

CHAPTER 20

Aesthetic Qualities and Aspects of Everyday Life. Notes on a Phenomenological Approach to Everyday Aesthetics

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Abstract: This paper aims to discuss the aesthetic quality of everyday life considered from a phenomenological perspective. It is aimed at highlighting the way phenomenology is invested in every detail of the daily experiences and therefore also open to aesthetic qualities and values found in these experiences. The phenomenological perspective seems especially interested in the most detailed and full presentation of human experience complete with atmosphere and value judgments and thus also in portraying the emotional reactions towards the world-as-experienced. The paper also focuses on the category of listening-in understood as an attentive, open, and engaged relation to the world.

Keywords: Phenomenology, Aesthetic Experience, Aesthetic Consciousness, Aesthetic Qualities, Everydayness

1 Introduction

Arnold Berleant (2010, p. 17) remarks that “the aesthetic has a powerful and pervasive presence in the human world.” We know this from first-hand experience. Observing and identifying the subtle changes in the sensual presentation of colours and sounds through their vibrant shades and timbres leads to an acknowledgment of the aesthetic qualities of things, beings, and events. Although not nearly as cherished as the aesthetic qualities in artworks and officially acknowledged art performances, everyday events and experiences carry many moments of aesthetic enjoyment, provided we care to listen and watch attentively. However strange or unexpected the change from attending to art to

attending to everyday happenings may seem, it is already a fact if not a comeback to the core of aesthetics. There is an acknowledged tendency of devoting “a significant part of its attention to the area that is beyond the boundaries of art, or, rather, what is nowadays presented as art” (Kvokačka 2018, p. 519). Some of this area and the tendencies surrounding it could be described as everyday aesthetics.

My goal in this paper is to describe the aesthetic character of the everyday experience while looking for the possible common ground between phenomenology and everyday aesthetics. In this task, I turn to John Dewey (1980, p. 10), who insists on recovering *the continuity of aesthetic experience with normal processes of living* and to Arnold Berleant (Berleant 1999, 2005), whose observations on aesthetic aspects of everyday life have been most inspiring for me. I turn to phenomenological philosophers like Edmund Husserl, Roman Ingarden, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Mikel Dufrenne for their understanding of daily processes and experiences in the aesthetic light. Guided by their understanding of the bodily and sensual aspect of the experience, I shall turn to the concept of the *meeting* (or *encounter* and also *aesthetic situation*), and to Husserl’s idea of the *aesthetic consciousness*, as well as the concept of *listening-in*, which seem particularly relevant in pointing towards the aesthetic aspects of everyday experience from the phenomenological perspective.

2 From Individual Experience to Aesthetic Encounter

During our daily activities, when we walk and observe, we sometimes notice certain elements in the environment that make us see it as aesthetically fuller, brighter, or prettier. Before something beautiful or sublime may be recognized through reflective and analytic experience by means of concepts and comparative weighing, one may react spontaneously to the environment because of its simplest aesthetic or *quasi*-aesthetic qualities. A distant shimmering sound or a patch of tall grass with its light colour and delicate waving movement against the birch trees might be a gratifying sight for someone. Roman Ingarden (1961, p. 867) mentions a random, yet aesthetically gratifying experience of that kind:

May it not happen that we lift the window-blinds in our room someday in spring and catch the sight of the garden where the trees have opened into flower during the night? We are suddenly dazzled and fascinated by the sight of apple trees a bloom against the background of a fair sky?

In the quotation above, Ingarden's aim is not so much to present different and varied occasions that may result in an aesthetic experience, as it is to show the different sources and materials for art; imagination or reacting directly to nature rather than reflecting on the artwork presented in the gallery or a performance. However, the example is persuasive enough to give a sense of how simple experiences may greatly influence the observer. These situations although not immediately seen as worthy of aesthetic experience and far from entering the category of art, may have enough aesthetic appeal to win the heart of perceivers or change their perspective, since the environmental perception and thus the everyday perception "offers an especially rich opportunity for illuminating aesthetic experience" (Berleant 2005, p. 10). In these mundane situations, the aesthetic quality is not assumed but discovered. It is a process of realizing and unmasking rather than relying on established attitudes. Such unexpected situations, says Berleant elsewhere, are distinguished by *deliberate attention* and enlarged focus. "When we appreciate the environment [...] there is a deliberate focus on the direct grasp of environmental features within a setting or field that we join with as participants" (Berleant 1992, p. 14).

Whatever is found in the environment, the qualities or aspects that are being discovered require an attentive response. For example, upon listening to a musical work recipient reacts with an immediate reply or resonance – in singing or in rhythmic bodily response. Even the inner response that does not manifest itself in bodily behaviour may become the aesthetic encounter between an aesthetic object, an author or performer, and a recipient (Ingarden 1975, p. 262; Berleant 2005, p. 34).

The aesthetic aspects of everyday experiences mean focusing on little nuances and details. Nothing is unimportant, *no detail is insignificant* (Merleau-Ponty 2004, p. 94). Sometimes these are the sun rays on the porch, the colourful flowers by the side of the road, or the softest sounds that greet us in the morning and surprise us at night. They are common and unusual at the same time. They command our attention even when we know and expect their presence. Pauline Oliveros (2005, p. 15) remembers the soundscape of her childhood, in which the sounds of *chirping, rasping crickets, frogs and melodic mockingbirds* engaged her attention and shaped her desire to become a composer. From a dense soundscape or passing gaze, engaging into receiving an environment may turn out into an aesthetic experience. Still, such a transition does not happen automatically. On the contrary, for such a change to occur, one must follow a certain path or allow oneself to attain a certain state of

mind. “Deep listening comes from noticing my listening or listening to my listening and discerning the effects on my bodymind continuum, from listening to others, to art and to life” (Oliveros 2005, p. 24).

3 The Aesthetic State of Mind

In speaking about everyday aesthetics it is sometimes assumed that noticing, qualifying, and reacting to certain qualities of everyday objects and situations is possible to everyone at any time. However, it is necessary to acknowledge that there are entry conditions for such behaviour. Ingarden acknowledged that for the aesthetic experience of the work of art to take place there are certain conditions and criteria that need to be fulfilled (Ingarden 1961, p. 292). I am certain that similar requirements apply in discovering aesthetic qualities during daily activities. There may be favourable or adverse conditions that affect the way something is perceived, for example, the acoustics in the given room or the noises in the surrounding space. Other conditions may have to do with the state of mind of the recipient, e.g. “emotional disturbances, the condition of our sense organ” (Ingarden 1961, p. 292). Perhaps the psychic conditions are even more important than the physical ones. Of course, these conditions might appear differently in different cultures or traditions, not to mention that certain individuals might be immune to certain states and therefore enter into the aesthetic state of mind more easily and quickly.

Looking at something freely and without considering its practical implications may not always be possible, but when it is, the qualities of a given object are all that matters. A piece of rock or a marble stone becomes weightless and subtle; it becomes a tall, strong woman or a bird soaring in the sky. The shape of the given thing becomes an inspiration for one’s imagination; “...it is *given* to us not as a piece of marble, but as ‘Venus’, i.e. a woman or a goddess”, concludes Ingarden (Ingarden 1961, p. 293). The reverse applies when responding to literature. All the things one reads about are treated as ‘real’ objects. They are *objectified*. In this process, the ontological status of an observed object is disregarded (Ingarden 1961, p. 300; Husserl 2005 p. 459). Consequently, the object’s aesthetic or artistic qualities become ‘real’ in the sense that they dictate what this object is for the viewer. All these processes and observations being true about aesthetic experiences are also true in everyday experiences.

There is another aspect of reacting to the view or object, which is sometimes called aesthetic consciousness. Husserl talks about aesthetic consciousness as a certain state of mind that accompanies looking at art or admiring something aesthetically. In fact, for Husserl, the aesthetic state of mind may happen independently of art or any artistic activity. It is a state of mind in which one focuses on how things are being presented or represented and how they are given without trying to figure out how they are according to objective measurements. This (aesthetic) state of mind also marks indifference towards the existence of the object of the gaze:

We are living in an aesthetic consciousness. In it we ask no questions about the being and nonbeing of what directly appears or appears in an image [...] We can produce aesthetic consciousness on the basis of external perception. We contemplate aesthetically the objects we see and hear. We can produce such a consciousness on the basis of immediate phantasy (Husserl 2005, p. 459).

Everything that matters is the sensuous or imaginative presence of things, their feel, their visual and tactile presence: “The actual position takings, the synthetic or the simply thetic position takings that we thereby carry out on the basis of the one consciousness or the other, are not aesthetic position takings” (Husserl 2005, pp. 460-61). Husserl talks about aesthetic consciousness as an example of acting on by modifying and naturalizing the objects of experience. The aesthetic state of mind (aesthetic consciousness) applies to the situations in which one is imagining or experiencing something, not through the direct sensuous data but a modified gaze – an immanent perception (Ibid.). The aesthetic state of mind, it would seem, is a kind of image perception or imagining. Husserl describes the difference between focusing on the object remembered and focusing on the qualities and presentations given in the image:

In normal contemplation of the picture, I live in the image consciousness. In that case, I focus my attention on something entirely different: I see the form of a sublime woman, of superhuman size, two powerful and large young angels, and so on (Husserl 2005, p. 113).

The aesthetic consciousness, therefore, is a type of immanent experience consciousness (image consciousness), during which one is not only referring to modified data/objects but is focusing on qualities and

appearances close to *imagining re-presentation* (Husserl 2005, p. 185). The symbolic, representational aspects of the presentation (object) are noticed and acknowledged. The question remains, whether in an everyday situation, fleeting and changing as it is, the same idea of Husserl, might apply. Does aesthetic consciousness apply to everyday experiences?

4 The Aesthetic Qualities of Nature

When we see a scene or a fragment of nature, to be able to see it aesthetically, to be able to attend to its colours and other aesthetic qualities, we need to be free from serious concerns, intellectual burdens, and also objectively ready to take on the task. In this respect, Ingarden talks about certain sensitivity and ability to attend to qualities. On the other hand, in comparison to an institution such as opera, concert hall, or art gallery, there are no objective constraints to consider, no right acoustics or light, yet there is also no ritual and no entrance to ease one into the focusing, attentive state of mind. Indeed, the outside area and random scenery are usually not ideally suited for contemplating aesthetic qualities, so when it occurs, that means that whatever is usually preventing one from seeing the surrounding area aesthetically – noises, traffic, random meetings – has disappeared or been disregarded. In this context Berleant (2005, p. 17) speaks about a participatory model, in which the “lived space must be complemented by recognizing the influences that environment exerts on the body”, how it “contributes to shaping the body's spatial sense and mobility, and ultimately to the definition of its lived space.” This happens, for example, when one smells the fresh scent of elder or grass and immediately feels more open to linger in the environment, or when the soft sounds of tweeting birds send an inviting message.

Dewey and Husserl have suggested that the natural environment is perceived as embedded with aesthetic qualities or emotional aspects (Dewey 1980, p. 16; Husserl 1983, p. 53). Husserl (1983, p. 53) describes simple experiences of looking at the sofa or house piano in terms of how these things appear as having a certain quality or character. The things in the lived world (*Lebens-Welt*) are experienced as possessing concrete characteristics, equipped with qualities and values. The immediacy of the experience of those characters tells us about the way in which one receives the world. Everything is given as such and such, everything appears already fully established.

I simply find the physical things in front of me furnished not only with merely material determinations but also with value characteristics, as beautiful or ugly, pleasant and unpleasant, agreeable or disagreeable, and the like [...] These value-characteristics and practical characteristics also belong *constitutively to the Objects* (Husserl 1983, p. 53).

This attention to details and openness to everything that is given reflects the primary postulate of getting back to the things themselves. It also means waking up the sensitivity to this, which is directly and sensually given in the experience and being deeply aware of what is given (Ingarden 1970, p. 296). The environmental experience suggested above, but also the bodily experience of everyday – as in an instrumentalist playing her instrument and sensing her body interacting with the instrument, or a gardener admiring his new additions to the garden – may suddenly be found filled with aesthetic qualities and lead to a deep, meaningful experience and aesthetic joy (Berleant 2005, p. 136).

5 Listening-in to the World

This openness to the qualities of the things experienced is also one of the main elements characterizing “listening-in.” The category of listening-in is linked not only to actual listening but to any sensual attending that is open and focused at the same time. It seems that one needs to learn to listen and see clearly to be able to notice more than just the boldest expressions of the world. Some effort is crucial for realizing the presence of aesthetic qualities (Haapala 2005), as is a certain freedom and ability to let go.

Everyday experience is usually seen as the experience in the familiar environment or in situations that are directed towards achieving practical goals. But, just as the aesthetic experience requires changing the state of mind from neutral or practical into modified or aesthetic, so does simple and everyday interaction with the aesthetic. The qualities of the world may only be noticed by those who listen. The category of *listening-in* may be used to describe the change necessary to perceive the qualities and aspects of the world around us. For despite the fact of that some qualities are already and immediately given in the experience, as Husserl asserts, other qualities are recognized only through the process of *listening-in*. The latter means being attentive but also open, free, and focused on the environment. *Listening-in* requires engagement and attentiveness that changes the way one sees the environment. There are many potentially aesthetic situations, sights, or audio experiences, that

need to be noticed. Berleant (2005, pp. 135-136) describes such listening in terms of bodily engagement. "Musical listening thus is bodily engagement with sound in a setting [...] body-sound-space." He further explains: "One senses the sound entering one's body; one can feel the sound vibrations going through to the feet."

Yet, the ability to *listen* is a rare skill today (Treasure 2011). As various kinds of noises cover the natural ambiance, one needs to start listening and be both focused and diffuse, spreading the attention as wide as possible, *expanding consciousness of sound* in many dimensions (Oliveros 2005, p. 21). The process of *listening-in* is an ability to be ready and welcoming to all the sounds and sights around. As Pauline Oliveros (2005, p. 57) remarks, the listening attentively changes the way one listens: "When I really listen in this way I hear differently, in the sense that merely being open to listening changes how I listen..." And elsewhere: "Listen to everything until it all belongs together and you are a part of it" (Oliveros 2010, p. 7).

When taking a walk or on a way to work, one may choose to look around, be attentive and discerning, and watch everything around in search of aesthetic qualities. This may result in hearing the polyphonic togetherness of the audio details of all kinds of sounds from the cries of the birds in the sky to crunching sounds of the sand under someone's feet. To perceive a sound as music requires a change of attitude. Usually, we undergo such change with a special ritual when going into the philharmonics or putting on a record, but sometimes, we simply let ourselves be attentive and engage during the listening situation. The sounds of the coffee machine or someone's tapping on the table, the coin dropping, as well as many other sounds might then surprise one as music. The range of hearing as inherited and developed during one's life, the culturally shaped expectations, and an individual readiness and openness to sounds are all part of the cognition of music. But from time to time, despite all the training and expectation, despite former experiences, one opens up and starts listening to the environment and hears the incoming everyday sounds as the music, or sees the shapes and colours around as aesthetically qualified.

6 Conclusion

Dewey (1980, p. 3) suggested the need to acknowledge qualities and moments in one's life that stand out and grasp people's attention, implying that the sheer presence of the aesthetics elements in daily

experience may be deeply affective and thus philosophically important as well. Dewey and Berleant both acknowledged the aesthetic character underlying human experience (Berleant 1992, p. 10). Husserl suggested that world-as-present (*Leben-Welt*) is filled with qualities and more importantly with aspects of value. Thus, the things we experience are not neutral, on the contrary, they are seen as sweet or sour – so to speak – right from the start, and with more perseverance, they become fully aesthetically charged. Yet to see these aesthetic aspects and elements of the environment and to react to them one needs to be attentive and open; one needs to listen, to let go of the practical concerns at least long enough to be able to recognize and acknowledge the qualitative character of the environment. Everyday experiences are considered to give occasions for the aesthetic experience less often than art galleries or art festivals, but the difference is primarily in the approach we use to evaluate them. What if, the listening-in attitude, that of attentiveness and openness, is the only thing needed to turn everyday simple walks into a discovery of aesthetic joy?

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