

Neophilia

So, what else is new! Or the special attraction for today is - - -

Yet another of our inherited intuitions is a sense of neophilia. This is present in the form of protean responses in many animals and is of basic survival value. Proteus, the Greek god of the River, constantly changed his shape so that he could not be captured. The lowly rabbit exhibits a protean pattern of escape by randomly changing direction as the fox chases him. Proteanism is the basis of our creative instinct. It can overwhelm other artistic pursuits and become the only criterion for producing art. Some Post- Modern schools of art encourage anything new for the sake of newness. Since practically everything we do can be considered as art, this means that the sky is not even the limit in constraining neophilia.

(Note 18).

Ellen Dissanayake, after much deliberation, came to the conclusion that the most primitive and basic behavior that distinguishes what we see as artistic, is the act of ‘making something special’. Of course, if something is made ‘special’, that means we are able to differentiate it from the regular everyday hum-drum. The question then arises of how we are able to do just that.

If Homo Erectus made a hand-axe that was much smaller or much bigger or much fancier than the normal ones that had been made for a million years previously, it would appear special. In fact, we would most likely describe the making of such a hand-axe as ‘being creative’. All that was then required was for some ancestral women to employ their sense of neophilia in order to appreciate such ‘creative’ non-normal behavior.

Creativity is a manifestation of the primitive protean instinct that triggers the attention of our inquisitive right hemisphere. Ellen Dissanayake's 'making something special' is yet another example of a present-day human adaptation of an ancient animal defense mechanism.

Darwin in his second book, saw neophilia as one of the mechanisms for sexual selection of a mate. It was his idea that sexual selection especially by the female, could account for rapid evolutionary changes in contrast with the basically slow process of survival of the fittest. Miller points to the Wodaabe tradition of female mate selection where the men have developed the most complex body painting anywhere. (Note 21, 22). The concept of developing newer and better anything, can be promoted by encouraging creativity. Certainly, in this case, creativity is a factor in sexual selection. But sexual reproduction itself, rather than cloning, is in line with the Cosmic direction of increased complexity at a cost of increasing entropy.

An interesting corollary to females selecting for creative mates, is that the neophilia gene gets passed on to the next generation of both males and females. The females are thus not only able to appreciate male creativity but can themselves become more creative---a positive feedback loop. Dickie's Institutional Theory nicely incorporates this gem of a primeval mechanism. (You need someone to tell you that what you just made is 'art'.)

Often it is the female that seeks a mate outside of the home group. This aspect of neophilia had an important survival advantage in the Pleistocene when the home group was a small, isolated band and inbreeding became a

problem. It must have been this innate mechanism of appreciating the new that made women love creative men who sang songs, told marvelous stories at the campfires and painted pictures of buffalo on cave walls.

Body-painting vs. the latest Spring Fashions

Dutton re-enumerates many of the points made by Pinker and adds a few of his own.

(Note 10).

He points out the intuitive sense we all have for body adornment. There is an obvious connection to our basic need to seek something new. The earliest examples indicate that body painting goes back at least 100,000 years. It is, as Darwin pointed out, used by males in the sexual selection process, to impress females. If you cannot grow red pin feathers or the colorful tail of a peacock, why not use red ochre and paint your own body. Presently, body painting is associated primarily with tattoo artists who usually create pictorial images rather than trying to change the shape or appearance of the body. It is in fact extraordinary that women do not use body color more than they at present do. We seem to be limited to the use of rouge, mascara and lipstick. With the advent of safe body color, it would seem natural that women would avail themselves of these and hire artists who specialize in painting human bodies. This is definitely a course that should be taught in every College of Art. We could have mauve women with zebra stripes etc. – just use the sense of neophilia. It could become the fine art of body painting. With the use of permanent dyes, the effect could last a lifetime, and the stuffed and preserved bodies would be

exhibited as masterworks in art museums. (Does this paragraph exemplify the sense of neophilia gone whacko?).

Of course, in our present world, body painting has been supplanted by the use of colourful fabrics, and the advent of the fashion industry. The advantage here arises since clothes can be changed to meet the circumstances. Also, there is the added attraction of novelty --- in each season a new array of fashions appears. Because of their primal history, body sculpture and the colour aesthetics of changing the appearance of the human form, (the fashion industry), should be part of the basic curricula at any arts college.

One year I was teaching a course in computer graphics at Tallinn University when signs appeared on the sides of streetcars saying "Beatrice is coming". Shortly afterward, huge posters appeared on street corners of Beatrice in the nude with a laurel wreath and holding a bunch of grapes. I pointed this out to my students so they could follow this superb advertising campaign --- probably for a major theatrical production of a Greek Tragedy! It turned out that it was a gallery opening displaying photographs of Beatrice.

The gala opening lasted a few hours and then closed. Everyone was baffled --- until a month later an enterprising reporter cornered Beatrice and got an explanation. "If you are 22, young and beautiful, denied entry to Art College and your husband is a billionaire, what would you do?" Two years later Beatrice was operating a fashion design house in Tallinn. Truly an excellent example of an enterprising artist!

OK! Lets recap the components of neophilia. First, we are aware of our everyday environment and that awareness is remembered in our neuronic memory as ‘the usual’. Second, when something ‘unusual’ happens it triggers our thalamus to prepare for ‘fight or flight’ by giving us a shot of adrenalin. This, thanks to our deep genetic memory that our ancestors learned millions of years ago. Thirdly, our modern neocortex gets into the act by trying to analyze which response is the most appropriate. So, if the snake you just confronted is non-poisonous, why bother running and waste energy!

Artists who design advertising make use of ‘cognitive dissonance’ which is another name for something that jolts us into looking and analyzing what is ‘out of the ordinary’. The longer the target looks at the ad, the more the artist gets paid! Living in an electronic milieu, we are constantly bombarded with ads, each attempting to be the newest and extra special. Thus, we become addicted to shots of adrenalin and we name this condition as ‘neophilia’.

Suppose as a landscape painter you are sitting on a hill viewing into the far distance. You notice aerial perspective or fuzziness but you also note that red is not present in the distance. (The usual) The red apples on an apple tree far away have disappeared. So also have any red poppies that you could have seen in a nearby field.

You decide to paint in a magnificent red sunset in the far distance. Red in the far distance is unusual, it appeals to our sense of neophilia. The viewer is attracted to your painting. But suppose you painted a red maple tree in the far distance, this would cause major cognitive dissonance! The viewer would be attracted to your painting because their neo-cortex is busy

spending time trying to figure out what is unusual about this scene. The final disposition, (what to do), might be 'OK. I like this novelty'. But suppose you made the foreground fuzzy, reds in the far distance, similar small objects larger in the distance, etc. You have probably created too much cognitive dissonance, and the viewer might simply reject the painting as an ugly mess! Too little novelty equals boring, too much dissonance equals repulsion.