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Abstract

In The Blank Slate, Steven Pinker draws on evolutionary psychology to criticize the current state of modern art. Pinker criticizes both modernism and postmodernism in art and claims that these artistic movements have lost complete touch with what people like in art. Art is a human universal and an evolutionary adaptation, and evolutionary psychologists have been able to determine the kinds of colors, shapes, and designs that most people like. Art has entered into a state of decline because modern and postmodern art depart so radically from innate human tastes. Pinker argues that contemporary artists need to reengage themselves with human nature. While we agree with Pinker that art is an evolutionary adaptation, and that it is possible to understand innate tastes and the evolutionary reasons for these tastes, we nevertheless argue that Pinker (1) has a superficial and sometimes erroneous understanding of modern art, (2) conflates modernism and postmodernism in art, (3) has a poor grasp of much postmodern art, (4) focuses excessively on the emotional side of art, thus ignoring its cognitive or intellectual side, (5) fails to provide a convincing argument as to how a greater understanding of human nature can be helpful in reorienting art, and (6) commits the naturalistic fallacy by implying that artists should orient their work to what most people want in art. Pinker's analysis of art suffers from these difficulties primarily because of his limited understanding of the history of art and the social world of artists. Artists have no obligation to be guided by mass taste, and they, along with their more knowledgeable consumers, have standards and criteria for judging works of art that are valid in their own right. Moreover, an enormous amount of art catering to mass taste is still being produced; elite and mass art exist side by side and both have important audiences to serve.

“Sischy once said to me, ‘My greatest love is Conceptual art. I may be even more interested in thinking than in art.’ She added, ‘René and I used to have an argument. He’d say something like, ‘Well, that work is really beautiful,’ and I’d say ‘So?’ and he’d say ‘Well, you hate art if you say ‘So?’ about something being beautiful,’ and I’d say – and I’ve come to realize that it’s more complicated than this – ‘Well, maybe I just hate art when the only thing going for it is that it’s beautiful.’”

– Janet Malcolm (1986)

In his chapter on the arts in his recent book *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (2002), the neuroscientist Steven Pinker bemoans the current state of the arts in general and of art *strictu sensu* in particular. He provides both a diagnosis and a possible solution. The diagnosis is rooted in Virginia Woolf’s famous statement that “in 1910 human nature fundamentally changed.” Art had already begun to be taken over by so-called modernism, and the year in question is significant because it marked a London exhibition of the post-Impressionist paintings of van Gogh, Cézanne, and Gauguin. Pinker castigates modernism for its “freakish distortions of shape and color” and its “abstract grids, shapes, dribbles, and splashes.” He charges that it glorified pure form and disdained beauty, and did so because it was driven by a political and spiritual agenda. This castigation of modernism is also extended to postmodern art forms. Postmodernism in art – such as Andy Warhol’s paintings of soup cans and images of Marilyn Monroe and Cindy Sherman’s photographs of “grotesquely assembled bi-gendered mannequins” – is held in considerable contempt. Postmodern art, Pinker says, is both relativistic and paranoid.

In his book Pinker is attacking the widely held doctrine that the mind is a blank slate and that there is no such thing as human nature. It is this doctrine, he claims, that has been the implicit theory of human psychology undergirding modernism and postmodernism in art. But art, as a human universal, is a product of human nature, an evolved adaptation of the human mind. Evolutionary psychologists have studied what people like in art – what the most popular colors, shapes, and designs are – and the modernists and postmodernists have lost complete touch with these innate human desires. Art is therefore in decline because it departs so radically from what the ordinary person likes. The vast majority of people can no longer understand or appreciate art “without a support team of critics and theoreticians.” “The dominant theories of elite art and criticism in the twentieth century grew out of a militant denial of human nature. One legacy is ugly, baffling, and insulting art. The other is pretentious and unintelligible scholarship. And they’re surprised that people are staying away in droves”? (Pinker, 2002:416)

If the problem with modern and postmodern art is its denial of human nature and its role in the appreciation of art, then for Pinker the solution is for artists to regain an understanding of human nature and a respect for “the minds and senses of human beings.” And fortunately, he says, this is already beginning to occur. A revolt has begun and a new philosophy of art is emerging. He mentions in particular such new artistic movements as *Derrière Guard*, the *Radical Center*, *Natural Classicism*, the *New*

Formalism, Stuckism, the Return of Beauty, and No Mo Po Mo. All of these movements stress the return to beauty and technique in art.

While Pinker has many interesting and valid points to make, we submit the following objections to his critique of contemporary art and artists:

1. Pinker's understanding of modernism in art is both superficial and, in several respects, erroneous. Contrary to Pinker, modernism was never really opposed to beauty in art. It was opposed to commonly received opinions of beauty, as well as to making beauty the paramount (or the only) goal of art, but it was not against beauty per se. In our view, most if not all of the Abstract Expressionists (a school of modernism), for example, were looking for very specific and personal kinds of beauty in their art. And the art of one of the greatest of the early modernists, Matisse, was primarily about beauty. Unfortunately, Pinker cites two theorists of modernism, Clive Bell and Virginia Woolf, and a strong opponent of modernism, Tom Wolfe, as if they know modernism best and as if their views on it are sufficient to close the debate.
2. Pinker conflates modernism and postmodernism. He seems to view postmodernism as merely an extension of modernism and to lump them together on the basis of how "weird" and unconventional they are – a superficial idea, and a terribly simple-minded one for a thinker of Pinker's caliber. Contrary to Pinker, postmodernism in art, as in literature, philosophy, and other scholarly fields, was a *reaction against* modernism, not an extension of it. This is made extremely clear in David Harvey's book *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989), where he provides a detailed and highly systematic contrast of modernism and postmodernism.
3. Pinker also has a thin understanding of much postmodern art. He condemns Mapplethorpe for producing works merely because of their shock value, but in fact very little of his work is at all sexually graphic. Some of his most beautiful photographs were of flowers. Moreover, Mapplethorpe can easily be seen as a formalist whose main concern was with beauty. Postmodern thinkers have often referred to Mapplethorpe as a postmodernist, but during his life he was sometimes ridiculed for his supposedly retrograde "formalist" and "modernist" concerns. And just because a work of art is calculated to have shock value does not mean that it is valueless. That alone is no basis for condemning artistic expression.
4. Pinker seems to focus excessively on art as simply a matter of the emotional experience of pleasure. There is a cognitive or intellectual dimension to art that he entirely overlooks. Marcel Duchamp talked of *retinal art* – the art of the *eye* rather than the mind. His concept of retinal art revolves around a rejection of art that is just beautiful or appealing to the eye. Duchamp cites van Gogh as the principal example of this kind of art. Duchamp's *oeuvre*, at least after he stopped painting, is essentially his refutation of retinal art. His primary objective was not to create something beautiful – beauty being something he seemed relatively indifferent to, except in women – but something for the mind. Duchamp's artistic creations were attempts to move the mind beyond its natural ways of thinking and reasoning. This is to imagine a world in which, for example, a shovel, signed, dated, and titled "In Advance of a Broken Arm," can be placed (and actually was placed) in a museum alongside masterpieces by Picasso and van Gogh.
5. Pinker suggests that a greater understanding of human nature would be helpful in reorienting art, but we fail to see how this would be so. The new movements that

Pinker refers to as staging a reaction against contemporary art are not rooted in some sort of systematic study of how human nature undergirds art, nor do they need to be. In art and other humanities, a new generation produces something new and different because of the critical need to demonstrate *creativity* or *originality*, the *sine qua non* of such fields. Often new movements achieve their originality by resurrecting old fashions and refurbishing them. There is thus nothing surprising in the return to beauty in the realm of art; the new artistic movements may be consistent with human nature, but they do not depend in any way on knowledge of it.

6. In his disdain for modern and postmodern art, Pinker implies that art should conform to human nature and thus that artists should simply give people what they want. This is problematic in several ways. First, Pinker commits the naturalistic fallacy. As formulated by the philosopher G.E. Moore over a century ago, “*is*” *does not imply* “*ought*.” It is a logical fallacy to move from a knowledge of what things *are* like to a moral conclusion of what they *should be* like. Thus, knowing what most people like in art provides us with no basis for saying what they should like. Second, what grounds are there for assuming that the tastes of the average person should prevail over the tastes of others who appreciate and consume art? Philosophers, natural scientists, and social scientists are hardly engaged in doing research and writing books and articles simply because they will have mass appeal. They sometimes write popular books for the educated public – *The Blank Slate* being an excellent example – but they can do so only because they and other scholars have already done highly technical research producing interesting and important findings that can be summarized in popular form. Philosophers and scientists write mostly for each other and only occasionally for the public (and even then only the most educated among them). In intellectual life, whatever relationship exists between elites and the public is one in which the former *educate* the latter. (Is this not precisely what Pinker himself is engaged in?) Why should art be different? We hasten to add that we are not trying to turn Pinker’s disdain for modern and postmodern art into our own disdain for popular art. Popular art that emphasizes beauty and the themes that most people like best already exists, and popular artists can be found in large numbers. One need only think of Norman Rockwell, the celebrated American artist.
7. We agree with Pinker that art is rooted in human nature and is an evolved adaptation (although the jury is still out on what kind of adaptation art is, i.e., whether it evolved by natural selection, as Ellen Dissanayake, 1995, argues, or by sexual selection, as Geoffrey Miller, 2000, claims). However, in viewing art as an emanation of human nature one needs a much longer temporal perspective than Pinker’s, which is merely the last century. For example, in the long sweep of human history painting is very recent as a dominant art form, whereas sculpture is very old and much more widely found in the world’s cultures and civilizations. What is the meaning of this for the question of how human nature produces art?

We are great admirers of Pinker and accept a large amount of what he says in *The Blank Slate*. But if he wanted to include a chapter on art, then he should have prepared himself much more carefully. In marked contrast to the other subjects he discusses in his book, his knowledge of art is thin and superficial. Pinker has not overstepped his talents, which are enormous, but he has overstepped his level of knowledge and understanding. Had he read and studied the history of art over the past century more

carefully, he likely would have produced a chapter that was much more accurate and insightful, and that came to somewhat different conclusions. Much of what makes art interesting and important to many people is its attempt to go beyond the ordinary or the easily understood. For art merely to conform to human nature, as Pinker is simplistically suggesting, would result in its death.

References

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