

THEME: Aesthetics in Practice

*On Birds, Beasts and Human Beings.
An Approach to the Continuity between Art and Life*

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“Those who cannot feel the littleness of great things in themselves are apt to overlook the greatness of little things in other.”¹

Kakuzo Okakura, *Book of Tea*

In 1934 John Dewey laid the foundation of a Philosophy of Art which had its roots in the essential conditions of life, that is, the basic vital functions which human beings share with birds and beasts. Dewey asserted that at every moment living creatures are exposed to conflicts from its surroundings, and at every moment they try to restore the harmony, to satisfy their needs. Fifty four years after, Ben-Ami Scharfstein published his book *Of Birds, Beasts and other Artists* (1988) in which he tries to show the universality of the art instinct in humans, animals and birds. He returns to the biological background of art and explains how human beings and other animals are pushed to self-expression by their personal and social needs. Although he recognizes an explicit expressive behaviour of human beings, also indicates that if we want to understand our nature and the art we create, we will not deny these biological roots. The aim of this paper is to examine that continuity between art and life from a comparative approach to the views of these authors. In this sense, this paper explores two main points: the naturalistic background of aesthetics and the functionality of art such as manifestation of a culture.

I. The Naturalistic Background of Aesthetics

The proposal of naturalistic background recovers the continuity of aesthetic experience or aesthetic process with normal processes of living. Western tradition has sharply distinguishes art from real life and remit it to a separate realm such as museums,

¹ Okakura, Kakuzo. *Book of Tea*. Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 2007, p. 6.

galleries, theatres or concert halls; in contrast, this naturalism has been addressed from a different starting point. Therefore, I begin drawing a comparison between deweyan naturalistic humanism and Scharfstein's biological thesis. Both authors root aesthetics in our biological nature and emphasize how important it is the natural context to develop aesthetic experiences. However, they present differences in their epistemological elaborations due to their different aims: Dewey's task was "to restore the continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience"²; whereas Scharfstein's aim was to find an aesthetic universal, that is, what is common to art, what is common to mankind.

Dewey starts *Art as Experience* criticizing the aesthetic theory which has separated the existence of the works of art as products that exist apart from human experience. Artistic objects have been separated from both conditions of origin and operation in experience and have been set in a remote pedestal, "a wall is built around them that render almost opaque their general significance, with which aesthetic theory deals"³. Thus, in the first chapter, called "The Live Creature", Dewey gives the biological and anthropological fundamentals to place aesthetics in life, a life that "goes on in an environment, not merely in it because of it, through interaction with it"⁴. All art, as Dewey understands it, is the product of interaction between living organisms and their environment, that is to say, is the product of having an experience.

Similarly, Scharfstein proposes art as a product of this interaction. Both authors share that our environment has an aesthetic dimension; this "biological-sociological commonplace" or "biological-sociological nature" from which makes possible our most distinctively human accomplishments, "joining the animals in us with the human in its most imaginative, concentrated, powerful and subtle expressions"⁵. Scharfstein illustrates this point with examples of artlike activities of three creatures different (birds, apes, and children) in the second chapter, called "Prehuman Intimations". In these pages, I focus on birds, and particularly on birdsongs, because we can find Scharfstein's

² Dewey, John. *Art as experience. The Later Works, 1925-1953*, vol. X. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1987, p. 9.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁵ Scharfstein, Ben-Ami. *Birds, Beast and other Artists. An Essay on the Universality of Art*. New York: New York University Press, 1988, p. 188.

biological thesis in this point⁶. Despite the differences between birds and human beings, Scharfstein draws analogies, which give us his biological-sociological basis for art:

(1) Firstly, he proposes birdsongs and human art as a way in which the individual self is made external. Both reflect its entire being and to make possible an accurate, deep form of communication⁷. Likewise, Dewey's notion of experience implies participation and communication. He explains how art and its objects communicate and are expressiveness of human experiences, and emphasises the role of art as "the only media of complete and unhindered communication between man and man that can occur in a world full of gulfs and walls"⁸. However, Dewey does not say that communication to others is the intent of an artist, but a feature of experience.

(2) Secondly, Scharfstein suggests art as a way to produce a pattern of rhythmically organized. Birds, like human beings, produce and are attracted to sounds organized, that grow out of a repertoire of complicated phrases and require a relatively high degree of organization⁹. Dewey also introduces the organization as a fundamental feature of experiences, but, in contrast to Scharfstein, Dewey puts emphasis on the change. Although Scharfstein asserts that the occasions evoke distinctive song-variants or kind of art, he does not pay attention to that variable context which generates new organizations. For Dewey, life is a process of interacting and interchanging through which man dynamically organises his environment.

(3) Thirdly, Scharfstein asserts art as a way to establish intimacy, because it identifies the individual both by general kind and particular inwardness. Art, as birdsongs, creates a dialogue between individual that is personally and emotionally exact and develop their intimacy¹⁰. In this way, Dewey talks about intimacy too, but he explains how this brings about the form. Objects are arranged and adapted to serve immediately the enrichment of the immediate experience, take on aesthetic form. This mode of composition or arrangement holds the parts together and establishes meaning and continuity in our lives¹¹. Therefore, whereas Scharfstein presents this intimacy by means examples of lover's nature of the poet or war songs, Dewey dedicates some

⁶ Scharfstein comments that birds have two primary reasons for which to sing: one to defend its territory against other males, and to attract females, *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁸ Dewey, John. *op.cit.*, p. 110.

⁹ Scharfstein, Ben-Ami. *op.cit.*, p. 48.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹¹ Cf. Dewey, John. "The Natural History of Form", *op.cit.*, pp. 139-167.

chapters to the nature of the form, through which we carry our experience to consummation.

(4) Fourthly, Scharfstein proposes art as a way to create a pattern of challenge and response, a sort of competition for the sake of cooperation and cooperation for competition. He gives as human analogy African drummers played against one another, the duel between Mozart and Clementi or Japanese, Sanskrit and Chinese poets engaged in improvised verse-capping or verse-completion contests¹². In contrast, Dewey does not talk about art as a sort of competition. He considers that response due to the rhythm and the continual variation, due to the immediate richness of the whole which provides the conditions for new stimulations of new responses upon every subsequent approach. Both authors seem to share the notion of creative response for variety and the notion of organic demand, though Dewey pays more attention to define fundamental ideas such as rhythm and form, and Scharfstein emphasises the examples which illustrate art as a way of response.

(5) Finally, Scharfstein puts forward art as a helpful way to create the interdependence and emotional closeness of the members of a group. In the same way, Dewey explains how art is a quality that permeates an experience; an experience in which a body of social matters and cultural meanings become aesthetic as they enter into an ordered rhythmic movement toward consummation. Like birds displays, human dancing or ceremonial are both an integral part. To understand them, we should remember that our intimacy with our bodies, but also our closeness of the group; in short, our biological, cultural and individual background.

Briefly, I contrast Scharfstein's analogies between birds and human beings with some of the main ideas which constitute Dewey's naturalistic humanism. Obviously, this presentation does not accurately reflect the deep of their thoughts, in fact this was not my intent, but it gives an approach to the main points which constitute that biological background. In spite of the differences in their epistemological explanations, both thinkers root aesthetics in the natural context. Nonetheless, Scharfstein's prose and his multitude of examples hinder us to clearly compare between both. For that reason, I am going to regard three main notions which both thinkers develop and which summarise this naturalistic background.

¹² Scharfstein, Ben-Ami. *op. cit.*, pp. 51-52.

First of all, there is a common feature in both theses, the need for fusion. For Dewey, every human activity is the result of interaction between organisms and their surroundings, between to experience and to make, which implies a reorganization and fusion of energies. That is, living creatures are continuously suffering rhythmic alternations between disunity and unity, between harmony and chaos in their lives and this is not simply a passive activity, but a meaningful creative process which joined a combination, a movement and culmination, of breaks and re-adjustments. Scharfstein also talks about the fusion as a pattern of expression, of which art, especially in the form of ritual, is the most concentrated element. Similarly to Dewey, he talks about the need of fusion and emphasises how this need leads to a denial that the arts are essentially separated from one another.

Nevertheless, Scharfstein seems to introduce the idea of fusion to characterize the tendency in art to go beyond the limited impulse, the limited aspect of life. This contrasts with Dewey's idea of life as aesthetic process; it appears as if Scharfstein wanted to attribute such a privileged status to art versus the humdrum of everyday life. However, that criticism is overcome if we consider his proposal and some Scharfstein's examples of this idea of fusion, which is present everywhere in its many forms. The main problem is that Scharfstein, like Dewey, does not explain carefully what it is exactly that idea of fusion and this is showed too restrictive view, adhered to art-centred aesthetics. We need to focus in his examples, particularly in !Kung's words¹³. Scharfstein explains the extraordinary loquacity and interesting characteristic of this language, which "makes their encampment sound like a brook the endless murmuring of which is punctuated by shrieks of laughter"¹⁴. Their language is more than a system of communication, this contains lyrics, rhythmical games, dancing; therefore, its ordinary prose turns into "stylized eddies of art"¹⁵. !Kung's language evinces how Scharfstein's idea of fusion opens a new way of thinking not only in art, but also in life. The basic subject is fusion of art with art, friend with friend, and art with reality¹⁶. For that reason,

¹³ !Kung people live in the Kalahari Desert in Namibia, Botswana and in Angola. They have a hunting and gathering lifestyle and are highly dependent on each other for survival. They speak the !Kung language, characterized by using click consonants, frequent speech sounds in many languages of southern of Africa.

¹⁴ Scharfstein, Ben-Ami. *op. cit.*, p. 200.

¹⁵ "A particularly exciting or dangerous event arouses 'volcanic eruptions of sounds', which an anthropologist describes as 'the greatest din I have ever heard human beings produce out of themselves'". *Ibid.*, p. 201.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

aesthetic process is not restricted to rare events and people, but it is involved from the start with perception. It entails sensitive awareness with our surroundings.

Thus, I should like to supplement the idea of fusion or organization of energies with two related ideas: oscillation and equilibrium. Scharfstein exposes how oscillation is a fusion which joins different elements, in fact, he asserts, the whole history of art seems to be made of alternations or oscillations between extremes¹⁷. That oscillation requires opposites to succeed one another, equilibrium requires their simultaneous presence. In the same way, Dewey shows how living creatures restore the harmony in their environment, adopt a meaning and this is possible because our environment is in flux, as Thomas Alexander said «meaning is only possible in a world which can be disrupted, in which ambiguity, change, and destruction play a role»¹⁸. Our lives are developed in variable and disruptive situations and places that need a sense; hence human beings signify different phases of their lives at every moment.

As far as the equilibrium is concerned, this comes about not mechanically and inertly but because of oscillation. There is in nature, in our lives, something more than mere flux, there is reached equilibrium. Life supposes energy and attention, but also pulses or stimulus; life is a process of interacting and interchanging through which man dynamically organises his environment. For that reason, Dewey gives the same value to change and order; in fact, if there is a greater change or variation, there will be a more interesting aesthetic response. Aesthetic perception is a full act of perceiving what happens in our lives when we are both most alive and most concentrated on the engagement with the environment.

Scharfstein introduces the ability to create powerful equilibrium by means of artists. Chinese art is, for Scharfstein, a marvellous example because this frequently uses principles of equilibrium. For instance, Chinese calligraphy makes evident these principles by the stroke. One stroke of the brush is a tonic pulsation by which individual and universal lives are joined¹⁹. Scharfstein introduces Shí Tāo (石涛), who developed fundamental aspects of rhythm in capturing the spirit resonance of the world and revealed its immensity through the method on the one-stroke in the seventeenth

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 209-210.

¹⁸ Alexander, Thomas. *John Dewey's. Theory of Art, Experience and Nature. The Horizons of Feelings.* New York: SUNY, 1987, p. 125.

¹⁹ Scharfstein, *op. cit.*, pp. 212-213.

century²⁰. He talks about rhythm because it sets that harmonization or equilibrium which directs the interaction with our environment.

In other words, rhythm, oscillation, focuses on the way that we deal with our activities, in that process to be present which constitutes an art of living, according to Crispin Sartwell²¹. Therefore, according to Dewey and Scharfstein, we need to debunk the myth that opposes art and utility. Western art has characterised for its own sake; in fact artworks are separated from crafts because these are useful products in our everyday lives. In contrast, these thinkers, the same than other cultures, consider aesthetic practices and arts as a way of intensifying our lives, as a useful process. Dewey refuses the kantian aesthetic tradition, like Richard Shusterman asserts, because his aesthetic naturalism entail the whole live creature, not some intellectualized properties of form. Similarly, Scharfstein denies the eighteenth century tradition of art through an analysis of the art of the present and its features to claim art as essentially universal.

II. The Functionality of Art

Art has been traditionally defined emphasising different elements (such as disinterested contemplation, artists' creative process or works of art) but these authors' proposal presents art as a quality of doing and of what is done. Both introduce a useful definition of art because it is in too many things and too hard to separate from them, because it is present in every form we give our acts²². Thus, they show how all human beings share the condition that makes art both universal and indispensable. In this point, I would like to address fundamental similarities between Dewey's notion of art as a celebration of the life of a culture and Scharfstein's view of art as exhibition of the deep forms of individual and culture, carried in his recent work *Art without borders* (2009).

In the fourteenth chapter of *Art as Experience*, called "Art and civilization", Dewey defined art as "a manifestation, a record and celebration of the life of a civilization a means of promoting its development, and is also the ultimate judgment upon the quality

²⁰ Cf. Shí Tāo's ontology of art the one stroke, which is the expression for the inherent fusion of things. The one-strokedness supposes synthesis, contains in itself the universe and beyond; thousands and myriads of strokes. Therefore, Shí Tāo (石濤) gives to the art of painting, born from one stroke of the brush, the role of generating a world. In a changing world, painting is the great way of the transformation of the world. (Scharfstein, *op. cit.*, pp. 205-206).

²¹ Sartwell, Crispin. *The art of living: aesthetics of the ordinary in world spiritual traditions*. New York: SUNY, 1995.

²² Scharfstein, *op. cit.*, p. 228.

of a civilization”²³. Similarly, Scharfstein argues that “art in all its forms is always the instinctive and the willed antithesis of loneliness”²⁴ but it is always something else, it creates, disrupts and recreates the human order, is a sharing human response. Human beings learn from experience, and this experience is not only individual, but also social. We learn social customs which are modes of action with story and transmitted meaning; we develop our capacities and share attitudes of the culture in which we participate. These are elements, enduring and inseparable forces, that organise our existences and art, as Dewey and Scharfstein say, is the great force in effecting the consolidation of our pattern of everyday sociability²⁵. Art is the most intense activity conformed to the needs and conditions, and it introduces the substantial aspects of each culture.

Aesthetic experience is more than aesthetic, each of the communal modes of activity, united the practical, the social, and the educative are integrated in a whole, which is expression of the life of the community. In that respect, Scharfstein takes the aesthetic experience further and gives a summary of the traits essential for it, regardless of culture origin²⁶. He justifies this point giving an enumeration of reasons why sensations, perceptions and basic aesthetic preferences are roughly alike among all human beings, despite of the fact that these basic human emotions are altered by social and cultural habits. Dewey does not support this kind of reasons, but he recognises how “works of art are means by which we enter, through imagination and the emotions they evoke, into other forms of relationship and participation than our own”²⁷. Nevertheless, whereas Scharfstein gives biological and even scientific reasons such as our neurological vision, our capacity of perceiving colour or our ability to construct objects; Dewey offers an anthropological reasoning to explain how we can arrive at the attitudes expressed in the art of another civilization because of their closeness to them. For Dewey, the field, in which art takes place, is able to break down boundaries between cultures. In this way, although these authors explain from different points of view our immediate and potential capacity of having aesthetic experiences of another culture, they share the

²³ Dewey, John. *op. cit.*, p. 327.

²⁴ Scharfstein, Ben-Ami. *op. cit.*, p. 228.

²⁵ Cf. Scharfstein, *Art without borders: A Philosophical Exploration of Art and Humanity*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009, p. 390: “In either style the members of the groups of culture fuse themselves into a single expressive pattern of which a ritual, with its art, is the most easily identified example. The patterns of everyday sociability are the substrata in which the fusions of ritual and art take shape”. Dewey, John. *op. cit.*, p. 327: “The works in which meanings have received objective expression endure. They become part of the environment, and interaction with this phase of the environment is the axis of continuity in the life of civilization”.

²⁶ Cf. Scharfstein, Ben-Ami. *op. cit.*, 2009, pp. 361-364.

²⁷ Dewey, John. *op. cit.*, p. 336.

vision of art as a language without boundaries, as an engaged interaction between the parts.

This raises the question if we can experience aesthetically art of another culture. Dewey and Scharfstein maintain that art supposes a genuine participation, in some degree and phase, in the experience of another culture. The ability of art to be experienced as great by people of different times and traditions rests not only on its panhuman qualities, but also on the variable readiness of its spectators to appreciate it²⁸. Through art we learn from one another, changing our way of participating, and become more similar and more human. Therefore, both authors claim that we can appreciate different arts and the very variability of experiences from our own context, our present lives. In this way, Dewey's attitude is more optimistic, or perhaps naïve, than Scharfstein's position because he does not seem to see limits in this kind of interaction²⁹. However, although Scharfstein indicates that there are cultural constraints, he also points that our ignorance of the subtlety and depth of intimate acquaintance does not deny their pan-cultural expressiveness³⁰. For that reason, Scharfstein explains that the experience of foreign works "may be to the good, as when it accentuates characteristics of the art that familiarity has made invisible to those who were born to it"³¹. This does not imply contradiction between the endless variety of aesthetic phenomena and the human universality that underlies it, but as Scharfstein says, "it is more helpful to become aware of how endless variety makes up endlessly rich sets of variations on common human themes"³².

III. Conclusion: The Continuity between Art and Life as Endless Process

The aim of this paper has been to re-focus interest in Dewey's naturalism and Scharfstein's universalism because both proposals try to restore the continuity between art and life. Despite the divergences, these thinkers provide a global overview of art's creation and reception which attempt to demonstrate the rich background of our lives, from which we create art as a way of leading a meaningful life. Dewey's principle of continuity and Scharfstein's idea of common aesthetic sense is too complex to be

²⁸ Scharfstein, Ben-Ami. *op. cit.*, p. 385.

²⁹ Cf. Cynthia Freeland's criticism about Dewey's proposal of art as a universal language between cultures in chapter III "Cultural crossings" *But, is it Art?: An Introductory to Art Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 60-89.

³⁰ Scharfstein, Ben-Ami. *op. cit.*, 2009, p. 369.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 367.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 367.

explained briefly in these pages, for that reason, to conclude I would like to sum up the main ideas of this presentation in three points:

Firstly, this paper has tried to show, or at least suggest, the aesthetic dimension of our lives. Through naturalistic proposal, aesthetics roots in basic needs or biological commonplaces. Scharfstein's example of birds and Dewey's features of experience reveal how art is the product of the interaction between human beings and its environment. However, whereas Scharfstein emphasises the personal and social aspect of human needs, Dewey points on organic needs. Nevertheless, they share that the conditions which make art possible are the world itself, both our biological-sociological rhythms and the larger rhythms of nature. Through this naturalistic approach it is easier to explain why the arts have taken so different forms and have nonetheless seemed to us to be so much alike, identifiable emotionally or imaginatively as art in spite of their variety³³. If life is always also aesthetic, art can plausibly be explained as a heightened, more highly focused embodiment or ordinary experiences.

Secondly, this presentation criticises the damaging dualisms and antithesis formulated by philosophy since Descartes and Locke. Art is neither simply objective nor subjective, but both. Its objective basis results from its biological background and its subjective aspect emerges from the creative process that involved both the artist and the perceiver. In contrast to the eighteenth century tradition of art which has unduly intellectualized works of art, both thinkers root aesthetics in life and experience, accepting it in all its uncertainty. Their naturalism breaks down old dualisms such as art-crafts, disinterested-useful, spiritual-natural, becoming open to all varieties of aesthetic experiences from contemporary art or other cultures. That unification of artistic traditions and sensitivities, which is generalized from numerous episodes of cultural contact, supposes a new place not only to experience, but also to communicate.

Finally, this paper presents art, like life, as an endless process. At every single moment, every living creature experiences the world and organises the energies, and this is a continuous process. That endless process, which incessantly needs new meanings or responses, supposes a creative participation, through which we interact with the surroundings and develop ourselves as part of a group. Maybe Scharfstein's last words in *Birds, Beasts and other Artists* can explain more clearly this point:

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

Art ties us together with filaments of imagination and entangles us more deeply in our humanity. It inscribes our space, inward and outward, with the transformations of life. It is our fusion with the world by means of our fusion with one another, and our fusion with one another by means of our fusion with the world. It is sensual, abstract, immediate, distant, clear and enigmatic. I have explained it as best I can, but I know that I have left it still enigmatic. The enigma, like the explanation, always renews itself.³⁴

³⁴ Scharfstein birds beasts, p. 230.