

**From *Schein* to *Erscheinen*:
Martin Seel and Latest Developments in Aesthetics**

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Abstract

The history of aesthetics is basically dominated by the concept of *Schein* (appearance). Baumgarten has understood art and the aesthetic experience as an experience of semblance or appearance. The Kantian concept of art as free play was also linked to the concept of *Schein*. For Hegel, the being of the beautiful lies in its *Schein*. *Schein* was also central to the aesthetic theories of Walter Benjamin and Theodore Adorno, especially their debate on the decline of the aura. However, this history has been interrupted by various attempts to depart from the idealistic notion of *Schein*. Outstanding among these attempts is the concept of *Erscheinen* (appearing) introduced by the contemporary German philosopher Martin Seel (1954-). In his *Ästhetik des Erscheinens* (Aesthetics of Appearing), published in German in 2003 and translated into English in 2005, Seel argues that the aesthetic experience consists in the process, rather than in the final product, of the object's appearing. He introduces the concept of appearing as a central notion in the aesthetic experience. The present study thus explores Seel's contributions to aesthetics as represented in the shift from *Schein* to *Erscheinen*, together with the notions of resonating and pictorial appearing. By doing so, the study aims to show how Seel makes a shift of attention from art as representation to art as presentation.

Keywords: Martin Seel; aesthetics of appearing; resonating; pictorial appearing; presentation

من المظهر إلى الظهور:

مارتن زيل وأحدث تطورات علم الجمال

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المستخلص:

يهيمن مفهوم المظهر (Schein) على تاريخ علم الجمال. فقد فهم باومجارتن الفن والتجربة الجمالية على أنهما تجربة تتعلق بالأساس بالمظهر. كما ربط كانط مفهوم الفن خاصته - باعتباره لعباً حرّاً - بمفهوم المظهر. وبالنسبة لهيجل، يكمن جوهر الجمال في المظهر. كما كان مفهوم المظهر أيضاً محوراً أساسياً في النظريات الجمالية لفالتر بنيامين وتيودور أدورنو، لا سيما في نقاشهما حول تلاشي الهالة. لكن هذا التاريخ تخللته محاولات عديدة للخروج على مفهوم المظهر الضارب بجذوره في علم الجمال المثالي. ومن أبرز هذه المحاولات مفهوم الظهور (Erscheinen) الذي طرحه الفيلسوف الألماني المعاصر مارتن زيل (1954 -). ففي كتابه المعنون «علم جمال الظهور» (Ästhetik des Erscheinens)، الذي نُشر باللغة الألمانية في عام 2003 وُترجم إلى الإنجليزية في عام 2005 تحت عنوان (Aesthetics of Appearing)، يرى زيل بأن التجربة الجمالية تكمن في عملية ظهور الشيء، وليس في مظهره النهائي. ومن ثم فإن هذه الدراسة تستكشف إسهامات مارتن زيل في علم الجمال المعاصر، التي تمثلت في التحول من مفهوم المظهر إلى مفهوم الظهور، وكذلك في مفهوم رجع الصدى (resonating)، أي الأثر الذي يتركه العمل الفني في المتلقي بعد أن انتهاء التجربة الجمالية المباشرة، بالإضافة إلى الظهور التصويري. وبذلك، تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى إظهار دور زيل في تغيير مفهومنا عن الفن من كونه تمثيلاً إلى (representation) إلى اعتباره عرضاً أو تقديمًا (presentation).

الكلمات المفتاحية: مارتن زيل - استيقا الظهور - رجع الصدى - الظهور التصويري - العرض

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Introduction

Schein (appearance, semblance or show) is a central concept in aesthetics. The elusive nature of this concept made it integral to the aesthetic theory that views the essence of art in terms of indeterminacy and free play. The concept was important to Baumgarten, who understands art and aesthetic experience as an experience of semblance or appearance (*Schein*). He “could proclaim aesthetic truth to be probability, the semblance and appearance of truth.” (Campe and Wiggins 196). Kant closely linked his concept of artistic free play to the concept of *Schein* and, therefore, contends that “moral *principles* ... are not so easily reconciled with *Schein*, for moral principles are generally in tension with our imitating of others, appearing other than how one is, and pretence” (Clewis 131). Kant believes that *Schein* is where the art object shows itself for disinterested pleasure. Because this disinterested pleasure, “aesthetic perception,” for Kant, “is not an acquisition of knowledge” (Seel, “The Career of Aesthetics” 401). For Hegel, “The beautiful [*Schöne*] has its being in pure appearance [*Schein*]” (4). As the being of the beautiful lies in its *Schein*, *Schein* is seen by Hegel as “a vehicle for the manifestation of truth” (Rosen, *On Voluntary Servitude* 317). *Schein* was also central to the aesthetic theories of Walter Benjamin and Theodore Adorno. It was a cornerstone in their debate on the decline of aura (a concept similar to the idealist concept of *Schein*). Adorno, for instance, links art as *Schein* to his negative dialectic, where the artful unresolved tension is kept between *Schein* as having no relation to “nonaesthetic reality,” and, at the same time, connecting “the work of art to a broader sphere of social meaning” (Rosen “Benjamin, Adorno” 51).

Martin Seel introduces a shift in the course of aesthetics from *Schein* (appearance) to *Erscheinen* (appearing). In his “The Career of Aesthetics in German Thinking” (1999), Seel provides a sketch of the development of aesthetics from Baumgarten to Adorno. The sketch, as he puts it, represents “the prehistory to an aesthetics of appearing” (“The Career of Aesthetics” 410). This culminates in his subverting of Heidegger’s aesthetics which defends the idea that we should not forget appearance, or Being, to his own claim that we should not forget appearing, as process of presenting. Seel’s aesthetics of appearing, as he contends, “makes it

possible to see the uncontrollable presence of our own being not as a lack of meaning or Being but as an opportunity to perceive ourselves” (“The Career of Aesthetics” 412).

With this said, there is almost no complete study in English on the critical appraisal of what difference or shift Seel made in aesthetics. This is due partly to his being a contemporary critical theorist and to his writing in German. Fortunately, his most relevant work to the present study, *Aesthetics of Appearing*, is translated into English in 2005 by John Farrell. There are only comments and analyses that come within a chapter on aesthetics. For instance, Jadranka Skorin-Kapov, in her *The Aesthetics of Desire and Surprise: Phenomenology and Speculation* (2015), analyses Seel’s differentiation between object of perception and aesthetic objects, a distinction leading to the difference between ordinary perception and aesthetic perception. “Aesthetic perception,” Skorin-Kapov writes, “perceives an object in its ‘aesthetic appearing,’ which contains a level of indeterminacy” (134). As a process of indeterminate appearing, “there is a surplus of presence unaccounted for by the objectivity of the object and by the employment of one’s separate senses; the appearing process reveals an aesthetic object” (Skorin-Kapov 134). By stressing Seel’s emphasis on artworks as presentations in a process of appearing, Skorin-Kapov contends that Seel “wants to free sensual perception from its representational chains” (134), a conclusion that will be scrutinized for its implications for the present study. In the same way, that is, writing about Seel *en passant*, Tone Roald, in his *The Subject of Aesthetics: A Psychology of Art and Experience* (2015), pays attention to the hierarchy of aesthetic experience as proposed by Seel in his *Aesthetics of Appearing*, stating that “Seel proposes a hierarchy of experience ranging from ‘pure’ sense perception, to affectively laden perception, to that of understanding” (45).

With this scarcity of secondary literature on Seel’s contributions to aesthetics, the present study will focus primarily on Seel’s works. The study will be at best with conceptual and analytic approach. Nonetheless, comparative moments cannot be avoided in order to better understand the need for this conceptual shift and its implications for aesthetic theory.

Seel and Art as *Erscheinen* (Appearing)

To begin with, the concept of appearing (*Erscheinen*) ought to be clarified. According to Seel, *Erscheinen* is an interplay between subject and object. For this reason, some commentators said that Seel’s aesthetics lies between phenomenology and reader response. This is because Seel is preoccupied by aesthetic perception as integral to aesthetic experience.

“Seel,” according to Claudia Olk, “is concerned with the ways in which the aesthetic object presents itself, and relates the immanent qualities to how it appears to the recipient” (24). In this respect, Seel himself writes in the first lines of his Preface to *Aesthetics of Appearing* that “[t]his book makes the proposal of having aesthetics begin not with the concepts of being-so [*Sosein*] or semblance [*Schein*] but with a concept of appearing [*Erscheinen*]” (xi). For him, aesthetic perception is attentiveness to this appearing. Aesthetic perception, in Seel’s aesthetic account, has an active role to play. As Vsevolod Rybakov explains, “aesthetic objects are formed by and comply with aesthetic perception as a special mode of perception and experience” (687).

To work on an aesthetic theory, one can be faced with a mayraid of starting points. One can start with artworks as objects, with the subjects who confront the artworks, or with a dialectic that combines both subjects and objects either positively like Hegel or negatively like Adorno. Seel decides to start with ‘*processes of perception.*’ For Seel, “[a]esthetic perception is open to us at all times” (*Aesthetics of Appearing* 20). Seel also writes that aesthetic perception is a time for the moment:

We encounter what our senses and our imagination happen upon here and now, for the sake of this encounter. This is one reason aesthetic attentiveness represents a form of awareness that is constitutive of the human form of life, for without this possibility of consciousness human beings would have a vastly diminished sense of their life’s presence (*Aesthetics of Appearing* 20).

Seel, in his focus on the process of appearing, departs from philosophies of art such as those of Hegel and Arthur C. Danto. For Hegel, as Seel argues, poetry departs from the realm of appearance “in favor of the world of sensuous ideas” (*Aesthetics of Appearing* 22). Danto also sees visual art as leaving all appearing behind. Against both Hegel and Danto, Seel takes appearing as the constitutive element of aesthetic production and perception. As he puts it, “[a]rtworks are not things of appearance with an added intellectual content, but genuine events of appearing processes” (*Aesthetics of Appearing* 23). Appearing is as multiple and different as the ways we perceive an object. There can be mere appearing, atmospheric appearing, or artistic appearing. This entails that perception of an object is inexhaustible.

But what is meant by appearing in Seel’s account? Seel argues that appearing is the focal point of aesthetic perception. This is because when

we perceive an object we perceive it not as a static being-so (under a certain aspect), but as a process of appearing. Such attentiveness to appearing is constitutive to aesthetic perception. Appearing, for Seel, is “a minimal concept of aesthetic encounter. It attempts to formulate the smallest common denominator between the manifold types of aesthetic objects and their perception” (*Aestehtics of Appearing* 35). Thus, “the aesthetic appearing of an object, Seel writes, “is a *play of its appearances*” (*Aestehtics of Appearing* 37).

Seel then unpacks the meanings of such a definition. He starts with the *object of perception* and argues that an object cannot be separated from its appearances, which are the objects’s determined properties, or “everything that can be determined about it on the basis of sensuous experience and conceptual discrimination” (*Aestehtics of Appearing* 37). All that we can distinguish in a thing through our senses is its appearance. However, the appearances of an object of perception are those enduring rather than the fleetings ones. Therefore, an object of perception “must not be equated with some of its appearances” (*Aestehtics of Appearing* 38). An object of perception, however, is not identified with its appearances. As Seel explains, “the identity of objects of perception is essentially tied to their causal history, that is, to a *sequence or duration* of states that is characteristic of their passage through space and time” (*Aestehtics of Appearing* 39).

As for appearance, Seel defines it in this way: “the conceptually discriminable sensuous composition of an object of perception” (*Aestehtics of Appearing* 41). To differentiate appearance from appearing, Seel writes:

The phenomenal reality of objects is located in their appearance. This reality can be discerned in various ways. The correlate of these different kinds of comprehension is on the one hand the “being-so” and on the other the “appearing” of phenomenal reality; this is the fundamental distinction in my theory (*Aestehtics of Appearing* 45).

By ‘being-so’ Seel means the phenomenal aspects of an object of perception, and by appearing he means the intercation (or play of qualities) of appearances in an object of perception. Such play of qualities is elusive and “cannot be epistemically fixed” (*Aestehtics of Appearing* 45). In appearing what is important is the “phenomenal simultaneity of the aspects sensitively perceivable in an object; what is important is the how of their givenness here” (*Aestehtics of Appearing* 46). Appearing is

foregrounded when we “allow an object of perception to have effect without restricting ourselves to specific aspects of its constitution or function” (*Aestehtics of Appearing* 47). Seel also argues that the concept of aesthetic appearing of an object is dependent on the sensuous constitution or appearance of the object. Appearing, therefore, goes in contrast to “propositionally fixed aspects” of the objects of perception, or to their being-so (*Aestehtics of Appearing* 48).

The concept of appearing has nothing to do with the notion of truth in art. That is, it is nonrepresentational. Appearing, Seel argues, is not to be understood in the Platonian sense of “the shining out of a nonsensuous *idea* of the beautiful—and thus as an encounter with a truth that is above appearing” (*Aestehtics of Appearing* 54). The concept of appearing, rather, is not an appearing of something but appearing as such. What we attend to in aesthetic perception is not the individual appearances of an object, but “what is appearing concurrently and fleetingly from a particular position” (*Aestehtics of Appearing* 55).

By attentiveness to the appearing of aesthetic objects aesthetic perception, Seel argues, is attributed to a heightened sense of the real. Aesthetic semblance [*Schein*] is taken by Seel to be a mode of appearing. He thus writes: “The power of aesthetic semblance emerges from an alliance with the processes of appearing. It is founded on the presence of what is appearing and yet goes way beyond presence and reality” (*Aestehtics of Appearing* 58). Aesthetic semblance is seen also as enriching aesthetic appearing with more aspects.

In aesthetic appearing there is a focus on the fleeting characters of an aesthetic object. As Seel argues, “to sense something in its appearing does not mean to grasp it in all of its appearances” (*Aestehtics of Appearing* 76). This is because the fleeting moment does not reify all appearances and fix them in one appearance that can be grasped. As far as aesthetic appearing is concerned, Seel differentiates between an object of aesthetic perception and an object of aesthetic imagination. He thus writes:

the objects of aesthetic perception are in constant interplay with their being perceived. Imagined objects, on the other hand, display a much more limited variety in their appearing. Whereas an object of perception continuously offers different impressions when we move in its presence, the objects of aesthetic imagination are constantly under the direction of this imagination (*Aestehtics of Appearing* 76).

The reason for this difference is that in imagination there is only subjective process, while in aesthetic perception there is a subject-object interplay. What is imagined thus has nothing to do with an extramental reality; it is much more determined by “the act of imagination than by what is experienced in the aesthetic perception of any real object” (*Aesthetics of Appearing* 76). Unlike in aesthetic perception, which is strongly tied to what is present, aesthetic imagination is free from what is present.

Seel then defines aesthetic perception in relation to the process of aesthetic appearing. He writes that aesthetic perception is “perception of something in its appearing, for the sake of this appearing” (*Aesthetics of Appearing* 88). As attentiveness to an aesthetic object in its appearing is an attentiveness to a process of presentation, aesthetic perception is characterized by openness. First, it is open to “the simultaneous and momentary play of appearances on its object” (*Aesthetics of Appearing* 88). It is also open to the interaction of sensuous sensing and to the immediate presence of the aesthetic event. It is also open to sensuous imagining and to “reflective movements with which it ascertains the strategy and construction of the objects of appearing” (*Aesthetics of Appearing* 89).

Thus, aesthetic perception, in Seel’s account, is not an idealistic fixed operation of perceiving works of art. It is also not a substitute to sensuous perception but an execution of it. It is a focus on the materiality present here and now of the aesthetic object of perception. Thus, it “goes beyond fixation on a theoretical or practical treatment of its object ... It is open here and now to the play of appearances accessible to it” (*Aesthetics of Appearing* 89). As an open process of perception, aesthetic perception is open to different types of appearing.

Types of Appearing

Seel differentiates between three types of aesthetic appearing: mere appearing, atmospheric appearing, and artistic appearing. In mere appearing, “we pay attention to nothing other than the repleteness of its momentary and simultaneous givenness, including the effects of a supportive sensuous semblance that might thereby arise” (*Aesthetics of Appearing* 91). In such a dimension, the object of perception appears in its objectness. We let ourselves be “captivated by the mere presence of the appearances interfering and coexisting on it” (*Aesthetics of Appearing* 91). In mere appearing, one could say, the viewing subject is not foregrounded; what is foregrounded in such mode of perception is the object itself. This is a mode of pure phenomenality, where there is focus

on what is appearing. There is no ambition, in this mode, of going beyond what is present, that is, beyond the here and now of the object of perception. This entails that there is no ambition also to constitute a meaning of what is sensed. “What counts here,” as Seel argues, “is nothing but perceiving the momentary simultaneity of what is sensuously perceivable” (*Aesthetics of Appearing* 92).

The second dimension is *atmospheric appearing*. In this mode, the object of perception “becomes intuitable in its existential significance to the perceivers” (*Aesthetics of Appearing* 92). Such existential significance might relate us to incidents in the past by stirring our memories. Unlike mere appearing, atmospheric appearing gives the situation of perception “a characteristic form in such a way that this character of the situation ... becomes intuitable in these objects (*Aesthetics of Appearing* 92). An example of this is how a piece of music can change the atmosphere in a given place. Atmospheric appearing comes with a style that affects and changes how we perceive. Atmospheres also have their own objective reality. They exist even if no one is paying attention to them. We are surrounded by atmosphere wherever we are. Seel, however, stresses that the working concept of atmosphere in his account is not to be taken as “the general perceptibility of atmospheres;” rather, he is speaking about “a sensuous-emotional awareness of existential correspondences” (*Aesthetics of Appearing* 93). Atmospheres are “a situation’s appearing” with all the senses and symbols related to it (*Aesthetics of Appearing* 93). Unlike mere appearing which has no appeal for meaning, atmospheric appearing is “always a *meaningful* perception ... [in which] aspects of biographical and historical knowledge frequently play an important part” (*Aesthetics of Appearing* 94). As such, atmospheric appearing is auratic in that it evokes knowledge of “cultural references in which the perception of these atmospheres is situated” (*Aesthetics of Appearing* 94). Reflection, in atmospheric appearing, is open to our spatiotemporal mode of existing.

In the third type of appearing, *artistic appearing*, artworks come into view. This mode is different from mere and atmospheric appearings in that artworks are *presentations*. Artworks, Seel confirms, are “presentations *in the medium of appearing*” (*Aesthetics of Appearing* 95). Here it is important to demarcate objects of art having artistic appearing from objects of mere and atmospheric appearing. What makes objects of art different is that they are “*constellational presentations*” (*Aesthetics of Appearing* 95) in the sense that their meaning is tied to their material. Artworks, thus, are *articulating* appearing in that they “need to be understood in their performative intent” (*Aesthetics of Appearing* 96).

Such understanding “unfolds in the context of an interpretative, an imaginative, and occasionally a reflective disclosure of artistic objects” (*Aesthetics of Appearing* 96). Unlike mere and atmospheric appearings, artistic appearing has a lot to do with meaning, where there is something to be understood. Artworks, from the outset, are created to be interpreted. Interpretation is thus essential in artistic appearing. The subject/the perceiver, therefore, is to be equipped with the knowledge necessary for interpreting the art object. All that the perceiver has (knowledge, interpretation and imagination) “has the aim here of bringing the artistic appearing of the work to life” (*Aesthetics of Appearing* 97).

As presentation, artistic appearing can bring to presentation the human world. The encounter with objects of art makes the presence of human life independent of the perceiver; it gives way to the presence of general experience. In such encounter with works of art, Seel writes, “we encounter presences of human life” (*Aesthetics of Appearing* 97). This metaphysics of presence brings Seel in agreement with Heidegger’s notion of ecstatic presence, where man finds himself surrounded by a web of spatiotemporal and meaningful relations.

The notion of meaningfulness is key in drawing the difference between the three types of appearing. For instance, in *mere appearing*, “we become aware of a present while temporarily suspending its meaningfulness” (*Aesthetics of Appearing* 102). Here there is an exposure to the momentariness of aesthetic perception. In *atmospheric appearing*, it is precisely the dimensions of the existential meaningfulness of concrete conditions that come to consciousness” (*Aesthetics of Appearing* 102). The atmosphere of a thing or situation always yield an impression. As for *artistic appearing*, “there occurs a presentation of particular presents” (*Aesthetics of Appearing* 102). These presentations can lead to the occurrence of concrete and enduring present. The artistic appearing has something dialectical in it: “it can present abstract and enduring presents only by virtue of a presentation of *passing presents*” (*Aesthetics of Appearing* 103). These three dimension intersect in the situation of aesthetic perception.

Seel defends a major thesis: “artworks are objects of a *different appearing*” (*Aesthetics of Appearing* 105). Artworks are objects of perception that are different from any other objects in that they are presentations. They are made with the intention to be comprehended as presentations. A text is arranged in a way that presents what it should present. As Seel writes: “In contradistinction to other forms of presentation and sign formation, artworks are objects that, by virtue of their individual appearing, function as presentations of human relations”

(*Aestehtics of Appearing* 108). In the objects of art we can only get what is presented if we are “attentive to the sensuous medium of this presentation” (*Aestehtics of Appearing* 109). In an artistic photograph, for instance, we should be attentive to the colors, the angle of the shot and to other artistic presentations. This is not important in viewing a press photograph of a president meeting his cabinet. The conspicuousness of the play of artistic signs make artistic appearing conspicuous.

For Seel, appearing is a constitutive element of aesthetic experience. In this sense, aesthetic perception focuses on the the process of appearing of the elements of the artwork. This focus on self-presenting necessitates no focus on higher reality but an attentiveness to the process of appearing itself. This entails both duration and simultaneity. As Seel writes: “The simultaneity of aesthetic appearing ... is not tied to processes of a sensuous semblance” (*Aestehtics of Appearing* 69). Appearing is associated with what is given to our senses here and now. “It is always directed at the current self-presentation of its objects” (*Aestehtics of Appearing* 69). As Mario Wenning explains:

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 (2).

To percieve something in its indeterminacy is to be open its possibilities. This entails that aesthetic perception of something in its appearing is not only immanent, that is, self-sufficient and self-contained, but also has a margin for the Other that is not yet. This means that “aesthetic experience – in case it manages to develop its capacities and come true – by means of immersion and attention takes us somewhere else” (Rybakov 690). There is a dialectical element in this process. That is, in art critique there is a dialectic between determining and being determined (Seel, “Letting Ourselves Be Determined” 74). In other words, there is something at stake between the art object and the subject engaging with it.

What makes Seel different from his predecessors is that he establishes a link between works of art and those who perceive them. This subject-object relation is quite characteristic of his approach to aesthetics. “For Seel,” as Wenning writes, “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” (2). What is important in the idea of appearing is the process; unlike the idealistic notion of appearance [*Schein*], it highlights the fleeting moments in aesthetic perception, or the here and now of the work of art. What is revealed in aesthetic appearing is the radical temporality of art, of its presencing. In this way, the notions of art as archive of the past and art as anticipation of the future seems irrelevant in Seel’s account.

This play of the appearing of appearances makes the aesthetic object an object approached in its indeterminacy. As Seel writes, “[t]he aesthetic object is an object experienced in its indeterminacy; the aesthetic situation is a situation open to the indeterminacy of both its world and the world as a whole (*Aesthetics of Appearing* 138). Such indeterminacy has a liberating force. “It is liberating,” Seel writes, “when it emerges as consciousness of unexplored, undetermined, open possibilities that exist here and now” (*Aesthetics of Appearing* 138). Focusing on the here and now makes the present itself indeterminable not only the past and the future. With this indeterminacy, one finds oneself entangled in the process of appearing not in what that means for a higher reality or mere semblance.

In aesthetic objects, appearing is essential. “The aesthetic object,” Seel confirms, “is what is appearing ... Its entire being is based on its appearing” (*Aesthetics of Appearing* 139). This is what Kant realized when he asserted the notion of the disinterestedness of the perception of art. As Seel explains, “[d]isinterested beholding is a beholding that is eager for what is appearing, how it comes to intuition in the process of its appearing” (*Aesthetics of Appearing* 139). By disregarding the theoretical and practical dimensions of the world, through focusing on appearing, we foreground the dimension of freedom. This is because “aesthetic experience proceeds by way of liberation from the constraints of cognitive and practical commitment” (Seel, “Active Passivity” 273). What we have is a free play of perception. Such aesthetic perception, Seel writes, “represents a special *variety* of freedom. It does so, because everything that follows from this activity follows from the fact that, in the first instance, nothing follows from it” (“Active Passivity” 280).

The work of art is an appearing of a special kind. It is an appearing that is *revealing*. As Seel argues, “it reveals itself in its appearing” (*Aesthetics of Appearing* 151). This entails that has an influence on its beholders as it urges them interact with it, exploring, discovering, understanding and interpreting. The same applies to Seel’s notion of resonating in art, an important idea which deserves some elaboration.

Seel’s Notion of Resonating

Seel’s notion of “resonating” is a philosophical concept primarily discussed within the context of aesthetics and the philosophy of perception. Seel has extensively explored how art and aesthetic experiences impact human perception and understanding. Resonating, Seel argues, is “a phenomenon not of the transcendence but of the radical immanence of appearing. It is the extreme form of aesthetic appearing and is therefore a potential though improbable state of aesthetic objects of all kinds” (*Aesthetics of Appearing* 142). Resonating is a process on the part of the object of our perception.

Resonating occurs in life and in art. That which occurs in life, that is the extra-artistic, Seel calls *mere* resonating; it is different from *artistic* resonating. Examples of mere resonating are “the rustling of the trees in a wood, the roaring of a mountain stream, the rumbling of a big city ...” (Seel, *Aesthetics of Appearing* 143). In case of the rustling of the trees, we listen to a sound that has no specific source. Mere resonating here denotes “an occurrence without something occurring” (Seel, *Aesthetics of Appearing* 143). Mere resonating has something to do with the notion of the sublime, that is, with that which exceeds the limits, the formless. Reality here “reaches appearance in a nongraspable version” (Seel, *Aesthetics of Appearing* 145). As this formless reality denotes no higher meaning, resonating can be perceived “only where perception has liberated itself from all teleological orientations” (Seel, *Aesthetics of Appearing* 146). What is highlighted here is the perception of something in its unfolding.

In artistic resonating, or resonating in art, there is an encounter with a form of formless appearing. The difference between mere resonating, that is resonating in nature, and resonating in art is that “the resonating of art is an arranged resonating and its perception an arranged encounter with a resonating” (Seel, *Aesthetics of Appearing* 147). In addition, artistic resonating is immanent within the process of aesthetic appearing; it “*reveals itself* as resonating, and it transpires *within* a play of shapes” (Seel, *Aesthetics of Appearing* 147). Artistic resonating refers to the way in which a work of art continues to affect or echo within the perception

and experience of the observer, even after the immediate act of perceiving has ended. The engagement in an aesthetic experience leads to a form of resonating, where the experience of the artwork lingers and continues to affect the observer's perception and reflection. In short, artistic resonating, in Seel's aesthetics, highlights the ongoing experiential dimension of art—the way it lives on in perception and reflection, shaping our understanding and experience of reality.

The work of art is a resonating of a special kind. The work reveals itself in its resonating. It presents itself in resonating. In this way, it directs its beholder to explore and engage in interpretation and discovery. The process of resonating in art is an immanent process. As Seel argues, “[a]rtworks, insofar as and so long as they unleash the energy of resonating, are what they reveal and reveal what they are” (*Aesthetics of Appearing* 152). The work of art, in this way, reveals its own process of appearing. It “presents itself as something forming, not as something formed” (Seel, *Aesthetics of Appearing* 153). This process of forming unfolds the work's energy and artistic resonating in this case “is indeed an overflowing of the work's energies beyond the play of its parts and shapes” (Seel, *Aesthetics of Appearing* 153).

In a fashion similar to auratic art, Seel argues that artistic resonating can create a mystical experience. In such experience there is a unison between object and beholder. The beholder, furthermore, becomes part of the work's kinetic energy. In such experience, “nothing but the sensuous appearing of the work is opened; no extra-artistic meaning for which the work could serve as confirmation is revealed. The work is the source of *its own* energy of appearing” (Seel, *Aesthetics of Appearing* 153). Only perceiving the work's resonating can make possible the losing of oneself in the work.

As such, Seel's concept of resonating is rooted in the idea that art and aesthetic experiences do not merely convey straightforward messages or meanings. Instead, they create a space where experiences resonate with the perceiver, eliciting a sense of reflection, contemplation, or emotional engagement. Resonating, in this sense, refers to the way an aesthetic experience continues to reverberate within a person even after the immediate experience has ended. According to Seel, resonating is not a passive experience; it is an active engagement that intertwines perception and reflection. When we encounter a piece of art, a poem, or even a landscape, our initial perception is only the beginning of a process of engagement. The experience “resonates” within us as we continue to think about it, explore it, or feel its emotional impact.

Seel makes a clear distinction between interpretation and resonating. While interpretation aims to decode or explain the meaning of an artwork, resonating emphasizes the subjective and ongoing nature of aesthetic engagement. Resonating is less about understanding the artist's or author's intention and more about how the work affects and stays with the observer/reader. This effect is often subtle, non-linear, and deeply personal, making resonating a fluid and dynamic experience.

Seel's notion of resonating challenges conventional approaches to aesthetics by emphasizing the ongoing, reflective nature of aesthetic experiences. It shifts the focus from interpretation to engagement, highlighting how art and beauty resonate within us, shaping our perceptions and thoughts long after the initial encounter. In this sense, resonating is not just a reaction but a lasting and transformative process, underscoring the profound impact of aesthetic experiences on human consciousness.

Seel then endeavours to develop a theory of the picture in relation to its appearing. He sketches how "the appearance of pictures differs from the other appearances of the visible world" (*Aesthetics of Appearing* 161). Seel argues that "[t]he appearance of a picture is an occurrence on the surface of the pictorial object" (*Aesthetics of Appearing* 162). Unlike the appearance of a sculpture, such appearance has little to do with the space surrounding the picture. Seel does not deal with pictures in general sense, that is, a picture of a lion in an encyclopedia. Rather, he is of the opinion that singular art pictures that contain individual realizations of objects are paradigmatic for a theory of the picture. He also confirms that appearing is decisive for pictures. He thus writes: "In being grasped as a picture, the pictorial object *refers* to aspects of its appearance, irrespective of whether it also refers to things or events in the world. This *highlighting of aspects of its own appearing* is the decisive pictorial operation" (*Aesthetics of Appearing* 174). The picture brings things to appearance only in its *appearing*. In relation to appearing, pictures gain their specialness. As Seel puts it, [w]hat distinguishes pictures from ornaments is the presentation, the highlighting of aspects and references of what is appearing" (*Aesthetics of Appearing* 178).

Seel gives a paramount importance to the pictorial appearing of cinema. The pictures or images of the cinema, he writes, are "not primarily objects of saying, but of showing" (*The Art of Cinema* 33). Within their sphere they show something that "comes into appearance" no matter how much it refers to situation outside of their pictorial appearing (Seel, *The Art of Cinema* 33). That is, no matter how this thing is representational or nonrepresentational. The artistic picture/image has a

significant and essential relation to the notion of appearing. As Seel argues, [i]t exhausts the potential of images. It makes its *own* appearing into the scene of *an* appearing, which always remains dependent on the intensity of its *own* appearing” (*The Art of Cinema* 33).

Related also to the concept of appearing, in Seel’s aesthetics, is the concept of the beautiful. To be beautiful is “to *be* in a such a way that the thing or event itself is valuable . . . It refers to something with intrinsic value” (Seel, “Beauty” 166). The beautiful in this sense is good, yet not instrumental as it must be good in itself. Beside its being valuable/good, for a thing to be beautiful, it “must *appear* in such a way that it *shows* itself to be intrinsically valuable” (Seel, “Beauty” 166). In such appearing, the category of the beautiful takes on an aesthetic sense. For the beautiful, appearing is an essential condition. Seel thus writes: “something can be experienced as beautiful if it is an instance of the good which enters the world solely on the power of its appearing” (“Beauty” 167). To put it briefly, “all instances of beauty are something good in itself, but particularly the *appearing* of something that is good in itself, especially within the landscapes of nature and art” (Seel, “Beauty” 168).

In Seel’s aesthetics, the relationship between beauty and appearing is quite deep and essential. For Seel, aesthetic experience is fundamentally tied to the way things appear to us — not just in a factual, perceptual sense, but in the way their appearance *captures* us, *reveals* itself as meaningful, intense, or touching. Appearing is thus not merely “showing up” but a kind of manifestation that invites contemplation and emotional engagement. Now, beauty in Seel’s framework is one specific, privileged mode of appearing. It’s not the only way things can appear aesthetically (other experiences like the sublime, the grotesque, the tragic, etc., are also forms of appearing), but beauty is a particularly harmonious and captivating mode. Beauty, one could say, is the radiant fulfillment of appearing — when something appears in a way that draws us in by its balance, form, expressiveness, or perfection. Seel wants to free beauty from being only about judgment or objectivity (as in classical aesthetics) and relocate it within the event of appearing — meaning beauty happens when we experience something *in its appearance*, not as a property it has independently.

Conclusion

Seel’s aesthetics of appearing offers a compelling reorientation of the aesthetic theory, emphasizing perception and presence over the traditional categories of truth and representation. By framing aesthetic experience as an encounter with appearing, Seel broadens the scope of aesthetics to

include not only art but also everyday life. His approach provides a valuable philosophical perspective for understanding how we engage with the world aesthetically. In other words, beauty, for Seel, is not an attribute things possess, but something that happens in the experience of their appearing. Appearing, therefore, is the very being of the work of art. What Seel thus presents is an invitation to rethink aesthetic experience from the viewpoint of aesthetic appearing. This departs from either the aesthetic of being, where a higher reality is sought, or the aesthetic of appearance or illusion, where a fixed appearance is given.

Seel's account of aesthetic appearing is important development in the history of aesthetics. However, it lacks a speculative moment, as he did not link his account to the wider context of how art can play an emancipatory role for human beings. He did not elaborate on the implications of aesthetic appearing to the human form of life. His account, therefore, remains technical and relevant only to the current of art for art's sake. Social reality witnesses an eclipse in his account.

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