
Formalism and the Beautiful

Art's Core?

Representation and Imitation

- ❖ Most paintings, nearly all novels, and many works of music are—and are by design—representational or imitative (or, mimetic).
- ❖ This is why, the view of art as imitation took hold in the first place.
- ❖ We have seen that this theory seems not even extensionally adequate—
 - ❖ —but suppose we relax the notions of representation and imitation somewhat.
 - ❖ Consider, for instance, Beethoven's Symphony No. 6 in F, Opus 68.
 - ❖ Many take the view that this symphony, wordless though it is, depicts (or represents, or imitates) nature.
 - ❖ Here too it is noteworthy that it was named 'The Pastoral' by Beethoven himself.

The Movements of this Symphony

- I. Allegro ma non troppo. Sonata-Allegro. 'Awakening of Happy Feelings on Arriving in the Country'
- II. Andante molto mosso. Sonata-Allegro. 'Scene by a Brook'
- III. Scherzo. Allegro. Scherzo/Trio. 'Joyful Gathering of the Country Folk'
- IV. Allegro. 'Thunder, Storm.'
- V. Finale. Allegretto. Sonata-allegro. 'Shepherds' Song: Happy and Thankful Feelings After the Storm'

Depiction and Representation

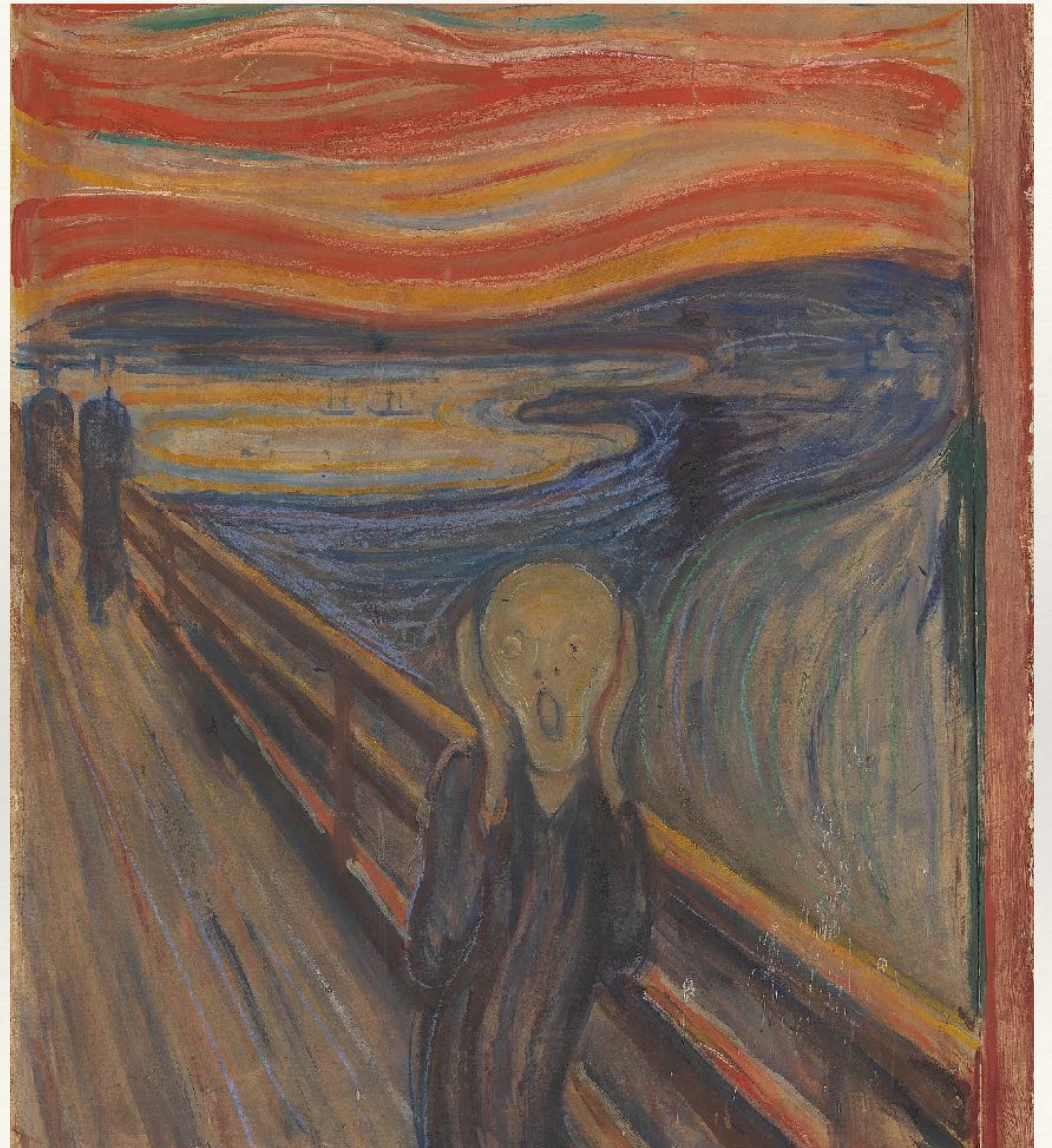
- ❖ Plausibly, some of these seem to be attempts to depict some pastoral scene sonically.
 - ❖ So, e.g., the Second Movement ('Scene by a Brook') and the Fourth Movement ('Thunder, Storm.')
- ❖ Others, though, seem rather focussed on the emotional or affective responses of a person experiencing nature.
 - ❖ So, e.g., the First Movement ('Awakening of Happy Feelings on Arriving in the Country') and the Fifth Movement ('Shepherds' Song: Happy and Thankful Feelings After the Storm')
- ❖ Importantly, for our purposes, a depiction of a feeling or an emotion is a depiction all the same.

Sonic Depiction

- ❖ Let us suppose, then, taking Beethoven's titles at face value, that sonic structures no less than pictorial structures can depict or represent.
- ❖ Here one might note, although one can depict an emotion expressed, it is difficult to conjure how own might draw an emotion.
- ❖ Some argue that in fact music is better positioned than painting to depict emotions and other affective responses.

Munch, 'The Scream'

- Painted in 1893, by the Norwegian Artist Edward Munch
- According to Munch, he had been walking in the evening and suddenly came upon an eerie, almost grotesque blood-red streak in the sky at sunset.
- This he took to be 'infinite scream passing through nature.'
- In fact, although his Norwegian title as 'Skrik' (shriek) his German title was 'Der Schrei der Natur'.
- As Munch said, 'I sensed a scream passing through nature; it seemed to me that I heard the scream. I painted this picture, painted the clouds as actual blood. The color shrieked. This became The Scream.'



So, why Formalism?

- ❖ First: painting.
 - ❖ It is true of a painting, whatever else is also true, that it is an arrangement of colors, lines, vectors, shapes, volumes, and spaces.
 - ❖ The first question, owing to Clive Bell, is this: what makes a painting—as opposed many other arrangements of the same features (advertisements, painted walls, knitted sweaters, holiday snapshots. . .)—a work of art?

Significant Form

- ❖ The answer, according to Bell, is the presence of *significant form*.
 - ❖ Note immediately, that from our perspective, the account is normative:
 - ❖ The notion of *form* is presumably value-neutral.
 - ❖ The notion of significance is manifestly not: it is normative.
- ❖ Note, too, although it begins with painting, Bell's Formalism generates quickly, and in some cases easily, to other art forms.
 - ❖ Even allowing that Beethoven's 6th Symphony depicts or represents nature and our responses to nature—which some already question—those features, according to Bell, are inessential to making it a work of art.
 - ❖ Less obviously, but equally according to Bell, the account exports to literature and drama and poetry (where the formal features include plot and rhythm and sometimes rhyme).
 - ❖ Same again for architecture, where Formalism became a sort of rallying cry.

John Simpson, Architect



The Queen's Gallery,
Buckingham Palace, London



Walsh Family Hall
South Bend, IN

Frank Gehry, Architect



Walt Disney Hall, Los Angeles



More fully: 'Let me tell you one thing. In the world we live in, 98 % of what gets built and designed today is pure shit. . .There's no sense of design nor respect for humanity or anything. They're bad buildings and that's it.'

Gehry Responds to his Critics

The Case for Form

- ❖ Significant form, its proponents might say, *elevates* an artefact from the category of *mere artefact* into something with the status of art, thereby distinguishing it from something with pedestrian form.
- ❖ One obvious question: what makes a form *significant*?

The Basic Claim

- ❖ x is a work of art $=_{df}$ x possesses significant form.
- ❖ Note that in our text, Carroll (p. 89) offers a slightly weaker version:
 - ❖ x is a work of art *iff* x possesses significant form.
 - ❖ In our terms, this is weaker, because it is an extensional rather than an intensional, essence-specifying account
 - ❖ On Carroll's formulation, a necessary and sufficient condition of something's being a work of art is its exhibiting significant form.

Arguing for the Necessity Claim

- ❖ x is a work of art *only if* x exhibits significant form.
- ❖ The Common Denominator Argument (CDA)
 - (1) Whatever is necessary to all instances of art must be common to all instances of art.
 - (2) The only possibilities are: (a) that all art is expressive; (b) that all art is representational; and (c) that all art possesses significant form.
 - (3) Neither (2a) nor (2b).
 - (4) So, all instances of art must possess significant form.

Arguing for the Sufficiency Claim

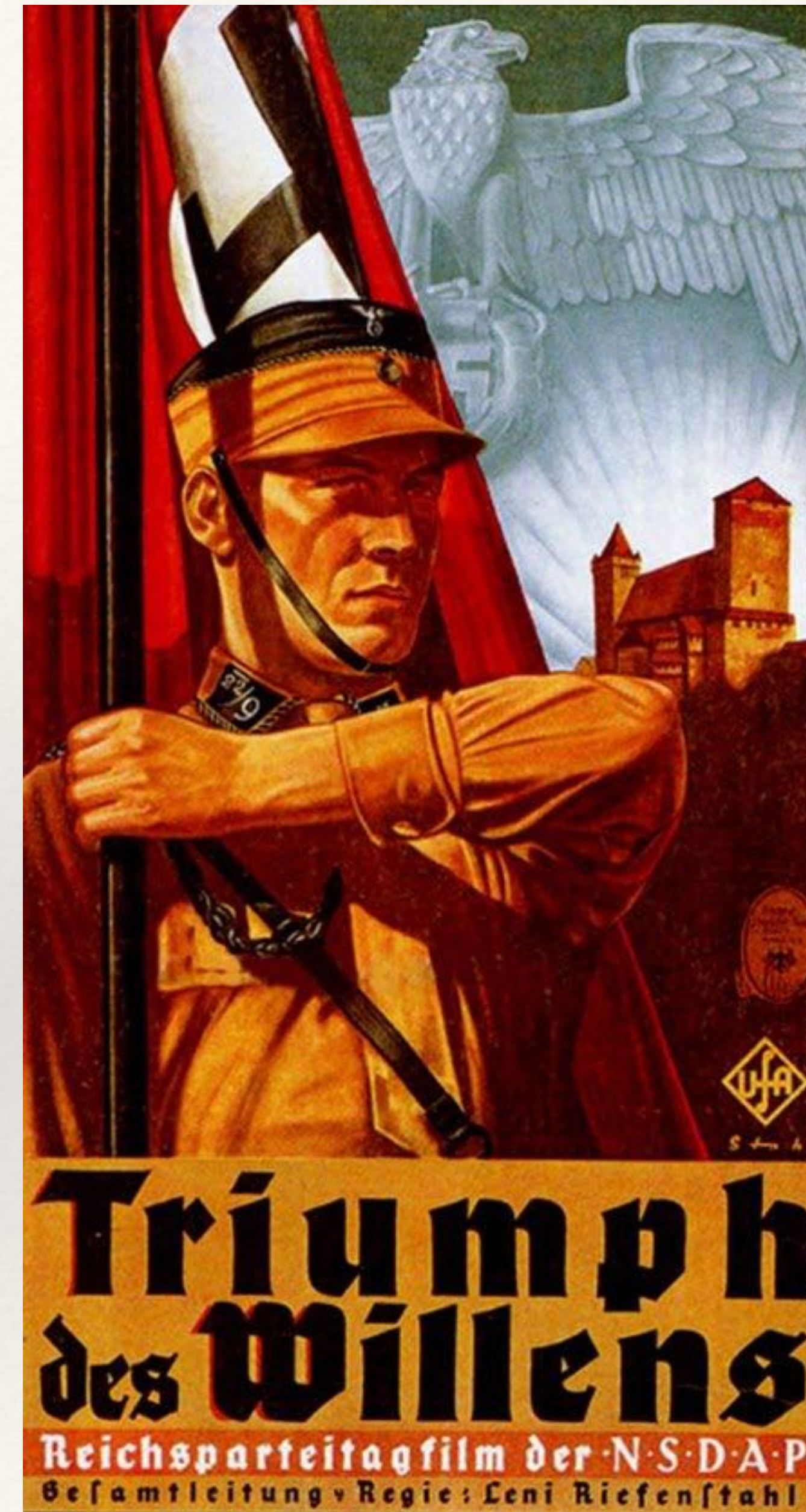
- ❖ x is a work of art *if* x exhibits significant form.
 - ❖ Surely, even if we accept CDA, it looks as if Formalism gets the extension wrong, but casting the net too widely: political speeches, advertisements, prayers, perhaps some sport (as soccer is called ‘the beautiful game’), logical or mathematical proofs, scientific theories, cars. . .
 - ❖ In response, the proponent of Formalism goes functional: the *primary function* of art is to possess significant form. So, the the Function Argument for Formalism (FAF):
 - (1) Of all the activities and artefacts that possess significant form, only artworks possess it as a primary function.
 - (2) If kind K possesses ϕ as a primary function, then being- ϕ is sufficient for being a member of kind K .
 - (3) So, if x possesses significant form as its primary function, x is a work of art.
 - (4) So, x ’s possessing significant form (as a primary function) is sufficient for x ’s being a work of art.

One Further Consideration

- ❖ Formalism makes sense of our critical practices:
 - ❖ We criticize works of art on formal grounds all the time (we say, e.g., that the film was ‘too long’ or the novel ‘poorly structured’ or the piece of music ‘discordant’).
 - ❖ We also at time praise works of dubious moral value, despite their dubious moral value, on formal grounds (e.g. some fascist architecture, or Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will*).

Triumph of the Will

- A Nazi propaganda film commissioned by Hitler
- Chronicles the 1934 Nazi Conference in Nuremberg
- Developed and deployed a series of innovative filming techniques (including moving cameras, arial photography, slick editing, and long-focus lenses) — garnered in praise at home and throughout Europe.
- It is in fact still taught in film schools as well as seminars in European history.
- Roger Ebert (2004): ‘These [*Triumph of the Will* and *Olympiad*, made three years later, also by Riefenstahl] are by general consent two of the best documentaries ever made. But because they reflect the ideology of a monstrous movement, they pose a classic question of the contest between art and morality: Is there such a thing as pure art, or does all art make a political statement?’



As Regards the Case for Formalism

- ❖ We will return to Riefenstahl when we do our unit on Art and Politics, but, for now, as regards the case of Formalism, we have a sort of abductive argument (AAF):
 - (1) Our critical practices involve us in praising and blaming works for their formal features, irrespective of their moral or political content.
 - (2) The only or best explanation of this critical practice is Formalism.
 - (3) So, Formalism.