

Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature

Volume 7
Number 1 *Fall 2008*

Article 4

Fall 2008

Review of Martin Seel, *Aesthetics of Appearing*, trans. John Farrell.

Mario Wenning
University of Macau

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrc>
[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Recommended Citation

Wenning, Mario (2008). Review of "Review of Martin Seel, *Aesthetics of Appearing*, trans. John Farrell," *Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature*: Vol. 7 : No. 1
Available at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrc/vol7/iss1/4>

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College. <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrc/vol7/iss1/4>

For more information, please contact repository@brynmawr.edu.

Martin Seel, *Aesthetics of Appearing*, trans. John Farrell. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005. 283 pp. ISBN 0804743819.

Reviewed by Mario Wenning, University of Macau

Martin Seel belongs to a generation of German thinkers who productively reinterpret and develop many of the central motifs of the Frankfurt School tradition of critical theory. While distancing himself from the pretension and dogmatism associated with membership in any "school of thought," Seel shares with his intellectual ancestors a concern for the philosophical significance of art and aesthetic experience. It is not only the concern for aesthetics that connects Seel primarily to Adorno, but also his engagement with topics as diverse as happiness, nature, or the role of activity and passivity in ethics and epistemology. Seel is characteristic of contemporary German philosophizing in that he knows the traditions on both sides of the Atlantic. This is expressed in the attempt to cultivate a style of thinking that emphasizes conceptual clarity coupled with knowledge of the tradition and an openness to concrete aesthetic, ethical, and epistemic phenomena.

In his *Habilitationsschrift*, which appeared in 2000 in German and was elegantly translated by John Farrell, Seel returns to his earlier concern for questions of aesthetics and builds on his as yet untranslated dissertation *Aesthetics of Differentiation*. The title of the dissertation suggests that Seel would stress fragmentation over unity. This impression is misleading in that *Aesthetics of Appearing* develops an encompassing aesthetics that stresses what is common in art rather than its diversity.

This project is bold in at least two respects. First, we are no longer accustomed to overarching systematic proposals in a time of the critique of "grand narratives." The philosophy of art has become sensitive to the dangers inherent in any aesthetics of "x." It wants to break with a tradition that tended to disenfranchise and forcefully reduce what it was supposed to explain to its own interests. The disintegration of the art world into multiple, continuously changing art practices and the corresponding dismissal of the search for any one overarching purpose would seemingly thwart any attempt at an integrative aesthetics. In spite of these obstacles, Seel swims against the current by once again pursuing the fundamental question of philosophical aesthetics: "what is the essence of art and aesthetic experience?"

Second, the book is bold because the answer provided to the latter question is controversial in that the concept of appearing, *Erscheinen*, has been called into question in particular by the aesthetic revolutions of twentieth-century avantgardism, a point I will return to. Accordingly, Seel has to spend much conceptual effort to support his thesis that it is the concept of appearing (rather than, for example, semblance, mimesis, or play) that best characterizes what we undergo when we experience diverse works of art in an aesthetic (rather than instrumental, scientific or any other non-aesthetic) way.

After a *tour de force* through modern aesthetics from its beginnings with Baumgarten to Adorno, the second chapter, which is by far the longest and most systematic, presents and develops the central idea expressed in the title of the book. The last three chapters are rather loosely connected

meditations on flickering and resonating, the metaphysics of the picture, and the relationship between art and violence.

The central idea developed is the following: Aesthetic appearing is a quality that manifests itself in our experience of objects, surroundings, people, atmospheres, etc. It occurs when we perceive them in a way that is disinterested, playful, and focused on the singularity and the fleeting character of the experience. What sets it apart from other modes of experience is that it does not determine the object completely, but perceives it in its constitutive indeterminacy. Aesthetic appearing discloses to us our residency in the here and now. It thus enables us with the awareness of the ephemeral nature of reality and our place in this reality.

In principle, every object of sensible experience is a potential object of aesthetic appearing: "We can react aesthetically to anything and everything that is anyway sensuously present—or we need not react thus." A slight modification makes the thesis less universal in scope: "There are places where it is difficult not to behave aesthetically (depending on one's inclination, in the forest or in the garden, at an auto dealership or in a museum, in a concert hall or in a sports area), just as there are places where it is difficult to do so (in an office of a public authority, in a parking garage, during an examination, at the dentist's, or at Wal-Mart)" (Seel 34).

The richness of Seel's approach consists in taking seriously the interplay between art works, the demands they make, and the person experiencing them. This is not typical of the history of aesthetics. While aesthetic theories such as Bloch's and Heidegger's only consider the work of art (as the anticipatory semblance of a utopian reality or the concealment of truth), others, such as Kant's, only take into account the subject that judges something to be beautiful (as at once pleasurable, universal, necessary and "purposive without a purpose"). The first approach misses the point that we cannot understand the process of art without understanding it as part of an experience that subjects participate in, while the latter experiential account misses the importance of the art work. For Seel, the normativity inherent in aesthetic appearing is to be found neither exclusively in the experiencing subject nor exclusively in the object. Rather it results from the complex interplay between the work and the spectator, reader, or listener.

This complex notion of aesthetic appearing as an interplay of subject and object is defended against competing accounts such as that of Arthur Danto. Danto claims that the art work and the sensuous experience of this work do not play a central role after it has become impossible to distinguish "mere real things" from art objects during the twentieth century. The readymades in particular have proven, Danto claims, that the sensuous dimension of appearing has become superfluous, or at least inessential to what these works are about.

To Danto's dismissal of the category of sensuous appearing, Seel objects that two phenomenally equivalent objects are not necessarily aesthetically equivalent. We should not, Seel contends, think of aesthetic appearing as irreducibly bound to our senses and certain art objects. Seel claims that what aesthetic appearing consists of in the case of abstract art, such as Duchamp's readymades or Warhol's Brillo boxes, is not sensuous presencing, but forms of imaginative presencing, which depend not only on the physical properties of an object, but also on the context in which it stands.

This expansion of what is meant by "appearing" also reveals the limitations of the category. By combining a *mélange* of sensuous and intellectual dimensions, it loses diagnostic and explanatory precision. Doesn't the fact that much contemporary art appeals to imaginative acts of making present in engaging us in thought puzzles triggered by the claim "this is art!?!" suggest a more radical turn away from appearing? Experiences that are triggered by randomly selected and replaceable objects indicate a qualitative shift of what art can do, a shift that Seel's conception cannot adequately address. For him all objects reveal the same indeterminacy of experience, even if in ever different ways.

The occurrence of conceptual art, which marks the end of the necessity of sensuous singularity, of the "aura" of the art work, does pose a problem for a theory operating with any standard meaning we would ascribe to the term "aesthetic appearing." Whoever goes into a contemporary performance must admit that aesthetic appearing is only one (even though a highly important) dimensioning that coexists with many other dimensions of the aesthetic process such as reflection, conceptual confusion, displacement, recognition, etc.

Seel's controversial proposal makes a strong case that the dimension of object-bound appearance does survive as an essential aspect of aesthetic experience even in borderline cases in which ordinary objects become art objects. There is a simple litmus test to prove Seel's point. No knowledge of what an artwork does philosophically can escape the fact that, in the end, we have to confront the artist's oeuvre to be experiencing it, be it a white canvas, a silent piece of music, or an everyday object that has been put into an art context. The experience of the work remains a necessary condition of its aesthetic appreciation.

However, even if we agree that residues of aesthetic appearing thus conceived are necessary conditions for contemporary art—and Seel makes a strong case for this assumption—there are arguably other necessary conditions which could be said to be equally important, e.g. revolutionary world-disclosure, disinterestedness, or aesthetic delight. It is not always clear if Seel simply treats aesthetic appearance as the umbrella concept that encompasses all of these other dimensions, or if he sees these in some other form of relationship with aesthetic appearance. Seel's claim that it is ultimately appearing that is essential about our aesthetic encounters calls for a more precise use of the term to clarify what it includes and what it excludes.

Appearing is not supposed to be just a new name for an old insight. In particular it is important to understand that appearing, *Erscheinen*, is not the same as the traditional aesthetic concept of aesthetic semblance, *Schein*, as it was prominent in aesthetic debates in German idealism and the Frankfurt School tradition. Rather it refers to a process that is in principle transitory and without an end (*Erscheinen* is thus rightly translated as "appearing" rather than "appearance" or "apparition"). Furthermore, aesthetic appearing is intended to refer to the phenomenal constitution of objects in a reliable rather than merely illusory sense ("illusion" being the alternative translation of *Schein*).

We can distinguish between an object's being-so and its appearing, in which the being-so captures our sensuous attention. Both being-so and appearing address the phenomenal constitutions of the object. Whereas the simple being-so addresses the first-order qualities of an

object that can be fixed in propositional knowledge, the appearing-dimension becomes manifest through lingering or aesthetic perception of the object. The former is independent of the act of perception while the latter depends on, even if it is not reducible to, perception. These dimensions are connected in that an object that is discerned in its appearing also has and reveals the various visual, acoustic, haptic, olfactory, and gustatory appearances it simply has in terms of its being-so. Although the corresponding ways of perceiving objects are not mutually exclusive (I can for example watch a movie in the mode of aesthetic attention and yet perceive that it has a certain duration), aesthetic experience is different in kind from other forms of cognition: "It does not want to explore a constitution of the world; it wants to expose itself to the world's presence" (55). Drawing on Karl-Heinz Bohrer's work, Seel primarily focuses on the radical temporality that is revealed in aesthetic appearing. The exclusive focus on presencing, however, leaves out the other two temporal dimensions that are essential to works of art: remembrance and anticipation. Hegel rightly refers to art works as "vessels of memory" for they preserve and keep alive past experiences and rescue them from being forgotten. Furthermore, art works are capable of cultivating a sense of potential futures. They enable a form of what Bloch calls anticipatory semblance or pre-inkling (*Vorschein*) in that they sharpen our sense of possibility (*Möglichkeitssinn*).

These remarks should not diminish the book's virtues. Not only is it succinct, instructive, and crisply argued, it also has an aesthetic quality of its own. Seel has written a philosophical novel, filled with rich and often compelling interpretations of individual works of art. There is a protagonist, a rare exception in contemporary aesthetics. Reminiscent of Descartes's use of a piece of wax, Kant's nightingale, or Heidegger's interpretation of Van Gogh's peasant shoes, Seel invites us on an imaginative journey to discover the various experiential dimensions that an object as profane as a soccer ball can have. Oscar's ball was bought in Hamburg. What is special about it is that it becomes an object of aesthetic delight. The ball serves to elucidate what it is that distinguishes aesthetic from other forms of experience and investigation. "Taw" is the name Oscar gives the ball after receiving it as a present. It has quite a complex life story and plays different roles in different contexts and chapters of the book. As part of a crime scene it becomes a piece of evidence, whereas it becomes an object of aesthetic delight when perceived as a leather ball with a certain smell and a certain shape or a symbol of childhood experience. It has a history of being produced by Adidas, being bought in a store in Hamburg, and being played with time and again. The choice of this protagonist reflects not only the author's apparent interest in soccer, but also his conviction that mere profane objects can be objects of "atmospheric" or "mere appearing." The analysis also draws on and interprets examples from modernist literature and film to develop the basic argument.

While evoking and decoding the often opaque quality of aesthetic appearing as a process of presencing, the book does not attempt to pursue the question of what significance aesthetic appearing has in a culture's processes of "self-appearing." The analyses lack what Hegel and Adorno call a "speculative moment." While we learn a lot about how aesthetic experience is structured, the question of how it relates to other activities and in what way it has been transformed by various aesthetic revolutions throughout history remains open. I am sure that Seel has good reasons to dismiss theories with a "speculative moment" as flights of fancy or expressions of aesthetic theory gone wild. However, an encompassing aesthetic theory would

have to address issues such as what it means that ordinary objects enter the realm of aesthetic perception or art works become abstract and self-referential.

Aesthetics in the tradition of critical theory from Schiller to Adorno, Benjamin, Bloch, Bürger, and Eagleton has aimed for a critical understanding of the subversive, emancipatory, as well as ideological roles of aesthetic processes in modern societies. The specific normativity, these thinkers argue, has political and philosophical implications that cannot be adequately captured within the narrow confines of a traditional ontology of art or theory of aesthetic experience. What are the ethical, political, and other implications of losing oneself in the world of appearing? Why is the feeling of freedom from determinacy and use restricted to this experience? What is the danger of a loss of shape and autonomy due to the intoxicated condition one finds oneself in when being moved by artistic epiphanies? These questions are largely bracketed by Seel, but an engagement with them would be necessary to show why his important insight into the nature of aesthetic appearing is in fact relevant.

Although Seel does not directly position aesthetic appearing with regard to questions of ethics, politics, or the economy, the chapter on "Borderline Experiences Outside and Inside Art" and in particular the final "Variations on Art and Violence" focus on the tension between power and powerlessness. Detailed depictions of acts of violence that capture the viewer's imagination are abundant in the history of art from the *Odyssey* to Francis Bacon's paintings and suggest more than a superficial affinity. Drawing on the film *Fargo*, Seel sees the original scene of violence as being determined by the triangular relationship of perpetrator-victim-spectator. Although violence often occurs in encounters between perpetrators and victims, the "meaning of violence," Seel argues "cannot be understood independently of the additional position of ... spectators" (188).

Violence and aesthetics stand to each other, to use Bohrer's phrase, in a "relation of mutual determination." If it is the case that acts of violence are often committed with the perspective of a present or absent spectator in mind, Seel's answer does not go far enough. That art allows us "to linger in the eye of violence as no involved or uninvolved person can," is, although plausible, not a compelling argument for the substantive affinity between violence and (especially modern) art.

Compared to Seel's reading, Adorno's speculative interpretation of the affinity of the aesthetic violence of the work of art and actual violence appears like a hyperbolic disclosure:

The comportment of artworks reflects the violence and domination of empirical reality by more than analogy. The closure of artworks, as the unity of their multiplicity, directly transfers the nature-dominating comportment to something remote from its reality; this is perhaps because the principle of self-preservation points beyond the possibility of its realization in the external world, there sees itself confuted by death, and is unable to reconcile itself to that; autonomous art is a work of contrived immortality, utopia and hubris in one; scrutinized from another planet they would all seem Egyptian. (*Aesthetic Theory* 139)

To simplify this muddled passage: the structure of the art work reflects real violence in that it creates unity (through the mastery of artistic material). Although it is fleeting in nature, its character as a work also points beyond transition, while its harmony points beyond mastery.

It might be an exaggeration to follow Adorno in identifying works of art as mummified promises, as sites where the principle of self-preservation and mastery encounters its constitutive limits. On the other hand, the price for Seel's comparatively deflated account of aesthetic experience as an immersion in otherwise unavailable forms of presencing is that it threatens to lose the critical bite necessary to understand what is at stake in the relationship between art and social reality.

Despite these reservations, the broad vision and range of aesthetic topics addressed on a persistently high level deserves not only attention but respect. It has been too long since we have seen a constructive and ambitious attempt to develop an encompassing aesthetic theory. The fact that this book is also a joy to read makes it even more refreshing. Seel's invitation to reconsider aesthetic experience from the perspective of appearing, a dimension that survives even in the art forms that are often seen as taking flight from appearing, makes him one of the most important and original voices in contemporary philosophy of art.

Works Cited

Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, Trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977.