

Booknotes

Philosophical aesthetics remains one of the most difficult areas in philosophy. The topic of beauty, which the ordinary person might have expected to be central to it is neglected, and perhaps legitimately if it spares us ill-judged forays into the artistic stratosphere. More damagingly a concentration on beauty might lead one to think that the aesthetic is pre-eminently the province of high art. Proust, in some views the very archetype of an aesthetic man, was well aware of this danger. In one of his essays he takes a young man (himself, one supposes) to task for wanting to rush away from what he perceives as the mess of his family dinner table to the glories and grandeurs of the Louvre. In taking him(self) to task, Proust does not urge that he should not go to the Louvre. He should, but he should deny himself the opulence of the van Dycks and the Veroneses, and go instead and stand in front of the Chardins. He will then begin to realise that what he had thought of as the mediocrity of everyday life, down indeed to the cooking pots, the dead fish lying on the table and the half-emptied glasses, can have a beauty all of their own. These things are beautiful because Chardin found them beautiful to paint, Proust says, common crockery being as beautiful as a precious stone.

Proust is certainly on to something here, in the first place that the aesthetic does and should cover the whole of life, the everyday most of all, because the everyday is where we spend most of our time, and where the impact of the beautiful or the ugly is most widely and unconsciously felt. There are, though, problems which Proust does not address, most notably that arising from what he calls 'the divine equality of all things' before the eye of a Chardin or a Morandi (who also concentrated in his work on the everyday, to sublime effect). Could a Chardin or a Morandi make us see a supermarket plastic bag or a Coke bottle or a Brillo box as beautiful? How should these matters be approached? Given their importance to the way we live, should these questions not occupy philosophical aestheticians far more than they normally do?

So the appearance of a book entitled 'Everyday Aesthetics' by Yuriko Saito, published in 2007 by the Oxford University Press no less, is to be welcomed, particularly as the author has a keen sense that the appearance of our everyday properties and possessions, including our personal grooming, does matter, and is therefore worthy of philosophical investigation. Indeed, surely correctly, she sees all this as shading over into the moral, to do with how we treat

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each other and the natural world. 'A person who rips apart a beautifully wrapped gift or gobbles up a Japanese lunch-box meal without savoring each ingredient is often judged not only deficient in aesthetic sense and manner but also lacking in moral sensibility', she says. This rather diffidently expressed insight she extends to architecture and the environment more generally, all of which is admirable.

Saito does, though, speak of her book as 'only a modest beginning', and she is right in this. On the whole she tends to point to what she calls the complexity of everyday aesthetics without coming to clear conclusions. Thus she spends a lot of time considering the aesthetic value of ageing and of the natural appearance of materials in somewhat Ruskinian terms, but then finds it difficult to handle to-day's 'shabby chic' as she calls it, the currently fashionable taste for jeans and other clothes which look shabby and impoverished (which seems to be condemned because it 'aestheticises' poverty). She seems to think that the main objection to graffiti is not aesthetic, but societal, because people see it as an assault on property (and it is unclear what her own stance is here). Then she quotes Le Corbusier as advocating 'clean homes, with no more dirty, dark corners', whether approvingly or not, is not entirely clear, because she also advocates a degree of natural disorder. And there is a lot of inconclusive discussion of the requirements of 'green' aesthetics: how, for example, can we modify our initial predisposition in favour of an immaculately manicured lawn in the light of knowledge of the 'toxic' brew of chemicals necessary to sustain it, or should we? Saito appears to think that we should, but she gets into frightful trouble when she faces up to the fact that a number of the things everyday aesthetics might advocate were part of nationalistic agendas in pre-war Japan and Nazi Germany.

Strangely, in view of the wide reading which has gone into this book and into its general orientation, the name Heidegger is not mentioned. Nor, more disappointingly, are the names of Chardin or Morandi, for Saito's discussions would have greatly benefited from a detailed analysis of what the art of the everyday might teach us about everyday aesthetics. And finally, the name of Warhol is not mentioned either. Andy Warhol has triumphantly shown that a Brillo box or a Coke bottle can indeed be a work of art. In these circumstances perhaps the most urgent task of everyday aesthetics, and one which bears on many of Saito's concerns, ecological, moral and aesthetic, is to examine whether it can also actually be beautiful.