Bowerbirds and Their Bowers
Bird Art before Bio Art

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Bowerbirds constitute the avian family *Ptilonorhynchidae*, consisting of some twenty species distributed throughout certain regions of Australia and New Guinea (Frith, Frith, and Barnes 2004; Frith and Frith 2008). As their English name indicates, these birds have become well-known because of the bowers that most of these species construct, arrange, decorate, compose and judge, as part of their courtship. Often, both by academia and popular culture, bowerbirds and their bowers are presented as a challenge regarding what may or may not be considered art, according to a Western perspective (Amstutz 2021; Rosenfeld 2021). Since I also wrote along these lines elsewhere (Cortés Zulueta 2016: 524–51), in this chapter I will focus instead on how human and avian gazes coalesce and intersect within and around these bowers, enlightening diverse meanings and representations, created by both humans and birds.[1]

This requires examining how, in some specific cases, certain human gazes — here, mainly Western gazes — look towards bowers through certain frames. Conventional concepts and assumptions, such as the ones

1 I wrote this chapter while a Juan de la Cierva-Incorporación fellow (Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation) at Universidad de Málaga, and it is part of the project Entomornithophilias (and Phobias): Impressions and Encounters of Birds and Insects (B1-2022_11), II Plan Propio de Investigación y Transferencia, UMA.

derived from the sterile white cubes of museums or galleries, pre-condition how we categorise art, and their influence extends beyond those spaces. For instance, at times, when looking at bowers, humans see a plainer picture, almost a two-dimensional composition, as if they were looking at a painting. Or they treat bowers as some kind of sculpture, forgetting aspects like the singing or the movements of the birds. While others emphasise aspects such as materials, textures, or solid shapes, consider them in terms of land art, or present these ensembles as artistic installations.

Figure 1: Satin bowerbirds at their avenue bower, in a backyard

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Meanwhile, the mobile and embodied gaze of bowerbirds shapes the structure and disposition of the bowers and their decorations in different ways, depending on the basic form characteristic of each species, ordinarily variations of either a maypole or avenue configurations. Maypoles — organised around one or more central posts and thatched by some of the species — and avenues — with stick walls that run parallel

along a longitudinal axis — lead, enhance or block that gaze, echoing and responding to it. Bowers, as well, blend gazes with sound, interweave it with other sensory dimensions, and enable or frame certain movements. Lastly, human and avian gazes gather around the illusionist tricks displayed by great bowerbirds, or the step-back look that some bowerbirds use to evaluate and to rearrange their bower's decorations and composition, and that humans tend to anthropomorphise and associate with that of a human painter or other artist, tilting their heads and leaning or stepping back to look and judge the ensemble from a distance. On the whole, it is as if most human gazes are trying to dissect and embalm bowers, to turn them into a more conventional kind of art in a human sense, whereas what the birds are doing is more lively, vibrant and vital, in many ways.

Looking at bowers before and beyond Bio art, allows us to reflect on the issues outlined above, and on the entanglements of avian and human gazes surrounding them. Likewise, this stresses how bowers were and are, indeed, Bio art long before and beyond the human concept of Bio art. As ephemeral but recurring structures maintained during the months of the breeding season, abandoned when it ends, and then rebuilt in the following season, bowers — and bowerbirds — enact annual and biological cycles of the ecosystems to which they belong. Bowers, attended (or not) by bowerbirds — some males building and furnishing them and their collections, some females visiting and judging them, some young females or males learning how to do either one or the other —, flourish and decay following these cycles. When abandoned or in the off-season, the sticks or orchid stems that formed the walls, posts or thatched roofs of the bowers lie in disarray, scattered by the winds or damaged by the rains, and the collections of ornaments appear spoiled or dismantled, if they have not been taken away. In contrast, during the breeding season the bowers are continually arranged and rearranged by male bowerbirds, and undergo constant reparations due to damages caused by the weather, by the actions of rival birds or by other animals, humans included. The birds also tend the moss and the surroundings, removing fallen leaves or anything that tarnishes the overall effect. Since a significant number of the collected items are organic, and also perishable —

flowers, fruits, mushrooms, leaves — they have to be replenished over and over, to make the bower look and feel as fresh, pristine and alive as possible, for the female bowerbirds to judge, and to choose.

Beyond this organic immediacy, several other temporal dimensions and layers converge into bowers. In stark contrast with this instantaneity, and in principle and in accordance with standard evolutionary processes, bowerbirds have been making bowers across millions of years (Ericson et al. 2020: 824–26), with different essential layouts remaining similar across long periods of time — yet again, Bio art long before the term itself. But then, other temporal layers overlap and are also manifested through bowers. To begin with, in the collections displayed in them. Because, besides perishable organic matter, these assortments also contain feathers, elytra, shells, bones, or pebbles, among others, or even past or current human objects, which is relevant when reflecting on how bowerbirds' selections and collections affect human archaeological sites and studies (Dwyer, Minnegal, and Thomson 1985). On the other hand, although different populations of the same species of bowerbirds share a similar bower typology, their collecting or decorating styles differ. Depending on the populations, they could be more colourful and diverse, darker and barer, or favour certain kinds of hues or objects over others, in what have been discussed as distinct cultural or artistic trends that can change more swiftly and that have to be learnt — learning to make it, learning to judge it — from other individuals (Diamond 1986; Madden 2008). Additionally, each individual bowerbird has his or her personal preferences that affect what they built or choose.

So, all these layers and their temporal dimensions, from the evolutionary through the cultural to the individual preferences, interact and are materialised in bowers, through the actions of bowerbirds, and embodying their gazes. Bowers become, then, a lively manifestation and portrait of the meanings enclosed in those layers through the bowerbirds' choices and their selections from among what is available in their environment, via decisions which are informed by both biology, culture and individual experience. And human gazes linger over these configurations, imposing some of their own terms and assumptions.

On a handful of human gazes over bowerbirds and their bowers

Theoretical discussions around the concept of the gaze, and its role in defining, deploying, imposing and reinforcing certain hierarchies and power relations, have been very prominent and influential for decades, and still remain current. Among others, a noteworthy instance is that of Laura Mulvey's article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (Mulvey 1975), addressing the construction of an objectifying and sexualising active male gaze over a passive and 'just something pleasurable to look at' female body. Mulvey scrutinises how this male gaze is constructed through cinema, specifically. Analyses such as John Berger's (Berger 1972) had a broader range, from art history to visual culture. My own scope will be ample regarding media examples as I will approach a series of cases drawn from popular science books, wildlife films, an exhibition or a defined corpus of paintings, mostly dating from the late 20th century to the first decades of the 21st century, with the occasional earlier example from the 1970s.[2] Despite the variety of sources used, I will narrow my approach focusing on how human gazes frame bowerbirds and their bowers in these samples, in terms of which facets, categories or conventions of the involved concept of art and the artistic are emphasised, and which are minimised, forgotten or denied. Hence, these gazes tend to project a flatter vision of bowers, conditioned by Western art conventions and often limited to sight or to fixed visual aspects while simultaneously denying or minimising bowerbirds' own embodied gazes.

In the Western framework, there is a thoroughly established and dissected tendency of ignoring or negating the gazes and agencies of subjects considered inferior or subaltern. Since bowerbirds are animals other-than-human — even other-than-mammal —, there are other factors to take into account. As birds, they are conceived as belonging to the realm of science, of biology, and gazed prioritising that context. Due to how objectivity in general, and scientific objectivity in particular, has been historically shaped in close association with the preeminence

2 Western 'discovery' and perception of bowerbirds in the 19th century is another topic of great interest, that I am planning to address it in a future publication.

of the visual domain and understandings concerning distance and disembodiment (Daston and Galison 2010), this adds towards solely considering the human gaze on bowers, isolated from other sensorial dimensions. Also, towards a reluctance to acknowledge bowerbirds with agency and abilities usually depicted as paradigmatically human, which brings to mind the notion of anthropodenial, a term coined by Frans de Waal to refer to the "a priori rejection of shared characteristics between humans and animals when in fact they may exist" (de Waal 1999: 258).

Animal architecture

In 1974, the ethologist and Nobel laureate Karl von Frisch published the popular science book *Tiere als Baumeister* with the collaboration of his son, Otto von Frisch (Frisch and Frisch 1974b). Although a more accurate translation of its original German title would be 'animals as master builders', or 'animals as architects', the English translation of the volume by Lisbeth Gombrich — elder sister of art historian Ernst Gombrich — appeared under one that shifted the emphasis from the animals to their constructions, from recognising certain abilities of the animals involved to providing a technical and conceptual umbrella that could encompass — and, in a way, partially dissolve — their creations, and introduced them in a slightly less 'anthropomorphised' manner: *Animal Architecture* (Frisch and Frisch 1974a).

The book encompasses a compilation of cases, starting with those animals — Radiolaria, sponges, corals, snails — whose living bodies are perceived as architecture, then to continue with proper "builders" (ibid: 22), as organised in taxonomic sections, from arthropods — here, spiders and insects — to vertebrates — fishes, amphibia, reptiles, birds and mammals —. Frisch deals with bowerbirds and their bowers at the end of the bird section (ibid: 236–47), setting them and their courtship "in a class by itself" (ibid: 237), and stressing that their shyness and isolation

make them difficult to observe.[3] He then discusses three examples of avenue bowers — that of satin, great and Lauterbach's (or yellow-breasted) bowerbirds —an example of a thatched maypole bower — and that of the orange-crested gardener (or streaked) bowerbird. He provides details on the appearance of each species, the building process and characteristics of their bowers, their favoured decorations, their courtship displays, stories on how some of these courtship ceremonies were finally filmed (ibid: 241–44) or on their use of human materials: glass beads (ibid: 238); "[b]ottle tops, metal buttons, hair curlers, nails", teaspoons, car keys (ibid: 240), or a tin mug (ibid: 241), as illustrated by a drawing featured on the cover of some editions of the book.

As a testimony to the bowerbirds' singularity, Frisch devotes an additional epigraph to the question: "What passes in the mind of a bowerbird when he builds and decorates his bower?" (ibid: 244–47): "[n]aturally", neither him nor anyone else can answer such a question, since "there is no means of bridging the gap to the consciousness of other living creatures" (ibid: 244). To a certain extent, what follows is a balancing act in which the ethologist takes a couple of steps forward, then pauses and takes a step back. Afterwards, he keeps going back and forth between two opposing stances. At first Frisch states that in contrast to the conviction of other scientists — irrefutable at that point, he warns—, he doesn't believe "that only we humans possess the faculty of thought", and in fact he does believe that, with regards to "thought processes and aesthetic feelings in animals", "significant traces can be found in bowerbirds" (ibid: 244). Some of this can be seen as striking from our current standpoint of acknowledging that other animals do have thoughts and feelings, but at the time of Frisch's book the scientific consensus had disputed this for decades, until it was defied by figures like Donald Griffin (1976).

Probably this explains Frisch's step back as, next, he cautions that "it would be wrong to expect too much thought behind the actions of birds", because "[t]hey build cleverly constructed nests without having been taught and without much trial and error" (Frisch and Frisch 1974a:

3 Another theoretical dimension that is relevant but that I am not going to address here is the issue of animal privacy.

245). He mentions that these activities are led by innate drives and proceeds to allude to instances from other parts of the book that confirm this, starred by birds lacking insight: female ducks building their nest in the middle of a busy city or on a dangerously high roof, or a hummingbird mother unaware that her nest was being stolen bit by bit while she sat inside of it. Frisch also offers a minor counterpoint, arguing that "it would not do to generalize" from these records, since there are "considerable differences in the mental levels of birds and their activities" (ibid: 246). Although, in the previous passage, the weight was clearly on the other side of the scale.

In the end, he concludes with a final step forward on behalf of the bowerbirds, given that

> [...] it would not do to generalize. [...] Nor would it be meaningful to argue, as some scientists have done, that a bowerbird cannot have an aesthetic understanding of his displays because they are triggered off by his sex hormones[4], and that without these there would be neither building activity nor courtship display. (ibid: 246–247)

On the one hand, Frisch sets apart bowerbirds from the rest of the animals included in his book. On the other, his swaying stance also reflects the tensions behind the scientific gaze towards bowers and bowerbirds, which in the mid-70s still denied that these birds were purposely looking at what they were doing. And ultimately, bowerbirds were now securely located on the realm of *Animal Architecture*, with its accompanying connotations. Actually, the original German version of the title — *Tiere als Baumeister* — can be traced back to the widespread tradition of portraying animals as industrious beings, devoted to their trades. Additionally, the umbrella notion of architecture frames the matter, and the gaze, in a very specific manner. Despite being one of the three fine arts, together with sculpture and painting, architecture tends to have more technical and functional overtones connected with an emphasis on material structure. A definite distinction between structure and decoration

4 Here, he might be referring to A. J. Marshall (1954).

was theoretically deepened throughout the 20th century, often favouring the former. This might explain why the notions of animal architecture or animal architects became readily accepted and disseminated, as if they were considered less threatening for human uniqueness than those of animal art or animal artists, that could be viewed as granting a gaze, as associated with more creative and transcendent endeavours beyond instinctual or mechanical automatisms.

In one way or another, the successors to Frisch's book kept insisting on function or structure, often with a matching title and tilted either towards biology or architecture. On the side of the former was the volume of the biologist Mike Hansell, again *Animal Architecture* (2005), with chapters on functions; building materials; construction; work organisation and building complexity; mechanics, growth and design; building costs, animal architects as ecosystem engineers and evolution. In the section discussing design and aesthetic sense he highlights bowerbirds, like Frisch, as the best candidates to study regarding if, for them, it is relevant that an artefact or architecture looks right, besides being functional (ibid: 158). Previously, he had explained how spotted bowerbird females used bower walls to screen themselves from the male, relating it to threat reduction, or how tooth-billed bowerbird hid themselves behind a tree when a female arrived, emerging later (ibid: 31). Hansell also describes bowerbird displays as multimedia presentations (ibid: 160), expands on the relevance of female choice to shape the bowers and to select for certain kinds of male brains (ibid: 158–60), and proposes an art school hypothesis, which assumes that both males and females would have to train for years as artists — "to develop an appreciation of the effect their displays may have upon females" (ibid: 161) — and art critics[5] — to judge bowers—, respectively (ibid: 161).

In turn, on the side of architecture it feels like in *Eläinten arkkitehtuuri / Animal Architecture* (1995) — then revised and published as *Animales ar-*

5 Interestingly, referring to males Hansell uses the term "artists" without inverted commas, but he employs them with "art critics" when alluding to females (161).

quitectos – Animal architects – Architekten der Tierwelt[6] (2001) — the architect Juhani Pallasmaa had decided to take a few steps back, although he was relying in sources like Frisch or a previous publication by Hansell. His chapters cover functions, construction methods, engineering, landscape architecture, ecological and economic issues, and a series of lessons to apply, while mainly stressing structure and materials. Throughout the book, and although he vindicates aspects of animal architecture as its integration in its surroundings, Pallasmaa reduces it to mere instinctual and mechanical impulse, and ascribes beauty — and presumably, aesthetic sense — exclusively to the mind and the human eye (ibid: 17–18), and when addressing bowerbirds, he interprets that Frisch is the only author who sees traces of aesthetic sensitivity in the behaviour of either these birds or chimpanzees (ibid: 67–68). If on the side of biology caution stems from a resistance to anthropomorphising but leads to anthropodenial, on the side of architecture — and humanities, in general —, the tendency is that of denying transcendence, which here implies a very reductive gaze, indeed, towards bowerbirds and their bowers.

Sculpture: Why not land art (or bowerbird installations)?

In a sort of point-of-view shot, the camera bumps and treads along a dense rainforest, betraying every single step of the person who carries it. As convention dictates for wildlife films a male voice-over, that had been referring to the eye and the look — a mating never seen, the need of a practiced eye —, indicates that there is a bower that is impossible to miss, in these forests. The shot changes, and we see the man walking a few steps and then crouching and leaning on the leaf litter covered ground, very close to the empty structure. He encourages us to imagine how baffled early European travellers were "when they found something like this in the depth of the forest". The camera proceeds to follow, from top to bottom, the stem of a tree fern, revealing a crescent stack of sticks

6 The full English title is *Animal Architects: Ecological Functionalism of Animal Constructions*.

surrounding it until it flows into a green foundation, neatly encircled by a concentric ringed hollow and a thick wall of moss. The man begins to explain the different elements of the structure while touching and manipulating some of them, the twigs around the tree fern, the orange caterpillar pendants hanging from them, the rim of compacted moss, the rare black fungi placed on top of it. A series of interspersed close-ups ensue, detailing the twigs, the pendants, the man's hand holding and showing a fungus over the moss rim.

Figure 2: David Attemborough explaining a MacGregor's bowerbird bower

Bowerbirds: The Art of Seduction, 2000

This is the opening of the segment devoted to the bower of MacGregor's bowerbird (*Amblyornis macgregoriae*) in David Attenborough and BBC's 48-minute wildlife film *Bowerbirds: The Art of Seduction* (2000). An adapted and slightly longer version of this film was aired as an episode of the United States popular science program Nova under a catchy title that also alludes to seduction but personifying it: *Flying Casanovas* (2001). In both documentaries the MacGregor's bowerbird sequence runs along the same lines and is very similar, mostly with matching

editing. Nonetheless, since there are some small differences — changes in the voice-over, a few additional shots of the bird placing decorations — I am going to base my analysis in the 2000 version.

This version's subtitle dares to bring forward the term art, although restricting its implications by linking it solely to courtship and seduction. In this sense, the MacGregor's bowerbird segment is central to the film because of the comparison and reflection it offers. After Attenborough has presented the bower in absence of the bird, he introduces his owner through commented footage of him putting back the fallen black fungi on top of the moss, eating the food that he has stored in the joints of the branches nearby, or struggling to suspend from a twig one of the sticky caterpillar droppings. As it is important to have as many of the latter as possible because the bird's "reproductive success will depend in his having, on the eyes of the females, the most impressively ornamented bower around."[7]

Once more leaning over an absent bower, Attenborough comments on how females don't look for a good father or helper — since male bowerbirds don't do that — but judge and choose on the basis on how a bower has been built, decorated and how a male dances within it, meaning that "the females must have some kind of aesthetic sense, artistic sense". Smiling, the host likens the artistic and aesthetic preferences of these females to that of some sculptors[8] in recent years, pertaining to land art. The subsequent shots and explanations propose a comparison between the sculptor Andy Goldsworthy and the previously introduced male MacGregor bowerbird through parallel editing, accompanied also by some statements voiced by the former. In alternating shots, the camera shows Goldsworthy selecting and picking up some branches, then the bowerbird doing the same with some twigs. Goldsworthy gradually stacks up the branches in the shape of a giant egg, while the male bird

7 This and the following quotes are literal transcriptions of Attemborough's voice-over (Bowerbirds: The Art of Seduction 2000).

8 "European sculptors", although land art is an international art movement closely associated with North America. Attenborough also uses "environmental art" as another denomination for land art.

arranges the top of his maypole by adding and arraying more twigs. After one further scene of Goldsworthy, the bowerbird appears inside the bower's inner ring, looking up and down at the maypole, maybe even delivering a glimpse towards the camera. Goldsworthy is then seen making his finishing touches, stepping back and looking around his egg-shaped structure. And Attenborough's voice wonders: "if this is a work of art […] why is this not?", while the camera slowly pans over the empty bower, bottom to top, from the moss wall and the black fungi to the inside circle, and the maypole foundation upwards.

It is noticeable that the comparison focuses on building males instead of the judging females that started it. Besides, in his commentary, Goldsworthy insists on segregating himself and his art from birds or animals, although he recognises that some parallels can be made, and later he expands on the materials.

Along the sequence, the concepts of sculptor and sculpture — another one of the three fine arts — are reiterated, both spoken and visually suggested. The bower, as a sculpture, is critiqued in the absence of the bowerbirds, and analysed on its forms, composition and elements, exhibited in detailed shots. Its empty appearance, devoid of birds and movement, is gazed upon top to bottom at the beginning, and then bottom to top while being posited as art, during symmetrical and mirrored shots. Moreover, despite the convergences between land art and bowers, and land art's ruptures with the conventions of Western academic sculpture, the comparison fails in other senses. Precisely because of that rupture, in land art the accent tends to be in letting the artworks change, even decay, with the environment. During the breeding season the aim of the bowerbirds is the opposite, to keep the bowers fresh and pristine. Besides this, bowers are not sculptural forms in relation to the landscape but rather scenarios that come alive through displays and interactions between the birds. Although these scenarios do have certain forms, these are inextricable from the movements and displays of each species. In a way, these movements and forms come first, and that is why bowerbirds actively look for and select suitable materials, even if they are uncommon. Instead of the other way around, as Goldsworthy explains about

his own process, in which materials like curvy or straight branches can take him in one direction or other.

After the bowerbird-Goldsworthy comparison, Attenborough continues exposing the "multimedia" displays of the bowerbirds in the bower. But, altogether, the gaze that prevails in this segment that wonders on bower as artworks, is a sculptural one. As if that gaze was considering bowers as artistic installations on a plinth or pedestal, empty, frozen, timeless, abstracted from everything else. Just like bowers were presented in the exhibition Laubenvögel – Ein Leben auf der Bühne (Bowerbirds – A Life on Stage, Landesmuseum Natur und Mensch, Oldenburg, 2017), mixing elements of art galleries and installations with that of natural history museums, since the bower of each species was shown together with a male specimen inside a glass case, sidestepping females, life, or movement.

As if painting with flowers... or bits of plastic

> Every time the bird returns from one of his collecting forays, he studies the over-all color effect. He seems to wonder how he could improve on it and at once sets out to do so. He picks up a flower in his beak, places it into the mosaic, and retreats to an optimum viewing distance. He behaves exactly like a painter critically reviewing his own canvas. He paints with flowers; that is the only way I can put it. A yellow orchid does not seem to him to be in the right place. He moves it slightly to the left and puts it between some blue flowers. With his head on one side he then contemplates the general effect once more, and seems satisfied. (Sielmann, 1970: 152 [cited in Frisch and Frisch 1974a: 243–44])

This excerpt by the wildlife filmmaker and biologist Heinz Sielmann on the orange-crested gardener or streaked bowerbird (*Amblyornis subalaris*), reproduced by Frisch, provides an account of the bowerbirds' step-back look and uses it to compare these birds to painters and their bowers to paintings. That is, as pieces belonging to the remaining one

of the three fine arts, architecture, sculpture and painting. This other kind of painterly gaze imposed upon bowerbirds and their bowers is not uncommon, and it usually fixates on facets like colour or composition, especially the former. Likewise, if looking at bowers as sculptures empties and freezes them, looking at them as paintings also tends to reduce them to a flat surface, like that of a canvas.

As for colour, Frisch identifies the preferred tonalities of decorations of the bowerbird species whose bowers he describes: dark blue and yellow-green for satin bowerbirds (Frisch and Frisch 1974a: 238), white or pale yellow for great bowerbirds (ibid: 240), mainly blue with some touches of red for yellow-breasted bowerbirds (ibid: 241–42) or a wider palette of bright and glistening colour for the streaked bowerbird painting with flowers, or with moss, fruit, beetle elytra or snail shells: yellow, red, blue and dark green, glittering and shiny (ibid:242-44). Colour, together with positioning or composition, is also very prominent in Jared Diamond's scientific paper *Animal Art: Variation in Bower Decorating Style Among Male Bowerbirds* Amblyornis inornatus (1986), — a New Guinea species that customarily makes thatched maypole bowers, also known as Vogelkop bowerbirds. In fact, as suggested by this title, he claims the differences in bowers' styles, either between populations or within populations and individuals of the said species, stem from cultural traits connected to the preferences watched, learnt and developed by each bird. And these differences and preferences are mainly characterised in terms of colour. In contrast with the South Kumawa Mountains's population, which favours black elytra, dark brown acorns, grey or brown snail shells, dark brown stones, black sticks and moss (ibid: 3042), the Wandamen Mountains's bower feature green moss and decorations of many colours: fungi, leaves, bark, fruits, flowers and butterfly wings either orange, black, red, yellow, green, blue, grey, brown, purple or green. However, among Wandamen birds one individual specialised in orange fruits, flowers and seed; another in butterfly wings; two more in yellow or purple flowers respectively, and one more in orange fungi (ibid: 3044).

Figure 3a: A satin bowerbird's bower, surrounded by blue objects

Photograph by Doug Beckers [Flickr]. CC BY-SA 2.0 Deed (Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic)

The 'painting with flowers' (among others) trope is brought to mind when Diamond details the piles of items of the same kind grouped by colour with the odd one with a similar hue — at times, human objects, as his Kodak cartons among yellow fruits or a blue matchbox close to blue fruits (ibid: 3045) —, or the occasional combination of dissimilar hues, like brown and grey snail shells in the same pile although in different parts of it (ibid: 3044). He also discusses positioning — in a way, akin to composition —, how the individual birds seem to place their favoured colours inside the thatched structure, and the less preferred ones outside. The trials and changes of mind in some bowerbirds, adjusting the placement and colour pairings of some of the decorations, recall to *pentimenti* (ibid: 3045–46). Overall, colour is a central matter, and this is confirmed through the round and flat plastic poker chips that Diamond chooses to test the birds' preferences, erasing the variability of natural

objects and leaving behind just samples of seven colours, finally reaching the conclusion that Vogelkop bowerbirds select their decorations "possibly, but not provenly, by hue"[9] (ibid: 3046).

Figure 3b: Detail of a great bowerbird's bower, displaying white objects

Photograph by Gary Leavens [Flickr]. CC BY-SA 2.0 Deed (Attribution-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic)

This focus of the gaze on colour is also very present in wildlife films which compile bowerbirds among other animals. Particularly, in the case of satin bowerbirds (*Ptilonorhynchus violaceus*). Their fascination towards blue and plastic blue things has translated into a standard, even expected sequence. Often repeated, the usual scene shows a male offering a blue decoration (bottle cap, straw, clothes peg) to a female and it has garnered enough global attention and public acclamation as to become replicated and adapted in social media in the form of illustrations

9 Although he cautions that bowerbirds' sight and perception in general may differ considerably from human perception.

or viral memes, both insisting in the bird's blue obsession (Day 2020). Another typical and iterated content that documentaries have picked up from scientific papers is that of bowerbird painting, which involves "a male masticating plant material and wiping the plant-saliva mixture onto the inside walls of the bower" while, during their visits, "females nibble at this paint" (Bravery, Nicholls, and Goldizen 2006: 77). Initially reported as an instance of tool use in which some satin males used a piece of bark as a brush to apply the substance (Marshall 1954: 51–53), the painterly gaze has conditioned how this phenomenon is both presented and understood. Again, the change of colour or visual appearance is what tends to be emphasised (Diamond 1986: 3042). Probably because of the perceived parallelisms with human painting, this behaviour is anthropomorphised or insinuated as an argument towards supporting the artistic abilities of bowerbirds, above others. But this framework reduces and flattens the matter, even though the females nibble on the impregnated walls of the bowers, other relevant senses, like taste or smell, are often forgotten or left out of this issue, and weren't thoroughly addressed until more recently (Bravery, Nicholls, and Goldizen 2006: 77).

On the whole, gazing at bowers through painting, or as paintings, turns them more or less into "a flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order" (Denis 1998 [1890]: 863). Somehow, as if they had been transformed into one of the canvases depicting bowers by the artist Mary Jo McConnell, displaying the structures and decorations in their rainforest milieu with haunting colours and light patches but also empty, not a bird in sight, and thus unchanging, devoid of any insinuation of movement. McConnell's paintings are part of a series for which the artist made several visits to the Arfak mountains in West Papua, Indonesia (New Guinea island), in order to portray the efforts of several individual Vogelkop bowerbirds in their bowers along the years (PBS 2009; Cortés Zulueta 2016: 544–50). McConnell talks about these bowerbirds as fellow artists and above all as fellow painters, nicknaming them Leonardo or Andy Warhol in accordance with their artistic preferences. On the one hand, this approach and the time that McConnell spent carefully and patiently observing and portraying each bower on site made it possi-

ble for her to offer fascinating insights and realise certain parallelisms between the pictorial resources she puts into practice and that of the birds regarding, for example, the use of light and its effects on the decorations at certain times of day. On the other hand, it also translates as if her stance towards bowers was addressing them as paintings. As if she thought about the relationship between bowerbirds and their bowers along similar lines of her own relationship with her paintings as flat objects outside of herself, that can be finished and then looked at from a distance and a vantage point, instead of being continuously kept, run, and lived.

Figure 4: The bower of a Vogelkop bowerbird by Mary Jo McConnell, from her series of bowers painted in situ

Courtesy of Mary Jo McConnell. [https://www.mjmcconnellart.com/]

Dancing with the bowerbirds

Dancing with the birds (Cordey 2019), a wildlife documentary filmed in New Guinea and South America, focuses on the courtship displays of a series of birds, which it labels as dancing. Its high-quality and close-up footage is combined by a voice-over delivered by Stephen Fry, swaying between science popularisation and jesting puns. The birds are grouped and presented in five sections titled The Swinger, The Pole Dancers, The Artists, The Teamsters and The Greatest Showman. Around 15 minutes of the 52-minute movie, located on its central segment, are starred by two male individuals from two distinct species of bowerbirds, *Sericulus ardens* and *Amblyornis macgregoriae*. Respectively nicknamed as Flame and MacGregor's according to the vernacular designations of the species, one has a simpler bower of the avenue type and the other one a complex maypole.

Of course, these two bowerbirds are referred to as the artists, and their alternating stories and images follow the usual patterns of each of them picking sticks to build their bowers, shaping their walls or maypole, choosing their colours, struggling with their placement and with decisions on composition, or dealing with dangers such as a rival bird, a raptor, or a pig. Nonetheless, the climax of the segment is definitively the dancing, when the females make their appearance. MacGregor proves himself capable of several accomplished mimicries, that he puts into practice to attract a female, who lands inside the moss ring and proceeds to listen in what the commentary calls a "blind audition" from him, while hiding behind the maypole: of birds from the forest and of the sounds of a village nearby, including barks, pigs, woodchopping, human talk in the local language or children playing. This is followed by "a game of hide-and-seek": the female advances towards the male and the sound source, while the male steps sideways in the opposite direction to keep the maypole between them, so they go round and round enacting the ring moss, while only glimpsing each other, if at all. The musical soundtrack, at this point a bit tango-like, envelops the pair's movements as if they were part of a choreographed ballroom dance. The interaction culminates with episodes of what is named as the "crazy thistle head",

with the male opening his yellow crest and thrusting himself forth and back towards the female while the soundtrack adopts an accelerated dixie or swing rhythm suitable for an acrobatic circus act[10]; until she flies away, finally not that interested.

Figure 5: MacGregor, the MacGregor's male bowerbird, singing and imitating for the female, while hiding behind the central pillar of the bower

Dancing with the birds (Cordey 2019)

Flame, in the presence of a female, exchanges calls and tries to convince her to enter his walled bower by expanding and contracting the pupil of his yellow eye, striking over the deep-orange feathers of his head. At first, without success, but when the female returns Flame offers her a blue berry, she walks into the bower, and Flame can resume his routine while carrying the berry in his beak. This implies his "signature dance, the matador", announced by an evocative and romantic waltz-like combination of violin and guitar: a series of slow circular movements with his crouched body and left wing executed while he rises, as punctuated by *castañuelas*, then followed by a "clockwork" step

10 I am grateful to Borja Cortés Zulueta for his help with the soundtrack's tunes.

downwards, and an "odd" final series of head bumps to the female already inside the bower, consummated with brief copulation, and ending with him chasing her out of the bower. The sequence's editing opts for a shot/counter shot structure, and it relies heavily on the exchange of gazes between male and female. Because, although the focus of the film is still on the males, "the females are not swept to the sidelines" and "[t]he female gaze is perhaps the real star of the film" (Waters 2019). The extreme close-ups capture the gazes and some of the slightest reactions of the flame bowerbird female, how she barely opens her beak and tilts her head in consideration, how the feathers of the top of her head bristle and she raises it almost negligibly accompanying the movements of the male.

Likewise, the small avenue bower stands out as an intermediary between the bowerbird gazes, since its walls frame and mould the exchange of looks and movements — or maybe it is the other way around, and gazes and movements shape the bower. As it focuses on the birds' gazes, the film displays — and thus, gazes at — female and male flame bowerbirds as seen through the bower, since they look at each other across it — the female at the male's display, the male at the female's reactions —, and it also encompasses their movements. Reciprocally, and conversely too, in the case of the MacGregor's bowerbirds the maypole contributes a moveable spot for the male to hide from the female's gaze and a way to decide when to offer glimpses of himself while they both retrace the form of the moss ring. All in all, despite the constructed editing, the anthropocentric comments, and the accompanying music tinging the birds' interactions, looking at bowerbirds as if they were dancing lets certain things shine through, due to the emphasis in movement, in the birds' presence and bodies, and in their gazes too.

It also converges with how some New Guinea people like the Kalam talk about the bowerbirds they know and live with. That would be MacGregor's bowerbirds, or *kwŋb*, in Kalam. The naturalist Ian Saem Majnep explains that a *kwŋb* builds a *gow* or platform piling sticks against a sapling and then:

> [...] hangs cobwebs, insect frass, and little bunches of fruit and flowers from the sticks [...] like a man heaping up sticks of sugar cane and hanging bunches of bananas from this, to display and give away after a dance[11]. (Majnep and Bulmer 1977: 73)

Figure 6: An exchange of gazes between the female flame bowerbird and Flame, the male, mediated by the avenue bower

Dancing with the birds (Cordey 2019)

Besides, he points out that these birds are easily caught at their bower. He also tells the story of a big dance festival of the birds and animals, akin to the *smy* or major ceremonial with which the Kalam celebrate the initiation of boys, requiring careful planning and preparations. For Kalam, *kwŋb* "is a very appropriate sponsor for the *smy*" due to the circular dance-ground of moss it constructs around at sapling, and also because through its "noisy and spectacular" display it "invites other species of birds [...] to its dance ground: and some of the rodents and marsupials also come and dance there at night". (ibid: 166)

11 I learned about this source through Amstutz (2021), for which I am grateful.

Glimpses of bowerbird gazes

Along the various sections of this chapter I have exposed how different kinds of human gazes condition our understandings of bowerbirds and their bowers. I have also attempted to offer glimpses of the bowerbirds' own gazes shining through these frames imposed to them, occasionally in part because of them, often despite or in opposition to them. Most of the time, when trying to claim or to wonder about them as art, it feels as if human gazes are trying to dissect and embalm bowers (and bowerbirds) to freeze and to fix them. Somehow, as if it was necessary to think about bowers and bowerbirds along the lines of a more conventional or academic kind of art in order to claim them as artistic, or as artists, while what the birds are actually doing is lively, vibrant and vital.

Bowerbirds' gazes shape bowers, and the other way around, simultaneously and in varied manners depending on the types of bowers and, down to the smallest details, on the preferences and experiences of the individual birds involved, both males and females. More broadly, in maypole bowers such as MacGregor's, the central shaft marks the axis around which the gazes and movements of the two birds intertwine, as encircled by the moss ring. In turn, the stick walls of avenue bowers work as a frame and an amplifier of the crossroads of looks, while in some cases the ensemble of decorations serve as a background during the display. Bowerbird gazes not only move but are more-than-visual, multisensory. They not only summon a wider range and ampler threshold of colours, down to ultraviolet, but also enable being heard and not seen, and reveal a string of spots from where to articulate or listen to sounds: behind a maypole, as channelled by a stick corridor, from inside the shaded gallery of a thatched structure. Besides, bowers can also be nibbled and tasted, as the females do with the paint the males apply, and if the courtship is rounded off, the final step involves touch, and an intimate contact between the birds.

Looking at bowerbirds gazing at bowers… At times, bowerbird and human gazes get entangled in particularly intricate patterns (Cortés Zulueta 2019: 37–39). Like in the enthralling scientific findings that unfold how great bowerbirds (*Chlamydera nuchalis*) create size gradients

and optical illusions in their avenue bowers, putting into play a complex illusionism intended for other birds — especially, for the females (Endler, Endler, and Doerr 2010; Kelley and Endler 2017). In particular, great bowerbird males arrange their predominantly white and grey decorations by situating the smaller ones close to the opening of bowers' walls, and then placing progressively bigger ones as the distance increases. The results have been called "theaters with forced perspective" (Endler, Endler, and Doerr 2010) and inversely to what happens in some baroque theatres, this implies the perception of a more levelled and even background from the point of view and gaze of the audience — the females inside the bower— that contains and enhances the display of the involved males.

This vantage point, necessary for the forced perspective, is defined and framed by the bower's avenue, and from it we can either gaze with the female towards the male and the background of decorations, and evaluate and appreciate the merits of that perspective, or we can gaze with the male towards the female, and take into account her reactions, perception, and wonder about how the display and the arranged decorations look to her and from there.

Human and bowerbird gazes also coalesce around the step-back gaze that bowerbirds embody when they are evaluating and perhaps rearranging the bower's decorations. For instance when, as seen in a popular on-line video, a Vogelkop bowerbird flies in and lands in the moss floor of his thatched bower — "his deep forest architectural wonder" (Cornell Lab of Ornithology 2015) — with a bunch of small magenta bellflowers in his beak, he delivers and places them in the chosen spot for a matching small monochrome stack, with some orangish leaves nearby. Then, he composes the flowers with care and takes a step, or hop back, and looks closely at the effect, easily bringing to mind the artists, sculptors, painters that I have been discussing in the different sections. Above all when the bird, with a quick gesture, removes the blemish of a minute speck. In part, this implies imposing certain assumptions and human projections on bowerbirds and their bowers. Even so, it can also turn into an acknowledgement of the gaze of bowerbirds, of how at those moments they are looking, and not only looking, but wondering

how something looks, for themselves and possibly for the gazes of other birds, including the female bowerbirds that will later look and judge themselves. And thus, bowers are the lively and constantly replenished ensembles that encompass these crisscrossings of movements and gazes, which shape and are shaped by them.

In the same video, the Vogelkop bowerbird flies away and comes back, hopping with another bunch of flowers. Adds them to the neat pile, steps back and looks down and checks, and for a brief moment, pauses and looks towards the camera, as if he was aware of its presence at that precise moment, and likewise as in other moments during the video. For an instant, this works as a reminder that bowerbirds, males and females, can also gaze and look back at us humans.

Figure 7: The eye (and the gaze) of a satin bowerbird

Photograph by Will Brown [Flickr]. CC BY 2.0 Deed (Attribution 2.0 Generic).]

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