

Aesthetic Investigations

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Janneke Wesseling's *The Perfect Spectator*

Author

LEEN VERHEYEN

Affiliation

UNIVERSITY OF ANTWERP

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REVIEWED BY LEEN VERHEYEN

In her recent book *The Perfect Spectator*, art critic and historian Janneke Wesseling tries to explain what happens between a spectator and a work of art at the moment of encounter. Following Susan Sontag, Wesseling claims that the traditional way of dealing with art focuses too much on the content, interpretation, and meaning of artworks, and takes the sensory experience of the work for granted. According to Wesseling, the opposite approach is needed: we must focus on our senses and on the question *how* and *why* we experience 'meaning' in a work of art.

Starting from her own experiences as a critic, Wesseling aims to arrive at a new theoretical framework of looking at and contemplating art. To develop this framework, Wesseling draws heavily on reception aesthetics, hermeneutics, and phenomenology. By showing that the encounter between the work of art and the spectator must be considered an encounter between two active players, attention is drawn to the fact that meaning is not so much generated by the work, nor by the person interpreting it, but comes about in the interaction between work and spectator. This means that the spectator is not just a passive observer of the artwork, but must perform an activity in order

to experience the work, and that works of art have an intrinsic quality that enables them to enter into a dialogue with the spectator.

In the first chapter of the book, Wesseling focuses on reception aesthetics and hermeneutics in order to develop an idiom and a terminology to understand the complex relation between artwork and spectator. Drawing on reception aesthetics, Wesseling shows that a dialogue takes place between spectator and artwork, meaning that the spectator has to be understood as an interlocutor, and the artwork as an active counterpart. By considering interpretation as the outcome of an interaction between two active players, we can ask ourselves *how* an artwork can ‘act’ and what kind of action that might be.

However, in the second chapter, Wesseling shows that the theoretical framework designed by reception aesthetics is incomplete, because it does insufficient justice to the interaction. In particular, theorists working in reception aesthetics, such as Wolfgang Kemp, focus too much on the artwork’s historical context and too little on the anachronistic position of the spectator. Furthermore, attention is given exclusively to the visual character of perception, and needs to be corrected by an approach in which embodied and situated perception are pivotal.

In the third chapter, the notion of the ‘internal critic’ is introduced to grant the artwork a more active role than has yet been the case in reception aesthetics. With the notion of the internal critic, Wesseling refers to the self-critical and self-reflective function of the artwork. According to Wesseling, the work of art has a dual nature: it speaks about the world and simultaneously talks about itself; it is artefact and representation at the same time. Not only do contemporary works of art often reflect on their own status as artworks, every artwork also occupies a place among other works. For Wesseling, it is by this self-reflective nature that the work invites the spectator to enter into an active dialogue with the work, because it prevents the work from being construed merely as a representation of reality and encourages the spectator to understand the work also as an artefact.

In the fourth chapter the concept of the spectator is further elaborated. In this chapter Wesseling introduces the new concept of ‘verticon’, which is derived from ‘horizon’, to indicate the physical spectator. Wesseling uses this concept to formulate an alternative to the one-sided focus on visual perception and historical context in reception aesthetics by stressing the importance of embodied and situated perception. In this way, Wesseling tries to revitalize reception aesthetics by returning to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology and Gadamer’s hermeneutics.

In the fifth chapter, Wesseling turns to different discourses on spectatorship and the position of minimal art within these discourses. According to Wesseling, minimal art indicates the ‘birth of the spectator’: the spectator can no longer contemplate the artwork as an outsider, but has to participate in it, because the work creates a spatial and theatrical situation in which an

active role is attributed to the spectator. However, Wesseling argues that minimal art makes something visible which is already present in all previous art works, because every artwork needs a spectator in order to be seen and has been made with the spectator in mind. Without a spectator, Wesseling writes, an artwork is merely a thing in a room.

Before coming to conclusions, Wesseling discusses an artwork by Joëlle Tuerlinckx, *Le Parfait Visiteur*. By using this example, Wesseling tries to show that every artwork has a dual structure of 'being included' and 'being excluded'. An artwork always assumes a dialogue with a positioned, performative spectator, but at the same time the spectator remains excluded from the world he or she perceives in the work. While this interplay of inclusion and exclusion has been made explicit in artworks since the late 1960's, when this duality was turned into the content of the artwork, this dual structure has applied to all Western art since the early Renaissance. By using many examples of works of both contemporary and fine art, Wesseling shows that the interaction between the spectator and the work of art should be central in a theoretical understanding of the way the artwork actually *works*.

Throughout the book, Wesseling convincingly argues for the importance of focusing on the 'event of the artwork' when developing a general theory of art. By introducing the concepts of the 'internal critic' and the 'verticon', Wesseling develops a useful framework to come to a better understanding of the two players within the interaction, although these concepts are described in various ways, which means that it remains somewhat vague what these concepts *exactly* refer to. Furthermore, it is a pity that the interaction itself between artwork and spectator is not really conceptually worked out. In the first chapter, Wesseling refers to Gadamer's idea that the encounter with the work of art changes the spectator's 'horizon of expectations', but she does not return to that idea after developing her concepts of the 'internal critic' and the 'verticon'. In this way, one of the central questions of the book, the question how we experience 'meaning' in an artwork remains to a large extent unanswered. Nevertheless, Wesseling's development of a framework to understand the two aspects of the interaction between the spectator and the work of art can provide a good stepping stone towards a theory in which this interaction is central.

leen.verheyen@uantwerpen.be
