

VPAS 7380.001 (87906)
Charles Darwin and the Evolution of Beauty
M-W 4-6:45

Fall 2020
Dr. Charissa N. Terranova
University of Texas at Dallas
Arts & Humanities

Office Hours: Online by appointment
Contact: terranova@utdallas.edu
www.charissaterranova.com



Description:

On first blush, the coupling of “biology” and “beauty” seems problematic. This is owed to the central role of quantification within science; in order for something to be legitimately scientific it must be measurable. Going against this grain, beauty is irreducible. The complexity of beauty – that it is situated, contextual, and a changeful concept of history always in flux – defies quantification and the formulaic.

In the 1871 text *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, Victorian biologist and evolutionary theorist Charles Darwin developed an idea of beauty that bears none of these usual problems. In short, we learn from Darwin that legitimate science can posit legitimate ideas of beauty. Beauty and aesthetic agency are active scientific components of evolution, yet they defy the conventions of scientific reduction since they have little to do with quantifiable fitness. Darwin’s idea of “sexual selection,” developed in *The Descent of Man*, explains the reason for functionless beauty in living organisms: why peacocks have large, cumbersome but beautiful feathers and why a stag has large but handsome antlers. While an impediment to survival and thus unfit and functionless in the usual sense of the term, these characteristics continue to appear across evolutionary time because of the aesthetic preferences and agency of the female of the species. The peahen chooses the peacock with the most attractive feathers and the doe chooses the buck with the biggest antlers because, in both instances, she finds them beautiful. For Darwin, the agencies and energies of sexual selection were distinct from but complementary to the more quantifiable rubric of “natural selection,” the conceptual driver of *The Origin of Species* (1859).

This course focusses on Charles Darwin’s ideas of beauty and aesthetic choice within his theory of sexual selection. The class investigates how Darwin’s ideas of sexual selection and natural selection are simultaneously good science and ideological: how they identify facts of the natural world while also are a historically contingent reflection of certain Victorian mores. From this perspective, the class studies how *The Descent of Man* is at once about beauty within evolutionary theory and an anti-slavery polemic and how *The Origin of Species* identifies the objective interconnectedness of all living organisms while is also molded by the Victorian economic theories of Thomas Malthus, David Ricardo, and Jeremy Bentham.

Requirements:

Students will participate in scheduled seminar meetings through presentations of 500-word reader-response papers and the discussion of both student presentations and assigned reading. Students will be responsible for a final presentation based on a long research paper, the topic of which will be approved by the professor. Students are encouraged to develop paper topics that support and contribute to their larger dissertation research.

Course Modality:

Remote/Virtual Course – Instruction is delivered online in real time according to the day and time in the class schedule (i.e., synchronously). The instructor delivers the instruction from home or the office. Students complete the course at a distance.

Be aware that, due to the probability of unforeseen shifts and transformations in public health, any aspect of this class could change abruptly.

Goals:

- Students will improve public speaking skills.
- Students will improve expository writing skills.
- Students will research in depth a topic pertaining to Charles Darwin, the evolution of beauty, interspecies communication, aesthetics in the realm of nonhuman animals, and contemporary bioart and bioarchitecture.
- Students will learn about Charles Darwin, the evolution of beauty, interspecies communication, aesthetics in the realm of nonhuman animals, and contemporary bioart and bioarchitecture.

Assignments:

1.) Reader-response essays.

For each seminar meeting, students write and present (read aloud) a 500-word reader-response essay. Essays should summarize and critically encounter reading assignments. Students should take a resolute position (develop a thesis statement) vis-à-vis the reading in the writing assignment. Papers should be:

- 500 words in length
- double spaced
- titled; title in italics centered at top of page one
- heading with course name and number, professor's name, and student's name left-hand justified
- paginated
- 12-pt font
- include footnotes and a bibliography
- Due to the professor at terranova@utdallas.edu by 10 am of the day of each meeting.

2.) Long Paper and Final Presentation

Students will write a 17- to 20-page research paper on a topic discussed with and approved by the professor. The topic should both come from the material in class and, if possible, relate to the student's overarching research goals as a graduate student at the university. Papers should be:

- 17- to 20-pages in length
- double spaced
- include a title page and a title
- paginated
- 12-pt font
- include footnotes and a bibliography with at least five sources
- 30 to 45-minute presentation: PowerPoint and Discussion
- **Final Paper Due Monday December 7**

Grades:

Reader-response essays:	50%
Final Paper: Presentation + Paper:	<u>50%</u>
	100%

Books::

- Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (1859)
- -----, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871)
- -----, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872)
- Jennifer Johung, *Vital Forms: Biological Art, Architecture, & the Dependencies of Life* (2019)
- Barbara Larson and Sabine Flach, eds., *Darwin and Theories of Aesthetics and Cultural History* (2013)
- Thomas Robert Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1789)
- Richard O. Prum, *The Evolution of Beauty: How Darwin's Forgotten Theory of Mate Choice Shapes the Animal World – and Us* (2017)
- Evelleen Richards, *Darwin and the Making of Sexual Selection* (2017)
- Sonia Shah, *The Next Great Migration: The Beauty and Terror of Life on the Move* (2020)
- Julia Voss, *Darwin's Pictures: Views of Evolutionary Theory, 1837-1874* (2010)

Reading and Meeting Schedule:

Wednesday August 19 Course Introduction: How Culture Forms and Informs Science

- Larry Silver, "Cultural selection and the shape of time," Barbara Larson and Sabine Flach, eds., *Darwin and Theories of Aesthetics and Cultural History* (2013) 69-82.

Monday August 31 Natural Selection

- Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (1859)
 - Chapter II Variation Under Nature
 - Chapter III Struggle for Existence
 - Chapter IV Natural Selection

Wednesday September 9 Laissez-faire Capitalism and the Economic Fabrications of Natural Selection

- Thomas Robert Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1789)
- Sonia Shah, "Malthus's Hideous Blasphemy," *The Next Great Migration: The Beauty and Terror of Life on the Move* (2020)

Monday September 21 Sexual Selection

- Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871)
 - Chapter I The Evidence of the Descent of Man from Some Lower Form
 - Chapter VII On the Races of Man
 - Chapter VIII Principles of Sexual Selection
 - Chapter XIII Secondary Sexual Characteristics of Birds
 - Chapter XIV Birds – Continued
 - Chapter XIX Secondary Sexual Characters of Man
 - Chapter XX Secondary Sexual Characters of Man – Continued
- Optional extra reading: Laurence Shafe, "Why is the peacock's tail so beautiful?," Barbara Larson and Sabine Flach, eds., *Darwin and Theories of Aesthetics and Cultural History* (2013) 37-52

Wednesday September 23 Individual Online Meetings with Professor

Wednesday September 30 Race, Gender, and the Cultural Fabrications of Sexual Selection

- Evelleen Richards, *Charles Darwin and the Making of Sexual Selection* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press)
 - Prologue
 - Chapter Four Beauty Cuts the Knot
 - Chapter Five Reading the Face of Race
 - Chapter Ten Critical Years: From Pigeons to People
- Evelleen Richards, "Darwin and the Descent of Woman," in *The Wider Domain of Evolutionary Thought*, David Oldroyd and Ian Langham, eds. (London: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1983) 57-112.

Monday October 12 The Evolution of Beauty

- Richard O. Prum, *The Evolution of Beauty: How Darwin's Forgotten Theory of Mate Choice Shapes the Animal World – and Us* (New York: Doubleday Press, 2017) 17-88; 303-342.

Wednesday October 21 Animals and Emotions

- Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872)
 - Chapter I Principles of Expression
 - Chapter IV Means of Expression in Animals
 - Chapter V Special Expressions of Animals
 - Chapter VI Special Expressions of Man: Suffering and Weeping
 - Chapter XIV Concluding Remarks and Summary
- Optional extra reading: Julia Voss, *Darwin's Pictures: Views of Evolutionary Theory, 1837-1874* (2010) 181-248.

Monday November 2 Vital Forms

- Jennifer Johung, *Vital Forms: Biological Art, Architecture, & the Dependencies of Life* (2019) 1-78.

Wednesday November 4 Individual Online Meetings with Professor

Wednesday November 11 Student Presentations

Wednesday November 18 Student Presentations

Wednesday November 25 Student Presentations