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# **Talking about Beauty: A Study of Everyday Aesthetics among Low-Income Citizens of Milan**

Lucia Ruggerone, *Robert Gordon University*

K. Neil Jenkins, *Newcastle University*

## **Abstract**

This paper reports on research undertaken into the aesthetics of the everyday. As well as the subject matter of aesthetic philosophy, art criticism and of the sociology of art, beauty and beautiful are of course very ordinary matters too. To shed light on the meanings of beauty as used in everyday settings and in natural language, we use the data collected in a study conducted with a group of low-income residents of the city of Milan. In this study we were interested in analysing their lifestyle in terms of their relationship with aesthetics, i.e. with 'beautiful' objects and/or experiences. Participants' self-reported aesthetic appreciations suggest that conceptions of 'beauty' are used as devices to narrate pieces of identity, memories, experiences, etc. Their aesthetic judgements take on an anthropological function, creating a framework of meanings that help the participants make sense of the world of objects and of their own lives with/through them.

**Keywords:** beauty, poverty, aesthetics, art, objects, life-world, phenomenology.

We contend that there is a broad distance separating ordinary perceptions of beauty and disciplinary discourses around the 'truly beautiful'. By disciplinary discourses we mean conceptualizations of beauty principally found in aesthetic philosophy and in art history, where scholars seek to establish a definition of beauty (and therefore supply a measuring gauge to discern beautiful from non-beautiful things) and then provide examples of these definitions mainly in works of art. Assumptions about beauty are also incorporated in sociological investigations of a range of cultural areas, such as art, fashion, design and the human body; these assumptions remain mostly implicit, while sociologists concentrate on explaining how

aesthetic judgements are influenced by social structure and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1991, 1984), or by membership of specific subcultural groups an/or social institutions (Becker 1963, 1982). Although these -now classic- sociological approaches effectively describe the embeddedness of aesthetics in social contexts, they all align with the idea that beauty is nested only in some special enclaves of human activity, namely the arts and the bordering domains of fashion and design.

In this article we draw attention to the fact that aesthetic appreciations do not only occur in relation to artworks, design pieces, or fashion items and that they are not only formulated by experts and/or highly educated/cultured individuals. On the contrary, experiences of beauty and aesthetic assessments permeate ordinary people's everyday lives: as they go about their ordinary affairs, individuals continuously make aesthetic choices, evaluations, remarks, that give sense to their experience and shape their way of existing in the 'life-world'<sup>1</sup>. And they do all of these things, without tending to the theoretical definitions of beauty, without interrogating themselves on the appropriateness and the legitimacy of their taste<sup>2</sup>.

When examined at the level of the mundane life-world, aesthetics is stripped of its aura of mystery and extraordinariness<sup>3</sup> and beauty is not confined within the boundaries of museums, art galleries and symphony halls. To find the sites of this alternate beauty, we focus on the ordinary experiences of beauty emerging from the relationship between subjects and objects in everyday settings, and aim to explore how these experiences might serve very different purposes than 'displaying aesthetic taste'. Our work is based on empirical data and constitutes a study on the life-world experiences of beauty as described in a series of interviews with participants in mundane settings of everyday life, namely the participants' homes. The households visited are all in Milan and are homes to people living in conditions of extreme or relative poverty. By concentrating on a group of poor people interviewed in their homes

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(mostly council estate flats often situated in deprived neighbourhoods), we wanted to strongly challenge the idea of aesthetics as something happening only in special circumstances and locations, somehow separated from the everyday life. Firstly we were interested in discovering from participants if, and how, their lifestyle incorporates aesthetics; secondly, and more theoretically focussed, we wanted to use the topic of beauty to show the distance between theoretical discussions of aesthetics and the mundane manifestations of ‘everyday aesthetics’ in the ordinary life-world. Finally we propose that this disjuncture of everyday practice and academic theory can be treated as an ethnomethodologically interesting dichotomy [a “Lebenswelt pair”, (Garfinkel and Wieder 1992, Lynch 1993, Ruggerone 2013)] on which a respecification can be performed<sup>4</sup>.

### **The problematic concept of beauty**

In his book *On Beauty* Umberto Eco captures the problematic character of this notion when he introduces his work as a “review [of] those things that, over thousands of years, human beings have considered beautiful” (Eco 2004: 10). His intention is to explore the objects that the people in different historical periods have indicated as beautiful. In an attempt to emphasise the inclusiveness of his approach to the topic, Eco argues that beauty is not only about art; however, he then proceeds to illustrate it only through artworks. The justification he offers for this way of proceeding is simply that ordinary people “wrote nothing to tell us why they might have considered such things beautiful, or to explain to us what natural Beauty meant to them” (2004:12) The consequence of this lack of documentation is that, for Eco, in order to reconstruct notions of beauty in history, we need to limit our look to the artistic productions of the different ages. This way the equation between beauty and art is *de facto* reinstated.

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Secondly, Eco claims that he is not operating with a given definition of beauty, but he does argue that beautiful are “things pleasing to contemplate independently of the desire we may feel for them” (2004:10). In other words he maintains that beauty, to be beauty, needs to be independent from desire and other emotional involvements and, by this remark, he implicitly adopts a Kantian definition of beauty.

Arguably Kant’s theories of beauty and aesthetics are among the most authoritative and influential. In his *Critique of Judgement* Kant (1790, 1951) denies that beauty can be considered as a property of the object and argues that it can only derive from a subject’s appreciation of the object, independently of its functionality or its ability to give sensual pleasure: “an object of delight apart from any interest”, the object of a pure aesthetic gaze, uninterested in its possible functions. In defining the aesthetic experience, Kant also adds a second feature that needs to be present to classify an experience as an aesthetic one: its “universal communicability”. In other words, he sees a normative aspect in the judgement of taste according to which, when we express such a judgement, we demand agreement from others. Although a lot has happened in aesthetic philosophy since Kant, his work on beauty and aesthetics has casted such a long shadow on the debate that even contemporary developments often incorporate and/or refer back to Kant’s theories in their discussions (for ex. see Janaway 1993, Scruton 2007, Zangwill 2002, Dowling 2010, Forsey 2013, 2014).

In aesthetic philosophy, the recent movement of Everyday Aesthetics has gained popularity in the last ten years, with a number of essays and articles (Irvin 2008, Saito 2007, Leddy 2012, Melchionne 2011, Haapala 2005) attempting to liberate the discourse of aesthetics from its exclusive marriage with art and extending its rubric to ordinary experience:

“The contemporary movement of Everyday Aesthetics shows great promise for expanding the focus of the discipline from its historical preoccupations with fine art and natural beauty to include objects and activities that it has heretofore neglected: sofas, knives and coffee-pots on

the one hand, and cooking, walking to work or going to a ballgame on the other.” (Forsey 2014: 5)

However, within the movement, there is little consensus on the ways in which this extension should be performed (Forsey 2013). Some scholars (Dowling 2010, Leddy 2012) adopt a conservative position reconfirming the primacy of traditional (Kantian) criteria of aesthetic evaluation and reasserting the “normative aspect” as the core of aesthetic experience<sup>5</sup>. They maintain that quotidian objects or practices can be aesthetically appreciated only if and when they are taken out of the ordinary and raised in the realm of the extra-ordinary. Against this stance, other scholars argue that, by doing so, the everyday character of the experience is irremediably lost; on the contrary, they suggest that it is the very definition of aesthetic experience that should be radically transformed when dealing with the quotidian. In particular Saito (cited in Dowling, 2010: 231) claims that the normative character of judgement we apply to art is not a requirement of aesthetic experience *per se*, but merely an adopted quality to induce a communality among critics, so that they can assess the appropriateness of these judgements. For some critics, like Dowling (2010: 232-233), renouncing the possibility of assessing the legitimacy of aesthetic judgement is a problematic and ultimately untenable option, which would transform the study of beauty into an ‘anything goes’ approach. For others, like Scruton (2007:236) “the open-textured vocabulary of aesthetics and the seeming difficulty of isolating any shared grammar or shared set of norms that will distinguish aesthetic from other forms of judgement”, is an open issue in aesthetics’ discourse. Despite the complexity and the appeal of this dispute, we cannot address it in detail here; it is just worth noticing that much of the debate is still centred on the problem of determining on what bases an object or experience can be said to be of an aesthetic kind. In our own investigation of everyday aesthetics we adopt an attitude of indifference about the legitimacy of aesthetic

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judgements. The attitude is inspired by the observation that in the ordinary world, to which we too want to adhere, people are mostly not concerned about the appropriateness of their practices or evaluations to formal aesthetics; instead, in natural language, things are referred to as 'beautiful' without setting them against an objective gauge or normative rubric, and people don't expect to be, and rarely are, asked to account for their attributions and evaluations in those terms<sup>6</sup>.

For sociologists the questions of 'What is beautiful?' and 'Why is this beautiful?' are mostly replaced with more materialist questions such as 'by whom, when and for what reasons was this work or object thought beautiful?' (Hadjinicolaou, 1978). Currently in sociology, consideration of the concept of beauty usually falls under the concern of the sociology of art, a field that (at least in Europe) is still heavily dominated by the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1984) and his investigation of people's taste carried out across 1960s French society.

In an open critique of Kant's ideas, Bourdieu considers taste as part of the habitus, a mode of relating with objects and the world in general, resulting from the combined influence of economic and cultural capital. He argues that taste is a set of predispositions that individuals learn via an educational process shaped by both the schools they attend and the lifestyle of the family they grow up with; the impact of this educational process is then disavowed or denied with the purpose of 'naturalizing' skills that are in reality acquired in order to solidify the privilege of the affluent middle-classes over other social groups. Thus, according to Bourdieu<sup>7</sup>, taste is not a natural predisposition of humans, through which we would all be able to understand and appreciate beauty. Rather, for Bourdieu, uneducated or scarcely educated people from unprivileged backgrounds (most often poorer people) usually confuse beauty with pleasure and end up describing as 'beautiful' things and/or experiences that are really just sensually pleasurable, but really lack the aesthetic properties possessed by works of arts or

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design objects. In this sense, familiarity with art and high culture becomes a mark of distinction between the dominant classes, whose members have the time and the skills to indulge with and appreciate art works, and the dominated lower classes who emerge, from Bourdieu's analysis, as mostly unengaged with the concept of aesthetics: "in Bourdieu's analysis, working class people are concerned with that which is necessary or useful" (Trigg, 2001:105). Certainly the general perception is that in situations of extreme economic fragility, people would and should concentrate their scarce resources towards acquiring functional objects, responding to basic practical needs, without any or very little concern for the objects' aesthetic traits: "Bourdieu's logic suggests that the poor develop their habitus out of necessity" (Layton 2006).

For Becker, author of the other classic text in the sociology of art (De La Fuente 2007), beauty is not so much about taste, rather it emerges as a by-product of the organizational structure of the art world, where insiders function as decision makers about what is to be regarded as aesthetically valuable. Unconcerned by issues of social stratification and class distinction, in his book Becker describes the social organization of the art world as constituted by a network of people cooperating toward the creation, distribution, exhibition and consumption of art objects. Adopting an anti-elitist approach that challenges the assumption of art history about the artwork being the product of a genius and therefore "something more special" (1982:xi) and distant from the ordinary, Becker's approach demystifies the production of art and the role of the artist, although not the appreciation of the final product. His work is perhaps better described as an example of "the sociology of occupations applied to artistic work" (Becker 1982: x), rather than a sociology of art proper, as it remains almost totally unengaged with aesthetics. For Becker, art, to be art, needs the support of the organizational apparatus that makes it possible; without it, art does not happen and cannot simply spring from

a decontextualized encounter between an individual and beauty. As has already been clearly noted (Kimmel 1983), the whole issue of beauty is excluded from Becker's work<sup>8</sup>.

### **Art in action: social life around beauty**

Although very different from each other, Bourdieu's and Becker's contributions both emphasize the importance of analysing social factors and contexts in order to understand how artworks are produced and then experienced by the public; at the same time they both exclude any consideration or discussion of the characteristics of the artworks and of their active role in social situations<sup>9</sup>. The 'new sociology of art' (De La Fuente 2007)), developed in the last twenty years, has strived to overcome some of these limitations by focussing more on the ways in which artworks feature within social situations in a variety of settings: in museums, galleries or symphony halls as well as in ordinary social sites. Although this sociological work foregrounds the everyday dimension, especially through the analysis of the reception of artworks, it still fails, we argue, to challenge the conceptual definition of aesthetic judgement (Born 2010); instead it takes for granted the exclusive relation between beauty and art, uncritically adopting the definition of aesthetics set by the experts, the academies or the market.

Several authors (Mangione 2013, Accord 2010, De la Fuente 2010, 2007, Tanner 2010, Born 2010, DeNora 2000, 2003), have noted that there has been a move in sociology from the study of art worlds to an interest for microsociological investigations of people's encounters with art objects<sup>10</sup>, where the goal is "to identify the mechanism and range of social meanings through which people make sense of it (art)" (Mangione 2013: 30). Encouragement for this

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extension of the sociological scope came especially from scholars interested in exploring how aesthetic objects “play an important role as arbiters of social relations, meaning and action through how they are used by individuals and groups to order daily existence” (Acord, DeNora 2008: 235). Attempts in this direction have emerged largely from microsociological studies in the production and consumption of art, carried out by scholars working in the tradition of symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology (DeNora, 2000, 2003, Hennion 2008). The first cohort has particularly focussed on the interactional processes through which interpretations of artefacts as art objects are collaboratively constructed on the exhibition sites (Vom Lehn, Heath, Hindmarsh 2001, Heath and Vom Lehn 2004, Bruder and Ucek 2000, Mangione 2013) and on how artistic meanings are incorporated in the organization and the practical installation of art events by the curator (Acord 2010).

Inspired by insights offered by ethnomethodological studies of work, science and technology and also incorporating some ideas drawn from ANT (Latour, 2005), the second cohort aims at showing how artistic objects provide opportunities for perceptions or actions (DeNora and Acord 2008: 227-228) by focusing on situations in which art objects (material or immaterial) spur people into, or out of, some course of action<sup>11</sup>. In this area of study, the predominant idea is that the art object and the social world are situationally coproduced (De la Fuente 2007: 417-18) and therefore the qualities of the artwork become crucial to understand how it ‘latches on’ to episodes of social life taking up roles that can only be uncovered through ethnographies<sup>12</sup>. Although these microsociologies of art have indeed abandoned the grand theories of art history and the sociology of art in order to follow art-objects in the course of their movement through the social, they do not look at how aesthetics may be defined in ordinary everyday life situations. In other words, in all these approaches, the ‘artfulness’ of art

objects remains taken for granted, and the assumption that artwork is where beauty resides is never thematized, let alone challenged.

In this respect we wish to re-voice Paul Willis' criticism of the sociology of art for reinforcing rather than questioning "the fallacy that aesthetics is synonymous with art" and for failing to "locate aesthetics as a characteristic of ordinary and everyday social contexts" (Willis 2005:74). While Willis is here mainly targeting Bourdieu and his followers, we believe that this critique can also inform the microsociological analyses mentioned above. Despite concessions to the importance of analysing how people get involved with artworks and how they collaboratively construct their aesthetic judgements, we feel that Willis's call for "a radical re-visioning of the study of aesthetics" (2005:75) so that the "invisible aesthetics" of everyday life is made to emerge from the flow of everyday practices, is still left unanswered even by these recent contributions.

## **Research Methods**

Differently to previous interactionist studies of visitors in museums, galleries and other official sites for the exhibition of artistic beauty, we are trying here to capture aesthetic experiences in the most ordinary of settings, the participants' homes, and to investigate their relationship with the objects on which they themselves bestowed aesthetic merit. To tune people in with the aesthetic disposition, we used plain, natural language and asked them to show us something beautiful in their houses. Through this ploy, we elicited their accounts of the specific relationship they had with the objects of their choice, hoping this way to produce through their words a phenomenological description of aesthetic judgements in the life-world<sup>13</sup>.

As mentioned before, the decision to focus on ‘poor’ people intends to challenge the assumption that the everyday life of the materially poor is devoid of aesthetic pleasures, either because they must focus on functionality and necessity, or because their taste is not refined and therefore not oriented towards the really ‘beautiful’. We believe that this view is based on a reductive definition of aesthetics produced within the academic discipline of aesthetic philosophy and reinforced by the dominant paradigm in the sociology of art, in particular the highly influential theory of Bourdieu.

The adjective ‘poor’ is here used in a common sense meaning, as an underspecified category, not identical with the ‘official’ formulation as deployed by social policy and governmental analysts. There is a common-sense notion of being poor, and the ways in which we selected our research participants ensured that we would interview individuals experiencing various degrees of economic fragility, from relatively lighter economic constraints to situations of serious deprivation. Most of our interviewees (total number 16) were recruited while they were collecting foodstuffs at the *Pane Quotidiano*, a non-profit organization located in Milan and operating through two food banks in the city, where people in need can get bread and other basic foods for free. After agreements with the organization’s leaders, we were given site access and approached a number of service users informing them that we were researchers doing a study on households and the objects they contain. About half of our interviewees were found at the *Pane Quotidiano*, the rest were recruited by visiting charities headquarters and asking the staff to put us in contact with some of their service users; finally we used a ‘snowball’ technique on the basis of suggested participants from informants themselves. The participants were visited in their homes by two researchers, data was collected via digital audio-recording and a digital camera (usually just a mobile phone) recording the interview conversations and photographing participant nominated objects and their context.

Once admitted in our interviewees’ home, we engaged them in an informal conversation, rather than fixed interview schedule, about their accommodation; often the interviewees

offered to give us a tour of their home, of which we requested, and were usually allowed, to take photographs. Following this general introduction and a rapport created, we asked the interviewee to show us ‘something beautiful’ among the objects in the house. When an object was identified, we requested permission to photograph it: permission was granted on all occasions. The interview then focussed on the object selected and the respondents were encouraged to describe the object and its meaning for them in their own terms. Generally this included the object’s ‘story’: they often narrated how they acquired it and notable events related to its ownership and use. Significantly, and a finding in itself, none of our respondents requested clarification on what we meant by ‘beautiful’, the concept was unproblematic for them and they were able to go on to select and show us their beautiful objects without further clarification of what we meant.

Our interest was not in assessing the validity of their judgements of beauty or the kind of taste they displayed; indeed the interviews did not address the issue of taste. Instead the aim was to uncover what the interviewees deemed beautiful, admittedly when prompted to do so, and their locally situated accounts of what made, and why, an object beautiful to them. Participants were not prompted to explain in terms of formal aesthetics, its concepts and conventions, but allowed to relate the texture of experiences, meanings and emotions the objects invoked for them. In the following we will present three examples of accounts from the data that illuminate the breadth of meaning attributed to the ‘beauty’ of various objects.

### **What do people talk about, when they talk about beauty?**

This research is based upon a multi-method approach incorporating in-depth interviews with the participants and a household ethnography documented by pictures taken by the

researchers<sup>14</sup>. The photographs are not meant to be representations of ‘beauty’, they are instead photographs of objects that have been chosen by the participants as ‘beautiful’, and therefore have a documentary function. The interviews, the verbal interactions, rather than the photographs are key to understanding the question of what is beautiful for the participants and why; but again there are as many limitations on words as there is on the photographs.

### **1. The Shrine.**

When we ask her to show us something “beautiful” in her house, the forty-something mother of three children, whom we will call Maria, immediately lead us to the flat’s main bedroom and points to the little shrine shown in figure 1.



Figure 1. Statue of Padre Pio. Photograph taken by Lucia Ruggerone

The main statue in the installation, adorned with numerous rosaries and surrounded by holy images, represents Padre Pio, an Italian priest who lived in the south of Italy between 1887 and 1968 and was canonized in 2002. The controversial story of Padre Pio is renowned in Catholic Italy and abroad, where some people believe him to have born Christ's stigmata and to possess supernatural healing powers, displayed in the miracles he reportedly performed during his life. Although the reliability of accounts of these miracles has always been controversial, even within the Catholic Church, Padre Pio has attracted nevertheless the praise and devotion of a large number of followers and his shrine in San Giovanni Rotondo, where he lived and is buried, has become a destination for religious tourism and pilgrimages.

Without hesitation Maria indicates this installation, and the bigger statue in particular, as the most beautiful object in her house:

“He is my point of reference...”

The story of the statue, that Maria goes on to tell us, is closely associated with her children especially two of them: Paolo, her 12 year old disabled boy, and Giulio, the youngest one, 5 year old at the time of the interview. The statue was a gift from a young woman Maria met in a caffè in Milan, while she was out on errands pushing Paolo in his wheel chair. The young woman had approached Maria and told her she had a disabled brother at home suffering from similar problems to Paolo; they started chatting and the woman promised to visit Maria shortly afterwards with a present for her. The present was the statue in the picture, which the woman said would help Maria cope with Paolo's ill health. Maria informs us that the statue has indeed helped her a lot. She then continues to narrate two further episodes related to the statue in which, she is sure, Padre Pio performed miracles that directly affected, indeed reportedly saved, her child's life as well as the whole family. She continues,

“...then this thing happened to my five year old son. When he was about two, he fell through a glass with his tricycle and he came out unscathed. He turned around to me and he said: “mum, Pio”. I didn’t know what he meant, but then I realised he was telling me he had seen Padre Pio. He was referring to this statue here...I think it was a miracle...”

and she later adds:

“...so many times you hear people wondering if miracles really exist...there was a time when I did not have any faith left, but now, thanks God, miracles do exist....sometimes I light candles in front of the statue and one night I left a candle burning and I fell asleep. At some point I heard a loud noise, I turned and I saw the fire...it was him [Pio] waking me up so that I could extinguish the flames...”

“This, after my kids, is the thing I like most, dearest to me...”

As we can see from these extracts, Padre Pio’s statue is an object of beauty and veneration for Maria, it plays a very important role in the family life, it is a symbol of reassurance, and is attributed a protective function. In Maria’s account of the statue, its beauty has very little to do with its appearance and much more to do with the functions of protection she attributes to it, with the subsequent emotions it provokes. The statue embodies beauty, but in Maria’s words this beauty relates to feelings of comfort and protection, in terms of religion and attributed intervention in her family’s life. Other parts of the interview confirm that religion plays an important role in Maria’s life and that her belief provides her with a kind of haven and feelings of peace in an otherwise difficult life, and it is within this context that the beauty of the object emerges, not with the object alone. It is worth noting that, especially in the past, artworks

frequently found inspiration in religion and their beauty was due to their representation of religious belief (Baxandall 1972). However, when these same objects are viewed within the iconographic approach, their beauty becomes disconnected from their religious meanings, and the decontextualized objects are evaluated on the basis of abstract aesthetic principles. This is not the case here: in the daily life of Maria, beauty and religious meaning are interwoven and both incorporated in that particular statue of Padre Pio,<sup>15</sup>.

## **2. The Drum**

We meet Al around 6:30 pm, on his way back from work in a hot summer evening at the main entrance of the building where his flat is located, in a semi-central area of Milan, near one of the two main railway stations. We climb a few sets of stairs to reach the top floor of the building. His flat is very small and lived-in, as Al shares it with four friends, all immigrants from Egypt. It consists of a large kitchen/living room and one bedroom filled with a bunk bed, two singles and a mattress lying directly on the floor. We sit down on the couch in the main room and start chatting. Al has a foreign accent, but his Italian is certainly comprehensible. He asks us a few questions about our research and he seems a bit concerned and dubious about the purpose of our visit. We explain to him that we work at University and we are doing a study on houses and the objects they contain, reassuring him that his identity and our conversation will be kept anonymous and only used for research purposes. Feeling reassured, he confides to us that he is an illegal immigrant to Italy without a working permit, he has to be very careful and fears that the police might arrest and repatriate him to Egypt. He explains he came to Italy in search of work and a better life but because he doesn't have a work permit he can only find occasional, irregular jobs. He depicts his life as being quite secluded: what pains him most is not to be able to have a night-life and attend venues where music is played. Music, it turns out,

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is his great passion in life, and being able to listen to and play music constitutes, as we shall see, for Al the essence of beauty.

“I love music, all music, modern, jazz, Latin American, classic ....I own so many CDs...

The fact is that I have a degree in music; I studied it for years and then I played music for ten years for a living.... I was a drummer”

When we ask him whether he is playing at all in Italy, Al says

“When I came here I told myself I had to leave music for a bit...when you play in a band you work very unsociable hours, you are out all night, come home in the morning... it is a lifestyle that would certainly attract the attention of the police... I don't want that, I want to keep a low profile and earn a living...”

When we ask Al to show us the most beautiful object in the house, he opens a cupboard and produces the drum in figure 2.



Figure 2. The Drum. Photograph taken by Lucia Ruggerone

“This is the drum I play now, for fun... some friends sent it to me from Egypt. For me this drum is beautiful, the sound it makes is beautiful, would you like to hear it?”

So then Al starts playing the drum and we just sit there listening to his music: he seems very happy to play and enjoys the sound of the drum, an object that Al evaluates principally as a gateway to the beautiful world of music. However, it is not irrelevant that this drum comes from his homeland: as well as a being a tool to play music with, it also embodies Al's bonds to his country and to his past social persona. Al is clearly still a drummer and a musician, but in his new life as an illegal immigrant there seems to be no space for that identity: on the contrary that identity must be hidden, repressed, kept at bay to avoid problems with the police, but possibly also to minimise a sense of nostalgia and regret for what has been left behind. In Al's new life in Italy there is very little beauty at all; he describes it as a precarious, uncertain, edgy life where the present is bleak, and the future unknown. However, beauty has not completely disappeared, it is just displaced, elsewhere in the intangible world of music and encapsulated in that artefact that contains what is beautiful in Al's life: music, his homeland, his identity as a musician. In the same way as Maria, Al knows unproblematically what we mean when we ask him to show us a beautiful object; he does not hesitate in his choice, nor is he doubtful about the drum's beauty.

Like in the previous example, the beautiful object is considered a source of comfort, although for different reasons than Maria's. For her the comfort and the beauty of the Padre Pio statue derived from its almost magical powers to take upon itself Maria's various responsibilities, anxieties and worries; in Al's case the comfort of the drum resides in its being a reminder of his skill and his talent, of an identity that is only temporarily bracketed due to the highly precarious circumstances of living abroad and the sense of loss that it has involved.

### **3. The Dresser**

In our third case the selected beautiful object is the dresser shown in figure 3



Figure 3. The Dresser. Photograph taken by Lucia Ruggerone

This piece of furniture is part of the family heirloom for Carlo, an elderly Italian man living on his own in a council flat in the south of Milan where he has lived for over twenty years. When we start talking, Carlo states that the council estate has changed for the worse in the past few years, and he blames this on a heavy influx of immigrants from Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe. He is retired, living on a small pension, and suffers from numerous health issues which impact on his everyday life and on his plans for the future. He is lonely, with his closest relatives living far away in Sicily and, although Carlo is not happy in Milan, he stays because he requires healthcare services that would not be readily available to him in Sicily. In his conversation with us he comes through as very nostalgic for a past when he worked as a security guardian in a jewellery shop in the area. He used to have a very good relationship with the shop owner, who had so much trust in Carlo that he would leave him the keys to the jewellery to go and open the shop in the morning. Although a bachelor, Carlo explains that he did not feel lonely at home, as he was surrounded by the family of his brother, sister-in-law and their children who lived in an adjoining flat, as well as his friends who lived close by. Carlo no longer recognises the estate as his own: the once familiar streets and courtyards have become alien to him, he reports often feeling threatened and he very rarely goes out. His flat is now his world. He informs us that since he moved into it, over twenty years before, he has done a lot of repair and renovation work in order to make it more comfortable and best suited for his needs. Around the flat are various television sets and a number of radios, some of them partly dismantled exposing their inner workings. Carlo explains that fixing electric things has been his hobby for many years and he is still trying to keep it up although his bad vision is making it increasingly painful for him (during the interview he is wearing dark glasses all the time, although we are indoor). So when we ask him to show us something beautiful in his house, we half expect him to point to a vintage radio or TV set. Instead he selects the dresser as the most beautiful thing he owns. In explaining why he considers the dresser the most beautiful object

in his flat, Carlo narrates the object's story: it was passed on through three generations and he believes may be a valuable antique:

“It belonged to my grandmother, it's old, very old, it is still artisanally built, like they used to do in the old times... if somebody offered me a new one I would say “no”... when I die they can take it away, but not now...”

In talking about the dresser Carlo points out to us the quality of the craftsmanship visible in the object's shape. He admires in particular the carpentry skills of the maker, the skill and the passion he must have put into its construction, which is what he believes gives the dresser its value. He emphasises its desirability with the following:

“There was somebody who used to live here, who used to buy old furniture, cleared cellars for a job...he saw the dresser and offered to swap it for a new one...but I turned him down, although he insisted quite a bit...”

For Carlo, the dresser is an object infused with a beauty based on the artisanal skills it incorporates and on the personal meaning it bears for him. Also it clearly is an object of nostalgia, able to open up, when looked at by Carlo, a flux of happy memories of the beautiful past, echoing with familiar voices and laughs and children playing in the courtyard and the twinkling of the jeweller's shop keys in Carlo's pocket. All the beauty of this past is now incorporated in the skilfully made dresser whose display of craftsmanship and solid and tangible presence gives Carlo's nostalgia a material reality.

### **Discussion: Re-specifying beauty in the life-world**

Through the examples we have presented above we propose an alternative way of looking at aesthetic experience by locating it in mundane practices of the everyday social life of ordinary people. The descriptions of something or someone being beautiful are so frequent and mundane in people's ordinary conversations that we think it makes sense to try and investigate at the micro-level what people mean by 'beauty' and the objects that they declare as 'beautiful'; in other words, in the study, we wanted to discover what beautiful and beauty are glosses for and what functions they serve in people's ordinary life.

Our perspective was initially inspired by ethnomethodology and its programme of respecification. The programme consists of re-reading the concepts used in various academic disciplines (for example, philosophy, art history, sociology, etc...) in the light of the ordinary practices that flesh out these concepts in situations of the life-world. In this paper we have taken 'beauty' as our initial topic ('epistopic' in ethnomethodology's jargon) and investigated what meanings its use takes on in episodes of natural language use in ordinary life. However, in our study we have very liberally applied the ethnomethodological programme of respecification, especially as it emerges from Garfinkel's last formulation (2002), and we are aware that many aspects of our work differentiate it from the 'original' version. For example, our use of interviews, as a method of data collection contradicts the ethnomethodological principle of only analysing naturally occurring phenomena. The use of this method, focussed on people's accounts and narrations rather than on their practices, is aimed at recovering the actors' points of view, to shed light on at least a part of their subjectivities rather than just analysing the procedures that create social order and connote the actors as its 'members'.

We will not try here to address these issues (nor to pre-empt the many other critiques that could be moved to us on the use of respecification), as we do not intend to argue that our approach indeed carries out the programme of respecification as described in ethnomethodological texts. However, we claim that the ethnomethodology-derived appreciation of the distance between theoretical discourses and the life-world has been crucial

in shaping our approach and in informing our attempt to propose an alternative way in which sociologists might want to address the topic of beauty and analyse the role that judgements of taste play in ordinary social life. In the mundane life-world of ordinary people judgements of beauty, as we have illustrated, are used by participants to describe the relationships between themselves and some particular objects; they function as a device through which people manage to narrate, to themselves and to others, their memories, experiences, and identity.

While not strictly ethnomethodological, we believe our approach to be an example of a phenomenologically inspired sociological investigation, striving to foreground not only the pragmatic social pole of the life-world, but also its subjective pole, that sphere which has to do with “what the actors are experiencing, how they interpret their experiences and how they structure the world they live in” (Eberle 2012:299). By focussing on the subjective pole of the existential experience of beauty as lived by our participants, we have shown how far this can stand from the erudite discourses of philosophers and sociologists of art; on this basis and in these terms, we have called for a recovery of the life-world dimension of beauty. Ironically our undertaking could be seen as a misreading of Garfinkel’s recommendation to respecify academic concepts: somehow we feel that’s what we have done, although not exactly in the way Garfinkel figured and suggested. By choosing this approach, we are perhaps joining that cohort of ethnomethodologists who do not feel restrained by issues of loyalty, but who instead are opening up to ethnographic procedures that combine the precious intuitions of Garfinkel with contributions from phenomenological sociology and from symbolic interactionist perspectives as found, for example, in the ethnographic work of Goffman (1961,1963) and in the empirical cultural investigations carried out by Blumer (1969) and Becker (1963).

## **Concluding remarks**

This paper is based upon the investigation of the everyday understanding of ordinary people, i.e. not academic experts, as to what in their experience and everyday life is of ‘beauty’. The focus is neither on the individuals interviewed for the study nor on the objects themselves as bearers of an inherent, normative beauty; on the contrary the focus of attention is specifically on the experiential relationship between the subjects and the objects displayed as examples of beauty<sup>16</sup>.

We believe that when looked at in this way, beauty ceases to be an abstract concept mysteriously incorporated in some objects raised to extraordinary by expert judgement and appreciation, to become a “phenomenon” available to ordinary people in their everyday lives, in fact in many cases a very important resource to cope with their everyday lives. When seen in this light beautiful objects are not only or predominantly there to be admired; rather some objects are deemed beautiful by people because of the experience they make possible for them. Whether this experience is truly aesthetic or not constitutes, in the perspective we have adopted, an “academic” topic of concern that fails to capture (and in fact distances the researcher from) the ordinary phenomenon of beauty. The normativity of aesthetics is not something that ordinary people articulate, explicate, or elucidate upon when they use it, rather their judgements reflect the quality of their experience of the object which can be based on a range of different personal reasons and intentionalities. As we have shown in the cases discussed and as it further emerged in the rest of the study, everyday aesthetic judgements do not relate to taste, rather they seem to take on an anthropological function which has to do with the creation of a framework of meanings that help people order and make sense of the world of objects and their own lives (Miller 2009). In this regard, we dare to say that academic discourses about beauty, especially art history and aesthetic philosophy, miss the life-world phenomenon of beauty, although it might be the case that this is not what they were ever interested in capturing.

We believe sociology has been circumventing (or “ducking out of questions about the aesthetic”, Scruton 2007: 236) the topic of beauty in a number of ways, although we have considered mainly two. Firstly the structural, Marxist perspective of Bourdieu and his followers that link the discourse on beauty to the development of a notion of taste seen as a mark of (class) distinction and deceptively passed by bourgeois ideology as a “natural” gift legitimating hierarchy of value among members of society. As a consequence of this ideological narrative, beauty has been lifted from the realm of the mundane and put into extraordinary sites such as museums, art galleries, concert halls, special collections etc. As a result, appreciation of beauty has become unequally distributed through social groups and made virtually inaccessible for those located at the bottom of the social ladder, who lead lives basically devoid of real beauty, whatever that is.

Secondly, in part inspired by the movement in favour of a democratization of art and of universal access to its temples, sociological research has extended to analyse people’s encounters with art objects within the sites of exhibition: “to identify the mechanism and range of social meanings through which people make sense of it”. This has consisted mainly in interactionist and ethnomethodological studies of people visiting museums and observed while they talk with each other in front of the pieces on show. While this kind of analyses might catch the phenomenon of “museum going” and help us appreciate how the experience of looking at art is mostly a collaboratively achieved process of sense making, we would contend that it does nothing to address the issue of beauty as an ordinary life-world phenomenon. Rather it takes the established equation between art and beauty for granted and analyses some of the social occasions in which this equation is reiterated, but fails to answer the basic question of “what is it that people talk about when they talk about beauty?”

We are very aware that this question cannot bear a unique and universal answer and with this article and our broader study we are not in any way suggesting that we are providing a new life-world based definition of beauty. Such an outcome would be ridiculous as much as

impossible. More simply we want to suggest that, when thrown into the flux of ordinary life, aesthetic takes on an anthropological meaning and that the aesthetic value of objects is for ordinary people a signifier of a set of relations they entertain with those things. What we wanted to do was to explore ordinary life and show that the aesthetic dimension plays a part (sometimes an important part) in the experience even of those people that traditional theories of beauty exclude.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, our study has given voice to a group of people that are rarely consulted, especially on matters of beauty. Normally studies of beauty include the participation of artists, curators, critics or selected groups in the public; here we talked about beauty with people who are usually excluded from this sphere of human experience on the assumption that interest for beauty cannot coexist with economic deprivation and difficulty to satisfy basic needs. If we are entitled to only one act of generalisation (in momentary denial of ethnomethodological avalutativity) we could then say that this is an assumption made possible by the disciplinary discourses on beauty and their failure of going back to the things themselves.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> The use of phenomenological jargon here is not casual: our approach intends to offer a phenomenological investigation of beauty in the mundane world.

<sup>2</sup> Except perhaps when in a situation where they are urged to express their judgement on some kind of art work: a painting, a sculpture, a cinema classic etc., in other words objects that already incorporate some culturally approved aesthetic value (see Bruder and Ucok, 2000: 342-43).

<sup>3</sup> Supporters of the traditional view would conclude that, when stripped of the quality of the extra-ordinary, it ceases to be aesthetics altogether: this conclusion is precisely what we wish to dispute.

<sup>4</sup> Cautionary remarks about the classification of this work as a respecification are discussed later in the article.

<sup>5</sup> This stance more often than not ends up dismissing ordinary aesthetics as “trivial” (Dowling 2010: 241-42).

<sup>6</sup> By adopting this attitude of indifference we also comply with ethnomethodology’s anti-theoretical stance: we are not interested in assessing what truly is beautiful, but in the ways in which people encounter beauty and thereby situationally create it.

<sup>7</sup> For a concise but punctual review of Bourdieu’s stance on aesthetic, see Scruton 2007: 234.

<sup>8</sup> The same cannot be said about the notion of taste, which certainly is addressed in Becker’s work, though probably more in texts other than in *Art Worlds*. As much as art, taste is for Becker the result of a set of interactive processes during which an individual learns to appreciate a typology of objects, be it marijuana or jazz music. However, and again in opposition to Bourdieu, the process of learning taste is not connected to social stratification, but described as a sort of rite of passage to become a member of a subcultural group (Becker 1963).

<sup>9</sup> For an interesting discussion of Bourdieu’s and Becker’s work see Tanner 2010.

<sup>10</sup> In fact DeNora, Acord and more recently Mangione are at the forefront in this movement towards focusing on the social life of art objects as they circulate through society.

<sup>11</sup> Acord and DeNora (2008) borrow from psychology the concept of “affordance”, “coined by Gibson (1979/1986) to describe how objects may provide opportunities for perception and/or action” (2008:228).

<sup>12</sup> In this respect the researcher has to be an expert in the artistic field in which the object is located and of the social culture in which the practices are nested, lest the nature of the coupling might be missed. This is an application of Garfinkel’s requirement of “unique adequacy” (Garfinkel 2002, Lynch 1993).

<sup>13</sup> We have called this process an exercise in respecification, although we are quite aware of the differences between what we did in our study and orthodox ethnomethodological definitions of the practice. In particular we must notice that our data, in the form of interviews with individuals in their own homes, does not constitute ‘naturally occurring data’ but that the conversations are ‘artificial’. However, we argue that the results of our study can still constitute a respecification of the topic of beauty as the interviews evoke a set of life world aesthetic experience.

<sup>14</sup> In a second phase of the research we asked the participants to take their own pictures of beautiful things, but this second phase has not been considered or discussed in this article, but elsewhere (see Lunghi, Trasforini 2010).

<sup>15</sup> In describing some aspects of Baxandall’s work, Tanner (2010:236) underlines that Baxandall (1972) was interested in the type of interaction between paintings and viewers in Renaissance Italy and he remarked how religious art in particular penetrated areas of the believers’ social life by generating and reinforcing their attachments. It can be argued that Maria’s case is an example of this kind of “affordance” (Accord, DeNora 2008).

<sup>16</sup> Our take on these objects of beauty resonates with the approach advocated by Gell (1996) in his essay about Vogel’s net, where he argues that artefacts should be considered artworks when they are “embodiments or residues of complex intentionalities” (p.37).

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