

## *Philosophical Aesthetics and the Aesthetics of Everyday Life*

### *Introduction*

The central aim of the XIVth International Congress of Aesthetics was to illuminate the nature of aesthetics as philosophy. The theme inevitably makes one think about the other side of it as well. Then, the question is, what is non-philosophical aesthetics?

The focus of this paper is the relationship between philosophical aesthetics and other forms of aesthetic practice, and I believe that the nature of aesthetics as philosophy can better be understood comparing it with non-philosophical aesthetics.

I will concentrate on non-philosophical aesthetics, especially on the aesthetics of everyday life, and outline its advantages and drawbacks. What can be done in and through it? What not? If we talk about 'everyday aesthetics', what should we pay attention to in the first place?

I will illuminate the general question with the help of an example – what is »said« of an aesthetic nature through make-up, hair-dos, clothes and other things related to a person's appearance, and what kind of aesthetics can be manifested through such things? And how does this differ from philosophical aesthetics?

### *I*

It is clear that aesthetic conceptions and values can be manifested not only through verbal expressions but also through deeds and action. One can show what one appreciates simply by wearing a certain kind of clothes. In philosophical aesthetics as an academic discipline the typical manner of dealing with aesthetic issues and expressing one's ideas is to write and talk about them. One explicates in words how one connects one's thoughts with the earlier philosophical discourse. But this is indeed not the way one manifests one's aesthetics in everyday surroundings. There, non-verbal or tacit cases of aesthetics are dominant.

But if everyday aesthetics is to a large extent tacit, what does it mean and what does it reveal of the nature of such aesthetics? If ideas are not explained in words but shown through clothes or bodily movements and deeds, what does this indicate? And can something like this be philosophical? What, indeed, can be done through this sort of aesthetics?

I start with some obvious drawbacks of such aesthetics, and move on to its advantages in a moment.

First, the drawbacks – although we can discuss whether or not they actually are drawbacks after all.

1. Firstly, the messages one sends through, say, clothes are often fairly imprecise. Take a look at the accompanying picture, for example. It is easy to see that this attire has something to do with rather unconventional ideas about dressing up. But there are issues that are much more uncertain: what does this person actually appreciate, for example? This particular color? Cut? Material? Designer? How does she want to be understood? Does she like the dress, or is she being forced to wear it? Is her getup an aesthetic statement at all, or is it perhaps a sexual or political one? Tacit messages in everyday life are hints or clues rather than clear signs. Thus, they cannot be very philosophical in the standard meaning of the word, because philosophy, I think, should be as clear and precise as possible. (What kind of clarity and precision philosophy actually needs and what kind of clarity is possible is another, very tough question, of course.)

2. The second point is close to the first one or defines it, namely, such manifestations of aesthetics cannot be analyzed to reveal their nature, their relation to other sorts of aesthetic solutions or to their background. They cannot tell why they are what they are or why they are not something else, and they cannot present alternatives. They simply are what they are. The contrast to well formulated philosophical cases of aesthetics is striking.

3. Thirdly, tacit cases of aesthetics are unable to negate most things. They cannot reveal what is *not* valuable, what is *not* appreciated and so on. Tacit everyday aesthetics is dominantly affirmative. It accepts and emphasizes the things it shows but it does not actually say anything about the things it does not show. A business suit does not deny the value of jeans since it does not take any stand on them. The point of departure of everyday aesthetics is not to question things and reflect ideas through that, in contrast to the point of view of philosophy.

4. The fourth point is the last one, and it is perhaps the most interesting one. Namely, it is obvious that one cannot reach many philosophically interesting questions and areas at all if one sticks to clothes and other such means of presenting one's aesthetic ideas. How could one say anything on





ontology or how could one define anything through that? Such questions, however, are at the very core of academic philosophical aesthetics.

It must be stressed, however, that this last weakness is very strongly created by the everyday *context*. Many art works are quite as mute as normal attire but they can activate these problems because that is what we expect to happen in the art world. Pieces of canvas that look practically the same as pieces of cloth can be seen as some sorts of definition of art or as ontological comments. Consider certain works of Malevitch and their relation to figurative art – they are philosophical, even if not quite in the same way as academic studies. Or what is even more appropriate here, think about Eva and Adele! They create their art through their personal appearance, clothes, make-up and behavior. All in all, tacitness itself is not an absolute obstacle for something to be philosophical, but in everyday surroundings or contexts non-philosophicalness seems to be the case.

Thus, many restrictions are largely due to the way we approach things in everyday life. The things »in themselves«, so to speak, are not as impotent as it might seem at the outset, but the everyday mode of dealing with them leads us to think so. But this, of course, is only functional: our everyday lives must rest largely on simple and unquestioned conceptions about the world if we want to be able to do anything. If we pondered everything profoundly, we would soon starve to death.

So much for the disadvantages of the aesthetics of everyday life.

On the other hand, there are clear advantages in presenting one's aesthetic ideas and values in the tacit everyday way – advantages compared to more philosophical and especially to traditional academic forms of aesthetics.

1. Firstly, in one sense, visual or »displayed« manifestations of one's ideas are more precise than verbal or other conceptual approaches – even if they lack other sorts of precision. One can look like one's aesthetics, so to speak, and it is important to notice that such visual presentations are able to convey information on a nuanced level. I can *say* »She is wearing a black dress«, but that is not at all as exact as the information one gets from *looking* at her dress – then you see exactly what kind of black the black is. This kind of information is only attainable through the senses, not through verbal, conceptual descriptions, with which philosophers often are content. Moreover, if one thinks of what detailed comparisons, as regards colors, for example, one can make do with one's eyes and how poorly equipped we *conceptually* are in this regard, the difference becomes evident. There are always many perceptually different colors that are described and remembered through one concept only. (Note that even if we talked about non-

verbal, visual concepts, they are also rough instruments when compared to what we really see.)

2. Secondly, »wearable aesthetics« is very effective and rapid at conveying information. One can see surprisingly many things practically in a fraction of a second. I can see at least something essential of someone else's aesthetic ideas and show my own ideas to others without problems within a brief moment when we meet in the street. Compare this to the time you have to spend in reading an article or a book about someone's aesthetic ideas – not to mention the time that is necessarily spent on writing such works.

3. Lastly, everyday aesthetics is very swift to change and react to its surroundings. If one wishes to present another sort of aesthetic idea, one only needs to change one's attire, and that can be done within minutes. And if one wishes to react to anything in one's surroundings quickly, this is also easily done. Compare this, once again, to rigid academic/philosophical forms of aesthetics. There, if one wishes to deal with aesthetic issues in a typical way, i.e. through writing, it is not easy to do it very quickly, simply for practical reasons. A profound analysis of any aesthetic question may take years if not decades to produce. There is hardly point in talking about »reactions« here at all.

## II

I have presented some of the drawbacks and advantages of everyday aesthetics. Of course I have simplified matters. What one should think about these aspects depends on what one wishes to say about aesthetic questions and to accomplish by certain aesthetic practices. If one's goal is to form a philosophically penetrating analysis about anything, one cannot do it just through wearing clothes. Then, muteness is a disadvantage; one needs words. On the other hand, the aesthetics of everyday life is much simpler than critical analyses, and the place of philosophical aesthetics is not in everyday life. There, other forms of aesthetics are more vital and practical, and speed and simple, even superficial effectiveness count more than deep analyses or conceptual precision. And, of course, tacitness is not a flaw in any serious way.

But different kinds of aesthetics need not be completely disconnected from each other. Philosophical aesthetics can analyze the crucial aspects of everyday aesthetics. It can – and should – analyze what tacitness, imprecision and affirmation mean, what speed or some sort of volatility means, and so on. At the same time, by studying practices that are not philosophical,

philosophy would, through negation, deepen its picture of its own characteristics and capacities as well. Moreover, considering how art-dominated a field philosophical aesthetics has been up till lately, one should try to find out which concepts and questions of that kind of aesthetics are relevant in the context of everyday aesthetics in the first place. Is it, for example, important to ponder what originality or creativity is, as it has been in the art world? I would suggest that it is not crucial simply because such phenomena are not very important in everyday life context. Rather, often their counterparts seem to be.

A systematic map or even a comprehensive list of issues that are central and worthy of attention in everyday aesthetics cannot be presented here – I have tried to say something of that elsewhere – but it is clear that these issues are not quite the same as those that have been pivotal in art philosophy or in any other field of philosophy. The philosophical analysis of everyday aesthetics must be of its own kind.

In any case, the most important thing to my mind is that it seems that philosophical analyses of everyday life could be a good way to make philosophy more interesting and understandable to more people. It would move philosophy closer to their daily lives. On the other hand, stretching philosophy beyond its traditional boundaries creates new kinds of problem for philosophers to ponder. And this, I believe, is the only way to keep philosophy alive in the long run.