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| THE EVOLUTION OF WESTERN ART |
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| **Nicholas Tresilian** |
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***THE EVOLUTION OF WESTERN ART***

***Nicholas Tresilian***

***INTRODUCTION***

**The visual art of the West is currently going through the cultural equivalent of a cinematic cross-fade in slow evolutionary time. An old genre of visual art based perceptually on closed, contemplative art-objects – typically easel-paintings and free-standing sculptures - is gradually ‘fading out’ – in practice, becoming an academy, prodigiously self-referential and narcissistic. Meanwhile newly emergent art-forms based on open, immersive art-environments –installations and contextual works – are rather more rapidly ‘fading in’. Were this functional cross-over happening in isolation, without reference to events in the wider world, it might be of interest only to dedicated followers of visual art. But visual art never happens in isolation. Creative imagination is intensely connected. Change in visual art is like a tickertape in a cultural stock exchange. It continuously reels off messages about our species’ broader relationship with its planetary environment. At the moment it is talking to us about a turning-point in the trajectory of our own ecological evolution: in the well-tested idiom of visual art, the current migration from closed to open images, in itself unexpected, is looking increasingly like a marker for deep change in the broader dynamics of sapient evolution: the Great Change, as we may well call it, from an open to a closed ecology.**

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*Like garden bees cruising an herbaceous border for pollen and honey, gallery-goers conventionally cruise an art-gallery’s lines of paintings and sculpture in search of the ‘hit’ of aesthetic pleasure. For the past 500 years the Western world has valued its own visual art primarily as a source of aesthetic pleasure. As a consequence, all the more ancient forms of art have also gradually become valued in Western eyes for the aesthetic pleasure they can give. Art-mages which only a century ago used to be dismissed as ‘primitive’ and worthless other than for anthropological research or as collectors’ curios, can now be seen as having aesthetic value of their own: speaking directly to the senses – sometimes more directly even than the West’s own apparently more sophisticated art. This is the ‘Story of Art’ as told by Gombrich in his great international best-seller of that name. Yet for all its eloquence and scholarship, Gombrich’s ‘Story’ perpetuates one of the great Western-centric fallacies: the belief that all art (to paraphrase Walter Pater) aspires to the condition of Western art and is at root aesthetically motivated.*

*On the contrary, 30,000 years of Hunter-Gatherer cave art and a further 10,000 years of Agrarian temple art bear witness that visual art’s default position across the millennia has not been as a source of aesthetic pleasure, but as a reservoir of shared myth and a generator of communal rites of passage. As such, far from replicating art’s present essentially marginal role in the human community, the great ritualistic environments of their day, from Lascaux to St Peter’s Rome, played a central role in the life of the human communities they served – as is evident from the vast capital investment they represented, in relation to the economic resources then available. Clearly art’s central role in those days was one of major adaptive significance. The nature of the Darwinian struggle for economic existence does not allow us to conceive rationally of 40,000 years of capital-intensive ritualistic art as having no adaptive value at all – as just so much cultural waste. Cave and temple art must have fulfilled some significant function in the real world, contributed to the perpetuation of the human gene-pool – even if today there is no consensus about what the contribution of the arts to human adaptation might then have been.*

*All that may to-day seem long ago. And for sure, since Vasari the mid-16th century in The Lives of the Artists wrote his blanket denunciation of ancient ritualistic art (other than the Classical but including the Christian) as ‘barbarian’, aesthetically-motivated art has occupied the cultural high ground in the Western world. In the circumstances the Western-fallacy was clearly not implausible. The West had capped off the dark wells of ritualistic motivation and replaced them with the Pierian spring of aesthetic imagination. (This has remained an axiom of Western elite culture, even though the emergence of 20th century industrialised mass culture from the forgotten fields of folk art has clearly uncapped the ritualistic wells again, albeit arguably in a thoroughly opportunistic and arbitrary way.)*

*But today there is widespread evidence that the arts themselves are once more in migration from an aesthetic to a ritualistic orientation. Contemporary visual art provides a particularly direct confirmation of this migration. The ‘modernisation’ of Western art, with its once-contentious randomised and simplified aesthetic, consolidated towards the end of the 20th century in Minimalist art, far from proving an ‘end of art’ or even an end in itself, has turned out simply the first step in a much deeper metamorphosis of visual art from a contemplative to an immersive form. In practical terms this means the slow, statistical transition from painting and sculpture to installation and contextual work which we are seeing throughout the world today.*

*Were this metamorphosis occurring in vacuo, without reference to events outside art, it would perhaps only be of academic interest. But when art is practised at the highest level it does not occur in vacuo. On the contrary, the act of imaginative creation seems to represent the human mind in its most globally connected form. Evidence for this is that the two complementary ‘polarisations’ of visual art, the aesthetic and the ritualistic, correlate historically with the two complementary modes of our cultural evolution.*

*`Here however we have another Western-centric fallacy to contend with: the belief that all cultural evolution has been like Western evolution – only slower – a stream-like flow of open, innovative evolution, maintaining the human ecology in a state of continuous progressive change, in which the main cultural driver is an ever-expanding rational science. Certainly this is cultural evolution as the West itself has experienced it in the past 500 years of progressive Industrialisation, in the process transforming the human ecology from a manual to a machine basis. And certainly there must be some kind of correlation between a world in open evolution and an aesthetically-motivated art, since in historical terms the two came in through the door together – during the period we nowadays call the Renaissance.*

*But the experience of a world in open evolution has so burned itself into the Western imagination, that the West’s intelligentsia even today for the most remain deeply incurious about the pattern of cultural evolution visible in more ancient worlds – which is really very different from our own.*

*Art itself is our witness as to the depth of the difference. 3o,000 years of Hunter-Gatherer cave art, followed by 10,000 years of Agrarian temple art, testify to two long periods of relatively pond-like, closed/iterative evolution, characterised by long-term ecological stability, with progress limited by a rule of more of the same - enrichment by the accrual of the self-similar rather than by the discovery of difference – with art in its ritualistic form at the centre of the human economy, and science placed at the service of art in astrology, alchemy, divination etc.. (These occult disciplines have also all been enthusiastically revisited by modern mass media).*

*The Latin root of the word ‘art’ has the meaning ‘to fit’. However well a ritualistic art may have ‘fitted’ ancient cultures in closed ecological evolution – cultures enriching themselves by improving existing technologies rather than by inventing new ones – it is quite another thing to ‘fit’ our conceptions of art to the expectation of some future world in closed evolution, placing art at the centre of the human economy all over again.*

*Yet the correlation of a ritualistically-motivated art with closed ecologies has stood firm for the better part of 40,000 years – and has also been underwritten by the more recent correlation of aesthetically-motivated with an open ecology. Only with eyes blinded by both the Western-centric fallacies described above, could anyone surely deny that the return to latently ritualistic art-forms in contemporary post-Modern art is not, potentially at least, a marker for a correlative migration at the level of the global ecology: a migration from open to closed evolution. Furthermore from an economic viewpoint this outcome is definitely no longer unthinkable.*

*Ecologies in open evolution are driven by what one may call the economics of plenty : the expectation of abundant economic resources stretching on into the future. ‘Plenty’ in his sense is privileged viewpoint of the ‘haves’ over the ‘have-nots’ in any world characterised by ecological inequality: as when the West first began to evolve an emergent machine ecology and the rest of the world was still gridlocked in Agrarianism. For the ‘haves’ the new plenty seems to guarantee a permanent escape from ancient scarcity. But scarcity is itself the result of a successful previous globalisation of an earlier new ecology (as Agrarianism globalised to replace Hunting-Gathering except at the very remotest fringes of planetary life). In course of time any new ecology must in its turn globalise, bringing the former haves and have-nots all in the same ecological tent together, competing simultaneously for the same resources with the same technologies. The result: a new ‘super-scarcity’ – scarcity at the next ecological level up from the last - and sooner or later an inevitable reversion to in the alternative forms of low-risk, self-similar growth, characteristic of a world in closed evolution.*

*Even if the correlation between our art and our ecological evolution did not exist, the prospect of a new super-scarcity is certainly no longer unthinkable. All of us today live in a world where rapid industrialisation has already radically depleted global reserves of arable land, water, mineral resources and renewable energy – and where over-population, extremes of wealth and poverty and fundamentalisms both religious and secular further threaten the stability of the global economy.*

*For that matter it is no longer so unthinkable either that the arts might come good on their correlation with the human ecology – even if we don’t present know what drives the correlation – and yet again find their way to the centre of a human economy more in need of co-operation than competition to secure the survival of our selfish yet sapient genes.*

*‘The proper study of mankind is Man’ wrote Alexander Pope – a couple of centuries before the political discovery of the opposite sex. Today sapience is surely the proper study of men and women alike: the bundle of qualities and quantities which makes human life distinct from animal life, above all in its unique and simultaneous capacities for creation and destruction. From the perspective of the future for sapient life, it is surely no longer unthinkable either to envisage a communication- compact world in which our sapient species engages ritualistically with the planetary biosphere to secure its own survival under super-scarce economic conditions – just as our Agrarian ancestors did in the great civilisations of Mesopotamia, the Nile, the Indus valley, the Yellow river and central America. That said, it would obviously be premature to try to second guess the form a ritualistic art might take in a future tightly-wired ecology of intelligent automata. Nor to speculate whether men or machines would come out on top. Nor yet to ask whether – perhaps the deepest question of all – authentic ritualistic meaning could be generated in the absence of at least one or more authentic divinities. From this last perspective it is difficult to judge whether the present aggressive stance against religion taken by Dawkins and others is truly the voice of a secular future speaking, or simply the last hurrah of an already obsolescent reductionism.*

*But if ritualistically-motivated art in some form is as likely as the correlations suggest to play an enlarged role as a source of collective coherence in some future industrialised world, we owe it to ourselves at least to begin to understand how art ‘fits’ within the overall scheme of human communication. And to begin with we must surely address how we as a species come to have access to the two equally valid but mutually complementary forms of art, the aesthetic and the ritualistic – as a result of which art history is much more of a white-knuckle ride than the exponents of the traditional Western-centric ‘Story’, from Vasari to Gombrich, ever let on.*

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*`SYNOPSIS FOLLOWS ON NEXT PAGE*

1 NUDE RECLINING/NUDE DESCENDING

* Compare and contrast the opposite ways we see the artist’s life model when immobile (nude reclining) and when mobile (nude descending a staircase). One is a closed object, a particle; the other an open event, a wave. Because we have two ways of seeing, we also have two ways of producing the images of visual art; in S and in T; as an aesthetic object and as a ritualistic event
* For 500+ years Western art has been biased towards the S/aesthetic. But 30,000 years of Hunter-Gatherer cave art + 10,000 years of Agrarian temple art indisputably point to the T/ritualistic as visual art’s default position.
* Why do we need these two equally valid but opposite forms of art, the S/aesthetic with closed images, the T/ritualistic with open images? Apparently to mediate the two opposite forms of our own cultural evolution

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* Call it original sin, call it the human condition, Alone among the species sapient humanity is capable of upwardly evolving its own ecology and thereby able to escape adaptive challenges - such as the ending of the last Ice Age
* That great global warming event prompted sapient humanity’s first ever ecological saltation: from Hunting-Gathering to Agrarianism some 10,000 years ago, rippling across the world in the next 5 millennia
* But far the most egregious example of high-risk upward evolution has been the second saltation – from an Agrarian to an Industrial ecology – for which Western civilisation has provided the main platform in the past 500+ years

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* To leverage this saltation, the West evolved today’s familiar form of high-agility/low-coherence ‘ecological construction-site’ culture – call it Type A – driven by the economics of plenty, prioritising science over an S/aesthetic art
* But the default position for cultural evolution across the millennia ihas indisputably been a Type B low-agility/high-coherence culture – driven by the low-risk economics of scarcity, prioritising a T/ritualistic art over science
* Will Type A or Type B values prevail in humanity’s future? The evolution of art itself may provide an answer – a diagnostic ‘tracer meme’. First, however, we need better to understand art’s positioning as a form of communication

2. THE DARK ENERGY OF ATTRACTORS

* Artists produce attracting images: images which bind rather distribute their meaning; releasing the ‘hit’ of pleasurable recognition to the attentive eye for which gallery-goes cruise the galleries like bees after pollen and honey
* We have no algebra for the attracting image. The West’s formal understanding of communication – enshrined in Information Theory – is all about the distribution of rational meaning as a clean feed of information
* Art on the other hand generates relational meaning which is inherently syncretic – yoking opposites together and arbitrarily balancing them out within the same image, creating an attractor to capture rather than inform the eye

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* Furthermore as a source of attracting images, far from being divorced from reality, visual art plays a privileged and highly influential role within a worldwide informal communications economy populated by attractors
* In this sense ads, brands, consumer products are attractors; stars, celebs, gurus, leaers are attractors; political platforms and belief-systems are attractors; clubs, families and friendships are attractors…and so on
* Attractors are the ‘dark matter’ of human communications, orthogonal to reason, but massive in the cultural account – the centripetal ‘glue’ which binds peoples together even when centrifugal rationality is splitting society apart

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* That said, most attractors in the public domain are subordinate to some less visible vector of rational value: ratings, revenues, profitability, market share, shareholder interest etc. – and thereby much less free than they seem
* Where art stands apart is in prioritising relational above rational meaning. Art is about the production of unsubordinated attractors. In this capacity it serves as a path-finding system for relational meaning in the wider world at large.
* On occasion small variations in art can flag major evolutionary change. Is contemporary Conceptualism, by migrating art from the S/aesthetic to the T/ritualistic genre, an early-day marker for a coming new Type B culture?

3. ART IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

* All over the world is the ritualistic temple art of the last Type B culture, a culture in closed/iterative evolution, driven by the economics of scarcity, prioritising art over science, based on a global ecology of Agrarianism.
* Agrarianism (*many tools for one use* as in agronomy, husbandry, construction, irrigation, transportation, manufacture etc) began to replace Hunting Gathering (*one tool for many uses*) some 10,000 years ago
* The new more productive Agrarian ecology brought a solution to the adaptive challenge resulting from global warming at the end of the last Ice Age, and at the same time conferred a competitive advantage on ‘haves’ over ‘have-nots’

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* Hereby hangs a mystery. The West’s own evolutionary experience teaches that to leverage an irreversible ecological saltation requires a high-agility/low-coherence Type A ‘construction-site’ culture of the Western kind
* Yet as Levi-Strauss was the first to observe, there is no trace of Type A innovation in the mature form of Agrarianism seen in temple art. It as though the Type A culture self-liquidated…as construction-sites indeed tend to do.
* A possible explanation for the disappearance of the Mesolithic Type A culture would be the scarcity-to-super-scarcity curve: the successful globalisation of a new ecology leading via plenty to a new scarcity at the next eco-level ‘up’

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* The scarcity-to-scarcity curve would also explain the aspect of ancient cultures most intransigent to Western thought: the central role of T/ritualistic art in the human economy, within Type B ‘settlement’ cultures
* The economics of scarcity (largely replicated in the values of modern Socialism) are intrinsically risk-averse and conservative. In the process they collapse the surplus value needed to fund adaptive agility in the ecology
* Instead, universal economic scarcity confers an adaptive advantage on those cultures with the compensating high levels of motivational agility which a T/ritualistic art, with its signature rites of passage, is evolved to produce.

4. THE PROTO-INDUSTRIAL

* As well as providing collective self-management by a Keatsian ‘negative capability’, art in Type B cultures had a second role to play, as an economic ‘sink’ for such surplus value as all societies occasionally produced
* Whence the capital intensive nature of the ancient ritualistic environments – both cave and temple art acted as absorbers of free capital which might otherwise have destabilised economies in Type B closed evolution.
* 1000 years ago Western civilisation itself was a Type B culture with an Agrarian ecology and a communications infrastructure of monumental cathedrals, abbeys and churches generating Christian rites of passage

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* All this was to be undermined in the proto-Industrial age with its migration from Type B/closed to Type A/open evolution. The proto-Industrial is the West’s ‘hidden’ revolution, screened by the greater scale of the Industrial
* What prompted the West’s cultural migration in the course of the middle remains a subject for speculation – the rediscovery of classical civilisation certainly played a part – that too had been a civilisation of machines
* But in both the Classical and the Western, the machines were still coupled to naturally-available sources of energy. In this sense the proto-Industrial was a speeded up ‘super-Agrarianism’ and remained essentially reversible.

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* In its turn the proto-Industrial was driven semantically by a correlative ‘lap-dissolve’ in human communication, as the open meme gave way to the closed meme in both arts and sciences of the Renaissance-Enlightenment period
* The migration from the open to the closed meme led on to a rebalancing of the culture as art on its way ‘down’ met science on the way ‘up’ – resulting in the beguiling illusion of a convergence of art and science in a new humanism.
* In the visual arts the cathedral was progressively deconstructed by the Gothic arch. The macrocosmic gave way to the microcosmic perspective. The result was both liberating and deeply improbable: high definition aesthetic space

5. THE THERMO-DYNAMICS OF THE AESTHETIC

* Compactness, closure and ‘noiseless’ 3-D complexity were the 3 ‘pillars’ of aesthetic idealism in the art of the Old Master period 1450-1850. The exclusion of time – the 4th dimension – was the basis of its improbability
* Aesthetic improbability was continuously under pressure from probability itself, in the form of passing off, faking, public access issues, and the tendency to creative fade-out, imposing periodic crises of re-invention
* Nonetheless for 400 years aesthetic idealism with its characteristically noiseless/timeless 3-D space held firm – its phases of agonised reinvention now the benchmark periods of art-history from Renaissance to Romantic.

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* That said, how did the art of the proto-Industrial period ‘work’? A great masterpiece is like a two-way mirror: it reflects a rational image back to the eye, while letting the eye through to the relational attractor embedded within.
* I said we had no algebra for the aesthetic attractor. But by combining Claude Shannon’s information theory with the thermodynamics of Ilya Prigogine we can obtain a simple equation for an attractor as a self-regulating system
* In this model the attractor is formed by balancing out equal amounts of ‘signal’ and ‘noise’. It easily accounts for the appearance of so-called ‘primitive’ art with its signature juxtaposition of representational and random elements.

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* But the high-definition image, with its characteristic feed of pure ‘signal’ is another matter altogether. How can an objective feed of pure signal at the same time function subliminally as a ‘split feed’ of signal and noise?
* Here it seems that the Western Old Masters, and the Classical Masters before them, intuitively discovered the core theorem of Information Theory which explains this possibility, many centuries before Shannon himself formulated it.
* In turn the profound improbability of an art based on cognitive overload – which was the basis of Shannon’s theory – explains why aesthetic idealism collapsed so rapidly when the proto-Industrial gave way to the Industrial.

6. THE CLASSICAL FALLACY

* It was no coincidence that the art of the Western proto-industrial period was catalysed by Classical art. Classical civilisation was proto-Industrial in all but name – from an evolutionary viewpoint, a dress rehearsal for the Western.
* Both the classical and the Western versions of the proto-Industrial represented Type A culture in its ‘weak’ form, still loosely bound by an earlier Type B belief-system and essentially reversible (qv. Roman → Byzantine)
* Furthermore classical civilisation narrowly ‘failed’ to deliver an Industrial Revolution. Consequently when the West did deliver an Industrial ecology, its classically educated elites were profoundly wrong-footed – and in denial

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* The Industrial revolution changed everything. By its crucial re-invention of the machine as a prime mover, replacing unpredictable natural energy-sources with smoothly controllable motive power, it embedded irreversible change
* Furthermore the new high-energy machines could be developed to deliver ever higher energies, and were thus also the engines of a ‘strong’ Type A super-growth, opening the way to an apparently ever-expanding super-plenty
* By the mid-19th century the Industrial revolution was tearing down the Palladian stage-set of the proto-Industrial, blackening the cities, huddling the masses, changing the very tempo of life and the geometry of appearances

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* The great metropolitan academies and salons, developed to teach the high-definition attractor and market it as a product, were the ultimate bastions of denial in this respect and in many ways suffered the rudest collapse.
* Looking back at 19th century academic art today, with its bifurcation into divergent streams of Narrative and Decorative art, we can recognise a final surrender to pictorial probability. Commercially it was a triumph.
* But by the second half of the 19th century, fresh generations of younger artists were abandoning the discredited ‘gold standard’ of the noiseless aesthetic image, to explore the alternative aesthetic potentials of the noisy attractor.

7. THE AGE OF REDUCTIONISM

* 500 years of figurative art have trained the Western mind to think of art as an imitation of life and the meme as a replicator. But the meme can be both open and closed, both ‘sticky’ and ‘smooth’ – the logical positivist’s graveyard!
* As for the relationship between art and evolution: it is one of reciprocity rather than replication. As we have seen: type A cultures in open evolution select for closed attractors; type B cultures in closed evolution select for open attractors
* Here is a clear indication that cultural selection is grounded in a perceptual universal: the reciprocal relationship of figure and ground – in which the dynamics of the ground drive the selection of the perceived figure

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* Shannon’s ‘core theorem’ is about the production of noise in overloaded channels. It thereby also provides us with a potential explanation for the growing pre-eminence of reductionism in the industrial age.
* Reductionism treats complexity as noise and simplicity as signal – as such it represents the progressive effects of information overload on human cognition in a world where industrial super-plenty drives a continuous growth of data
* Reductionism in art directly inverts the values of aesthetic idealism, The noisy mages of the early moderns incurred the wrath of the public by depleting the aesthetic ‘signal’ – thus undermining figural complexity, idealism’s first ‘pillar’

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* But contrary to entrenched Academic belief, high-definition aesthetic space was not the only basis for an attracting image. Shannon’s overload theorem affirms the potential for attractors at both high and low levels of complexity
* Early in the 20th century the first self-confessed Modernists began to explore the aesthetic potentials of the low-definition attractor in the first non-figural or ‘abstract’ art – finally collapsing the pillar of aesthetic complexity
* This was a step too far for the cultural cheerleaders of the embittered inter-war years who sought to abolish abstract art by a ‘return to the figure’ – brutally enforced in the totalitarian dictatorships of Left and Right.

8. THE MODERNISATION OF WESTERN ART

* By the 1950s, however, the aesthetic potentials of the ‘return’ had been exhausted – at least as a basis for aesthetic improbability. A perhaps inevitable sense of déjà vu attached to the second-wave abstract art which now emerged
* With New York now making the pace, the old dichotomy of abstract vs figural was finally resolved in Pop Art, which placed figural images in non-figural space – a Modernism suddenly accessible to all.
* As for the anti-illusionistic character of non-figural space, apparently masking the aesthetic ‘hit’ – that was resolved in minimalism – expanding the image-surface to create a new kind of immersive visual environment

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* Minimalism collapsed the second ‘pillar’ of aesthetic idealism: visual compactness. At the same time it was simplifying. From the 1960s onwards Minimalist art in all its forms came to dominate contemporary art markets
* But reductionism in art still had one more card to play. Conceptual art, with its images indeterminate between S and T, was the last hurrah of the aesthetic object, but at the same time a portal to a potential new ritualistic art.
* As implied in the work of Duchamp 50 years earlier, Conceptualism collapsed the third and final pillar of the Western Old Master tradition - systemic closure – paving the way for a new post-reductionism of open attractors extended in time.

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* Looking back over the 20th century clear parallels emerge between modernist art and physics: both pioneers in reductionism; both ‘post-classical’; both initially unintelligible; by the end of the century both deeply embedded in the culture
* The reductionist diaspora in the second half of the 20th century: from digitisation via the consumer culture, to McDonaldisation, human rights, the dumbing down of media and schools, the dandyism of street cred and ‘cool’ – a globalised idiom
* There are post-reductionist parallels too: installation and contextual art play chaos and complexity theory. But how are we to ‘read’ this apparent ‘return’ to the open meme in both art and science in the late 20tth/early 21st century?

9. THE LOGIC OF THE LOGISTIC CURVE

* Where does art begin? In the traditional Western-centric ‘story’ (qv Gombrich) it began with the cave-man, the artist of the Upper Palaeolithic, marking up underground ritualistic environments with pigmented earths and charcoal
* Our new evolutionary story of art has its origins millions of years earlier, in the rites of passage of our remotest biological ancestors, locked into Type B cultures by the economics of scarcity, surviving by dint of collective coherence
* The coming of sapient humanity has broken that pattern with two separate episodes of Type A open evolution, the first of which – from Hunting-Gathering to Agrarianism – followed the scarcity to super-scarcity curve

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* Will our current saltation – from Agrarianism to an ecology of Automata as it now seems – follow the same scarcity to super-scarcity curve and lead us back into Type B closed evolution at a higher ecological level still to come?
* We have explored the reciprocal relationship of art and the human ecology across the millennia. If that logic holds for our present world, then the migration from S/aesthetic to T/ritualistic is a clear marker for A → B change
* The low-profile transition from the closed attractors of Minimalist art to the open attractors of Contextual and Installation art also correlates well with the low profile of the point of inflexion on a scarcity → super scarcity curve

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* Capitalists want Type A growth to go on for ever – environmentalists would like to stop it now. Neither Utopia is attainable. Both those scenarios would more likely end in environmental catastrophe than deliver a soft landing.
* That said there is no discernible reason why sapient humanity should alone be able to escape the iron logic of the logistic curve which leads from scarcity via plenty to eventual super-scarcity and a return to Type B closed evolution.
* But to negotiate the bend leading from the Type A construction site to the Type B settlement will need a radical deepening of the cultural rebalancing already under way in to-day’s post-reductionist art and science

10. POST-REDUCTIONISM

* The figure/ground reciprocity of our memes and our ecology lies at the heart of the cultural evolutionary story. Ecologies in A/open evolution select for closed memes. Ecologies in B/closed evolution, for open memes
* If in this respect art and science lead the chase, it is surely because artists and scientists are exposed to the dynamics of the evolutionary field by their own creative action – and so are first to traverse new cognitive thresholds
* Reductionism was one such threshold. Over the last 150 years non-classical particle physics and counter-classical modernist art have bred in parallel, pupated in mutual obscurity and come to parallel fruition in the modern world.

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* All that was in response to a phase of ‘strong’ Type A evolution marked by the progressive deconstruction of the weak proto-Industrial coherence, freeing up the culture to generate and absorb ever more ecological innovation.
* But innovation, like scarcity, (though unlike poverty) is relative rather than absolute. The new may be truly new. But more of the new is never so quite new. And still more of the new starts to mutate into the self-similar.
* In short there is both an outside and an inside track to the logistic curve in its later stages: an ecological ‘push’ and a cognitive ‘pull’ – both driving in the same direction – to a re-prioritisation of relational meaning in a type B world

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* Capitalism and environmentalism, the two global ideologies of the 21st century, offer alternative escape routes from the logic of the scarcity-to-super-scarcity curve. Each guarantees the species an evolutionary hard landing.

* Our species’ best hopes of an evolutionary soft landing now seem to depend on following the curve and fitting our culture to it, starting from a gradual re-convergence of the arts and sciences – arguably already under way.
* That post-reductionist re-convergence would in its turn simply be the initial play on the route to a fully-fledged but as of now completely unguessable future Type B culture in which ritual again played the central adaptive role.

EPILOGUE: FREE VS UNFREE IMAGINATION

* The figure-ground theory of cultural selection is fully commutable - it ‘works’ equally well in both directions. A vivid illustration of this property: the parallel reversals to Type B Agrarianism and to T/ritualistic art in the Byzantine age

* A more recent example: the emergence of syndicalist socialism in the mass culture of the industrial proletariat during the 19th century: a case of harsh economic enclosure ‘hardening off’ the existing Type B ritualistic folk culture
* In the 20th century syndicalism, with its Type B convivial values and robust anti-elitism, was brutally expropriated by the totalitarian elites of Left and Right. It has long been the adoptive idiom of the industrialised mass media.

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* Today’s mass media have a reasonable claim to own the global communications high ground: to speak directly for today’s ‘strong’ Type A high-agility/low-coherence eco-construction site culture.
* But ultimately the mass media are the products of the unfree imagination: their offer of Type B conviviality subordinated to the Type A competitive values of the media-owning interests, their horizons bounded by probability.
* The co-evolutionary reciprocity of our memes and our ecology – for which visual art has supplied our tracer meme – seems more directly expressed in the creations of the free imagination – memes originated, not replicated

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* The migration from the eye-outside a deconstructed S/aesthetic art, to the eye-inside an emergent T/ritualistic art seems to mark a natural point of self-liquidation for the Type A ecological construction site
* As such it brings our sapient species to the foot of an immense new learning-curve in which ritual is redeployed on a global scale to underwrite human co-operation in a Type B settlement ecology of super-scarce resources.

* It remains debatable whether our species will ever reach that economically sustainable median state, neither Utopia nor Dystopia , or whether the accumulated discontents of the ‘have-nots’ vis-a-vis the ‘haves’ of the past Industrial age will long before that have combined to finish us all off.//