The Philosophy and Biology of Art

Art in Chauvet Cave. ~35,000 years old. Smithsonian

Overview

Art is a ubiquitous part of human life. We create songs and dances; erect elaborate statues and monuments; and paint beautiful pictures of people, landscapes, and other objects. But what exactly is art and where did it come from? Is there an evolutionary story of art? What does art represent or express? And are we the only creatures that engage in artistic creation? This course will explore these and other questions at the intersection of the philosophy and biology of art. We'll look at works from historical and contemporary thinkers, such as Charles Darwin, Noël Carroll, and Marilynn Johnson. We'll consider more recent discussions, such whether there might be a *group*-level explanation for art and whether art is best thought of as a fitness signal or a spandrel. The aim of this course is to provide students with an in-depth understanding of art and the philosophical and biological questions that it raises. No prior familiarity with the philosophy of art or the philosophy of biology is required.

Required Text

There are **three** assigned books for this course – Stephen Davies's *Philosophy of Art* (2006), Marilynn Johnson's *Adorning Bodies* (2022), and Shawn Simpson's *Art as Communication* (2024). All other readings will be made available on the course website.

Schedule

Note: (*PoA*) stands for Davies's book. (*AB*) stands for Johnson's book. (*AaC*) stands for Simpson's book.

Class 1	**Introduction**: Syllabus overview
Class 2	**What is Art?**: required: (*PoA*), pp. 24-28; (*AaC*), Introduction & Ch 1
Class 3	**Darwin**: required: Darwin. *The Descent of Man,* Part 1, Ch 2 and (*AB*) Ch 5

Class 4	**Behavioral Modernity**: required: Godfrey-Smith, "Signs and Symbolic Behavior" Optional: (*AB*), Chs, 1 & 2
Class 5	**Behavioral Modernity (p2)**: required: (*AaC*), Ch 2; (*AB*), Ch 3
Class 6	**Group Communication**: required: (*AaC*), Ch 3; Optional: Deborah Tollefsen, "A Dynamic Theory of Shared Intention…"
Class 7	**Art as Communication**: required: (*AaC*), Ch 4, pp. 129-175 **Note: Short paper due**
Class 8	**Art as Communication (Groups Revisited)**: required: (*AaC*), Ch 4, pp. 176-185 Optional: Ronald Planer, "Going Dennettian about Gricean Communication"
Class 9	**Evolution**: required: Stephen Pinker, *The Blank Slate* & *How the Mind Works,* selections; (*AB*), Ch 6 Optional: Geoffrey Miller, "Sexual Selection for Cultural Displays"
Class 10	**Evolution (p2)**: required: (*AaC*), Ch 5, pp. 191-196; Kathryn Coe, "Art: The Replicable Unit…" Optional: Kathryn Coe, *The Ancestress Hypothesis: Visual Art as Adaptation*, selections
Class 11	**Group-level Selection**: required: (*AaC*), Ch 5, pp. 196-200; Noël Carroll, "The Arts, Emotion, and Evolution"
Class 12	**Animal Art**: required: (*AB*), pp. 159-182; Stephen Davies, *The Artful Species,* pp. 1-15, 32
Class 13	**Animal Art (p2)**: required: (*AaC*), Ch 5, pp. 200-209; (*AB*), Ch 7; Eduardo Mercado III, "The Humpback's New Songs…"
Class 14	Class choice of topic **Note: Final Paper due on Finals Exam Date**