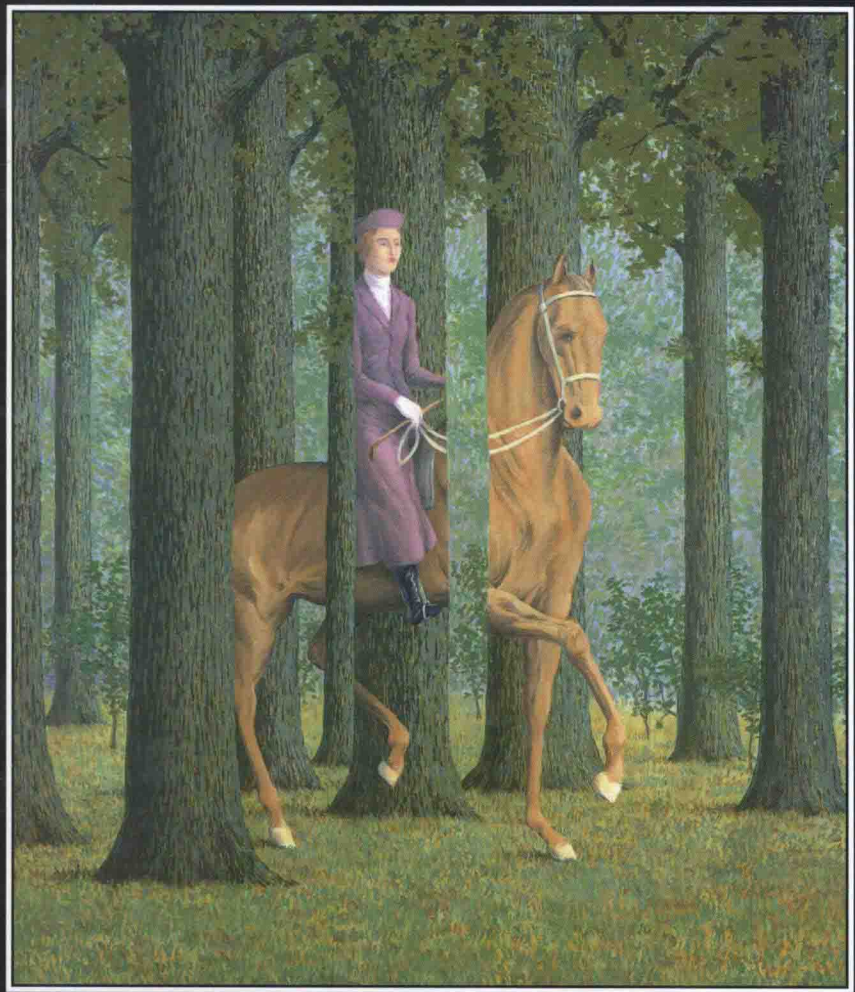


Darwin and Theories of Aesthetics and Cultural History

Edited by
BARBARA LARSON and SABINE FLACH



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ASHGATE

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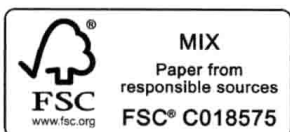
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DARWIN AND THEORIES OF AESTHETICS AND CULTURAL HISTORY

Darwin and Theories of Aesthetics and Cultural History is a significant contribution to the fields of theory, Darwin studies, and cultural history. This collection of eight essays is the first volume to address, from the point of view of art and literary historians, Darwin's intersections with aesthetic theories and cultural histories from the eighteenth century to the present day. Among the philosophers of art influenced by Darwinian evolution and considered in this collection are Alois Riegl, Ruskin, and Aby Warburg. This stimulating collection ranges in content from essays on the influence of eighteenth-century aesthetic theory on Darwin and nineteenth-century debates circulating around beauty to the study of evolutionary models in contemporary art.

Barbara Larson is Associate Professor of Art History at the University of West Florida. She specializes in intersections between art and science in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Her publications include The Dark Side of Nature: Science, Society, and the Fantastic in the Work of Odilon Redon (2005), and The Art of Evolution: Darwin, Darwinisms, and Visual Culture (2009), which she co-edited.

Sabine Flach is currently Professor of Contemporary Art and Art Theory at the School of Visual Arts, Department of Fine Arts, New York City. She specializes in modern and contemporary art, aesthetics, aesthesis, and media of embodiment; habitus in habitat; the epistemology and aesthetics of visual thinking; and intersections between art, art theory, art history, and cognitive, neuro- life-sciences, and perceptual psychology. Her publications include: Habitus in Habitat I: Emotion and Motion (2010), Habitus in Habitat II: Other Sides of Cognition (2010), and Habitus in Habitat III: Synaesthesia and Kinaesthetics (2011), which she co-edited, as well as Sensing Senses. Die WissensKünste der Avantgarden. Künstlerische Theorie und Praxis zwischen Wahrnehmungswissenschaft, Kunst und Medien. 1915–1930 (2013).

This book is dedicated to the memory of Chester A. Larson.

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Preface

This book was inspired by two conferences in which the influence of aesthetic theory on Darwin and the scientist's important legacy to art historians and aesthetic theorists came into focus. The first conference, "Kultur der Evolution: Rethinking Evolutionary Theory from the Perspective of Cultural Studies," was sponsored by the Zentrum für Literatur- und Kulturforschung in Berlin in October 2008, and the second conference, "The Art of Evolution: Darwin and Visual Culture" was held at the Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London, on the occasion of the Darwin bicentennial in July 2009. The very richness of the topic at hand is such that the essays in this volume begin with Darwin's youth and continue into the present. As the reader will gather in the following introduction, there is much more to be investigated concerning Darwin, aesthetic theory, and cultural history, and the editors hope that the text at hand will encourage further enquiry.

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Introduction

Barbara Larson

In the late 1830s, when Charles Darwin was formulating his theories of evolution, including the reason behind the existence of the emotions (formerly, the passions) and their manner of expression, eighteenth-century aesthetic theory provided a serious resource. Notebooks from 1838 to 1844 are filled with references to Joshua Reynolds, Edmund Burke, Archibald Alison, and David Hume, among others. Then, as in recent decades, neither scientists, nor philosophers, nor art theorists were thought to have a privileged position in explicating emotive responses to forms and colors in the natural world or in the domain of the arts. Darwin's ideas were shaped by many observers on the human (or animal) response to the natural world, especially, but not exclusively, those engaged in neurology, including a number of aesthetic theorists. Today, an active site of aesthetic theory is emerging from current work in neuroscience, and Darwinian ideas have proven to be central, as we shall see.

While a round through the neurosciences might make sense in terms of a physiological basis for aesthetic theory that we might expect to be connected to Darwin, what of the "in between" period, when other kinds of theories supplanted or were more readily considered than a biological basis for an aesthetic appreciation of nature and art? Indeed, when Darwin was publishing his principle texts, other positions were far better known and more influential than a physiological basis for aesthetics, such as the moralizing of Ruskin on the spiritual underpinning of beauty in nature and, by extension, in the best of art, and the Aesthetic "art for art's sake" Movement—neither moral nor based in biological concerns. Yet a number of theorists of the arts either used Darwinian language, referred to the scientist in crucial aspects of their work, or enthusiastically recalled his writings as central to their own developing ideas. These include philosophers of art as divergent as Hippolyte Taine, Alois Riegl, Gottfried Semper, Heinrich Wölfflin, Aby Warburg, George Santayana, and E.H. Gombrich.

In some cases, cultural histories were implicated in the idea of selective external pressures that “weed out” the unviable, leaving only the environmentally suitable, according to Darwinian natural selection. Devoted Darwinian follower Grant Allen had taken up this approach in *Evolution in Italian Art* (1908). In it, he claimed a limited number of possible subjects available to Italian artists during the Renaissance and a “descent with modification,” which he examines “with the eye of an evolutionist.” Thus, varieties emerge that reflect different environmental conditions imposed upon them; for example, the “Paduan type,” which “befits the denizen of a university city.” This “scientific” approach to the history of art itself has a considerable legacy, as we shall see. Moreover, we find Darwin emerging at unlikely aesthetic junctures, such as in the early twentieth century, when artists mined his ideas on camouflage to affect the aesthetic act of the “hidden” object in plain view wherein the end goal is protection from one’s enemy, ultimately contributing to the promotion of camouflage during World War I. In another context that involves survival and its antithesis, are corporeal aesthetics of health and the body in eugenics campaigns in which Darwin’s ideas on selection were often appropriated and underscored as authoritative.

As a student at Cambridge in the late 1820s, Darwin had read Joshua Reynolds’ *Discourses on Art* and Edmund Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* and had visited the paintings collections at the National Gallery in London and at the Fitzwilliam in Cambridge.¹ As would be the case with a gentleman scholar of Darwin’s generation, he was familiar with the by then standard aesthetic categories of the sublime, the beautiful, and the picturesque. Like the artists who accompanied voyages of exploration, he often framed his pictorial references in this familiar context during the course of his five-year voyage around the world.² In his *Beagle* diary of the early-to-mid 1830s, and later in the published *Journal of Researches*, novel scenes were often described according to such conventions. On approaching Santa Cruz:

The gaudy coloured houses of white yellow & red; the oriental-looking Churches & the low dark batteries, with the bright Spanish flag waving over them were all most picturesque.—The small trading vessels with their raking masts & the magnificent back ground of Volcanic rock would together have made a most beautiful picture.³

When he refers to several soldiers playing cards by a campfire at night on the Argentine pampas as a “Salvator Rosa scene,” he is demonstrating awareness of the British association of the sublime with the example of the seventeenth-century painter.⁴ In concluding comments on his voyage, real scenes and artificial representation converge: “Group masses of naked rock, even in the wildest forms; for a time they may afford a sublime spectacle... paint them with bright and varied colours, they will become fantastick; clothe them with vegetation, they must form, at least a decent, if not a most beautiful

picture."⁵ In his discussion of color, Darwin was evocative and often precise. He relied upon Patrick Syme's hand-tinted *Werner's Nomenclature of Colours*, but sometimes mentioning the art of painting itself was enough.⁶ In December of 1831, when approaching the Bay of Biscay, he wrote:

[I] was much struck by the appearance of the sea... It is not only the darkness of the blue, but the brilliancy of its tint when contrasting with the white curling tip that gives such a novel beauty to the scene.—I have seen paintings that give a faithful idea of it.⁷

After the publication of his experiences and some of his scientific observations aboard the *Beagle*, Darwin turned once again to Reynolds and Burke, and to many other sources as well, as he worked privately on the theories that would come to have such a tremendous impact on science and culture over the next two centuries. Aesthetic theorists now were helpful to him not in "picturing" nature, but in grappling with the physiology behind responses to the natural world. Darwin was drawn to the "sensationalist" school of philosophy of the mind in British eighteenth-century thought that originated with Locke, who connected subjective human response to objective phenomena in the environment. Followers of this school made the vibratory patterns of the nervous system central in understanding the relationship of man to his surroundings. These vibrations, following the impact of the external object on the nervous system, were described as sensations. For Locke, sensations are followed by reflection, which shape the self. Locke believed that the effect of sensations on the *tabula rasa* of the newborn contributed to associations or memories and were crucial to development.

Darwin thought Edmund Burke worthy of consideration. Burke drew on the materialism of Locke, but had less of an interest in associationism. Burke made pleasure and pain the two central arenas of aesthetic impact in his program—the former attached to society (and beauty) and the latter to self-preservation (and the sublime). Though not a scientist himself, he posited that beauty is produced through smoothness and gradual variations in external objects, producing a relaxing effect on the nerves, whereas responses connected to terror and pain (the sublime) cause extreme tension in the nerves. The speculative advantage for Darwin was the universal application of such possibilities, an emphasis on innate responses (rather than those which are learned), and a program dividing the individual under threat, which could be applied to the struggle for life within and without species, countered by a theory of the need for and pleasure found in society.

The Scottish branch of associationism was compelling as well. These thinkers focused on the nervous system and stressed past memories or associations. For Hume, whose *A Treatise of Human Nature* had been published in 1739–1740 and *Of the Standard of Taste* appeared in the same year that Burke initially published *A Philosophical Enquiry* (1757), the source of aesthetics rested within the mind. However, Hume believed that the physical structure

of the mind made some objects more readily beautiful and others likely to inspire fear. Archibald Alison, in his *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste* (1790) went further in abandoning the idea of aesthetic possibilities residing within the object itself. Aesthetic appreciation was ultimately found in the free play of the imagination rather than a direct impression from object to mind. We have individual associations or memories that cause responses. Following Locke, we find a face beautiful, for example, not because of set laws of beauty, but because of past associations. Darwin's grandfather, the evolutionist Erasmus Darwin, who was attentively read by Charles Darwin in the years he formed his central ideas, followed such associationist thinking:

Our perception of beauty consists in our recognition by the sense of vision of those objects, first, which have inspired our love by the pleasure they have afforded to many of our senses; as to our sense of warmth, of touch, of smell, of taste, of hunger and thirst; and secondly which bear any analogy of form to such objects.⁸

Writing in the early nineteenth century, the Scotsman Dugald Stewart also found aesthetic associations to be located in the mind rather than in the object, but this occurs through a complex series of associations. Darwin outlined Stewart's theories of the sublime and of taste. In his autobiography Darwin noted that while on the *Beagle* voyage, he had thought sublime sensations were attached to a higher power (god), but had since realized this was not the case (see Chapter 1 of this volume). Stewart's explanation for such confusion, as noted by Darwin, was that we understand the meaning of the sublime to be, at its most literal, height, and we associate ascension with power (or the sensation of "inward glorying") and therefore think of god as living in the heavens. Later, when we experience wonder or terror as in observing a vast ocean, for example, we are reminded of the rather similar sensations we experience with height and this brings god to mind; thus, through a complex interaction of associations we associate god with the sublime. Darwin offered a somewhat Burkean corrective: "It appears to me, that we may often trace the source of the 'inward glorying' to the greatness of an object itself or the ideas excited & associated with it..."⁹ However, the Scottish program encouraged him to consider variability and relativity in standards of beauty. Therefore, humans followed cultural standards of beauty in mate choice and even highly personal ideas based on past associations.

But what of Joshua Reynolds and Darwin's readings in the late thirties? Reynolds is hardly a theorist who would be considered as grounded in biology; on the contrary, his program held up classical standards of the ideal. Yet Reynolds did acknowledge relativism and opinion in relationship to beauty, to which Darwin responded, "Is our idea of beauty, that which we have been most generally accustomed to...[d]eduction from this would be that a mountaineer...borne out of country yet would love mountains, & a negro, similarly treated would think negress beautiful..." Darwin further

commented that although Reynolds could account for the instinct to feel beauty, he could not account for the feeling itself.¹⁰ Later, in preparing *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872), he found Reynolds' observations of the human figure worth reviewing and mentions him, perhaps because this book was designed to appeal to artists as well as scientists.¹¹

Darwin's own most developed aesthetic program was in the area of sexual selection wherein he believed that females of all species save humans choose the most "beautiful" male, whether this is based on color or formation of secondary sexual characteristics (e.g. antlers) or size or a combination thereof, and human males choose females also based on ideas of beauty. Sexual selection was introduced in *On the Origin of Species* (1859), but largely developed in later years and was a major consideration in *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871). The impact of the Darwinian program on the aesthetics of allure among humans has been the subject of a number of books in literary theory and more recently has come into focus in the arts.¹² Biologist Geoffrey Miller has suggested that it is sexual choice with all its aesthetic implications that has been the driving force of human evolution (as opposed to the primacy of that other Darwinian mechanism "natural selection" or "survival of the fittest.").¹³ This includes abilities in the arts, sports, and leadership that are forms of display and become interwoven with mating rituals (including in the present day).

Darwin's extensive speculations on the biological basis of mate attraction (where beauty effects procreation and survival of the species) or the symbiotic relationship between birds or insects and plants and flowers (where beauty as perceived by humans is but a byproduct of natural processes, such as the ability of those seeking nectar to spot bright colors) drew considerable attention, much of it negative. The eminent art theorist, John Ruskin, who thought of himself as a skilled scientist, was a self-appointed detractor, promoting the idea that beauty in nature was for the aesthetic pleasure of god and man. Jonathan Smith has written about the specifics and timing of Ruskin's publications on plants, for example, designed to thwart Darwin.¹⁴ When the formerly devoted follower of Ruskin, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, seemingly diverged to produce sensual "material" paintings of women compressed in tight spaces beginning in 1859—a date that coincided with the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*—there were those who suspected some kind of theoretical alignment between the scientist's physiological arguments on evolution and the emerging amoral school of Aestheticism, most notably that branch derisively dubbed the "fleshly school," which included Rossetti, by poet Robert Buchanan.¹⁵

Though Rossetti never claimed a biological or Darwinian basis to his approach, the theorist who did attempt to popularize the scientist's aesthetic ideas was Grant Allen. In a direct rebuttal to Ruskin and his followers (perhaps Buchanan among them) he opened his text *Physiological Aesthetics* (1877) as follows: