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The Definition of Everyday Aesthetics

Kevin Melchionne

Abstract

This article responds to recent controversy in the aesthetics of everyday life with a succinct definition designed to clarify the domain of study. The article is intentionally designed for brevity and accessibility in order to facilitate usage.

Key Words

Dowling, everyday aesthetics, Leddy, Saito

1. Introduction

In recent years, everyday aesthetics has developed into something of a sub-discipline. Innovative work has been matched by a dose of controversy, a healthy sign of energetic inquiry. Some of this controversy derives from vagueness in the object of study, a tendency toward generosity in categorizing objects or practices within everyday aesthetics, extending it to activities that seem unlikely candidates for aesthetic consideration, like laundry or just sitting quietly.^[1] At times, scholars have treated everyday aesthetics as something of a catch-all, a default third basket for what is not comfortably categorized as fine art or natural beauty. For instance, Tom Leddy defines everyday aesthetics negatively but still broadly, reserving it for "objects that are not art or nature."^[2] Others have resisted this expansion, arguing that it undermines important features of the concept of the aesthetic. Faced with the seeming triviality of many everyday aesthetic experiences, Christopher Dowling worries that "we are in danger of losing the sharp and significant focus on those responses that legitimately engage critical attention and interest."^[3]

The expansive and restrictive approaches both have reasons in their favor. Thought-provoking analyses of practices like meal preparation, wardrobe, and the daily commute have distinguished work in everyday aesthetics. Yet, the range of objects or practices that one finds under the rubric *everyday* can seem arbitrary and this calls for a definition of the everyday. Without a conception of everyday aesthetics, it is not clear what the distinctive value of everyday aesthetic activity might be and why it is useful to speak of everyday aesthetics on its own terms.

Definitions are notoriously difficult. The value of a carefully drawn concept of everyday aesthetics may be considerable but the chances of drawing it conclusively are still slim. At the risk of ignoring Aristotle's advice that one should not expect more precision than a subject permits, I propose a definition of everyday aesthetic activity. The definition should help us to distinguish everyday aesthetic activities not just from fine art but also practices which, though outside of the fine arts, are not really everyday aesthetic practices.

2. The confluence of the everyday and the aesthetic

The problem is how the concept of the everyday restricts a broader category, aesthetics in general. An everyday aesthetic object or practice is:

a. ongoing

This may seem obvious but it bears mentioning that everyday aesthetics is not merely a synonym for minor, vernacular, or non-fine art but, instead, represents a particular way that the aesthetic exists outside of conventional forms of artistic expression. Everyday aesthetics concerns our recurring, daily routines rather than episodic events or projects. Dwelling, the cleaning, inhabiting, enjoying of the home, is a daily activity made and remade on a regular basis. By contrast, interior decoration is rarely done, only once every few years at its most frequent. To be sure, interior decoration nourishes and informs the aesthetics of dwelling. But, by itself, interior decoration is simply not an everyday practice. Likewise, the aesthetic character of everyday activities like cooking, dressing, or cleaning will be different from episodic activities such as, say, holiday feasts, weddings, or vacations. The latter group still counts as vernacular, folk, popular or ordinary aesthetic activity. But it is better seen as embracing seasonal or life-cycle events, requiring complex planning and big decisions focused upon a single event of short duration. In contrast, everyday life is marked by an economy of effort, a minimum of planning, and the easy integration of the aesthetic into routines with amendments and variations along the way.

b. common

By common, I mean widely experienced or practiced. An everyday activity is not exotic, esoteric, or otherwise specialized or credentialed. It is accessible and generally, though not universally practiced. For instance, although rife with experts, contests, and awards, cooking or food preparation is widely practiced, usually without the benefit of advice from star chefs. By contrast, finger exercises are only a typical everyday aesthetic activity for pianists. Few of us are pianists. Thus, the daily finger exercises of the pianist are not relevant to everyday aesthetic theory.

Similarly, the Japanese tea ceremony does not count as an everyday aesthetic practice despite its prominence in discussions of everyday aesthetics. For all its attention to the beauty of the ordinary, the traditional tea ceremony is esoteric and rarely practiced, even in Japan. In Tokyo it is far easier to find people drinking a cup of coffee or eating a donut than participating in a traditional tea ceremony. At best, the Japanese tea ceremony offers a model that we may apply to practices in our lives. It elevates the everyday to a ceremonial occasion.^[4] After participating in a ceremony, if I return to my daily food preparation with a deeper appreciation of the utensils, the heating and pouring of water, the aroma, then the tea ceremony has improved my everyday aesthetic life.

But like an instructional film, this edification does not make it part of everyday life.

Even when they revolve around the same cultural products, professional and everyday activities are worth distinguishing.

For instance, nearly everyone watches television but few of us are in the business of making television shows. The everyday

aesthetic practice, then, is watching, the way we integrate narrative into our leisure time by following a series.

c. activity

In everyday life, some experiences take on value from the overall practice of daily life, the everyday routines, habits, or practices. Everyday aesthetics is defined more by form than content, in other words, more by the doing than its product. Many works of art have the everyday as theme or subject matter. Having the everyday as thematic content does not make an object or practice part of everyday life. A still life painting of a table of food, an opera with a quotidian setting, a novel treating the protagonist's everyday life only have the everyday as a theme.

Ordinary objects are not part of everyday aesthetics merely because they are ordinary. With ordinary objects, our tendency is to consider the object itself and its distinctive design or arrangement. When it comes to the everyday, design can be a red herring. Instead, we must look to the object's role in everyday life. For example, a window with a view of a landscape has no everyday aesthetic value if the room is rarely occupied or the blind always drawn. However, if the light, the view, and the bench beside it contribute to the aesthetic character of some daily moment, then we may speak of the window in terms of everyday aesthetics. It is the regular morning coffee, the acknowledgement of the evening sunset, or the mere raising of a blind after waking that imparts everyday aesthetic value to the window.

d. typically but not necessarily aesthetic

An everyday aesthetic practice has aesthetic features as a matter of course, though not of necessity. For instance, one need not dress with style but it is not perverse if one does. In contrast, taking out the trash is an everyday activity for nearly every one, but it is not typically an aesthetic activity. It would be bizarre to embellish it with ceremony. Of course, it is possible to conceive of taking the trash out aesthetically. But *what matters is not the logical possibility of a quality but, instead, its typicality*. 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.

3. Conclusion

Instead of an expansive catch-all, everyday aesthetics is restricted to the aspects of our lives marked by widely shared, daily routines or patterns to which we tend to impart an aesthetic character. The practices which enjoy these dual features of everyday pervasiveness and aesthetic character are limited. There are five main areas of consideration: food, wardrobe, dwelling, conviviality, and going out. Nearly all of us eat, dress, dwell someplace, socialize, and go out into the world for work or errands on a nearly daily basis. We prepare meals and appreciate the meals made for us with respect to aesthetic features. We assemble wardrobes for aesthetic and expressive purposes, to enjoy and be enjoyed (or, for some

other effect) by the people we encounter over the course of a day. We dwell someplace, cleaning, arranging, and rearranging the space each day, and resting or relaxing in it.

We engage in social interaction, routine acts of conviviality, like greetings, humor, story-telling which have aesthetic dimension as well. We go out into the world, to work or on errands, designing a path to see and enjoy where there is to enjoy among the possible paths to our destination. When these activities have an aesthetic character, they are properly the subject of the aesthetics of everyday life.

In relation to what is offered by great works of art, the satisfactions of everyday life may be modest. However, their pervasiveness in our lives makes them important, arguably more important than what we gather from conventional works of art that we encounter from time to time. The everyday is the portion of our aesthetic lives which we occupy the most.

Although not reducible to it, well-being is greatly dependent on everyday aesthetic life. Indeed, there may be features of everyday aesthetic life (for instance, autonomy, flexibility, insouciance) that make it especially conducive to well-being.

Like any definition, this discussion is bound to elicit some head-scratching. I am sure that there are more than a few cases that test the boundaries. The definition offered here is both expansive and restrictive. It is restrictive in that it identifies everyday aesthetics with a fairly narrow range of widely practiced daily human activities. However, it is expansive because, in giving the category some shape, it opens neglected aspects of our lives for further consideration.

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Endnotes

[1] Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford University Press, 2008), especially the discussion of the appreciation of ambiance in Ch. 3; and Sherri Irvin, "The Pervasiveness of the Aesthetic in Ordinary Experience," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 48 (2009), No. 1, 29-44; for laundry, see Pauliina Rautio, "On Hanging Laundry: The Place of Beauty in Managing Everyday Life," *Contemporary Aesthetics*, (Vol. 7, 2009), www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=535; and Jessica J. Lee, "Home Life: Cultivating a Domestic Aesthetic," *Contemporary Aesthetics*, Vol. 8 (2010), www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=587. Downloaded on November 11, 2012.

[2] Thomas Leddy, *The Extraordinary in the Ordinary: The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*, Broadview Press, 2012, pp. 8-9.

[3] Christopher Dowling, "The Aesthetics of Daily Life," *British*



Journal of Aesthetics, Vol. 50 (2010), No.3, 225-242. For more on expansive and restrictive approaches on everyday aesthetics, see Kevin Melchionne, "Aesthetic Experience in Everyday Life: A Reply to Dowling," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 41 (2011) No. 4, 437-442.

[4] I am grateful to Yuriko Saito for this observation.