

Everyday aesthetics and world-making

La estética de lo cotidiano: creando mundo

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ABSTRACT

The project of world-making is carried out not only by professional world-makers, such as designers, architects, and manufacturers. We are all participants in this project through various decisions and judgments we make in our everyday life. Aesthetics has a surprisingly significant role to play in this regard, though not sufficiently recognized by ourselves or aestheticians. This paper first illustrates how our seemingly innocuous and trivial everyday aesthetic considerations have serious consequences which determine the quality of life and the state of the world, for better or worse. This power of the aesthetic should be harnessed to direct our cumulative and collective enterprise toward better world-making. Against objections to introducing a normative dimension to everyday aesthetics, I argue for the necessity of doing so and draw an analogy between everyday aesthetics and art-centered aesthetics which has dominated modern Western aesthetics discourse.

KEYWORDS

EVERYDAY AESTHETICS; THE POWER OF THE AESTHETIC; WORLD-MAKING

RESUMEN

El proyecto de hacer mundo (world-making) lo llevan a cabo no sólo los hacedores de mundo profesionales, tales como diseñadores, arquitectos y encargados de manufacturación. Todos participamos en este proyecto a través de las variadas decisiones y juicios que realizamos en nuestra vida cotidiana. La estética tiene un rol que desempeñar muy relevante a este respecto, aunque no suficientemente reconocido por nosotros o por los teóricos de la estética. Este texto en primer lugar ilustra cómo nuestras aparentemente inocuas y triviales consideraciones estéticas cotidianas tienen serias consecuencias que determinan la calidad de nuestras vidas y el estado del mundo, para bien o para mal. Este poder de lo estético debería ser reconducido para

dirigir nuestra empresa cumulativa y colectiva hacia la mejora del hacer mundo. Contra las objeciones a la introducción de una dimensión normativa en la estética de lo cotidiano, defiende la necesidad de hacerlo y establece una analogía entre la estética de lo cotidiano y la estética centrada en el arte que ha dominado el discurso estético occidental moderno.

PALABRAS CLAVE

ESTÉTICA DE LO COTIDIANO, EL PODER DE LO ESTÉTICO, HACER MUNDO

I. SPECTATOR-CENTERED AESTHETICS

MODERN WESTERN AESTHETICS THAT EMERGED during the 18th century is characterized by the following two features. First, it is primarily concerned with the aesthetic experience of the viewers, audience members, and readers; in short, the receivers. Second, with the emphasis on disinterestedness as the distinguishing mark of an aesthetic attitude or experience, the sphere of the aesthetic is relatively unencumbered by other areas of human concerns such as the moral, political, religious, scientific, and practical. Thus, the model for the aesthetic discourse is a spectator perceiving an object and deriving an aesthetic experience in isolation from the rest of life.

This model of aesthetics is by no means universally shared. In Western aesthetics, Friedrich Nietzsche was the first to challenge this model. He points out that «our aesthetics have hitherto...only formulated the experiences of what is beautiful, from the point of view of the *receivers* in art. In the whole of philosophy hitherto the artist has been lacking.»¹ He singles out Kant in this regard, arguably the most influential aesthetician at his time and even today: «Kant, like all philosophers, instead of envisaging the aesthetic problem from the point of view of the artist (the creator), considered art and the beautiful purely from that of the ‘*spectator*’.»² Nietzsche’s own aesthetics is rather concerned with how one becomes an artist, creator, or poet of one’s own life by giving it «an aesthetic justification»: rendering its every aspect, including those aspects which are difficult to accept, a part of an organic whole. Just as a dissonance in music or a painful event in a tragedy is indispensable to an aesthetic whole, «*as an aesthetic phenomenon* existence is still bearable for us, and art furnishes us with eyes and hands all the good conscience to be able to turn ourselves into such a phenomenon.»³ As such, «in man *creature*

1 Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Will to Power*; tr. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, ed. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books, 1968, p. 429, emphasis added.

2 Nietzsche, Friedrich, *On the Genealogy of Morals* in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, tr. and ed. Walter Kaufmann. New York: The Modern Library, 1968, p. 539, emphasis added.

3 Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Gay Science*, tr. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage

and *creator* are united» and the man who fancies that «he is a *spectator* and *listener* who has been placed before the great visual and acoustic spectacle that is life...overlooks that he himself is really the poet who keeps creating this life.»⁴ Thus, for Nietzsche, the significance of aesthetics in our life is profound because it provides a strategy for fashioning a good life. Accordingly, there is no separation between the aesthetic, the moral, and the existential in his view.

When we put the mainstream spectator-oriented Western aesthetics in a global context, its limited scope also becomes evident. For example, the Japanese aesthetic tradition is dominated by the *practitioners* of various arts. While discussion of the aesthetic experience of the *receiver* of art is not absent, one commentator of Japanese aesthetics observes, «Japanese aestheticians... have generally very little to say about the relationship between the work and the audience, or about the nature of literary and art criticism.»⁵ In this tradition, what may at first appear to be a how-to manual for an artistic practice turns out to be a discourse on how to live one's life. Mostly Zen priests or students of Zen Buddhism, Japanese art masters and their disciples all emphasize selfless devotion, rigorous self-discipline, and constant practice in the chosen artistic medium not only as a means to achieve artistic excellence but more importantly as a way of experiencing enlightenment and self-fulfillment. For example, the 16th century tea master, Sen no Rikyū is recorded as defining «the art of tea» as «the way through which one attains spiritual awakening.»⁶ Thus, the Japanese aesthetic tradition, like Nietzsche's philosophy, regards aesthetics as a practice to achieve a good life, overcoming any separation between and among the aesthetic, the moral, the existential, the spiritual, and the practical.

This quick examination of Nietzsche's aesthetics and Japanese artistic tradition helps illuminate the limitations of the model still prevalent in contemporary Anglo-American aesthetics. In this paper my focus is on the world-

Books, 1974, p. 164, emphasis added. Similarly, «it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally justified» and «existence and the world seem justified only as an *aesthetic phenomenon*» (*The Birth of Tragedy* in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, p. 52 and p. 141, the last emphasis added). Specifically, «whatever it is, bad weather or good, the loss of a friend, sickness, slander, the failure of some letter to arrive, the spraining of an ankle, a glance into a shop, a counter-argument, the opening of a book, a dream, a fraud- either immediately or every soon after it proves to be something that 'must not be missing'» (*Gay Science*, p. 224, emphasis added).

4 Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Beyond Good and Evil* in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, p. 344 and *Gay Science*, p. 241.

5 Ueda, Makoto, *Literary and Art Theories in Japan*. Cleveland: Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1967, p. 226.

6 Sōkei, Nanbō, tr. Toshihiko and Toyo Izutsu, «A Record of Nanbō,» in *The Theory of Beauty in the Classical Aesthetics of Japan*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1981, p. 155.

making project participated by all humans, not so much as professional artists and designers but rather as citizens and consumers. My thesis is that we are all implicated in the world-making project *and* aesthetics plays a surprisingly important role in this collective and cumulative endeavor. The kind of aesthetics relevant here is what I call everyday aesthetics, dealing with issues in our everyday life, such as daily chores, home-making, workaday environment and practices, leisure activities, and aesthetic preferences and judgments we make on various objects with which we regularly interact.

Despite the fact that everyday aesthetics in the Western tradition has a long history beginning with Greek philosophy,⁷ modern Anglo-American aesthetic discourse has been dominated by discussion of fine arts in the past two centuries and it is only recently that everyday aesthetics started garnering renewed attention among aestheticians. Its status as a legitimate subject of aesthetics, however, has been challenged by those who question whether everyday aesthetics has the proper «aesthetic credential.»⁸ This challenge stems from the following two concerns that are related. First, many issues belonging to everyday aesthetics are considered too trivial, not worthy of serious attention the way discussion of art is. Second, there is no basis for an inter-subjective discourse, leaving only subjective and personal experiences. I shall defend the credential of everyday aesthetics by illuminating its power which affects the way in which our life and the world are shaped.

II. TRIVIALITY OF EVERYDAY AESTHETICS AND THE POWER OF THE AESTHETIC

My premise that all of us are participants in the joint project of world-making may sound grandiose, as well as counter-intuitive. Not all of us are professional world-makers like architects, designers, artists, and other kind of creators; instead, we normally see ourselves as the recipients, dwellers, and consumers of the world fashioned by these professionals. However, I maintain that, despite the lack of awareness, we all contribute to this world-making enterprise, and aesthetics plays a surprisingly important, indeed crucial, role. Let me first offer several examples which illustrate how our everyday aesthetic sensibility, taste, judgment, and experience affect, or sometimes determine, the quality of life and the state of the world.

7 Thomas Leddy provides a brief history of everyday aesthetics in Western aesthetics discourse in his *The Extraordinary in the Ordinary: The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*. Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2012, pp. 23-48.

8 Cf. Christopher Dowling's «The Aesthetics of Daily Life,» *British Journal of Aesthetics* 50:3 (July 2010).

A. LANDSCAPE AESTHETICS AND POLITICAL PERSUASION

Aesthetics is a powerful ally to political persuasion. This is no news particularly regarding the use of arts, exemplified in Plato's proposed censorship of the arts in his Republic and Nazi Germany's utilization of arts. In comparison, little attention has been paid to the ways in which aesthetics of everyday environments and objects helps promote a political agenda.

Landscape aesthetics is particularly pertinent in this regard. One such example is Nazi Germany's program of creating a natural landscape worthy of the Aryan race by eradicating alien plant species while restoring and cultivating native species, in a chilling parallel to their ethnic cleansing of humans. According to their agenda, «the area must be given a structure which corresponds to our type of being ... so that the Teutonic German person will feel himself to be at home so that he settles there and is ready to love and defend his new home»; hence, it is necessary «to cleanse the German landscape of unharmonious foreign substance.»⁹

Even less known is an example from pre-World War II Japan. After two and half centuries of isolation from the rest of the world, Japan finally opened its doors in 1868, initiating a sudden and rapid process of Westernization. In its own estimation, Japan could not compete against Western civilization, except in its aesthetic tradition.¹⁰ This construction of the national aesthetic heritage included the so-called «uniquely» Japanese art forms and aesthetic sensibilities. Equally important was the aesthetic value of their everyday environment and its ingredients.¹¹ For example, Japanese bridges were celebrated for their design to blend in with the surrounding nature, in comparison to Western, particularly Roman, structures which were interpreted as being designed to dominate nature.¹²

By far the most prominent example, however, is cherry blossoms. Their ephemerality signaled by graceful parting after a short-lived life was celebrated for embodying the moral virtue of not clinging to life unnecessarily. The most

9 Groening, Gert and WOLSKHE-BULMAHN, Joachim, «Some Notes on the Mania for Native Plants in Germany», *Landscape Journal* 11:2 (Fall 1992), pp. 122-123.

10 Cf. Karatani, Kōjin's «Japan as Museum: Okakura Tenshin and Ernest Fenollosa» in MUNROE, Alexandra (ed.), *Japanese Art After 1945: Scream Against the Sky*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994 and «Uses of Aesthetics: After Orientalism», in BOVE, Paul A. (ed.), *Edward Said and the Work of the Critic: Speaking Truth to Power*. Duke University Press, 2000.

11 The most influential writing was Shiga Shigetaka's *Nihon Fūkei Ron* (*Theory of Japanese Landscape*), published in 1894, during Sino-Japanese war. Trained as a geologist, Shiga was also a member of an ultra-nationalist party.

12 Alan Tansman discusses Yasuda Yojūrō's «Japanese Bridges» (originally published in 1936, revised and lengthened in 1939) in *The Aesthetics of Japanese Fascism*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.

poignant reference to this aesthetics of cherry blossoms can be found in the praise for Kamikaze pilots for their readiness to depart life, as well as planting of cherry trees on the invaded soils of Korea and Manchuria.¹³ The aesthetics of these natural and everyday objects promoted by various intellectuals of the time was not intended as a political propaganda. However, it was appropriated by the military for uniting Japanese citizens in their war time effort. One commentator thus emphasizes the potency of «policies and rhetoric [that are] ostensibly meant to beautify work, the workplace, and everyday life.»¹⁴

Perhaps with less direct consequences, the American wilderness aesthetics that developed during the 19th century was also motivated by the relatively young nation's attempt to formulate and promote national identity and pride. At first plagued by an inferiority complex with regard to America's uncultivated, crude, and uncouth land in comparison to civilized European lands, 19th century American intellectuals sought to put a positive spin on their land by turning the initial disadvantage into an asset. Landscape painter Thomas Cole, for example, declares that «the most distinctive, and perhaps the most impressive, characteristic of American scenery is its wildness.»¹⁵ The implications of this wilderness aesthetics are far-reaching, both positive and negative, ranging from the formation of the national park system to the displacement of indigenous Native American population and suppression of forest fires.¹⁶

The aesthetic appreciation of one's native landscape is critical in the formation of national identity and pride. Indeed this is one of the legacies of landscape aesthetics. Simon Schama observes that «national identity... would lose much of its ferocious enchantment without the mystique of a particular landscape tradition.»¹⁷ Arnold Berleant also points out that «national groups

13 Ohnuki-Tierney, Emiko's *Kamikaze, Cherry Blossoms, and Nationalisms: The Militarization of Aesthetics in Japanese History*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002, gives a thorough account of this military utilization of aesthetics regarding cherry blossoms, accompanied by a number of letters and diaries, as well as photographs, of Kamikaze pilots.

14 Tansman, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

15 Cole, Thomas, «Essay on American Scenery,» first appeared in *the American Monthly Magazine*, I (January 1836), included in CONRON, John (ed.), *The American Landscape: A Critical Anthology of Prose and Poetry*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1974, p. 571.

16 For a historical account of the development of wilderness aesthetics and the formation of American national parks, see Nash, Roderick, *Wilderness and the American Mind*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982 and RUNTE, Alfred, *National Parks: The American Experience*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987. I also give a more detailed account than presented here in *Everyday Aesthetics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 72-77, and «Cultural Construction of National Landscapes and its Consequences: Cases of Japan and the United States» in Arntzen, Sven and Brady, Emily (eds.), *Humans in the Land: The Ethics and Aesthetics of the Cultural Landscape*. Oslo: Unipub, 2008.

17 Schama, Simon, *Landscape and Memory*. London: HarperCollins, 1995, p. 15.

commonly possess a mystique about their land» and «part of that mystique is an affection for their landscape and its beauty.»¹⁸ However, when such cultural nationalism becomes political nationalism, particularly with a militaristic agenda, it often leads to problematic consequences. While creation of desired landscapes in these historical examples were primarily carried out by the government officials and militaries, many citizens of these respective societies participated in these world-making projects, even if unwittingly, by supporting such landscape aesthetics. With or without problematic consequences, there is no denying that such an aesthetic tradition exerts a powerful influence on the course of a nation's history.

B. ENVIRONMENTAL RAMIFICATIONS

Although environmental ethics is by now an established discipline, it has not paid enough attention to the environmental ramifications of our aesthetic taste, preference, and judgment.¹⁹ For example, our attraction to scenic wonders, particularly in the United States under the wilderness aesthetics just mentioned, tends to neglect protecting unscenic lands, such as prairie and wetlands, with devastating consequences.²⁰ The same problem plagues nondescript-looking or unattractive creatures, such as fish, invertebrates, and insects. They do not garner the same kind of publicity and support when endangered, compared to creatures which are cute, cuddly, graceful, or awesome, such as whale, seal pup, crane, and bald eagle. Stephen Jay Gould laments the fact that «environmentalists continually face the political reality that support and funding can be won for soft, cuddly, and 'attractive' animals, but not for slimy, grubby, and ugly creatures (of potentially greater evolutionary interest and practical significance) or for habitats.»²¹

Aesthetics also plays a significant role in consumers' purchasing decisions and their attitudes toward their possessions. In the present-day United States, more often than not, the aesthetic interests seem to work against ecological concerns. A prime example is the throw-away mentality encouraged by the industry practice of planned obsolescence regarding not only the function but also the style and fashionableness of products, filling up landfills. We also have an aesthetic penchant for rare wood such as mahogany, smooth paper with

18 Berleant, Arnold, *Living in the Landscape: Toward an Aesthetics of Environment*. Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 1997, p. 15.

19 I discuss various aspects of green aesthetics in Chapter II of *Everyday Aesthetics*.

20 Ann Vileisis, for example, gives a sorry history of America's treatment of wetlands in *Discovering the Unknown Landscape: A History of America's Wetlands*. Washington, D. C.: Island Press, 1999.

21 Gould, Stephen Jay, «The Golden Rule – A Proper Scale for Our Environmental Crisis», included in Armstrong & Botzler, *Environmental Ethics* (1993), p. 312.

no imperfections, and bright white shirts. Satisfying these aesthetic desires is responsible for the destruction of rainforest and the use of environmentally harmful chemicals such as bleach and laundry detergent with optical brightener, a kind of fluorescent blue dye.

The cultivation and maintenance of a green lawn remains an American domestic practice, even after the environmental cost of using water, fertilizer, and herbicide has been well-publicized. Although mingled with a culturally –and historically– specific notion of work ethic and civic duty, the primary motivation behind «keeping up with the Jones» is aesthetic – the lawn must be velvety-smooth and green, not brown, of uniform appearance and height without any weeds. While the green lawn exemplifies an aesthetically desirable but ecologically harmful phenomenon, the case of wind turbines offers the opposite example. It is best illustrated by the vociferous objection to the alleged eyesore-qualities of the Capewind project in the Nantucket Sound, the largest off-shore wind farm in the world recently approved after ten years of debate.²² A similar debate is occurring regarding the plan to build wind turbines and solar plants in the Mojave Desert. The same aesthetic objection to eyesore underlies the prohibition of outdoor laundry-hanging, despite its undisputed environmental benefit, in roughly 300,000 homeowners' associations in American suburban communities, affecting 60 million people.²³

Finally, our environmental awareness is also influenced by the power of the aesthetic. We often refer to belching smoke stacks from factories and massive oil spill, such as the Exxon Valdez and the recent BP disaster, as the quintessential examples of air and water pollution. Their aesthetic impact consists of dramatic images and an effective narrative structure of «an event» with a beginning, middle and end, accompanied by an identifiable villain and hapless victims. Such aesthetically powerful events tend to eclipse our daily individual actions which are equally, if not more, serious as a source of pollution, because they lack comparable aesthetic effects.

Thus, by virtue of seemingly innocuous and inconsequential attitudes, choices, and actions guided by aesthetic considerations, we unwittingly become participants in the world-making enterprise, often harming the environment and ourselves in the process.

22 I explored the aesthetic issues involved in this case in «Machines in the Ocean: the Aesthetics of Wind Farm,» *Contemporary Aesthetics* (2004) as well as in «Responses to Jon Boone's Critique», *Contemporary Aesthetics* (2005).

23 «To Fight Global Warming, Some Hang a Clothesline», *New York Times* (April 12, 2007). A New Hampshire-based activist organization, Project Laundry List, compiles various homeowners' association rules against laundry hanging and works on promoting «Right to Dry» (<http://www.laundrylist.org>).

C. CULTIVATION OF MORAL VIRTUES

However, the power of the aesthetic *can* be and has been directed toward improving the state of the world and quality of life. As indicated by the example of cherry blossoms, Japanese culture has a rich tradition of mobilizing the power of the aesthetic. One prominent example is the cultivation of moral virtues, such as respect, care, and thoughtfulness through aesthetic means.

We usually regard philosophical issues related to human relationships and social interactions as ethical and political matters. At the same time, we attribute inter-personal moral virtues, such as care, thoughtfulness, considerateness, and respect, to a person's character constituted by certain actions. What is often unrecognized is that the communication of such virtues, or lack thereof, can be accomplished through the *aesthetic* dimensions of our actions, such as the tone of voice, gestures, facial expressions and the like, which can range from rude to polite.²⁴ As Nell Nodding points out, «I cannot claim to care for my relative if my caretaking is perfunctory or grudging.»²⁵ A person's aesthetic sensibility, whether in providing or receiving an aesthetic experience, can be an important measure of her moral capacity, as well as the moral value/disvalue of her action.

The Japanese art of tea ceremony best illustrates this aesthetic expression of moral virtues. While tea ceremony is a special occasion informed by various rules and artistic training, its practice has had a profound effect on Japanese people's everyday life. The elegant actions of both the host and the guest not only condense the beauty of each bodily movement but also provide an expression of respect toward the other by taking great *care* in acting. The beautiful bodily movement is thus not simply a dance-like performance but more importantly a vehicle for communicating reciprocal respect and thoughtfulness.

It is significant in this regard that the Japanese term for cultivating manners and etiquette, *shitsuke* 躰, was created in Japan by combining two Chinese

24 Katya Mandoki develops a systematic account of these and many other aesthetic dimensions of our activities, institutions, and professions in *Everyday Aesthetics: Prosaics, the Play of Culture and Social Identities*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2007. When we judge the moral worth of an action, it may be the case that we cannot separate what the action accomplishes (helping a friend in need) from the manner in which we act (gently, roughly, sarcastically, sincerely, grudgingly, spitefully). In such a case, the problem for moral theories, such as when formulating the Kantian maxim for an action, is how to describe «the action.» Is it «helping a friend in need,» or rather «acting spiteful and hateful when helping a friend in need?»

25 Nodding, Nell, «An Ethics of Care,» excerpted from *Women and Evil and Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, in PERCESEPE, Gary (ed.), *Introduction to Ethics: Personal and Social Responsibility in a Diverse World*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1995, p. 176.

characters: body 身 and beauty美.²⁶ While manners are often regarded as nothing more than superficial rules or a means of discriminating between social classes, the role it plays in the Japanese cultural tradition offers another possibility: the aesthetic embodiment of other-regarding moral virtues.

Communication of virtues such as respect, care, and thoughtfulness can also take place by the aesthetics involved in creating, handling, and appreciating objects. For example, the spatial design of both Japanese gardens and packaging attends to the pleasure of gradually unfolding experience, inviting the visitor and receiver to take time and care in savoring the experience.²⁷ Japanese food serving helps us to appreciate the native characteristics of the individual ingredients, and by serving many dishes all at once encourages us to compose our own order of eating.²⁸

This same other-regarding consideration is expressed aesthetically in the most unlikely activity: the disposal of garbage. For example, a manual for non-Japanese business people notes that «when eating a mandarin orange, many Japanese will remove the peel in one, unbroken piece, and place segment membranes inside the outer peel, so that the leftover materials end up in a neatly wrapped little package.»²⁹ I find the same sensibility in the way my parents stuff their garbage bags for pick-up. Because, in Japan, the garbage bags are placed in a designated community spot and their municipality mandates that garbage bags be transparent, they try to hide the unappetizing-looking content, such as food debris, by using innocuous-looking garbage, such as unrecyclable plastics and papers, as a buffer between the bag and the food debris. This seemingly superfluous gesture is motivated by their thoughtfulness in shielding the neighbors and passersby from an unpleasant visual experience even for a short time.

26 I owe this point to Kazuo Inumaru.

27 For the aesthetics of unfolding space, see MAKI, Fumihiko's «Japanese City Spaces and the Concept of *Oku*,» *The Japan Architect* (1970), pp. 51-62 and Hendry, Joy's *Wrapping Culture: Politeness, Presentation and Power in Japan and Other Societies*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993. Arnold Berleant also points out that «a city that engages the imagination requires the *twists and turns* we find so intriguing in medieval streets, the unexpected squares, fountains, vistas, restaurants, and shops tucked away in strange places, towers to climb, roof gardens and hilltop parks with panoramic views, street players, and public performances» (*Aesthetics of Environment*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992, pp. 73-74, emphasis added).

28 I explore these moral dimensions of Japanese aesthetics in «The Moral Dimension of Japanese Aesthetics», *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65:1 (Winter 2007), and specifically regarding packaging in «Japanese Aesthetics of Packaging», *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 57: 2 (Spring 1999).

29 Sai, Yasutaka, *The Eight Core Values of the Japanese Businessman: Toward an Understanding of Japanese Management*. New York: International Business Press, 1995, p. 56.

Suppose we gobble up carefully prepared and meticulously arranged foods without savoring each morsel, rip apart a beautifully packaged gift, and hurry through a garden path without paying attention to the unfolding vista and the stepping stones under our feet. We miss the opportunity not only for enriching our aesthetic experience but also for gratefully acknowledging the thought and care that went into cooking, packaging, and garden-making. If we instead take time and care in appreciating these objects' aesthetic appeal, such experiences help cultivate the attitude of respect, care, and thoughtfulness. Because these experiences are embedded in daily life, they can be a powerful, though subtle, vehicle for moral education.

Arnold Berleant's notion of social aesthetics is helpful in this regard.³⁰ He calls for «acknowledging the presence of an aesthetic factor ... in environments of all sorts, including human situations and social relationships.»³¹ He argues that civilized and humane human interactions share with aesthetic experience certain desiderata, such as acceptance of the other on its own terms, willingness to participate and reciprocate, and respect for the uniqueness of the other. In short, «ethical values lie at the heart of social aesthetics.»³² Marcia Eaton also points out that, ultimately, there is a «connection between being a person who has aesthetic experience and being a person who has *sympathies and insights of a kind required for successful social interaction.*»³³

This brings us back to Nietzsche's aesthetics and Japanese aesthetic tradition both of which, we have seen, are concerned with aesthetics' role in cultivating the practice of leading a good life. However, the personal project of creating a good life can succeed only in the context of a good society founded on morally –and aesthetically– guided human and social interactions. As such, aesthetic matters in our lives are neither frivolous superficiality nor, to borrow Yrjö Sepänmaa's phrase, «high cultural icing.»³⁴ Nor are they confined to works of fine arts. Rather, promotion of and support for sensitively designed objects and environments, as well as civil human interactions expressed respectfully and thoughtfully, are an indispensable ingredient of what Sepänmaa calls

30 Berleant, A., *Aesthetics and Environment*, Chapter 14: «Getting Along Beautifully: Ideas for a Social Aesthetics» and «Ideas for a Social Aesthetic» in LIGHT, Andrew W. and Smith, Jonathan M.(eds.), *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.

31 Berleant, A., *Living in the Landscape*, p. 39.

32 Berleant, A., *Sensibility and Sense: The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World*. Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2010, p. 95.

33 Muelder EATON, Marcia, *Aesthetics and the Good Life*. Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1989, p. 175, emphasis added.

34 Sepänmaa, Yrjö, «Aesthetics in Practice: Prolegomenon», in *Practical Aesthetics in Martti Honkanen (ed.), Practice and in Theory*. Helsinki: University of Helsinki, 1995, p. 15.

«aesthetic welfare.»³⁵ He points out that a true welfare state should guarantee not only «health care, education, and housing,» but also «an experiential aspect of welfare. An aesthetic welfare state should offer a beautiful living environment and a rich cultural and art life» because they provide «the basic conditions of life.»

While professional world-makers, such as architects, designers, and manufacturers, as well as policy makers, shoulder a large burden of providing aesthetic welfare, all of us take part in the same endeavor through our engagement with other people and objects. When we appreciate that our experiences are honored and dignified, we in turn would be inclined to «pay it forward», as it were, in our dealings with others. For example, appreciating the thoughtful preparation of garbage bags will motivate us to be equally mindful when stuffing our bags. Such an experience is conducive to cultivating civic-mindedness and nurturing a reciprocal feeling of caring for others. This kind of reciprocity is one of the most important ingredients of a good life and civil society and aesthetics is a crucial vehicle for facilitating their cultivation.

I conclude from all these examples that, whether we like it or not and whether we are aware of it or not, aesthetics does play a crucial role in the humanity's world-making project. I propose that one mission of everyday aesthetics is to raise our awareness of this power of the aesthetic and develop what may be called aesthetic literacy. That is, we need to recognize and become vigilant toward the way in which our seemingly innocuous and inconsequential aesthetic tastes, judgments, and decisions significantly affect the state of the world and the quality of life, for better or worse.

III. WHAT TO DO WITH THE POWER OF THE AESTHETIC

However, is recognizing this power of the aesthetic and developing aesthetic literacy enough? Once recognized, what should we do with this power of the aesthetic? We have two options regarding this potent power of the aesthetic. One is to end everyday aesthetics inquiry at this point, that is, with simply exposing its potency. The other is to go further by engaging in a normative discourse to guide this power toward a certain direction.

The first option is to separate the aesthetic from the other life values, such as the moral, political and environmental, and train ourselves to act only on the basis of the latter, without being affected by any aesthetic considerations. So, for example, we should decide on the issues regarding wind turbines, laundry

35 *Ibid.*, p. 15. The next three passages are also from p. 15. Marcia Eaton also points out that «the idea that beautiful behaviour and beautiful surroundings go together is gaining credence» («The Social Construction of Aesthetic Response», *British Journal of Aesthetics* 35:2 (April 1995), p. 105).

hanging, and lawns by reference to their respective environmental concerns only. By the same token, we should practice cultivating moral virtues through education, personal discipline, religious training, and the like. Similarly, we should try to judge and act on political issues without allowing influence from various aesthetic strategies. This way of promoting social, political, and environmental good may be supported by the advocates of Kantian ethics who would want to appeal only to one's rationality as a moral compass. The separation of the aesthetic and other life values will also be supported by those who object to a kind of social engineering or «nudging» of our aesthetic life to conform to what Marcia Eaton calls «aesthetic ought.»³⁶ Furthermore, after considering the precedents where the powerful effect of aesthetics promoted dubious political ends as well as leading us away from an environmentally sound future, one may be inclined to choose this option and sever the tie between the aesthetic dimensions and other value-laden aspects of things.

However, as Friedrich Schiller argued in his vision of the aesthetic education of man, humans are creatures who are affected by and operate on the sensible as well as on the rational level, and what really moves us to act is that which appeals to the sensible part. I believe this is recognized by psychologists, educators, propagandists, and advertizing agents, but curiously not sufficiently by aestheticians. Commenting on the relationship between aesthetics and fascism, Alan Tansman points out that, while there are examples of «the dangerous alignment of aesthetics and politics..., the aestheticization of politics has a more positive lineage as well – an aesthetically grounded ethics that can evoke sympathy for one's fellows and ground freedom in the experience of beauty.»³⁷ Similarly, Arnold Berleant declares that aesthetics' significance «lies not only in the ability... to serve as a critical tool for probing social practice but as a beacon for illuminating the direction of social betterment.»³⁸ Those who have been promoting a sustainable future also recognize the potential of aesthetics to serve this cause and argue for its utilization. To cite only one example, David Orr holds that «we are moved to act more often, more consistently, and more profoundly by *the experience of beauty* in all of its forms than by intellectual arguments, abstract appeals to duty or even by fear.» Therefore, he continues, «we must be inspired to act by examples that we can see, touch,

36 Muelder Eaton, Marcia, *Merit, Aesthetic and Ethical*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 176. The notion of «nudge» to assist better decision-making is discussed in Thaler, Richard H. and SUNSTEIN, Cass R. *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness*. New York: Penguin Books, 2008.

37 Tansman, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

38 Berleant, A., *op. cit.*, p. 193.

and experience,» toward which we can develop an «emotional attachment» and a «deep affection.»³⁹

Given the potent power of the aesthetic, not utilizing it and steering it toward better world-making seems like a missed opportunity. Those professional world-makers cognizant of this power of the aesthetic have been advocating uniting the aesthetic appeal of the design with other values, such as environmental and social. For example, one landscape architect argues for the need to align aesthetics with ecology by making sustainable landscape design attractive and appealing, so that people cherish, maintain, care for, and protect it, rendering it «culturally sustainable.»⁴⁰ Another landscape architect observes that «this separation of art, ethics, utility and nature can leave aesthetics with an atrophied, and indeed, frivolous role in landscape education» and calls for the need to «make explicit a developing aesthetic criteria related to both ethics and utility.»⁴¹

But what about those of us non-professionals who are nonetheless engaged in world-making project through our everyday aesthetic decisions? I describe the current situation in which we are affected by the power of the aesthetic as *laissez faire*. We are letting the power of the aesthetic be used for any purposes or agenda irrespective of its cumulative and collective consequences. There is a compelling reason for supporting this *laissez faire* attitude: when it comes to aesthetic matters, we favor complete freedom and reject any attempt to regulate aesthetic taste, if such legislation of aesthetic taste were even possible. However, the problem is that the power of the aesthetic has already been co-opted by those who seek to guide our aesthetic life toward a certain direction. We have already looked at examples of coercion, such as the prohibition against laundry hanging and the pressure to keep up with the Jones' green grass. Aesthetic strategies also «nudge» us toward certain choices in every corner of commercial enterprise today, ranging from branding of goods and food styling to creating a specific multi-sensory ambience in a store. If we continue to endorse a *laissez faire* attitude, we are in effect supporting

39 Orr, David, *The Nature of Design: Ecology, Culture, and Human Intention*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 178-9, emphasis added, 185, 25, and 26. A parallel reminder was issued by Aldo Leopold who claims that «we can be ethical only in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love» and that it is «inconceivable... that an ethical relation to land can exist without love, respect, and admiration for land, and a high regard for its value» (*A Sand County Almanac*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1966, pp. 251-261).

40 Joan Iverson Nassauer, «Cultural Sustainability: Aligning Aesthetics with Ecology», in Joan Iverson Nassauer (ed.), *Placing Nature: Culture and Landscape Ecology*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1997, p. 68.

41 Dee, Catherine, «Form, Utility, and the Aesthetics of Thrift in Design Education», *Landscape Journal* 29:1-10, p. 21.

these existing «aesthetic ought» and «nudge» by default. As Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein point out, «there is ... no way of avoiding nudging in some direction, and whether intended or not, these nudges will affect what people choose.»⁴² So, can everyday aesthetics promote an alternative or competing «aesthetic ought» and «nudge» to steer our aesthetic tastes, choices, and judgments toward sustainable future, good life, and better society? I propose that everyday aesthetics engage in a normative discourse to guide the non-professionals among us toward more informed aesthetic judgments which move our decisions and actions toward better world-making.

IV. OBJECTIONS TO EVERYDAY AESTHETICS AS A NORMATIVE DISCOURSE

A. NO CONSENSUS ON GOOD LIFE/GOOD SOCIETY

However, there are many objections to this normative direction for everyday aesthetics. First, we simply don't have a consensus as to what constitutes good life and good society. Some of us are ardent defenders of free enterprise while others believe socialism is a better societal system; furthermore, we disagree over whether it is better to be a dissatisfied Socrates than a satisfied pig. On the one hand, aesthetics cannot be expected to solve these perennial debates. However, on the other hand, it seems to me that there are some basic facts and values that I believe can be accepted as common to humanity's flourishing, such as health, a sustainable future, a humane and civil society based upon mutual respect, and comfortable, stable, and welcoming environment, among others, although their specific ingredients will depend upon cultural, historical, and other contexts. If aesthetics can be a powerful ally in enhancing these basic amenities for human flourishing, I cannot think of any good reason for not utilizing its powerful influence. At the same time, if aesthetics can be a formidable enemy, as some of the examples have shown, then I believe that it is our collective responsibility to expose its role and oppose it.

B. AUTONOMY OF AESTHETICS COMPROMISED

However, there is a persistent resistance to connecting the aesthetic and other life values, particularly the moral, within contemporary Anglo-American aesthetic discourse. The primary reason is the worry that developing a normative discourse will compromise the core of the aesthetic, namely the sensuous and the free play of the imagination. This resistance is understandable when considering the development of modern Western aesthetics since the 18th century. It has been a process of declaring the independence of aesthetics from

42 Thaler and Sunstein, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

other considerations, in particular the moral. This project of establishing the autonomy of aesthetics gave rise to the aestheticism of the late 19th century, followed by the aesthetic formalism of the early 20th century. However, strict aesthetic formalism which severs any tie between the sensuous and other life concerns has been largely discredited by now.

The mainstream aesthetic discourse regarding art is developed with an assumption that the judgment regarding art is not merely a matter of subjective opinion and there is a sense in which our interpretations and judgments are amenable to inter-subjective discourse, not so much to achieve a consensus but rather to engage in a reasoned and critical discussion. In one sense, therefore, the notion of «aesthetic ought» exists in art aesthetics, though rarely phrased as such. Although there is no one correct interpretation and evaluation of a work of art, within all-too-familiar disagreements, we do disregard those appreciations which are derived from highly idiosyncratic personal associations or not based upon sufficient or correct information. For example, theories such as Arthur Danto's artworld and Kendall Walton's categories of art demonstrate not only the relevance, but indeed the necessity, of connecting the sensuous with other considerations, such as its art-historical context, the technique used in production, the artist's oeuvre, and the like.⁴³ Without these considerations, our aesthetic experience of a work of art can be misguided, although it can possibly be amusing, enjoyable, or stimulating.

There is also a possibility of improving our aesthetic sensibility through education by learning art history, literary criticism, music appreciation, and the like. Engaging in an aesthetic experience and forming an interpretation and judgment by reference to these relevant considerations helps set the stage for intersubjective exchanges, without thereby compromising the freedom to exercise one's imagination and creativity or expecting a consensus of judgment.

Nature aesthetics is following suit by developing the possibility of engaging in a critical discourse and educating one's aesthetic sensibility through nature walk, nature writings, and works of art that represent or comment on nature. Despite considerable debates about the relevance and relative importance of scientific, historical, mythological, poetic, and imaginative associations in nature aesthetics, there is a sense in which some of these associations in certain contexts do render our aesthetic experience of nature richer, possibly more appropriate, and less trivial. Even those who advocate the imaginative aesthetic

43 For Danto's theory of the artworld, see «The Artworld» in Joseph Margolis (ed.) *Philosophy Looks at the Arts*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978, pp. 132-144. For Walton's categories of art, see «Categories of Art,» *The Philosophical Review* 79 (1970): 334-367.

appreciation of nature seem to distinguish between «imagining well» and the undisciplined «imagination let loose [which] can lead to the manipulation of the aesthetic object for one's own pleasure-seeking ends.»⁴⁴

But when it comes to everyday aesthetics, we have not developed an equivalent discourse yet in which to analyze the appropriateness of our response or a strategy for educating and improving it. If everyday aesthetic responses are considered trivial because of the lack of a critical discourse regarding them, it is not clear whether the absence of such a discourse is endemic to everyday aesthetics or rather a lacuna that needs to be corrected. My proposal is to pursue the latter possibility by leading everyday aesthetics to explore what sort of considerations are relevant and necessary to guide our everyday aesthetic responses toward better world-making.

C. NEGLECT OF THE SENSUOUS

There is a further worry that consideration of other life values associated with everyday objects and activities will compromise their sensuous surface which should be the focus of our aesthetic experience regarding them. For example, David E. Cooper asks: «Can the look of a lawn really change according to ecological savvy? Or wind farms begin to look beautiful when their benefits are explained at a consultation meeting?»⁴⁵ The point is well-taken, but the same question regarding the effect of the cognitive on the sensuous can be raised with respect to art and nature appreciations. Does the revelation that a painting is a forgery change its appearance? How about finding out that the beautiful sunset was caused by air pollution? Admitting that the cognitive can modify or transform the sensuous does not necessarily commit us to what I call determinism whereby the cognitive considerations nullify the sensuous and determine its aesthetic value. Specifically, after learning the environmental cost of a green lawn and the benefit of wind turbines and laundry hanging, it is not the case that the lawn automatically becomes ugly while any kind of wind turbines and any method of laundry hanging become aesthetically positive. The green lawn still maintains its luscious appearance, but it no longer looks innocently and benignly gorgeous after we discover its environmental price; its appearance is modified to become somewhat morbidly gorgeous or garishly beautiful. At the same time, even if the environmental benefit may stay the same, there should be an aesthetic difference between differently designed and

44 Brady, Emily, «Imagination and the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature,» in Allen Carlson and Arnold Berleant (eds.), *The Aesthetics of Natural Environment*. Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2004, p. 164.

45 Cooper, David E., «Look of Lawns», *Times Literary Supplement* 5525 (February 20, 2009), p. 23.

arranged wind turbines. The unabashed, in-your-face parading of laundered underwear is aesthetically different from more discreet hanging which hides underwear behind less objectionable items such as linens and towels. There is also an aesthetic difference between arbitrarily hung laundry and thoughtfully arranged laundry hanging which is indicative of the consideration for its visual impression to the neighbors and passersby.⁴⁶ Thus, making connections to other life values does not necessarily compromise the perceptual aspects of the aesthetic experience; instead, it enriches the experience.

D. AESTHETICS SUBJECT TO MORAL CENSURE

Some may still object to the notion of a normative discourse of everyday aesthetics by suggesting that doing so would subject aesthetics to moral censure. For example, Thomas Leddy questions whether there is anything objectionable in aesthetically appreciating junkyards and roadside clutter. He points out, and I agree, that artists are particularly «sensitive observers of our world and that they capture aesthetic features in their works that we might not normally notice.»⁴⁷ In light of a number of examples from contemporary art Leddy provides to illustrate this point, there is no good reason to close the door of aesthetics to a variety of approaches. I share his proposal «to clear a space for a form of aesthetic appreciation that is freer, more imaginative, and more in tune with important discoveries of modernist art than is allowed by current morally-centered views in aesthetics.»⁴⁸

However, I would argue that such an appreciation must co-exist with, rather than supplant, the life-value-based response. In fact, Leddy may not disagree with this claim, as he endorses Peg Brand's proposal to «toggle between interested and disinterested perception in viewing political art» and applies it to everyday aesthetics.⁴⁹ The junkyard as a junkyard should be experienced with all of its life values, particularly when pragmatic concerns are at stake, for example, in deciding whether or not to clean up the environment. However, there may be no compelling reason to always experience a junkyard in such a way. It will certainly impoverish our aesthetic life if we never experience things like junkyard for its interesting colors and textures.

46 For a thoughtful discussion of the aesthetics involved in laundry-hanging, see RAUTIO, Pauliina's «On Hanging Laundry: The Place of Beauty in Managing Everyday Life,» *Contemporary Aesthetics* 7 (2009).

47 Leddy, Thomas, «The Aesthetics of Junkyards and Roadside Clutter,» *Contemporary Aesthetics* 6 (2008), sec. 5.

48 Leddy, Th., *Ibid.*

49 Leddy, Th., *The Extraordinary in the Ordinary*, cit., p. 114.

The equivalent situation exists in art aesthetics. Although Walton is right in proposing putting a work of art in its category to appreciate a work of art properly, there may be occasions in which deviating from the work's proper category is beneficial, such as viewing a representational painting as a non-representational painting in order to focus on its formal structure. So, the legitimacy of my environmentally-informed aesthetic response to green lawn and laundry hanging, one could argue, is context-dependent and we have much to gain from recognizing the value of aesthetic experience unencumbered by the life values associated with the object. The important point to be emphasized, then, is that we cannot make an indiscriminate case for or against one kind of aesthetic appreciation of everyday objects with other values or disvalues. A further consideration is needed to determine the appropriateness of a certain kind of judgment in a particular context. So, the normative dimension of everyday aesthetics discourse consists not so much of a set of «correct» or «appropriate» judgments as the determination of a particular context which further determines what relevant factors should be considered.

E. INSTRUMENTAL VALUE OF AESTHETICS

Finally, some may object to reducing aesthetic dimensions of our lives to a means for serving some other ends, like better world-making. So, is aesthetics valuable merely as an instrument for bettering the quality of our life and society? It is instructive that John Dewey describes the moral function of art as follows: it is «to remove prejudice, do away with the scales that keep the eye from seeing, tear away the veils due to wont and custom, (and) perfect the power to perceive,» because, according to him, «works of art are means by which we enter ... into other forms of relationship and participation than our own.»⁵⁰ Appreciating art on its, rather than our, own terms helps us cultivate this moral capacity for recognizing and understanding the other's reality through sympathetic imagination, thereby widening our horizons and ultimately laying the foundation for a civil society.

Similarly, as we have seen, the Japanese aesthetic tradition, whether regarding practice of art or engagement in everyday activities, can be characterized as an instrument for leading a good life, whether in terms of spiritual discipline or cultivation of moral virtues. There is no indication that this understanding of aesthetics as an instrumental value compromises the aesthetic value of art, our experience of it, and our engagement with everyday practice.

Conceived this way, I believe that characterizing aesthetics as an instrumental value does not diminish its place in our life. Instead, it provides an ultimate justification why the aesthetic in our life is indispensable, rather than

50 John Dewey, *Art as Experience*. New York: Capricorn Books, 1958, pp. 325, 333.

some luxury or fluff. Our aesthetic life is an important instrument for shaping the state of the society and world and improving the quality of life. Thus, it behooves everyday aesthetics to continue developing a critical discourse to improve our aesthetic life beyond art and nature appreciation so that we become better equipped to participate in the collective project of world-making.

In conclusion, we need to reclaim aesthetics' prominent place in the project of world-making and its inseparable connection with the rest of life.