

*Art and Intimacy: How the Arts Began.* By ELLEN DISSANAYAKE. A McLellan Book: University of Washington Press. 2000. pp. xvii + 265. £19.95.

ONE OF THE leading lights of international aesthetics at the beginning of the twentieth century was Max Dessoir, whose *Aesthetics and the Theory of Art* (1906, trans. 1970) is seminal reading. Through the course of the century a rift developed between empirical aesthetics and philosophical aesthetics, though both approaches were co-present in his work.

Dissanayake's book echoes Dessoir's interest in empirical aesthetics, while drawing on the most recent scholarly resources. The author admits to not being a specialist in these various areas but she is obviously well read, believes in making connections and presents her ideas in a clear and well-argued way. If Dessoir were still around I am sure he would have approved of the project, though he would not necessarily have agreed with its conclusions.

The author tells us in her preface that 'neither the aesthetic theories of philosophers in their ivory towers nor the common sense of men and women on the street provides good reasons for taking the arts seriously'. The book's arguments lead up to chapter 6 which claims to offer such reasons, grounded in a 'biosocial framework'. Chapter 1 describes mother—infant relationships and the human need for the signs of mutuality 'praise, recognition, encouragement, comfort, affectionate touching, and fond smiles', these are supported by physical behaviours that include the expression of emotion in speech through 'intonation (speech melody), rhythm stress, tempo, amplitude, pauses, and voice quality'. The child grows into adulthood through the simulation of adult behaviours familiar through play. Chapter 2 unpacks the behaviours connected with belonging and its 'ceremonial reinforcement' through ritual, emphasizing the roles of telling, singing, and movement. Among the Kalapalo, for instance, narrators 'manipulate their vocal pitch and other prosodic features to take on the voices of other characters' and they use a variety of conventions to promote and sustain audience interest. Chapter 3 discusses 'Finding and Making Meaning', and the author observes 'Whether they appear in Homer or Lady Murasaki, Dostoyevski or Danielle Steele, grand opera or soap opera, news features or television commercials, we are attracted by these and other humanly relevant themes that derive from evolved needs and interests.' Chapter 4 takes us into 'Hands-on' competence, drawing our attending to the pleasures to be derived from actually doing things and the ways in which such doings have been given meaning. There are some nice

observations about the ways in which technology obstructs the development of hands-on play (pp. 119-122). Chapter 5 discusses 'Elaborating', the common features of mutuality, ceremony, and art that make them different from ordinary communication and behaviour, and this is where I find the nub of my problem with the book. But to continue my summary, Chapter 6 argues why we should take the arts seriously, because they answer to psychological necessities occasioning specific social behaviours. The Appendix 'Toward a Naturalistic Aesthetics' offers 'Naturalistic Criteria for Aesthetic Quality' which are (i) accessibility coupled with strikingness, (ii) tangible relevance, (iii) evocative resonance, and (iv) satisfying fullness. Modern, relativistic culture is contrasted with traditional, tribal, culture where 'appreciation for beauty, excellence, and skilled workmanship is inherent . . . and needs only direction and reinforcement. In all but a few small-scale traditional societies, ritual paraphernalia, utensils, textiles, and many other items are inarguably well made and beautiful' (p. 224). I would like to think that this has been a fair summary of the book's developing argument though it is obviously highly abbreviated and fails to capture the ways in which the argument has been elaborated by an array of vivid examples. But the argument does have its problems, some of which were addressed by Francis Sparshott in his delightful book *The Structure of Aesthetics* (1963) in relation to the earlier literature of empiricist aesthetics.

In a nutshell, the same criticism can be made of the 'Naturalistic' approach as Sparshott made of the theory of empathy: 'if true (and it has been discarded rather than refuted or replaced), [it] sheds much light on the method of aesthetic perception and appreciation, but none at all on our systems of preferences' (*Structure of Aesthetics*, p. 243). Pop music answers to the demands of the tribe, Beethoven is something else: wherein lies the difference? The musical project might have needed the rhythm of the drums to get going but can the complexity of Beethoven be explained in similar terms? To turn to a different art form, early stories, myths, and legends might have been useful for social bonding, particularly in the ways in which they were told, but what of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* . . . let alone ICAFLCA's *The Trial*? According to Jane Harrison (*Ancient Art and Ritual*, c. 1913) the Parthenon frieze originated in a wooden doll paraded in the Greek spring festival. While Plato valued *eurhythmic*, *euharmonion*, and *euschemosyne* (rhythm, harmony, and grace) as values in life, music, and the visual arts the exemplification of such characteristics in the Parthenon statues is qualitatively different from any possible exemplification in the parading of a corn doll. The author tells us that after she had attended an aerobic exercise class at the University of Edinburgh with some five or six hundred students she 'was almost able to levitate on the eight-block walk home' (p. 164). One might feel quite considerable elation in

listening to a live performance of a rock concert or a symphony but doesn't the quality of the object of the experience count?

A trickier question is whether the world becomes a better place because of the presence of aerobics and Beethoven: Hitler used both in his cause. The author acknowledges that sociobiological behaviours include hate and fear as well as love. The cause of art is open to be perverted or, as the latest jargon has it, 'transgressed'. New artistic devices can open up, or satisfy, sociobiological proclivities. Alberti mentioned narcissism in *De pictura* (1434) and Baudelaire pornography in *The Salon of 1859*.

Having made both of these points another two follow on. The book does respond to a mood abroad to create art responding to social needs. One thinks of the growing importance of public art and community arts: in the first case, quality may be, and frequently is, sacrificed at the altar of committee consensus, and in the second case, good intentions may lead to indifferent art. Second, one thinks of the popularity of regressive behaviour in warehouse parties, Eminem's *The Marshall Mathers LP* and a variety of Live Art performances. I wonder whether the author would find them socially desirable?

A prime difference between animals and humans is the latter's ability to reflect on their behaviour. This has been pointed out many times. A theory of art that is adequate to the world's greatest achievements must incorporate, in some way or other, a theory of reflection. I think I'll leave aerobics, football anthems, and messing around with clay to other people and concentrate on my strolls through the Peak District, reading Proust and listening to Beethoven.

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