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ON THE EXCEPTIONAL STATE OF AESTHETIC OBJECTS IN EVERYDAY AESTHETICS

Abstract: A relatively recent debate in everyday aesthetics began half a decade ago, when Irvin (2008) and Saito (2007) challenged the unitary aspect of what Dewey (1980) had dubbed “an experience,” as opposed to “mere experience.” The discussion evolved tortuously, engaging numerous philosophers eager to clarify the impact, study object, and definition of everyday aesthetics by offering normative grounds on which research can be carried out in the field. I show that the debate is far from over, since there are cases in which the normative grounds offered contradict the nature of the everyday and thus defeat their own purpose. Consequently, I propose reconsidering the rejection of exceptionality in everyday aesthetics, arguing that the distinction between the exceptional and the ordinary is not as essential for the movement of everyday aesthetics as it has been deemed.

Key words: everyday aesthetics, exceptional objects, exceptional events, fragmentary experience, Deweyan aesthetics

1. Irvin and Saito contra Dewey

For John Dewey (1980, 35-57), everyday situations do not form aesthetic experience unless they are brought to closure or fulfillment, i.e., to completeness in a sensory and cognitive sense. Irvin and Saito reply that such views are still loyal to “traditional aesthetics,” where the work of art is seen as a disruptor of the actual flow of the everyday. In a similar vein, they write, Dewey asks we take out specific complete events from the borderless everyday flux of events.

There are several points in which I take issue with the arguments Sherri Irvin brings to this effect:

(1) *One can develop conscious awareness of one’s sensory experience* (Irvin 2008, 35). I strongly disagree that this can be formulated as a response to Dewey, since it brings no specific amendment to his own view. Irvin states that we can be conscious of experiences which are usually unconscious, e.g., one’s fingers’ interaction with the keyboard while one is typing a text. I hold that, be that as it may, we will still not be able to be conscious of *all* such experiences simultaneously with undergoing them. For example, while focusing on my typing, I may not have been conscious of my crooked position on the chair, or of the background noise announcing a storm outside. Therefore, mere experience remains well and sound separated from the set of actual conscious aesthetic experiences. Furthermore, as I shall argue in a few minutes following the footsteps of Tom Leddy, we might just as well say that, by means of her conscious / unconscious distinction, Irvin herself picks up everyday activities and confers upon them the exceptionality condition.

(2) “The fact that something does not emerge into explicit consciousness does not rule out its relevance to the aesthetic character of experience.” (Irvin 2008, 36) One may wonder if this cannot be generalized into saying that mere experience contributes to *an* experience, which does not go far from Dewey’s own conception of aesthetic experience. Dewey admits to the absolute continuity in life of experience and to the exceptionality of the aesthetic experience in what concerns this continuity. But he never denies that (continuous) mere experience can be a basis for (exceptional) aesthetic experiences.

Irvin and Saito (2007, 52) conclude that aesthetic experience has to be stripped of its art-centered meanings and of its exceptionality in order to function within an everyday aesthetics. But if both complete experiences *and* mere experience may have aesthetic character, one within what is called “art-centered aesthetics” and the other within a “pure” or strong everyday aesthetics, what is left for aesthetic character to stand for if not for *anything*?

2. Dowling and Leddy contra Irvin and Saito

It is probably for this reason that Christopher Dowling believes that everyday aesthetics might have become too trivialized and even nonsensical or redundant (Dowling 2010, 226). From a Kantian point of view, he sees Irvin's examples as pertaining to the agreeable, and in no case to the normative aspect of the beautiful. Whoever makes a judgment of beauty can expect that everyone will accept it (Kant 2007, §6, 42-3), which is not the case with aesthetic experiences in the everyday.

Tom Leddy's critique is even more interesting. The manner in which Irvin and Saito describe everyday aesthetic experiences is as if one could slow down or even stop time and discern every bit of sensorial stimulus that contributes to the experience. Leddy (2005) thus wonders whether, by "augmenting the ordinary," everydayness is not, in fact, compromised. In the continuation of this argument, we could in fact say that, since art is appreciated *qua* art and does not require any profound change in our vision and attitude, its appreciation pertains to the everyday more than do the experiences depicted by Saito and Irvin, which require a change of attitude toward them so that they can be "extracted" from the everyday. But changing our attitude actually means changing our everyday attitude toward things, making everyday aesthetics not so "everyday" from the outset.

As far as I can tell, the manner proposed by Saito and Irvin for analyzing everyday events stems from Paul Ziff's idea of relative aspection, developed throughout the second part of the 20th century and partially adopted as-it-is by Saito (2001), who recognizes Ziff as one of her main sources. Ziff's (1984) idea was that every object requires a proper aspection, or "view," in order to be appreciated aesthetically. In his essay, entitled "Anything Viewed," he writes that, based on this principle, *anything* can be appreciated aesthetically, since even in the most peculiar, ugly, or repugnant thing there is some sort of order or sequence that reflects harmony, balance, or even proportion. I should, nevertheless, like to note that Ziff's relative aspection is entirely augmentative, meaning that anything can be viewed aesthetically *only if* we change our attitude toward it and enframe it within a proper imaginative, emotional, and perceptual setting. Therefore, it would be contradictory for any aesthetics that adopts Ziff's relative aspection to fight off the exceptionality condition.

3. Melchionne and Leddy contra Dowling

Overall, Christopher Dowling's position is that values present in art (e.g., critical significance and discursiveness) can include experiences

from daily life, in such a way that a rejection of art on behalf of everyday analysis is not necessary. Kevin Melchionne (2011, 2013) doubts this is the case, since everyday experiences cannot be treated autonomously, as – Melchionne argues – in the case of works of art. Additionally, Leddy (2012) holds that everyday aesthetics should drop the Kantian distinction between agreeable and beautiful altogether. When Dowling writes that due to Irvin’s perspective on the aesthetic in the everyday we may lose sight of “the core concept of the aesthetic,” Leddy thus replies that there is no such core concept, or at least there is no absolute or unchanging core concept.

We can, therefore, observe a continual refinement of the relationship between art and non-art with regard to a potentially common aesthetics for the two. This is what actually motivated me to write this paper, that is, the fact that more and more people with a research background in the arts take explicit interest in everyday aesthetics, which was supposed to try and “break free” from art-centered aesthetic theory. Some of these people (e.g., Rațiu, 2013) have suggested that we turn from modern “fine art” to contemporary art in order to ameliorate the differences between the two concepts – “art” and “the everyday.” I submit that, if we go all the way with Leddy’s argument that there is no “core concept” of the aesthetic, we might as well say that there is no core concept of “art” or of “the everyday,” as the shift from modern to contemporary art has proved. So, what if we regard the exceptionality condition of both art and everyday objects in the same manner, that is, as if they had no fixed unchanging meaning?

4. Revisiting the Exceptionality Condition

Rounding up the debate, it is clear that all discussions touch upon the status of everyday aesthetics with regard to the existence or inexistence of its study object’s exceptionality condition. Are everyday objects and events exceptional or not? Do we need to reject the exceptional character of aesthetic experiences, and, if yes, is this possible? I propose we review the exceptionality condition in what concerns the following points:

(1) (Let me begin with the shortest point) In Sherri Irvin’s case, the exceptionality condition is rejected with regard to the impact of everyday aesthetics on morality. She believes (2008, 41) that focus on non-exceptional events will help solve dissatisfaction with our life (work, family, lodging, etc.) – a dissatisfaction that, in turn, leads to the exhaustion of natural resources and harm being done to the environment and to others. We have seen, however, that focus on non-exceptional events renders the latter exceptional. So why maintain the

dichotomy in this regard? Does everyday aesthetics really need to bother with such distinctions in order to address moral matters?

(2) It seems to me that authors such as Kevin Melchionne are far too trenchant in their attempt to define everyday aesthetics. He (2013, §3) defines everyday aesthetics as that sub-discipline in philosophy and cultural studies that takes interest in (a) ongoing and (b) common (c) activities, which are (d) typically but not necessarily aesthetic. Basically, I disagree here with conditions (a) and (b), that is, with Melchionne's limitation of everyday aesthetic experience to ongoing and common activities. These two limitations draw directly upon rejecting the exceptionality character of aesthetic experience, which is seen as the token of Dewey's aesthetics. To show why I disagree with these limitations, let us take one of Sherri Irvin's examples (2008, 35) of everyday aesthetic experiences:

it is possible for me to attend to the feeling of my fingers on the keyboard as I type, although I usually fail to do so. Attending to one's sensory experience is a form of mental discipline that can be learned, and can perhaps become as natural as ignoring that experience. Many aspects of our everyday experience, then, are already conscious in the way that Dewey requires; and others can be brought to consciousness.

I believe that this is an experience "brought to consciousness," in Irvin's terms, and "made exceptional" in Tom Leddy's terms. This alone raises serious questions on the "war on the exceptionality condition" waged by Irvin, Saito, and Melchionne. Furthermore, attending to one's feeling of one's fingers on the keyboard as one types does not have to be ongoing, nor common, in order to be an aesthetic experience. Who is to say that a person *not* typing texts on a daily basis cannot have an aesthetic experience when he or she touches a computer's keyboard, even if that person has never touched a keyboard before, or has done so rarely? For Dewey, aesthetic experience needs to be set off by a distinctive activity, such as opening a book, or, in our case, touching a keyboard. The first lines of a book, or the first feelings of touching the computer's keyboard, then merge with other elements that continue or replace the initial ones, such as actually seeing the words you type being formed on your computer's screen, thus forming a distinctive experience from the rest of the everyday. In this sense, I cannot see how Irvin's example stands as a counterargument to Dewey's conception of aesthetic experience. No matter how much we'd like to safeguard the non-unitary aspect of these subtle aesthetic experiences, we must, in the end, admit that they lose their utter ordinary character, as we must also admit that, since we refer to them as *one* experience or *another*, they

have something that glues them together and that differentiates them from daily haphazard.

Restriction (*d*) imposed by Melchionne is also something I find hard to accept when defining everyday aesthetics. He argues that everyday aesthetics takes interest in activities that are (*d*) typically but not necessarily aesthetic. Melchionne (2013, §2) writes, and I quote:

An everyday practice is not rendered aesthetic by some counter-intuitive transfiguration, leap of creative re-invention, such as an artist's ready-made. The flow of everyday life is not conducive to mental gymnastics. Instead, the typicality and conventionality of the activity fosters and gives shape to the aesthetic.

This condition results in what I find to be some implausible statements on behalf of Melchionne, such as that in which he holds that attending to one's wardrobe is more suited for the study of everyday aesthetics than household activities such as taking out the garbage. In section 3 of his article, he ends up limiting everyday aesthetics to five "areas of consideration": *food, wardrobe, dwelling, conviviality, and going out* (Melchionne 2013, §3). I find it very hard to believe that aesthetic experiences cannot occur outside these areas. This limitation of aesthetic analysis resembles the limitation classical theory imposed on art-specific aesthetics, which is what everyday aesthetics turned against in the first place. Plus, it contradicts both foundational (Ziff 1984) and current works (Naukkarinen 2013, §6) which support that it is possible to evaluate *everything* aesthetically. If everyday aesthetics claims a different approach from art-specific aesthetics, then why does it take on the latter's methods and restrictions?

In one of his latest articles, published this month I believe, Melchionne (2014, §1) further tries to deepen the gap between the arts and the everyday. He asks there what does everyday engagement offer that is more valuable than engagement in the arts. And he answers:

Everyday aesthetics denotes 'the aspects of our lives marked by widely shared, daily routines or patterns to which we tend to impart an aesthetic character.' Everyday aesthetic activities are ongoing, familiar practices with potential though not necessary aesthetic features. One may choose to impart or impute aesthetic quality to these practices but are not obliged to. For example, one has the opportunity to dress with flair but may simply throw on the closest pair of old trousers.

Melchionne is implying that "throwing on the closest pair of old trousers" has no "aesthetic features," whereas putting ourselves forth by dressing "with flair" has aesthetic features. But isn't dressing with flair a means for standing out from the crowd, that is, a means for

becoming exceptional? Is not Melchionne proposing here the exceptional as the study object for everyday aesthetics? With this, I hope to have raised some doubts with regard to condition (d), also.

My conclusion, or rather, my conclusive observation is that an account of everyday aesthetics through the filter of the exceptionality condition remains not only debatable, but also imprecise. The turn against unitary experience is not a necessary one in the course of the development of everyday aesthetics, and it tends to lead to reasoning that defeats its own purpose. I would say that fragmentary, ongoing, and unconscious experience should rather be colligated with the study of experience as closure (or unitary experience) within the movement of everyday aesthetics. I do not see the two as radically opposed one to another. Likewise, there have already been accounts undermining the credibility and sustainability of a “pure” or “strong” everyday aesthetics that rejects exceptionality, such as Leddy’s or Rațiu’s work. Those perspectives came from the field of the arts. I hope to have provided a much more humble *sensu stricto* phenomenological account here.

Acknowledgements: *This paper is supported by the Sectorial Operational Programme Human Resources Development (SOP HRD), financed from the European Social Fund and by the Romanian Government under the contract number SOP HRD/159/1.5/S/136077.*

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