

# Appraising the Ordinary — Tension in Everyday Aesthetics

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ABSTRACT. The recent movement of Everyday Aesthetics seeks to theorize our responses to ordinary things and daily activities. But a tension arises in such attempts: can we appreciate the ordinary *as* ordinary without first making it extraordinary or unusual? Tom Leddy, in his new work *The Extraordinary in the Ordinary* argues that we cannot. This paper will contrast his approach with the dissenting position of Arto Haapala, and argue that aesthetic experiences and appraisals can indeed reveal themselves within quotidian contexts.

In 2005, Tom Leddy made the following remark about the nascent field of Everyday Aesthetics:

It would seem that we need to make some sort of distinction between the aesthetics of everyday life ordinarily experienced and the aesthetics of ordinary life extraordinarily experienced. However, any attempt to increase the aesthetic intensity of our everyday life-experiences will tend to push those experiences in the direction of the extraordinary. One can only conclude that there is a tension within the very concept of the aesthetics of everyday life.<sup>1</sup>

This tension cuts to the heart of what the movement seeks to achieve. Everyday Aesthetics has sought to open up a new domain of inquiry within the discipline, in part by focusing on objects and activities that have generally been neglected by traditional aesthetic theory: sofas, knives, and coffee-pots on the one hand, and cooking, walking to work or going to a ballgame on the other. But more than expanding the range of objects

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<sup>1</sup> Leddy, 2005, p. 18.

and activities fit for our aesthetic attention, some philosophers in this area have argued that our aesthetic experiences of the everyday cannot be theorized along the same lines as our experiences of the fine arts, or the beauty and sublimity of nature. The quotidian aspects of our lives, while meriting aesthetic appraisal, also require that we rethink how we respond to ordinary things. The tension, as Leddy saw, is that appreciating a sofa or ballgame, or subjecting it to our theoretical gaze, seems to lift it from the realm of the ordinary to that of the unusual or striking. That is, to make such a thing worthy of our aesthetic attention is at the same time to make it somehow extraordinary, or rob it of the very everydayness the movement seeks to focus on. When Leddy published his work *The Extraordinary in the Ordinary* last year, I hoped for a resolution to this tension, but I was disappointed. For, instead of trying to solve the problem, Leddy merely conceded the game, claiming that it is not possible to “approach the ordinariness of the ordinary without making it extraordinary, without approaching it, therefore, in an art-like way”.<sup>2</sup> I disagree. While thus far attempts to capture the peculiarly aesthetic nature of our daily lives have not been overly successful, I do not think that it is in principle an impossible undertaking. I will contrast Leddy’s approach with that of Arto Haapala to illustrate the difficulty the movement faces, before providing a suggestion of my own.

Leddy’s central claim is that “the ordinary qua ordinary is uninteresting or boring and only becomes aesthetic when transformed” to become akin to a work of art.<sup>3</sup> He affects this transformation through the notion of “aura” which explains how quotidian objects come to merit our attention. Aura is not an aesthetic property per se but an experience of an object as “having the quality of heightened significance in which it seems to extend beyond itself”.<sup>4</sup> Aura is a phenomenological characteristic of an object *as* experienced, in a particularly vivid way. When we ascribe aesthetic properties to a thing—when we appraise it—we are describing our experience as having an aura for us. His various characterizations of aura include that we need to experience an object as (i) being somehow greater than itself; (ii) as having a “surrounding glow”; and (iii) as seeming more real and alive.

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<sup>2</sup> Leddy, 2012, p.121.

<sup>3</sup> Leddy, 2012, p.112.

<sup>4</sup> Leddy, 2012, pp.116-7.

This experience is attended with pleasure; requires “imaginative perception”; and what he calls an “aesthetic attitude” or a “sensing in a certain way”. Specifically, “aura is what aesthetic properties have in common”, and what accounts for an object being seen to possess them.<sup>5</sup> For us to make an aesthetic appraisal of an ordinary chair, for instance, we must first experience that chair as being different from, and having greater significance than, the other objects in the room (including the other chairs). Only then can we apply predicates such as graceful or delicate to it, and be said to have had an aesthetic experience of it, due to its transformation into a nominal work of art.

Glenn Parsons, in a paper delivered to the American Society for Aesthetics annual general meeting in St. Louis, understands Leddy’s theory in terms of metaphor: to perceive an object imaginatively, with aesthetic attitude, is just to perceive it metaphorically.<sup>6</sup> Its heightened significance for us is thus of a particular kind. Read this way, Leddy’s account shares some of the characteristics of Danto’s theory of fine art, from *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. But Leddy’s goal is broader than Danto’s, in that he wishes aura to describe aesthetic experience at large, including that of everyday things. And it is here that weaknesses arise.

First, if we grant that aura transforms the ordinary, the aesthetic will not be its only kind. For instance, everything that my partner has ever received as a gift has a “glow” of untouchability about it such that it can never be thrown away, no matter how old, chipped, torn, or stained it might become. If I suggest that this coffee mug with the broken handle should go, I’m invariably met with the cry “but it was a gift!” I call this the aura of sentimentality and while it raises the mug to a status somehow greater than itself, it has nothing to do with the aesthetic merit of the mug in question. My partner may even agree with my assessment that it is old, broken and tacky but he values it nonetheless. Similarly, my friend who returns every year to the same mosquito-ridden holiday cottage with the lumpy sofa, leaky windows and smell of mildew, does so admittedly because his family has always spent the summers there. (I would call this the aura of nostalgia). But if there are various auras that objects can have,

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<sup>5</sup> Leddy, 2012, pp.128-135.

<sup>6</sup> Parsons’ paper was presented as part of a panel on Leddy’s book. St. Louis, October 25, 2012.

we need a way of distinguishing between them, to isolate the one that is aesthetic, both to ourselves and to others.

Of course the auras of sentimentality and nostalgia are highly personal: there is no arguing about the sentimental value of a mug with the person who feels that sentiment. But an aesthetic aura would be equally subjective: the object must be lifted *for me* from the realm of the ordinary, and have heightened significance again *for me* when I appraise it. Because my experience constitutes the aesthetic object in question, any appraisal of it will be equally mine, and therefore not open to reasoned debate with others. The difference between a mug of sentimental value and one of aesthetic value will rest only on my say so. Yet our experiences, to *be* aesthetic, must be in principle shareable and communicable, whatever theory one subscribes to. They must have some objective, or objectifiable aspect to make them appropriately aesthetic. Leddy's notion of aura, at least regarding the everyday, instead leads us to an acute relativism, if not to dissolving what we mean by aesthetic pleasure and experience altogether.

Certainly no one would disagree that some quotidian objects such as chairs or china vases have come to be seen as extraordinary, and have been exhibited in museums alongside works of art, to be appraised in a similar art-like manner. But the difference between that chair in the museum and the one in my living room is that the former is publicly acknowledged to be an apt object of our attention, and the latter is one only because I have made it so.

Further, an emphasis on aura means that the object itself becomes of secondary interest: we do not appraise its qualities directly, but those qualities as seen through the veneer of its particular significance for us. What we are responding to, it appears, is the significance created, and the object is merely a vehicle for its delivery, in the way that an ordinary thing can become transformed within a metaphorical expression to have heightened significance. And while such a theory may work for our experiences of fine art, as Danto has argued, it is less successful for the ordinary chairs and coffee-pots that are part of our quotidian lives, in large part because these objects do not themselves lay claim to carrying any content or meaning that needs to be interpreted in the way that a metaphor—or work of fine art—can be. Even that museum chair, while being extraordinary enough to be displayed and appreciated, does not thereby become a

metaphor for something else: what we attend to in our aesthetic appreciation of it are the qualities that it actually possesses which in principle we can describe to, and discuss with, someone else.

Taken together, Leddy's conditions for the aesthetic experience of the everyday effect their goal only by omitting the one thing that drew these theorists' attention in the first place: its very everydayness, its familiarity and embeddedness in the context of our daily lives. Chris Dowling has called this a "weak" formulation of the aesthetics of daily life, where the concept of the aesthetic understood in terms of the value of fine art is merely "*extended to include*" quotidian objects and activities.<sup>7</sup> But it does this only by removing them from their contexts, and by first making them "strange" or unusual. I would like to contrast Leddy's approach with what Dowling calls a "strong" formulation of Everyday Aesthetics, which denies that an art-centred aesthetic can accommodate the stuff of our daily lives. Such strong versions are driven by the suggestion that despite the instrumental and functional nature of much of our everyday interactions, aesthetic experiences and appraisals can reveal themselves within these quotidian contexts. But they do so in ways not bound by the conventions and limitations that colour discussions of fine art.<sup>8</sup> Dowling argues that the strong version has not yet been successful in its aims—and I agree—but I am sympathetic to its overarching goal of bringing into focus the aesthetic texture of our ordinary lives qua ordinary, as a distinct but important facet of human experience. Let me turn to the work of Arto Haapala in this regard.

Haapala is critical of what he calls the aesthetic model of "strangeness", where a work of art is a paradigmatic example of a phenomenon that is supposed to "stand out from the stream of the everyday".<sup>9</sup> Like Leddy's notion of aura, strangeness is not a property of objects per se but a phenomenological characteristic of our interactions with them: a work of fine art hung by the mantle can become familiar over the passage of time, just as a nominally mundane object such as a phone booth can become strange when, for instance, we are travelling in a foreign country. Unlike Leddy, though, Haapala seeks to theorize the everyday as an aesthetic of the fa-

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<sup>7</sup> Dowling, 2010, p.241.

<sup>8</sup> Dowling, 2010, pp. 233, 241.

<sup>9</sup> Haapala, 2005, p.41.

miliar and uncover the aesthetic relevance of the everyday as it is lived. His discussion of the strange stems from Heidegger's analysis of a tool, such as a hammer, which, when functioning properly, we pay no attention to. Only when the tool malfunctions do we notice it, and it comes to be seen as striking or unusual. When it works well it disappears into its function, as background, or as a thing we use to achieve our everyday purposes and in this role it becomes familiar.<sup>10</sup>

The challenge for Haapala is how to make the familiar of aesthetic import without also making it strange. While he acknowledges the difficulty more explicitly than other theorists of the everyday, his proposal falls short of a solution. Again adopting a notion from Heidegger, Haapala's account ties familiarity to the process of "home-building" or settling down and making a place our own. Home-building is a way of forging a sense of belonging to an environment whereby we create attachments to our surroundings. Here the familiar can be contrasted with the strange, not in Leddy's sense of the boring versus the striking, but instead as that to which we belong, compared to being in a state of homelessness and alienation (or, in the case of the hammer, a state of disrepair).

However, while Haapala speaks to the import of the everyday, he has trouble explaining how these experiences are specifically *aesthetic* ones. His account provides a negative characterization, an aesthetic of what he calls the "lacking", or the "quiet fascination of the absence of the visual, auditory and other demands from the surroundings". The everyday provides pleasure through a "comforting stability" that makes us feel "homey and in control", not because things are taken out of context but instead because of their utterly ordinary familiarity for us, which gives us a sense of home.<sup>11</sup>

But there are many pleasures of home that we would not regard as particularly aesthetic: a hot bath or cozy seat by the fire also provide comfort and security in the way he intimates, and these feelings accompany a large number of our bodily or sensuous enjoyments. But physical pleasures are not aesthetic ones, even if we value them. Haapala's proposal seems to reduce the aesthetic to a kind of quiet satisfaction we feel when we arrive

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<sup>10</sup> Haapala 2005, p. 49.

<sup>11</sup> Haapala, 2005, pp. 50-52.

home and find things as they ought to be—a gentle sense that all is right with the world, safe and predictable. Here we seem to concede the aesthetic to an ethical-existential idea of place that provides us with a sense of meaning and identity. And in so doing, what Haapala calls our attention to is, ironically, that which commands no attention at all.

From this impasse between the unusual and striking on the one hand, and the familiar and safe on the other, there is a solution that allows us to focus on the particularly aesthetic elements of the everyday without either exoticizing those experiences, or subsuming them within some larger normative framework. My recent work<sup>12</sup> has focused particularly on designed objects rather than everyday experiences but I think it can provide a model for both because the two are intertwined.

We can agree with Leddy and Haapala that the ordinary things we use tend to disappear into the background of our instrumental goals and concerns. But it is not only when they break down that they come to our attention: we also notice things when they work extremely well, when they perform their functions with an ease or grace that calls for our appreciation. That some things are better than the norm does not make them strange, or remove them from the everyday any more than it makes them honorary works of art: they remain the chairs and coffee-pots that we use everyday. It is simply that at times some of them come to demand our aesthetic—as opposed to practical or ethical (or sentimental)—attention.

The factors involved in our aesthetic appreciation of the everyday run a line between the extremes of Leddy's and Haapala's theories. For one thing, to merit my approbation, a given coffee-pot, for instance, must perform its function, and do so very well. Were it to make bad coffee, or fail altogether, it would indeed become strange but not in a meritorious way. Fulfilling its function is a minimal requirement for a designed object to be a candidate for aesthetic appraisal. More than this, to appraise the coffee-pot I must be a coffee drinker. For those who do not drink coffee, or have never made it, the pot will be a mystifying artefact. But this means that a certain amount of culturally and historically specific knowledge is required for me to make this judgement: the coffee-pot must be part of my everyday life and activities. This speaks to Haapala's notion

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<sup>12</sup> Forsey, 2013

of home-building in that the coffee-pot must be familiar, but its aesthetic merit does not reside merely in its place as part of my home: it stands out as exemplary because of its functional excellence. Standing out, however, does not mean that the pot acquires the patina of a special aura: its aesthetic value does not prescind from its nature as a coffee maker that I use everyday.

What I suggest for an aesthetics of the ordinary qua ordinary is thus the following:

1. *Pace* Leddy, we attend to the actual qualities of the object in question, and in doing so, we are appraising something that is in principle shareable, and our judgements can thus be communicated to others (we can argue about the merits of my coffee-pot in a way that we cannot about, say, its sentimental value).
2. These qualities are integral to the object as it is used in our daily activities. Again *pace* Leddy, we need not lift it out of the realm of the everyday to thereby transform it into a nominal work of art to give it our attention. Instead, it is only by being an integral part of our specific lives that it comes to our notice. And this notice requires that we actively use it rather than merely admire it: an aesthetics of the ordinary combines objects with our daily interactions with them.
3. Being embedded in the familiar does not mean that a thing becomes mere background, however. *Pace* Haapala, we can notice and appraise an object when it works particularly well, and this makes it stand out from other coffee-pots we have used. But to appraise it aesthetically, we still need to be knowledgeable users and consumers of the thing in question. In doing so, we are not merely enjoying the sensuous pleasure of a cup of coffee.

If we focus on these factors as contributing to an object's beauty: functional excellence, contextually specific knowledge, actual qualities of the thing in question, its quotidian use, and the in-principle communicability of our judgements with others, then we have the makings of an aesthetic of the ordinary *as it is ordinarily experienced*. We need neither raise it to

the status of artwork with special significance, nor lower it to the level of mere familiar background to do so. It need have neither metaphorical nor existential meaning for us. When we appreciate the everyday, we do so *because* it is part of our lives but an object can become aesthetically pleasing by being very good, while still remaining very much an everyday thing. And this, I think is the kernel of what the movement of Everyday Aesthetics is striving for: a way of acknowledging the particularly aesthetic texture of our daily lives and concerns.

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