

## A SHORT INTRODUCTION TO EVERYDAY AESTHETICS

LEDDY, THOMAS. *THE EXTRAORDINARY IN THE ORDINARY: THE AESTHETICS OF EVERYDAY LIFE*. PETERBOROUGH, ONTARIO: BROADVIEW PRESS, (2012), 275 PP.

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Aesthetics as a philosophical discipline is relatively young since it was born in the 18th century. Though the theoretical roots and topics of aesthetics can be traced back to ancient philosophy, where they receive their first essential formulation in Plato's fantastic theories of beauty and art, the term was coined by Alexander Baumgarten in the middle of the 18th century (*Theoretische Ästhetik: Die grundlegende Abschnitte aus der 'Ästhetica,' 1750/1758*) to define his project of a science of sensory perception (aesthesis). The role of Immanuel Kant in European development is well-known. On the one hand, he inserted aesthetics into the system of philosophy. On the other hand, the subjectivization of aesthetics also happened through the Kantian critique, as Gadamer explains in *Truth and Method*. Everybody remembers the Kantian definition of "beauty" as disinterested pleasure from the *Critique of Judgment* (1790, cf. § 17). The next step in this European tradition is George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's world-philosophy. His absolute idealism has strong effects even today, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, where the influence of German Idealism has always been more substantial for historical reasons. In Hegel's hands, aesthetics was significantly reduced and disembodied. Hegel argues that instead of sensory perception, the ideas that fine art expresses are those that count. Hegel evaluated the term "aesthetics" as inappropriate and replaced it with "philosophy of art," more precisely with "philosophy of fine art."

Without any continuation, it is clear that the Europe-

an development of aesthetics became a torso due to the dominant role of the rationalist philosophical movement. It did not deal in a proper way with either the aesthetics of nature or everyday life. (In the Anglo-Saxon world, after Dewey, and with the rise of analytic aesthetics, interest in everyday aesthetics declined radically.) That is why we can say that the emergence of nature aesthetics (in the 1970s and 1980s, mainly under the influence of Allen Carlson and Arnold Berleant) and everyday aesthetics (in the first and second decades of the third millennium) only corrected the problematic European development of aesthetics. Thus, everyday aesthetics became a recent subfield of philosophical aesthetics focusing on everyday events, settings, and activities in which the faculty of sensibility is primarily at stake. Everyday aesthetics concerns not only our recurring daily routines but also episodic events or projects. We can see it, for example, in Yuriko Saito's books (*Everyday Aesthetics*, 2007 and *Aesthetics of the Familiar. Everyday Life and World-Making*, 2017), in the discussions on the pages of the online journal *Contemporary Aesthetics* (especially between 2008 and 2015). However, it is beyond question that the best introduction to everyday aesthetics is Thomas Leddy's book, *The Extraordinary in the Ordinary: The Aesthetics of Everyday Life* (2012).

Leddy's book has two main parts. The first part, which contains the first three chapters, offers us an excellent summary of the nature and field of everyday aesthetics. It happens within a broadly historical approach (Ch. 1), from the viewpoints of aesthetic experience and aesthetic properties (Ch. 2), and with a glance at the recent developments of everyday and environmental aesthetics (Ch. 3: A. Berleant, A. Carlson, A. Haapala, and Yuriko Saito). The second part (from Ch. 4th to Ch. 8th) contains the essence, namely Leddy's Aura Theory (in Ch. 4th) and "A Bestiary of Aesthetic Terms for Everyday Context" (Ch. 5). We can also find here the "Criticism Actual and Possible" (Ch. 6), the "Everyday Surface Aesthetic Qualities" (Ch. 7), and the old topic of aesthetics, the "sublime" in the frame of everyday aesthetics (Ch. 8).

At the heart of Leddy's book, however, is his Aura Theory, which defines both the range of objects of everyday aesthetics and the level of aesthetic experience. Therefore, I focus only on his Aura Theory in my review.<sup>1</sup> But what does Leddy mean by "aura"? The objects of everyday aesthetics are clearly not works of art, for which we require not only individual aesthetic experience but also a kind of objectivity. It is not the objectivity of a mountain, tree, or lion existing independently of the human psyche but intersubjective objectivity in Rorty's sense,<sup>2</sup> which manifests itself in everyday life as a consensus. For the objectivity of artistic creation, that is, for the objectivity of artistic value, the judgment of the "subjective poet," his own value judgment, is not enough. Instead, we need the consensus of a majority of a community (e.g., H-G. Gadamer's community of communication or A. Danto's art world) regarding the objective artistic value of a work of art.

In the case of everyday aesthetics, however, we are not dealing with works of art but with even the simplest objects and processes, i.e., "things" of our ordinary life in general. These, of course, do not necessarily result in aesthetic experience. But at least since John Dewey's *Art as Experience*, we have known in European culture that every experience has the potential for aesthetic experience ("an experience"). What is perceived, therefore, can also result in *aesthetic experience*. (Not in a work of art!) And for this, it is "sufficient" that the perceived "thing" is put into proper context. Our daily lives are primarily chaotic, fragmented, and frustrating, i.e., unfulfilled. However, in some cases, according to Dewey, it can be ordered, integrated, and can lead to fulfillment and satisfaction:

A piece of work is finished in a way that is satisfactory; a problem receives its solution; a game is

played through; a situation, whether that of eating a meal, playing a game of chess, carrying on a conversation, writing a book, or taking part in a political campaign, is so rounded out that its close is a consummation and not a cessation. (LW 10:42)

Leddy seems to call something like this an *aura*, but he distances himself from both J. Dewey and W. Benjamin in a sense. (More on that later.) In Leddy, the "aura" seems to be a phenomenal<sup>3</sup> construction born out as the ordinary thing (object, process, happening) is given to us in an aesthetic experience. This phenomenal construction is created by ourselves and by which even the simplest everyday thing can acquire a special, particular significance that the given thing alone does not have. So, there is only the possibility of an aura, just as the possibility of aesthetic experience with Dewey.<sup>4</sup> That is when, when placed in a specific context, we create for ourselves a phenomenon with aesthetic properties that go beyond the mere use of a given thing. We create it with our aesthetic attitude, putting things in a special aesthetic dis-

<sup>3</sup> Leddy mentions Husserl's phenomenology, but it can also be grasped by Heidegger's distinction between *phenomenological* and *phenomenal*: "Now that we have delimited our preliminary conception of phenomenology, the terms 'phenomenal' and 'phenomenological' can also be fixed in their signification. That which is given and explicable in the way the phenomenon is encountered is called 'phenomenal'; this is what we have in mind when we talk about "phenomenal structures." Everything which belongs to the species of exhibiting and explicating and which goes to make up the way of conceiving demanded by this research is called 'phenomenological.'" (*Being and Time*, § 7 C)

<sup>4</sup> The work of art does not exist in itself (neither for Dewey, Gadamer, Shusterman, or Leddy) but only in the experience of the recipient, which thus always implies some kind of non-conceptual understanding. And this is nothing more than the effect of the work of art itself. That is, without theoretical acceptance of the significance of experience, it is impossible to understand the way of being, functioning, and impact of artistic works. Artistic creation cannot be mere theory. One of the poles of a work of art is always objectivity ("ergon," not just "energeia"); that is, it contains at least one material moment that can be grasped sensuously. Even in such highly spiritual art forms as music or literature, we can find tangible and material moments (whether the vibrations of the air, the fixation of a text in the form of traditional or digital signs, etc.). However, this is only one side of the artwork, which remains a possibility without competent reception. For example, a Greek statue that has been underground or buried for centuries is only an opportunity for a work of art, which becomes a reality only through competent reception. However, without a competent audience, contemporary music, paintings, sculptures, poems, novels, plays, photographs, films, etc., also remain mere possibilities for works of art. Artistic creation, then, is the lived actuality of meaning embodied in a meaningful experience.

<sup>1</sup> It does not mean that Leddy's book does not contain an extremely rich fabric of historical and thematic analysis of different aesthetic movements and discussions.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. R. Rorty: „For Deweyan pragmatists like me, history and anthropology are enough to show that there are no unwobbling pivots, and that seeking objectivity is just a matter of getting as much intersubjective agreement as you can manage.“ (R. Rorty: *Philosophy and Social Hope*. Penguin Books, 1999, p. 15.)

course, identical to what Leddy captured with the concept of “aura.”

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Dewey’s excellent *Art as Experience* influenced Leddy extremely strongly since he sees him as “one of the originators of the aesthetics of everyday life” (Leddy 2012, 97). Leddy knows that “there is an immense advantage in seeing art as a kind of experience as opposed to a collection of items” (Leddy 2012, 101).<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, Leddy has also distanced himself not only from J. Dewey but also from W. Benjamin. As to Dewey, Leddy emphasizes, on the one hand, that we do not need every characteristic of Dewey’s “an experience” to find or create a phenomenon with aura:

I would not deny that there is such a thing as “an experience” in Dewey’s sense, although it may be difficult to find one that has all of the qualities mentioned. Nor is it clear that everything we would ordinarily call “an experience” would have all these qualities. (Leddy 2012, 69)

On the other hand, it is also clear to Leddy that “for Dewey, inchoate experiences cannot be aesthetic” (Leddy 2012, 98). However, Leddy knows that “something can have a unity that is quite ordinary. Moreover, fragmented, non-unified things can have an aura, for example, a fragment of an ancient sculpture” (Leddy 2012, 180).

Leddy also knows that speaking about “aura” in connection with artworks makes us remember, first of all, Walter Benjamin’s theory. However, Leddy goes on his own path:

“People sometimes use the term “aura” in a way similar to mine. However, I will be adapting it for my own purposes. “Aura” will be associated in the minds of many with Walter Benjamin, who spoke of the loss of aura in the age of mechanical reproduction. He thought of aura as having to do with unique existence and authenticity. That is, the

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<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that Gadamer says the same in *Truth and Method*: „the work of art is not an object that stands over against a subject for itself. Instead the work of art has its true being in the fact that it becomes an experience that changes the person who experiences it.” (H. G. Gadamer: *Truth and Method*. (Continuum, 2004, p. 103)

presence of the original carries with it an aura of authenticity. An original painting has an aura, in this view, that a copy or a photograph of that painting lacks. I will not be using the term this way, i.e., referring to the sense of authenticity possessed by an original.” (Leddy 2012, 178-179) In Leddy’s opinion, the original artworks do not lose their aura if we reproduce them in photographs; the photographs also can have aura (cf. Leddy, 2012, 181).

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It also follows from all of this that we can accept not only the primary claim that anything can become a work of art or part of it if placed in the proper context. (E.g., Duchamp: *Fountain*; Picasso: *Guernica*; Dali: *The Persistence of Memory*; etc.) We also need to accept the statement (since aesthetic experience can be brought about not only by a work of art but also by any natural or social “thing”) that aesthetic experience outside artistic creation can be completely individual and subjective. The intersubjective objectivity usually required for works of art is no longer necessary here. It also follows from the previous sentences that it is pointless to try to define the subject area of everyday aesthetics since anything can result in an individual aesthetic experience. These aesthetic experiences can be of quite different levels and strengths, as Leddy also mentions in his book, separating significant and superficial aesthetic qualities.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, if we look at Leddy’s everyday aesthetics from this perspective, Shusterman’s reasonable, logical counterarguments also lose their strength. Shusterman emphasizes, first of all (rightly), that somaesthetics is *ab ovo* everyday aesthetics since “Somaesthetics certainly includes important dimensions of everyday aesthetics because (as the soma is the medium of our lives) somaesthetics is centrally involved in the art of living, which involves many everyday activities.” Thus, “as the soma is necessarily and actively engaged in our everyday

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. “Everyday Surface Aesthetic Qualities,” Chapter 7th.

activities, somaesthetics, with its meliorative impulse to improve the quality of our experience, includes matters of everyday aesthetics.<sup>7</sup> However, he also formulates two possible critical arguments in this interview for the future:<sup>8</sup>

Pragmatist aesthetics advocated the aesthetic value of practices outside the realm of fine art in order to oppose art's compartmentalization from our ordinary lives and experiences. The pragmatist principle of continuity urged the continuity of life and art, insisting that art emerged from our practices of living and that art's intensifying of experience fed back into our lives, enriching them and sometimes even significantly reshaping them. *I worry that a dominant focus on everyday aesthetics in opposition to the traditions of fine art could result in a similar compartmentalization, obscuring once again the important relations and continuities between art and life.* (Emphasis by A. Kremer)

Leddy does not speak about any opposition between everyday aesthetics and fine arts in his book. The actual case is the opposite: he emphasizes these two spheres' permanent and mutual connections. The erudite representatives of everyday aesthetics do not speak and write about an opposing relationship but rather about a dialectic one. Shusterman's second criticism is a political argument:

This brings me to my second concern regarding our contemporary enthusiasm for everyday aesthetics. It could be characterized as a broadly political worry. Exhortations to focus on appreciating the beauty of our everyday lives instead of focusing on superior works of art can dull our critical, meliorist consciousness by giving us the impression that the everyday phenomena are good enough and do not require serious improvement. But this belies the troubling conditions of everyday life for too many people.<sup>9</sup>

There is indeed a risk of this happening in the case of some people. However, with that said, there are more advantages to Leddy's proposal than disadvantages. The disadvantage cannot be more significant than the already existing tide of kitsch thrown at us by the entertaining "cultural industry." Of course, mass art as a cultural industry is not the same as popular culture. On the other hand, Thomas Leddy's and Yuriko Saito's suggestions can open up a public and healthy discourse where we can openly and honestly talk about our individual aesthetic experiences. After all, the possibility of communication already has the potential for development. It has at least the potential to accept that aesthetics is at least a three-legged table: aesthetics of artworks, aesthetics of nature, and everyday aesthetics.

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<sup>7</sup> Shusterman will, of course, argue at length here and elsewhere for the legitimacy and importance of the everyday aesthetics, but here and now the differences are interesting.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. the last question and Shusterman's answer in the interview published in this issue: "Pragmatism, Sex, and Somaesthetics: An Interview with Richard Shusterman," by Alexander Kremer.

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. the same interview.