1-1-2021

A deweyan approach to the dilemma of everyday aesthetics

Thomas Leddy
San Jose State University, thomas.leddy@sjsu.edu

Recommended Citation

Thomas Leddy. "A deweyan approach to the dilemma of everyday aesthetics" *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* (2021). https://doi.org/10.4000/EJPAP.2273

EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF PRAGMATISM AND AMERICAN PHILOSOPHY

European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy

XIII-1 | 2021
Pragmatist Legacies in Aesthetics

A Deweyan Approach to the Dilemma of Everyday Aesthetics

Thomas Leddy

OpenEdition Journals

Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/ejpap/2273
DOI: 10.4000/ejpap.2273
ISSN: 2036-4091

Publisher
Associazione Pragma

Electronic reference
Thomas Leddy, "A Deweyan Approach to the Dilemma of Everyday Aesthetics", *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* [Online], XIII-1 | 2021, Online since 02 April 2021, connection on 04 April 2021. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/ejpap/2273 ; DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/ejpap.2273

This text was automatically generated on 4 April 2021.

A Deweyan Approach to the Dilemma of Everyday Aesthetics

Thomas Leddy

1 I argue for a Deweyan approach to everyday aesthetics (Dewey 1934/1989, hereafter LW.10). Everyday aesthetics is a new sub-discipline of aesthetic theory that has only been actively discussed since the 1980s. Although I borrow many ideas from Dewey in my approach to everyday aesthetics there are two key principles that sum up the Deweyan nature of the approach I take. First, there is a continuity between the aesthetics of everyday life and the aesthetics of art. Second, the relationship between the aesthetics of everyday life and the aesthetics of art is dynamic. In this paper I will focus on the first of these. In course of my discussion I question such dichotomies as that between the practical and the aesthetic, the ordinary and the extraordinary, and disinterestedness vs. engagement.[1] In my view, the dilemma is only real for those who wish to maintain relatively rigid distinctions within these dichotomies. The dilemma is only a dilemma if you think there is something disturbing about the thought that low-level aesthetic experiences are enhanced when attended to and when understood or appreciated differently by way of the arts.

2 In an article on recent debates in aesthetics, Paisley Livingston discusses what I have called a "tension" in everyday aesthetics and offers his own solution to what he considers the sub-discipline's central problem (Livingston 2015: 259). In setting up the problem, he refers to something I said in an article sixteen years ago: "It would seem that we need to make some sort of distinction between the aesthetics of everyday life ordinarily experienced and the aesthetics of everyday life extraordinarily experienced. However, any attempt to increase the aesthetic intensity of our ordinary 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" (Leddy 2005: 18). The quote raised a worry which several philosophers have tried to resolve. My own solution, briefly, is that the tension may be resolved by seeing aesthetics in terms of levels of aesthetic experience and in terms of continuity in a spectrum of aesthetic intensity that ranges from the most mundane to the most

extraordinary and intense, and in which there are dynamic and mutually enhancing relations between the various levels.

3 Yuriko Saito, Allen Carlson and Livingston each offer their own solution to the dilemma. In this paper, I shall argue that each of the solutions offered relies on keeping a strict distinction between two kinds of perception, a distinction that cannot be maintained. For Livingston, the distinction is between the practical and the aesthetic. For Saito, we need to keep descriptive distinct from normative aesthetics, and in particular we need to recognize that the ordinariness of the ordinary is distinct from aesthetic "gems" we might discover in everyday experience. Carlson insists that Saito herself has not kept to the idea insofar as her examples tend to be somewhat outside the realm of the ordinary. Both Saito and Carlson are reacting against formalist and aesthetic attitude theorists. Saito thinks that the aesthetic attitude theorist fails to engage with the aesthetic object. Carlson thinks that the way to resolve the dilemma is to set aside formalist approaches to appreciation of everyday life which focus on shallow or surface properties and to focus on engagement with things that can be known, for example an artifact's function. I will argue for the aesthetic attitude *and* engagement, but not for formalism.

4 Livingston observes that some experiences are not aesthetic experiences and yet satisfy the conditions of "perceptual uptake in the absence of awareness," and that these experiences often include "what is wholly commonplace and familiar" (Livingston 2015: 260). His example would be a person who makes a daily commute but pays little attention to the sights, sounds or smells on the route. Yet, I would argue, the commuter is surely aware of her surroundings, including the sights of braking cars and perhaps the smells of burning oil. Moreover, the question here is not about when unconscious things receive perceptual uptake but about when they rise to the level of the aesthetic, which is conscious. The commuter's experience which Livingston seeks to handle through unconscious perceptual uptake, can be better handled by talking about low-level aesthetic experiences, ones that can be described, for example, by applying aesthetic property terms such as "pretty," or "nice," or "looks good" (Leddy 2012). Livingston might reply that my use of the term "aesthetic" is overly stretched and that "aesthetic" should be limited to what is attended to "for its own sake." The attention paid to the sounds and smells of brakes and so forth is, on his view, "practical" and not aesthetic. The issue for a Deweyan like myself is whether the "practical" can so clearly be delineated from the aesthetic.

5 Livingston thinks that the everyday aesthetician reclassifies a part of the world as within the sphere of everyday aesthetics, for example by attending to a stretch of road aesthetically (Livingston 2015: 260). But the worry is that in doing so "the very 'object' of everyday aesthetics has somehow vanished or been vitiated as a result" *(ibid.)*. And yet if the commuter is not aware at all, if she is a kind of automaton, then she is not having either aesthetic or non-aesthetic experience, and thus what happens to her is not even relevant to aesthetics; whereas if she *is* aware, and has low-level positive, or even negative, aesthetic experiences, then no re-classification or special philosophical operation is needed to get her experience to the level of aesthetics. Although there is a difference between the practical and the aesthetically sensitive commuter, it is only that the first is attentive to more practical-oriented aesthetic qualities than the second is.

6 I do not know how other people experience driving, but my way tends to alternate between the two modes. If I smell gasoline or hear knocks in the engine I am going to be more focused in the practical mode, and yes these smells and sounds are ugly, i.e. negatively aesthetic. On the other hand, usually I am attending mainly to the sights along the road, and this is a less practical-oriented form of aesthetic perception.

7 The worry that making the ordinary extraordinary, or at least special (as I would now put it) keeps us from properly perceiving that which is ordinary (because doing so takes the subject out of the realm of the ordinary) is misplaced. The person who is stressed by her daily commute is not *helped* by learning how to attend to the boring, humdrum, or stressful nature of that commute. Nor is her ordinary bad or dull experience harmed by transforming it into something better. So I cannot see how recontextualizing the ordinary and experiencing it as something outside the ordinary can be a bad thing, unless it causes moral or practical problems. But to really deal with this issue we need first to turn to Saito's resolution of the dilemma.

1. Saito

8 Saito distinguishes between normative and descriptive dimensions of everyday aesthetics, and finds the tension of everyday aesthetics as between these. There certainly is a normative dimension to everyday aesthetics in that many everyday aestheticians are trying to improve things. I agree with Saito, for example, that we need to cultivate aesthetic literacy with respect to the everyday (Saito 2007: 243). This call for change is ameliorative. It says, "pay attention to this stuff, at least some of the time" and "an aesthetically more attentive life is a better one." It is much like saying that we would improve our lives if we meditated every day. Saito makes this call partly because she sees this literacy as necessary for changes we need to make in our relationship with our environment, that this is a matter of creating a more healthy, humane and environmentally sound world (*ibid.*: 244).

9 Towards the end of *Everyday Aesthetics* she turns to the tension between the descriptive and normative functions of everyday aesthetics *(ibid.)*. But I find this distinction problematic, more a matter of degree or emphasis than kind. I do not see how you can describe everyday aesthetic phenomena without at the same time, to some extent, promoting greater attention to such phenomena. And doing this is normative. Moreover, the dilemma is precisely that paying attention to the phenomena, which description encourages, itself brackets and enhances the phenomena, ratcheting them up to another aesthetic level. The dilemma, as I see it, is only a real one for someone who wants to maintain strict distinctions of the sort we are discussing, and not for a Deweyan who sees continuity and similarity between levels of experience as well as dynamic interaction between these.

10 One approach to everyday aesthetics, according to Saito, is to follow traditional aesthetic theory with regards to the aesthetic attitude. This would be to free ourselves from a practical attitude, i.e. from such normal ways of experiencing or reacting as "appreciating a utensil purely for its functionality or deploring a dirty linen that prompts us to clean it" *(ibid.)*. Aesthetic attitude theory, on her view, would, instead, call on us to closely attend to sensuous surfaces. In doing so, she admits, we can certainly find "hidden gems," for example in the appearance of the linen stain. She agrees that, in order to find these hidden gems, we turn to art, for example to poetry

and photography, and we appreciate the help they provide. So, in her view, we are faced with a choice between focusing on sensuous surfaces to find hidden gems and the normal practice of either appreciating something for its functionality or not appreciating something and then fixing or cleaning it. I question this choice.

11 What exactly is "appreciating a utensil purely for its functionality"? And do we ever actually do this? I see a spoon and a cereal bowl in front of me that I have just used. I like the way the spoon is shaped and how it works, and much prefer it to a plastic spoon or one that has less of a soup-spoon look. The spoon has fine lines, but it also holds cereal nicely. The cereal bowl is one we purchased at a Frank Lloyd Wright museum, and looks vaguely like the Guggenheim Museum in New York City. I love this bowl, which functions perfectly for my morning cereal. However, I cannot separate in my mind my aesthetic appreciation of the bowl from my appreciation of its functionality. And seeing it as a hidden gem is just a matter of moving my already aesthetic experience of the bowl to another level of aesthetic intensity. (Contra Saito, hidden gems are pervasive and hardly rare.) True, I am not always contemplating these utensils as I use them. But I choose them for my morning cereal because they look and feel right. And there is a continuity between this and seeing them as an artist would.

12 In short, my taking an aesthetic attitude toward the bowl is not radically discontinuous with when I just choose it from other bowls for my cereal. Indeed, this lower-level aesthetically-motivated choice is pretty strongly related to the appreciative contemplative level. You might say that the second level involves taking an aesthetic attitude, but it would be wrong to say that I take *nothing like* an aesthetic attitude when choosing the bowl for my cereal, even though that choosing is not, in itself, contemplative.

13 Nor is it fair to say, as Saito suggests, that in contemplating the bowl as an aesthetic object, I am simply attending to "sensuous surfaces." Of course I am attending to sensuous surfaces. But I am not *merely* attending to sensuous surfaces since, in contemplating it, I am aware of its feel in my hand, of its heft and weight and balance, all of which go into a feeling of its fitness for its function. Surely these feels are not surfaces, although they are sensuous. More than that, I am attending to the bowl as indicative of an underlying reality not immediately apparent to the senses.

Since both Saito and Carlson attack formalism, as found in Clive Bell's theory of art (Bell 1958), it is worth mentioning that there is an alternate interpretation of Bell's formalism that takes this into account. Li Zehou understands it not in terms of mere sensuous surfaces but in terms of the social and cultural sedimentation of significance (Zehou 1988). On this view, phenomenologically, the bowl comes with an indeterminate and unconscious background that can be made conscious. I can, while contemplating the bowl, attend to things that are not sensuous but are related to the bowl, such as how it fits the definition of "bowl" or how it fits into my overall taste in design. I can also attend to it in relation to practical matters, such as how I would feel if I broke it. A complex phenomenology of meaning hovers around my bowl. But if I attend to this I am still not attending to "pure functionality." There is no such thing.

14 The case of the stained linen is somewhat different. There is, of course, a difference between the person who looks at it as if it were a work of art and someone who looks at it simply as something that needs cleaning. But both of these attitudes are nonetheless aesthetic: they just focus on different properties and consequences.

15 Webster's defines "normative" as "of, relating to, or determining norms or standards." A norm is also associated with "normal" or "customary." Saito says that everyday aesthetics functions "normatively" when we appreciate "hidden gems" with the help of art, and that this is by way of bracketing our normal response, which is to clean up the stain. So the normative is not normal? But which is more normative in this case: cleaning up the stain or seeing it as a hidden gem? *Both* are normative in that both involve standards, although the second is more normal if, by that, we mean more common. This might differ according to place and time.

16 Treating the stained linen as a hidden gem is rendering the ordinary as extraordinary, and my earlier writings might be guilty of overstressing the importance of this in everyday aesthetics. I now reject the idea of jumping all of the way from the ordinary to the extraordinary without considering all of the intermediary steps, the continuum of possibilities between these extremes. Normativity extends all the way down. Cleaning the stained linen is normative in that the very action of making it look better is intended to create or enhance a low-level aesthetic quality, i.e. "looks nice" or "is clean."

17 But do we, as Saito puts it, "lose something of the everyday life's everyday-ness or ordinary-ness" in taking the arts-based attitude, i.e. in seeing the stained linen as if it were, for example, an abstract painting? (Saito 2007: 245). I cannot see that anything is lost here except that one ought not to be spending time imagining the stained linen as work of art if one's household job is to make sure that such things look nice.

18 Saito calls the "clean it up" approach "descriptive" rather than normative. But "descriptive" is not quite the right word either. Sure, something is described in this case: the attitude of the person who has the household job of making things clean, neat and nice. But we may also describe the attitude of the artist who comes into the kitchen from her studio and is mesmerized by the interesting aesthetic qualities of the stained linen. So, overall, I do not think that the distinction between normative and descriptive helps resolve the tension in everyday aesthetics. However, Saito has made us more aware of how action in response to what we see in the world, for example cleaning and throwing away, is *as important* aesthetically as experience that is more detached and contemplative *(ibid.)*.

19 The question may be a matter of when. When should we make the ordinary extraordinary and when should we focus on achieving the low-level aesthetic results indicated by "neat," "nice," and so forth, i.e. results that are not always associated with the term "aesthetic" (which is why Saito calls them "seemingly non-aesthetic")? If you do the first too often you have what Saito calls "indiscriminate aestheticization." What happens if everything is experienced as extraordinary, as a hidden gem? Well, the result could be pretty disastrous! The dirty linen would never be cleaned. Yet, how bad is it really to promote more art-like experiences of everyday life?

20 Livingston interprets Saito's descriptive mode as trying to represent everyday life faithfully (Livingston 2015: 261). But representing everyday life faithfully is not just a matter of representing the need to clean up stained linen. It also involves representing the experience of seeing the stained linen as if it were art, or of seeing it as an artist would. These are all sides of everyday life, even though the second and third relate more to the everyday lives of artists, poets, and other aesthetically sensitive people.

21 I suppose the problem is that you have to *stop* seeing the linen as needing a cleaning to see it as an aesthetic gem or at least as aesthetically enhanced. But there is nothing to keep us from alternating between the two perspectives, or even combining them to some extent. Consider that, in washing dishes, one can enjoy the qualities of cleanliness as they emerge in the cleaning process in an intensified way quite different from the ordinary experience. And consider that this can be done if one practices "mindfulness" in the Buddhist tradition described by Thich Nhất Hạnh (1999).

2. Livingston's Solution

22 Livingston's own solution is to move to the level of aesthetic properties. On his view, everyday aesthetics is "the subfield that investigates the aesthetic properties of items not falling in the categories of scenic nature or the fine arts" Livingston (2015: 261). Talking about aesthetic properties is fine. However, almost all aesthetic property terms may be applied to both art and everyday life. Both artworks and flower arrangements can be called "beautiful," "pretty," or just "nice." Sure, some terms are used more often in the arts, for example "powerful," and some more often in everyday life, for example "cute." However, pointing this out is no solution the dilemma. Again, the dilemma is only a dilemma if you think there is something disturbing about the thought that low-level aesthetic experiences are enhanced when attended to and when understood or appreciated differently by way of the arts; it is only a dilemma if you think that something important is lost in doing this.

23 Livingston develops his own solution in terms of a strict distinction between the practical on the one hand and "intrinsic valence" of experience on the other (Livingston 2015: 261). This, he believes, is the clear dividing line between that which is everyday aesthetics and that which is not. The intrinsic valence is seen to be positive but always instantaneous, as when the nose of a fine wine "is instantly rewarding," or the immediate sensation of pain has "a negative valence" (*ibid*.: 262). Yet how is this distinction going to help solve the problem? A strict distinction between practical and intrinsic cannot be maintained any more than a distinction between appreciation of functionality and appreciation of surface features where one can happen without the other. Moreover, this approach ignores the continuum between instantaneous and slowly evolving appreciation.

24 Livingston thinks that everyday aesthetics needs a contrast between two kinds of experience. In the first kind, the primary object of attention is the agent's goal. These "instrumental experiences" are contrasted to experiences that focus on intrinsic valence which is described as "whatever makes the experience positively or negatively valued intrinsically or for its own sake" *(ibid.)*. Aesthetic experience is when the intrinsic value is predominant over the instrumental value. Value by way of contemplation is "inherent value" of which aesthetic value is one type. For Livingston, (drawing from Lewis 1946), "[c]ontemplation of what is immediately presented" is, finally, crucial to aesthetic experience (Livingston 2015: 263). This all depends on the kind of radical distinction between the practical and the contemplative that Dewey would reject.

25 Livingston explicates his solution of the dilemma of everyday aesthetics in terms of a story of three fictional characters named Yukiko. We need concern ourselves only with Yukiko1 and 2 since Yukiko3, who focuses on negative aesthetic qualities, raises no new

problems. Yukiko 1 receives a gift of *wa-gashi* from a suitor and considers what his choice indicates about his discernment and taste. She then attends to the "practical problem" of undoing the package without damaging the materials, which is "the only proper way to do it." After that, she sets it aside. Yukiko2, by contrast, "experiences a mild pleasure as she examines the exquisite packaging" and "relishes the cakes." Livingston then says, "it strikes me as uncontroversial to observe that our second Yukiko has an aesthetic experience, while the first one does not" (*ibid*.: 264). In short, Livingston seeks to resolve the dilemma by blocking any way to consider the level of the practical, that of Yukiko1, as aesthetic.

26 Yet Yukiko1 may well be having aesthetic experience, depending on how one defines it. Again, I may be accused of overextending the term "aesthetic" here but, in the Deweyan tradition, I see continuity where others see radical division. As Yukiko1 looks at the *wa-gashi* gift she considers issues of taste. Although she may not be focusing on the surface qualities of the item as such, she needs to take these into account as she evaluates the taste of her suitor. Although she is more focused on background considerations than Yukiko2, these features, for example whether or not her suitor is "elegant" or "tasteful," are aesthetic. Moreover, Yukiko1 engages in an activity, unwrapping a package, which is done in "the only proper way," where "proper" is used aesthetically, much like "clean" in the case of the dirty linen. Livingston is correct that both Yukikos are responding to the same object differently, but they are both responding aesthetically.

27 *Both* Yukikos' activities involve a heightening of significance, a heightening which I have called in my book "increase of aura" (Leddy 2012). Perhaps the second Yukiko attends to the gift in a different or more intensified way than the first. Perhaps she is at a "higher level," although it is hard to say so without more information. Yukiko1 may, too, be having an aesthetic experience in her evaluation of the taste of her suitor by way of aesthetic evaluation of his gift. This is not to deny that there are other, non-aesthetic, aspects of her experience.

28 Livingston writes that, "[i]n her concern for social distinction, the first Yukiko misses out on an aesthetic experience, even if she accurately classifies the packaging's place in a hierarchy of goods" (Livingston 2015: 265). He imagines her as "vain, self-absorbed and sadly obsessed with her relations to other[s]" *(ibid.)*. He also stresses that her experience is constituted in terms of her "proud sense of her status or identity in relation to the suitor; in short, her social distinction" *(ibid.)*, assuming that such a self-directed attitude cannot be included in aesthetic experience. But he also, interestingly, describes her as "a young woman of leisure with ability to attend to objects around her with discernment…" This would make her experience potentially aesthetic, according to, for example, Humean guidelines. To be sure, she is not admirable as a person, and yet she may still be having aesthetic experience.

29 Livingston says that Yukiko1's pleasure is not aesthetic but rather "immediate delight in acquiring an expensive object" *(ibid.)*. By contrast, the second Yukiko is focused correctly on the quality of the packaging, which concern is not "overshadowed" by practical considerations (i.e. how expensive the object is). The first Yukiko's experience is, according to Livingston, "instrumental," for she "fails to appreciate the inherent aesthetic value of the packaging…" *(ibid.)*. It is this radical distinction between the instrumental and the inherent that the Deweyan would question.

3. Allen Carlson

30 The third theorist I would like to consider is Allen Carlson. Carlson correctly describes the key elements of my theory, as set forth in my book, in which I introduce the idea of "aura" in the tradition of disinterestedness although enhanced by my own understanding of Bullough's notion of "psychical distance" as imaginative perception (Bullough 1912). Carlson writes, along similar lines to Saito, that my "account is explicitly not an aesthetics of everyday life ordinarily experienced...[and] cannot resolve the dilemma of everyday aesthetics" (Carlson 2014: 59). He thinks I should recognize that everyday aesthetics is not about the extraordinary. I agree, and yet the very title of my book, *The Extraordinary In the Ordinary*, stresses the ordinary. The focus is on the ordinary and what is to be found in it.

31 There is some ambiguity in the phrase "aesthetics of everyday life ordinarily experienced." In one meaning, my approach *is* providing such an account in that I recognize, list and categorize a wide variety of ordinary experiences in everyday life that involve low-level aesthetic experience, for example when one selects a shirt to wear in the morning because it "looks nice." Very low-level aesthetic experiences of this sort have low level "aura" in my sense of the term (i.e. give a heightened sense of significance), in contrast to things that have even less aesthetic value, or none at all. Although I admit that the term "extraordinary" should be reserved for high points in aesthetic experience, it is still true that the aesthetic takes us out of the ordinariness of the ordinary, the boringness of the boring, and the dullness of the dull.

32 Carlson favors the theory of Arnold Berleant, who sees engagement as the criterion of the aesthetic, for resolving the dilemma (Berleant 1997). He correctly observes that Berleant rejects various dichotomies, for example between subject and object. From a Deweyan perspective, this is good. Yet Berleant holds vigorously to one dichotomy, that between disinterested and engaged perception, which I question. On my view, engagement can, and ultimately must, incorporate moments of distancing or disinterested perception, i.e. detachment from practicality and cognition. It is nearly impossible to engage with a tree aesthetically if it is about to fall on you, and it is difficult to scientifically analyze something and aesthetically appreciate it at the same time. Berleant thinks disinterested engagement a contradiction in terms. I think the contradiction is momentary at best, and that proper engagement involves a process of toggling between disinterested and interested perception, which ultimately synthesizes the two. Similarly, in art appreciation, although one can look at a Rembrandt portrait either in a formalist way or through strong emphasis on historical context, the best result comes from toggling between these two to gain a holistic understanding. This is also true in everyday life.

33 Another thing neglected by Berleant's view is the important role played by imagination in engagement. Berleant calls on the appreciator to immerse himself in the object of appreciation. But it is only through imagination (or through mindfulness, which I will discuss in the next section) that we can identify with what we perceive. In addition, it is only through imagination that an object seems to have greater significance than it would have if it were pure sense data. Imagination (and/or mindfulness) is required for engagement, and imagination intensifies. I do not see how one can engage with what Carlson calls "the mundane, common, routine, humdrum, banal, and even just downright uninteresting" without making the very things so-labeled less mundane, etc.

The dilemma of everyday aesthetics is resolved only by recognizing this. The problem with the cognitivism that Carlson, Parsons and others advocate is that it leaves out the important dimension of imagination as also the way in which certain things can be experienced in a sensuously intensified way that involves no element of cognition (Carlson & Parsons 2009).

34 Although Carlson thinks that Berleant's view can solve the dilemma as I posed it, he discerns a successor dilemma, which needs resolution through another strategy. It is the question of how one motivates focus on the everyday as everyday given that it is uninteresting. His solution is his cognitivism since background information, for example about the intended functions of artifacts, makes things interesting. But there are two senses of "interesting," one of which is cognitive, but another simply means aesthetically engaging. The everyday is not uninteresting in the second sense, and so there is no problem of motivation.

35 Carlson concludes his essay with a critique of Saito's way of appreciating a baseball game, a way that includes not only smells and tastes (the hot dog) but also art-like features of baseball. His view is that appreciation cannot be motivated or maintained without knowledge of the game (Carlson 2014: 64). I am on the side of Saito here: a baseball game can be appreciated aesthetically from a number of different angles, and Carlson's point can only be relevant if we are talking about appreciation of a baseball game qua baseball game. The experience of a baseball game can be framed in different ways, and it is not the case that only the baseball expert can have a good time (aesthetically speaking) at a game. A photographer, for example, can have a great time while knowing little about the actual game. This, of course, can be true while conceding that the main reason for going to a baseball game is to enjoy a baseball game and that this is what motivates most people.

36 But we should also note that baseball is very much like art in that rules are central to what happens and what is appreciated. Baseball and other formal games are as much *unlike* everyday life experiences (like making a meal or taking a shower) as are fine art experiences. So, to use the appreciation of baseball as baseball as the paradigm for appreciation of everyday life, is problematic. Appreciation of a cup of coffee, a walk, a shower, an outfit, or a baby playing, does not require any knowledge of history, traditions or rules, although such knowledge is often useful.

37 So, although cognitivist aesthetics is valuable as an approach to appreciating such things as baseball games qua baseball games, and can be valuable in conjunction with imaginative perception or mindfulness, it does not resolve the dilemma of everyday aesthetics. What does resolve the dilemma is to take the pluralist approach I have described, along with a recognition that there are gradations of intensity ranging from low-level aesthetic experiences to ones that are extraordinary. Where does motivation come from? It comes from mindful and imaginative perception being engaging and pleasurable.

4. Saito on the Aesthetics of the Familiar

38 In her more recent book, *Aesthetics of the Familiar,* Saito returns to the issue at hand arguing that everyday aesthetics ought to be understood primarily in terms not of a list of objects but of an attitude (Saito 2017: 10). She describes this attitude, towards everyday objects and activities, in terms of pragmatic considerations involved in

accomplishing tasks, although she admits that, in everyday contexts, preoccupation with accomplishing a certain task often eclipses its aesthetic potentials *(ibid.)*.

39 I agree some situations are just pragmatic (or, as I prefer, "practical"). In these cases, one is not noticing or otherwise responding to any aesthetic features. Say I notice that my tire is flat. There is no time for contemplation or appreciation. I do not even see the flat tire in *negative* aesthetic terms. I have to engage in a course of action, must refill the tire and find a place that will fix the leak. To be sure, after the whole project is over, I can reconstitute the event, perhaps by incorporating it into a story I tell, as a low-level example of "an experience" in Dewey's sense. But the practical side of repairing a tire requires nothing aesthetic... except in the minimal sense that, after repair, the tire now looks, once again, "right."

40 But what is this everyday attitude of which Saito speaks? She agrees with Ossi Naukkarinen when he says that "[t]he everyday attitude is colored with routines, familiarity, continuity, normalcy, habits, the slow process of acclimatization, even superficiality and a sort of half-consciousness and not with creative experiments, exceptions, constant questionings and... deep reflections" (Saito 2017: 10; and Naukkarinen 2013). Call this the attitude of familiarity.

41 But what makes *this* the "everyday attitude"? Haven't Saito and Naukkarinen both admitted that what is everyday for one person might not be for another? What Naukkarinen describes here is not the everyday attitude of a creative artist, thinker, philosopher, poet, musician, or nature lover. Nor is it the everyday attitude of anyone who has a zest for life and an urge to create. I would suggest that the everyday attitude of the familiar, as described by Naukkarinen, is a less-than-optimal attitude for approaching everyday life. It is an alienated, because only half-conscious and superficial, attitude... an attitude to be noted but "got beyond." However, if we focus on the first part of the Naukkarinen quote it could be seen instead as describing, more positively, a domain of the habitual and routine in which focus is placed on mindful self-actualization. Perhaps this is what Saito has in mind.

42 Saito is right that the person whose job is to package artworks may be satisfied or not with her wrapping job, and that this is part of everyday aesthetics. She is right that that person's attitude will be different from the attitude of the art connoisseur. However, as I will argue, it will not be the attitude of "the familiar" in Naukkarinen's sense if it is to have anything aesthetic to it.

43 Yet Saito endorses Naukkarinen's idea that, in addition to an art-like pole to everyday aesthetics, there is another pole that includes such things as household chores towards which we take what she considers a non-aesthetic, pragmatic attitude. She refers to this pole as "more physical in nature" (Saito 2017: 11). She also believes that these things form "the core of everyday aesthetics" *(ibid.)*. How can the core of something aesthetic be non-aesthetic? When we take a non-aesthetic attitude towards these things for pragmatic purposes they are not aesthetic and hence not part of everyday aesthetics.

44 Although I agree that daily chores can be approached aesthetically, I believe this is by way of a different kind of attitude, the aesthetic attitude. And, when they are approached aesthetically, they rise a bit above the humdrum and merely pragmatic. They cannot be part of the core of everyday aesthetics, or even part of everyday aesthetics, if there is nothing aesthetic about them.

45 Perhaps for Saito and Naukkarinen, the aesthetic nature of these "more physical" activities is unconscious, and the important contrast here is between conscious and unconscious aesthetic experience. Yet, as I argued at the beginning of this paper, surely some level of consciousness is required for anything to be either aesthetic or experiential. So the most plausible theory is that there are experiences that seem at first completely non-aesthetic, but actually have an aesthetic charge, albeit one that the actors might not be fully conscious of.

46 Saito is mainly opposed to the idea that everyday aesthetics requires a defamiliarization of the familiar. But she seems only to be thinking of the high-level forms of defamiliarization. If she could accept low-level forms then there would be no disagreement. And I think she *does,* implicitly. Thich Nhất Hạnh the previously mentioned Zen Buddhist philosopher, speaks of mindfulness in washing dishes (Nhất Hạnh 1999). Saito also speaks positively of mindfulness. Washing dishes definitely falls into the category of activity that is "familiar, routine and ordinary," the category which Saito sees as central to everyday aesthetics. For me, mindfulness *weakly* defamiliarizes washing dishes by bringing the activity *somewhat* out of the ordinary. As I see it, what is central to everyday aesthetics is that it involves everyday experience *made special*, to borrow a term from Ellen Dissanayake (Dissanayake 2009). One way this can happen is when we are mindful, as long as the resultant experience has an aesthetic charge.

47 Saito describes the position she opposes in this way: "In order for [everyday life] to be foregrounded as the object of aesthetics, it has to be illuminated in some way to render it out-of-the-ordinary, unfamiliar, or strange: it needs to be defamiliarized." Further, "aesthetic experience promotes a radically sensitized acuity of perception that is the antithesis of everyday inattentiveness." Thus, "the everyday must be rescued from oblivion by being transformed; the all too prosaic must be made to reveal its hidden subversive poetry" (Saito 2017: 11). Yet this all seems right to me, although revealing hidden subversive poetry might describe a particularly high level of defamiliarization.

48 In order to attack this position Saito discusses some forms of defamiliarization that are deeply unpleasant, for example the one described in Sartre's *Nausea* of a situation in which everything takes on such a strongly defamiliarized look that it is overwhelming. She describes the hero of the novel, Roquentin, as losing the usual control of existence we maintain through conceptualization. In this, he fails to "experience ordinary objects in their benign everyday aspect." Hence his nausea.

49 Saito is suggesting that this form of extreme defamiliarization negates a kind of low-level aesthetically positive thing of which we are seldom conscious, which Roquentin refers to as the "everyday aspect," and that this aspect can be recovered only by returning to control based on conceptualization. But I think reinstituting conceptual control goes too far, that perception under concepts, particularly literal concepts, inhibits aesthetic experience when not combined with a moment of direct sensuous experience. Perhaps the real solution is simply to come down from high-level defamiliarization.

50 Roquentin is described as experiencing the tree as having "lost the harmless look of an abstract category" and becoming an aspect of a larger material obscene "paste" without individuality. This is indeed a very strong negative aesthetic experience. And it may reveal, by its very absence, something we are not always conscious of, i.e. that being able to categorize and individualize things is comforting. But this comfort only

has aesthetic value if it goes beyond mere categorization. And, as I have suggested, categorization, when abstract, is precisely what keeps us from experiencing things as having the kind of presence I call "aura."

51 Saito thinks that, "the most comfortable mode of our interaction with things around us requires an act of intellectual knowing that gives us a power to control them by organizing, categorizing and classifying them" (Saito 2017: 15). I agree that "comfortable" can be an aesthetic quality, but is categorizing sufficient to generate it?

52 Saito believes, a "move to turn the mundane, everyday, humdrum into an aesthetic treasure trove is an attempt to extend the time-honored aesthetic attitude theory to everyday life" (*ibid*.: 19). She finds this problematic since it is only one part of everyday aesthetics *and* can only happen against the background of (or by way of contrast against) the familiar, ordinary and mundane. Further, to try to make everything special is to make specialness disappear. You want to balance art-like experiences of a paper clip with using it to neaten up the workspace.

53 Saito and I are closer on this point than it may, at first, seem. For example, as I argued in an early paper (Leddy 1995), neatness is an aesthetic property, although at a very low level of intensity. So we agree that using a paper clip to neaten up a desk can be an example of everyday aesthetics. Where we disagree is more on the relevance of Dewey's concept of "*an* experience" (LW.10: 42-63). Many hold that "an experience" cannot be helpful in defining everyday aesthetics because it is too committed to being something grand, as in a meal at a fine restaurant. But, for Dewey, "an experience" can also be something as simple as being satisfied with repairing one's car (*ibid*.: 11). What is really at issue here is how to approach what Dewey called "the humdrum" (*ibid*.: 47). Note that Dewey here considers the humdrum an enemy of the aesthetic (which "the practical" is not) and associates it with submission to convention.

54 The main problem Saito has with defamiliarization, as we have seen throughout this paper, is that it seems to negate the everydayness of the everyday. She and others worry that treating everyday experience as art-like, which is what defamiliarization does, involves disloyalty to the particularity of such experience. She adds that scrutinizing the object in the way we might a work of art violates the flow of everyday experience.

55 Dewey thought that art refines and intensifies everyday experience, and it is true that this involves providing some structure where there was none before. However, providing structure is also part of everyday experience. We provide structure when we recount an experience we had to someone else in the form of a story with a beginning, middle and end. Recounting the events of our lives, including our dreams, is part of what it means to experience everyday life aesthetically. Some of the "flow" is lost in this transformation, but not all of it. After all, flow is characteristic, as an intensified quality, in both artistic and art-like experience.

56 As we have seen, much of Saito's position involves rejecting, or at least downgrading, the aesthetic attitude. In my book I defended Bullough's take on this, particularly in his account of experiencing a fog at sea from a "distanced" perspective (Bullough 1912). I believe that distancing provides us with the possibility to perceive metaphorically, and not just under the standard categories. (Ironically, seeing a thing as itself in a heightened way, as happens in mindfulness, is in my view a kind of metaphorical seeing.)

57 As I have just argued, I think that the aesthetic attitude can do the job that Saito thinks it cannot. In particular, I think it is wrong for everyday aesthetics to abandon the aesthetic attitude for the sort of attitude that Naukkarinen recommends, an attitude that fails to bring out metaphorical qualities and that seems limited to a quiescent non-creative approach to everyday life. As I have said previously, "any attempt to increase the aesthetic intensity of our ordinary everyday life-experiences will tend to push those experiences in the direction of the extraordinary." This does not mean that they must *become* extraordinary: the emphasis is on "in the direction of."

58 Saito agrees with Carlson that my concept of "aura" does not resolve the dilemma, and I concede that, by itself, it does not. Perhaps the dilemma needs a complex response. Or perhaps there really is no dilemma at all, or just a dilemma for those who, like Carlson, think we have to choose between formalist and cognitivist appreciation, or, like Livingston, between the practical and the intrinsically valuable. Saito thinks the dilemma cannot be resolved (as Carlson would resolve it) simply by introducing cognitive understanding, since such understanding, say of how a knife works, is needed to properly experience both the extraordinary performance of a knife-swallower and something as everyday as watching one's mother skillfully cut vegetables. The idea of "aura" helps here since it indicates how something experienced aesthetically seems to go beyond or rise above the merely humdrum.

59 Saito says experiencing the ordinary as ordinary offers the core of everyday aesthetic experience whereas I think that "making special" does. Making special is what gives something aura in my sense. When Saito says that "putting something on our conscious radar and making something visible does not necessarily render our experience extraordinary" (Saito 2017: 24). I must now agree, but I still insist that it must go beyond the merely practical.

60 There are different ways to pay attention. On the realist model, there are properties already out there in the world, including aesthetic properties, and we can either attend to these or not. Another model is more Deweyan and pragmatist. It sees properties as neither fully objective nor fully subjective and as emergent on the interaction of the live creature and the surrounding environment. I advocate this pragmatist model of paying attention. One aspect of the pragmatist model is that it does not exclude the affective element of experience since it does not isolate the subjective from the objective. "Paying attention," on this model always has an affective aspect. And of course this also means that it always has an evaluative aspect. I go perhaps a bit further than Dewey in insisting that paying attention also requires emergence of aura. Let's call this the pragmatist/romantic conception of paying attention, although I think this conception is also present in Dewey implicitly.

61 Again, whereas Saito says that "[b]ringing background to the foreground through paying attention contrasts with conducting everyday life on autopilot," I think that when we pay attention in a pragmatist/romantic way to, say, washing dishes, it is *not* that real background is now foregrounded but rather that a potential is actualized: the potential of real experience comes out where routinized mechanical experience existed before. Both Saito and I (and Dewey and Nhất Hạnh) want to get beyond chopping vegetables mindlessly. We all favor mindfulness. But how to interpret "mindfulness"? I would not interpret it in a realist fashion since the realist interpretation leaves out affective/evaluative content and provides no basis for the experience of "aura" which is necessary, on my view, for the whole thing to be aesthetic. How a Buddhist would

interpret it depends on the form of Buddhism: there are certain forms that seem more realist whereas others are more like Dewey in deconstructing the objective/subjective split.

5. Conclusion

62 We have seen that the relatively new field of everyday aesthetics seems to have a dilemma in that whenever the phenomena of everyday life are attended to aesthetically they are raised above the merely mundane, and thus we lose the very ordinariness of the ordinary. The solution to this dilemma, I have argued, is to recognize that the relationship between the ordinary and the extraordinary is both continuous and dynamic involving constant interaction between levels of the aesthetic. Raising the humdrum somewhat out of the humdrum either through mindfulness, imagination, seeing like an artist, or application of the aesthetic attitude is a good thing. It is the ideal of everyday aesthetics as a practice rather than something to be rejected so as to give credit to the dullness of the dull.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BELL Clive, (1958), *Art*, New York, Capricorn Books.

BERLEANT Arnold, (1997), *Living in the Landscape: Toward an Aesthetics of Environment*, Lawrence, Kansas, University Press of Kansas.

BULLOUGH Edward, (1912), "'Psychic Distance' as a Factor in Art and as an Aesthetic Principle," *British Journal of Psychology*, 5, 87-117.

CARLSON Allen, (2014), "The Dilemma of Everyday Aesthetics," *in* L. Yuedi & C. L. Carter (eds), *Aesthetics of Everyday Life*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

CARLSON Allen & Glenn PARSONS, (2009), *Functional Beauty*, New York, Oxford University Press.

DEWEY John, (1989), *Art as Experience*, in *The Later Works, 1925-1953*, Volume 10: 1934 (LW.10), J. A. Boydston (ed.), Carbondale and Edwardsville, Southern Illinois University Press.

DISSANAYAKE Ellen, (1990), *What is Art For?*, Seattle, University of Washington Press.

LEDDY Thomas, (1995), "Everyday Surface Aesthetic Qualities: 'Neat,' 'Messy,' 'Clean,' 'Dirty'," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 53, 259-68.

LEDDY Thomas, (2005), "The Nature of Everyday Aesthetics," *in* A. Light & J. M. Smith (eds), *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*, New York, Columbia University Press.

LEDDY Thomas, (2012), *The Extraordinary in the Ordinary: The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*, Peterborough, On., Broadview.

LEWIS Clarence Irving, (1946), *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation*, La Salle, Il., Open Court.

LIVINGSTON Paisley Nathan, (2015), "New Directions in Aesthetics," *in* A. C. Ribeiro (ed.), *The Bloomsbury Companion to Aesthetics*, New York, Bloomsbury Academic.

NHẤT Hạnh Thich, (1999), *The Miracle of Mindfulness: An Introduction to the Practice of Meditation*, Boston, Mass., Beacon Press.

NAUKKARINEN Ossi, (2013), "What is 'Everyday' in Everyday Aesthetics?," *Contemporary Aesthetics*, 11. Online: (https://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=675).

SAITO Yuriko, (2007), *Everyday Aesthetics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

SAITO Yuriko, (2017), *Aesthetics of the Familiar: Everyday Life and World-Making*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

ZEHOU Li, (1988), *The Path of Beauty: A Study of Chinese Aesthetics*, tr. G. Lizeng, Beijing, Morning Glory Publishers.

NOTES

1. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for help in this formulation.

ABSTRACTS

Everyday aesthetics is a new sub-discipline of aesthetic theory that has only been actively discussed since the 1980s. This paper addresses what many consider the central issue of the field, called "the dilemma of everyday aesthetics." I discuss three authors who address this issue: Yuriko Saito, Allen Carlson, and Paisley Livingston. Drawing on Dewey's anti-dualist stance, I argued for a continuity between the aesthetics of everyday life and the aesthetics of art. In course of my discussion, I question such dichotomies as that between the practical and the aesthetic, the ordinary and the extraordinary, and disinterestedness vs. engagement. In my view, the dilemma is only real for those who wish to maintain relatively rigid distinctions within these dichotomies. The dilemma is only a dilemma if you think there is something disturbing about the thought that low-level aesthetic experiences are enhanced when attended to and when understood or appreciated differently by way of the arts.

AUTHOR

THOMAS LEDDY

San Jose State University
thomas.leddy[at]sjsu.edu