

Against “vulgar and shallow interdisciplinarity”

Matthew Rampley
The Seductions of Darwin. Art, Evolution, Neuroscience. University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press 2017. IX, 189 p. ISBN 978-0-271-07742-0. \$ 34.95

Since the writings of the Strassburg psychologist Wilhelm Windelband (esp. *Geschichte und Naturwissenschaften*, 1897), we are familiar with the idea that humanities and natural sciences represent opposing epistemological systems. Fifty years before C. P. Snow coined the memorable catchphrase of the “two cultures”, Windelband spoke of ‘nomothetic’ and ‘idiographic’ approaches. While the former (characteristic for the natural sciences) strives to formulate general laws, based on reductionist datasets, the latter, dominant in the humanities, is dedicated to the analysis of concrete subjects that are historically and geographically specific.

IN DEFENCE OF THE ‘TWO CULTURES’

In recent years, innumerable authors have tried to overcome this divide by tackling the traditional domains of a discipline like art history with the methods and approaches of the natural sciences – evolutionary biology and neuroscience being the most prominent among them. While causing considerable furore in specialist and lay circles alike, many professional art historians are sceptical when it comes to judging the merits of such attempts to explain art history scientifically. And, according to Matthew Rampley, such scepticism is absolutely justified. His new book, *The Seductions of*

Darwin, sets out to give an analytic account of just why this unease is spot on, and why the “vulgar and shallow interdisciplinarity” (105) performed by many of those fashionable authors belongs to the historiographic waste bin.

The Seductions of Darwin is a brilliant, polemic critique that mercilessly exposes the weaknesses and errors of his opponents, and highlights the explanatory limits of their approaches. This book does not take any prisoners. It is a pamphlet against the work of authors such as Richard Dawkins, David Freedberg, Semir Zeki and Ellen Dissanayake, to name just a few of the most prominent positions. Rampley astutely analyses the intellectual shortcomings and flaws of their work, and makes a forceful plea for “Multiple Cultures of Inquiry” (131), defending the traditional domain of cultural-historical analysis against the phantasies of those who are hoping to find a world formula explaining art history in terms of simple biological mechanisms. The range of literature discussed and the variety of arguments presented and refuted is remarkable.

A CRUSADE AGAINST MODERN MYTHS

His argument is presented in four chapters, each devoted to one approach that strives to illuminate art history by use of scientific frameworks. The chapters cover subjects ranging from evolutionary aesthetics, such as Richard Dawkins’ concept of the *meme*, over “neuroarthistory” in the vein of John Onians or Semir Zeki, to the systems theory of Niklas Luhmann. As a starting point for the first chapter, Rampley chooses those theories claiming that our sense of beauty is not culturally acquired but rather an innate evolutionary survival, inherited from the dawn of our species. These theories consider art as “adaptive behaviour” – the human equivalent to the feathers of the peacock (31). The argument, in short, claims that we prefer

certain forms and aesthetic traits because they promise an asset in the struggle for survival; “making things special” (Dissanayake) would constitute an advantage in the process of sexual selection. We thus prefer, as for example Denis Dutton has argued, landscapes that correspond to features of the east African savannah, the evolutionary point of origin of our species that offers an ideal habitat. Modern men inherited this preference from their Pleistocene ancestors (17). Similarly, authors such as the sociobiologist John Alcock argued that the preference for the Greek ideal canon of proportions can be explained by the fact that they are in tune with the properties of young adult women who are primed for successful reproduction: art as a fitness indicator.

Rampléy debunks these arguments quickly and sovereignly. His opponents make it sometimes all too easy for the historian to outmanoeuvre their pathetic explanations: only few civilisations, for example, actually use the evolutionary superior proportions of Greek sculpture, and even this country has invented them only rather late – the archaic Kouroi follow quite different aesthetic standards (34). Refuting Dutton’s argument about landscape is equally easy: the art historian can vouch that many historic protagonists and even periods were attracted to landscapes that were not entirely evolutionary beneficial. Darwinist aesthetics fails completely in explaining phenomena such as the preference for the ‘sublime’ or ‘gothic’. But even if our taste for certain environments would be evolutionarily determined, it does not, for example, explain why some prefer them painted in the style of Poussin, and others in the manner of Turner. Rampléy clearly enjoys driving home his punches, of which there are many.

In many cases, the author is not so much concerned with the empirical insights of the theories discussed, but with their explanatory value. What he really takes offense in is not always the argument in itself, but the “banality of their insights” (42). Even if we would wholeheartedly subscribe to the theories brought forward by the

authors discussed, if we would agree with everything they say, it would most likely still be irrelevant for most art historical questions. To stick with the example: even if we would agree that “certain types of landscape painting *may* perhaps evoke primal ancestral memories of a Pleistocene environment to which humans were adapted” how “does it help when trying to determine the relationship between individual paintings of the same subject, Friedrich’s *The Oak Tree in the Snow* (1829) and Gustav Klimt’s *Tree of Life* (1909)” (10)?

SIMPLIFICATIONS

Rampléy emphasises this alleged irrelevance especially in chapter three, on art history and neuroscience – probably the book’s strongest part and also its point of origin (vii). The names of the main opponents – David Freedberg, John Onians, Semir Zeki – are much-debated since many years. A good part of Rampléy’s argument is devoted to the frequently stated critique that neuroarthistory follows a simplistic idea of mimesis, making the new approach the direct heir of 19th-century empathy theory. Again, “reference to neural networks merely describes in a different vocabulary what are already unexceptional ideas” (93). Most notoriously, John Onians’ *Neuroarthistory* (2007) explains the making of art as a quasi-automatic reproduction of environmental impulses caused by mirror neurons. Brunelleschi, for example, was able to invent central perspective because he grew up in Florence, a city where the rectangular Roman grid of the streets was still visible and consequently imprinted on the young artist’s mind (91). A similar point was made by David Freedberg and Vittorio Gallese who argued that the beholder of a painting is mentally “replicating the same cortical motor activity that the artist did when he executed the works” (84).

Rampléy uses this example for highlighting that “neuroarthistory has an undeclared intellectual ancestry in modernist art theory”, namely the idea that pure form communicates a certain affect to the beholder (87). At the same time, the approach is, paradoxically, not very interested in art per se. The gist of mirror neurons is, after all, that we can

assume that our brain perceives representations of things *as if* they were real. For neuroaesthetics, “there is nothing specific about art, there is no difference between viewing a pedestrian road crossing and a Bridget Riley painting” (103). Neuroarthistory gives, according to Rampley, “an impoverished account of art” (93) that has little to offer when it comes to such questions.

While evolutionary aesthetics and neuroscience *might* have something to say about the universals underlying art making, they cannot account for regional and historic contingencies and specificities. Their essentialist statements are in trouble when confronted with the phenomenon of stylistic change and plurality. This holds weight especially for Onians’ focus on the plasticity of individual brains. As Rampley rightly points out, he struggles to explain why certain things become cultural phenomena – e. g. why people all over Italy (even provincial artists!) gained aesthetic pleasure from central perspective painting which seemed so intimately tied to the conditions in Florence (92). Or, to give another example: while the Romans, attuned to the benevolent hills of the Campagna, are claimed to have ‘mirrored’ these shapes in their art and started building round arches, they nevertheless preferred rectangular shields and military formations – while the Greek, hard-edged inhabitants of a rough rocky landscape produced, surprisingly, elegant round shields.

THE LIMITS OF CRITIQUE

The Seductions of Darwin is a well written, breezily argued book. Its staunchly polemical perspective is at times quite entertaining; its style of argumentation can nevertheless also become rather frustrating for the reader. The book is a self-declared “critique” (viii), an attempt to deconstruct other author’s arguments and to highlight their flaws and limitations. This impulse is especially strong in the fourth chapter on systems theory and the work of Niklas Luhmann. His interpretation of art as an autonomous system is founded in the evolutionary framework of systems biology, arguing – against the theory of adaptation – that the environment does not necessarily determine the

self-regulating internal operations of systems. But when following the evolution of the art system, Luhmann simply rehearses the well-known arguments one can find in any textbook on art history: as a non-expert, he has to draw extensively on the work of the discipline he intends to criticize, his “disavowal of historical explanation” is entirely reliant on insights of historians. Worse than that, his limited grasp of art historical research makes him very susceptible to (bad) historical explanations (119). The evolutionary story he tells is the well-known cliché of the emancipation of art, from medieval religiosity to modern autonomy. In analysing the anti-historicist’s use of historical research, Rampley clearly shows that Luhmann’s systems theory merely glosses out-dated art historical narratives with an additional layer of theoretical jargon (125).

This method of highlighting one’s opponent’s shortcomings in order to deconstruct and collapse their arguments is fairly straightforward. To give that a positive spin: Rampley turns the plea for scientific ‘exactitude’ against his opponents. He consequently dwells extensively on rather petty “charge[s] of inconsistency” (118) that can be brought forward against every author discussed. Time and again he emphasises what an author “neglects”, where he is “vulnerable to criticism”, how his theories are “undermined by unresolved weaknesses” (122). The reader encounters continuously the bellicose reproach that “there is no evidence” (31), and that something is “asserted, but there is no means by which such explanations can be critically scrutinized” (34f.). As such, the book makes essentially a destructive argument that is mainly interested in what’s *wrong* with other people’s ideas.

AGAINST CRITIQUE

Authors such as Bruno Latour (Why has Critique run out of Steam?, in: *Critical Inquiry*, 2004) and Rita Felski (*The Limits of Critique*, 2015) have recently made a passionate statement “against critique”, and why the mere nit-picking and ‘deconstructing’ of other people’s works is just that: a destructive, mean-spirited practice. One does not

even have to share their convictions – though they certainly have a point – to wish that a monograph made at least *some* positive, constructive proposals in its own right. But this is something Rampley hardly attempts: he wrote a pamphlet, not an essay. He has, in any case, little attention left for the possibility that incriminated authors like John Onians might actually be productive for current art historical (not interdisciplinary!) debates. Onians' conclusions might often be bogus, yet his absolute conceptual attention to the experiences of an individual and its reactions to its environment and the surrounding visual culture (an essentially cultural-historical approach) provide an interesting counterpoint to many current methodological trends, e. g. the reliance on statements of "intentionality" abundantly used in studies on contemporary art, or the speculations on the 'lives and loves of images', describing the image as an autonomous nomad (or monad or even as an active subject and protagonist in its own right) that seems to exist and replicate without any beholder's share.

Only on the last three pages, Rampley suggests that it might be "important to maintain a constructive attitude, for there might still be important gains in engaging with the new Darwinism" (140). This comes rather as a surprise to the reader, as the whole book seems an attempt to damn approaches that take inspiration from natural sciences, arguing instead that "different domains of inquiry have distinct aims, values and purposes" (105), meaning that their methods will only interact partially. The book's final sentence "acknowledge[s] that some of the questions that evolutionary theory asks, and their implications, have still to be worked through" (142). But apart from a few sketchy remarks there is not much indication as to which way such a working-through might lead art history. It would have been most interesting to learn where Rampley thinks that empirical approaches based on methods of the natural sciences could be beneficial for art history. Another chapter devoted to these questions would have been a valuable addition to his slim volume.

NEW PERSPECTIVES?

It might be moot to complain about such omissions; as the author states in the beginning: "this book is about choices" (ix). Yet, one wonders how he made his choices. Especially systems theory, though undeniably being rooted in concepts from evolutionary biology, does not immediately strike the eye as a "Neo-Darwinist" approach. Many followers of Luhmann's ideas, such as Kitty Zijlmans or Beat Wyss, rather seem completely unfazed by this legacy – and Rampley does not even try to suggest otherwise (123–125). At times, one might get the impression that he mainly chose positions that were easy targets for a damning critique. It is remarkable that the book hardly discusses the work by intellectual heavyweights such as Ernst Gombrich or Winfried Menninghaus, who have written extensively on art and biology (they are briefly mentioned on pp. 30, 49f.). This is surprising, as especially Gombrich's staunch positivism seems to resonate very well with Rampley's aversion against "intuitive assumptions and speculation" (42). But their more sophisticated and historically informed theories maybe did not provide enough of an open flank for attack for Rampley to do his polemic work.

One gets the impression that he prefers what Anthony Grafton called the strategy of a "slow-footed fullback [...] against the tactics of a fast-moving striker. Just kick the legs out from under your opponents – show that they have misread, or misinterpreted the documents – and you need not bother to refute their arguments" (*The Footnote*, 1997, 16). This is probably unfair, not only because Rampley's mind undoubtedly moves very fast, but also because he very much tackles and refutes his opponents' arguments. But I fear that for many readers the take-home lesson of the book will be just that: that they no longer have to bother with "the exponents of evolutionary theory" who "need to develop much more sophisticated and finely calibrated conceptual tools" (136) before (maybe!) being of relevance for art history. From here on, the onus of proof lies with them, the humanities are absolved. The art historians can breath a sigh of relief and return to working within the "normal

framework of the discipline” (140) – whatever that might be. By writing such lines, Rampley risks (probably rather against his intentions) that his pamphlet will be understood and gladly taken up by many a reader as a rallying cry for an obstinate methodological conservatism.

Rampley can draw such a conclusion precisely because of the selection he made. In a recent review to John Onians’ new book *European Art. A Neuroarthistory* (in: *Journal of Art Historiography* 15, 2016), Rampley concluded his critique with a mention of a recent collection of essays edited by Suparna Choudhury and Jan Slaby on *Critical Neuroscience. A Handbook on the Social and Cultural Contexts of Neuroscience* (2012). It is another piece of research that asks for the intersections of cultural studies and neuroscience. Yet, as Rampley concedes, it approaches the question from an entirely different perspective, including recognition that “the brain is itself a cultural artefact” (ibid., 9). The authors claim that cultural practices had a major impact on the “ecology of mind”, and that only an analysis of cultural development allows for understanding the evolution of our species. Culture shapes the neural networks of our brain. Choudhury and Slaby are by no means mavericks in their field, but rather exponents of a widespread trend promoting the so-called “cultural brain hypothesis”. One could name many similar titles, e. g. Joan Chiao’s *Oxford Handbook of Cultural Neuroscience* (2015), or Greg Downey and Daniel Lende’s *The Encultured Brain* (2012).

In *The Seductions of Darwin*, Rampley makes, however, no mention of these or similar publications. One wonders why. These ideas would have been undoubtedly more pertinent to the book’s topic than, for example, systems theory. They are also probably much closer to the state of the art in psychology and biology than either Luhmann or Dutton. The sheer existence of something like the “cultural brain hypothesis” might suggest that there are contributions that already today work towards developing the “much

more sophisticated and finely calibrated conceptual tools” Rampley demands. He is obviously even familiar with them – yet he decided to exclude them from his book, and thus suggests that the debate on biology and culture is entirely static and unproductive. I am not suggesting that these publications and approaches hold the key to solving *any* art historical questions. But in the context of a book devoted to theories at the crossroads of “art, evolution, neuroscience”, it might have been appropriate to present a more balanced picture of the state of debate within the incriminated disciplines.

DR. HANS CHRISTIAN HÖNES
 Research Group „Bilderfahrzeuge“,
 The Warburg Institute,
 Woburn Square, London, WC1H 0AB, UK,
hoenes@bilderfahrzeuge.org