



NEW IDEAS

Art and religion: Inverting the primacy

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On the basis of the conception of aesthetic imagination derived from evolutionary psychology, cognitive psychology, and social cognitive neuroscience, today it is possible - and more appropriate - to invert the traditional view of anthropologists and archeologists that conceives the arts (from the early pre-historic arts) as mere instruments supporting religious beliefs, practices, and rituals.

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INTRODUCTION

Anthropologists, cognitive archaeologists, and evolutionary psychologists commonly think that (a) throughout much of history the arts operated in tandem with religion; (b) the arts often operated in the service of religious communal rituals; (c) this service already began from the early pre-historic art - probably the Upper Paleolithic art of Cro-Magnon about 40,000-10,000 years ago (Finlayson 2009). One of the current and most relevant evolutionary approach proposes that the first art accompanied the invention of magical-religious ceremonies as an important means of making these rituals special and extraordinary in order to convince practitioners, attract their attention and interest, provide emotional excitement and satisfaction, and coordinate group effort (Dissanayake 2000).

In our perspective, it is very plausible that art and religion co-evolved, in particular that the arts arose in human evolution as adjuncts to religion, especially to communal magical-religious ceremonials, rather than as independently evolved activities. On the contrary, the sexual selection model (art arose because of the advantages it grants artists – whose behaviors and products had a prior history of fitness indicators and then acquired the role of status indicators, contributing to the artists' social prestige) is not suitable for the early art, since it presupposes the existence of specialized individuals in societies where the division of labor was not yet that

highly developed. Above all, it is undoubtedly true that the arts achieved an independent and pure form many centuries later, after the eighteenth century system of fine arts had developed and aesthetics had become an autonomous discipline.

However, from the beginning the arts did not perform only an instrumental role in the service of religion, as a mere accompanying counterpart of already available religious beliefs, practices, and rituals. On the contrary, our thesis argues that the arts discharge an indispensable and constitutive function in the early development of religion. Precisely: in virtue of aesthetic imagination, the arts contributed to invent creative patterns of beliefs concerning the religious convictions, and they helped to shape and organize the ritual practices according to these beliefs. We ground our hypothesis on the definition of aesthetic imagination derived from evolutionary psychology, cognitive psychology, and social cognitive neuroscience, and we discuss it on the basis of an enlightening case study, the shamanistic interpretation of the Upper Paleolithic art.

DEFINITION

In order to understand the function of the arts in the early development of religion it is crucial to determine the main features of aesthetic imagination. The current (evolutionary, cognitive, neuro-) theories have reached no general con-

sensus on the definition of aesthetic imagination. However, they definitively clarify that aesthetic imagination is not the source of factual, empirical, practical, and utilitarian information, simply because these kinds of information can be conveyed more effectively by other means. However, this does not mean that aesthetic imagination has in principle no cognitive value. On the contrary, the hypothesis that aesthetic imagination represents a simulative and virtual preparation for dealing with real-world problems is very pervasive. The uncontroversial common core of the different theories about the aesthetic imagination is as follows (Consoli 2012). Aesthetic imagination enables imaginative simulations to occur that are decoupled from the actual state of the world; these simulations compress virtual models, maps, and templates that can be applied as mental reference points to all relevant real-world scenarios; these models re-enact simulative schemata previously entrenched in memory and work creatively on them in a way that defies habitual expectations and routinized processing. In this way, the aesthetic imagination provides modal knowledge about patterns of possibilities and affordances; practice with imaginative simulations allows the improvement of capacities such as anticipation, self-regulation, mind reading, empathy, and so on; and, this practice aids the development of mental flexibility in novel and complex circumstances.

DISCUSSION

The role of aesthetic imagination in the religious experience is often underestimated. We can stress this fact if we consider one of the most suggestive interpretations of the early relationship between art and religion, the shamanistic interpretation of Lewis-Williams and his followers (Lewis-Williams 2002). From their perspective, at least some of the rock art items of Upper Paleolithic caves represent geometric forms that are very similar to entoptic phenomena usually perceived in trance experiences. Drawing on ethnographic material, notably connected with pre-modern hunter-gatherers communities of the far west of North America, and especially on the San people of southern Africa, Lewis-

Williams hypothesizes that these items were associated with shamanistic practices. Particularly, the development of higher-order consciousness allowed our ancestors (in particular shamans - people who were believed to have special skills and supernatural powers) to enter into altered states of consciousness; to perceive entoptic phenomena leading to hallucinatory visions in line with a three stage model (stage 1: perception of shimmering and undulating geometric shapes; stage 2: interpretation of the shapes as representative of actual objects; stage 3: full-blown hallucination of an apparently real experience); to construct on this basis a cosmological view of a tiered universe, and to translate these experiences into images.

At a first glance, this case study seems to confirm the religion primacy. The artistic activity looks like a simple corollary of the religious practice: the rock art items visually illustrated, and so simplified and made more comprehensible, the cosmological narratives and the symbolic gestures of the shamans executed during the ritual practices. On the contrary, if we look more deeply, we can acknowledge the essential and constitutive role of aesthetic imagination.

The case study of the San shows that shamans entered a state of trance through intense dancing, audio-driving and hyperventilation, without ingestion of hallucinogens. Then, they danced around the campfire while others sang, so they could be transported to the spirit world. These shamanistic dances and individual elements of them are largely depicted in San rock art. This image-making required a specific use of imagination as a simulation that re-enacts the previous, significant trance experience. In fact, the production of images could not be realized by shamans during the trance state: this is simply physically impossible. On the contrary, the shamans relived the experience of the supernatural realm while they were in an ordinary state of consciousness. Moreover, the fine lines of San paintings make it unlikely that all shamans depicted them. For this reason, it remains mostly unknown who, when, and under what circumstances images were painted. Nevertheless, San rock art is about deliberate recreation through the imagination of

the shaman's experience of the spirit world.

The function of the aesthetic imagination exercised by San is intimately connected with the general need of knowing. The imaginative simulation (the act of creating the rock art) makes sense of the previous altered states of consciousness, providing two indispensable templates. First, a refined understanding of what visions were effectively perceived during the trance experience, in particular during the final third stage, when there are generally visions of people, animals, and monsters. Secondly, a rationalization of the trance experience in order to understand the real-world pattern of possibilities enabled by the spirit world, so that, as Lewis-William put it, the introcosmos of the shamans was projected onto the common, material world to create a cosmology. In this perspective, the aesthetic imagination was freed from the practical functionality of the immediate problem solving. However, it was profoundly engaging because it involved crucial real-world implications.

The shamanistic practice reveals the typical feature of the genuine artistic phenomena. According to the so-called acquaintance principle (Hopkins 2012), the use of aesthetic imagination is grounded in and is not dissociable from an individual token. This token may be an aesthetic artifact or a temporal performance. However, unlike the ordinary use of imagination (but also unlike the use in science and philosophy), art always requires a personal, subjective, first-hand experience with a concrete and determined token. In its material presence, the token guides and prescribes the work of imagination, continuously refreshes the attention and contrasts habituation, is attractive and produces pleasure per se, and is appreciated and valued for itself. In line with the acquaintance principle, the San shamanistic practice was based on the common and direct experience with irreplaceable individual tokens, the artifacts constituted by the paintings and the collective, multimodal performance of the trance dance.

CONCLUSION

The first art was part of communal, performative, multi-media, temporal coordinated reli-

gious ceremonials. Operating within these rituals, the arts were not mere ornaments used to attract attention. On the contrary, the aesthetic imagination represented the key element in providing an actual and effective understanding of the practices to which it belonged. Precisely, it predisposed a common workspace in which participants could make sense of their collective experience, producing and sharing the deep cultural narratives that allowed individuals to understand themselves and others, and to organize their emotional and social lives. These narratives were constructed together, without already available prototypes, on the basis of the imaginative re-representing, describing, categorizing, and interpreting the previous pre-reflexive, non-conceptual, and immediate experience. Obviously, the understanding of the real-world circumstances, conditions, and opportunities was inevitably elaborated in magical, cosmological, and mythical terms. So the narratives, and the corresponding iconography and symbolic gestures, were characterized by religious contents. However, conceiving this complex stories and organizing their collective expressions in depictions, dances, songs and music was the main task performed by the aesthetic imagination.

Therefore, in our perspective the use of aesthetic imagination is tied to the goal of knowing. However, this goal is not exclusive. Many anthropologists view the artistic expression of religious experience as a social glue that binds groups and merges the individual into the collective. Undoubtedly, early art has the further adaptive function of reinforcing sociality and promoting social bonding, empathy, cooperation, identification, and cultural cohesion. However, the prosocial function requires, in principle, a cognitive one. Only if aesthetic imagination is able to satisfy the members' need for self-knowledge, can aesthetic experience transform private suggestions into coherent patterns of shared experience. Only if aesthetic imagination is collective play, embodied in a public, external, accessible token, can artistic behaviors and products unify people into socio-cultural wholes. So, with a slogan: no religion - and no community - without (aesthetic) imagination.

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