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Ernst Grosse and the Birth of the Anthropology of Aesthetics

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Abstract. – It is generally held that anthropologists began methodically to confront questions of aesthetics only in the latter part of the twentieth century. However, the philosopher and ethnologist Ernst Grosse (1862–1927) published already in 1891 an essay suggesting that anthropology holds the key to solving some of aesthetics' most fundamental problems. He argued that such issues as universalism and cultural relativism in aesthetic preference could only be addressed fruitfully once anthropology's empirical data and contextual and intercultural perspective were taken into account. In doing so, Grosse was the first scholar to propose a systematic anthropological approach to aesthetics. *[Aesthetics, anthropology of aesthetics, Ernst Grosse, history of anthropology, late-nineteenth-century German anthropology]*

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The conceptual coupling of "anthropology" and "aesthetics" seems a relatively recent development in the history of scholarship. It was only in the last three decades of the twentieth century, or so it would appear, that a small number of Western scholars, mostly anthropologists, started to bring the two concepts together in a systematic manner. As might be expected when pioneering scholars operationally link two multivalent notions, the results of these endeavors assumed various forms. Yet most of these efforts appeared to conceive of "anthropology" as referring to a particular approach, while "aesthetics" was construed as a subject matter to be analyzed from this anthropological perspective. The resulting examinations pertained especially, but not exclusively, to cultures traditionally studied within the Western discipline of social and cultural anthropology, also known as ethnology. In addition, all these endeavors shared an emphasis on the visual and some tended to conflate "aesthetics" (referring to qualitative experiences induced by a variety of visual stimuli) and "art" (signifying the creation and contextual use of images).[1]

Reflecting on these inchoate developments in anthropology from the latter part of the twentieth century, Jeremy Coote and Anthony Shelton remarked in 1992 on "what seems to be an emerging 'anthropology of aesthetics' within, or perhaps complementary to, the anthropology of art" (1992: 7). Indeed, they envisaged "a future anthropology of aesthetics" whose outlines still had to be established (1992: 8). This essay will not examine what has happened since, the analysis of which would need to include attention to the recent emergence in Chinese scholarship of an "aesthetic anthropology."[2] Rather, it suggests stretching the history of the explicit linkage of anthropology and aesthetics back to the end of the nineteenth century.

In 1891, the German philosopher, ethnologist, and art scholar Ernst Grosse (1862–1927) published an article titled "Ethnologie und Aesthetik." In this

1 See especially Maquet (1979, 1986); Kubach-Reutter (1985); Schomburg-Scherff (1986); Van Damme (1996). See, for example, also Jopling (1971); Otten (1971); Coote and Shelton ([eds.] 1992).

2 See, for example, the various articles on this topic published in the *Journal of Liuzhou Teachers College* (2008/3) (in Chinese).

programmatic essay he sought to promote the productive interchange between the two domains concerned. Grosse's essay has not been considered, however, by subsequent scholars who would endeavor to develop a field where anthropology and aesthetics meet (one assumes oversight, due in part to the considerable time-lapse between the essay's publication and the renewed interest in the topic, rather than willful neglect).[3] This article presents and analyzes Grosse's original essay. The first part introduces Grosse as a scholar, with an emphasis on his formative years leading up to the publication of the 1891 essay. It then discusses his conception of both "ethnology" and "aesthetics," and outlines three fundamental topics in aesthetics that Grosse felt could only be addressed fruitfully once the two fields were methodically interrelated. These three topics concern the possibility of aesthetic universals, the elucidation of cultural relativism in aesthetic preference, and the origins of human aesthetic or artistic activities. By suggesting that these issues be addressed from an empirical, contextual, and intercultural perspective, this article argues, Grosse was the first scholar to propose a systematic anthropological approach to aesthetics.

Ernst Grosse: Formative Scholarly Years

Ernst Grosse was born in Stendal, in what was Prussia, in 1862. After attending the local *Gymnasium*, he studied at the universities of Berlin, Munich, and Heidelberg. According to his biographer Pamela Elbs-May, who wrote an MA thesis on Grosse in 1977 and has published on his life and career, Grosse followed a broad spectrum of humanistic courses, and can in the end be considered a philosopher by training (1995: 173). In the "Editor's Preface" to the English translation of Grosse's book "Die Anfänge der Kunst" (The Beginnings of Art), translator and editor Frederick Starr, for his part, observes that Grosse "studied philosophy and the natural sciences" (1897: v), perhaps on the basis of information provided by the author.

In any event, it is clear from Grosse's writings that he was aware of Darwinian biology and took a vivid interest in such other new sciences as experimental psychology, admiring especially their "objective" rather than "speculative" approach to scholarship. Indeed, during Grosse's formative years as a scholar, the natural sciences were gaining in prestige, and their empiricism and "objectivism" generally appealed to students who, like Grosse, would be drawn to the burgeoning field of ethnology. For many of these scholars, often coming from a background in medicine, a scientific attitude implied a strong stance against the humanities (Zimmerman 2001). In some cases the dismissal included not only the interpretive or hermeneutic procedures of the *Geisteswissenschaften* but their traditional subjects of research. Trained in the humanities, and exhibiting a life-long interest in its topics, especially the visual arts, Grosse, however, was among those who regarded the methods and approaches of the natural sciences as ways of rejuvenating the *Geisteswissenschaften*. In this view, the new scientific outlook should reestablish the humanities on an empirical basis, thus freeing them from their speculative character, and assign them with the search for lawful patterns or regularities in human cultural affairs.

Grosse's interest in both humanistic topics and systematic scientific approaches is already clear from his PhD thesis titled "Die Literatur-Wissenschaft, ihr Ziel und ihr Weg" (The Science of Literature. Its Goal and Its Procedure), submitted at the University of Halle in 1887. In Starr's words, this study was an attempt "to show the necessity and possibility of treating the history of poetry after the methods of the natural sciences" (1897: v). Specifically, in his dissertation Grosse strove to lay the foundations of the science of literature as an empirical and nomothetic endeavor. He proposed that scholars systematically connect literary works both to the mental life, character, and even physiological condition of their authors, and to various variables of the physical and sociocultural environments in which they produced their work. Given the complexities of this type of research, Grosse suggested that analyses begin with the simplest forms of literary expression in the simplest settings available (e.g., a child's song's lyrics), before working one's way up to more complicated cases. This methodological procedure would also lead to a better insight into the conditions of the emergence and development of literature in general. A similar bottom-up approach would inform Grosse's later work on aesthetics and the visual arts.

In his Halle dissertation Grosse situated himself in what he saw as a tradition of "contextual" literary studies represented by Herder, Condorcet, Staël, Comte, and Taine. These scholars, each in their own way, regarded literary works not as isolated artistic creations but as products of their "times and climes." Grosse's examination is influenced especially, however, by the work of the British philoso-

3 The present author found a reference to Grosse's essay in Kokorz (2001), while searching the World Wide Web for "Ethnologie und Ästhetik" in 2009.

pher and sociocultural evolutionist Herbert Spencer (1820–1903). Particularly, he credited Spencer for having shown that the "great law of development" that governs everything in nature also applies to literature (1887: 35). Indeed, in his dissertation Grosse positioned himself as a philosophical materialist, a stance that is far less noticeable in his later publications.

Grosse would go on to critically analyze Spencer's concept of the "unknowable" in his *Habilitationsschrift* at the University of Freiburg in Breisgau. For this study he received his *venia legendi* in 1889, allowing him to teach as a *Privatdozent* in Freiburg (Elbs-May 1995: 174). In his analysis, published in 1890 as "Herbert Spencer's Lehre von dem Unerkennbaren" (Herbert Spencer's Doctrine of the Unknowable), Grosse showed Spencer's epistemology to be inconsistently presented.[4]

As part of his *Habilitation*, Grosse had to give a "trial lecture" (*Probevortrag*). Elbs-May relates that this lecture was titled "Die Bedeutung der Ethnologie für die Ästhetik" (The Significance of Ethnology for Aesthetics). Clearly, the 1891 essay that is examined here is based on this lecture from 1889. Following on from his *Probevortrag*, Grosse's first lecture course was dedicated to "primitive art" (Kunst der Naturvölker; Elbs-May 1995: 174). This would appear to make him by far the first to teach such a course in Europe or anywhere else.

Whereas Grosse in his "Literatur-Wissenschaft …" referred to ethnology only obliquely, despite this study's principled universal scope, he appears to have become much more knowledgeable about this developing field in the years to follow. Grosse seems to have become acquainted especially with contemporary Anglo-Saxon evolutionist anthropology (a connection with his work on Spencer seems plausible). For example, he favorably mentions the names of its representatives Morgan, Lubbock, and Tylor at the end of his 1891 essay (1891: 415).

Elbs-May reports that there is no evidence that Grosse took classes in ethnology. She suggests, however, that he may have studied under Adolf Bastian (1826–1905) in Berlin, since he contributed to a "Festschrift" (1896b) for this leading German ethnologist (1995: 173). Grosse did not refer to Bastian's views in print, but it is clear that his conception of ethnology had much in common with that of the Berlin scholar. Indeed, in H. Glenn Penny's assessment, "By the early 1880s, Bastian's ethnographic vision was widely embraced throughout Germany" (2003: 101). Building on Alexander von Humboldt's (1769–1859) cosmopolitan vision and natural science approach, Bastian promoted ethnology as a nonspeculative, comparative science that studies all of the world's cultures and uses empirical inductive methods to arrive at insights into human nature. A similar cosmopolitan and scientific attitude characterizes Grosse's ethnological work. However, Grosse appears to have diverged from Bastian, and indeed most of his German contemporaries, in associating with Anglo-Saxon evolutionist perspectives, albeit increasingly critically, whereas Bastian is commonly held to have favored rather a historical particularistic approach to the issue of cultural diversity.[5]

Given the near absence of references to any interest Grosse might have had in ethnology as a student, Elbs-May proposes that the philosopher Alois Riehl (1844–1924) might have influenced him in deciding to focus on ethnological themes. A professor of philosophy in Freiburg between 1882 and 1896, the positivist Riehl often taught classes on ethnology, also at the time of Grosse's *Habilitation* (1995: 174).

Grosse's interest in ethnology is evident as well from his book "Die Formen der Familie und die Formen der Wirthschaft" (1896a; The Forms of the Family and the Forms of the Economy). In the introduction to this study he argued that the accumulation of knowledge does not yet allow writing a nonconjectural "developmental history of the family." Indeed, he criticized the evolutionist Lewis H. Morgan (1818–1881) for the simplified unilinear view and lack of empirical corroboration in his attempt to write such a history in his "Ancient Society" of 1877 (1896a: 3 ff.). Grosse proposed to concentrate instead on establishing recurring relationships between ways of familial organization and types of economic organization. Drawing on a variety of societies worldwide, he concluded not only that such relationships exist, but that in each case the observed form of the family is best suited to the local economic conditions and needs (1896a: 245). Continuing the "contextual structuralist" approach already evident in his 1887 dissertation, this monograph thus also demonstrates Grosse's "functionalist" leanings in the study of culture, another Spencerian trait.[6]

As for Grosse's interest in art and aesthetics as topics of ethnological investigation, it may be inter-

4 James Iverach's (1891) contemporary review of this book praises Grosse for his clarity of exposition, fairness, and radical criticism.

5 For a concise exposition of Bastian's views, see Penny (2002: 17–29). See, for example, also Chevron (2004) and Fischer, Bolz, and Kamel (2007).

6 On Spencer's functionalist approach to the study of culture, see Carneiro (1981: 183–185).

esting to observe that the University of Freiburg had had an ethnological collection since 1860. Grosse, who is known to have had a vivid interest in Japanese art ever since he saw Japanese objects in a window shop at 15, became honorary curator of this collection in 1889 (Elbs-May 1995: 175).

In 1894, Grosse was awarded an extraordinary professorship in philosophy and ethnology at the University of Freiburg. Although an attempt was made at some point to recruit him as an ethnologist at the University of Berlin (von Bode 1927: 54), and despite the fact that he was offered a full professorship in Freiburg only in 1926, Grosse would remain there until his death in 1927. His teaching was interrupted, however, first by travels in Europe and then by an extended stay in Japan and China between 1907 and 1913 (Elbs-May 1995: 176 f.). In 1900, he published "Kunstwissenschaftliche Studien" (Studies in the Science of Art), based on his Freiburg lectures on art theory. After Grosse's sojourn in the "Far East," the focus of his research would be on East Asian art (see, for example, Grosse 1922 on brush-painting).

Grosse was and is probably best known as a scholar for his book "Die Anfänge der Kunst," published in 1894 and translated into several languages.[7] Incidentally, in this work he never referred to the 1891 essay, which may be one of the reasons why this essay has been overlooked. The art historian and intellectual historiographer Ulrich Pfisterer has recently rekindled interest in Grosse's book, which he typifies as "an exceptional intellectual achievement" (2008: 79). In an analysis of new developments in the study of art in the German-speaking world around 1900, Pfisterer observes that the title of Grosse's work is somewhat misleading. Indeed, rather than being one of many contemporary studies that examine the origins of "ornament" in evolutionistic terms, Grosse's book "in reality … presents itself as an attempt to found anew the discipline of *Kunstwissenschaft* on a strictly objective and scientific basis …." (79). This effort for Grosse included applying both a global perspective across time and space and a multidisciplinary approach.

The brief characterization of Grosse's 1894 book already gives some idea as well of the essay on aesthetics he published three years earlier. However, to what is perhaps the dispassion of "objective science," one should add the passion of a young scholar who enthusiastically perceived and promoted new opportunities for the study of aesthetics. In his book on art, Grosse returned to some of the essay's topics. Still, the focus of the two publications is different, the one taking as its main concept *Kunstwissenschaft*, the other *Ästhetik*, albeit the boundaries between the two are not always sharply drawn. Grosse's book undoubtedly deserves closer scrutiny within the context of the history of ideas. The first two introductory chapters particularly are intellectual-historically rewarding, in part since they seem to parallel to a significant extent today's global and multidisciplinary developments in the study of art.[8] Also, for example, one might wish to examine the extent to which Grosse's book served as a template for Franz Boas's classic study "Primitive Art," published in 1927. The focus here, however, will be almost exclusively on the 1891 essay, which not only addresses issues closer to aesthetics, but puts more theoretical emphasis on the idea of ethnology.

Ethnology as the Comparative Study of Peoples across Space and Time

Indeed, what is to be expected from a late-nineteenth-century essay that purports to relate "ethnology" and "aesthetics," specifically, as it turns out, to discuss aesthetics in the light of ethnology? From a present-day Anglophone perspective, especially, one may notice that Grosse did not use the term *Anthropologie*. For him and most of his contemporaries this term denoted physical anthropology and its associated ideas of different human races, a topic he had no real interest in. Grosse may have used at times the then common word *Race* (though preferring *Völker*, peoples), he did not attach any importance to the notion of race as an explanatory scientific tool (e.g., 1894: 33). Rather, he stressed the biological unity of humankind and the shared mental capacities of its members (e.g., 1894: 101), in keeping with the "psychic unity of mankind" explored by Bastian and adhered to by the sociocultural evolutionists as well.

Grosse did tend to divide the world's cultures into various types, roughly in line with contemporary evolutionist classificatory schemes that posited typologies ranging from "savage" to "civilized," but his division was based on interrelated ecological, economic, and sociocultural factors, not racial characteristics. This dimension of Grosse's thought is mentioned briefly to counter an easy stereotype

7 In addition to the English translation already mentioned (reprinted 1898, 1899, 1900, 1914, and 1928), the book has also been published in Russian (1899), French (1902 and reprint), Spanish (1906 and reprint), and Japanese (1921 and reprints).

8 See, for example, Eibl-Eibesfeldt und Sütterlin (2007); Zijlmans and Van Damme (2008); Dutton (2009); Scharfstein (2009).

of late-nineteenth-century German ethnological scholarship as preoccupied with race. Indeed, attempts are now being made to correct this stereotype, together with what appears the equally misleading idea that German ethnology at this time was informed mainly by colonial considerations (it is suggested that it was inspired rather by a Bastianian cosmopolitan and scientific outlook) (Bunzl and Penny 2003).

The concept of ethnology (*Völkerkunde*, *Ethnologia*) had made its appearance in late-eighteenth-century writings, referring to a descriptive and historical "science of peoples and nations," to cite Adam František Kollár's definition of 1783 (Vermeulen 2009: 257). It is generally held that the scholarly practice it designated came to blossom as an independent discipline in the German-speaking world in the mid-nineteenth century, with the foundation of ethnological societies and the establishment of ethnographic museums. University chairs in ethnology were not established, however, until the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century (Vermeulen 1995: 39 ff.). Grosse's 1891 essay testifies to the intellectual excitement that the budding science of ethnology created among turn-of-the-century scholars entertaining a cosmopolitan outlook.

In its most abstract sense, ethnology for Grosse designated the comparative study of the world's various "peoples" or "nations," each of them examined ideally in the totality of their environmental and sociocultural dimensions. This view on ethnology's intercultural comparative and broadly contextual nature becomes clear from Grosse's 1891 introductory discussion of scholars whom he felt in retrospect to have applied the "ethnological method" to problems in art theory (1891: 393 ff.). Grosse's instructive intellectual-historical exercise, focusing on the study of art rather than aesthetics, has been addressed elsewhere (Van Damme 2010). Suffice it here to say that he discussed the views of Jean-Baptiste (l'Abbé) Dubos (1670–1742), Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), and Hippolyte Taine (1828–1893). Grosse pointed out that these scholars all applied an intercultural comparative perspective, however embryonic, highlighting differences in the art of various peoples. They then sought to explain these differences, even more embryonically, by reference to such environmental or contextual factors as "climate" (Dubos, Herder, Taine) and an underspecified amalgamate of "local customs and spirit" (Herder, Taine).

Already from these initial discussions it surfaces that Grosse conceived of intercultural comparison in a truly global sense across space and time. His view included European peoples (indeed, Taine even limited his comparisons to Europe) and was concerned with cultures of both the present and the past (for example, the sixteenth-century "Mexicans" touched upon by Dubos). Ethnology's comparative scope for Grosse thus was definitely not restricted to what he called throughout the world's "lesser developed peoples" or "peoples at lower stages of culture." Still, these peoples he considered the ultimate "treasures of ethnology," and noted that it is precisely their art and culture that the early comparativists either disregarded (Dubos, Taine) or undervalued (Herder). What was worse, asserted Grosse, this neglect still held true in his own day. Whereas all the other branches of the *Geisteswissenschaften* had by then successfully incorporated ethnology's most interesting material, he claimed, "aesthetics" stubbornly refused to take this material into account (1891: 392).

Aesthetics as the Study of Art's Affective Qualities

In his 1891 essay, Grosse used the term "Aesthetik" (the orthography employed there) in two related senses. At one point, he provides a definition of the concept. "Aesthetics," writes Grosse, "is concerned with the study of aesthetic feelings and aesthetic activities as these occur in the inner and outer worlds of experience" (1891: 398).[9] Aesthetic feelings, he explains in Kantian and indeed Spencerian fashion,[10] are feelings of pleasure and displeasure that distinguish themselves from other such feelings in that they are unmediated. By this he means that feelings called aesthetic are induced not by any associations or considerations of functionality a stimulus might evoke but by its formal qualities per se. Aesthetic activities, for their part, are those activities that strive primarily or secondarily to evoke aesthetic feelings. These activities manifest themselves first and foremost in works of art. "The aim of aesthetics, then, is to examine the nature, conditions, and development of aesthetic feelings and activities" (398).[11]

In his essay Grosse uses "Aesthetik" also in a rather different sense as referring to the theoretical

9 "Die Aesthetik beschäfigt sich mit dem Studium ästhetischer Gefühle und der ästhetischen Thätigkeiten, wie sie in der inneren und äusseren Erscheinungswelt gegeben sind." All translations from the German are the author's.

10 Cf. Grosse (1887: 53 ff.), see also Munro (1960: 311).

11 "Die Aufgabe der Aesthetik besteht nun darin, das Wesen, die Bedingungen und die Entwicklung der ästhetischen Gefühle und Thätigkeiten zu erforschen."

dimensions of the study of the arts, albeit the arts are conceived first and foremost in their capacity of instantiating and inducing aesthetic feelings. An example of this can be found at the end of his essay, in a context where Grosse discusses the relationships between "art and culture," conceived as the prime subject matter of *Kunstwissenschaft*. He suggests that it is "Aesthetik" that should guide research in this area, by identifying and sharply formulating problems, bringing them to the attention of the scholarly community, and suggesting ways of solving them (1891: 416). In his later writings he would use the term *Kunstphilosophie*, or the "philosophy of art," to designate the scholarly field that provides theoretical guidance in the study of art (1894: 1, 8; 1900: 1).

The term aesthetics has indeed been assigned multiple meanings ever since Alexander Baumgarten (1714–1762) introduced the concept *aesthetica* in the middle of the eighteenth century. For Baumgarten aesthetics pertained, in a still different sense, to the study of knowledge derived from the senses (*cognitio sensitiva*). Kant adopted this epistemological reading, but in his later work aesthetics came to refer to the study of the beautiful and the sublime, not necessarily or even primarily in the context of the arts. Hegel then equated aesthetics with the "philosophy of art," and this interpretation especially entailed that theoretical issues concerning the arts became frequently subsumed under the heading of "aesthetics." This tendency is also shown in Grosse's secondary usage of the term in his 1891 essay.

Although Grosse's explicit definition of aesthetics highlights "aesthetic feelings" and "aesthetic activities," his essay addresses both only indirectly. Emphasis is placed instead on "aesthetic products," objects assumed to embody and evoke aesthetic feelings. The aesthetic preferences of the people who produce and use these objects are then to be inferred from the artifacts' visual properties. Given Grosse's intercultural scope in time and space, this methodological stance implies that he regarded both aesthetic sensibility and the capacity to express this sensibility in a given medium as human universals. Indeed, Grosse assumed the existence of panhuman aesthetic needs and a universal artistic impulse, resulting in drawings, paintings, sculptures, and decorations, as well as in songs, dances, and poetry (1887: 27 f.; 1891: 395; 1894: 24, 78). Moreover, he consistently qualified these human expressions as *Kunst*, whatever their origin in time and space is. Although the application of the label "art" in this context is today derided by some as a form of Western conceptual imperialism, it would seem more appropriate to consider Grosse's use of this term as having an emancipatory value, signifying acknowledgment of the producers' full humanity and respect for their expressive capacities. (Indeed, the same critical attitude that disapproves of the use of the term "art" in relation to extra-European cultures tends to chastise nineteenth-century Western writers on these cultures for allegedly *not* recognizing the artistic or aesthetic qualities of their expressive products.)

By stressing that one needs to examine objects deemed artistic in order to establish local aesthetic preferences, Grosse's approach clearly differs from the epistemology and methodology that would inform the empirical studies that were carried out in the second half of the twentieth century, providing the basic material for a nascent "anthropology of aesthetics" towards the end of that century. For these studies focused not on artistic or aesthetic objects per se, but on the verbalized evaluative responses of culture members to these objects.[12]

Grosse's emphasis on artifacts is, however, fully in keeping with the ethnology of his time. Based primarily in the new ethnographic museums, ethnology favored the examination of artifacts as an "objective" route to the study of humanity. The most prominent representative of this approach was Bastian, founder of the Berlin Museum of Ethnology in 1868–1873, who saw this museum's collections as a laboratory for examining the world's cultures by means of the objects they produced.[13] These objects Bastian conceived of as the "incarnations of folk ideas," and even the "sole imprints" of a people's "folk spirit" (as cited by Ivanov 2007: 238 f.), thus granting objects a privileged status in the study of culture. Grosse shared the epistemic value that Bastian attached to artifacts as starting points of analysis, although both scholars would have agreed that objects needed to be examined in light of what was known of the cultures that produced them.

Like ethnology, Grosse regarded *Aesthetik* first and foremost as a *Wissenschaft*, a science (1891: 392). He, therefore, strongly disapproved of the speculative turn aesthetics had taken in the Romantic period, embracing instead more recent developments characterized by a scientific spirit. Indeed, it is against the type of philosophizing in aesthetics that came into vogue from the end of the eighteenth century onwards that Grosse pitted his own empirical approach. He vehemently opposed the "speculative fuddle" of the Romantic period in general and

12 See Van Damme (1996), especially chapters five and six on the epistemology and methodology of anthropological research into aesthetic preference.

13 See Penny (2002), especially chapter one, and Fischer, Bolz, and Kamel (2007).

criticized the work of its aestheticians in particular. Completely ignoring the promising impetus given by Dubos's and Herder's empirical and intercultural explorations, these Romantic aestheticians indulged themselves in "mystical phantasies on the nature of art," looking no further than the classical examples of the European arts. Fiercely denouncing these speculative tendencies, he charged: "Never have the words of aestheticians sounded so full as in this time, and never have they been so hollow. It was in all respects the most infertile period in the science of aesthetics, if in the face of these muddled and empty conceptual fantasies one can indeed speak of a science" (1891: 396).[14]

Speculation's hold on aesthetics continued well into the nineteenth century, and Grosse suggested it could still be felt in his own day (1891: 416). Meanwhile, however, new approaches were being developed that did take seriously the idea of aesthetics as a science. Grosse felt a reorientation of the field was taking place as part of a revival of the natural sciences, whose practitioners were also turning to the problems of aesthetics. Among others, he pointed to the contributions that had been made by Gustav Fechner (1801–1887), whose "Vorschule der Ästhetik" (Elementary Aesthetics), published in 1876, reported on experimental studies in aesthetic evaluation. In Fechner's now famous phrase, what needed to be developed was an aesthetics *von unten* (from below) in opposition to an aesthetics *von oben* (from above). Welcoming this new empirical aesthetics, Grosse acknowledged that the questions it poses were modest compared to those that speculative aesthetics had tackled. But then the problems "modern aesthetics" addressed were at least solvable (1891: 398). This illustrates a methodological viewpoint that fundamentally informs Grosse's work. Science must proceed from the simple to the complex; it cannot turn to more complicated topics if the relatively easy problems have not been solved first.

However, Grosse considered even empirical aesthetics wanting in that it failed to take into account the data provided by ethnology. Grosse's criticism may be illustrated by his discussion of Fechner's "Vorschule" (1891: 400 f.). Fechner set out to examine, among other things, the degree of visual pleasure afforded by various rectangular forms. For that purpose, he deployed one of three methods he proposed for experimental aesthetics, namely, the method of use. (The two other methods, the method of choice and the method of production, will be briefly considered below). The method of use is one in which works of art and other objects are examined "on the assumption that the characteristics that are most commonly found in them will be those that win the most widespread approval in the society that has originated them" (Berlyne 1971: 11). Applying this method of use, Fechner measured the width-to-length ratio of various rectangular objects of everyday use, such as picture frames, books, and tables. He concluded that the ratio of such rectangular objects' sides usually approximates that of the famous golden section, long considered to have a special aesthetic value.

Grosse praised Fechner for having understood that a science of aesthetics needed to begin at the simplest level, but wondered how Fechner's conclusion could have the universal validity it was suggested to possess. For Fechner's examination was restricted to "the Western European cultural sphere" (*Culturkreis*), its objects supposedly designed to cater to its peoples' taste. It would have sufficed for Fechner, argued Grosse, to measure the ratio of the sides of Japanese *kakemono* – vertical scroll paintings – to have learned that the golden section ratio does not apply in all culture areas. Grosse observed that Fechner had never suggested that experimental research should take into account cultures outside Europe, and neither he nor anyone else had ever devised, let alone performed, a study that included attention to the "aesthetic products" of all the world's peoples. Yet such comparative studies were obviously needed, Grosse claimed, in order to avoid the trap of basing a general theory of "aesthetic feeling" on only one or a few cases worldwide. The message should be clear: even "modern aesthetics" was still in need of the contributions that ethnology could provide.

Applying Ethnology to Aesthetics: Three Topics of Research

This brings us to the questions in aesthetics that Grosse felt could only be addressed properly once ethnology's data were taken into account in a systematic intercultural comparative approach. Three basic topics may be discerned in the second half of his essay.

The first of these concerns is what would be called today the question of "aesthetic universals." At one point Grosse stated that one could only speculate about the fruits that ethnological studies of artistic or aesthetic objects would yield one day. How-

14 "Niemals haben die Wörter der Aesthetiker so voll geklungen als in dieser Zeit und niemals sind sie so hohl gewesen. Er war in jeder Beziehung die unfruchtbarste Epoche, welche die ästhetische Wissenschaft erlebt hat, wenn man vor jenen verworrenen und leeren Begriffsdichtungen überhaupt noch von einer Wissenschaft reden kann."

ever, he felt that this much was clear: it would be the results of ethnological research, and these results only, that would enable one finally to answer "that old question, so often repeated in vain," whether or not there are universals in aesthetics. Or as Grosse described them, "allgemeingültige, objective Bedingungen für das aesthetische Gefühl," with these "generally valid, objective conditions for the aesthetic feeling" referring to stimulus properties having a panhuman appeal (1891: 404). Having earlier warned against the danger of "universalizing" the results of experimental research in aesthetics that pertain solely to Europe, or that are based on only a few cases worldwide, he added that the existence of aesthetic universals should not, however, be precluded (1891: 401).

Following Fechner's method of use, the intercultural comparative research needed to establish these universals in aesthetics, would take as its "empirical data" artifacts assumed to embody local aesthetic preferences. Further analysis of these objects' visual features should then lead to the establishment of the aesthetic principles that informed their creation. Epistemological considerations aside, it will be clear that this procedure poses some serious methodological problems. For example, how is one to decide which objects from a given culture were meant to be aesthetically pleasing? And, if this could be established satisfactorily, which of these objects' properties should be held responsible for locally inducing a pleasurable effect? Grosse seemed in fact aware of these methodological problems (1891: 403 f.).

If only for this reason, it is noteworthy that he never considered the opportunities that Fechner's two other methods provided for an "ethnological aesthetics," the method of choice and the method of production. These two methods focus on people's conveyed aesthetic preferences and the principles that guide them in creating objects intended to please the senses, respectively. Grosse's methodological proposal to concentrate instead on deducing aesthetic preferences from a culture's art forms reminds one of the role ethnographic collections were held to play in late-nineteenth-century German ethnology. For the research procedure suggested by Grosse in the search for universals in aesthetics, however problematic or even questionable, could in principle be carried out by a patient researcher working in museums holding sufficiently diverse collections of objects from around the globe.[15] Also, this approach would allow Grosse to study aesthetic preferences in a truly global sense across time and space, including cases where recourse to people's verbalized opinions is practically unrealistic or indeed impossible. Such opinions, moreover, he may well have considered less scientific than the "objective" qualities of the works he proposed to examine.[16]

Rather than the establishment of aesthetic universals, however, Grosse seemed to be more excited by the prospect of ethnology demonstrating that European assumptions about the worldwide validity of certain aesthetic principles were incorrect. Having pointed out that the sides of Japanese *kakemono* do not as a rule comply with the principle of the golden section, he provoked his readers with a more striking example. European decorative art, Grosse wrote, is characterized by symmetry, and from this observation it has been concluded that symmetry will always be preferred to asymmetry. However, among the Japanese, he asserted, it is precisely asymmetry that has been made into the guiding principle of the local decorative style. Although in "Die Anfänge der Kunst" he would soften this claim in a footnote (1894: 147), in his 1891 essay he added: "This fact alone perhaps proves the ethnological method's value for aesthetics better than any theoretical exposition" (1891: 402).[17]

So a second question to be addressed by an ethnologically informed aesthetics concerns "aesthetic relativism" or "cultural relativism in aesthetics." Grosse did not use such terms, but later in his essay he employed the expression "nationale Geschmacksdifferenzen," or "national differences in taste" (1891: 405). At the point where he introduced the idea of "national taste," however, Grosse's interests had shifted somewhat. From a discussion of the assumed cultural variation in adherence to aesthetic principles (such as symmetry or asymmetry), he had gone on to a consideration of what he saw as cultural differences in the preference for, and concomitant excellence in, a given art form or artistic genre. What Grosse had in mind are generalizations that he regarded as "long established and universally accepted." Thus, the Germans are said to be particularly fond of music, whereas the French love rather form and color, hence painting and sculpture. More generally, Grosse gave the impression that from the perceived flourishing, or mere prevalence, of a

15 See also Grosse (1894: 148 ff.), where he makes a beginning himself, including in his analysis published specimens.

16 See also Zimmerman (2001: 48 f.), for a discussion on what he considers nineteenth-century German ethnology's distrust of oral or written sources, seen as interpretive rather than objective facts.

17 "Diese eine Thatsache beweist den Werth der ethnologischen Methode für die Aesthetik vielleicht schlagender als alle theoretischen Erörterungen."

given art form or genre in a particular society, a consensual cultural preference for this art form or genre might be inferred.

In discussing cultural differences in aesthetic preference, Grosse also added a historical dimension (1891: 404 ff.). This consideration of "diachronic aesthetic relativism" not only strengthened his point but underlined his comprehensive comparative outlook across both space and time. Grosse's examples are taken from Europe's past. They do not concern culturally relative preferences for particular art forms or genres, but cultural changes in taste within a given field of artistic endeavor. Grosse noted that the history of European music, art, architecture, and literature amply demonstrates that aesthetic preferences in each of these fields could change over time. Thus, referring to an example cited by Fechner, he observed shifts in the European appreciation of music. Whereas the harmonic relationships deployed by the eleventh-century composer Guido of Arezzo, say, must have sounded beautiful and natural to listeners of that period, they sound false or highly unpleasant to today's ears. Similarly, in the visual arts preferences for forms and colors have changed considerably, for example, from Renaissance to Rococo to the Empire style – striking differences observable in "but a few hundred years." As Grosse concluded, even though his historical discussion had not distinguished regional traditions within Europe, "national taste finds itself in a process of constant transformation" (1891: 406).

Having established all these various differences in aesthetic preference between peoples and among periods, Grosse asked, as a logical next step, how we might account for them. The question of what determines a nation's taste in art, he claimed, had been raised dozens of times, but the explanations offered were less than satisfactory. They were too general and superficial, merely suggesting the influence of environmental and cultural factors in the vaguest of terms (1891: 406 f., 408 f.). However disappointing he considered this to be, Grosse was not surprised. Not only was the question a truly difficult one, but attempts to answer it had focused on European cultures, meaning cultural settings that are usually so complex that they baffle even the cleverest of analysts. He, therefore, suggested that scholars turn their attention first to the "relatively simple conditions" found among *Naturvölker*. Not that it would be easy to explain "the taste of even the rudest of people," but the prospects seemed a little better when conditions were more transparent, he assumed, than among *Culturvölker*. It was only when these comparatively simple cases had been solved that aesthetics could hope to move on to account for "national taste" in more intricate settings (1891: 407 f.).

By drawing attention to local conditions (*Verhältnisse*), Grosse, in keeping with his "integrationist" views more generally, seemed to suggest some form of contextual approach to the problem of cultural relativism in aesthetics. To give an idea of the type of approach he appeared to have in mind specifically, one may call attention to an examination Grosse provided later in the context not of taste but of what to him was the related idea of culturally varying artistic talent, as expressed in a given medium. In preliminary analyzing the causes of what he considered the exceptional quality of Australian Aboriginal drawing, Grosse proposed what might be called, in today's terms, a "human behavioral ecology" approach. It is an approach that privileges the physical environment and climate, their effects on the local subsistence economy, and the repercussions this in turn has on the development of skills in individuals from the society concerned. These skills then include those that are applied in the creation of art.

Briefly, Grosse suggested that in a climatic environment unsuited to the development of agriculture, Australian Aboriginals are forced to live by hunting and gathering. In order successfully to spot and catch prey, male hunters have to develop sharp vision and a good visual memory (for tracing animals) as well as finely attuned motor capacities (for throwing boomerangs and spears). These well-developed visual and motor skills are then also deployed in the creation of high quality drawings (1891: 409 ff.).

However, and somewhat surprisingly given Grosse's own "progressive" methodological prescriptions, he concluded by observing that he thought it unlikely that, building on such an approach, one would be able to lay bare one day, at least with the same determination, the causes for, say, "the development of painterly genius among the Dutch" (1891: 412).

The third and final question that Grosse felt the discipline of aesthetics should address with the help of ethnology concerns the "developmental history of art." He claimed in fact that no other brief of aesthetics was so much in need of a consideration of ethnological data than the problem of what he also described as that of the "beginnings of artistic activity" (1891: 413). If one equates "artistic activity" with "aesthetic activity," as Grosse tended to do, then the attention to the issues of origin and evolution follows from his stipulation, mentioned earlier, that aesthetics' task is to "examine the nature, conditions, and development of aesthetic feelings and activities." Grosse said little to nothing about the

origins and developments of human artistic or aesthetic behavior per se, but concentrated instead on his proposal that the topic be examined with reference to the data that ethnology provides.

In promoting his ethnological approach to the problem of the origins of art, Grosse argued quite extensively that the application of the "historical method" to this topic would bring us back only as far as the time of the first writings (1891: 413 f.). This was obviously not the period of the first artistic objects, as archaeological finds in Grosse's own time, specifically from Paleolithic Europe, were increasingly making clear.[18] Yet Grosse did not find it useful even to invoke prehistory and archaeology in examining the question of origins, on the grounds that archaeology was not able to provide a proper cultural setting for the artistic objects it uncovered (1891: 414, 416; cf. 1894: 21).

Ethnology, in contrast, might supply us with rich contextual detail. This would allow scholars to examine the systematic relationships between "art and culture" that Grosse suggested are crucial to the understanding of any art form (1891: 416). The assumed relevance of contemporary ethnological studies for the examination of the origins of art becomes clear when we consider that Grosse here applied a classic evolutionist argument. In agreement with the intellectual climate of British rather than German ethnology of the time, he asserted that present-day *Naturvölker* live out the various stages of the human past in the full light of the present. Among these "living fossils" representing humanity's phased cultural development, contemporary hunter-gatherers, such as the Australian Aboriginals, occupied a privileged position. Allegedly living in the simplest of economic and social conditions, they were assumed to provide a window unto the dawn of human culture, including the first art forms (1891: 416 ff.). This is a theme that Grosse would elaborate in "Die Anfänge der Kunst" of 1894.

Summary and Concluding Remarks

Central to Grosse's 1891 essay are the contributions that ethnology can and should provide to solving problems in aesthetics. Aesthetics is conceived primarily as a theoretical field of study where questions are formulated and methodologies to answer them proposed. In Grosse's view, the questions of aesthetics concern above all "aesthetic feeling," particularly as expressed in and experienced through what are known as works of art. Related topics concerning the arts may then also be the subject of aesthetics, such as the differential artistic achievement assumed to exist among cultures and time periods. Grosse identified a European tradition of theoretical reflection on "art and beauty," but questioned the form "aesthetics" had taken from the end of the eighteenth century onward. Specifically, he criticized the limited cultural range of application of its questions (aesthetics is "eurocentric") and the non-empirical methodologies suggested to answer them (aesthetics operates as a branch of speculative philosophy). Contemporary forms of experimental aesthetics might have overcome this last criticism, but these new developments, too, still lacked an extra-European dimension.

Grosse believed that the situation overall could be remedied if aesthetics would turn to ethnology. By drawing on ethnology's data and approach, the study of art's affective properties would be able to transcend its outdated emphasis on Europe, abandon its unproductive speculative character, and get closer to the spirit of the natural sciences. As befits a proper science, aesthetics, like ethnology, should formulate its fundamental questions bearing in mind a global scope across time and space. In answering these questions, it needed to rely on empirical data, which included those that ethnology provided. When it came to accounting for observable differences in a phenomenon relevant to its investigations, a scientific aesthetics, in line with ethnology's contextual emphasis, needed to consider the explanatory value provided by the systematic relationships that obtain between the phenomenon in question and the setting in which it occurs.

Also characteristic of science in Grosse's view is the imperative first to investigate relatively easy problems before turning to more complicated ones. In the case of aesthetics this could be achieved in European and extra-European contexts alike, for example, by investigating the aesthetic value of simple objects of everyday use rather than complex works of art. However, when asking contextual questions about the relationship between artistic or aesthetic objects and their cultural environments, Grosse thought it best to turn first to the supposedly simpler conditions found in some of the societies that ethnology studies.

There is indeed an overall sense in Grosse's exposition that ethnology should serve as an auxiliary science to the discipline of aesthetics. Given the prominence of aesthetics in Grosse's essay, it might have been called "Aesthetics and Ethnology" rather

18 See Pfisterer (2007) for an extensive review of the broad range of contemporary scholarly and popular-scientific literature discussing artistic objects from Paleolithic Europe uncovered by late-nineteenth-century archaeology.

than "Ethnology and Aesthetics." It could be tentatively argued, however, that Grosse ultimately suggested that, in the process of becoming a more scientific endeavor, aesthetics should model itself on the discipline of ethnology and become equally empirically based, contextually oriented, and interculturally comparative. In that light, the essay's title "Ethnology and Aesthetics," rather than the reverse, acquires a new meaning and could be interpreted as emphasizing ethnology's guiding role in transforming aesthetics as a discipline.

Be this as it may, aestheticians after Grosse would not turn to the data of ethnology, let alone that they would model their discipline on ethnology in terms of scope, method, and approach. As an academic discipline, aesthetics in the twentieth century would remain first and foremost a philosophical endeavor. Its practitioners, reflecting on the arts and the experiences they induce, shunned as a rule both consideration of cultures outside the West and any reference to the data provided by more empirically oriented disciplines.[19] Following Fechner, an empirical or experimental aesthetics did eventually develop, within psychology, but it would hardly display the intercultural orientation promoted by Grosse.

As for ethnology, the ethnological or anthropological study of art and aesthetics that would slowly develop in the twentieth century hardly took up the big questions and comparative approach suggested by Grosse. Its practitioners would focus rather on particularistic studies based on the "fieldwork" they carried out in African and Oceanic societies especially.[20]

Within this context of in-depth research on site, the question of the origins of art fell out of favor quite naturally as a topic of anthropological research, together with the evolutionist paradigm within which it was framed. Yet Grosse's far more original proposal systematically to investigate aesthetic universalism and relativism through anthropology's data and lens, although far less tainted by evolutionism, was not taken up by anthropologists either. To begin with, the object-centered methodology Grosse proposed to investigate these matters was no longer endorsed by scholars of the succeeding fieldwork generations, who favored verbalized data on aesthetic preference instead. As for the research into aesthetic universals, "modern" anthropology would thus have to await the accumulation of a sufficient amount of verbalized cross-cultural data before any conclusions regarding the existence of such universals could be drawn. In the spirit of cultural relativism that would come to dominate twentieth-century anthropology, however, interest in establishing universals was decidedly low. Indeed, anthropologists in this century would be of the same mind as Grosse in displaying far more interest in culturally varying views on beauty. But anthropologists started slowly to display an interest in studying cultures' aesthetic preferences only several decades after Grosse wrote about examining methodically not only their similarities but differences worldwide, provisionally suggesting ways contextually to account for the cultural diversity in taste. It would in fact take a century before both universalism and cultural relativism in aesthetics would be addressed again as topics of systematic investigation within anthropology.[21] By that time, Grosse's programmatic proposals and explanatory suggestions had been all but forgotten.

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19 Exceptions include Dewey (1934), which has an intercultural scope, and Scharfstein (1988), which is not only globally oriented but pays attention to data provided by the "natural sciences." See also Scharfstein (2009).

20 See, for example, Morphy and Perkins (2006), surveying twentieth-century developments in the anthropological study of art and aesthetics.

21 See Van Damme (1996), providing surveys also of the ways in which the problems of universalism and cultural relativism in aesthetics were touched upon in twentieth-century cultural anthropology (see chapters three and four especially).

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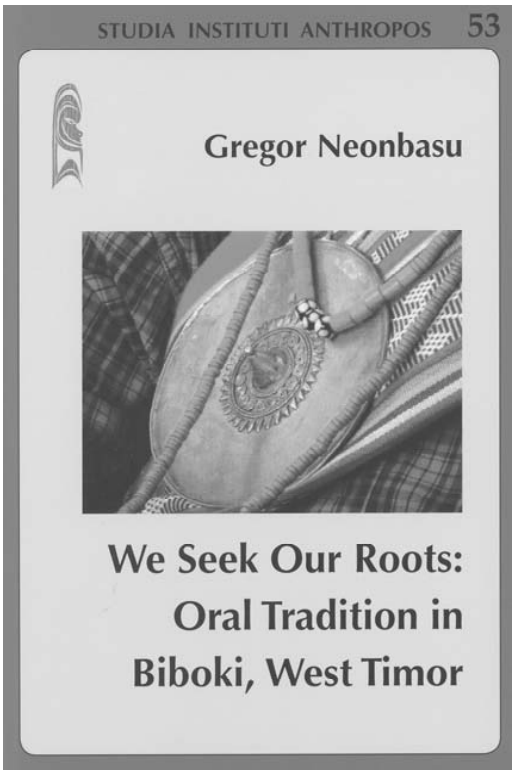
Studia Instituti Anthropos



This book describes the pattern of the daily life of the people of Biboki in West Timor — Eastern Indonesia — in terms of their efforts to affirm the "roots" of their daily lives. The core claim of this study is that oral traditions form the basis for which local people both trace their origins and at the same time endeavour to conceptualize their relationships with their fellow human beings and with the cosmos. It means that oral traditions are a fundamental tool for people in establishing their roots of life within a community and in assisting their efforts to establish authority within society. The chapters of the book present a range of genres of oral traditions, in conjunction with detailed exegesis and linguistic analysis in order to demonstrate the fundamental rote of these oral traditions within the life of the people.

According to Bibokinese, the root of life is considered to be the ancestors and the Supreme Being represented in the heirlooms kept in traditional houses. Life in society should be based on performing rituals at the traditional house as a vital way to create and preserve a flourishing community. At each performance at the traditional house — and also at other traditional sites where people hold rituals — oral traditions become a key factor in maintaining links with the past.

Neonbasu, Gregor: We Seek Our Roots. Oral tradition in Biboki, West Timor. Fribourg: Academic Press Fribourg Switzerland, 2011. 385 pp. ISBN 978-3-7278-1700-7.