

Aesthetic Investigations

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What (if any) aesthetics of everyday experience should we have?

Author

ANGELA BLACK

Affiliation

TULSA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Abstract: In this paper, I will show that an aesthetics of everyday experience independent of our analyses of art is absolutely essential. While the aims of discourse about art may be normative, the aims of discourse about everyday aesthetic experience are very different — such discourse has, in part, epistemic goals, and, to the extent that it has a normative goal, such a goal is not agreement about the judgments of such experiences but about how disparate judgments can both find place in the shared aesthetic space. In other words, discourse about quotidian aesthetic experience is meta-aesthetic in character.

I. INTRODUCTION

At least since the early modern era and the formulation of the concept of ‘the fine arts,’ there has been some notion of standards of aesthetic evaluation that apply particularly to ‘art proper.’ For some time now philosophical aesthetics has largely concentrated on explicating these aesthetics of the fine arts, even to the point of conflating aesthetics with the philosophy of art as such. Since the latter part of the twentieth century, however, there’s been a movement in aesthetics to go beyond just talking about the aesthetics of art and re-engage with the full scope of aesthetic experiences available to us. This space of aesthetic philosophy is generally referred to as everyday aesthetics’, and in the past half-century or so a number of aestheticians have struggled against the inertia of an arts-focused space of aesthetic theorising to establish the claim that there’s something distinct and philosophically rewarding to say about everyday aesthetics.¹

One of the most basic questions in everyday aesthetics is whether there is, apart from the already well-articulated aesthetics of art, a distinct aesthetic of everyday experiences. That is, should we apply the analytical apparatus developed for the aesthetic evaluation of art to nonart objects, or should we deploy a separate theoretical framework? Aesthetics of the everyday was long neglected but not because there are good arguments against it — the unreflective assumption seems rather to be that our aesthetics of art will suffice to deal with such experiences.

Within the scope of the broader literature on everyday aesthetics, Yuriko Saito and Sherri Irvin have proposed their own models for particular analysis of the everyday, and, by contrast, Christopher Dowling has offered an argument specifically against such a move. Dowling’s stance is predicated on two claims: that aesthetic experiences are only philosophically interesting inasmuch as they are properly subjects of normative discourse; and that quotidian aesthetic experiences are not properly subject to such discourse and hence not philosophically interesting.² He further claims that Irvin and Saito are likewise committed to such a stance by their own analyses, which would be a significant victory for his view if it were true. The debate between Irvin and Saito on one hand and Dowling on the other is but one aspect of a complex and nuanced discourse around everyday aesthetic experiences. This debate nevertheless highlights some central issues in everyday aesthetics that are also explored by other scholars, and a close analysis of how their positions play against each other will yield insights that, hopefully, will generalise beyond this specific exchange.

In this paper, I will show, first, that Dowling seriously misreads Irvin and Saito, and second, that an aesthetics of everyday experience independent of our analyses of art provides a uniquely valuable way of engaging with and discussing our everyday aesthetic experiences. While the aims of discourse about art may be normative, the aims of discourse about everyday aesthetic experience are very different. To the extent that the latter has a

normative goal, such a goal is not agreement about the judgements of such experiences but rather about how disparate judgements can both find place in the shared aesthetic space. That is, the goal of discourse about everyday aesthetics is creating a space in which a variety of frameworks for articulating aesthetic experience, even if contradictory, can be shared and developed without privileging any one over the other. Such discourse would be philosophically interesting without (*pace* Dowling) being subsumable under normal critical discourse about art, which is traditionally considered to have the aim of establishing and applying a consensus around a canon of artistic desiderata.

My argument proceeds as follows: first, I will show that Dowling's critique of Irvin and Saito fails, clearing the ground for a distinct quotidian aesthetics. I will then investigate the basis of Dowling's claim against everyday aesthetics, which provides a jumping-off point for my own analysis of the nature of discourse about everyday aesthetics. Finally, I will then provide said analysis. In doing so, I hope to establish that we should indeed have an aesthetic of the everyday, and further it should be one that reflects the diverse and even chaotic nature of our aesthetic engagement with the everyday world.

II. WHY DOWLING'S CASE AGAINST EVERYDAY AESTHETICS FAILS

II.I Dowling's case against everyday aesthetic experience

Christopher Dowling offers an argument that we should *not* care about everyday aesthetic experiences, on the strength of two claims:

1. Aesthetic experiences are only philosophically interesting inasmuch as they are properly subjects of normative discourse
2. Quotidian aesthetic experiences are not subjects of normative discourse

Furthermore, Dowling insists that his interlocutors are themselves committed to 1. and that they fail to establish a conception of everyday aesthetic experience that would rebut 2. Crucially, Dowling gets this argument off the ground by putting the Deweyan distinction between 'an experience' and 'mere experience' on a footing with the Kantian distinction between beauty and agreeableness.³

According to Dewey's distinction, from *Art as Experience*,⁴ 'an experience' has a kind of unity to it, a sense of clearly defined boundaries that separate it from other experiences. This can be anything from the experience of hearing a loud bang to playing a game to completion. 'Mere experience', by comparison, consists of the phenomenological landscape, if you will — the millions of little sensations that all blend together to form the general backdrop of our conscious existence. Dowling invokes this distinction because it is an aesthetic-theoretical commonplace that anything which can be reasonably called an *aesthetic* experience must necessarily be *an* experience, and so

exhibit a certain degree of unity (and, if this ‘experience’ is to be aesthetic, it must also exhibit complexity).

Next, Dowling expresses concern for cutting a fine distinction between what *is* aesthetic and what is merely ‘aesthetically relevant,’ which is to say, what might contribute to or be relevant to an aesthetic experience proper.⁵ That is, Dowling wishes to distinguish between, first, proper unitary experiences in the Deweyan sense, and second, ‘mere experiences’. This is, on the face of it, a reasonable distinction to draw regardless of one’s general aesthetic frame — my experience of a painting, for example, is obviously not the same thing as those experiential factors that influence *how* I experience the painting. The aesthetic experience of a painting is *an* experience, while the phenomenological horizon in which the experience of the painting is situated might *affect* and thus be *relevant* to that aesthetic experience. It must not be confused *with* the aesthetic experience.

Dowling then goes on to connect this distinction between the aesthetic and the merely aesthetically relevant to the Kantian distinction between beauty and the merely agreeable.⁶ On a Kantian analysis, there is a distinction to be made between the agreeable, which is to say judgements ‘grounded in subjective pleasure’ that are taken to be based on ‘private feeling,’ and beauty, the experience of which has (or is taken to have) normative force, ‘demand[ing] a similar response from others.’⁷ Dowling concedes that judgements of ‘agreeableness’ technically could be called ‘aesthetic,’ even under a strictly Kantian paradigm, but argues that judgements of agreeableness are essentially ‘idiosyncratic and a-critical,’ and thus of limited, if any, interest.⁸ So he draws a parallel: the proper aesthetic experience is subject to normative claims just like the experience of beauty, while a merely aesthetically relevant experience has the same character as the merely agreeable experience, which is to say that it is not subject to normative discourse.

Dowling discusses some examples of everyday aesthetic experiences offered by Sherri Irvin, which he seems to take as sufficiently representative of the genre to get his argument going.⁹ He then goes on to note that Irvin’s examples don’t seem to be proper experiences in Dewey’s sense of the term:

... [Irvin] does not aim to render her examples consistent with Dewey’s account of the aesthetic... Instead she develops grounds for thinking that those criteria excluding her examples should be either manipulated or abandoned. This strategy is indecisive as the opponent will maintain that Irvin’s examples, in lacking the features at issue, may result in pleasurable, but not aesthetic experiences.¹⁰

So, we are meant to understand, if the given examples of everyday aesthetic experiences are not proper experiences, they must be ‘mere experiences,’ which is to say, they are examples of the agreeable, and are therefore not proper subjects of normative aesthetic discourse.

Wrapping up, Dowling goes on to insist that both Irvin and Saito are committed to an interest in aesthetic judgements that are properly the subject of normative aesthetic discourse, rather than purely acritical responses.¹¹ By ‘acritical responses’ he just means what might be called ‘gut responses’ — when I scratch an itch (to use one of Irvin’s notable examples) my response is more likely just an unreflective and uncomplicated sense of satisfaction, rather than some more sophisticated analysis of the process and its results. Such a-critical responses resist any analysis much deeper than simple approval or disapproval, but more importantly, they are inherently private — you cannot know what it is like for me to scratch my itch — and so obviously not proper subjects of normative discourse. In other words, Dowling’s stance is that his interlocutors believe that everyday aesthetic experiences *are* worthy of aesthetic interest, so therefore such experiences *must* be subject to normative discourse (else they would not be interesting), and therefore must *not* have the character of merely agreeable experiences (else they would not be subject to normative discourse). Since he thinks Irvin and Saito fail to establish that everyday aesthetic experiences are more than merely agreeable experiences, he suggests that their arguments fail on their own terms and that everyday aesthetic experiences are not worthy subjects of aesthetic interest.

II.II Why Dowling’s argument fails

As it happens, I do not believe Dowling is correct either in holding that 1. Irvin and Saito are committed to the claim that everyday aesthetic experiences are subject to normative discourse or 2. that being the subject of normative discourse is necessary to make aesthetic judgements philosophically interesting. Dowling’s reasons for thinking that Irvin, at least, is so committed are sketchy at best. No explicit declaration, of the form ‘*x* assertion of Irvin’s is why she is committed to this view’ is ever made, and the entirety of his comments on the matter are restricted to one paragraph.¹² He first comments that Irvin takes notice of the fact that Dewey’s criteria of *unity* and *closure* are important inasmuch as they mark out ‘a clearly delimited entity,’¹³ a necessary prerequisite to ‘secure the potential objectivity of aesthetic judgements.’¹⁴ He then goes on to observe that in a different paper, Irvin exhibited concern as to whether a particular sort of everyday (and putatively aesthetic) experience could be regarded as having a proper object.¹⁵ These two observations effectively exhaust Dowling’s explanation for why Irvin is committed to the view that everyday aesthetic experiences must be amenable to normative discourse. Dowling does not say why this conclusion follows. It seems that he is under the impression that qualifying for normative discourse is the *only* reason to establish that certain kinds of nebulous, quotidian (and putatively aesthetic) experiences do, in fact, have discernible objects. Against this speaks the fact, also noted by Dowling, that Irvin is not interested in ‘secur[ing] the objectivity of aesthetic judgements.’¹⁶

I find a lot of faults with this argument. To begin with, Dowling is mis-

taken in assuming that Irvin's concern with establishing that the experience of an itch does, in fact, provide a proper object was to establish that it is likewise a proper subject of normative discourse. It is true that Irvin mentions in the course of the discussion under consideration that '[c]ontemporary normative accounts of aesthetic appreciation often carry an implicit or explicit requirement that some object independent of one's experience be grasped,' but Dowling ignores the fact that Irvin is not *exclusively* pre-occupied with such accounts.¹⁷ Her primary concern, rather, appears to be to show that the experience of an itch can be described as aesthetic under any account of aesthetic experience that requires an object to 'anchor' the experience, which, as Irvin says, 'is common in accounts of aesthetic experience and appreciation.'¹⁸ This could not be more clearly stated than in her conclusion to the section in which this discussion occurs:

Should it be thought, then, that there must be a distinction between appreciative experience and that which is appreciated, there are good prospects of securing such a distinction even in the case of basic somatic phenomena like itches.¹⁹

Irvin expresses no opinion at all in this section as to whether normative or non-normative accounts are to be preferred, and the fact that her argument works equally well for either sort of account (so long as the account requires that there be an object to aesthetic experiences) puts paid to Dowling's (unstated) assumption that the purpose of making such an argument is to ensure that aesthetic experiences are proper subjects of normative discourse.

Dowling's analysis of Irvin fails in another way, however — one that is particularly informative for our present purposes. He has either missed or chosen to ignore the fact that while Irvin is aware of the putative importance of unity and closure as defining marks for aesthetic experiences, she ultimately rejects these as important criteria. Dowling *does* note that '[w]hile many of her examples lack these features, she dismisses the concern...,'²⁰ but it is impossible to make sense of this comment of his without concluding that he does not recognise the importance (or perhaps even the substance) of Irvin's conclusion on this matter — at least, if he takes Irvin to be committed to the position he imputes to her. Irvin rejects unity and closure 'even in the weak sense as conditions for an experience to count as aesthetic,'²¹ *because* she is not concerned with securing the objectivity of aesthetic judgements, as she states explicitly, or, I take it from the discussion that follows, even the shareability of them. Irvin notably does not make this claim, and Dowling might be forgiven for thinking that the omission was made advisedly, but I believe that the comments following the claim support my reading. In other words, Irvin cites examples of aesthetic experiences that do not exhibit unity and closure. Dowling seems to take this as an oversight, since he believes she is committed to the objectivity of aesthetic judgements, a position difficult to maintain if one does not require aesthetic experiences to exhibit unity

and closure. But Dowling has misread Irvin — her examples were chosen with purpose. Irvin is, on my reading, not committed to the objectivity of aesthetic judgements, as her examples illustrate. By waving away these examples, Dowling waves away evidence that Irvin does not hold the position he imputes to her.

Irvin is not concerned with asserting that aesthetic experiences are even necessarily open to criticism, objective or otherwise. Consider the example she gives of smelling her cat's fur. 'I am petting the cat, I lower my face to his fur and enjoy the smell, period. End of story.'²² Irvin rightly asserts that there is no 'connoisseurship or sophistication' with respect to this experience.

I do not go on to position the cat's smell in a careful taxonomy of scents... or... create a fashionable new scent, *Eau de chat*, in which I capture a selection of the scents the cat emits and place them in some relation to one another.²³

This is not, however, because there is no complexity to be found in the smell of a cat's fur — Irvin takes care to make these points in support of the claim that 'actual placement of elements within a complex structure is not necessary for the elements to be considered aesthetically.'²⁴ Irvin is ultimately not concerned with whether the objects of experience in these cases are actually simple or complex, though — it's still clear, she claims, that they are aesthetic in nature.

The pertinent element of this, relative to Dowling's characterization of Irvin's argument, is the claim quoted above, that a complex structure is not necessary for considering something aesthetically. If Irvin is arguing that the question of whether or not the experiences are aesthetic in nature does not turn on whether they are complex, then it cannot be the case that she is committed to aesthetic experiences having some sort of complex structure upon which one could rest critical discourse. Without a structure of some sort to the experience in question, it seems the only real comments that could be made about a given reaction to them would be 'I get it' or 'I don't get it.' This is hardly the sort of 'critical discourse' Dowling is talking about! If it is the case that Irvin can qualify simple experiences as aesthetic, Dowling cannot reasonably claim that Irvin is committed to the notion that aesthetic experiences must be proper subjects of normative discourse.²⁵

Dowling's claims that Saito is committed to such a position are likewise shaky. He asserts that Saito is

... committed to holding that certain of our everyday aesthetic assertions *must* carry some claim to 'responsible criticism and discourse' given that she holds that many of these, having environmental ramifications, should be the subject of critical scrutiny.²⁶

Note the condition on which the conclusion is based; to wit, 'having environmental ramifications.' The subject of the chapter in Saito's *Everyday*

Aesthetics that Dowling relies on here is the *non-aesthetic* consequences of our quotidian aesthetic judgements. In other words, Saito's argument — or at least the part of it that Dowling references here — is that our everyday aesthetic responses 'should be the subject of critical scrutiny,' in Dowling's words, for non-aesthetic reasons. Dowling does not take the time to clarify this point, but he should have, because a proper explanation of what Saito was actually arguing would have revealed his own argument as a non-sequitur.

Dowling's claim is that Saito and Irvin, as noted above, are committed to normative aesthetic discourse, and his claim is specifically about *aesthetic* norms, as illustrated here:

When characterizing *aesthetic* responses to daily life should we insist, as Kant does, not only on a distinction between judgements that lay claim to the agreement of everyone and those that merely report subjective pleasures but also upon the particular theoretical interest in judgements of the first kind? I think so — and while there is not space to develop this approach here, it will suffice to recognize the extent to which [Saito and Irvin] seem committed to an interest in precisely such judgements.²⁷

It could not be clearer that Dowling is arguing that Saito and Irvin are committed to the existence of normative discourse specifically regarding our aesthetic responses to everyday life. That, however, is not at all what Saito was talking about in the chapter Dowling references. In an effort to demonstrate that we ought to pay attention to our quotidian aesthetic experiences, she argues that these responses *have non-aesthetic consequences*. To take just one of many passages that show her focus, here, she notes that '[t]he history of American landscape aesthetics, though decidedly not developed to nurture ecological sensibility, does illustrate that our aesthetic taste can be guided to serve a specific social agenda.'²⁸ In arguing that there is a link between our aesthetic values and our social values, Saito also draws a clear distinction between them; we can evaluate aesthetic responses from the standpoint of their practical value (or disvalue, to draw nearer to Saito's running theme). The only sense in which Saito argues that everyday aesthetic experiences should be subject to 'responsible criticism and discourse' — in this chapter, at least — is from non-aesthetic perspectives. This should not be surprising: as we've seen, Irvin and Saito both offer some variation on the argument that everyday aesthetic experiences are important inasmuch as they may have some moral or practical impact, though not necessarily only in that respect.

This is, of course, not at all in conflict with Saito's 'anything goes' approach to everyday aesthetics.²⁹ One could assert that there are no aesthetic responses to everyday experiences that are *aesthetically* incorrect while still maintaining that some might tend to produce morally or socially undesirable results. Dowling's claim that Saito is committed to *aesthetic* norms for everyday experiences is not entailed by her commitment to criticism and discourse

about everyday aesthetic experiences so long as said criticism and discourse is non-aesthetic, which is all that Saito argues for in the chapter to which Dowling is referring. As Dowling offers no other reason to think Saito is so committed, we must conclude that his argument fails.

So much for Dowling's arguments that Irvin and Saito are committed to an interest in aesthetic normative discourse about everyday aesthetic experience (and thus to norms governing such quotidian experiences). Beyond his (mistaken) claim that Irvin and Saito are committed to such a position, he offers no substantial argument for insisting on it. He thinks it 'significant' that Kant distinguished between norm-governed aesthetic responses and purely subjective or 'pleasurable' aesthetic responses, but his assertion that '[i]f... aesthetic talk in this domain includes the mere evincing of subjective responses... we are in danger of losing... focus on those responses that legitimately engage critical attention...' baldly begs the question.³⁰ Saito openly desires to draw focus *away* from the latter responses, at least as traditionally understood, and Irvin is arguably uninterested in them when it comes to quotidian aesthetic experiences, so both could simply affirm the antecedent and be done with the matter. Statements such as '[o]n such a view [i.e., Saito's and/or Irvin's] I find myself left wondering what all the fuss has been about'³¹ do not so much address Saito and Irvin as talk past them, as neither Saito or Irvin seem interested in 'all the fuss' about normative aesthetic discourse in this realm.

That said, neither Saito nor Irvin seems to do much to address the question of *why* it is we ought to eschew the kind of normative discourse that attaches to talk about art when considering everyday aesthetic experiences. In essence, Saito and Irvin seem to simply assert that we need not be interested in normative aesthetic discourse about everyday aesthetic experiences, while Dowling asserts that we should. If Dowling can be rebuked for begging the question against Saito and Irvin, it seems that Saito and Irvin don't speak to Dowling (which is not surprising, as they weren't trying to), inasmuch as no one on either side of the debate has offered a coherent sustained defense of his or her position, even if Saito has offered us the beginnings of such defenses. Let us therefore see if we can construct explicit arguments for and against such norms in the realm of everyday aesthetic experience.

III. NORMATIVE DISCOURSE AND WHAT MAKES AESTHETIC EXPERIENCES PHILOSOPHICALLY INTERESTING

Dowling's position seems to be rooted in the assumption that in order for aesthetic experiences to be philosophically interesting, we must be able to have normative discussions about them – in other words, if there is no possibility of criticism of everyday aesthetic experiences, why would we care about them? He is not alone in thinking this way. Roger Scruton towed a similar

line; he took it as a given that we will have debates about everyday aesthetic experiences. Contemplating how the residents of a house, the neighbours, the carpenter who installs it, and others might take interest in the shape of a doorframe, he says ‘... all will have an interest in the way the door looks: and the less practical their involvement, the greater that interest will be.’³²

Let us leave aside the unwonted assertion that aesthetic interest is necessarily inversely proportional to practical interest. Scruton proposes that the solution to the ‘coordination problem’ that naturally arises from this proliferation of interest is rational discourse in which we ‘strive for agreement.’³³ Scruton never explicitly claims that the ultimate goal of discourse about everyday aesthetic experience is to sort responses into ‘better’ and ‘worse’ responses — to define some standard of taste, if you will, for quotidian aesthetics — but the insistent presence of the normative aspect of this discourse leaves little room for any other conclusion. Scruton’s assertion that this discourse is the philosophically interesting aspect of this area of investigation and Dowling’s dismissal of ‘a-critical’ responses lends support to the supposition that their position is, roughly, that discourse about everyday aesthetic experience must be normative, because the only conceivable problem to be resolved is the problem of agreement. That is, if there is no problem to be resolved, then what we have regarding quotidian aesthetic experience is not so much discourse as commentary (and such commentary is presumably not philosophically interesting).

I disagree with this position because I deny that the ‘coordination problem’ that Scruton presents, is what makes discourse about aesthetic experiences philosophically interesting. I believe the aim of philosophically interesting discourse about aesthetic experience is not securing agreement, but rather achieving understanding and mutual accommodation in the ‘public aesthetic space’ across differing aesthetic paradigms. To expand on this without getting ahead of the argument, I would like to reconcile aesthetic pluralism with aesthetic autonomy in a productive fashion, one that multiplies rather than delimits opportunities for rewarding aesthetic experiences. This seems to me a more interesting philosophical challenge than just deciding whether everyday aesthetic experiences provide yet another opportunity for someone to be ‘right’ and someone else to be ‘wrong.’ Under my interpretation, aesthetic discourse about quotidian objects and experiences has a character distinct from traditional discourse about ‘art proper,’ opening up vast territory in aesthetic analysis. This strikes me as much more philosophically interesting than just dismissing the aesthetics of the everyday as a poor relation to the aesthetics of art as such.

I will not challenge the presumption that mere commentary would not elicit philosophical interest. But there is, first of all, room to challenge Scruton’s assumption that the problem of everyday aesthetic experience is one of agreement, and second, the elements from which we may explicitly construct such a challenge are already found in Irvin’s and Saito’s work. The claim that

quotidian aesthetic experiences do not exhibit closure and unity in the same way as experiences of art, calls into question the preoccupation with normativity. Scruton and Dowling suppose must exist in order to make aesthetic discourse philosophically interesting. At the same time, this negative claim regarding closure and unity is the first step in articulating just what sort of philosophically interesting discourse we might, in fact, have about them instead.

Saito makes the uncontroversial point that we ‘ignore or suspend from our experience’ of artworks many things that nonetheless present themselves when considering the work but which are not a ‘proper’ part of it – ‘[f]or example, a symphony is to be appreciated through *its* sound only, disregarding the traffic noise outside the symphony hall, the coughing of the audience...’ and so on.³⁴ She uses this observation to make the more controversial point that we have no compelling reason to similarly bracket out our experiences of weather (to take the particular quotidian phenomena under discussion in the essay I am referencing): ‘... weather as an aesthetic object is not something neatly confined into a package.’³⁵ In other words, insofar as we can have aesthetic experiences of everyday things, we have aesthetic experiences of everyday things generally speaking, not of just certain kinds of everyday objects or everyday objects that fall under a certain rubric. This situation makes it impossible to articulate a set of standards of what we must and must not consider in formulating our aesthetic experiences. What do I bracket out of my experiences of the weather? Of petting the cat? It seems obvious that one single standard could not rule in both cases, but if that’s so, the set of norms needed proliferates.

Since we clearly do not carry around a massive compendium of aesthetic standards for every conceivable everyday object, then unless we reject the possibility that we *do* have aesthetic experiences of everyday things, we must conclude that many quotidian aesthetic experiences are free-form in the sense that they are of, well, no *particular* things at all. By this I mean not to imply that a given aesthetic experience has no particular object, but that there’s no easily articulable set of things that serve as objects of aesthetic experiences, or neatly defined sets of rules for having aesthetic experiences about any given thing. Even if you and I are both having aesthetic experiences of the weather on the same day, at the same time, in roughly the same place, there’s no guarantee that we are having aesthetic experiences of the same sets of features.

This explication of what’s going on in quotidian aesthetic experiences underwrites Saito’s apparent insistence that there can be no normative discourse about such experiences. No such norms can exist because there’s no specific, common object of evaluation between any two quotidian aesthetic experiences, even when two subjects are having aesthetic experiences of the same general object (such as the weather, on a given day from a given location). If you and I are both contemplating a painting, the presumption that we can

articulate norms that describe a ‘correct’ aesthetic experience of the painting depends on our being able to identify to what those norms apply – that is, on the ‘of the painting’ clause. We cannot articulate a set of norms about what it is to have a correct aesthetic experience of the weather, because, as noted above, there is no standard idea of what it means to have an aesthetic experience of the weather. Do we ‘... focus only on the visual appeal of the cumulus cloud, or concentrate on the sound of the raindrops hitting the roof’?³⁶ Again, as I suggested above, no norms exist for identifying the proper objects of quotidian aesthetic experience, which entails that no norms can exist for what it is to have a proper aesthetic experience of those unspecifiable objects. This is just a sceptical argument against normative discourse about everyday aesthetic experience — if there are no norms as to *what* we talk about, there can obviously be no norms as to *how* we talk about it (whatever it happens to be). Saito’s position does not simply argue that such normative discourse *does not* apply to quotidian aesthetic experience, it argues that it *cannot*.³⁷

This is of course a heady conclusion, and one that might strike some readers as implausibly strong, as it seems to imply that my aesthetic evaluations can never be *wrong*. Suppose you and I are looking out of the window, observing the weather, and I state that the weather today seems ‘peaceful’. If there is, in fact, a large tornado bearing down on us, my observation is straightforwardly wrong.³⁸ This seems to count against the conclusion that we *cannot* engage in normative discourse about the weather. I think, however, that the example shows less than it would at first appear. It assumes that in observing ‘the weather,’ we are both considering the same things in the same context. Perhaps, unbeknownst to you there were *several* tornados yesterday and so I regard today’s weather as, relatively speaking, ‘peaceful.’ Perhaps I’m bracketing out the tornado itself and referring only to the uniform blanket of thick, grey clouds that obscure the sky. Perhaps I am simply perverse, and find the idea of mass destruction soothing.

These replies are offered somewhat playfully, of course, but I believe they illustrate Saito’s point, which is that there are no formalised frameworks for evaluating quotidian aesthetic experiences as there are for evaluating artworks. Now, to be sure, there are informal customs that can be invoked with regard to certain kinds of everyday objects of aesthetic consideration. In considering the weather, for instance, it would be *unusual* to bracket out the single most dramatic phenomenon visible at the moment. However, it would not be *wrong* in the way that it would be wrong to consider the colour of the wall upon which a painting is hung when evaluating the painting. While we undoubtedly carry with us sets of commonly used standards of aesthetic evaluation that can be applied to various everyday objects, even if the evaluation is purely private,³⁹ the point of the sceptical argument outlined above is that such informally conventional norms are only straightforwardly applicable if the object of our consideration is such that it falls into an informally conventional category. On the contrary, in quotidian aesthetic appreciation I am

free to direct my appreciation towards anything I like, up to and including the most *outré* assemblages of things. Now, certainly once something has been picked out, apt or inapt things can be said, but it is nonetheless impossible to say that any given quotidian aesthetic evaluation is *straightforwardly wrong*, because there is always the possibility of constructing a plausible context for the evaluation. This move is denied us when making evaluations of artworks, as the type of work constrains the available contexts of evaluation.

When we are permitted, as we are in appreciation of the everyday world, to specify the object of evaluation as well as its context in an *ad hoc* fashion, there are no evaluations that are *simply* right or wrong, only those that are more or less unusual, more or less interesting. Everyday aesthetic experiences lack any pre-established framework of evaluation for what is being considered, let alone a conventional notion of *what* is being considered. What critical discourse there could exist about these experiences seems bound to be more pre-occupied with establishing what is being considered and how, rather than the correctness of any judgements rendered. This is especially true given that without any norms of consideration (on either objects or frameworks of judgement), there is nothing much to say, from the critical standpoint, about the choices any given individual might make regarding what to consider and how to consider it.

It might be noted, however, that I have moved from claiming that there can be no normative discourse about everyday aesthetics to claiming that any such discourse is inevitably relative to *ad hoc* paradigms of evaluation, which is of course not quite the same claim. I do not think this undermines the general point against Scruton and Dowling. Even if we allow that there can be some normative discourse about everyday aesthetic experiences, remember that for our interlocutors, what makes aesthetic discourse philosophically interesting is the problem of agreement.⁴⁰ It is the fact that aesthetic discourse is focused on agreement, according to Scruton, that makes it evident that such discourse is interesting. I do not agree. To the extent that there is discourse focused on agreement about everyday aesthetic experiences, I think that it is vastly less important than discourse focused on uncovering the objects and contexts of evaluation. In other words, I think the salient issues regarding aesthetic discourse are communication and coordination. Even if one were not inclined to agree with this claim, however, the fact that there are no norms to govern the selection of objects and paradigms seriously undermines the view that what is interesting about aesthetic discourse is obtaining agreement.

Scruton is right to note that others besides the door-framer will have an interest in the aesthetic qualities of the door-frame, but this does not immediately indicate that *agreement* is what the various parties are after. Suppose I am interested only in the aesthetic comfort I take in my own home; why think that I am after agreement with *anyone*? Even in situations where more than one person is likely to have some interest in the aesthetic qualities of something, it would only follow that agreement is the interesting problem

if they each had *equal rights* over the thing in question. Returning to our persistent example of the door-frame, it may well be that one person has the prerogative to decide what the frame *will* look like while everyone else has only the prerogative to say what it *must not* look like. This is the situation in many scenarios regarding how one decorates one's private property that will be nonetheless visible to the public: the only norms that apply to your choices are negative, ruling out certain choices. Granted, we are not talking specifically about *aesthetic* norms in this case — most of these have moral or pragmatic justifications — but that only serves to underscore my point.

Why *would* we think that agreement is the relevant question in quotidian aesthetics, anyway? If you and I are both having an aesthetic experience of the weather, what might prompt us to think that we are interested in coming to a singular answer about the weather's aesthetic properties? Obviously, autonomy in this realm is also most conducive to personal aesthetic satisfaction, but since we are specifically concerned with demonstrating that there is philosophically interesting discourse to be had about quotidian aesthetic experience, that is not enough. Beyond personal satisfaction, discourse about our disparate experiences has the potential to be extremely productive, for instance by our gaining an understanding of each other, of discovering new ways to go about having aesthetic experiences, of expanding one's aesthetic sensibilities, and so on. This potential is not hindered by our being free to have our own aesthetic experiences, in our own ways. The resulting discourse would naturally require some critical vocabulary, but this vocabulary would not be deployed in the service of securing agreement, only in service of making apparent to ourselves as well as others the aesthetic qualities of the experiences in question.

Now, it needs to be noted that this view does appear to generate friction with Irvin's comment that when she smells her cat's fur, she does not then carry out a careful analysis of the aesthetic experience in question. But this tension is only apparent. Irvin is correct that we need not deploy this analytic vocabulary when having quotidian aesthetic experiences, but neither do we *need* to deploy our critical vocabulary to have an aesthetic experience of art. Just as this fact does not in the latter case mean that we *cannot* engage in discourse about our experiences, it does not rule out discourse in the former case.

The only question that remains is whether this sort of discourse is philosophically interesting, but I believe the answer is pretty clearly affirmative. To begin with, coordination problems have traditionally been considered philosophically interesting. Indeed, the problem of how a large, diverse population with diverse aesthetic sensibilities can go about maximising individual aesthetic pleasure *without* a uniform set of aesthetic norms seems to be a particularly interesting coordination problem. One might call it the 'problem of pluralistic aesthetic autonomy' which would undoubtedly involve the question of what non-aesthetic norms would best serve such a purpose. If we

believe it is likely that individuals both seek to maximise their own aesthetic pleasure *and* have differing aesthetic preferences, the appearance of such a problem seems inevitable. While this problem might not be of interest to any given philosopher, it's hard to see how one might maintain this is not a philosophically interesting problem as such.

IV. CONCLUSION

What (if any) aesthetics of everyday experience should we have? I believe I've shown that a particular aesthetics of the everyday is both possible and necessary. As for the nature of that aesthetic, I believe I've shown it should be one that accounts for the indeterminate nature of our aesthetic engagement with the world around us.

To show that an aesthetics of the everyday is *possible*, I first made the case that Dowling's argument against everyday aesthetics fails because he does not establish that everyday aesthetic experiences must be subject to normative discourse. To show that an aesthetic of the everyday is *necessary*, I then argued that aesthetic engagement with the everyday world is a kind of aesthetic 'free-for-all,' such that the norm-centred aesthetics of art will not serve for quotidian aesthetics.

So this brings us to the question of what an aesthetics of the everyday *should* look like — that is to say, the question of what sort of everyday aesthetics would be philosophically interesting. Having demonstrated that no norms govern the selection of objects (such as they are) of everyday aesthetic experience, it follows that no norms can be given for discourse about everyday aesthetic experience. In other words, there's no set of rules for discourse about everyday aesthetic experience because there is no singular discourse about everyday aesthetic experience, only a variety of improvised discourses about a variety of ad-hoc everyday aesthetic experiences. Without the formalities of art-practices to guide us, we are free to construct our own objects of aesthetic consideration from the variety of everyday experience, and likewise evaluate them as we please. The idiosyncrasy of these standards of evaluation do not render them any less real. And far from rendering discourse pointless, the specificity and multiplicity of aesthetic objects and frameworks for considering them creates a rich and rewarding field of aesthetic discourse. By speaking with each other about our everyday aesthetic experiences, we disclose to each other the sorts of things we pick out as significant and the ways we value them. In so doing, new ways of looking at the world are revealed, granting heuristic paths to novel aesthetic experiences. We reconcile and simultaneously hold valid a disparate and even conflicting variety of aesthetic paradigms, allowing us to find common aesthetic ground as well as to celebrate our aesthetic differences. This seems to me indisputably of philosophical interest.

drangelajblack@gmail.com

ENDNOTES

1. For a gloss on the history of everyday aesthetics, see Saito 2024.
2. Dowling 2010.
3. The distinction comes from Dewey (1934) 1980.
4. 35ff.
5. Dowling 2010, 227.
6. 228.
7. 228.
8. 228–229.
9. 226–227.
10. 228.
11. 239.
12. 239.
13. 239.
14. Irvin 2008b, 37.
15. Irvin 2008a, 28–29; cited by Dowling 2010, 239.
16. Irvin 2008b, 39; cited by Dowling 2010, 239.
17. Irvin 2008a, 28.
18. 28.
19. 29.
20. Dowling 2010, 239.
21. Irvin 2008b, 39.
22. 39.
23. 40.
24. 40.
25. I recognise that a great deal of my interpretation of Irvin rests on what could also be regarded as a ‘throw-away’ comment, made after the main point of the discussion at hand. That said, I think it is a fair enough interpretation of Irvin’s statements and, in any case, I have independently shown why Dowling’s interpretation of Irvin is mistaken.
26. Dowling 2010, 239; Dowling is citing Saito 2010, chapter 2.
27. Dowling 2010, 238–239.
28. Saito 2010, 72.
29. Terminology borrowed from Dowling 2010, 238.
30. 229. Although I have elided several parts of the sentence, I believe having done so draws attention to the banality of the observation, rather than obscuring Dowling’s intent.
31. 229–230.
32. Scruton 2007, 243.
33. 243–244.
34. Saito 2005, 158.
35. 160.
36. 158.
37. I believe these points regarding the aesthetics of weather are meant to generalise to everyday aesthetics. Frustratingly, Saito never explicitly says this, even though she prefaces the discussion with a note on the inadequacy of art-centred aesthetics for the aesthetics of everyday life. Note, however, a similar analysis of the Japanese tea ceremony as an object of aesthetic appreciation in Saito 2010, 33–35. Here she offers similar reasons to think that an art-centred aesthetic is inadequate to analyze the appreciation of the tea ceremony.
38. I am indebted to Sherri Irvin for this example.
39. This point is made in Irvin 2009, 229–230.
40. We’ve examined Scruton’s explicit statements to this effect, but Dowling seems also to be most plausibly read this way, especially in light of his remark ‘I suggest. . . that one should also recognise that the “aesthetic” judgements that are typically of interest in discussions of art are those possessing such a normative aspect such that judges will (say) demand agreement from apparent dissenters.’ Dowling 2010, 228.

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