

# Stephen Davies, *The Artful Species: Aesthetics, Art, and Evolution* (2013)

## John Powell

It is sometimes said in praise of a new philosophical work that so and so's 'important and difficult book' merits close attention. Well, I am pleased to say on this occasion that Stephen Davies' important and *easy* book, *The Artful Species* (2013), merits your close attention. In saying that it is easy I do not in any way intend to demean it. In fact, the opposite is the case: I intend to praise it. And I do not intend to mean that it was easily written: as any skilled writer knows, such apparent ease of style and clarity of argument are hard won.

*The Artful Species* is easy because reading it is a pleasurable experience, and it is important, and timely, because it provides an incisive, rational analysis of the work of a wide range of authors in the burgeoning field of art and evolution. *The Artful Species* exhibits that particular combination of philosophical rigour and readability that readers of Davies' earlier work would expect to find. However, readers familiar with his work will find in this book a major work devoted to a topic on which he has published little previously. Apart from the acknowledgement Davies makes that parts of chapters 4, 8 and 10 have appeared in some form elsewhere, I am aware only of a brief encyclopaedia entry he has compiled, that offers a summary overview of the territory, and a brief, but important, paper in the *British Journal of Aesthetics*.<sup>1</sup>

Davies' earlier published work has often been in fields traditionally associated with philosophical aesthetics, such as the ontology of art, definitions of art, musical expressiveness, and so on, and his credentials in these fields are impeccable. What sets this new book apart from most of his earlier published work is the impressive grasp it shows Davies has of fields such as evolutionary psychology, evolutionary biology, neuroscience, anthropology, and ethology. Davies appears to have personally read, digested, understood and assessed the works of all the writers whose work he cites. This is, in itself, a spectacular achievement, worthy of comparison with the eighteenth century *encyclopédistes*. It is an achievement whose pale imitation is increasingly a feature of some

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Davies, 'Evolution, Aesthetics, and Art', in *A Companion to Aesthetics*, ed. Stephen Davies et al. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009); 'Why Art is Not a Spandrel', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 50 (2010), pp. 333-341.

inferior, post-Google scholarship and it is an achievement increasingly rare in an environment where narrow specialisms are the norm and a working knowledge across more than one or two disciplines the exception.

Davies' style is personable and he writes with a simple clarity and grace. An impressive feature of his writing is the (apparent) ease with which, while presenting, summarising and assessing complex arguments from a wide range of sources, he maintains a lively, straightforward prose that is balanced, economical, authoritative, generally free from hyperbole and, for the attentive reader, not without touches of humour.

In this essay I locate *The Artful Species* in its academic context, I then briefly summarize the book's main arguments and claims and finally I examine some of the author's claims relating to landscape matters, venturing to suggest some ways in which they might be applied to the case of gardens. I begin, though, by commenting on two matters related to the book's production.

First, as mentioned above, the book's text is very readable for the educated public and the specialist reader alike. That readability is in part attributable to the absence of footnotes, and endnote indications in the text. However, those same absences also come at a cost. Because the book is extensively referenced – almost one third of the book's length is taken up with endnotes, and web and bibliographic reference materials – the serious reader may well find herself flicking backwards and forward constantly through the book in search of references and other notes that importantly complement the points being made in the body of the main text. Furthermore, because the existence of relevant endnotes and other references are not indicated in the body of the text a reader may turn to the back and find, unexpectedly, there is a relevant note or reference or, very occasionally, that there is not. That said, the endnotes are so extensive that inserting them in the body of the text as footnotes may have resulted in some inelegant and unwieldy page layouts, which the present arrangement has happily avoided.

Second, I believe that the lack of any images in the text is unfortunate. There is an extensive list of web resources that direct the reader to images. However, for the purposes of writing this review, I chose at random four links to online images supplied in the web resources list and found that the links to two of the images were inactive or otherwise faulty.<sup>2</sup> I acknowledge that a 50% failure rate based only on a random sample of four is inconclusive, but it does hint at an issue the academic publishing world needs to address: the transitory nature of online information means that references to online materials cannot

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<sup>2</sup> See for example <http://islamicart.com/main/calligraphy/index.html> as referenced on p. 31.

always be relied on to point to available information in an equal and comparable way to references to printed material. Furthermore, in the absence of an electronic version of the present book, putting aside the hard copy of the book and typing lengthy electronic reference links, such as <http://evolution.anthro.univie.ac.at/institutes/urbanethology/projects/urbanisation/landscapes/indexland.html> into a browser is a time-consuming and distracting task for a reader. In summary, I believe the insertion of at least a few key images in the body of the text would improve future editions of the book, considerations of cost notwithstanding. For although sometimes, such as in the case of Davies' written description of 'Excalibur' (working from that of Gregory Currie, p. 1), the reader can form a more or less clear image of the axe in question, in other cases, such as when Davies refers to but does not actually describe Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid's *Most Wanted* paintings (p. 48), the inclusion of an image in the text would be instructive and enable a smoother reading experience.

*The Artful Species* represents a major addition to the growing multidisciplinary discussion of art and evolution. It sets out to critically assess theories arising from a range of disciplines including literature, ethology, psychology, biology, neuroscience, and philosophical aesthetics. In broad terms, these theories claim that art and art behaviours are either evolutionary adaptations, or by-products of evolutionary adaptations (that is, spandrels), or culturally acquired technologies. Important theorists whose work is analysed by Davies include Ellen Dissanayake, Steven Pinker, Brian Boyd, and the late Denis Dutton, and I now introduce and briefly summarise the positions of these writers so as to provide some contextual background for Davies' book.

In *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes From and Why* Dissanayake argues that our art behaviours are evolutionary adaptations.<sup>3</sup> She writes from the viewpoint of anthropology and ethology and her overarching claim is that art phenomena and art behaviours involve the "making special" of human objects and events. She claims that the behaviour of making special has been central to human evolution and that the psychological resources which humans use in such behaviours are part of the basic psychological toolkit with which all humans are equipped. Dissanayake thus endorses the claim that Davies considers in his book: that our art behaviours derive from evolutionary adaptations that began to occur from the earliest time of *Homo sapiens*.

Dutton, a philosopher of art, also endorses the claim that art is an evolutionary adaptation. In *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human*

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<sup>3</sup> Ellen Dissanayake, *Homo Aestheticus: Where Art Comes from and Why* (Toronto: Maxwell MacMillan Canada, 1992).

*Evolution* he claims that an “art instinct” has evolved in us and that our art behaviours can be traced to evolutionary adaptations made by *Homo sapiens* during the Pleistocene.<sup>4</sup> He claims that the instinct evolved because it is an adaptation advantageous to attracting mates.

Boyd, a literature professor, argues in *On the Origin of Stories* that art and art behaviors are an evolutionary adaptation geared towards stimulating creativity and open-ended thinking in humans.<sup>5</sup> Such qualities, similar to those to be found in play, continue to enable us to flourish by encouraging us to see anew, to find new patterns, make new discoveries and so on, not only in art but also, importantly, in areas relevant to our survival, such as science. Boyd’s particular view of literature as a creativity enhancing adaptation is his own, but it is typical of the position of many in the literary humanities in its strong endorsement of literature being an evolutionary adaptation. Davies considers this position at some length in his book.

In arguing that our art behaviors are evolutionary adaptations Boyd, Dutton, and Dissanayake all thereby reject the more moderate position of art’s being a spandrel, or by-product, of some other necessary adaptation. However, Pinker, an experimental psychologist and cognitive scientist whose *How the Mind Works* has been highly influential, claims that art and art behaviors are by-products of evolutionary adaptations and are not themselves adaptations.<sup>6</sup> He has these words to say to those in the arts who would claim, on what Pinker considers to be inadequate grounds, that the arts are themselves adaptations: “I sense that most people involved with the arts want them to be an adaptation because they feel it would somehow validate or ennoble the arts.”<sup>7</sup> This is another theme that Davies takes up in his book.

*The Artful Species* comprises three parts. Part I introduces the book’s key concepts of the aesthetic, art, and evolution, and considers how they might be related. Part II explores the notion of the aesthetic in more detail. In particular it assesses the aesthetic in the contexts of (a) humans’ appreciation of non-human animals, (b) the landscape and (c) human beauty. Part III considers whether art is an evolutionary adaptation, a by-product or spandrel, or a culturally acquired technology.

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<sup>4</sup> Denis Dutton, *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure, and Human Evolution* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> Brian Boyd, *On the Origin of Stories* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works* (London: Penguin Books, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> Steven Pinker, ‘Toward a Consilient Study of Literature’, *Philosophy and Literature*, vol. 31, no. 1 (April 2007), p. 169.

What might be considered an over-arching aim of the book is to redress the imbalances, confusion and inaccuracies to be found in the work of many humanists on the one hand and evolutionary psychologists and neuroscientists on the other, working in the field. Davies claims that some of the humanists in the field harbour a political agenda regarding the value of their particular discipline, say literature, and possess “only a loose grasp of what the science requires” (p. 184). Davies feels that this leads them to “cherry-pick sources that support the conclusion they have already drawn” (p. 184). Additionally, he claims that the scientists are “sometimes naïve in their understanding of aesthetic theory and of what art appreciation typically involves” (p. 184). Davies, then, sets out to assess what he sees as the interested theories and claims of humanists and the art-ignorant findings of the scientists with nothing but a philosophical axe to grind, to assess what he sees as the interested theories and claims of humanists and the art-ignorant findings of the scientists.

I have not space here to examine in detail the arguments Davies develops in the book. However, it may be said that I share his disappointment that he was not able “to pull a rabbit from the hat at the end” (p. 119). Davies ends up rejecting the claims that art is for certain either an evolutionary adaptation or a spandrel or a cultural invention. For reasons clearly set out in the text, he rejects as inadequate, inconclusive or plain wrong, the evidence and arguments that these three positions present, but he does end up saying that if he had to bet, he would identify art behaviours as by-products of the adaptations of “intelligence, imagination, humour, sociality, emotionality, inventiveness, curiosity” (p. 185).

Davies devotes a considerable part of his text to an appraisal of the literature concerning the aesthetics of landscape appreciation and I now consider his findings. I then go on to speculate what his, and some others’, conclusions in this regard might entail for the art so closely intertwined with our notions of historical and present day landscape aesthetics: the garden.

Davies draws our attention to the fact that “most of those who write on landscape aesthetics” equate a habitat’s desirability with its beauty and that, in so doing, they make the mistake of “regarding as aesthetic any perceptually based evaluation” (p. 188).<sup>8</sup> He cites work by evolutionary psychologist Stephen

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<sup>8</sup> Davies characterisation of those who write on landscape aesthetics may be true with regard to some professional *writers* on landscape but it does not fairly reflect what professional landscape assessors in the country from which he writes actually assess. The New Zealand Institute of Landscape Architects’ guidelines for best practice for landscape assessment reads in part: “Sensory qualities are landscape phenomena as directly perceived and experienced by humans, such as the view of a scenic landscape, or the distinctive smell and sound of the foreshore.” This description of so-called

Kaplan and geographer Jay Appleton as examples of this. However Davies, noting that “this is not the place to dig in our heels” (p. 89), admits that although not everything that is attractive is beautiful, what *is* attractive in and about a landscape may well provoke something akin to an aesthetic reaction in those experiencing it. He writes,

[a]esthetic reactions vivify the attractiveness or otherwise of their objects, thereby bringing their objects into salience. That is how the reaction takes on its functional role in the ecology of the individual, how it more strongly comes to guide their behaviour (p. 89).

And he goes on to say that such an equation is defensible and “is made more plausible by the aesthetic character of the equivalent response among present-day humans” (p. 89).

Having accepted that environmental attractiveness and fitness for purpose, and their opposites, may result in aesthetic or proto-aesthetic experiences, Davies is in a position to consider whether such aesthetic preferences, or a propensity for finding such landscapes attractive, are directly heritable traits. In making these considerations he concludes that, based on his interpretation of the studies he cites, we should maintain an open mind, if not a scepticism, about studies purporting to explain our present-day reactions to nature in terms of preferences inherited from our distant forbears (pp. 95-99). Furthermore, for reasons I give below, he concludes that the much touted ‘savannah hypothesis’ should also be rejected because it is at best only partially true.

The savannah hypothesis claims that the habitat in which our ancestors all evolved and for which all their adaptations were selected was the contemporary savannah of Africa. It claims that our (alleged) present-day preference for landscapes that are open, with visible horizons, clumps of trees, and so on, is explained by our inherited preferences for such savannah-like features. Dutton accepts the savannah hypothesis as an explanation of our shared landscape preferences but tempers his acceptance with the acknowledgement that the savannah is “the probable scene of a *significant portion* of human evolution.”<sup>9</sup> Thus Dutton, like Davies, believes that the savannah hypothesis

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“landscape aesthetics” not only does not use the word “aesthetics”, preferring, along with Davies, “sensory” qualities, but it also gives prominence to senses other than the visual, which emphasis is frequently lacking in the work of the writers on landscape aesthetics that Davies quotes and is, to a degree, lacking also in Davies’ own appreciation of “aesthetic” landscape values. See New Zealand Institute of Landscape Architects, *Best Practice Note: Landscape Assessment and Sustainable Management 10.1*, at [www.nzila.co.nz/media/53268/nzila\\_ldas\\_v3.pdf](http://www.nzila.co.nz/media/53268/nzila_ldas_v3.pdf). Accessed 12/12/2013..

<sup>9</sup> Dutton, *The Art Instinct*, p. 19. Emphasis mine.

does not tell the whole story and that some human evolution occurred outside the paradisiacal savannah. However Dutton, unlike Davies, does not investigate the implications of this for shared landscape preferences. In acknowledging that human evolution occurred and humans flourished in a *variety* of landscape and climate types, Davies concludes that what humans have inherited is not a fondness for savannah-like landscapes and climates but rather an ability to adapt to live successfully in, and aesthetically appreciate an extraordinarily wide range of habitats from deserts to snow covered areas, from shipboard life to farmland, and from dense urban centres to remote natural areas (p. 100).

Davies accepts that, whatever qualifications may be made, art is in some way associated with our biological evolution. He claims that, “as multi-faceted makers of fitness, the arts cannot be incidental to our biological agendas” (p. 186). This raises an interesting question that is not touched on by Davies, Dutton, or Dissanayake, and which can be put in this way: if the arts are indeed a product of our biological past and if that shared biological past comprises the experience of a range of shared landscape types, then what effects, if any, have inherited landscape preferences had on the sorts of non-utilitarian (i.e. art) gardens that we have evidence of, from Mesopotamian civilization to today? This question is an important one to address because, unlike all the other arts, the art of garden making involves conscious decisions about what constitutes a ‘landscape’ that is pleasing, about what should be excluded from a pleasing landscape, and about what constitutes a landscape which we may find attractive because part of us finds it familiar.

Is there any connection between ideal and idealised historical garden landscapes and the ideal landscapes of our forebears and if so, what sort of connections are they? For instance, it is a well-rehearsed claim that the eighteenth century English landscape gardens of Lancelot “Capability” Brown, William Kent, and Henry Hoare, among others, sought to emulate an idealised ‘nature’ inherited from Greco-Roman sources and those sources’ later Continental (non-English) reflections<sup>10</sup> A less frequently cited influence on the English landscape garden tradition was the transference of ideas of nature brought back from China by Jesuit missionaries.<sup>11</sup> It is also a commonly argued thesis that these gardens, and in fact most (art) gardens, can be in part understood as representing the cultural milieu in which they arise.<sup>12</sup> However, the work of

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example: Stephanie Ross, *What Gardens Mean* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> Bianca M. Rinaldi, *The “Chinese Garden in Good Taste”* (Munich: Peter Lang, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> Geoffrey Jellicoe and Susan Jellicoe, *The Landscape of Man: Shaping the Environment from Prehistory to the Present Day* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995).

Davies and others makes one want to ask what role our biologically inherited attitudes to landscape may also play in this process. Perhaps gardens may turn out to give support to the notion that our art behaviours indeed stem from a complex, continuously evolving mix of our genetic inheritance and our surrounding culture.

It is important to distinguish the sort of research I am suggesting here from the many well known and often referred to studies of landscape preferences, such as those of Jay Appleton<sup>13</sup> and Roger Ulrich.<sup>14</sup> These studies ask questions about landscape in the broad sense, but gardens are not necessarily part of that landscape. In fact it can be argued that for much of their history, until the very recent emergence of the fashion for naturalistic gardens based on botanical and ecological patterns of the immediate environment, gardens have often ignored or reacted against their immediate environs. What then can be said in terms of landscape preferences of a garden that some readers may be familiar with – the much-awarded Australian Garden<sup>15</sup> – a significant portion of which represents an environment that to non-aboriginal Australians is harsh and alien? For what reasons do twenty-first century *Homo sapiens* find this an aesthetically pleasing ‘pleasure garden’? A fascinating study awaits someone keen to investigate historical gardens from Mesopotamian times to the present in terms of how well they invoke or *fail* to invoke the range of landscape types for which Davies claims we have inherited preferences.

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<sup>13</sup> Jay Appleton, *The Experience of Landscape* (New York: Wiley, 1975).

<sup>14</sup> Roger S. Ulrich, ‘Biophilia, Biophobia, and Natural Landscapes’, in *The Biophilia Hypothesis*, eds Stephen R. Kellert and Edward O. Wilson (Washington: Shearwater/Island press, 1993).

<sup>15</sup> The Australian Garden is situated at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Cranbourne, Victoria. An image of part of the garden is available at:

<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/1e/RedSandGardenToVisitorCentre%2CRBG-CranbourneVIC.jpg>. Accessed 12/12/2013.