

# compos mentis

## Everyone's a Critic: The Importance of Accountability in Artistic Engagement and Creation

**Emma Fergusson**

Kalamazoo College

### **ABSTRACT**

What does it mean to properly engage with an artwork? What is the function of aesthetic perception in our daily lives? What are the dangers of passive spectatorship and how can a more meaningful understanding of various artistic mediums lead to a greater understanding of the world at large? This paper explores the importance of proper engagement with artworks—including but not limited to film, literature, and other visual mediums—and the function of art criticism as crucial to the act of viewing an aesthetic presentation. I claim that artworks actively articulate and sensuously present their meaning or significance, but only to an active participant who reflexively works through that presentation. This level of responsible viewership serves, not only to qualify the depth of one's engagement with the artistic object at hand, but also with particular worldly circumstances. Thus, one's ability to commit to an artwork serves as a gauge of one's ability to commit to their own life. While there is no necessarily right or wrong understanding of an artwork, there is a true and a false way of engaging in that work of interpretation.

### **KEYWORDS**

Aesthetics, Art Criticism, Film, Perception, Spectatorship

## compos mentis

An artwork embodies a complex system of aesthetic materials and techniques which actively work to present the truth, the meaning that lies within and beyond its presentation. Anyone can look at a painting, scan the words of a text, watch the screen of a movie theater without gaining much beyond the mere appearance of color, shape, character or plot. But how can we encourage an artwork to open itself up to its audience? How can we truly experience that which the artist has created, which the artwork longs to reveal, which the viewer needs to understand? We must serve as our own art critics—not in order to criticize, to place a value upon an artwork, or to ascribe it a label of “good” or “bad,” but rather in order to scrutinize, to unpack, to engage more deeply, and thus to gain greater insight and understanding of that significance contained within a successful artwork. The viewer of an artwork has a duty—a duty to attribute a work with the kind of power that it wields to create change, to expand minds, to alter perspective, and to develop judgement. An artwork cannot accomplish such a task on its own—it requires equal involvement from its participants. When an individual engages only passively with an art object, they lose out not only on the aesthetic qualities of the artwork, but also on the opportunities for greater engagement with the world. Art is not only beneficial, but imperative to each individual’s capacity for change, for empathy, for reasoning, and ultimately for the proper participation in one’s own life. If a person cannot commit to an artwork in a meaningful way, he cannot hope to commit to his own relationships, to his own responsibilities, to his own circumstances in a meaningful way.

### I. AESTHETICS OF APPEARING

In *Aesthetics of Appearing*, Seel discusses not only the functions of the artwork as an actively appearing aesthetic presentation, but also the importance of perception, and the ways in which aesthetic perception serves both the artwork and the perceiver:

To apprehend something in the process of its appearing for the sake of its appearing is a focal point of all aesthetic perception. Of course, this perception frequently goes way beyond a mere execution-oriented sensing. In particular, the perception of artworks necessarily incorporates interpretive and epistemic attentiveness.

However, the aim of this interpretation and knowledge is first and foremost to be with the articulating appearing of the objects.... Aesthetic attentiveness to what happens in the external world is thus an attentiveness to ourselves too: to the moment here and now. In addition, aesthetic attentiveness to the objects of art is frequently an attentiveness to situations in which we do not find ourselves and perhaps never will: to a moment now and never. (Seel 2005, 15-16)

Seel identifies the act of appearing as the primary function of an artwork: it shows what it is to convey. The act of perception—of merely registering the existence of an aesthetic presentation—thus serves as the most basic function of the viewer. However, this basic level of perception must dig deeper, beyond the initial reactions of the senses, beyond the mere acknowledgement of the presentation of an artwork. One cannot (or should not) passively consume the movie, novel, play, painting, sculpture, etc. There must be other muscles at work. There must be deeper levels of attentiveness—a churning of thoughts, ideas, connections, and ultimately an attempt at understanding (or at least digesting). This is not to say that one should multitask—consider multiple unrelated and opposing ideas which detract from the artwork, or which distract from the true task at hand. Seel warns against this sort of false engagement. Rather, these deeper levels of perception must maintain a primary focus upon the aesthetic presentation at hand. As Seel suggests, the artwork is in the process of articulating as we perceive it—this is an action, a movement, and one which the viewer must match in order to properly engage. There exists a duality to the act of engaging with the artwork: as the artwork presents and thus articulates, articulates and thus communicates, the viewer must observe and thus perceive, perceive and thus engage, engage and thus interpret. Without the adequate attention of the attentive viewer, the artwork remains stuck, trapped, frozen—silenced, and incapable of communicating its truth.

Stemming from this notion of a dual movement comes the notion of a dual result. Specifically, the idea that in properly engaging with an artwork, the viewer not only unpacks the systems at work in the piece itself, but also commits to a greater level of engagement with their own life. There is an intangible facet to this level of perception: the viewer may engage with and experience a scenario which exists outside their own life, while simultaneously achieving a stronger

grasp upon their own reality. The viewer reaches a level of understanding which exists beyond physical form, memory, and reality. They gain access to a sense of truth—not truth in the sense of reality, in the sense of events or experiences that have actually happened, but, rather, truth in the sense of honesty, of empathy, of human understanding as a result of aesthetic communication.

Seel establishes artworks—and thus the process of an individual's interaction with an artwork—as distinct from that of other objects of appearing. He labels them as objects of “different appearing”—which is to say, different from other, non-art, aesthetic objects, e.g., trees, the gears of a clock, a plastic bag blowing in the wind, etc. Seel writes:

Objects of art are objects that are subject to an aesthetic treatment different from other kinds of aesthetic objects. Moreover, they are objects that deserve or do not deserve this treatment. In contrast to all objects of mere appearing and some objects of atmospheric appearing, the status of artworks is a *normative* status. They are objects that *merit* being experienced aesthetically, or being candidates for this recognition. It is only within the framework of such an evaluation that they can come to appearance as works of art. (Seel 2005, 110)

Approaching and interacting with an art object is necessarily distinct from interacting with objects that appear as states of affair: i.e., while the former has been actively crafted and serves to communicate through a system of highly intentional artistic techniques, the latter exists in a state of mere appearing which lacks the intentionality—and probably the complexity—of an art object. Only a different kind of understanding allows the unique elements at work within an artwork to appear. An artist has intentionally crafted the art object, has constructed a significance, which requires thoughtful interpretation. An object's status as an artwork subjects it to certain scrutiny. The art object earns the right to recognition as an artwork, and thus to in-depth attentiveness, through its creation, and through the fundamental presentation of its aesthetic qualities. An aesthetic object becomes an artwork when it is viewed as such by the attentive perceiver. Seel suggests that “Not types of sensuous presence but rather types of conception and interpretation are decisive for the art status on objects.” The material which makes up the artwork—be it paint, canvas, clay, ink, film—does

not determine its status as artwork. The status of artwork exists beyond material presence, beyond simply placing these items in a certain order, or shaping them, or mixing them together. The truth that drives these aesthetic constructions, the conception behind their creation, the understanding drawn out by the viewer of the presentation, has more to do with an object's status as an artwork: "The sensuousness of the material, which an art object can share with any other object, undergoes a metamorphosis into a state that it does not share with other kinds of objects" (Seel 2005, 106). In this way, the difference between a twisted, discarded scrap of metal left at the dump—which may exist as an aesthetic object—and the twisted scrap of metal reshaped and crafted into something new, or perhaps placed alongside other discarded objects in a sort of collage by an artist—thus solidifying the scrap as an art object—lies within a kind of transformation that takes place at the hands of the artist. As Seel terms it, a "metamorphosis" takes place. Objects constructed from the same materials do not contain the same properties of significance, do not require the same level of understanding and aesthetic engagement. Art objects exist in a state distinct from that of aesthetic objects, not only because of how and why they are made, but because of the way they must be perceived by the attentive viewer.

Seel further describes this level of understanding:

One cannot simply perceive the results of all these operations just as one can perceive stones, sounds, and colors. Rather one has to *understand* to a certain degree to what operations they are due and what functions they possess. This understanding leads not away from perception, however, but to a perception that can achieve precisely this—to grasp its objects in the organization of their material as products of a particular kind of operation. (Seel 2005, 107-108)

The greater level of understanding, of appreciation for the movements taking place within the self-articulating presentation of an artwork, the more one registers the artwork's significance, but also grasps the complexity of what the artist has done. Seel dismisses the fear of over-analyzing—of destroying the art by deconstructing it, of stripping it of its distinct, artistic properties by looking too closely into its functionality. Rather, he suggests that this process of more deeply understanding the artistic functions at work constitutes perception at its

most effective. The viewer thus comprehends the artwork not only on the level of its aesthetic appearance, but in terms of the way that appearance articulates itself, the way the sensuous materials interact, the way the artist has constructed the artwork and thus how the pieces of the puzzle have evolved and worked together to present something that exists beyond their mere appearing. The way in which Helen Frankenthaler stains her canvas in one solid plane of color, the manner in which Alfred Hitchcock moves his camera to direct the attention of the audience—these techniques benefit the overall impression of the artwork left upon the viewer, but provide an even more in-depth artistic significance when understood as aesthetic operations in and of themselves.

According to Seel, artworks are “special *kinds* of presentations.... They are made in order to be grasped as presentations of a particular kind. It is their primary functions. Their materials are organized so that they present *themselves* in such a manner that we can find *something* presented by them.” He goes on to say that “What is important is this self-presentation. Artistic objects exhibit themselves, in the precise organization of their material, in order in this way to bring something to presentation” (Seel 2005, 108). The major function of the artwork—the reason for its existence—lies in its ability to present itself—to articulate its aesthetic elements to the viewer. The artwork exists as a system, containing both the truth which it desires to express, and the means to articulate that truth to an active, attentive viewer. In a novel, words present something; in a painting, the colors and the brushstrokes; in a film, the images on the screen and the way in which the filmmaker has cut them together. The twisted, discarded scrap of metal requires shaping, or framing, or coloring, or reconstructing in order to function as a self-presenting art object. The art object, thus, requires the effort of the artist to communicate, and the effort of the perceiver to decode. Without this careful consideration, artworks “are what they are in aesthetic perception, but they are not what they *reveal* to an understanding and interpretive aesthetic perception” (Seel 2005, 109). In other words, while the aesthetic qualities of the artwork exist openly, without obstruction, to any passerby, the artwork only reveals—or actively articulates—its significance to those who perceive within, and thus beyond.

What purpose is there in distinguishing artistic objects from aesthetic objects, or from the sensuous materials that make them up? What benefit does this additional level of attention provide, and why do we bother wasting our energies

at all? To get at the heart of Seel's conception of the art object, and thus to extract the essence of an artwork's function and significance, artworks,

**Are ascribed the status of constellational presentations—the status of objects that can bring complex human conditions to light in the medium of their appearing.** They are in this respect “constructs of spirit,” to use Hegel's language. “The spirit of artworks,” Adorno writes in his *Aesthetic Theory*, is the spirit “that appears through the appearance.” This spirit, Adorno elaborates, which “infiltrates” the sensuous appearance of a work, cannot be cognized independently of this appearance; but it must not be equated with it, just as it must not be equated with the intention of the artist. (Seel 2005, 111) (My emphasis.)

There exist few words to sufficiently describe that which artwork accomplishes, which cannot be found elsewhere, aside from the human soul itself. Seel suggests “spirit”—a notion that works on multiple levels: the artwork stems from the “spirit” of the artist; the artwork itself embodies this spirit and strives to articulate it; the viewer perceives, recognizes this spirit, and thus finds it within herself. In expressing “complex human conditions” within a constellational presentation—i.e. an art object in which the materials, conceptions, techniques and truths work to present this “spirit”—the spirit of the work remains tethered to its aesthetic appearance, but not defined by it, or contained within it. The constellational presentation does part of the work, the viewer does the rest. What the viewer interprets may differ from that which the artist has intended. But the significance of an artwork lies not within the seamless communication of ideas—not within “right” or “wrong”—but within that significant truth, that spirit, which translates to each individual in its own way. To experience an artwork in this way is to exist simultaneously beyond and within—to find greater contact with the human spirit, the human experience, as well as to see beyond that which presents itself in the form of an art object. One who takes up the work of attending to such an artwork—such a constellation—also takes up the prospect of greater understanding of one's own experience, or the experience of others, and thus opens herself up to a greater kind of existence in which the barriers between human souls begin to melt away.

## II. FILMED THOUGHT

The role of an artwork's perceiver receives a deeper interrogation in Pippin's *Filmed Thought*. Pippin's position on the function of the spectator of an artwork—more specifically, the viewer of a film—centers the question of how one approaches, interacts with, and thus engages with the artwork he consumes. In using Alfred Hitchcock's 1955 *Rear Window* to illustrate his point, Pippin highlights the protagonist's activity of peering into the windows of the apartments of the people who live across the courtyard from him, secretly observing their lives from a distance:

When in *Rear Window* Lars Thorwald enters Jeff Jeffries's apartment and asks, "What do you want from me?" if we have been noting the constant analogy between Jeff's position and movie watching, **we know the question resonates with the larger question of what we think we want from movies, and that the film has been suggesting how badly we understand the depth of that question, and its connection with non-cinematic issues**, like adopting a spectatorial position with respect to other people. (Pippin 2020, 9) (My emphasis.)

Here, Pippin uses the example of Hitchcock's *Rear Window* as a means of clearly identifying the relationship between audience and artwork—in this case, film—as perceived through the philosophical lens of a movie which presents this issue in a relatively blunt manner, exposing the nature of the average moviegoer as indulgent in the spectacle and surface-level entertainment value of the film, without truly engaging, or acknowledging the issues at work—without truly attending to the concepts and elements of presentation which the movie brings forth. As Pippin goes on to explore, Jeff Jeffries in many ways mimics the position of the viewer in relation to an artwork—taking his experiences and inadequacies allows us to take our own position as filmgoers, and perceivers of art, into greater account.

The multifaceted nature of a film, when approached as an artwork, proves imperative to the proper engagement with that film. As Pippin writes:

The movie, one has to say in an ontological mode, *is the movie* it is only by means of this emerging, internal self-conception, a



dimension we can miss if we too quickly apply some apparent formal unity, like a genre designation or a sociohistorical concept, or if we simply attend to the plot. (Pippin 2020, 8)

A movie exists on multiple levels: in one sense, as the product of story elements—the world inside the film, in which the characters exist, a world where, even outside of the frame, these characters continue to move about, to live their lives, to eat and sleep and discuss and think about how they will react within certain situations; on another level, the world of the movie functions as a self-conscious entity—one in which the camera decides what we ought or ought not to see. Non-diegetic elements—such as music, voice-over narration—exist within this self-conscious world, but not within the characters' world. Special effects and stylistic lighting employed as a manner of depicting the psychological status of the characters, as opposed to creating a realistic setting, influence the audience's perception of the story as well. In short: the story itself vs. the presentation of the story. If we take for granted the technical elements employed—each of the choices made by the filmmaker—and take these choices as simply suggesting genre, or adhering to plot or convention, or as presenting the story in the most entertaining way, we miss the deeper significance behind each individual choice, and the effect created by each chosen element—certainly as part of a unified system within the film itself, but also as conscious, and significant beyond mere presentation. Pippin draws from Daniel Yacavone:

The duality between the "world **in** the movie," on the one hand, and the "world **of** the movie," on the other, what we see and attend to as depicted, and our sense of its being depicted in a way, or the "movie world" as a selection, highlighting, focusing, and, in its cinematic way, commenting. (Pippin 2020, 8) (My emphasis.)

In this way, movies function as self-reflective artworks: pieces fully conscious of their own function as framing a story and its themes in expectation of its perception by an audience. This duality suggests that the viewer's participation in the "world of the film" serves as equally significant to the presentation of the film—albeit from *without* the story itself—as the performances that take place on the screen and contribute directly to the story. Thus, Pippin also discusses the function of irony within the films he explores, noting that the elements at stake within the

film are often: “All not attended to as such or in an honest way by characters, but prominent for the attentive viewer” (Pippin 2020, 11-12). The filmmaker presents the artwork in such a way that it cannot do all the work on its own. A viewer who consumes the piece with a surface level of perception runs the risk of misreading and ultimately destroying the elements at work within the film.

Jeff Jeffries serves as the ideal example of the failing filmgoer. He watches the action from afar, drawn in by the spectacle and drama of the situation, but he does not take into account the larger issues of his scheme to catch Thorwald—issues which have less to do with his moral duty to capture a murderer, and more to do with his exploitation of the situation at hand as a means of personal entertainment. His fixation on Thorwald’s apartment leaves him blind to the stakes of his own life. In other words, the audience member adopts a “spectatorial position” in terms of his own life, and in terms of the lives of others, rather than a position of true engagement. He attempts to involve himself in the events of the actions taking place across the courtyard, in the apartment opposite him, but only in a way that maintains his distance from the reality of the situation. For Jeff, this position shifts when Thorwald enters his apartment, and the world of the movie suddenly penetrates his reality and forces him to interact directly with the questions he has heretofore ignored. Earlier, when Jeff watches from a distance as Lisa sneaks into Thorwald’s apartment, the stakes suddenly and immediately become clear: the world of the film does not exist within a bubble—it functions beyond the realm of the screen and applies to the world of the viewer in the same way that it applies to the characters. Hitchcock demonstrates this concept explicitly. Jeff only comes to realize his love for Lisa when the murder plot he has been indulging in, from a distance, puts *her* life at stake. This direct intersection between the world of the movie and world of the viewer suggests the level of interaction necessary for one to properly engage with an artwork.

As Pippin proposes, we must ask ourselves “what we think we want from movies”; the problem here lies within our inability to properly answer this question. What *do* we want from movies? Thorwald, the subject of Jeff’s entertainment, serves as the personification of the film world itself—agitated by the viewer’s inability to appreciate the duality of its presentation. Those who fail to consider this question beyond its most superficial answers—to be entertained, to be distracted, to be amused, to feel something—fail to grasp the nature of film and its capacity for philosophical reflection. People who ask the film to do the work

for them—to *make* them laugh, to *make* them cry, to *make* them think—ignore the work that they must do for the film, and thus do not thoroughly engage with the piece beyond its surface level, aesthetic functions. Though we engage more directly with one world of the film (the world *within* the movie) and tend to engage more subconsciously with the other world of the film (the world *of* the movie), we do not always recognize that our world, too, exists as a layer of the film world which must be engaged with. There is an active element necessary to viewership. We must *engage, notice, search, consider, and maintain* an active awareness of our position within the function of the film. The viewer ought not want the movie only to do things *to* her or *for* her. She must expect that a movie will engage in a dialogue *with* her, will ask her a question which prompts her to answer, and vice versa. A film is never complete when simply projected onto a screen—only when it begins its work in the mind of the viewer does the extent of its significance come to light. Ultimately, if one repeats to oneself while watching a movie, “it’s only a film, it’s only film,” she is actively rejecting the film, and denying that which the artwork strives to disclose to the viewer; what we ask of the film must also apply outside of the bounds of cinema all together. The film does not speak exclusively in terms of film-related issues—it addresses the world and the state of human nature, the questions of being and the issues of existence, in the same way that philosophical text does: it deserves to be unpacked, and it deserves to be engaged with. Not only are the lives of the characters at stake, but the lives of the audience as well.

Thus, the role of the spectator requires special attention, and a greater sense of active involvement with the artwork at hand:

It is often assumed that Hitchcock does this to show how “sinful” we are, how prurient movie watching can be, how voyeuristic it is. That is not the case, I argue. The problem Hitchcock is posing concerns not cinematic viewing as such, but an inadequate way of watching movies, Jeff’s (and very likely ours). This is posed as the difference between a purely spectatorial mode of viewing, as if the film is just there for us to watch and enjoy, and a more involved mode of engagement with the film, in which what is asked of us (most attentive, interpretive *effort*) is as important as what we expect from it. (Pippin 2020, 12)

Herein lies the heart of the argument at hand: that the effort on the part of the viewer must match that of the effort on part of the artist. The viewer must not simply expect to be entertained, to sit back and allow the film to work itself out. The film begs for attention, for an amount of non-passive work in return for its presentation. Hitchcock does not present the viewer as sinful for watching, but as sinful for not watching well enough:

We have, though, become a nation of moviegoers and, beginning at around the time of the film, 1954, of television viewers, in a way suggested by the tiny framed windows. I don't think this just means to suggest that filmed drama and comedy interest us because we like to be voyeurs, unobserved observers, but that we watch these screens *like Peeping Toms*. That is the *uninvolved spectatorial way* we watch them, as if what we see asks nothing of us, is simply there "for us"; and therein lie both the aesthetic and ethical issues.... (Pippin 2020, 31)

Pippin suggests that, beyond the voyeuristic implications of Jeff's position, and thus our position in watching a film—which therein suggests taking pleasure in the specific act of seeing but remaining unseen, of observing something that one was not meant to see—we also take pleasure in observing a scene—a dramatic or comedic dialogue, a private moment, a glimpse into the lives of other—which has no implication upon the life of the observer. A couple engaged in a heated argument is far more entertaining to the unseen observer than to the parties involved in the dispute. The viewer takes a sly satisfaction in the knowledge that she may indulge in the spectacle of conflict without facing the consequences of such a fallout. Thus, the "uninvolved spectatorial" viewer takes pleasure in consuming a movie or television show, secure in the knowledge that there remains an impenetrable fourth wall, isolating the film world from that of the real world. Herein, according to Pippin, lies the great fault of the filmgoer: to take up the role of the uninvolved spectator in one's approach to an artwork is to miss out on the greater implications of the artwork as a philosophical system. To take entertainment as a means of detachment from one's own life, or from the world at large, is to fundamentally misunderstand the function of the artwork, and to fail at one's job as filmgoer.

The audience does not literally engage with the action of the film. As Pippin puts it, “We are not *in* the action, cannot be affected by what happens, cannot intervene” (Pippin 2020, 23). As Jeff shows us, however, the failure to treat the art we witness with proper engagement can still have significant, real-life consequences:

In one sense, yes; *I* am invisible. In another sense, this does not mean that all I must do to understand the world presented is watch, like a voyeur, a “peeping Tom,” in the language of the film. In this case, here is something insufficient, deformed, about the way Jeff “watches” his little films, and that has something to do with the deformation in his relations with others, paradigmatically with Lisa. (Pippin 2020, 24)

Until the end of the film, Jeff does not register the hypocrisy of his own actions—his complete obsession with the lives of other, his absorption into the world he perceives through his window, blinds him and prevents him from critically addressing his personal relationships. When Lisa ultimately wins his attention by literally placing herself within the frame of the film he watches through his window, and an authentic and attentive relationship with her can truly begin, it is because he has felt the fear of losing her. He has realized how much he cares for her only through his proper engagement with the “movie” outside his window. He starts to appreciate her, to accept her for her differences, and welcome her affection because of a new understanding achieved through his open and active engagement with the aesthetic presentation at hand. The act of perceiving thus only has the potential to cause change, or to inspire understanding, to communicate truth and promote a greater engagement with one’s own life, only if the viewer sees beyond the blinders that often prevent us from seeing another life, another world, in terms of our own.

Cinematic techniques—and within the broader context of art objects, artistic techniques in general—serve to execute that which the filmmaker wishes to capture. The tools of the artist, the materials at their disposal, must work in such a way that the aesthetic presentation properly articulates content, tone, and mood to its audience. As Seel notes the importance of understanding the functionality of the elements of the art object at work, Pippin notes that understanding the role of the film director in constructing not only what the viewer sees, but how

and why they see the images at hand, can lead to a deeper understanding and richer grasp of the art object. As he writes of the largely passive viewer: "We have learned to ignore for the most part that someone is purposefully showing us what we are seeing, has decided what we will not see, and the events are not simply magically present in front of us" (Pippin 2020, 23). In understanding the artist's role in the creation of the final product, the viewer has a greater chance of picking up on the truth that the presentation strives to communicate. Acknowledging not only *what* is presented, but the way it is presented, helps to develop a more acute aesthetic perception—a type of perception often lost on the passive spectator. Pippin describes the notion of a "self-conscious" film:

Further, some directors do not want us to ignore their active involvement.... They are able also to draw our attention to the director's narrational control, and so to the presence of the camera, not just to what the camera is photographing. When we do notice, the visible narrational element is what gives the film its reflective form. Such a narrative form cannot but suggest a purposiveness, its point, and so manifests that the aesthetic object bears a conception of itself, a source of unity and ultimately interpretive meaning. It seems odd to say that filmed fictional narratives are in a sense "self-conscious," embody an awareness of themselves, but this is just an elliptical way of saying that the director is self-conscious of the point of the determinate narrative form. That point may simply be "to create funny situations" or to "scare the audience in a way they will enjoy," but it can clearly be more aesthetically ambitious; for example, to help us understand something better. This all corresponds to our own implicit awareness in experiencing an aesthetic object that that is what we are doing.... But such aesthetic attending already embodies a norm. It can be done well, or it can be done lazily, sloppily, indifferently, in a biased way, or self-righteously. (Pippin 2020, 24-25)

Most people watch a movie in the knowledge that they are watching a movie. The same self-awareness can be said of the film itself. In Hollywood films of the 1930s and 40s, studios strove to embody an "invisible" aesthetic—to craft

stories in a way that drew the least possible attention to the cinematic techniques themselves. In films that “draw our attention...to the presence of the camera,” however, where we lose a certain sense of objectivity, of “realism,” we gain a sense of artistic voice. We gain a sense of our role in the presentation of an artwork. In maintaining a self-conscious approach, the director not only attempts to create a purpose within the film but demonstrates to the audience that purpose as well. The audience knows they are watching a movie; the director knows she is creating a movie; yet the viewer does not feel disillusioned by this fact. This self-consciousness merely makes the process of perceptive attentiveness all the more rewarding—the aesthetic constellation at work, the layers of interior narrative as well as filmic, artistic voice that shapes the story—all of these elements, when well executed, make the viewing experience more engaging. When the artist ceases the attempts to cover up her tracks, and instead allows her movements, her ideas and her techniques to show, the viewer is allowed to see not only the final product, but the process that transforms the aesthetic into the artistic.

The powerful functional value of editing—whether subtle, unnoticeable, or distinct and jarring—can have a major impact upon the viewer of the film. Pippin writes:

[Jeff] creates out of what he views, what is meant. Put another way, he edits together the various scenes he has seen to make his own imagined film narrative, a murder thriller... This all of course mirrors what we see and largely what we also do when watching a film; we are always implicitly asking what it means that one sequence follows another, and we form our hypotheses the same way as Jeff, usually with more tentativeness. (Pippin 2020, 26)

The editing of a film—the order of shots between which the viewer cuts—between which the filmmaker directs our attention—suggests an implied interpretation. The viewer does not necessarily make a conscious connection between these moments, but, nonetheless, she picks up on a subliminal meaning. In *Rear Window*, for example, the scenes of Jeff observing his neighbors constantly cuts back and forth between the action taking place in a different location of the courtyard, and Jeff’s reactive expressions. Sometimes he looks amused, other times shocked, delighted—and in certain key moments, terrified. Through his observations of his neighbors, Jeff pieces together the tale of a murder; through our observations of

Jeff, we likewise piece together a specific interpretation of these events, taken out of context as they are. When the film cuts from Jeff's point of view, to Jeff's face, we know that he is reacting to the scene we have just witnessed from his limited vantage point. We are only allowed to view certain moments, however, as Jeff only catches certain glimpses. We form assumptions—orchestrated through direction and editing—based upon the information we do receive. There's an element of intuition to watching a movie, regardless of the viewer's level of engagement: one must commit to these intuitions in order to make sense of shots, pasted together. The questions we ask while viewing—though not explicit—remain a crucial tool to making sense of cinema as an artform. Without the ability to make connections—to ask, What is he looking at? Why is he smiling? What is the relationship between this person and that person? What does this or that event mean?—we cannot begin to understand the film, even at a most basic level. As one's level of spectatorship digs deeper, expands beyond the level of passive viewership—if one begins to notice the patterns of editing, or the ways in which the camera reveals and conceals—one's understanding of the film reaches that state of dual perception: of the world of the film, and that world *within* the film. This kind of active engagement reveals what lies beyond as well as within, and thus presents greater opportunity for openness and engagement outside of the artistic realm.

What makes the task of the viewer so difficult? What makes artistic engagement all the more worthy of a cause to promote? Because with great power, with great capacity for change, comes great fear:

This is because, inevitably, as noted, we are also often invested in some way in the clarification, and that investment can be self-interest, self-deceived, biased, subject to wishful thinking, and so forth. One of the ways this can become impossible for us to avoid acknowledging is when our views intersect with the lives of others, and they respond, intervene in some way to challenge us. And, of course, one of the ways this can be *avoided* is by preventing such challenges, keeping our distance, staying inside our dollhouses or cages, psychological as well as spatial. (Pippin 2020, 28)

Pippin acknowledges a fear of the "challenge" that accompanies interacting with



an artwork—particularly an artwork which refuses to be taken at face value. The ugly moments, the scenes which too closely resemble reality—these are the artistic choices which “hit too close to home”—which make the corrupt, disinterested aim of the uninvolved spectator much more difficult to maintain. In some ways, the act of maintaining a passive stance in relation to the artwork proves more taxing than the act of actively engaging. To disengage becomes a matter of shutting oneself off from the truth of reality; this can mean taking the area of the movie theater as an isolated space—one which exists outside the tethers of reality, outside of the implications of the world. The theater thus serves as a neutral space, in which anything might happen, and after exiting the theater, the moviegoer leaves behind anything gained or lost—as if no time at all has passed. Psychologically, the artwork has little to no impact aside from small sparks of emotional engagement. Deep, troubling issues and questions remain untouched, locked within the mind of the filmgoer, and left to rest during the movie experience. This kind of fear and avoidance can serve most aptly to gauge one’s inability to confront his own, personal troubles. His inability to confront the discomforts of the world. Art often looks harmless on the outside—once the real work begins, and that distance between the viewer and the aesthetic presentation has mostly collapsed, one must embrace their own vulnerabilities, their own weaknesses. There’s nothing easy about true, deep aesthetic attentiveness. We refer to a film, a painting, a poem, a sculpture as an *artwork* for three reasons: because the artist’s *work* is creating, because of the object’s *work* is presenting, and because of the viewer’s *work* is perceiving. Any truth worth knowing, worth revealing, requires the kind of work that makes the outcome all the more rewarding. To avoid the challenge of a well-crafted artwork is to deny oneself, to refuse one’s own chance at greater understanding—and, above all, to dismiss that which rivals even the human spirit in sheer beauty and promise.

### III. CONCLUSION

What is the function of aesthetic perception in our daily lives? What does it mean to look at an artwork properly? We are, in short, lost without our ability to explore an artwork and derive not only aesthetic pleasure, but also a mode of rational thought. To look at an artwork and ignore the active nature of its self-presentation, to take it at face value, is to destroy its functionality, and to

## compos mentis

assert one's one disengagement with life. One's ability to work as an art critic thus indicates one's ability to engage with reality—to acknowledge one's own existence within the world. Detachment, ignorance, passivity, are choices—they represent the choice of the individual to forfeit his place as a rational, thinking, feeling being, as an active part of the world. We cannot hope to lead lives of substance, lives of meaning, lives of playful engagement with the world, if we cannot partake of that engagement within the realm of aesthetic appearance. The art critic does not function to distinguish the good art from the bad art, the right art from the wrong art, or even the beautiful art from the ugly art, but rather to distinguish the active from the passive, the engaged from the disengaged, the thinking from the thoughtless, the living from the dead.

## REFERENCES

- Pippin, Robert B. 2020. *Filmed Thought: Cinema as Reflective Form*. Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press.
- Seel, Martin. 2005. *Aesthetics of Appearing*. Translated by John Farrell. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.