

Rules for Art in Oral Tradition

Three Position Papers
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Toward an Evolutionary Ontology of Beauty

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Though the idea of aesthetic rules is objectionable to modernist art theory, it seems increasingly clear that we are being forced toward an understanding of the oral tradition at least, and perhaps the arts in general, as generated by biocultural rules that are culturally universal, rooted in our neurogenetic makeup, and to be ignored only at the cost of artistic failure. At the very least, human artists need a tradition to resist and subvert; at most, that tradition must be tuned to our nervous systems and continuous with the last phases of our evolution, in which we reached our present form as mammals, primates, and human beings.

The study of the oral tradition has usually carried an unspoken assumption: that it is allowed its humble but secure place in the humanistic academy on condition that it recognize the superior qualities of freedom and novelty possessed by the literary tradition. Genuine literature—so goes the conventional wisdom—is free from the primitive constraints of folk art. (Devotees of the oral tradition might mutter that it is better to have such constraints, but they still accept the distinction.)

However, recent research on the culturally-universal three-second line of human poetry, and on the neuroanatomical and neurochemical substrate of this phenomenon, together with similar studies of narrative and other fundamental literary forms, suggest that the rules discovered by oral research extend beyond the specifically oral.¹ The three-second information-processing cycle embodied in the poetic line also shows up in the learning of sign language and reading as the first language of children born deaf, and in American Sign Language poetry. The rules of such cultural universals do not belong to a particular cultural technology, nor even to one particular sector of the sensory cortex, but rather are embedded in the developmental process of the whole brain, and lie ready at birth as a genetic competence awaiting the cultural stimuli that will bring them into action. These rules apply just as much to civilizations with advanced material technologies as to traditional societies. Certainly they

¹ Much of this research is summed up in the first two and the last chapters of Turner 1986.

are more easily noticed and investigated in traditional societies; the slower pace of change in such societies allows more time for the aberrant and sterile products of rule-violations to be weeded out—rough edges are smoothed by oral transmission, the bugs are ironed away. The voice of public opinion is more clearly and immediately heard by the artist, and the greater unity of such societies brings to the fore classical examples of the rules well used. But though they are muffled and obscured in advanced technological civilizations, the rules still apply.

If this hypothesis is correct, its implications for mainstream Western literature and the other arts are enormous. Just as much as in a traditional culture, contemporary Western artists must learn the deep rules of their art if they are to speak to the human brain in its own terms.

What kind of rules are they? Part of the modernist fallacy is that rules are necessarily constraints or prohibitions that prevent one from doing something that one would otherwise be free to do. It is vital to understand that the rules of human art are of a different kind. Essentially they are the instructions for the use of tools without which vital elements of the artistic activity cannot be achieved at all; they are “open sesame” that permit us access into the realms of human creativity by activating prepared neural competencies. The rules include those of poetic meter, harmony and melody, narrative, performance, gift-giving and ritual sacrifice, the reflexive dramatic operator that enables us to model another person’s point of view (and his model of our point of view) within our own, and others designed to open up our visual, plastic, and performative capacities.

The rules, it must be emphasized, primarily specify a process, not a product. (The metrical expertise—the understanding of the rules—that went into the poetry of Pound and Eliot resulted in a poetic music even when the result was technically free of verse.) In genres where process and product are hard to distinguish, especially in performance, where the audience’s presence and reaction are essential, mistakes can easily be made. A case in point is the Augustans’ misinterpretation of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, whereby Aristotle’s correct identification of the need for the dramatic *process* to be immediately present to the audience was codified as an injunction limiting the *product* within the three unities.

The rules, moreover, specify not only a process, but a generative process, one which affects its own course by various subtle feedbacks. Both narrative and poetic meter require artist and audience to continually adjust the course of the artwork according to emergent properties generated by the artwork itself. This accounts for the extraordinary richness and freedom of true works of art, often to be seen most gloriously in works created within highly structured traditional oral societies, like the Greece of Homer. Thus to neglect the rules is not to set oneself free but to abandon the generative and innovative process of feedback by which

freedom is attained. Without conscious aesthetic processual rules, the artwork—if it can be called one—will fall into one of two automatisms, the automatism of the random, or the automatism of some other rule, one that if conscious is not aesthetic (reflecting, perhaps, political or economic interests) and if not conscious then compulsive and inflexible.

How did the aesthetic rules arise? Clearly they are the result of that long period of gene-culture coevolution during which the human stock domesticated itself into the unique world-altering form that it takes today. The moment that ritual performance came to be partly transmitted by cultural learning—was not passed down solely through genes—a potent method was opened up whereby the species' culture could exert an overwhelming selective pressure on its gene-pool: success in the ritual would ensure greater reproductive success, and thus the preferential survival of those aesthetic, intellectual, and emotional traits demanded by the ritual. The gifted descendants of the ritually adept would in turn be capable of innovating greater subtleties and variations in the ritual, which would in turn demand higher neural capacities of its participants. (I believe we may even see a remnant of the selective process in certain aspects of sacrifice and scapegoat ritual.)

The new work on the neurochemistry of aesthetic and ritual experience confirms the physiological basis of many of the aesthetic rules. Poetic meter adds a whole new pattern-recognizing capacity to the linguistic decoder of the left brain, a capacity which carries with it a reward of pleasure for the poetic task. A subjective sensation—beauty—tells us when the process is going right and the product is as it should be. The aesthetic is a neurochemical recognition system, embedded by evolution in our genes, to be activated by a live cultural context (especially, as child-development researchers like Colwyn Trevarthen maintain, by mothers or other primary caregivers).

But to use such language as “recognition,” “going right,” “is as it should be,” implies that there is a real objective target for the aesthetic activity. The rules of the process are clearly aimed at something, something whose recognition and use might be of enormous value to the species, commensurate with the huge expenditures of metabolic and economic resources that aesthetic activity incurs. My final suggestion is that the aesthetic rules are designed to help us recognize, harmonize with, and contribute to the deep creative tendency or theme of the universe itself, the process and principle by which the universe continues freely to generate novelty and complexity. Evolution itself, both in the limited biological sense and in the larger cosmic sense that it is acquiring from the new cosmological physics, is a large expression of that theme. Evolution is indeed a feedback process, cycling through the successive phases of a reflexive algorithm: variation (by mutation or recombination), selection,

and heredity (which acts as a conservative ratchet, preserving what has been gained in the first two phases and setting up a new generation upon which they can go to work again).

The new science of dynamical chaos, non-linear processes, and self-organizing and dissipative systems, which is based on very elegant feedback models of physical process, perhaps gives us an even more general glimpse at the target of aesthetic activity. This new science provides a view of the universe, of which classical evolution is one case, as free and creative, and whose products—the delicately self-similar shapes of trees, the whorled paisleys of turbulence, the organized complexity of snowflakes—are immediately recognizable as beautiful. Traditional aesthetics, as they are found in the oral tradition, embody a set of rules for recognizing the creative process at work in the universe and for continuing it in new and human ways.

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Reference

Turner 1986

Frederick Turner. *Natural Classicism: Essays on Literature and Science*. New York: Paragon House.