

# ON APPREHENDING AESTHETIC OBJECTS

Leopold BLAUSTEIN

*Translated from Polish by Witold Płotka*

*Abstract and keywords prepared by Witold Płotka*

*Bibliography edited by Witold Płotka*

---

## *Abstract*

The study concerns the main elements of the aesthetic experience of both ordinary objects (e.g., a sunset) as well as artworks (e.g., a painting, a sculpture). These experiences are described as intentional, thus as directed toward their objects. It is argued that aesthetic experiences depend on the kind of objects apprehended; one experiences static and dynamic objects differently. Generally,

aesthetic experiences are essentially temporal and function to constitute their objects. The study differentiates reproducing (e.g., oil on canvas), imaginative (e.g., objects seen in a painting), and reproduced (e.g., a city depicted in a photograph) kinds of objects. The structure of, and relations between, these objects are to be examined, including the imaginative character of space and time, which are inherent to works of art.

*Keywords:* aesthetic object, aesthetic experience, spots of indeterminacy, imaginative world, phantasy.

---

### **O dožemanju estetskih predmetnosti**

#### *Povzetek*

376

Študija obravnava osrednje elemente estetskega izkustva takonavadnih predmetnosti (npr., sončnega zahoda) kakor umetnin (npr., slike, kipa). Tovrstna izkustva Blaustein opiše kot intencionalna, se pravi, usmerjena k lastnim predmetnostim. Zagovarja stališče, da je estetsko izkustvo odvisno od vrste predmetnosti dožemanja; statične ali dinamične predmetnosti namreč izkušamo drugače. Estetska izkustva so nasploh bistveno časovna in funkcionirajo tako, da konstituirajo svoje predmetnosti. Študija razlikuje med reproducirajočimi (npr., olje na platnu), imaginativnimi (npr., predmeti videni na sliki) in reproduciranimi (npr., mesto prikazano na fotografiji) predmeti. Raziskati je potrebno strukturo teh predmetnosti in odnose med njimi, pri čemer je potrebno upoštevati tudi imaginativni značaj prostora in časa, kakor pripadata umetnini.

*Ključne besede:* estetska predmetnost, estetsko izkustvo, mesta nedoločenosti, imaginativni svet, fantazija.

---

[| 3]<sup>1</sup> I.

Distinctive experiences, called “aesthetic experiences,” sometimes interrupt the main course of our mental life, connected with the struggle for existence or life-power. Such experiences occur, for example, when we hike in the mountains, when we look at paintings or sculptures, when we participate as spectators in theater or film shows, when we listen to music or a radio play. The fact that aesthetic experiences are, as it were, isolated islands in the stream of our experiences often makes us experience them as a rest. After all, during aesthetic experiences we forget about our worries and life aspirations, “we live in the moment”—as the Polish aesthetician Stanisław Ossowski (1933) writes—and not in the past or the future. This restful nature of aesthetic experiences may suggest that they do not require intensive mental effort from us. However, such a view would be completely wrong. This rest does not always consist in the absence of experiences, in “silence” in mental life, but often in one’s activity of a different kind than that which is connected with the struggle for existence or life-power. For example, a person [| 4] who is worried, obsessed with anxiety, usually pushes it out with her thoughts about something else, yet not with thoughtlessness; a tired person often rests by changing her duties. Similarly, aesthetic experiences, although we experience them as resting or relaxation following hardship, demand considerable activity, sometimes even extraordinary mental dynamism from us. It is by no means the case that it is enough to look at a beautiful landscape, listen to good music, or see a beautiful film for aesthetic experiences to arise. It is true that aesthetic experiences are primarily passive experiences, an apprehension, a

377

---

1 [This translation indicates original pagination directly in the text in square brackets; all page numbers refer to: Blaustein, Leopold. 1938. *O ujmowaniu przedmiotów estetycznych*. Lvov: Lwowska Biblioteka Pedagogiczna.]

perception of aesthetic objects. In addition to the perception of an object, we can also identify here rich reserves of experiences, in which we react to what is given to us in perception. Feelings predominate among them, judgments, e.g., in the form of aesthetic evaluations, occur less frequently, and acts of will appear very rarely. Nonetheless, it is not only in these reactive components of aesthetic experiences, but also in the perceptual ones, in those, in which an apparently exclusively passive reception of the aesthetic object takes place, that the activity of the person aesthetically experiencing them is revealed. That this is actually the case is to be proven by the following studies. However, we will not provide such evidence for all aesthetic approaches in general, but for their individual types.

## II.

378 Many objects that awaken aesthetic experiences in us are given to us perceptually. A sunset, the sky before a storm, and thus natural phenomena, slender church towers [1 5] and magnificent bridges, and thus architectural products, beautiful vases, costumes and other products of artistic industry, bird calls and various musical pieces—all these objects that are perceptually given arouse delight or give us pleasure that arises with their perception. Among these objects, we should distinguish static and dynamic ones. The former include buildings, mountain peaks, etc., and the latter include the human body when dancing, running, working, airplanes in the air, and musical pieces.

Is it sufficient to passively perceive objects, in order to reveal their aesthetic value? Let us first consider this question in relation to objects at rest. Walking down the street, I notice a beautiful building. I do not usually look at it from the place, from which I first saw it. On the contrary, I approach and move away, I seek the most favorable points of view, from which the beauty of the viewed object is fully revealed to me. I have to look at some objects from the side, from above, from below, in order to capture their most beautiful view. This is well known to anyone who wants to capture such a view in a photograph. Sometimes, the object of my aesthetic experience is of a large size. I can see it at a glance or look at its parts. Thus, I look first at some of its fragments, then at other ones; I return to fragments I have already seen; I remain in contemplation

---

of individual parts for as long as I like. Sometimes, I change something in the object so that it provides me with a fuller aesthetic pleasure; I overlook its deficiencies or supplement something with my imagination. When perceiving an aesthetic object, I must therefore be extremely active, if [| 6] I wish to see it in all its beauty, if I do not want to overlook any of its values.

But this is not the end of the observer's activity. It is known that we cannot simultaneously observe with the same intensity all the objects that appear in our visual field. What we focus on comes to the foreground, as it were, and the rest becomes only the background of the object perceived attentively. This whole, composed of the main object and its immediate background, is usually isolated in aesthetic experiences from the further surroundings, thus obtaining a whole that is closed in itself. All these factors show the active role of the person experiencing aesthetically.

What kind of object we see depends, therefore, on how we look at it. The object is not simply "found" by us; on the contrary, we participate to some extent in its formation, its "constitution" as an object of given aesthetic experiences—as some aestheticians would put it. Various people looking at the same object may see it differently. Some may see all of its aesthetic values, others may notice some, and others may not apprehend any. The object may be constituted differently by each viewer. They perceive it in different ways. Not everyone will notice that the contours of the building they are looking at harmonize with the lines of the landscape or create a synchronized rhythm with the neighboring houses; only some will look at the mosaic so closely as to notice its intricate finishing in detail or the regularities, [| 7] according to which the colors and spatial shapes are arranged in it.

It would be possible to provide further arguments in favor of the observer's activity in the context of static aesthetic objects, but the above line of reasoning will probably suffice. Only some of these arguments can be used with respect to objects in motion. After all, when I see, for instance, a running horse and enjoy its sight, I cannot remain in contemplation of a certain aspect of its movement for an endlessly long time or return to observing a phase of running that has already passed. But there are other circumstances here that make the constitution of aesthetic objects partly dependent on the observer. The perception of a dynamic object consists in the ongoing apprehension of the

object as it progresses in time, in the successive perception of its component parts while simultaneously grasping the structure of the whole. Thus, for example, when listening to a longer piece of music, it is enough to pay attention to something else for a certain time, i.e., to overlook certain parts of the melody, in order to apprehend the structure of the whole differently or not to apprehend it at all. The constitution of a dynamic aesthetic object also depends on the way, in which the already past parts are kept in “living memory”—as the Polish philosopher Roman Ingarden puts it. One can also perceive all the phases, all the components, but fail to apprehend the transitions between them and their aesthetic values. Anyone who observes a sunset on the high seas from the deck of a ship can aesthetically delight in each of the phases of this magnificent spectacle, but at the same time one can overlook the aesthetic values hidden in the slow transitions from the brightness of day through twilight to the complete [18] darkness of night, and [other values hidden] in the richness of the shades of color that are revealed in these transitions.

380 Thus, both in the perception of static as well as of dynamic aesthetic objects, the aesthetically experiencing person is active and actively determines the constitution of the object. What she sees and hears depends not only on the properties of the perceived object, but also on the course of the perceptual process.

### III.

A separate examination is required to account for such artworks as paintings, sculptures, theater and film shows, and radio plays. At first glance, it would seem that these objects are also given to us perceptually, because we see or hear them. However, a closer analysis of the states that occur here convinces us that, when we perceive such works, we are dealing with a specific psychological situation, different from that, in which we perceive landscapes, buildings, human bodies in motion, etc.

When we look at paintings or sculptures, when we observe what is happening “on” the stage or “on” the cinema screen, we see certain objects. Analyzing our experiences in these situations, we come to the conclusion that there are two possible, fundamentally different mental attitudes here. The first attitude comes into play when, following the action of [George Bernard] Shaw’s drama *Caesar*

---

---

and *Cleopatra* in the theater, I think about Caesar—a man who died long ago and about whom history informs me. The second [attitude], in turn, occurs when I think about this Caesar over there who is speaking to the Sphinx. In the first [| 9] case, I am thinking about the reproduced object, in the second about the imaginative object. The reproduced object can be an element of the spatio-temporal, real world that surrounds us, but the imaginative object cannot. This claim requires a more detailed justification.

Let us begin with spatial properties and relations. There is no doubt that imaginative objects are not devoid of [these properties]. If we were to describe what we see in the painting by the famous seventeenth-century Dutch painter Jacob Ruisdael, depicting a riverbank and a windmill, the description would be full of spatial terms. After all, in Ruisdael's painting, some objects are higher, others lower, some behind the windmill, others in front of the windmill, some closer, others further away, some to the right, others to the left. Real objects that I perceive appear to me in exactly the same way. However, a closer analysis shows a significant difference here. The part of the world around me that I currently perceive is filled with a certain number of spatial objects. My body is among them. Let us suppose that I get bored in this part of the surrounding world. So, I leave. After a while, I find myself in a completely different part of the world, filled with completely different objects. However, one object that was there is and must be here as well. It is my body, and I cannot escape it, despite my best efforts. Thanks to this fact, my body has a central meaning in my understanding of spatial relations. Something is behind something, whereas something else is in front of something, other things are to the left and others to the right, [| 10] depending on where my body is situated. In describing Ruisdael's painting, we would say that the building in the background is higher than the house to the right. In the painting, it is lower, but I take into account the fact that the building with the turrets is further away from me than the house to the right. Here, however, one thing worries me. If a certain object stands in spatial relation to another, in this case to my body, then it must also stand in spatial relations to others that are in the same space as my body. The river, the bank, the windmill are, therefore, not only in front of me, but also in front of my chair, to the left of the ashtray, to the right of the watch. Above them, I see the sky, and below the sky is the ceiling, below it lies the calendar.

It seems odd and simply absurd to me that I hesitate whether I should not rather give up the claim that objects seen when looking at the painting are in some spatial relation to me. In front of me, there is, to be sure, a photograph, i.e., a piece of paper with such and such colors, but the colored spots on it lie next to each other, nothing is closer or further, nothing is a river, a bank, or a windmill. I am indeed in a difficult situation, because I see before me a river, a bank, and a windmill. However, I find a way out of this situation, realizing that the river, houses, bank, boats, are indeed grouped in front of my body, but not in front of the self sitting in the chair at the desk, but as if projected into that world that reveals itself to me when looking at the painting. I am there, although invisible; I can even define the place, to which I am projecting myself. I “find myself” in this [11] part of the riverbank that I can no longer see, in the place where a photographer or painter would stand, wanting to photograph or paint the objects I see. I am not as large there as I currently perceive my body, but almost as tiny as those peasant women walking along the riverbank, smaller than the pen, with which I write. And it is precisely because I project myself in this way—unconsciously, by the way—that I see the windmill as bigger than me, although compared to my body sitting on the chair, it is much smaller. This body of mine, projected over there onto a part of the riverbank that is invisible to me, stands in no spatial relation to my body sitting at the desk. And, in general, the spatial world, in which those boats and houses are located, which I see when looking at the painting, has appeared as an alien or unwanted visitor in the space surrounding me, having no relations to it. It is not 20 cm or 200 km away from my chair. It would be different if I were thinking not about the imaginative object, but about the reproduced one. Then, I could perhaps decide, based on knowledge I have acquired elsewhere, that this windmill stands or stood so many miles away from me, in some distant country. However, we are interested at the moment in the world of imaginative objects. There are as many of these worlds as there are paintings, photographs, film images, etc., and none of them stands in spatial relation to that one, enormous space, in which both my desk and that distant country are located.

The same applies to imaginative objects that occur individually. Let us consider the example of a sculpture of a young man running. We can clearly

---



see [12] that this young man is heading in a certain specific direction, toward a certain precise goal, but who among us would locate this goal in the spatial world that surrounds us? It would be absurd to claim that the sculpted figure is heading, for example, toward the door where tickets to an exhibition are sold. This young man is heading to some place in some imaginative spatial world that is not given to us. The nature of his movements indicates some unrealized space, and it creates a certain pointer to some unfulfilled imaginative world. Of course, we are talking about the sculpted figure, not the mass of marble, which is in the same room as my body. Sculptors felt this, and for this reason they placed their sculptures on pedestals that seem to elevate the sculpted figure beyond real space. Frames have a similar function in the case of a painting, likewise darkness around the cinema screen, or a curtain in the theater. The rising of the curtain perfectly symbolizes the transition of our focus on the real world to a focus on the imaginative world. Evidence of our experience of the division between imaginative objects and the spatial world, in which we live, is also the fact that sometimes we consciously and with the help of special means strive to eliminate this divide, that is, to destroy our more or less conscious sense of the boundaries of both worlds. Examples include wax figures without pedestals in panoramas, and panoramas in general. However, all these means simply fail, and disturb our aesthetic experiences. Anyone who visits, for example, the *Raclawice Panorama* in Lvov, easily points out where the imaginative world [13] begins and where the real sands and bushes end. Imaginative objects lie somewhere beyond and above our spatial world. And here lies the source of that sense of rising above the reality of life in the aesthetic experience of works of visual art, theater, and film.

383

The same holds for time in the imaginative world. The time, in which imaginative objects come into being, endure, and pass away, is not the time of the real world that surrounds the viewer. It would be absurd to ask whether the imaginative event watched on the cinema screen, stage, picture, etc., takes place at the same time when the lady who watches it takes her lorgnette to her eye or whether it is followed by the closing of the gates of the cinema, theater, or museum at night. It would be absurd to claim that Hamlet saw the ghost of his father when my neighbor ate a third piece of a candy in a row. Thus, just as imaginative objects do not stand in spatial relation to the real world that

surrounds us, they are not connected by temporal relations to the events of this world either.

Imaginative objects are, therefore, neither in our time nor in our “space.” However, they are deceptively similar to real spatial and temporal objects, they are *quasi*-spatial and *quasi*-temporal, which does not exclude certain differences, e.g., in the flow of time passing in the real and imaginative world. Despite this deceptive similarity, we realize that the imaginative, *quasi*-temporal and *quasi*-spatial world is not part of our world; we are not at all deceived in our aesthetic experience. If the viewers were deceived, they would be in a rush to grab an umbrella in the last act of [Stanisław Wyspiański’s] *The Curse*, [| 14] facing the approaching storm. Othello would not kill Desdemona, because the spectators would betray the trick of his cunning subordinate. When on the cinema screen a train is going straight toward the spectator, the goer does not fear for her life; when at the fringe of the cinema screen a ship partially disappears, the goer does not look at the walls for the rest of it. The sense of distinctness of imaginative “artistic reality” does not abandon her for a moment.

384 The peculiarity of the imaginative object will become even more evident if we examine the concept of the reproduced object in more detail. As far as reproduced objects are concerned, to which our intention is directed when looking at portraits, photographs, film weeklies, scientific films, etc., any explanations are unnecessary. These are, of course, people, things portrayed, photographed, etc. These objects are now (or were once) objects that really exist, [they are] elements of the real spatio-temporal world that surrounds us. However, it would be wrong to assume that this is a characteristic or at least a common feature of all reproduced objects. For I can also be directed in my mind toward the reproduced object when I look at a painting of a knight’s castle that has never existed anywhere, painted by an artist solely from phantasy. This happens with “naïve” people who perceive images of the most bizarre monsters as painted from nature. For this reason, the perception of imaginative objects, not perceived as real and not located in our space, is a privilege of people with a certain level of culture, as, for example, travelers [| 15] who took part in the first cinema performances in exotic countries could observe this for themselves. Reproduced objects are, therefore, characterized—in contrast to imaginative objects—by the fact that they are perceived by us as real components of the

---

spatio-temporal world, in which they once existed or still exist and in which we live; it is irrelevant whether these perceptions are objective and correct. Moreover, it is enough for us to locate reproduced objects as really existing somewhere in real space and once in real time, and it is not necessary to determine the place and time. I can also perceive a reproduced object by looking at a photograph that reproduces a view of the sea, although I do not know what kind of sea it is.

Imaginative objects must be carefully distinguished not only from those that are reproduced, but also from those that are reproducing. A reproducing object is an actor, a canvas covered with pigment, a screen with the phantoms covering it, a marble figure, etc. When I look at 10 photographs of a person I know, I have 10 reproducing objects lying before me, and with their help I can grasp 10 imaginative objects, but only one reproduced object.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, when listening to radio plays, we are directed toward the imaginative world. When we hear the sound of a telephone ringing, we do not think that [16] someone is calling in our real world, when listening to an exchange, we do not have the feeling of eavesdropping on people speaking “seriously.” It is not important whether we believe that the songs of birds we hear, for example, are originally made by birds or skillfully imitated. Because even if we believe in the authenticity of the sounds, we do not believe in the existence of the world, in which they are heard. Real objects that we consider to be the sources of sounds, i.e., people, telephones, etc., we perceive as objects that reproduce or represent someone [or something] else. In this way, not only do people become actors, but also inanimate objects [are as if actors]. In this way, new worlds are constituted for the listener, alien to the real world that surrounds her and not related to it in time or space. The situation is analogous to that of viewing paintings, sculptures, theater, or film shows. The only difference is that in those cases, imaginative perception is based [solely] on visual or on [both] visual and auditory perceptions, while in the case we discuss now, it is based solely on auditory perceptual images.

385

After drawing the above distinctions, we can now consider the forms of activity of the recipient of a work of art with respect to one's imaginative

---

2 Cf. Blaustein 1930.

perception. It is not necessary to discuss in detail that most remarks made on the influence of the course of perception on the constitution of an aesthetic object can also be applied to imaginative perception. The point of view, from which the work of art is seen, the series of perceptual experiences, their duration, the repetition of some of them, etc., also play a major role in [17] imaginative perception. The distinction between static and dynamic works and the way they are perceived retains its importance in this area as well. However, in imaginative perception, there are new sources of the recipient's influence on the formation of the work of art in one's perception. They lie in the possibility of freely changing attitudes. For instance, a cinemagoer focused exclusively on the world of imaginative characters and events, absorbed in the plot, may completely overlook the aesthetic values of the reproduced object. In this way, the arrangements of artistic forms appearing on the cinema screen, their order, the way some disappear and others appear, the pace, at which this happens, the possible rhythm of changes on the screen escape the goer's attention. When, on the other hand, the goer focuses for some time on the reproducing object, follows the arrangement of artistic forms, notices the proper synchronization of movement and sound, is aware of the charm of the world in black and white colors, etc.—the object of one's aesthetic experience becomes richer, and thus acquires new values. And once again, it is justified to say that in aesthetic experience the object appears equipped with certain aesthetic values, but the quantity and type of these values that reach the consciousness of the person experiencing them depend not only on the mind-independent properties of the object, but also on the course and type of perception.

386

Nonetheless, the attitude adopted with respect to a reproduced object can also enrich the aesthetic experience. An attitude when looking at paintings that depict the martyrdom of those exiled to Siberia gives the viewed situations the charm of heroism, which enriches the work of art with new values, and the aesthetic experience [is combined] with new experiences, e.g., with a sense of sublimity, etc. [18] It seems, therefore, that only when the object is perceived in all three attitudes, of course with the predominance of the attitude toward the imaginative object, does the imaginary work of art reveal itself to us in the fullness of its features and aesthetic values.

---

## IV.

It is known that we owe many aesthetic experiences to literary works of art. Until recently, little thought was given to what a literary work of art actually is. Is it maybe a set of symbols printed on paper? Probably not, because in that case there would be many [specimens of] *Sir Thaddeus*<sup>3</sup> and not just one, as we are inclined to believe. Or maybe *Sir Thaddeus* is a set of [Adam] Mickiewicz's thoughts and other experiences from when he was creating this work? These thoughts, however, are long gone; they have long ceased to exist, and we are inclined to say about *Sir Thaddeus* that it exists to this day. So maybe *Sir Thaddeus* is a set of thoughts and other experiences of the readers of this work? In this case, there would be many [specimens of] *Sir Thaddeus*, and very diverse ones, because this work was read many times, and the experiences of various readers (or the same reader when re-reading it) were undoubtedly different.

This difficult problem was brought to the attention of aestheticians and literary theorists by the Polish scholar Roman Ingarden. However, he was not satisfied with merely raising this issue, but attempted to solve it. According to him, a literary work of art is a multi-strata product, in which four strata must be distinguished. The first is the stratum of verbal sounds, the second is the semantic stratum, built from the meanings of sentences [| 19] that are included in the work, the third is the stratum of represented objects, the fourth is the stratum of schematized appearances, in which the objects represented in the work are manifested. Thus, a literary work of art includes both verbal sounds, represented by written signs, and linguistic meanings of words and sentences, created from these sounds, the world of fictional characters and their surroundings, and the appearances of these objects, with the help of which we can visualize them, even though they are only described to us, not shown or otherwise visually given. There is an integral connection between the strata of a literary work; they create an integral whole. Insofar as a literary work of art is a valuable artwork, each of its strata potentially contains specific

387

---

3 [Blaustein refers here to Adam Mickiewicz's epic poem, *Sir Thaddeus, or the Last Foray in Lithuania*.]

---

aesthetic values, and the aesthetic values of all the strata produce a particular polyphonic harmony of the aesthetic qualities of the entire work.<sup>4</sup>

Roman Ingarden distinguishes a literary work from its individual concretizations, which arise during individual readings of the same work. *Sir Thaddeus* is, therefore, a single and unique literary work of art, and its concretizations are numerous, because this work has been read countless times. In a literary work of art, there are many “spots of indeterminacy,” especially in the stratum of objects represented and in the stratum [| 20] of appearances. When describing characters or inanimate objects, for example, the poet cannot and does not want to enumerate all their features. The reader can, therefore, for example, imagine the main character of the novel in detail in one way or another, as long as she attributes those features that the author of the novel clearly mentions. In the concretizations of a literary work of art, the spots of indeterminacy are “filled in,” but not all of them and not always in the same way.

388 From this compact presentation of Ingarden’s theory of a literary work of art, it follows that the apprehension of a literary work of art is a very complex experience. After all, the reader must perceive written signs and expressions, understand the meaning of words and sentences, think about the objects represented in the work, sometimes imagine them in relevant appearances, and bind these strata into a whole—and apprehending the idea of the whole requires certain experiences on the part of the reader. Ingarden writes about the influence of the complexity of the perception of a literary work on its concretization as follows:

The multitude and variety of experiences and acts that we must perform almost simultaneously when reading a work means that we do not live in all of them equally actively and perform them with equal perfection. As a result, various details of the work’s construction undergo more or less significant distortions in the individual phases and strata of concretization: certain details are omitted or “overconstituted,” (“overdeveloped”—a photographer may say), or on the contrary exaggerated, or ultimately wrongly reconstructed, etc. The one-sidedness of the

---

4 See Ingarden 1931 [1973a] and Ingarden 1937 [1973b].

---

reader's imaginative type, for example, entails significant deformations of the stratum of aspects, insensitivity to [1] 21] certain aesthetic qualities impoverishes the concretization of the work by them, the lack of ability to empathize with the mental life of the people presented in the work changes the content of the stratum of objects, etc. It is not possible to go into detail here, but it is certain that all these changes are reflected, or at least can be decisively reflected, in the polyphonic set of aesthetically valuable qualities and can distort the concretization of the work as an object of aesthetic experience. An important role is played here by changes in the reader's attention, the instability of its center, limited divisibility, etc. The direction of attention, the degree of its concretization, etc., is only in relatively few cases determined by the structure of the work itself (or its individual phases), while in general, the state of attention changes independently of the properties of the work. As a result, not all the details and strata of the work appear equally clearly. Once, another time, we perform an act or experience with greater attention, and in tandem with this, we are as if first to one stratum, then to another, while the remaining strata are present to us only peripherally and are vaguely outlined. We are most actively immersed in grasping the objects presented in the work, and least clearly aware of the properties of the semantic stratum of the work... As a result, in the individual phases of its concretization, the work manifests itself in a kind of perspectival foreshortening, in the skewing and exaggeration of some strata (in this case, the stratum of objects), and in the miniaturization of others. Something similar occurs here as in the faulty photographing of larger objects with an inclined [1] 22] camera positioning or when the positions of objects in relation to the camera differ significantly.

Quite the opposite foreshortening arises—so to speak—in the “philological” way of reading a work. It occurs among readers for whom the main interest is the so-called “author's language,” that is, the language, in which a given work is written, or the ways of expressing oneself, the structure of sentences, the types of relationships between them, surprises and stylistic ornaments, etc. Philologists generally delight in all this. For them, the value of a work is primarily determined by what occurs in the semantic and sound strata. On the other hand, what appears in the remaining strata, as well as the polyphonic arrangement of strata and aesthetic qualities occurring in them, is of subordinate importance to them, and what is more, it does not very often come to a lively constitution in the concretization of the work. The

polyphonic harmony of the work is, therefore, disturbed, it is distorted into a “perspectival foreshortening” that is incompatible with the work. Certainly, not every work is distorted to the same extent in philological reading. There are works whose language stratum dominates other strata in terms of its particular structure and aesthetic values, and which consequently demand a “philological” way of reading. But in general, such works are rather a kind of exception in literature. They are also a symptom of a certain decadence or baroque. Read with the stratum of objects in mind, they turn out to be empty and poor both in their “ideological” content and in the polyphony of aesthetic qualities. Other works rich in this [23] polyphony will never reveal their proper, artistic face to us in a philological reading, impoverished in perception by precisely what is essential to them.

Perhaps these examples will suffice to explain what I have in mind when I speak of the “perspectival foreshortenings” of a literary work, which flow from the complexity of its perception. (Ingarden 1937, 61–63.)<sup>5</sup>

390      This is not the only source of the dependence of the concretization of a literary work of art on the reader. Another, and a very important one, is the “filling in” by the reader of the above-mentioned spots of “indeterminacy,” with various readers specifying these spots differently.

In the aesthetic concretization of a literary work, its spots of indeterminacy... can be filled in various ways, depending on the course of the aesthetic experience or on the various abilities of the reader, such as his interest, type of imagination and scope of phantasy, sense of objective consequence, psychological sensitivity, subtlety of feeling, ability of emotional response, type and degree of ethical culture, etc. At the same time, each difference of indeterminacy has a certain influence on the whole of the concretization, although it may be more or less significant for its aesthetic value. Various cases are possible. Sometimes, failure to fill in one important place of indeterminacy or filling it in a way that is inconsistent with the work or finally inappropriately

---

5 [This quotation comes from the original Polish version of Ingarden’s book, *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art*. For the revised and enlarged version, see Ingarden 1973b, 90–92.]

---



matched to the other elements of the concretization destroys or at least [| 24] significantly spoils the qualitative arrangement occurring in it. Sometimes, on the contrary, the deliberate failure to fill in some place of underdetermination or, what is more, filling it in such a way that it seems—as it is usually said—not to be in the “author’s intentions” results in the removal of some unnecessary dissonance or increases the uniformity of the qualitative arrangement and thus contributes to increasing the aesthetic value of a given concretization. Of course, there may also be other cases. (Ingarden 1937, 213–214.)<sup>6</sup>

In the cited works of Roman Ingarden, the reader will find numerous further arguments in favor of the claim that the same literary work of art can be differently understood, depending on the course of the reader’s experiences, which of course determines a richer or poorer apprehension of its aesthetic values. A full apprehension of the work and its aesthetic values, therefore, requires great activity and the skills of the reader. Lacking that means, for example, that some readers of masterpieces will not perceive them as masterpieces at all. Their poor perception means that the literary work of art loses its beauty, its charms, and therefore is not a masterpiece in the given concretizations. 391

## V.

In the studies so far, we examined three basic types of aesthetic perception: receptive, imaginative, and signitive. And thus, the perception of a literary work of art is called “signitive,” because its basic component is [| 25] the conceptual understanding of signs, expressions. In each of these types of aesthetic perception, one who experiences aesthetically determines—as we have stated—the formation of the object of their experiences. This happens not only for the reasons already considered, but also for many others, and we will briefly examine the four most important arguments.<sup>7</sup>

---

6 [Again, this quotation comes from the original Polish version of Ingarden’s book, *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art*. For the revised and enlarged version, see Ingarden 1973b, 368–369.]

7 Mieczysław Wallis-Walfisz writes about one of the most important [reasons], not included in this study, in his text entitled “O rozumieniu dążeń artystycznych w

---

An object given perceptually, imaginatively, or signitively can fulfil the role of a symbol, it can represent some other symbolized object. A skeleton symbolizes death, a ploughshare—peace, a fox—cunning, etc. Peace and war, justice and freedom, youth and old age, times of day and year—these are examples of objects that are often symbolized in art and literature. However, an aesthetically experiencing subject may overlook the symbolic function of the perceived objects. For instance, one is delighted by the beautiful figures sculpted by Michelangelo, but does not apprehend the times of day that they symbolize; one looks with pleasure at [Zofia] Stryjeńska's well-known paintings, but does not apprehend the seasons of the year that they represent. Or one is aware of the symbolic role of certain figures or other objects, but interprets them idiosyncratically. In the sculptures by Michelangelo, one viewer may see symbols of morning, day, evening, and night, and another [may see symbols] of the awakening, blossoming, and waning of human life. One can [26] also apprehend the symbolic meaning of the object, but not exhaust it in its entirety. For example, one who apprehends a sleeping figure, sculpted by Michelangelo, as night, may not apprehend the mask lying next to it as a symbol of dreams. All these circumstances create a new source of the active determination of the experiencing person on the formation of the object of their aesthetic experiences.

392

Memory plays an important role in the aesthetic perception of dynamic objects. For instance, we must keep in a certain way the previous phases of a film or a literary work of art in our memory, if we are to apprehend the compositional values of the entirety of the work of art. Sometimes, we recall these previous phases in a completely different way than we perceived them originally; for example, the previous phases of a film perceived visually, yet only briefly and in a conceptual way, or a radio play perceived auditorily with the help of visual images. Such and other transformations in recalling previous phases of a dynamic object are examples of the active influence of a person on their aesthetic experiences.

Another source is the use of phantasy in aesthetic perception. Phantasy plays a threefold role in the perception of aesthetic objects. It often supplements perceived objects, e.g., fragments of a film's action, which are not displayed on the cinema screen, or the "continuation" of the imaginative world revealed in them, but which is invisible in the images. Those watching [Artur] Grottger's *Sign*, for instance, often present imaginatively to themselves that the unseen man who knocks on the window of the cottage is calling for a fight. [| 27] Phantasy, however, can not only supplement perception by adding things not given in perception; it can help to illustrate given things as well. For example, when reading a literary work, we often present imaginatively to ourselves characters and events given to us only conceptually, and many listeners of radio plays have as if a psychic television apparatus, because things perceived auditorily are simultaneously apprehended in visual creative images. Finally, phantasy adds to perception the dreams loosely connected with it, which—as the Polish aesthete Władysław Tatarkiewicz writes—give a certain additional aesthetic value to some works of art.<sup>8</sup> These associated dreams are no longer a component of aesthetic perception, but they determine, for example, the apprehension of the mood of a painting or a poem. It is clear that the use of phantasy in aesthetic perception in all three forms mentioned above can significantly influence the constitution of the aesthetic object. This can take place in a way that is beneficial or detrimental to the apprehension of the aesthetic values of the object.

393

Finally, one more factor is worth noting. Objects of aesthetic experiences are often mental entities or things that are, admittedly, devoid of a psyche, but "spiritualized" by us. Perception of such objects requires, among other things, empathizing with the states and mental experiences they express. The degree of subtlety of empathizing with an alien psyche determines, therefore, the understanding of the expression of a face "on" the screen, the voice of a character in a radio play, the statement of a character in a novel [| 28], etc. One who experiences aesthetically may possess this ability to empathize to various degrees, and the accuracy and richness of their perception of mental states and experiences depend on this fact. This is a rich source of their active influence

---

8 See Tatarkiewicz 1935, 393–405.

on the formation of the object of aesthetic experiences, while, for example, overlooking or misinterpreting what this object expresses is often at the same time overlooking its essential aesthetic values.

## VI.

The above studies lead not only to the justification of the thesis given at the beginning, but also to certain thoughts of a practical nature. Since in aesthetic experiences the object appears as equipped with certain aesthetic values, and the quantity and type of these values that reach the consciousness of someone who experiences them depend not only on the objective properties of the object, but also on the course and type of perception—it is up to us, and not only the creator of beauty, how much of the beauty of nature and art we will absorb, how much of it we will notice, how much of it we will feel. The aforementioned Polish aesthetician, Stanisław Ossowski, coined a fortunate term for our sad contemporary reality in this respect. He speaks of “aesthetic color-blindness,” which is so widespread today. Treasures of beauty, once created, have been accumulated in libraries and museums, a dense network of theaters and cinemas mediates, like radio, in the dissemination of beauty, and mass tourism makes it easier for us to see the beauty of nature—and yet, most often we pass by beautiful things insensitive to their charm, like a color-blind person [29] who does not notice colors. We hastily consume good and bad books, artistic and average films, without noticing the merits of some and the deficiencies of others, we climb mountains, counting the time it takes to climb, not contemplating the ever new views that are revealed to us, in cars we pass the most enchanting corners of the world, only glancing at some of them, which are destinations “famous for their beauty.” Beauty loses nothing because of such consumption, but the life of someone who is aesthetically color-blind, someone who often seeks joy where only its illusory appearance tempts and passes by such sources of joy that can generously bestow lasting emotion on oneself, is impoverished.

---

---

## Bibliography | Bibliografija

- Blaustein, Leopold. 1930. *Przedstawienia imaginatywne. Studium z pogranicza psychologii i estetyki*. Lwów: Wydawnictwo Polskiego Towarzystwa Filozoficznego we Lwowie. [Partly reprinted in: Blaustein, Leopold. 2005. *Wybór pism estetycznych*, ed. by Zofia Rosińska, 40–68. Krakow: TAIWPN Universitas.]
- Ingarden, Roman. 1931. *Das literarische Kunstwerk. Eine Untersuchung aus dem Grenzgebiet der Ontologie, Logik und Literaturwissenschaft*. Halle: Max Niemeyer Verlag. [Reprinted in: Ingarden, Roman. 1965. *Das literarische Kunstwerk. Mit einem Anhang von den Funktionen der Sprache im Theaterschauspiel*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag.]
- . 1937. *O poznawaniu dzieła literackiego*. Lvov: Wydawnictwo Zakładu Narodowego Imienia Ossolińskich.
- . 1973a. *The Cognition of the Literary Work of Art*. Trans. Ruth Ann Crowley and Kenneth R. Olson. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- . 1973b. *The Literary Work of Art. An Investigation on the Borderlines of Ontology, Logic, and Theory of Literature*. Trans. George G. Grabowicz. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Ossowski, Stanisław. 1933. *U podstaw estetyki*. Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Kasy Imienia Mianowskiego, Instytut Popierania Nauki.
- Tatarkiewicz, Władysław. 1935. "Skupienie i marzenie." *Marchoń* 1 (3): 393–405. [Reprinted in: Tatarkiewicz, Władysław. 1986. *O filozofii i sztuce*, 167–175. Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe.]
- Wallis-Walfisz, Mieczysław. 1935. "O rozumieniu dążeń artystycznych w dziełach sztuki." *Przegląd Filozoficzny* 38 (4): 295–321. [Reprinted in: Wallis, Mieczysław. 1968. *Przeżycie i wartość: Pisma z estetyki nauki o sztuce 1931–1949*, 80–105. Krakow: Wydawnictwo Literackie.]



*Phainomena 34 | 132-133 | June 2025*

## **Transitions | Prehajanja**

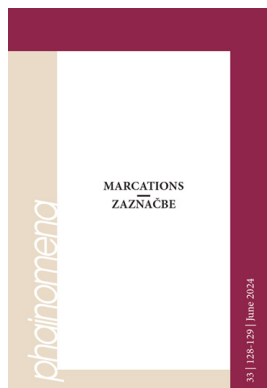
Dean Komel | Paulina Sosnowska | Jaroslava Vydrová | David-Augustin Mândruț | Manca Erzetič | Dragan Prole | Mindaugas Briedis | Irakli Batiashvili | Dragan Jakovljević | Johannes Vorlauffer | Petar Šegedin | Željko Radinković | René Dentz | Malwina Rolka | Mimoza Hasani Pllana | Audran Aulanier | Robert Gugutzer | Damir Smiljanić | Silvia Dadà



*Phainomena 33 | 130-131 | November 2024*

## **Human Existence and Coexistence in the Epoch of Nihilism**

Damir Barbarić | Jon Stewart | Cathrin Nielsen | Ilia Inishev | Petar Bojanić | Holger Zaborowski | Dragan D. Prole | Susanna Lindberg | Jeff Malpas | Azelarabe Lahkim Bennani | Josef Estermann | Chung-Chi Yu | Alfredo Rocha de la Torre | Jesús Adrián Escudero | Veronica Neri | Žarko Paić | Werner Stegmaier | Adriano Fabris | Dean Komel



*Phainomena 33 | 128-129 | June 2024*

## **Marcations | Zaznačbe**

Mindaugas Briedis | Irfan Muhammad | Bence Peter Marosan | Sazan Kryeziu | Petar Šegedin | Johannes Vorlauffer | Manca Erzetič | David-Augustin Mândruț | René Dentz | Olena Budnyk | Maxim D. Miroshnichenko | Luka Hrovat | Tonči Valentić | Dean Komel | Bernhard Waldenfels | Damir Barbarić

