

SEDUCTION / MATING

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It. *Seduzione*; Fr. *Seduction*; Germ. *Verführung*; Span. *Sedución*. The term “seduction” comes from the Latin *sedūcere*, “drawing aside”, “leading astray”. Seduction is the process of enticing a prospective mate in engaging for a sentimental or sexual relation. “Mating” is from Middle English *mate*, a borrowing from Middle Low German “mate” (“messmate”, replacing Middle English *mette* from Old English *ġemetta*: “sharer of food”, “table-guest”), and indicates the pairing of opposite-sex organisms for the purposes of sexual reproduction. In this article, seduction and mating are considered only in their possible aesthetic specificity.

The aesthetic problem of seduction and mating has enjoyed widespread currency, in particular in evolutionism from Darwin onwards. In the second part of his *Descent of Man* (1871), Darwin intended to complement the conception of natural selection developed in the *Origin of Species* (1859) with the concept of sexual selection. According to Darwin, the first form of sexual selection, namely the male competition for access to females, is a fight amongst males, conducted by means of both their physical vigour and their weapons such as deer’s antlers. While these weapons were originally selected because of their usefulness in defence against other species, they became more and more refined, serving purposes of sexual selection (advantage in procreation). The aesthetic domain of seduction begins when males do not limit themselves to fighting among themselves, but turn directly to females, in the attempt to seduce them. During this process, males display their charms before females (tints, wattles, plumes, dances, etc.). Darwin’s thesis is that the development of this ornamental beauty goes hand in hand with the development of the aesthetic sense in females: hence, males exhibit refined charms just because females are more sensible to adorned males (Welsch 2004; Bartalesi 2012).

Over the course of the debate in the 19th century, the importance of the aesthetic dimension of sexual selection was questioned by Alfred Russell Wallace. In his *Natural Selection and Tropical Nature* (1878), he contended that natural selection could well account for many features of male phenotypes and their beauty. In more detail, according to Wallace, ornaments and courtship displays may be explained “by

supposing that colour and ornament are strictly correlated with health, vigour, and general fitness to survive" (Wallace 1878). Though never fully rejecting the possibility of sexual selection, Wallace judges as an unnecessary hypothesis the "taste for the beautiful" which Darwin had strenuously affirmed (Cronin 1991).

Currently there is no agreement among scholars about the evolution of mate preference and seduction: some of the most widespread models are the sensory bias models (Ryan 1990; Endler and Basolo 1998), in which males mimicking certain sensorial stimuli linked with their ecological setting become more attractive to females; the direct benefit models (Williams 1975; Kirkpatrick and Ryan 1991), in which females are attracted to males able to provide them with an immediate reward (e.g. in terms of parental care, see Trivers 1972); or good genes models (Williams 1966; Zahavi 1975), in which males' power of seducing by means of their aesthetic traits depends on "good genes" signalling a remarkable fitness in the current ecological setting (other hypotheses are the "runaway sexual selection", Pomiankowski and Iwasa 1993; "genetic compatibility", Tregenza and Wedell, 2000; "chase-away sexual selection", Holland and Rice 1998).

From the perspective of aesthetics, the main concern is the role played by the taste for the beautiful in these explanations, thus reviving – as pointed out by Prum – the Darwinian point against Wallace's objections (Prum 2012). Prum adopts a threefold requirement which an explanation of the evolution of mate preferences as specifically aesthetic preferences should take into account: "(i) a component of the phenotype that functions as a signal through perception by another individual, and (ii) sensory/cognitive evaluation of those perceptions by the receiver leading to the exercise of preference/choice", as well as (iii) the coevolution of the signal and its evaluation (Prum 2012).

Such a criterion is far from being unanimously accepted. In particular, according to the explanations deriving from the so-called fitness indicator theory, clearly stated by Ronald A. Fisher (1930), seduction should be considered not as consequential to the perception or evaluation of beauty, but as consequential to the perception of fitness of the potential mate. Within this conception, two different variants can be distinguished. The first version does not deny that seduction and mating depend on the female perception of male beauty. However, so runs the argument, what is consciously perceived as attraction to beauty must be more correctly described as sustained attention to a mere fitness indicator. According to Miller's ornamental mind theory (Miller 2000), in particular, human art and media are a sort of sexual ornamentation comparable to the peacock's tail, whose evolution aims at seducing and attracting possible partners, signalling the individual's genetic fitness. The second version, typical of sociobiology, maintains that mate preferences do not rest on aesthetic premises, insofar as what seems to be at first sight a preference for beauty is actually nothing but the decoding process of fitness. In Volland's words: "Aesthetic perception is essentially an evaluation process and aesthetic judgment in its core is a judgment about the sociobiological quality of those who produce or sponsor costly signals and thus advertise for partners for sexual, political, or moral forms of cooperation" (Volland 2003). In this perspective, therefore, the aesthetic dimension is only appearance, since aesthetic perception is directly and exclusively determined by the consideration of fitness value.

Against this latter version, Wolfgang Welsch has raised several objections (Welsch 2004). For if seduction did not rest on the perception of beauty, but only on the perception of fitness, it would be necessary to assume a kind of pre-established harmony between beauty and fitness. That such isomorphism is rather unlikely, though, is already apparent from the fact that a minimal change in the aesthetic traits can sensibly alter the male mating chances. Further, seduction would seem to derive from an exclusive vision of the fitness character, something which should be proved rather than merely assumed: "Whatever the hidden meaning of beauty may be, the beautiful is first perceived and estimated due to its characteristics of being beautiful. It is precisely these aesthetic characteristics that produce the attraction" (Welsch 2004). In this sense, even if beauty on which seduction rests is ultimately used for non-aesthetic aims, the perception of beauty in seduction can in no way be by-passed.

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