

Philosophy: Beauty and the brain

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At the August meeting of the Philosophy Special Interest Group (Tuesday 22nd) I gave another presentation on the Philosophy of Art. Rather than discuss the whys and wherefores of what is, and what is not, art – Roman philosopher Lucretius observed “One man’s food is another man’s poison” – I chose instead to think about why we think some things are beautiful. Certainly, beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but it turns out that within the population of beholders, there’s surprising agreement. It seems several features – simplicity, repeating patterns, rhythm, symmetry, certain juxtapositions of colour, and certain ratios and geometries – visually, are generally pleasing. Why so? Because recent brain imaging studies have shown images that are judged to be subjectively attractive increase levels of activity in neural circuits associated with pleasure, reward, and reinforcement. That is, things that are personally considered beautiful tickle the parts of the brain that give rise to subjective pleasure, whether it’s Monet or Jackson Pollock doing the tickling. In the case of humans, (and other creatures), an important aspect of beauty is symmetry, both in terms of morphology and movement. Studies have shown that in terms of mate selection, symmetry is widely taken as an observable sign of good health, and desirable, since good health has profound evolutionary significance. Thus, an acute appreciation of symmetrical beauty, over the millennia and through processes of natural selection, has been burned deep into our neural circuits. So that’s why I think Susan Sarandon is lovely!

