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WELL-CONSTRUED EXAMPLES: A SHY NOTE ON ARNOLD BERLEANT'S ENVIRONMENTAL AESTHETICS

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Abstract

Abstract: Many discussions in aesthetics have, although aiming for universality, through their choices of examples represented only e.g. the middle class and the upper class of/or the Global North, if not only Western Europe and North America (e.g. examples of art in aesthetic theory). Environmental aesthetics looks far more international and open for all kinds of people when one looks at its choice of examples. One major reason for this is Arnold Berleant's work.

Keywords

Environmental Aesthetics, Everyday Aesthetics, Philosophy of Art, Berleant.

In two distinctive essays in *On Philosophy and Philosophers: Unpublished Papers 1996-2000*, "Philosophy as Ethics" and "Philosophy as Spectatorship and Participation," Richard Rorty develops a strain of argumentation about philosophers. Although one can ask how much this really is the case with aestheticians (I think otherwise it is highly probable that Rorty is on the right track), he claims that one becomes a philosopher as one first ponders ethical questions. (We might all do this before other parts of philosophy, but to claim that this is the route to philosophy itself, I find lacking evidence, and for sure, this is not how I became an aesthetician.) Then, on the other hand, to become a professional philosopher (this reflects Rorty's lifelong interest in meta-philosophy), one has to, in a sense, not just become a spectator of life (and culture), able to look at it from a distance, but also become a spectator of philosophy itself.¹

The duty of the philosopher to their humankind is to not become too detached, so they can have something to say about life and the world, but on the other hand they need to become detached enough so that they can become a spectator sufficiently to be able to build argumentation which is not based on too much subjectivity. "It throws him into an aesthetic rather than an ethical attitude toward philosophy," Rorty adds.²

The contemporary aesthetician, in this sense, of course deals with a twofold turn to becoming a spectator. Being a spectator of philosophy might not make a difference to what Rorty writes about, but being a spectator of the world increasingly becomes an aesthetic endeavor.

Aiming for universality, non-aestheticians, in philosophy, often pick absurdist examples, as they mostly just aim to support their argumentation with 'any valid examples.' They are there to

support their meta-driven remarks on reality. Wombats, beggars asking for money on the streets (typical of discussions on ethics) and pens in the hands of the philosophers are classics of philosophical examples – the wombats being an inside joke in logics, and the two others just being routine examples, which might sometimes show the lack of imagination of the speaker/author, but might also function as safe examples, that do not lead the minds of the listeners/readers astray from the topic discussed.

Aestheticians need to be more example-sensitive, as much is gained from dialog with them. Just think about Arthur C. Danto's endless return to the *Brillo Box* or Martin Heidegger's way of building a whole philosophy of art on remarks about the Greek Temple and a painting by Vincent van Gogh. Aestheticians have, however, their own routines, and I recall as a student laughing to the excessive use of Kasimir Malevich's paintings in the philosophy of art. I also remember how much respect I felt toward Noël Carroll, when he, suddenly, as (I believe) the first analytic aesthetician, covered film and other less discussed 'popular arts' in his *Philosophy of Art: A Contemporary Introduction* (1999), just among other examples, most of them taken from highbrow arts, without accentuating the issue (so making it, popular culture, 'natural'). If many aesthetic issues could be as much about film or pop music as they were about theater and painting, why not use those examples, too? This widened the scope of aesthetics maybe nearly as much as argumentation about their aesthetic nature did some years before (in Carroll's and, for example, Shusterman's work), as a key name (Carroll) just decided that it was time for them to make it into the canon of examples. Of course, argumentation needed to come first, but one cannot underestimate the normalization of popular culture in aesthetic discourse.

A philosopher accentuating detachment could, in the way already hinted upon above, say that examples are not meaningful, and they should not be read that way – as they only help to support philosophical points made. And to some extent this is true, even if some examples (*Brillo Box*) have also been fruitful as companions to philosophical dialog. But with the history of white/European upper-class thinking/experience and (Western Central) European art practices of the privileged that aesthetics hosts, it easily turns so that even the professionals in the field start to read the consistent use of only certain kind of examples as a philosophically substantial paradigm or an ideological statement. And for anyone external to the system, the use of only one kind of example (i. e. highbrow) show – partly following, of course, incorrect interpretations – what culture(s) aesthetics aligns itself with, whose experience matters and what kind of artistic products in the end really can be discussed with the help of aesthetics.

Everyday aesthetics, which is a late tag for a discussion which I believe popular culture aestheticians started way earlier (Benjamin, Marcuse, Eco, Sontag, etc.), has a similar problem with examples. I am not the first to note this and the note applies broadly to everyday studies, not just aesthetics. Ben Highmore writes:

Everyday life is a vague and problematic phrase. Any assumption that it is simply 'out there', as a palpable reality to be gathered up and described, should face an immediate question: whose everyday life? Often enough, however, such questions are purposefully ignored. To invoke the everyday can often be a sleight of hand that normalizes and universalizes particular values, specific world-views. Politicians, for instance, are often fond of using terms like 'everyday life' or 'ordinary people' as a way of hailing constituents to a common culture: people like us, lives like ours. The underside of this, of course, is that this everyday life is haunted by implicit 'others', who supposedly live outside the ordinary, the everyday.³

Aestheticians, who did not yet form a major part of the tradition Highmore criticizes in his introduction to *The Everyday Reader* (2002; the aesthetic tradition grew to be a phenomenon in the 2000s), have in the everyday aesthetics discussion focused absurdly much on Western (/Global North) (upper) middle-class lifestyles. Like Carsten Friberg, Elisabetta Di Stefano and I note critically in our introduction to the Forgotten Everydays special issue of *Popular Inquiry: The Journal of the Aesthetics of Kitsch, Camp and Mass Culture* (2021: 1),⁴ even if some authors mention possible life-worlds that they admit that they cannot in the end understand,⁵ and so turn reflectively to plainly more theoretical notes or examples that are from their own lives, working-class life, the life of the poor, and also the life of the really rich are visibly absent from the territory marked as everyday aesthetics. As much as in the philosophical discussions about art, dominated classically by mainly white middle-class and upper-class artists with (Western Central or Southern) European heritage and the taste of the educated people of these groups, the way design objects are on the table,⁶ the way we go jogging (not everywhere can people, especially females, walk/jog on the streets, not even in the US, which is today one of the main countries where everyday aesthetics is written⁷) and/or examples of dinners (cooking and watching TV⁸) and car rides make this discussion somehow hard to penetrate if one is from a life-world with a much less Westernized lifestyle in Chennai in India, or if one lives in a marginalized nomadic Roma community or is just too rich to still get the fascination with design objects that so many middle-class people experience. One can of course ask if there is an everyday in prison camps and where people are doing forced labor (in sweatshops, illegal brothels, and the like) – at least when we think of our everyday use of the concept, which accentuates only certain everydays to be referred to with the concept. Just as middle age is not in everyday language often reserved for criminals or Keith Richards (but more for working-class and middle-class people, especially parents), everyday life is not just dominantly a concept used to explain the life of unprivileged African Americans in Northern Philadelphia or beggars in Mumbai, India. I do think, though, that no one's life is intentionally left out from the discussion in aesthetics (I have no reason to doubt this), and that there is a genuine interest in understanding the topic as a whole.

Tom Leddy defines everyday aesthetics as a philosophical discussion that concerns "objects that are not art or nature,"⁹ and in Leddy's case, as he has studied roadside clutter, for example,¹⁰

this makes sense and it is well-supported by his own work. Many theories of aesthetics are of course based nearly totally on meta-level argumentation and not on notable features and/or objects of the everyday per se. Kevin Melchionne discusses the “ongoing” and “common” as features of everyday aesthetics.¹¹ Arto Haapala accentuates “familiarity” in his everyday aesthetics. He contrasts it with “strangeness,” which he sees traditional aesthetic theories as being into (through an interest in art).¹² Haapala thinks that “[t]he aesthetics of everydayness is exactly in the ‘hiding’ of the extraordinary and disturbing, and feeling homey and in control.”¹³ Having control of one’s life is, however, something, again, that mostly only privileged people can enjoy. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1962) is far from controlled by the protagonist (and definitely not ‘homey’).¹⁴ As we thought in our special issue with Di Stefano and Friberg, it would be great (I am here paraphrasing our thoughts a little) if there were sometimes sentences like “every morning when people go out collecting trash” or “flying in private jets,” but of course, like the self-critical aestheticians have said (I note this above), this would be something that would be hard to do, as the people writing about everyday aesthetics do not in this sense have experience of these lifestyles.

At the same time, I think there is always some way and route to make richer and wider object-scapes for texts about aesthetics, and one reason for me believing in this is the work of Arnold Berleant.

Berleant has in his *The Aesthetics of Environment* (1992) posed a challenge for aestheticians. In the chapter “Descriptive Aesthetics,” he shows how important it is to write rich descriptions of phenomena we want to understand.¹⁵ These include kayaking, sailing and circus performances. Not many of us have, however, been living very different everydays, and even if I, for example, could engage with writing about the multi-ethnic suburban lower-class everyday of immigrants in Sweden, living in the countryside as much as in the cities, growing up in the working class and later adopting a middle-class lifestyle, the leaps made are not remarkable, thinking about the broader picture that I have sketched out here. Not many of us could describe the life of a Mexican nurse, a Nigerian drug dealer or a cook from Bhutan (Ossi Naukkarinen’s examples of lives he does not know, see footnote 5), and I do not think we have to be able to do this to understand what everyday aesthetics is and what it can give to us, but if we want to make the discussion low-threshold for everyone and not create structures that pose unnecessary metaphysics in discussions, this is an important task. And, of course, I would easily feel uncomfortable reading descriptions of the everyday lives of the poor and the less-privileged written by privileged middle-class scholars who had no first-hand experience of them.

Still, I would like to pose the question: do the examples used in the discussion also steer it theoretically? If an article used the example of bad sleep just before a major drug trafficking deal with Russian Mafia or the way it gets heavier late in the winter when one needs to walk an extra mile if one wants to find wood for the fire (in Norther Africa), it is hard to imagine that one could then follow up with theoretical claims that this type of life is somehow ‘homey’ or that we are in our everyday when we are in control of it. For sure, examples steer not just readings (and the way some

people don't feel welcomed to certain discussions as they have the wrong experiences and backgrounds), but also writings, the way people build argumentation. A rich variety of examples does not as easily allow for narrow thinking.

Socially engaged literature, although often written by people who view other people's lives from the outside (some writers are good in this), could of course give us a helping hand, and, of course, sometimes theorists have made remarkable work in their aspiration to describe through their own lives the problems of class, ethnicity and gender. For example, bell hooks's *Outlaw Culture* (1994) begins with an incredibly illuminative description of what it meant in hooks's youth to enter liberal arts education when one did not share 'Caucasian' cultural roots.¹⁶

The work of qualitative social scientists offer texts where 'experience experts,' i.e. people who are, for example, addicts, poor or abused, explain their lives. The texts can shed light on lives that most scholars have no idea about.¹⁷ Still, the problem for aestheticians is that these materials virtually never contain ideas of the everyday or aesthetics, and thinking about the problems of people that social scientists study, it would feel rather awkward to crave funding to get this type of information about them.

To anyway get back to Berleant's writing, he has not simply just been portraying one set of environments, but, besides being the uttermost philosopher spectator that Rorty writes about, he has worked hard to create a broad number of environments, permanent, short-term and sometimes imagined, and futuristic, for his discourse. Space stations, rivers, Renaissance city centers (Venice), Japanese gardens and urban wilderness have always made me feel that this scholar is not just of the utmost excellence as a philosopher and cultural theorist. He is also into the whole world, through all kinds of human habitats, from the East to the West, from the South to the North, and through this act he also welcomes everyone to take part in his philosophical journey. I used to easily get the feeling that everyday aesthetics was not for me, but following Berleant's work, which was my central reading for my PhD in environmental aesthetics (on Venice), environmental aesthetics always felt like a discussion to which I could belong as much as anyone else.

I also had the privilege of having Arnold – besides his visiting Finland actively in the early 2000s – as my opponent when I defended my doctoral dissertation. I will never forget the wisdom and kind attitude of this intellectual giant, who has since mentored me as we have met in Helsinki, at conferences, and lately once on Zoom – who also had a sense of humor. Just before my defense, in October 2009, we sat down, me in a suit, and Arnold with a cloak borrowed from the University of Helsinki. Although I was nervous, he looked both stylish (in a Gandalf fashion) and a bit funny, because the cloak was really extraordinary, and I laughed a bit, and said, "You look medieval." Arnold answered immediately, "We are medieval." Thinking about the medieval ritual we were just entering; he was truly right. Just before we went into the classroom, Arnold asked Arto Haapala (my main teacher throughout my studies, and my Kustos in the ritual, who I have to thank for all the great visitors we had in aesthetics at the time), if he had to be a 'bad cop' during the process. Arto assured

Arnold of his freedom to chat the way he wanted. And Arnold was happy with that. We had a pleasant chat for a little over an hour, and all in all, Arnold left a big trace on my career, giving me much valuable advice then and even later on. Happy 90th birthday, Arnold Berleant!

¹ Richard Rorty, *On Philosophy and Philosophers: Unpublished Papers 1960-2000*, edited by W. P. Malecki and Chris Vorapil (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

² I am thankful to Wojciech Malecki for our short dialogue on the topic, which helped me to see Rorty's philosophy in the right context.

³ Ben Highmore, "Introduction: Questioning Everyday Life," in *The Everyday Life Reader*, edited by Ben Highmore (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 1.

⁴ Elisabetta Di Stefano, Carsten Friberg and Max Rynnänen, "Editorial: Forgotten Everyday," *Popular Inquiry* 2021, Vol 2, Iss. 9, 1-4.

⁵ Ossi Naukkarinen writes that his "everyday life is probably rather different from that of a Mexican nurse, a Nigerian drug dealer, or a cook from Bhutan," but also reminds the reader about the fact that philosophically it is more important to think of the attitudes people have toward their everyday. Ossi Naukkarinen, "What is 'Everyday' in Everyday Aesthetics," *Contemporary Aesthetics*, Vol. 11, Article 14: https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts_contempaesthetics/vol11/iss1/14 (section 2).

⁶ Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁷ See e.g. Shilpa Padke, Shilpa Ranade and Sameera Khan, *Why Loiter? Women and Risk on Mumbai Streets* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2011).

⁸ Kevin Melchionne, "The Definition of Everyday Aesthetics," *Contemporary Aesthetics*, 2013, Vol 11: https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1290&context=liberalarts_contempaesthetics.

⁹ Thomas Leddy, *The Extraordinary in the Ordinary: The Aesthetics of Everyday Life* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2012), 8-9.

¹⁰ Tom Leddy, "The Aesthetics of Junkyards and Roadside Clutter," *Contemporary Aesthetics*, 2008, Vol 6: <https://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/journal.php>.

¹¹ Kevin Melchionne, "The Definition of Everyday Aesthetics," *Contemporary Aesthetics*, 2013, Vol 11: https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1290&context=liberalarts_contempaesthetics.

¹² Arto Haapala, "On the Aesthetics of the Everyday: Familiarity, Strangeness, and the Meaning of Place," in *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*, edited by Andrew Light and J. M. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 40.

¹³ Ibid. 52.

¹⁴ The reference is fictional, but based on true life events.

¹⁵ Arnold Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Environment* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), chapter 3.

¹⁶ bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994).

¹⁷ See e.g. Riikka Perälä, "Civil Society Organizations and Care of the Self: An Ethnographic Case Study on Emancipation and Participation in Drug Treatment," *Foucault Studies*, 2015, Vol 20, 96-115.