European Thinking and the Study of World Art from a Natural Perspective*

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Abstract: My aim in this paper is to address some difficulties related to the development of an emerging discipline called world art studies. While it originates as a European discipline in the German scholarly tradition around 1900 (Pfisterer, 2008), world art studies comes to the fore only recently (Onians, 1996, 2016) with recent advances in natural and cognitive sciences, which hold promise for providing more inclusive categories that could serve the study of art as a worldwide phenomenon. I focus more specifically on the strengths and weaknesses of psychology as explanatory framework for world art studies. While contemporary scholars no longer dwell on collective mentalities or "spirits" of an age (Gombrich, 1967), the problem of postulating mysterious faculties in relation to art behavior and aesthetic response is still present when adopting as an entry point the universality of human nature.
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One of the recent developments in art history and art theory is world art studies, which aims at studying art as a worldwide phenomenon. While it originated as a European discipline in the German scholarly tradition around 1900 (Pfisterer, 2008), it has come to the fore in the European thought only over the last two decades or so (Onians, 1996, 2016), with recent advances in natural and cognitive sciences. What is the significance of this revival of the study of world art now and what are the historical components that this discipline retains from past models of art history? In trying to tackle these issues, I divided this paper into three parts. In the first part of the paper I look at the context in which world art studies took shape and make some brief remarks about two art historical systems of thought that continue or contest the Hegelian tradition, from which the field of world art studies fiercely tries to depart. In the next section I narrow down my analysis to what I call "natural frames of references", and more specifically psychology, which serves as evidence for placing art history within the natural sciences. And finally, in the last section, I dwell on the significance of world art studies' emergence in a European context and on a few puzzlements that this enterprise raises.

Models of Art History

In order to establish the theoretical background against which the emergence of world art studies may be comprehended, I will start by considering briefly two models of art history[1], which represent in a sense two extremes of a continuum. These are the metaphysical model based on the Hegelian system and the evolutionary model inspired from the Darwinian theory and biological sciences. The division is not

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[1] For a survey of several models of art history, see (Danto, 1986; Rampley, 2016).

absolute. Numerous elements of the two models are combined, for instance in the late nineteenth century writings of art historians such as Alois Riegl and Aby Warburg (Gombrich, 1960, pp. 15-17; Rampley, 2017, pp. 7-8).

The Hegelian model of art history offers an account of historical change and development of art by recounting "a teleological tale of progress of civilization" (Bahrani *et al.,* 2014, pp. 184); on this view, forms of art are regarded as ideal expressions of culture or age and, ultimately as expressions of human thought which aspires to an awareness of itself (Danto, 1986, pp. 230-231). As regards the evolutionary model, it appears to serve as a basic framework for most of the contemporary, naturalistic approaches to art history and aesthetics, including world art studies (Rampley, 2016, pp. 18). The two models share the common goal of providing an all-encompassing principle that could explain the development of world art practices and the universality of art phenomena. Thus, on the one hand, the Hegelian, idealist solution for dealing with the universality of art is to invoke some fictional, collective entities such as "World spirit", "spirit of the people", or "spirit of the age" (Gaiger, 2011, pp. 178; Gombrich, 1979a, pp. 28, 33) which are held responsible for the progress in the arts at particular locations over given periods of time, while on the other hand, the naturalistic solution is to appeal to natural kinds, that is, to substantive, innate categories that are part of our biological equipment (Bird, Tobin, 2017) and remain constant through cultural change. Inherited features such as neuropsychological dispositions to take pleasure in formal configurations that exhibit symmetry, regularity or balance (Onians, 2015, pp. 130-131) and to look for meaning in such configurations are just a few examples.

It is a matter of debate whether the propensity to make art and to appreciate art are such inherited evolved features in their own right. Yet, exploring the products of human action on such grand scales – from a Spiritual down to an evolutionary history of mankind – might prove to be difficult to achieve, let alone to subject to empirical verification. This holds equally true for answering the major questions that are asked in these models concerning the ultimate end of art and, respectively, the origins of art-making. As Gombrich (1979a, pp. 43) rightly remarks, every general theoretical framework needs some ordering principle that provides its coherence; whether this framework is made of sign-systems, as adopted for instance by semiotic art history (Bryson, 1983) or of some spirits, as implied in some social histories of art such as that of Hauser, which incorporates elements of Marxism, it is difficult to escape the Hegelian mythology altogether. It so happens, nonetheless, that some of the ordering principles that are available in the theoretical realm encompassing art practices might be less problematic than others. My take on this is that psychology might be a good explanatory framework that could serve art history and what I have in mind is cognitive psychology considered at the level of the individual, as opposed to collective psychology, evoking collective spirits as manifestations of specific cultures or nations[2]. In other words, I am suggesting that psychology may be a better-suited natural frame of reference than the evolutionary theory for coming to grips with the problem of the universality of art, which is at the core of disciplines such as world art studies. The idea is not new. It is Gombrich (1960) who most famously introduced psychology into the description of "the beholder's share"; he sought to affirm his concern with the individual human being (i.e. with his attitudes, convictions, behaviors etc.), thus importing in the realm of the arts the "methodological individualism" (Gombrich, 1979a, pp. 50-51; Burke, 2014, pp. 14-15) adopted from Karl Popper's philosophy of science. According to Popper, the methodological individualism entails "*constructing and analyzing* […] *models carefully in descriptive or nominalist terms, that is to say*, *in terms of*

[2] On the suspicion that collective psychological entities might still thrive in present art historiographies, see (Summers, 2002, pp. 144-145).

individuals, of their attitudes, expectations, relations, etc." (Popper as cited in Hemingway, 2009, pp. 300-301). This is compatible with maintaining that there are psychological and behavioral dispositions that belong to a shared human nature.

Natural Frames of Reference

What does it mean when we say that world art is interpreted in terms of natural frames of reference? As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, psychology proves to be appealing for the explanation of world art practices insofar as it holds promise for locating the discipline of art history within the natural sciences. Psychology is generally subsumed under a nomological approach that advances explanation in terms of laws or mechanisms (Wright, Bechtel, 2006, pp. 46-47), for example information-processing mechanisms (perception, attention, imagination and the like). The notion of "natural frame" at issue here is broad enough to encompass types of inquiry that rely on explanations derived from the natural sciences. Other natural domains of inquiry include, for instance, neuroscience, evolutionary psychology, cognitive anthropology, neurophysiology of vision, biology, physics, chemistry and so on. One can assume that what is really at stake in world art studies is to discover general laws (Rampley, 2017, pp. 2-3; Davis, 2015, pp. 70; 2017, pp. 243-244) within art history, derived from the functioning of the human apparatus. Thus, the epistemological issues related to the nature of art historical inquiries and the cognitive issues related to the processes of art making and response become more pressing than surveying the field's materials, although global surveys of the products of material culture (Onians, 2004) which broaden the canon of art are more and more expansive. A couple of decades ago, a classic definition of art history read as follows: "*the basic skill of what we call art history* [is] *the ability to assign a date, place, and, if possible, a name on the evidence of style*" (Gombrich, 1979b, pp. 133). These concerns, positivistic in flavor, regarding attribution and the temporal and spatial placement of works of art (Summers, 2003, pp. 15), are becoming less pressing than reflecting on the status and methods of the discipline of art history itself, which is in need of new theoretical models for organizing the materials that have been gathered so far. Such organizing principles could precisely be obtained by shifting the focus from the morphology of artifacts to the human response to prevailing artistic practices, both in its cognitive and affective dimensions.

Although the interest in the natural frames of reference has been revived at the end of the 1990s due to developments such as world art studies, the enterprise of worlding art through a natural grounding is of course not new. First of all, there were similar attempts in *historical* and *literary* scholarship and we can mention here Goethe's dream of a "world literature", hinted at in one of Gombrich's papers concerning the relativism in the humanities. Here's a poignant passage: "*Goethe could never have coined this beautiful term* [of world literature*] if his reading of Homer and of Shakespeare, of Hafez, Kalidasa, and finally of Plutarch, had not convinced him* [that] '*They were all human beings-so much is plain*' " (Gombrich, 1987, pp. 699). But there is also a long tradition of natural histories of *art* (Pfisterer, 2008; Onians, 2011, pp. 79), according to which art creation and appreciation are founded in human nature and psychology; it starts with Aristotle and Pliny the Elder and flourishes in late twentieth century art historiography: again, the writings of E. H. Gombrich, Michael Baxandall and John Onians are but a few examples. All of them were highly influenced by anthropology, vision science, psychology of perception and surrounding disciplines aiming at providing objective analyses of their objects of study. Gombrich and Baxandall, for instance, were interested in the psychological implications of the perception of the arts and gave detailed analyses of different modes of seeing and attending. These analyses were related to the singularity of art practices (Davis, 2015, pp. 83; Gombrich, 1979c, Baxandall, 1994) such as ornament or cubism; the results of

cognitive psychology that were put to use were therefore not overgeneralized. This is a significant point considering that a recurrent problem with the scientific approaches to art is precisely to determine up to what point one can abstract the phenomena described without loosing the very specificity (Rampley, 2017, pp. 3-4, 12-13) of the practices themselves.

Another challenge for world art studies is to elaborate on the problem of universals as applied to art without resuscitating the collective mentalities evoked by the Romantic, Hegelian historiographies. If it was questionable to consider art as a manifestation of the spirit of a culture or a nation, which also remains a problem for the cultural anthropologists of art (Anderson, 2014; Morphy, Perkins, 2006; Van Damme, 2003), one can only picture the difficulties when having to deal not only with national or regional art, but also with world art spanning thousands of years. One needs to be clear in the first place with respect to the categories of analysis that are put to use. Starting with the categories presumably founded in nature, which become part of the art historical analysis, for instance, the category of man as a biological being and the category of human engagement with art regarded as an integral part of shared human cognition (Gombrich, 1987, pp. 695-696). In what assumptions of individual human being is the study of world art grounded? What exactly is universal in the universality debate which accompanies the study of world art? If we refer to the universality of *human nature* as a whole does this entail the thesis that it is an "exception" (Schaeffer, 2007) among other living organisms? This would lead eventually to positing a transcendental foundation of humanity, rather than stressing the role of the biological nature of human beings. Should we perhaps be talking about the universality of the *capacity for aesthetic response*, as some evolutionary theorists of art do, entailing the same harmony of faculties for everyone (Schaeffer, 1992, pp. 381; Ingold, 1996, pp. 229-230) and a uniformity of human mind (Van Damme, 2011, pp. 46) when appreciating art? This would amount to the problem of postulating mysterious faculties in relation to art behavior and aesthetic response. Or maybe look instead for universal *aesthetic properties* (Kesner, 2007, pp. 102) rather than settling for considering the experience of beauty as a human universal? Finally, should we rather be aiming at the universality of a *concept of art,* a world art concept that would stand in contrast to historical, cultural inventions of art conceptions? All these are of course difficult questions to answer. Nonetheless, if we were to confine ourselves to psychological universals[3] one could hope to find a common basis for assessing world art practices in a manner that is compatible with the variability of cultures. The psychological categories such as perceptual processing, attention mechanism, emotions, etc. are perhaps less slippery than other universals, and they are becoming supported by substantial evidence from cognitive science. That being said, acknowledging that there are constants in the human psyche does not amount to positing a uniformity of response but it may be a good starting point for understanding why some reactions keep manifesting themselves irrespective of the community in which they are initiated.

World Art Studies in the European Context

Let me now come to the last part of my paper and make a few remarks about the significance of world art studies' emergence in a European context. As noted above, the problem of treating art as a worldwide phenomenon, – which implies both a temporal and a spatial stretching of the field of art – arises within the European discourse, particularly in the German scholarly tradition around 1900 (Pfisterer, 2008, pp. 70; Van Damme, 2011, pp. 46), which is at the time already heavily marked by experimental psychology

[3] For further examples of universals, see Brown, 2004.

and psychophysiology. The tradition within which world art studies develops is therefore not necessarily suffused with historical determinisms that would lead art historians to regard works of art as mere tokens of national identity, but is also relying on natural narratives that emphasize the role of constants in the human mind and behavioral dispositions in art-making and appreciation. Despite its rich past, the field of world art studies only acquires its name and becomes institutionally implemented at the end of the 1990s, with the advance of knowledge in the natural and cognitive sciences. The field is built on several methodological constructs (Rampley, 2016, pp. 17) but the conceptual tools adopted from the natural sciences occupy a particularly significant place. It is John Onians (1996) who coins the term, in a paper called *World Art Studies and the Need for a New Natural History of Art*. In keeping with the traditional discipline of natural history, scholars who engage in world art studies aim to embrace the materials of world art – which can be regarded very well as integral to the natural world – but at the same time try to adjust their efforts to provide some principles that would make these materials part of a narrative which would glue the loose pieces together, so to speak. This is reflected, for instance, in the entry "World art" in the second edition of the *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, which presents world art studies as "examining continuities, discontinuities and differentiation within visual cultures and the interaction between them throughout human history" (Smith, 2014, pp. 316).

A general impression that we might be getting is that of historical periods occurring in cycles, rehashing the same issues all over again; a related worry is that, eventually, this new natural representation of the art world which places emphasis on human capacities and takes the idea of a common humanity for granted adds nothing to the understanding of art practices. However, what may be making the difference in today's art historical scholarship is a firmer empirical grounding followed by a reframing of questions and conceptual tools that appear as more plausible than the fictional entities and spirits of the late nineteenth century which were summoned to account for art practices. One of the main objections to studying art as a worldwide phenomenon is that the categories deployed in this endeavor (e.g. the categories of 'art', 'aesthetic experience' etc.; Morphy, Perkins, 2006, pp. 2) are in any case Eurocentric and that Western narratives could not pretend to capture non-Western realities. I take this point to be a nonstarter and stress the need to refine the methodological principles that enable us to engage with artistic practices from different cultures and different times. As long as the intercultural analyses are kept within reasonable bounds, the study of world art from a natural perspective is as legitimate as it can get.

Conclusion

In this paper I have pointed to the possibility of studying world art within natural frames of reference, with a particular focus on cognitive psychology. I argued that placing the study of world art within the natural frame of psychology might be a good starting point for coming to grips with the problem of the universality of art, which is at the core of disciplines such as world art studies. While there has been a revived interest in evolutionary and neuroscientific perspectives concerning the art-related physiological and behavioral dispositions and their neural formation (Onians, 2016; Rampley, 2017; Davis 2017) over the past two decades, the postulates relative to the cognitive psychology of human response to art are still in need of a thorough analysis.

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