Nature, culture and the body in classical Greek religious art

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between nature, culture and social action in cult statues in archaic and classical Greece. Following the model of recent work in the sociology and anthropology of art, it shifts the focus from decoding the meanings of images, to understanding how artistic languages work to create expressive effects in particular institutional settings. Classical 'naturalism' is characterized as an artistic language with a heightened capacity for the appropriation of natural bodily responses – partly given in universal processes of maturation, partly socially specific to the codification of such maturational processes according to the role system of ancient Greek society – in the construction of affective commitment to social roles defined and validated within Greek myth and religious culture.

Keywords

Art; ritual; body; aesthetics; naturalism; iconography; style.

Introduction: the Greek revolution and the concept of naturalism

The early fifth century BC saw a profound change in the languages of Greek art, often described as the development of 'naturalism'. This transformed both the 'presentational style' (Witkin 1995) of statues of gods and their iconography. Archaic statues of Apollo take the form of 'kouroi', male youths (Plate 1). This statue type was based on Egyptian models and characterized by a closed and static form: arms attached firmly to the side of the statue (one sometimes bent horizontally forward at the elbow to hold an attribute), both feet flat on the ground creating a fundamentally immobile appearance; the head, like the whole of the statue, strictly frontal, staring into space; a hieratic image distanced from and eschewing interaction with the viewer (cf. LIMC Apollo: 5–6, 31). Classical statues of deities, by contrast, interact with viewers and share their space in a way which their archaic counterparts refuse. An Apollo by the fourth-century sculptor Euphranor (Plate 2) has his weight on his left leg and pivots on the ball of his right foot. His head turns towards the viewer, to whose approach he seemingly responds: the right hand raises his
plectrum to the lyre as Apollo bursts into song or alternatively pours a libation from a bowl as a manifestation of godly power (Palagia 1980; Himmelmann 1998).

Archaic gods are not immediately distinguishable from each other, or humans, except by context or attributes. The goddesses represented on the relief-frieze of the Siphnian treasury (c. 525 BC), seated or combatant versions of the contemporary free-standing female statue or kore, can be distinguished only by attributes or painted inscriptions (cf. Lullies and Hirmer 1957: pls 44–51). In classical iconography, by contrast, each deity has a characteristic bodily physiognomy, most marked in the different female deities, for example on the Parthenon frieze, a ‘matronal’ Demeter, a ‘boyish’ Athena and Aphrodite ‘a fuller more fleshy figure’, consonant with their particular religious functions as a goddess of fertility, a virgin-warrior goddess and the goddess of sexual love respectively (quoting Younger 1997: 134; cf. Himmelmann 1998; cf. Jenkins 1994: 78–81, figs 26, 36, 41).
Although historians of religion have recognized that the cult images of the classical period continued to be embedded in religious practices and ideas (Gordon 1979), this has had little impact on the interpretation of the iconography and style of such statues. Traditionally, the change to ‘naturalism’ has been interpreted as the birth of autonomous art (Gombrich 1960: 120), emancipated from the theocratic religious constraints characteristic of the Oriental cultures from which significant components of the visual language of archaic Greek art had been inherited (Metzler 1971: 60; Guralnik 1978). Correspondingly, classical statues of gods are interpreted according to the iconographic methodologies developed by Panofsky for the interpretation of Italian Renaissance art. Iconographic content is decoded as a ‘message’ or an allegory of contemporary political ideology or philosophy (Fehr 1979/80; Harrison 1977: 412; Erhardt 1997), while style is interpreted iconologically as a symptom of an individual artist’s or a particular period’s mentality (Harrison 1977: 413; Pollitt 1972).
Following the model of recent anthropological and some older lines of sociological thought (Gell 1998; Parsons 1951), this paper develops a new approach to archaic and classical Greek cult images by asking not so much what they mean, as what do they do? What are the effects of the different styles and iconographies of archaic and classical Greece on the viewers of such imagery and their relation to religious culture? How did naturalism work as a style and an iconographic system? How did it function as a component of classical Greek religious culture, by way of contrast with archaic style and iconography. I suggest that the key differences between archaic ‘schematism’ and classical ‘naturalism’ lie in the semiotically distinctive way each visual language appropriates the viewer’s body in the construction of affective commitment to contemporary religious culture and social structure.

My theoretical assumptions are simple. ‘Expressive symbolism’, objectified as ‘art’ through cultural technologies of aesthetic representation, is the primary medium through which affect or feeling is culturally shaped and socially controlled. What art does is organize affect, thereby motivating commitment to certain social roles or systems of cultural representation. The ability of art to do this depends on human embodiment. The possibility of aesthetic expression and responsiveness is grounded in a capacity for sensuous pleasure given in the biological fact of human embodiment. This places certain parameters on the ways in which cultures can utilize sensuous form to generate aesthetic pleasure and shape affective commitments. Conversely, aesthetic languages vary in the degree to which they chose to, or are able to, exploit predispositions for sensory response (built into the structure and functioning of the human body as it matures over time in broadly consistent ways across cultures) for culturally specific purposes.

Such a perspective permits a new conceptualization of ‘naturalism’. Whereas scholars grounded in traditions of cognitive psychology argued that Western traditions of bodily and spatial representation correspond to universal perceptual experience (Gombrich 1960, 1982; Deregowski 1989), recent work in the anthropology of art has stressed the conventional and culturally arbitrary character of all representational systems. The formal element in visual representation necessarily involves cultural choices, underdetermined by the object in nature which is being represented (Layton 1977). Moreover, our sense of the natural object world against which we might, as Gombrich would suggest, test visual representations is itself already determined by the cultural system in which we live (Mitchell 1986: 38). The monothetic, perspectival view of the world characteristic of Western naturalistic art appears ‘natural’ to us only because it utilizes conventions with which we are familiar. Other systems, like split representation in North-west Coast Indian art, are no less naturalistic; they simply embody different kinds of ‘visual information’, according to an alternative cultural view of what the distinctive features of objects are (Layton 1977: 42).

Although in certain respects attractive, this conventionalist critique of essentialist accounts of naturalism is not without problems. In particular, it makes it difficult to compare styles, whether across cultures or across time, since it affords no ground for an appropriate metalanguage that can impartially analyse the distinctive properties of incommensurable styles, except in the aesthetically thin terms of ‘bits of information’ (Layton 1977: 42). The distinctiveness of Western naturalism is consequently characterized primarily in terms of informational density, at the expense of consideration of its
specifically aesthetic-expressive properties and effects. Norman Bryson, for example, argues that the shift from schematic medieval art to the naturalism of the Renaissance reflects the change from a society in which domination is exercised openly, through brute force and symbols which do not disguise their arbitrariness, to the false consciousness, the naturalization of the arbitrary, in the ideological domination of bourgeois society (1983: 133–62). Such a perspective is not fruitful. The very idea of a social order based solely on force or fraud and individual self-interest is neither theoretically tenable (cf. Parsons 1937 for the classic critique of utilitarianism) nor an accurate description of the social orders of Medieval Europe or Archaic Greece. Moreover, such a perspective in certain respects marginalizes the constitutive and specifically material role of art, namely the capacity of aesthetic form to engage not just the intellect or mind (as false consciousness), but also the senses, in expressive response to cultural contents whose significance is transformed by their aesthetic codification and objectification.

Parsons’ theory of expressive symbolism and Peirce’s semiotics provide a means of resolving the polarized debate between conventionalist and essentialists, and trying to understand how naturalism functions expressively. Parsons and Peirce both recognize that human sign systems have both natural or biological and cultural components. Peirce’s conception of indices, icons and symbols provides a language for exploring the different relationships between the natural and the cultural in any given sign system, and the modalities (not necessarily of opposition or mutual exclusion) of that relationship. Parsons’ account of the role of expressive symbolism in action systems – its behavioural grounding, cultural shaping and its social effects mediated through affective response on the level of personality – allows us to show the broader sociological implications and effects of different organizations of the cultural and the natural in aesthetic systems, while insisting on the specifically aesthetic-expressive conditioning of those effects (Tanner 2000). As we shall see, far from naturalism implying a reduced role of the specifically cultural in producing expressive response, it is only by virtue of more elaborate or differentiated cultural schematizations that the ‘naturalistic’ style and iconography of classical Greek art is able to put to work naturally emergent perceptual discriminations and behavioural dispositions (given in universal processes of human maturation) for its own specific social and cultural purposes.

**Religion and the rituals of viewing in archaic and classical Greece**

Greek statues of deities were embedded in a specific religious culture. Conceptual and material frameworks associated with this culture shaped practices of viewing and the sensory apprehension of statues. This gave rise to a particular structure of aesthetic-expressive responsiveness, which bears little relationship to the abstracted decoding of meaning characteristic of traditional approaches to Greek art.

In Greek religion the sacred interpenetrated the world of everyday life to a very high degree. Features of the natural environment, such as springs or trees, were attributed to the agency of superhuman mythical powers (Bellah 1970a). The sacred was conceived not as a unified domain but a network of such powers, ‘each with its own dynamic and mode of action, its own sphere and limitations’ (Vernant 1983: 328). In this enchanted world,
statues of deities, like streams or trees, might mark the real presence of a specific divine power and exercise a corresponding agency. Greek literary usage consistently elides the (to us) ‘proper’ distinction between deity and image of deity (Gordon 1979), and similar assumptions informed the practical uses made of images. Possession of an image was tantamount to control of the sacred power it embodied, and the presence of the physical image was necessary to realize that power for particular purposes. Facing overwhelming odds against the Persian fleet at Salamis, in 479 BC, the Greek commanders ‘sent a ship to Aigina (a nearby island) for Aiakos and the rest that were of his house’. Aiakos was a mythical hero, descended from the god Zeus by the nymph Aigina, whose grandparents had distinguished themselves at the siege of Troy. The recipient of a hero cult on Aigina, [the image of] Aiakos embodied military potency and, as such, he could be loaned to assist those in military need, as he did at Salamis: the ship carrying [the image of] Aiakos arrived the next morning and led the Greeks to victory against the Persians (Herodotos V.81; VIII.64.83; Plutarch Themistokles 15).

Viewing such images was, correspondingly, a real interaction with the deity, and oriented to eliciting action by the deity on the worshippers’ behalf. The ritual practice of viewing took place at moments of crisis in the life-cycle of the individual or community, during the regular festivals of the religious calendar or in personal rituals of transition such as the occasion of marriage: both bride and groom would visit the temple of Aphrodite to dedicate some of the vessels used in the marriage ceremonial and thereby guarantee the sexual consummation of the marriage through mutual erotic desire (Kahil 1983: 243). Ritual considerations determined both the times when temples might be opened to allow viewing and the distance at which one might interact with the image/deity. At Sikyon, for example, only a female temple servant, ritually qualified by sexual abstinence, and a virgin priestess were allowed actually inside the cella of the temple with the statue of Aphrodite, ‘all others should behold the goddess from the entrance and address her in prayer from that place’ (Pausanias II.x.4–5; Clerc 1915: 28ff.).

The specifically religious nature of the act of viewing the statue was reinforced through the manipulation of visual, auditory and olfactory sensations. The manipulation of light and darkness in temples, using such devices as reflective pools of liquid or polished floors in front of the statue, enhanced the aura of deities sculpted in reflective materials like marble, gold and ivory. This produced the kind of radiant glow held to be characteristic of gods (Corbett 1970: 154; Beyer 1990; Wolfel 1990). The hymns sung at the opening of temple doors during festivals had distinctive rhythms and tones corresponding to the special powers of the god in question (Bremmer 1981: 201ff.; West 1992: 157ff., 178ff., 214ff.). The exceptionally beautiful fragrance – euodia – characteristic of the gods was simulated not only by burning incense but also by flowers, planted in the sanctuary gardens or hung as garlands in the temple, specific to each deity: poppies for Demeter, lilies for Hera and for Aphrodite myrtle, redolent of sexual desire not only through its association with the goddess, but through its ritual uses in the crowns of bride and groom and the euphemistic description of the female pudenda as myrtle (Detienne 1994: 48ff., 63ff.; Harris 1995: 101ff.; Goody 1993: 67; Bergren 1989: 8f.).

The two terms normally invoked in the approbation of especially impressive cult statues – kallos kai megethos, beauty and grandeur – are also regularly coupled in the description of divine epiphanies (Polybios IV.77; Strabo IX.1.17; Pollitt 1974: 191ff., 198ff.; Verdenius
1949; Pfister, RE Suppl. IV. s.v. *Epiphanie*). Far from establishing a contemplative aesthetic detachment, this vocabulary facilitated precipitation into that ‘state of altered consciousness’ characteristic of religious awe at the *mysterium tremendum* of the manifestation of sacred power (Bellah 1970b). Statues were not just looked at, but clothed, garlanded, fed with their share of the sacrifice, placed on their knees or in their upturned hands – all actions serving to blur the god/image distinction in favour of approaching the statue as a real partner in interaction (Gordon 1979; Freedberg 1989: 91ff.; Gladigow 1985/6; Aristophanes *Birds*: 518–20, *Ecclesiazusae*: 778–83). What seems to have been valued in artists’ *techne* – a more limited specifically technical concept than our modern notion of ‘art’ – was the capacity to produce statues which might facilitate such religious experiences, and in which the strictly material, human and worldly basis of the production of the statue was bracketed off or transcended.

These sensory frames and practical actions prepared in the viewer a specifically religious quality of expressive and sensory responsiveness, wholly different from the etiolated cognitive response implied by iconographic models of decoding meaning. How might the different visual languages of archaic and classical Greek art differentially have worked upon this particular religious sensibility and with what distinctive cultural and social effects?

**Religious ritual, aesthetic representation and social structure in archaic Greece**

The earliest Greek cult-images seem to have been especially dependent on the mythical and practical ritual contexts in which they were embedded for the communication of their religious potency (Romano 1988; Freedberg 1989: 91ff.). Alongside aniconic images (which continued in use throughout Greek antiquity) there were small, often portable, iconically unelaborated images, like the Hermes of Aenos in Thrace, a bearded head on top of square-sided pillar. Reputedly made by the mythic carpenter Epeios during the siege of Troy, and washed away in a flood of the river Scamander, the Hermes was dragged up in the nets of men fishing off Aenos in Thrace. The image resisted being chopped into firewood or burned directly, and, when thrown back into the sea, returned again to the men’s nets. Recognizing its divinity, the men who had found the image established a cult for it, each in turn playing host to the god-image in his own house. Such stories point towards the status of this and similar images as *agalmata*, talismans of mythic origin – often acquired through miraculous rescue from the sea – which circulated through the hands of aristocratic élites. Such objects endowed their holders with a religiously based prestige by virtue of the special powers which they, like the images of the Aiakidai from Aigina, mobilized on behalf of those who controlled them (Gernet 1981: 279ff.).

By the sixth century BC, such practical objectifications of the control of religious power were supplemented by increasingly elaborate aesthetic strategies, in part perhaps as a response to the appropriation of the control of *agalmata*, the private sacra of aristocratic élites, by the state (Vernant 1991: 156ff.; Lacroix 1949: 44f.). The statue for the cult of Zeus as a child at Aigion, made in the late sixth century by the sculptor Hageladas, represented the god beardless. The priesthood of the cult was filled by whichever of the boys of the city ‘won the prize for beauty . . . When his beard began to grow, the honour
for beauty (the priesthood) passed to another boy’ (Pausanias VII.xxiv). This representational strategy whereby the priest was assimilated to the god/statue as his facsimile and the living embodiment of his power is not uncommon in archaic art and cult. The Ismenian Apollo at Thebes was represented as a standard kouros, adjusted to hold attributes, probably a stag and a laurel branch (Simon 1957; LIMC: Apollo 31). The priest of the cult was selected from a noble family on the basis of exceptional personal strength and beauty. He took the cult title of Apollo, ‘The Laurel Bearer’, and enacted the part of the god in the major festival, assimilated to god and statue both by his exceptional beauty and by shared iconographic markers: laurel branch, long hair, bound by a crown or fillets, streaming down over his shoulders (Pausanias IX.x.2ff with Frazer’s commentary).

Recent studies of this statue type, the kouros and its female counterpart the kore, used as votives and tomb-sculptures from the late seventh to the early fifth century, have shown how they embody aristocratic values and self-identity (Stewart 1986). Youthful strength and vigour, grace and splendour of appearance were conceived of as signs of divine favour (Vernant 1991: 161). Like the kouroi, the korai are effectively indistinguishable from goddesses, except by attributes, like a bow for Artemis. The kosmos or ornament of jewellery, ritual haircuts and ritual garb, alongside their ageless beauty, might equally represent priestesses or goddesses (Schneider 1975). The characteristic ‘archaic smile’ of kouroi and korai signifies the status of both members of the élite and their sculptural self-representations in votive kouroi as agalmata – objects in which the gods may take delight. Agalma is semantically related to gelao, ‘to smile or laugh’, through aglaos, ‘shining’ or ‘splendid’. The radiant smiles of aristocrats and statues alike – the geleontes or ‘smiling ones’ as the aristocracies of some Greek states referred to themselves – assimilated them to the gods whose favour they enjoyed and whose life-style – also characterized by ease and a joyful smile – they in part shared (Karusos 1961, 1972: 91ff.; Osborne 1994; Fowler 1983: 166ff.; Yalouris 1986; Schneider 1975: 27).

For their aristocratic dedicators, these statues underwrote their claim to a special relationship with the sacred: they accessed the sacred through votive gifts, embodied it in their self-representation, mobilized it on behalf of the community and mediated to ordinary people in their role as priests and priestesses. The ordinary viewer was shut out of the magic circle within which agalmata circulated, along with the sacred power which they mobilized. The detachment of the kouros from the viewer, its refusal of interaction and its similarity to representations of gods engendered deference on the part of the ordinary person towards the aristocratic dedicators of these images as men of a qualitatively different nature.

This accumulation of symbolic capital by the élite, and the inculcation of attitudes of awful deference among their dependents and notional fellow-citizens, was reinforced by the ritual consumption of some such images in the context of aristocratic funerals. Archaic cemeteries shared many visual features with contemporary sanctuaries: little temples or naiskoi, kouroi and korai, sphinxes (Karusos 1961: 30ff.). When used as funerary monuments, kouroi must, like cult statues, have provided a dominant focus for the proceedings: elevated on tumuli, often more than life size (like gods), classified as agalmata – like cult statues (Karusos 1961, 1972: 91ff.), and sometimes themselves the recipients of ritual attention in the form of offerings such as libations to the dead (Rohde 1965; Kurtz and Boardman 1970: 148). Funerary laments, echoed in the vocabulary of the inscriptions on
the bases of tomb statues, memorialized the deceased in a vocabulary which assimilated him to the mythic heroes of the Trojan wars, more immediate epigony of the gods from whom the members of aristocratic families liked to claim descent (Alexiou 1974; Day 1989).

The aesthetic form of the statues, their social uses (as cult statues, votives and tomb statues) and their ritual consumption (in temples and at funerary ceremonies) all served to reinforce commitment to an élite self-identity as theoëides, godlike, while engendering a feeling of awe and deference towards the aristocratic élite on the part of the demos, the common people.

Naturalism, the body and the construction of expressive identity in classical Greece

How, then, does ‘naturalism’ differ from archaic style and iconography in the range of connotations it can evoke and in the semiotic means it uses to produce its specific expressive effects? This question is best answered by comparing archaic and classical images of goddesses with opposed powers and modes of action. Artemis is a virgin huntress. She refuses marriage and is cultivated primarily by ‘wild’ adolescent girls in the period of transition from childhood to the time when they are ‘tamed’ by marriage (Calame 1997: 91ff.; 117f.; Sourvinou-Inwood 1988). Aphrodite is concerned with the arousal of sexual desire and the realization of sexual pleasure refused by Artemis. Her eyes gleam with sexual allure, and a divine glow shines forth from her breasts, ‘a wonder to behold’ (Calame 1997: 124f., 198f.; Bergren 1989: 10ff.; Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite 88f.).

Some korai have been tentatively identified as Aphrodite on the basis of such attributes as a bird (a dove?) or a piece of fruit (an apple?); but these attributes, especially since the species of bird or fruit is seldom immediately identifiable, may be equally appropriate to other goddesses or even human votaries. The strongest cases for recognizing korai as Aphrodites are the figures flanked by Eros, the child of Aphrodite, on bronze mirrors (Plate 3), which at least indicate that korai could be Aphrodites, even if outside their original contexts we cannot recognize them as such. Archaic statues of Artemis are similarly identifiable as such only on the basis of their context (one of two female images in a temple of Apollo at Dreros – Stewart 1990: pl. 17), or the addition of attributes such as a bow to otherwise standard types of korai, which could equally well represent other deities (Richter 1968: figs 456–9). In Peirce’s terms the distinction between the two deities was constructed ‘symbolically’, requiring on the part of the viewer a conventional knowledge of arbitrary iconographic codes, which associated particular attributes with particular deities. Interpretation was a top-down process, intellectual and cognitive, more than specifically aesthetic-expressive, although, once viewers recognized which deity was represented, they would presumably have projected on the basis of their own religious knowledge some of distinctive connotations appropriate to each goddess. Beyond being iconically recognizable as a woman, the sensuous formation of the body of korai did little to encourage recognition of the specific identity and nature of the deity or in itself to elicit an emotive response to the connotations associated with each goddess by virtue of her specific sphere and modes of action.

In classical ‘naturalistic’ statues, conventional culturally arbitrary attributes are
supplemented by iconic and indexical signs which appeal to the embodied viewer in giving practical aesthetic substance to the distinctive religious values of the two deities. In addition to wearing the short-skirted chiton (characteristic of young girls as yet free of the constraints of marriage and the veil), Artemis is represented as a young girl with flat or only budding breasts and a rather narrow, sharp-featured face (Plate 4). Aphrodite is represented as a mature woman, full-breasted, increasingly wide-hipped, with a more sensuous, fleshy, soft-throated head and face (Plate 5). The distinctions extend from features of physiology, to the behavioural schemas through which the two goddesses express their own relationship to their bodies. Artemis is typically upright, engaged in or preparing for the vigorous action of the hunt. Aphrodites eschew vigorous action in favour of more languorous poses, reclining on a column for example, or corporeally exemplifying the ‘limb-relaxing love’ that was the manifestation of her power, as with slow and swinging gait she seductively approaches the viewer, displaying her ‘desirable bosom’.
Plate 4 Artemis ‘of Gabii’, Roman marble copy of an original statue by Praxiteles, c. 340 BC. (Paris, Louvre. Photo: Alinari 22583)

Classical Persephones and Demeters (goddesses represented by standard korai types in archaic art – Peschlow-Bindokat 1972; cf. LIMC: Demeter 17, Persephone 189) are in their turn immediately distinguishable from Artemises and Aphrodites. Demeter is a mother goddess, guarantor of fertility in agriculture and human reproduction, safeguarding female fecundity and the nurturance of children within the family. This nurturant and maternal role is expressed in her relationship to her daughter Persephone, the maiden, whose abduction by Hades and eventual return provide mythic material to articulate the changing nature of the mother–daughter bond before and beyond the daughter’s marriage. The primary festival of Demeter at Athens, the Thesmophoriai, was restricted to gunaikes, married women or matrons, and their daughters (Vernant 1994: xvif, xxvf). The late fifth-century Eleusis relief distinguishes Demeter and Persephone and their social roles, not only by the arbitrary cultural conventions of clothing and hair-styles proper to matron and parthenos (unmarried maiden), but also physiologically: Demeter
has heavier body, fuller breasts, a fuller face (cheeks, flesh under the chin, crease lines) than the slighter, less matronal Persephone (Plate 6; cf. Plate 7).

Of course, the selection of these distinctive features is in part socially and culturally determined: Greek medical writers favoured ‘large and bulky breasts’ in mature women as an index of suitability for child-rearing, whereas girls were bound round their chests from infancy to marriage in order to present a gracile, maidenly appearance (Hippokrates, Prohetikon II.24, with Dean-Jones 1991; Bonfante 1997: 184). But the distinctive features are also dependent on processes of physical maturation and corporeal change consequent upon adolescence, childbirth and child rearing – universal features which strongly lend themselves to the aesthetic and corporeal marking of social distinctions. Rooted in physiological experiences of both women and men (by virtue of their relationships with women), such features lent themselves to sensory recognition and a response grounded in the body, not just the knowledge of arbitrary cultural codes characteristic of the iconographic distinguishers in archaic statues of deities. Where these lines are drawn may vary from culture
Plate 6 Relief from Eleusis: Demeter, Triptolemos and Persephone, c. 420 BC. (Athens, National Museum. Photo: Alinari 24263)

to culture, and within classical Greek culture there is a degree of variation over time around these core iconographic types for the goddesses. But it is hard to imagine that in any culture the iconographic type characteristic for Greek Aphrodite could be culturally specified as the appropriate realistic image of a young pre-adolescent girl, while at the same time the Artemis type be thought to be the appropriate visual representation of sexually mature women, whether conceived in the more erotic terms of an Aphrodite or the maternal ideal of the goddess Demeter.
The conventions of the iconography of each goddess are not wholly arbitrary symbols, but partly grounded in physiological indices of natural processes of bodily maturation. Consequently, the distinctive expressive effects of such imagery depend not on culture (here the religious codes materialized in art) or biology alone, but on the interpenetration of cultural and behavioural systems which the artistic language of naturalism facilitates and realizes in processes of expressive interaction, most notably viewing. Turning back to the settings in which such images were encountered, specifically temples, more generally religious life and ritual interaction, we can now see what kind of distinctive expressive work naturalism did within these social settings.

The closed presentational style of kouroi and korai created a sense of hieratic aura, shared by gods and aristocrats, acknowledged by the viewer. The life and movement of classical statues, and their gestural repertoire makes for more direct, easy interaction. This shift in the structure of interaction between viewer-worshipper and deity is particularly marked in votive reliefs. In archaic votive reliefs, either the god or the votaries are represented, almost never both together (Berger 1970: 104ff.; Mitropoulou 1977: 86ff.). Classical votive reliefs typically show worshippers, making gestures of greeting, interacting with deities (represented in a larger scale), often pouring a libation in response to the worshipper’s sacrifice (Plate 7). Access to the sacred is defined less in terms of the essential qualities of a particular elite status group, and more in terms of specific ritual performances. Naturalism permits the construction of this relational space in the votive representation. The small scale of the votaries and their gestures signal respect towards and dependence on the gods as beings of a higher order. The god, in turn, pours a libation, completing the ritual act through which the worshipper accesses the sacred and signalling responsiveness to the worshipper’s act of devotion.

As in votive reliefs, so in cult statues, art did not just reflect religious ideas – for example, the distinctive religious roles of the different deities. It was the means by which motivational attachment to religious codes, and the social role expectations defined therein – as parthenos, gune and object or subject of erotic desire, was produced during the ritual process of viewing, of interacting with the god/statue. Imagine a bride and groom sacrificing on the occasion of their nuptials, in the ritual context described in the first section of this essay. For such viewers, an image like the Aphrodite of Frejus was not simply high-class pornography as recent post-structuralist and feminist readings might suggest (Osborne 1994; cf. Stewart 1997: 93–106, 152). Through making offerings to Aphrodite, the bride – crowned in myrtle and like Aphrodite heavily perfumed as symbol and means of erotic potency – gained access to the power manifested in that deity, and could feel herself to embody the charis, the erotic attractiveness and sexual complaisance attributed to both the goddess and the bride ‘giving herself in response to a man’s desire in the context of marriage’ (Detienne 1979: 62ff., 87ff.). For his part, the groom, becoming aware of the sexual desire aroused by the image, feels and submits to the power of Aphrodite, just as husbands were held to do in recognizing the allure of their bride and consummating their marriage (Bergren 1989). By virtue of the naturalistic presentational style, the fruit proffered by the goddess functions no longer simply as an identifying attribute, but as a component of their interaction. In return for the couple’s ritual performance, Aphrodite offers the piece of fruit, indicating that she reciprocates their sacrificial gifts by unlocking her powers on their behalf, prefiguring the bride’s gift of a quince to the groom in the nuptial chamber.
Statues of other deities – like Artemis, Persephone and Demeter – offered women and men rather different models of feminine beauty and appropriate female behaviour, each corresponding to different stages in the life-cycle of women or different roles of mature women, in their relationships to men. In each case the distinctive iconographic type – whether as a role model for women or a counterpart for men – lends motivational attraction to the modes of action characteristic of the deities in question, and the roles they represent. It accomplishes this by eliciting affective projections on the part of viewers grounded in their sense of their own bodies, stimulating a pleasurable sensory awareness of relevant behavioural potentialities and the corresponding schemas of bodily action: the nubile virgin ripe for taming or being tamed in marriage, in the case of Artemis; the embodiment of sexual desire giving rise to erotic mutuality in marriage in the case of Aphrodite; the matronly gune capable of giving birth to healthy children and standing in a nurturant relationship to her offspring in the case of Demeter.

The ritual process of viewing created in the viewer a heightened sensory awareness and religious responsiveness, an increased readiness to internalize codes objectified in the
statue and to project motivational dispositions already embedded in the personality. For each deity, the new artistic language gave a specific practical substance to religious codes, grounding them in the viewers’ sense of their own bodies, a corporeal sense shaped both by universal maturational processes and the particular social codification of those processes into a role system characteristic of Greek society. The language of naturalism provided a sensuous ground both for interaction with the statue/deity and for a motivationally intense experience of the specific nature of the deity in question and the manifestation of its power. Far from emancipating art from religion, naturalism was the means by which religious culture realized much deeper religious investment of the minds and bodies of viewers than had been afforded by the archaic style, whose form was largely determined by its function in appropriating religion for the legitimation of status hierarchy.

How can we explain this change? The development of naturalism in Greek art occurs during the same period in which democracy was established and institutionalized in Athens (late sixth, early fifth-century BC), and the new iconography was codified in the period 450–30 BC, when the Athenian democracy was at its height, and most active as a patron of art in commissioning the buildings and sculptures of the Akropolis programme – most notably the Parthenon. During this period, democratization extended to religious organization. Publicly funded cults with priests democratically selected (by lot) were created alongside the older cults often dominated by the aristocratic elite who held the priesthoods by right of inheritance. The ritual handling and care of venerable old statues, like the Athena Polias, the traditional prerogative of the noble genos of the Praxiergidai, came under public scrutiny. Their responsibilities were codified and published in inscribed stone by the demos and boule, with fines specified if the Praxiergidai failed to comply with these new regulations (Oswald 1986: 145ff.; Garland 1992: 100ff.). Control of artistic patronage – whether judging the competition for the design of the robe to be presented to Athena, or commissioning new temples and their sculptures, including cult statues – passed into the hands of democratic institutions, whether the boule (council) or jury courts selected by lot, both held to be representative of the demos as a whole (Aristotle Athenian Constitution, xlix; Rhodes 1981). In this context, it makes considerable sense to see an artistic language which served primarily the status interests of an aristocratic elite giving way to one oriented more closely to the expressive needs of the entire population within the particular religious settings for which the art was produced.

Conclusions

I have argued that our understanding of ancient Greek religious art can be enhanced by asking not what does this or that image mean, but how do specific languages of art work. In order to be able to describe and analyse how artistic languages work, we need to employ theoretical frameworks which can better reveal how art realizes its expressive affects through exploiting the sensory capacities of the human body than can text- or language-based models of analysis like traditional iconography or structuralism and its heirs. In visual art, culture and nature do not compete in a zero-sum game. It is only by virtue of a more differentiated system of cultural schematizations that classical naturalism was able to appropriate perceptions and behavioural responses, rooted in the
maturing body, for religious purposes. Putting nature to work on behalf of religion required a heightened cultural input, the production of a more complex artistic language by classical Greek artists: more culture and more nature, synergy rather than polarity. Similarly, rather than asking whether the power of images is a result of the social frameworks within which they are embedded (Gell 1998: 95), we need to develop theoretical frameworks and analytical methods which are sufficiently abstract to be able to incorporate the social and the aesthetic as analytic dimensions with their own distinctive properties and to show the modalities of their inter-relationships in different types of social and cultural setting. In classical Greek naturalism, at least, the aesthetic is social all the way through: embodied social roles, a socially specific codification of universal processes of human maturation, were a primary resource in generating aesthetic schemata.

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