

CHAPTER 19

Speculating Everyday Beauty

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Abstract: Everyday aesthetics *inter alia* claims: Also outside of art, there is beauty. The existence of such extra-artistic beauty is taken as a given in this branch of aesthetic research; yet the issue it faces is of a methodological kind: How would it be possible to research ordinary beauties without turning them into extraordinary beauties and thus re-aligning them to art? The present paper proposes the method of speculation as a possible solution. Speculation is argued to be of aid for everyday aesthetics, because taking a speculative stance on reality means to not intervene in it, but to rather take a step back and respectfully narrate the withdrawing from our human perception that certain aspects of reality undertake. As such, speculation is a possibility to master the paradox faced by everyday aesthetics, which consists in engaging without intruding on beauties hiding within the everyday, and hence of preserving while and whilst researching them.

Keywords: Everyday Aesthetics, Speculative Realism, Methodology, Beauty, Speculative Narration

1 Setting the Scene

This paper is a methodological one, the focus of which it is to set an impulse. Eventually, the aim is to strategically further two fields of aesthetic research, namely speculative aesthetics and everyday aesthetics. Yet one paper is not enough to rigorously elaborate both sides of the coin that here shall be thrown into the game. Since the volume for which this contribution is written is located in the realm of everyday aesthetics, it will focus exclusively on how the method of speculation can be of aid for everyday aesthetics. A continuative paper, published within the field of speculative aesthetics, might soon turn the coin around and focus on how everyday aesthetics can be of aid for speculative aesthetics.

To briefly introduce the latter field, up to today, speculative aesthetics is majorly concerned with what Meillassoux (2008, p. 7) famously titled “the great outdoors”, which led it to produce approaches such as “nonhuman aesthetics” (Wilson 2019) or “eco-aesthetics” (Zepke 2008), that research beauties residing apart from human existence. I hold two objections to speculative aesthetics’ research direction. On the one hand, and in a rather pragmatic vein, I wonder why we should care whether there is beauty in “zebras running through the savannah”, as Latour’s (1988, p. 193) famous realist dictum goes, or in the whirling of a cyclone over an uninhabited land (see Muecke 2016). What can we gain from this insight? How does it affect our database of philosophical knowledge?

On the other hand, and in a rather methodological vein, I claim that the beauty of realities that exist detached from humanity can often be speculated pretty smoothly. I think it is easy to imagine the beauty of a remote island, and that the beauty of this island lies precisely in its being-remote. The same is valid for a virgin forest scenery, that is beautiful precisely because no human ever stepped onto it. For this reason, I seek to argue that human-detached realities are not the real challenge that speculative thought is to face.

Instead, I shall suggest that speculative aesthetics rather focuses on the beauty that lies hidden within the human everyday, because, remaining within the latter’s perspective, these beauties keep withdrawing also within, and thus constitute the proper challenge for speculative thought. The present paper will elicit (1) why it is not a shortcoming of the speculative method that beauties remain withdrawing also therein, and (2) how speculation can be of help for everyday aesthetics in its endeavour to research precisely such beauties.

Before starting, a last remark to everyday aesthetics needs to be made. This paper is written in the awareness that everyday aesthetics is a field that is concerned with many manifestations of what the term ‘aesthetics’ is used as overarching for, such as the humorous, the ugly, the playful, or the grotesque. Nonetheless, and for the sake of clarity, my concern here is exclusively the aesthetic as it manifests itself in beauty. As Didier Debaise (in Pihet 2017, p. 77) adequately claims: “each milieu requires us to work it out anew.” By implication, a speculative research of e. g. the ugly as found in the everyday might afford other research means than are suggested here. This, however, remains to be researched still.

2 Everyday Aesthetics' Methodological Problem

So, what is the status quo of everyday aesthetics, and why is it claimed here that this field needs assistance? With regard to its concern with beauty, everyday aesthetics has set itself the goal of levelling beauty, that is, of widening the appreciation of beauty. A basic claim of everyday aesthetics therefore is: *Also outside of art, there is beauty.*

This claim identifies everyday aesthetics as a postmodern movement, which here is meant in the simplified sense of its being a reaction to modern academic thought. Medieval scholastic thought started to merge the concepts of beauty and art (as accessibly subsumed by the historian Wladyslaw Tatarkiewicz, see Tatarkiewicz 1974, p. 15), and this idea eventually became a mainstream conviction of later modernity. Beauty was said to reside primarily in art, and art was said to be primarily concerned with beauty. Eventually thus, modern thinkers held it as “impossible to dissociate” (Tatarkiewicz 1970a, p. 1) between beauty and art, and to study one of them without the other.

In this heritage of thinking, the scope of everyday aesthetics today is to extract the aesthetic from its bond to the artistic, and research it in the alternative realms in which it is capable of manifesting. This postmodern movement re-appreciates the excess of both phenomena to one another: “Beauty is not confined to art, while art is not solely the pursuit of beauty” (Ibid.). In other words, art exceeds beauty, hence it is not only concerned with beauty, and beauty exceeds art, hence cannot only be found in the arts. In the latter excess of beauty to art, everyday aesthetics is located.

It hence is everyday aesthetics' aspiration to re-enliven the claim that beauty exists *also* (an addition) aside from art, aside from any extraordinary practice potentially directed explicitly to its production. But according to the latter field of research, beauty exists as well in ‘normal’ practices, in practices concerned with other purposes, only a side-effect of which is beauty. In a Deweyan manner, we could also say that everyday aesthetics is not concerned with the beauty of “experiences” (such as constitute inter alia the experiences relevant for the present purposes, that are e.g. a visit in a museum or theatre, hence confrontations with art) which Dewey (2005, pp. 15, 18) described as events, units with clear boundaries that contrast sharply against the normal humdrum of life. But everyday aesthetics is rather concerned with the beauty of precisely this humdrum, this normal flux that makes up the quotidian.

For the present purposes, describing the difference between everyday and modern-artistic aesthetics in vein of Dewey's writing appears to be of higher assistance than the distinction of artistic as "contemplation-oriented" versus everyday as "action-oriented" aesthetics introduced by everyday aesthetics itself, namely by Yuriko Saito (see Saito 2008, p. 4). In writing so, Saito leads thought towards the aspect of how we react to different manifestations of beauty, that is, the differences of actions these diverse manifestations of beauty incite in us. However, my focus here are not the reactions these beauties incite; but rather the research approaches they afford. And precisely in this regard, in regard to its methodology, everyday aesthetics faces a problem.

Staying thus within the framework of Dewey's terminology, everyday aesthetics' methodological issue can be described as follows: By the very act of researching the beauty of the daily humdrum, the very action of pointing with the own researching finger onto it, the very statement "there is beauty, too", the focused-on beauty is extracted from the humdrum, and thus ceases to be a beauty *of* a humdrum, a humdrum beauty, but rather becomes a beauty of an experience. It becomes an event. It is extracted from the surroundings that define it and put into a new, 'non-natural', artificial surrounding comparable to a lab or a museum, whereby it crucially, and for everyday aesthetics' purposes detrimentally shifts from a beauty of the ordinary to a beauty of the special, and hence is realigned to the manifestation of beauty of which everyday aesthetics precisely seeks to discern it: artistic beauty.

In realizing this problem, everyday aestheticians today did not detect a newness. According to Tatarkiewicz, St. Augustine was the first thinker to distinguish sharply between beauty (see Tatarkiewicz 1970b, p. 51), which he defined in line with the ancient canon as an arrangement of parts that is complete within itself and therefore pleases, versus appropriateness or suitability, which pleases because of a thing fitting to something else. The everyday example the medieval thinker provides for the latter is the fitting of a shoe to a foot (see St. Augustine *Confessions*, IV, XIII, 20). But St. Augustine went even further. He not only discerned between two kinds of the aesthetic; but he also claimed them to stand in an antithetical relation to each other. As historian Tatarkiewicz (1970b, p. 52) aptly summarizes his notion: "As long as we regard things merely as useful, we will fail to see their beauty."

Crucially, St. Augustine by no means denied beauty to the everyday. We certainly encounter order and arrangement in the ordinary. But what he already steered the focus onto is the issue of our perception: Either

we appreciate a thing for its helpfulness to our purposes, or we appreciate it for its beauty. I see implied in this statement that an aesthetic appreciation of the ordinary *as ordinary* is impossible. As soon as we focus on the beauty of an ordinary object, we extract it from its original, natural surroundings and thereby alter its character, hence shifting it from everyday to extraordinary object, or, so one could even subsume, from tool to art. Whereas, in so stating, St. Augustine paved the way for the modern academic restriction of a research of beauty to art; everyday aesthetics today reclaims that an appreciation of something with which we interact is a form of aesthetic appreciation.

To clarify, everyday aestheticians do not see it problematic to claim that we can aesthetically appreciate e.g. the laundry in the action of hanging it, our clothes in the practice of wearing them, the plates in the action of arranging them on the kitchen's shelf, or the flowers in the action of picking them. To them (as well as to me), this is pretty plausible, thus, they infer, we can aesthetically experience beauty in the everyday.

The issue faced by everyday aesthetics hence is not of an ontological kind. The problem is not whether there is beauty in the everyday. There evidently is. Nor is the issue faced by everyday aesthetics of an epistemological kind. This branch of research does not state that we have difficulties in perceiving this beauty. We evidently can. But what makes the field of everyday aesthetics so exciting to think in and with, is that it faces a methodological question, a question *twice detached from reality*, so one could say, namely: How can everyday aesthetics research what we perceive without altering the reality perceived? Hence, *how can we philosophically capture the beauty of the ordinary while preserving it in its ordinary character?*

Everyday aesthetics strongly argues for the possibility to do so, but it is still debating the question: 'How to?' (see e.g. Haapala 2005, p. 50 or Saito 2008, p. 50), hence how to research the beauty of the everyday without losing "the everyday-ness of the everyday" (Saito 2008, p. 50), viz. without stripping the 'everyday' of what ought to be the 'everyday aesthetic'. Into the shark tank of attempts, I here shall throw a further suggestion and propose that speculation qualifies as a method gainful for everyday aesthetic research.

3 Introducing Speculation

Speculation is a method for doing inter alia philosophy, which reaches as far back as Antiquity, yet for long held the bad fame of being a style of

“thinking that was not put to the test”, and hence was criticized as too “pie-in-the-sky” (Debaise in Pihet 2017, p. 67). However, in the 20th century, speculation sparked the interest of philosophers such as Alfred North Whitehead, Henri Bergson or Gilles Deleuze, in the heritage of which these days various philosophers and research communities in different places are engaged in the “rehabilitation” (Ibid.) of this method, and in rethinking as its strength what was formerly held as its weakness. As Isabelle Stengers re-coins it, speculative philosophy is precisely not a critical (elsewhere the speculative is also described as a “pre-critical” method, see Bryant et al. 2011, p. 3), but a “constructivist” (Stengers as cited in Kouw and van Tuinen 2014, p. 128) manner of doing philosophy.

In its status quo today, I can count five schools of speculative philosophy: new materialism (for an accessible introduction to this eldest school of speculative thought see Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012), speculative realism (for an overview of the evolution of this school see especially Bryant et al. 2011), object-oriented ontology (abbreviated as OOO; the initiating work of which was Harman’s *Tool-Being*, published in 2002), the Brussels school of speculative narration (accessible explanations of this undertaking can be found in the here cited interviews, see Pihet 2017 and Doucet 2018), and the most recent Portuguese school of “TTT” (see introductory video on YouTube, TTT Studio 2021), an abbreviation which is intended to represent nothing despite a mocking of the abbreviation OOO, and a re-thinking of the latter’s entity-based ontological claims. Of these ‘schools’, speculative narration is the most methodologically concerned, and I will hence mainly rely upon it here.

3.1 Speculation’s Concern

Of special interest for the present purposes is the fact that thinkers involved within the school of speculative narration have set out to retrace the history of the term ‘speculation’. As Katrin Solhdju (Solhdju in Pihet 2017, pp. 69-70) writes:

In Ancient Rome, a speculator was a scout, a lookout, either in a tower observing the surrounding area, or sent ahead of an army. [...] Later on, the term came to denote the stargazers, people looking far into the distance, equipped with apparatuses to observe the stars. We can see very clearly how the term ‘speculator’ came gradually to represent someone who looks further and further afield, hence finally the pejorative meaning of someone

speaking of things whose existence escapes experience, an experience that cannot be proven.

However, continuing in the words of Solhdju (Solhdju in Pihet 2017, p. 69), what sparked the interest of these scholars is that in his original role, “the speculator has a practical function that is very embedded in the real, in experience: to be on guard against approaching danger, to warn his comrades if necessary to prepare the city to defend itself, to prepare the soldiers to get into position etc.” In this framework, speculation results as not only “pie-in-the-sky” (see above), but rather as a hitherto downplayed and overlooked method that could be engaged with for “practical” (Ibid.), “pragmatic” (Debaise 2017, pp. 9-10), “empirical” (Debaise throughout 2017), and, as I am attempting to show here, even everyday philosophical concerns.

The general ontological scaffold speculative thinking is based upon is realism, viz. the claim that reality exceeds our perceptual capacities, so that involved in every situation are aspects of reality that withdraw from our grasp. Speculation is concerned with precisely these aspects of reality that for a normal look remain foreclosed - to stay in the scenery of Ancient Rome depicted by Solhdju, the look of the citizen who resides on the level of the town, or the look of the soldier who stands amidst the troop - and that only the speculator, viz. the method of speculation is able to witness.

In its postmodern rehabilitated version, speculation thus is not concerned with existences beyond reality, but with ‘the beyond’ existing within reality. Alternatively, one could claim that speculation does not focus on something that is beyond reality, but only on something that is beyond our modern-trained eyes, which remains a here and now in reality. I suggest calling these withdrawing aspects of reality ‘minorities of perception’ in order to explicitly restrict their existence as minorities to the role allocated to them by classical perceptual frameworks, that thus remain unable to account for whether the minorities they constitute might not even be ‘majorities of reality’. If we accept the Heideggerian conception of *Zuhandenheit* as it was pulled into speculative philosophy by Graham Harman (see Harman 2002), the more a thing allows us to suppress it, hence the more it gives way to us suppressing it, the more powerful it is, because this subjugated role grants it the space to act on us without being traced.

Speculation draws our attention to the fact that any givenness, any acceptance of a status-quo presupposes a politics that subjugates certain

slices of reality. As Deleuze and Guattari (2004, p. 256) wrote: “politics precede being.” Prior to any givenness there is always suppression. By implication, givenness is only a perceptual framework, an epistemology, but never a reality. Far from ever being given, for the realist ontologies in which speculation is undertaken, reality is always on the go (see e.g. Barad 2012, p. 7), and only ever temporally comes to a halt in ‘givennesses’ (in the plural). In a nutshell, the scope of speculation hence is to make us look differently onto and enrich our understanding of reality.

3.2 How Speculation Functions

Describing how the speculative method functions is especially problematic, as for fear of limitation, the relevant literature seems to prevent any attempt at a definition. Speculative methodological approaches repeatedly stress that the very concept of ‘method’ must not be mistaken as “a ready-made tool-box” (Solhdju in Pihet 2017, p. 76); but that it rather is to be understood as a manner of producing thinking trajectories. In this regard, Debaise (2017, p. 9) also defines ‘method’ as “an art of effects.” Later on, he states: “The speculative method is dynamic, unable to stabilize itself once and for all” (Debaise 2017, p. 17). Fabrizio Terranova (Terranova in Pihet 2017, p. 76) even goes so far as to claim: “We cannot define what we are doing, because that is not desirable.” One hence needs to find a balance between depicting the speculative method trustworthily, that is, as constitutively open, and conveying it in an accessible way to an audience of non-expert readers. In the following, this will be my attempt.

I opine that the method of speculation can be described as what new materialist meta/physician Karen Barad describes as “diffractive” in kind (this term is accurately introduced in Barad 2014 as well as 2007, pp. 71-96). It is a way of nagging on a situation, returning to it over and over again, for the sake of attending to the perceptual minorities engaged therein. As situations always manifest themselves differently in every new story that is told about them, there will never be ‘the’ narration, a singular manifestation that acquires the status of an objectivity. Speculation is aware thereof, and embraces the endlessness of narrative possibilities that reality bestows us with. It is responsive to and acts as responsible for the excess in which reality exists to every existent narration of it. Precisely for the sake of revealing this excess, speculation busies itself with alternatively narrating situations that might only be perceived as given, but that are never given.

As conceptualized by Barad (2012, pp. 7, 9-10; 2014, p. 184), responsibility is not only an usurping of tasks, as it is also an allowing the other to respond and thus a conversation to manifest. In this light, speculation consists of a “sensitivity to the milieu hosting” (Debaise in Pihet 2017, p. 76). It consists of granting of narrative space, of giving precedence, of providing a voice to what Stengers defines as “possibles” in contrast to “probables” (Stengers as cited by Solhdju in Pihet 2017, p. 74), and what Benedikte Zitouni (Zitouni in Doucet 2018, p. 16) describes as “unforeseen and intriguing dimensions of reality.”

Speculation then is less a narration of something, as it is rather a narration in which alternative subjectivities have the chance to manifest themselves. As Terranova (Terranova in Pihet 2017, p. 72; emphasis added) describes the didactic approach of speculative narration: “we want to shake up the idea of the personal project [...]. The idea is not to tell one’s own story, but *to narrate the world* on the basis of a local experience.” It is a narration that in the beginning manifests itself as a narration of a human concerned with the world, and that during the course of its own manifestation becomes a narration of the world that manifests itself by means of a human.

However, and this is crucial for the present argumentation, what speculation does not aim at is the act of overthrowing the situational politics it confronts. It rather narrates minorities of perception without making them lose, but by, paradoxically yet deliberately maintaining them in their subjugated nature. Above, I have defined speculation as the method that is conceived as apt for constructing a realist worldview. It thus is the concern of speculation not to intervene in the world, but rather to get an insight into how the world is functioning in itself.

Speculation claims to be a way to master the paradox of witnessing minorities of perception without turning them into artificial majorities *for* perception. It is a respectful narrating, and not a brutal extracting of something from its natural status, because speculative philosophy knows that by doing so, it would not catch hold of what it seeks to research, ‘realist realities’, viz. realities as they happen in themselves; but it would only gain access to realities that in this act it is constituting.

Instead of attempting to pinpoint what resides in the corners of our eyes, speculation can be described as respectfully narrating these realities in their fleeting. Instead of bluntly disclosing them, it treasures these realities’ treacheries (see Martach 2020). It does not stop withdrawing processes, but it appreciates events precisely in their withdrawal. For this reason, Zitouni’s (Zitouni in Doucet 2018, p. 16) description of the

speculative action as an “unravelling” seems to me to be misleading. Speculation is not about bringing order into the chaos; it is exactly about cherishing and caring for the chaos that reality, the world, a situation is. As Kouw and van Tuinen (2014, p. 129) aptly conclude their paper: “But isn’t speculative philosophy precisely the attempt to destabilize the world, to let in a bit of chaos, and to return existence to the consistency of the event?”

3.3 Why Should, and How Could Speculation Be of Help for Everyday Aesthetics?

To recall, everyday aesthetics seeks to research instances of (inter alia) beauty in the daily humdrum. Yet, as it has been outlined already, the paradox everyday aesthetics thereby confronts is that its research action, hence the very act of pointing such ordinary beauties out and drawing our attention onto them, distorts the reality of these beauties, so that they cease to be ordinary and rather become extraordinary, viz. cease to be what everyday aesthetics wishes to research. What everyday aesthetics affords is a method that allows it to more cunningly approach the realities it seeks to scrutinize, in order to be able to research them while preserving ordinary beauty in its ordinarieness. My claim in this paper is that speculation is a method that allows us to do precisely this. To subsume, speculation is capable of realizing two actions simultaneously, and this combination is crucial for the purposes of everyday aesthetics: (1) Speculation grants access to perceptually subjugated aspects of reality. Yet in so doing (2) it does not extract but preserves and realistically narrates them in their ‘subjugatedness’.

We tend to see the beauty of the everyday only in the beginning of our engagement with things, or in the phase of entering a situation. Growing accustomed to such beauties, we happen to lose sight of them. Whatever it is that we found beautiful when encountering it for the first time, when starting to engage with it - be that our house slippers, the way our dog walks, or even the face of our partner - with the course of habituation, the unfolding of the everyday, the beauty of these realities tend to slip through our grid of attention. Nonetheless, also drawing on the realist ontologies introduced here, I believe that these beauties remain there, are existent, just they lie dormant.

It is precisely in this regard that the methodological strength of speculation comes to the fore. Speculation can enable us to witness the beauties that lie dormant within the everyday, yet importantly without re-

awakening these beauties or pushing them back into the focus of our everyday eyes. This would imply a change in epistemology, whereby these beauties would become something different, would live through a change in their ontology - e.g. would turn from the habitual and worn-out house slippers to something similar to Van Gogh's farmer's shoes Heidegger famously philosophized about. Instead, a speculative look rather carefully and even tentatively observes these beauties in their dormancy, and cherishes them in their lying-dormant.

As it has been introduced here, speculation is not concerned with what is detached from reality. To propose a speculative approach to the beauties hidden in the everyday does not mean to suggest that the respective researcher should sit in her office and simply imagine or meditate about the beauty a laundry hanging activity could (potentially) have. This would just contribute to a further increase in the 'armchair attitude' philosophy in general is often criticized for (see e. g. Walton 2007, p. 152).

By contrast, speculation is rather supposed to imply an involved manner of doing research, as Barad (2007, p. 56) has it, a kind of research that is "not about intervening (from the outside) but about intra-acting from within." To be explicit here, a speculative research of the everyday affords the researcher to get engaged in the everyday. In the words of Barad (2007), it presupposes the entanglement of matter and meaning, of doing and thinking. This also means that the philosopher, who often remains today a white western male, gets preoccupied with activities that even today remain classically executed by (also but not only white/western, sometimes less but sometimes also equally educated) females. Indeed, such a side-effect corresponds all too well to the general feminist concerns of speculative (especially new materialist) thought.

Within this involvement, e.g. the activity of laundry hanging, washing the dirty dishes, stacking clothes in the own wardrobe, the speculative move consists in taking a step back and detaching the own thinking from "imbu[ing] mankind with a particular function" (Debaise in Pihet 2017, p. 74), namely the one of being the actor upon an inert world, e. g. the one who is hanging the laundry; and crucially also observe how the laundry guides the own actions of hanging it. As a colleague and friend of mine, Hongwei Tang (Tang in Martach 2021, min. 12:50 – 12:58), recently described it: "To realize and dive into this being-determined [...] is what for me means to take up a speculative position."

Speculation hence consists in *the movement of a detachment that is realized within the situation of an involvement*. It is the detachment, the action of

distancing one's perception from modern hierarchies, that grants us access to subjugated beauties, and hence makes us see many more beauties than an anthropocentric stance would hold as possible to exist. It is the situation of being involved in the everyday that enables us to research the laundry as beautiful in the act of hanging it, the clothes in the act of stacking them, or the dishes in the act of washing them, viz. to research everyday's ordinary beauties without stripping their ordinariness off them, but rather by preserving its beauties in and cherishing them for their dormancy.

4 Conclusion

Whereas modern aesthetic research reduced beauty to art; one of everyday aesthetics' aspirations is to reclaim that beauty exists also outside of art. However, everyday aesthetics confronts a methodological paradox: By the very act of researching the beauty in and of the everyday, it makes this beauty special, and thus distorts the reality it seeks to scrutinize. The present paper claims that the method of speculation can be of help in this regard. In its postmodern version, speculation can allow us to access hitherto dormant beauties without awakening them, but rather by appreciating them for and narrating them in their lying-dormant. It is capable of this by its peculiar combination of being an act of distancing within a situation of involvement. An implementation of the speculative approach into the field of everyday aesthetics remains, for now, desirable.

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