

**PHIL*6200*01 (0184) Problems of Contemporary Philosophy
Art and Science**

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There has been a great deal of recent work by philosophers, but especially scientists, arguing that art can be understood in scientific terms. There are two main themes in this literature. [1] Attempts to understand aesthetic preferences in terms of the evolved nature of *homo sapiens*: we like what we like because we have the Darwinian nature we have; [2] neuroaesthetics: our aesthetic preferences are determined by the nature of our brain and its function. (Note: these two themes are compatible) These views are, in the opinion of this Instructor, deeply problematical. Steven Pinker, for instance, has conflated *ought* with *is*: the reason "nobody" likes *avant garde* art according to Pinker, has to do with the fact it is not representational (if visual art) or narrative (if literary), or melodic (if musical). For Pinker, the contemporary art system is a biologically perverse system designed to get sex for its participants (a good evolutionary idea), but not to cater to our evolved preferences. Art is an instance of sexual selection run amok. The issues with this conception of art *and* evolution will be discussed in this course.

We shall read Dennis Dutton's excellent *The Art Instinct*. Dutton himself points out that an account of aesthetic preferences is not an account of value (a point that escapes Pinker). Yet Dutton does think that evolution matters to art. We shall try and figure out if and why. In the second part of the course, we shall read a series of articles in the new field of "neuroaesthetics." Most of the "research" in this field is arguably nonsense. We shall try and get clear about why, and if there is something to learn from the brain when it comes to art.

We shall keep this in mind throughout: philosophers have written about art since Plato and Aristotle. They have had important and interesting things to say. Kant has informed all thought about art from the 3rd Critique to the present. While the views of scientists need to be taken seriously, we need to keep in mind the fact that much of how we understand art is culturally constructed *by philosophers*.

Requirements:

Regular short reports on readings (approx. 300 words x 7 x /5 marks = 35%) Students are asked to write about something in the assigned reading they believe to be, true, false, good, bad, moronic--something that interests them in one way or another. Such writings will be the basis for discussion in seminar.

Major essay (3500-4000 words.) written for potential* conference submission: 65%.

*the length of this paper is the length to which philosophy conferences typically restrict submissions. I'm hoping you will submit your paper to a philosophy conference such as: CPA, WCPA, PSA, SPEP, CSWIP...