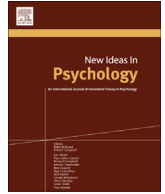




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Tensions in naturalistic, evolutionary explanations of aesthetic reception and production

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ABSTRACT

Aesthetic universals may plausibly reflect biases in aesthetic reception that arose through evolutionary pressure. However, the role universals play in high-level aesthetic creativity is not well understood. After reviewing evolutionary aspects of aesthetics, some specific proposed aesthetic universals, and the nature of creativity in aesthetic domains, I examine a creative dynamic in which long-term pressure for novelty leads to inexorable tensions with canalized aesthetic biases. Examining the role of aesthetic universals in individuals' creative processes, as well as more thorough *trans*-historical assessments of the development of universals, are proposed as methodological strategies for gaining traction on this issue. Such investigations have the potential to inform the role of the audience in shaping the evolution of artist styles, how universals play out in high versus low art, the possibility of identifying new aesthetic universals (perhaps particularly with conceptual art), and the relative value of novelty versus adaptive value in aesthetic creativity.

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1. Aesthetic perception and aesthetic universals

The nature of aesthetic perception and cognition has long concerned philosophers and empirical researchers across domains (Levinson, 2003; Shimamura & Palmer, 2012; Smith & Tinio, 2014). Many themes have arisen in this line of discourse, including the categorical status of art versus non-art objects, objective versus subjective aesthetic dimensions, and internalist versus externalist explanations of aesthetic phenomena. Another prominent issue is the notion of aesthetic universals, including their origin, nature, explanatory power, and implications. Universals may be defined by appearing in some form in every known culture (Brown, 1991), by posited incorporation into some basic domain of mind (Feist, 2004; Gardner, 1983; Karmiloff-Smith, 1992), as representing a biological 'instinct' (Dutton, 2009), or in terms of statistical regularities or constraints evident in aesthetic artifacts (e.g., Trehub, 2000).

Aesthetic universals can be construed in several distinct ways. One involves identifying objectively measurable characteristics of artworks themselves, which have aesthetic potency and might then serve as a quantitative basis for operationalizing aesthetic

constructs (e.g., Berlyne, 1971; Birkhoff, 1933). Another involves more experiential aspects of aesthetics (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi & Robinson, 1990; Dewey, 1934), including emotional responses that arise in potential interactions with stimuli – not limited to artworks *qua* artworks (Xenakis & Arnellos, 2014). These two approaches may be further distinguished or elaborated by consideration of the evolutionary versus cultural factors impacting them, the malleability or scope for change of potential universals, issues of embodiment, and so on.

At the outset, I wish to clarify my position on several relevant issues and lay out what aspects of the themes I will (and will not) emphasize in this paper. I will not exclusively advocate for an art-centered or interactionist account, as this distinction lies somewhat outside the purview of my main argument. Instead, I shall explore how aesthetic perception in the form of aesthetic universals plays out in the realm of high-level or "big-C" creativity (Kaufman & Beghetto, 2009), in which persons with tremendous expertise in a domain generate productions that are not merely personally novel, but novel for the world, and which fundamentally change the way a domain operates (see also Sternberg, 1999).¹

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¹ Judgments of high versus low levels of creativity are typically made via consensus judgments by other experts and gatekeepers within the relevant domain, since no objective criteria exist by which to distinguish levels of creativity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988).

While I will emphasize observed statistical properties of bona fide aesthetic artifacts, this does not reflect a commitment to a fully art-centered view of aesthetics: the endgame of identifying aesthetic universals is to detail the structure of the *mind* as informed by aesthetic artifacts, rather than merely to specify the perceptual structure of artworks as a distinct category of stimuli. I will discuss examples from several aesthetic domains and media, but I will not deal extensively with unwieldy question of the extent to which purported aesthetic universals are domain-general versus domain-specific. The former may include broadly applicable, abstract principles like symmetry or perceptual grouping (Ramachandran & Hirstein, 1999), which transcend particular aesthetic domains and likely have a direct evolutionary basis (e.g., rooted in facial symmetry in mate selection – see, e.g., Chatterjee, 2014; Little, Apicella, & Marlowe, 2007); the latter may be more domain- or modality-specific (like the importance of simple pitch ratios in tonal music – see Justus & Hutsler, 2005), though domain-specific universals may still have an evolutionary basis. Finally, I mainly emphasize hedonic aspects of aesthetic response, which include preference, liking, experience, beauty, satisfaction, and evaluation – consistent with the historical emphasis of philosophical and psychological aesthetics. Increasingly, recent models of aesthetics have emphasized non-hedonic aspects of aesthetics, such as negative aesthetic emotions and emotional appraisals more generally (Silvia, 2005, 2009a), responses to ‘bad’ art (Meskin, Phelen, Moore, & Kieran, 2013), as well as attempts at integrating previous models along numerous criteria including the experience of transcendence, self-adjustment, health, and social factors (see Pelowski, Markey, Luring, & Leder, 2016). In this paper, as an initial foray into questions of the relation between the creation and reception vis-à-vis aesthetic universals, I maintain a focus primarily on hedonic aspects of aesthetics, with the expectation that these other, non-hedonic perspectives will inform these issues in future scholarship.

The main thrust of the paper is as follows. After an appropriate exposition of background issues spanning evolutionary aspects of aesthetics, proposed aesthetic universals, and the nature of creativity in aesthetic domains, I shall focus on a creative dynamic in which long-term pressure for novelty leads to the making of highly esoteric aesthetic productions, creating inexorable tensions with evolutionarily canalized aesthetic biases. Questions I address include: How do putative aesthetic universals play out in the context of high-level creativity? Do similar criteria or universals operate in high versus popular art? What is the scope for development or modification of any natural biases, for instance, in the perceptual capacities needed to process some aesthetic stimuli adequately? What can we expect about the future of the arts, and how would this further inform the nature of psychological aesthetics and aesthetic universals?

2. Aesthetic universals through the lens of evolution

Why would it matter if there are aesthetic universals or not? One reason is that the issue is emblematic of broader debates about the structure, nature, and potential malleability of the human mind (e.g., Pinker, 2002; Tooby & Cosmides, 1992). Within the realm of aesthetics, a lack of universals, and a concomitant variegation of aesthetics across different times, places, and peoples, would imply a lack of direct adaptive value of the arts and an ‘anything goes’ aesthetics, whereby culture would function largely independently of biology. Indeed, some scholars have promoted a view of aesthetics and creativity in which socio-cultural considerations are absolutely paramount (Csikszentmihalyi, 1988; Sawyer, 2012). The relation and interaction between biological and cultural influences is a pervasive issue in any complex human activity, including aesthetics (Kozbelt, 2017).

Acquiring solid evidence for the existence of aesthetic universals is, conceptually and methodologically, rife with difficulties. Aside from the Popperian quandary of never being able to *prove* the existence of universals, a diverse set of methods and lines of evidence – differing in foundational assumptions, precision, and scope – are potentially relevant. Such methods include cross-cultural and *trans*-historical comparisons, laboratory studies, anthropological studies, inter-species comparisons, archaeological evidence, case studies of eminent creators, analyses of statistical features of aesthetic objects, and so on. Befitting a still-nascent domain, different studies may yield inconsistent or controversial findings (as in recent cross-cultural work challenging the longstanding notion of a universal preference for musical consonance over dissonance – McDermott, Schultz, Undurraga, & Godoy, 2016). However, even if apparent exceptions to such biases are occasionally found, the relatively robust convergence of findings across multiple studies and methodologies would be suggestive of deep biases and regularities in human aesthetic cognition, which call for some explanation.

To pursue this line of inquiry, one can make a plausible, biologically grounded argument that many aspects of aesthetics should be more or less culturally universal. While observed cross-cultural commonalities do not guarantee an unambiguous evolutionary origin for a particular bias or behavior, it represents a minimum standard for such an attribution, being harder to ascribe to cultural coincidence than some common predisposition or phylogenetic point of origin.

Human aesthetic productions are not nearly as varied as they could be in principle. Constraints rooted in our perceptual and cognitive systems, as well as our behavior and social structures, have arguably given rise to a strong set of biases in the reception and production of aesthetic artifacts. People everywhere share highly evolved perceptual and cognitive systems with a common neural architecture, adapted by natural and sexual selection for processing information from the environment to arrive at an understanding of the structure and content of our surroundings, which in turn promote reproductive success. In this view, aesthetic productions that have any claim on sensory modalities must be predicated on some underlying biological basis. This process of ‘canalization’ (Waddington, 1942) constrains the kinds of aesthetic artifacts that people are likely to find worth spending time and other resources on (see also Wilson, 1998).

Previously, Kozbelt (2015) argued these points with reference to a thought experiment on the extent to which human aesthetic and creative products might be comprehensible to other intelligent species (and vice-versa), with the intent of highlighting what aspects of the study of aesthetics might be considered the most legitimately scientific. Emphasizing sensory and cognitive parameters and their pragmatic evolutionary basis, at least some aspects of aesthetics and creativity are arguably universal – particularly those arising out of basic adaptations to evolutionary pressures to process information effectively, which might be evident via particular perceptual features associated with artworks.

Questions about the evolutionary basis of human aesthetics are two-tiered (Kozbelt, *in press*). One level concerns our predilection for aesthetic domains in general: why do we as a species enjoy and engage in activities like visual art, music, and poetry rather than not doing so? Another level deals with systematic patterns in aesthetic preferences: what characteristics of aesthetic artifacts may be regarded as intrinsically appealing, at least to large segments of humanity? Answers to the first question involve potential evolutionary mechanisms that produced our aesthetic faculty in the first place (for a review, see Dissanayake, 2007). Detailing and choosing among specific mechanisms – like natural selection (Orians, 2001, 2014), sexual selection (Miller, 2000), or artistry as a byproduct of

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