

Debate and Open Forum: Neuroimaging is Important to our Understanding of Aesthetics and our Responses to Art

Professors: Michael Trimble, Roger Scruton, John Onians, John Sloboda, Ray Tallis and Nigel Osborne

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The "Musical Brain" conference was a remarkable event that brought together people from different backgrounds and affiliations. The dynamic of the presentations and the strong individuality of the speakers created an exciting atmosphere for interdisciplinary collaboration. There was an engaging diversity of speakers including talks about contemporary music, cave drawings and music in therapy.

A contemporary cultural relevance was evident in such choice terms as: neuroaesthetics, neuromirroring, neuroplasticity, evolutionary cheesecake, self realisation, neuroscepticism and neuromania. Intriguing theories were also expressed such as Professor Roger Scruton claiming that, "the brain doesn't dance" and "the power of music goes beyond the matter and ignores scientific questions".

Different opinions about the implicit and the explicit connection between neuroscience and the creative mind were expressed but only one thing remained undisputed; the fact that Music is a universal art form that plays on the strings of our feelings, provoking deep unconscious emotions. This was demonstrated by Stephen Johnson and Professor Nigel Osborne.

The conference discussed the possibility of neuroimaging giving us a better understanding of how we appreciate Art. It questioned whether research in neuroscience could produce new forms of Art appreciation. A major point of debate was whether or not our reactions to art, and specifically music, could be recognized by looking at brain activity. Many of the speakers felt that the experience of appreciating music derived from cruder human experiences and could not be linked to particular patterns of neural activity. However, others argued that from Aristotle onwards people have observed and studied our reactions to the Arts and neuroimaging is simply the latest development in this field, another layer to add to our understanding. The overriding opinion seemed to be that there are questions about our reaction to music and the arts in general that neuroscience can answer and there are those that it cannot as yet do so. The questions that cannot be answered should not be dismissed but nor should the idea that neuroscience can be used as a tool to aid our understanding.

The performances by Ian Brown and the Sacconi Quartet were very impressive. Stephen Johnson's method of illustrating points with live music was particularly effective. In this manner we immediately experience the emotions or the effects of the piece in question. This went some way to demonstrating why music is different from the other arts, although the conference as a whole left this question unanswered. For example, nothing was said about the fact that when music is being played live the audience is directly in contact with the creative process whereas in painting, by comparison, the audience is looking at the result of a completed process.

The overall structure of the conference was promising but as the day unfolded the question and answer sessions after each speaker grew longer and ate into the time allocated to the Open Forum at the end, which should probably have been given precedence. The

discussions with the individual speakers were lively and interesting points were raised which suggests that the Open Forum had the potential to be the highlight of the day given more time with some speakers indicating they were holding back some points for the debate. As it was there was little more than the opening statement from Professor Ray Tallis which led to the conference ending with a neurosceptic bias as opposed to a balanced debate. In terms of content there were a good variety of speakers but there seemed to be a bias towards neuroscepticism and, surprisingly for an event held at the Institute of Neurology, there was very little neuroscience.

At the start of the Open Forum a vote was taken on whether neuroimaging is important for our understanding of aesthetics and our responses to Art. The majority voted yes. The idea was that the vote would be taken again after the discussion to see if the debate had affected people's opinions. Due to time constraints and the debate being cut short the second vote was never taken. This was a pity as it would have been very interesting to see if the ideas put forward had changed peoples' views.

Audience response and engagement is one of the key elements of a conference but although it was encouraged throughout, the main platform for it was not fully fulfilled. Perhaps the loss of the Open Forum could have been compensated by interaction between audience and speakers in the breaks but unfortunately the constraints of the venue did not readily promote this kind of interaction.