

BOOK REVIEW ARTICLE

AESTHETICS AS PHENOMENOLOGY: THE APPEARANCE OF THINGS

Introduction

*Aesthetics as Phenomenology: The Appearance of Things*¹ by Günter Figal is concerned with the phenomenological approach to aesthetic experience, the experience of art. Here, aesthetics has been seen as phenomenology by showing that artworks are appearances and the works are exemplary in the relational, lived space. The book is a scholarly work where Figal tries to understand how phenomenological standpoints help us to understand more clearly the aesthetic experiences. Intending to clarify his understanding, he takes help from Kant, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, et al. who have contributed to the phenomenological understanding of art.

The phenomenological reflection on aesthetic experience is concerned with the subject matter of aesthetic experience which is the works of art. The artworks are phenomenal. This is the main theme of the book and throughout the book, we will see how works of art through their perceptibility, reflectiveness, through their forms, and finally, the spatial character of arts helps them to appear themselves. It is not the appearance of something but pure appearance. Thus, aesthetics is phenomenology and must be phenomenology, and if one wishes to know what can be aesthetically experienced art is the clearest way to know this. Aesthetics alters phenomenology. On that account, perception is essentially connected to experiencing them. Artworks are appearing things, i.e., equal to thing-like appearances, things are made to appear. Arts as appearing things are beautiful. The experience of art is possible and

¹ This book is originally published in the German language in 2010, and the English translation by Jerome Veith was first published in 2015 by Indiana University Press., USA.

irreplaceable because of its phenomenal essence. In this article, I will try to show the main ideas of the book which eventually proves that artworks show themselves as appearances. In order to simplify this discussion, I will divide the article into some sections which will be elaborated further.

Characteristics of Works of Art as Appearances

To comprehend art as the appearance of things, Figal has shown in his book how an interplay of various moments helps us in this respect. He starts with Kant's concept of beauty. This beauty as such is decentered order that stands for itself as an appearance. This order only exists in appearance and this appearance in artworks is deictic. A work shows itself and only in itself. Art shows something that it is as such and shows nothing beyond it. Another subject of observation is the forms of appearance through which an artwork shows itself. The forms of artworks are a mixture of various art forms. Works as works of art consist of this mixture. Finally, the artworks are spatial and for this spatial character of artworks, adequate aesthetic experience is possible. In these various moments of apprehending art as the appearance, the concept of possibility is a common thing. Decentered order of art is apparent in their possibilities. The appearance is understood phenomenologically. The phenomenon is a possibility in art, it sets into the work as such. Through forms, it shows the forms of possibility. The perceptible character is also possible. Space is the basic possibility of artworks. It is the space where the artworks appear.

Aesthetic Experience is the Experience of Beauty

The basic aim of philosophical observation of art as Figal points out is to search the artworks whose art character is self-evident. Philosophical clarification of the essence of art has the character of reflection: aesthetic reflection. Fine art says the supposed art character of artworks is 'beauty' that reflects in art. Because of this character that is beautiful, the artwork differentiates itself from other things. Hence, it is a fine art that only setstandard of art-philosophical observation. Art is elementarily

experienced by our senses and beauty reveals itself through sensory perception. Thus, it is called aesthetic. The beauty in something that invites observation, i.e., similar to an artwork. Beauty reveals in art. In Baumgarten's understanding, aesthetics is in the sensible knowing and this sensible knowing is at work in the beautiful objects which aesthetics and the philosophy of art deal with. Understanding art does not start with the determination of the work but with the aesthetic experience and the aesthetic experience of art is the experience of its beauty. The aesthetic reflection begins with what 'is known,' and from this aesthetic reflection proceeds 'what is known as such' to 'which is experienced, the beautiful.'

Figal discussed Kant's philosophical aesthetics for whom aesthetic experience is related to the 'transition' between the concept of the natural and freedom. When one sees beautiful things, one should recognize that the thing is related to something, i.e., neither to nature nor to freedom but to the very ground of freedom viz., supersensible. This supersensible is given to the sensible and it does not oppose the sensible. This supersensible arrives with a sensible aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experience pertains to nature and the freedom in the form of the inner possibility of the subject as well as the external possibility of corresponding nature. Thus, the portrayal of beauty unites nature and freedom. In the *Critique of Judgment* Kant presupposed that the aesthetic experience is the experience of beauty that is connected to aesthetic taste. Taste is the capacity for judgment. In this taste, particular preferences unite with knowledge of what is distinguishable in its diversity. In the context of taste, Kant emphasizes the concept of *disinterestedness*. Disinterestedness is detached from utility or desirability. This disinterest is independent of stimulus and affect. One should not stimulate nor induce the inner motion of the beautiful. Beautiful gives an occasion for reflection and the taste for the beautiful is a reflective taste. Reflection is to be understood as grasping something in the context of the totality of its moments without determining this totality as such. Kant's concept of

judgment is reflective when universal has to be found on the basis of a given particular. Beautiful is something individual. The aesthetic judgment contains “a relation of the presentation of the object to the subject” (Figal 44). Beauty is not mixed with pleasure and nuisance, rather it is ‘completely free.’ Kant calls the judgment of taste ‘contemplative,’ which means the experienced object is already in the play. Aesthetic judgment as Kant says, “in looking at the existence of an object indifferently, only holds its complexion up to our feeling of pleasure and displeasure” (Kant 209) and this complexion is determinate and the counterpart to aesthetic experience. Kant at one point argues that the pleasure in the beautiful is the pleasure ‘of mere reflection’ and this pleasure accompanies the common grasp of an object that is accomplished in the cognitive faculties. Hence, aesthetic reflection is not objectless and aesthetic reflection is engaged with the object in a determinate way. Moreover, Kant's elaboration of beauty as a quality of a thing that has determination, i.e., complexion. Thus, he also maintains object-related aesthetic experience.

One cannot cognize the beautiful at a glance but comprehend it by getting involved with it and by experiencing it. The concepts apply to things, purposes, or sensations for they do not apply to the beautiful. For understanding beauty, no determinate thought, or concept is adequate, and no language reaches it. According to Kant, an artwork is a beautiful presentation of a thing, a beautiful presentation of an object, a presentation that is actually just the form of presentation of a concept through which this concept is universally communicated². When Kant says, a beautiful is a decentered order it is an appearance.

Heidegger's notion of beauty is the way by which truth is unconcealed. Unlike Plato's conception of beauty, Heidegger's treatment of beauty is to let Being shine. Beauty is something that attracts, it points to Being in its truth. Heidegger thinks that the work of art belongs to a realm where

² See Kant's *Critique of Judgment* for further studies.

the work itself opens up. For example, Van Gogh's painting is the representation of the farmer's shoes, and the painting lets appear something by itself being there, not by referring to something. Some other art of the same kind also shows something that is not in there as belonging to a world but as in artworks. This is also a subject of aesthetic consciousness.

Gadamer relates the aesthetic experience with the self. For him, every experience is something self-experiencing. Aesthetic experience as he says is not just any kind of experience, but an essential form of experience. So, for Heidegger and Gadamer, experience is fundamental. It is the power of experience wherein we are not aware of the experiences of objects. Gadamer's thoughts were influenced by Hegel's aesthetics, especially Gadamer's notion that art completed its meaning when it is experienced in its original life context. If so, then the problem regarding this view, is that we cannot experience the artworks whose original life contexts no longer exist. However, Gadamer's understanding of beauty does not refer to anything beyond itself like that of Heidegger, rather illuminating or self-illuminating. For him, art is a transformation into truth. Art helps to transform something real into the truth that one can recognize 'as it is.'

Hegel's aesthetics does not claim the beautiful as the highest thing, but in art, the appearance of liveliness and the spiritual animation are present. According to Hegel, objectivization of the subjective rediscovers in objectivization thereby subjective self-rejoined in the free individuality that is actualized in the artwork. For Hegel, the experience is of the utmost importance in aesthetically understood art and the artworks are the stimulators of experience. Like Hegel, Schelling's thought on art is that art is a kind of reflection of the absolute identity of the subject and the object or the conscious and the unconscious activity.

Experiencing Artworks as Appearances

Appearances are present for perception. The only accessibility of

appearances is possible through experiencing them. Appearances are perceived as something that is there and as the appearance of someone. Appearances are unfolding in a way of experiencing them, their unfolding depends on the possibilities of perception and imagination. There are three things in the experience of appearance that are inextricably connected. They are (a) something that appears; (b) appearance; and (c) the experience for which it appears. Appearance is the thing that connects something that appears to the experience for which it appears. Appearance is nothing but appearing itself. But the aesthetic appearance is different from what Kant talks about appearance as the objects and the properties ascribed to them which are actually given. So, in Kant's sense, the objects are appearances but at the same time differ from the same objects themselves. But Schiller's view is different from Kant's. For Schiller, imagination connects to presentations in general. The power of imagination can be seen in the free variation of the presentations. The appearance would be the realm of possibilities where the combination and division of presentations are not stuck to the standards of reality. Appearances are nothing but the experience of the varieties of possibility as one sees something given under the guise of its possibility of being otherwise and ignores its real givenness. One should take it as something that appears, but the reality is not crucial. As a form of possibility, all the possible variants of appearance are equal.

As for Husserl, the phenomenal character of aesthetic appearance and artworks reveal the essence of phenomena. Aesthetics becomes phenomenology by way of inner consistency and aesthetic objects become the objects for phenomenology. For him, free variation is central to phenomenology. In this research, something has to be a phenomenon if it is understood not in the factual givenness, but in its possibilities of being given. The concept of phenomenon includes the phenomenon as something as the intentional correlate of consciousness where a thing appears to consciousness as what it is in the manifold of its possibilities as itself. Appearance is a process in consciousness. It depends on

consciousness and can be seen from the angle of its appearing in consciousness. Appearing and what appears is viewed in their togetherness. Husserl's distinction between appearing and consciousness follows the idea of correlation. For him, if phenomena are the possibilities that can be seen in the experience through free variation, in this sense, they are given in the representation through imagination or phantasy. The procedure of free variation violates the idea of fixation that may create a problem, but in artworks, as in appearances free variation and fixation work together. In such a way, it is in the artwork where the phantasies are fixed as they constituted what actually they are, and in this fixation where phantasies unfold as appearances in a phenomenological sense. In the artwork, the phantasies found determinacy and designation in which we can see them clearly and distinctly as they are.

Artworks as pure appearances do not imply that what appears in them does not exist in reality. In artworks, things can be used in diverse ways. In art, reality itself is not depicted but at the same time, some real things appear in it, irrespective of their position in reality. In this way, a completely artificial world, i.e., the world as such is there, but the real world does not appear in art, rather a possible world combining artificial things and the things from reality appeared³. Artworks are phenomena but they are neither subjective appearance nor objective material things. They are appearances in themselves. One can experience an artwork on its own.

What is revealing in a story is the possibility that the story presents as an appearance. The story's appearance allows one to understand its inner structure by depicting the sequences, motivations, and the relation of characters to one another. Accordingly, artworks develop the inner

³ Every artwork is a combination of imagination and reality but its materials are gathered from the outside of the world. The materials may be real or inspired by reality but their incorporation in art is most imaginative.

possibilities of the occurrence such that one understands how something which is told can exist in the interplay of events, people, and places. A novel (an artwork) is a pure appearance of the possible, the recounted story becomes transparent as such.

Husserl differentiates between image-object and image-thing. Image-thing is something being given and the Image-object is the appearance. The image-thing has a meaning that is an image-object that appears in a certain context. There is an idea that things and objects cannot be easily separated. The things themselves become their meanings or appearances, for example, a novel does not only refer to a story but it is a story as such. In this field, Merleau-Ponty's idea of the body becomes relevant that not only suggests the indistinguishability of expression and expressed realized nature in the body, but also suggests their reversibility. Reversibility refers to the idea that the meaning of something must be transformable back in the thing itself. Hence, he shows the intertwining of the seeing or hearing and the seen or heard. Though it is not clear how this intertwining is to be understood. To clarify this, we must know how something perceivable not only connects to meaning but is perceived as meaningful in itself. In this regard, the concept of showing and self-showing has a significant impact on understanding the perceivable and the perceived thing or the appearance and the appeared.

Showing and self-showing

According to Figal, artworks are phenomena. They show in themselves. Heidegger in his *Being and Time* translates the Greek word '*phenomenon*' as that which shows itself. Phenomena are determined by showing themselves. This showing itself or self-showing is similar to 'explicit condition.' In this line of thought, a phenomenon is explicitly shown, because something reveals only when in its self-showing. Phenomenality is meaningful in its self-showing. Through reflectiveness and perceivability an artwork shows itself that is self-showing. This reflectiveness belongs to the essence of art. A work such as an image can

be known by itself, by looking at its form. Thus, the work is reflected in its form. Work's perceivability is also important because an image makes it possible of seeing something. When we look at an image it has a 'seeing' character that becomes central. Everything in an image is dominated by this 'seeing' character. These two characters work together in a work. Artworks "show themselves, they only show as forms by belonging in the material or substance... without the forms of art, the material or substantial aspects of artworks would not be showing. Accordingly, it could not show itself in its belonging to the phenomenal essence of artworks" (Figal 96).

The relation of interdependency can be understood between appearance and what appears is possible deictically. Deictically indicates dependency or belongingness of appearance and what appears. Suppose that a person's expression or gesture is showing his pain, but this gesture of pain is not independent of the pain itself. Through this expression, the appearance of the person is showing himself by showing something that is pain. So, the appearance of the gesture of pain has shown in itself. Likewise showing something through gestures a person is showing himself.

Art Forms

Figal mentioned that showing and self-showing of a phenomenon are possible through the forms of appearances and art forms are the forms of appearances because artworks show themselves in their forms. The determination of artworks as what they are is allocating them to forms. The designations of artworks are their formal designations. According to Kant, in order to determine fine arts, one should orient oneself by something outside of art that may provide a model and this model is the way of expression through which people communicate their thoughts, intuitions, and sensations by means of words, gestures, and tones. On the basis of these ways of expression, fine arts have been divided into three categories such as the art of speech, visual art, and the art of the play of

sensation. Kant envisages that visibility and audibility are important for the presentational sense of artworks, and among these two factors, visibilities, have more importance. Even for the sculpture whose texture is essential in order to experience it, that is possible through touch, despite that, it is visibility by which one can see “how it is textured, and this, not the factual touching, is significant for how one experiences its appearance” (99). In the differentiation of art, the character of presentation becomes important because Kant differentiates poetry, visual art, and music on the basis of their unique mode of presentation of aesthetic ideas. As poetry is the form of words, it deals with the understanding of ideas that the poet intended to communicate. Visual arts are the corporeal expression of what and how the painters want to speak by mime. And music deals with the arrangement of sensation in harmony and melody. Thus, arts, although they differ, fetch the same idea, i.e., aesthetic ideas to the consciousness but in different ways.

Unlike Kant, Hegel does not divide fine art, rather he differentiates various forms of art. He shows the development of art in twofold senses such as, firstly, the Genesis of art, and secondly, the presentational sense of art, i.e., the possibilities that are given through their forms. Hegel's discourse supposes that an adequate appearance is where the essence of the presentation itself would be fulfilled through the possibility of a form of presentation. For him, art holds and presents existence that is as true in its appearance. For Hegel, it is the ideal that is the determination of art placed between the presentation and what is presented.

Hegel prioritizes poetry among other two forms of art such as painting and music. The painting represents something in an actualized form for perception. It best suits the presentation of what is interior. On the other hand, the music lacks the content, hence it cannot clearly express a piritual content. But the romantic art is completed in poetry, it unifies visual art and music. About poetry, Hegel thinks, “the inwardness of music combines with the formal determinacy of visual art” (104).

Nietzsche's division of art into two worlds such as a dream or the imaginative nature of Apollonian and intoxication or the musical nature of the Dionysian is the fundamental possibility of art. In the first possibility, in dream images, something is simply there in such a way that it comes to appearance - not in reality. On the other hand, intoxication is self-forgetfulness, "It is dissolution in a whole that surrounds and pervades one, that is not recognizable, only experienceable" (106). For Nietzsche, every art arises through the combination of the two art worlds. Nietzsche uses an example from Schiller where the latter says, "a certain musical attunement of my feelings precedes this, and the poetic idea follows it in me" (106-107) which indicates a poetic presentation followed by musical attunement. Thus, "art forms do not always instantiate themselves in the same way, but rather in a way that they represent a certain form" (108).

The experience of images is self-evident. Images are given, one cannot add something that is not there in the image. Thus, it is in a sense, exclusive. Images are closed which means what is there in an image are the components of the image, one cannot rule out any single component from an image. In order to experience an image, one needs to observe an image as a whole, in its totality and simultaneity. Thus, *closedness, exclusivity, totality, and simultaneity* make up the essence of an image that is called the imagistic. The imagistic is always given in an image, nothing come from the outside of the image. An architecture or a sculpture is imagistic in nature, one can experience its givenness that has the essence of an image. Any art is poetic in its essence. Here, poetic in the sense, that artworks have language through which they are gathered together from the outside of the world and present in the artworks. Poetry has a linguistic character with the help of which it can express the sense of what is said. Likewise, every art is poetic in nature, they have a sense of What said they want to show, and what they want to show is showing themselves. The sense that is expressed in the artworks is not found in the outer world.

Manifestations of the forms in artworks are the objectivation of artworks that Gadamer thinks, manifestations involved in the artworks and the art becomes an object⁴. Gadamer calls this a structure that has actuality that is expressed for the audiences and by means of that objectivation or structure art possesses the character of showing itself. This structure can be experienced and understood by all.

Painting, music, and poetry can be experienced by seeing, hearing, and reading them. But it does not imply that they are only accessible in these modes of experiencing them. Figal uses an example, of Paul Klee's image *Old Sound*, where one can experience this image as something normally audible in the visibility of the painting. This example suggests that a form of art does not consist of a single form but a combination or mixture of forms. Fine art is a setting-there, it deals with the forms of appearance - the imagistic, the musical, and the poetic. The work of art belongs to the forms, and "the artist's action - the shaping, painting, composing, and poetizing - is the setting-into-place of the forms of appearance that through this setting-down first reveal themselves to be the forms of art" (134). These art forms can be found in a single artwork, so the work is a work of art and is a mixture of different art forms. Sometimes one art form dominates another such as if the imagistic dominates the musical and the poetic and reveals itself into work then that work would be known as an image. Such is applicable to the other two art forms also. On the basis of the domination of an art form over the other art forms, genres of art come to the surface such as visual art, poetry, and music.

Space

Finally, Figal shows us that the space is something where the artwork appears. The artworks have a character, i.e., spatiality which means the artworks show themselves in a space that is not a factual space but the phenomenal space. It is Heidegger who is the first person to formulate

⁴ 'Manifestations of the forms are the objectification of artworks' supported by Tolstoy, Collingwood et al.

the idea of the spatiality of the artworks philosophically. Heidegger in his essay “Art and Space” talks about this that is the interplay between the art and space that is to be understood by way of place. The spatiality of the art character must be primarily grasped by the character of the place. And the determination of the place is a gathering that brings-together plurality into a totality. The place is where a work of art appears and shows itself and grants the place. The place allows the work of art to show itself. The place permits the work for self-showing. This is the place that is *phenomenally giving* and the place in which something or the work of art shows itself is *phenomenally given*. The relation between them, between the phenomenally giving and the phenomenally given, is only possible because of the spatiality. In a painting, its framework limits its space, and within that framework, the place helps to appear in the painting that shows itself with all its components, in its totality, simultaneity, exclusivity, and closedness. It is the place that helps us to see how a work of art should be seen. Suppose that, in the case of a sculpture, its place helps to see that in which angel, in what distance it should have been seen. On that account, a work of art is determined by its place. A novel or story is also spatial. It is the book that is the place for a novel or for a story where a novel shows itself.

Conclusion

In concluding remarks, we can say *Aesthetics as Phenomenology: The Appearance of Things* really helps us to understand a new approach to understanding works of art. As Figal shows in his work, how a work that is an aesthetic object appears to us as a pure form of appearance. Work appears in a fixation on its possibilities which implies that it has other possibilities too, we could have experienced it in diverse ways. Art as a phenomenon is possible. Art shows itself in its possibilities. Real things re depicted in art, but when reality appears in art the nature of reality is changed in appearance in art. It may be possible that a real city is depicted in a novel, but its depiction is not the depiction of the real city as it is there in reality, rather a possible depiction of the city that should

not be judged on the basis of its real nature when it is used in art. On the contrary, a work of art is not a product of pure fancy or imagination. It is a mixture of imagination and reality that appeared through art and becomes appearance as it is. Appearances are a presentation of the possible. One can only access an appearance by experiencing them. Though an appearance has some materials or substances they appeared through a form. A form of art is also a form of appearance. Space is the final thing where a form appears. Appearance needs a place where it can show itself, and it only shows itself by self-showing. A work of art never shows something beyond it that is not in there. A work of art is a complete whole that only suggests the things which are inclusive in art. It is an appearance completed in its totality. Thus, the book provides us a complete understanding of art as appearing things, as an appearance that is phenomenal.

Subham Saha

University of North Bengal

References:

Figal, Günter. *Aesthetics as Phenomenology: The Appearance of Things*, translated by Jerome Veith. Indiana University Press, 2015.

Hegel, G. W. F. *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, translated by Bernard Bosanquet. Penguin Books, 2004.

Heidegger, Martin. "Art and Space," Translated by Charles H. Seibert. *Man and World* 6, no. 1. 1973, pp. 3-8.

Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. Blackwell, 1962.

Heidegger, Martin. *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated by Albert Hofstadter. Harper Perennial, 2001.

Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgment*, translated by Werner S. Pluhar. Hackett, 1987.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by Colin Smith. Routledge, 1962.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of Music*, translated by Shaun Whiteside. Penguin Books, 1993.

Plato. *The Republic*, translated by Desmond Lee. Penguin Books, 2007.

Rothko, Mark. *The Artist's Reality: Philosophies of Art*. Yale University Press, 2004.