

Greyness, everyday and nature

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A few months ago, Arto Haapala was invited as a guest professor to our Faculty. During his stay he talked about environmental aesthetics and aesthetic well-being and it called my attention a concept he named as “the greyness of the everyday”. He introduced that expression in order to talk about the perceptual state linked to “habit” or “lack of aesthetic attention” in which we daily find ourselves in our everyday environments. In order to draw a contrast between aesthetics of nature and aesthetics of art, Haapala showed during his presentation some images of natural environments from Finland, as well as a little series of pictorial works in which that nature was represented. At the end of his talk, he said his intention was to include at least one picture of the nature around his place, his *everyday-natural environment*, because he wanted to capture and make explicit to us its greyness. In spite of his effort, he wasn’t able to grasp and bring that image, though.

Making use of his notion of “greyness”, I would like to argue that our everyday aesthetic experiences make, albeit sometimes implicitly, general reference to Nature, regardless of whether she is directly present in our experience. For that reason, I think these experiences must be considered as relevant in order to develop an environmental consciousness, within which the aesthetic part of it plays an important role in informing our care and concern about the environment. To defend my position I will borrow the examples proposed by the works of Pauliina Rautio, Janet McCracken and Yuriko Saito, and their reflection about laundry, children and playtime recycling, and non-scenic nature cases.

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Greyness

It seems paradoxical that something we define as lacking in aesthetic relevance or attractiveness, something thinkable in terms of “greyness”, could be crucial for any kind of aesthetic experience in general. Haapala (2005) draws a first contrast between the opposite terms “familiar” and “strange”. The absence of aesthetic attention based on our familiarity with the environment assumes that the idea of “greyness” takes place as the result of having made ‘ours’ an environment in a full existential sense.

When we talk about our everyday environment, we mostly think about the *place* we live in. Generally, we refer to a social environment, which is, in turn, built within a natural one; both of them make an ecosystem that becomes our final point of reference. There, we have a well-known “horizon” of objects, of ways of being, and expression; but other aspects, however indirectly, such as the weather, a river, fauna or vegetation are essential parts of that same horizon. When we go out to the street nothing is strange to us. Used as we are to the aesthetic appearance of things, they don’t call our attention and blur into a neutral grey background. How, then, do our everyday aesthetic experiences develop and how something familiar to us can finally be aesthetically relevant? I’ll try to build an answer from these three suggesting examples.

On Laundry

One of the most beautiful examples of everyday aesthetic experience we have is the one elaborated by Pauliina Rautio (2009) about laundry. Laura, her protagonist, lives in a very small village in northern Finland. She describes her experience in letters paying attention to how it evolves together with the environment as spring and summer pass by. Rautio shows how the types of beauty Laura experiences while hanging her laundry outside sometimes take place in association with memories, others awaking her imagination in different ways or in relation to thoughts, facts, and evocations; that are introduced by the sense of “serendipity”: a sort of happy feeling associated with a sense of unexpected discovery. Laura’s aesthetic reflection on the environment will be gradually transformed into a personal tool for managing her everyday life. If we had to find a place for “greyness” in Rautio’s example, we would say that it lays much more in the action than in the environment. What is really quotidian, familiar and grey is just the action of hanging laundry.¹ Although the action is hardly mentioned nor

¹ “The clothes-line and the physical routine around it seem to become a constant and as such invisible. Only the variables are noticed and addressed against this constant. In writing about laundry hanging Laura does not write much about the task itself but more about all that changes that go around it: the seasons, the weather, the laundry, items, colours, time, her feelings and in a word her everyday life. If one would hang laundry to dry inside there would be fewer variables to account, virtually none relating to one’s natural environment. There would be less opportunity to observe and acknowledge changes.” (Rautio 2009)

described in the text, even so, it is what truly opens the door to aesthetic enjoyment. For that reason, it seems that there is certain imbalance between action and environment; for in the example, it is the action that gets the whole weight of everydayness. In spite of the fact that her place is for Laura, of course, her everyday environment, the described circumstances turn it into an exceptional case, not amenable to a general description. Laura lives in a natural environment. Because of its latitude, it is a natural space of great contrasts and it has a desirable ecological health and appearance. Even if she shows concern about global warming, Laura describes the coming of spring as linked to the state of things “as they should be”, as “everything being all right” as it is, as if in accordance to their natural present state. If it wasn't for the house there, the small garden and the depopulated village, we could imagine that environment as being simply Nature, and we could understand how everything is aesthetically beautiful and evocative. But let's see how her experience is:

Laura's letters are related to months and to general descriptions of changes in the seasonal environment. While hanging the laundry in spring and early summer, Laura focuses upon the changes of the environment. Laura's aesthetic attitude is open, receptive and she lets herself to be filled with the several sensations, memories, evocations, that the beginning of a new cycle of life offers to her. With the zenith and decline of summer, Laura comes into a phase of aesthetic introspection in which the experience and reflection about the changes performed sediments in her spirit. Here it is where beauty gains its contributory character in Laura's life and where the environment gains a mirror-like dimension. At the end of summer, daylight hours decrease and it makes the house appear again in the narration: “the windows [that I have just washed] reflects parts of the yard and parts of the living room inside. In the nine old squares of glass there is my whole world.” (Rautio 2009)

The extremely beautiful example of Rautio disregards the importance of the action by overemphasizing the experience of a privileged environment that we can basically consider as natural. Spring blossoms in her surroundings with so much strength as we could easily imagine if we were looking at wild spring in the same place but without human presence. We have long forgotten about “greyness” because everything here powerfully calls our attention and surprises us, with serendipity, as if it were new, leaving aside any impression of routine or everyday feelings. The experience of the environment overflows the everydayness of hanging laundry.²

Probably the aspirations of an everyday aesthetic experience need to be different, and, somehow, more moderate, because everything I do experience as domestic,

² See in relation to Rautio's critic to Haapala, also in the text (2009): “Aesthetics of the everyday is aesthetics of the ordinary. As such it is usually set against or compared with aestheticizing the everyday as the making of the extraordinary. (...) According to Haapala aesthetics of the everyday has fundamentally to do with an existential account of the everyday. Paradoxically, then, the beauty of the everyday according to his view depends on out not noticing the beauty of the everyday.”

quotidian, familiar, conventional in my everyday brings with it a charge of habit, routine, practical need or repetition, in short, a sort of “greyness” within which I may still find something aesthetically pleasurable.

Playtime recycling

The second example I want to examine is the one offered by Janet McCracken, who explores children play, especially when they construct new toys from found things. McCracken focuses on the similitude that the activity of recycling in children playtime has with imaginative construction in art and how the re-use of materials in playtime may be akin to the sort of skills we exhibit in our adult recycling activities. She thinks: “recycling makes our everyday a little more like art” and “tries to seek for “a fundamental relation between recycling and art, in order to understand what drives people to recycle things instead of throw them away.” (Mc Cracken 2005, pp. 191f.) My interest in this example is, otherwise, related to my aim at showing the lack of interest for the aesthetic properties of matter or stuff, as such, that we usually reveal in our daily life; especially in contrast with the much more intense interest we have regarding the aesthetic properties of formal, functional or superficial content of things, and how our everyday aesthetic experience fulfils the important task of connecting us with the obliterated aesthetic properties of matter. In the text there are two preliminary considerations that I would like to mention. In the first place, the act of recycling is defined as “something old or used, a bottle, a newspaper, a tire, or in other words garbage, finding a new use as something else” (Mc Cracken 2005, p. 190.) Secondly, a previous aesthetic assumption often assumed: garbage is unpleasant (while recycling is in tune with nature).

By saying that recycling is “to give a new use to something old”, in fact we might be making reference to two different things: we may be talking of something, or a part of something, we can reuse, because of its good state; or we may be talking of something deteriorated and that we consider as useless. In the first case, we recycle the *object* or its parts; in the second case, we recycle its *matter*. The example Mc Cracken provides is centred on the first statement. But the first contains the second. Children all over the world of any age and time have constructed toys from found things showing a clear intuitive awareness of the idea that the life of matter is not over when the ‘objet’ is spoiled.

When children make their own toys, they use found materials adjusting the project they face to the resources they have, not only because of the shapes, their possible uses and functions, but also interacting with the different types of matter. Playing, they handle it, touch it, feel it, look at it, think about it and compose it, imagining the possibilities that the *whole* set of its properties offers. I would like to suggest they do it as good apprentices of craftsmen. Matter does not only show formal, functional or superficial aesthetic properties but also displays other of physical order, very important from an aesthetic point of view to our ordinary

experience, such as, flexibility, weight, conductivity, texture, permeability or durability, among others. All these are properties we need to consider when we decide to get rid of or keep on using objects or its parts for something else, and they require manipulation.

“Handicraft”, says Richard Sennet, “designates a lasting and basic human impulse, the desire to perform a task well”.³ If we accept that the average time to master a profession is ten thousand hours, then we can also accept that learning that craft includes in its development the idea of “greyness”. The learner gradually familiarizes with the task and material, aesthetically engaging himself with it all to the point of making them their “own” in a full existential sense, opening then his perception to a range of aesthetic fine nuances. During the process, at the same time, everything he has already been gradually learning “becomes, in some sense, grey”. “The Craftsman”, Sennett says, “explores the dimensions of skill, commitment and justice in a particular way. It focuses on the close connection there is between hand and head. (Sennett 2008, p. 21)” Through the direct learning based on repetition and in the slow process established in the mind-hand interaction, the craftsman gets a particular technique, a sort of practical-aesthetical knowledge that contains lots of tacit information, in which the ability of expression is also cultivated, be it artistic or not. Nevertheless, Sennet argues, “when a person develops a skill, the content of what she repeats changes” (Sennett 2008, p. 54) and that change of content, that takes place in direct action with materials, belongs to this kind of action and is shared with the idea of recycling. Of course children don’t have ten thousand hours of practice making their own toys and for that it can be questioned or we can ponder, if you like, if there is any kind of “greyness” in their interplay with matter. Even though at their beginning there could be any, I think they act just like craftsmen because they need to have some of what we call “greyness” for playing successfully. They will be successful in constructing, when they aesthetically engage with matter as they gradually began to introduce “greyness” into their actions.

At the time of guilds and workshops, the master craftsman was a social authority and “the good skills that established the authority of the master were inseparable from ethics. This ethical imperative kept expressed through a purely technical activity” (Sennett 2008, p. 54) and “his ethical behaviour was implicit in its technical work” (Sennett 2008, p. 81). The technical skills of the craftsman were directly related to aesthetic and practical comprehension of materials, which were recipients of ethical attributes, as Sennet and Saito agree in quoting (in the voice of Ruskin): “the workman has not done his duty... unless he even so far honours the materials with which he is working as to set himself to bring out their beauty, and to recommend and exalt, as far as he can, their peculiar qualities.” (Saito 2007, p. 117)

The matter that the craftsman works with has implicit inner aesthetic limits to his action (limits of time, pressure, light, strength, temperature, humidity, heat, etc.)

³ (Spanish edition, in Anagrama Ed. All quotations have been translated from the Spanish text .)

The good craftsman had to work matter in a respectful way and submit himself to the physical nature of her properties trying to capture that nature in his aesthetic relationship to it. At one point, good work began to be expressed through metaphors in which ethical virtues were ascribed to matter. So, as Sennett points out, "the kindness of the wall" (Sennett 2008, p. 170) or "the honesty of brick or of gold" (Sennett 2008, p. 173) were expressions of qualities associated with modifications of certain aesthetic properties, for example, colour, whose main purpose was to "enhance our awareness of the materials themselves and, thus, to think of its value" (Sennett 2008, p. 172). In this sense, aesthetic engagement entailed and meant technical commitment.

Saito's Elk

Finally, I would like to refer here to the well-known example provided by Holmes Rolston III of the full of worms elk's rotten skeleton, commented as an unscenic case in nature by Yuriko Saito (1998). There is no discussion about the repulsive character of the example; we can even imagine its unbearable disgusting odour. Any sort of aesthetic pleasure can hardly be justified as a response to such a gruesome event, even if, as Saito has suggested, we could adopt an ecological stance towards the phenomenon. It is a rotten body. And it is almost impossible to deny its gruesome character.

When we think about the aesthetic value of natural environments we cannot but to face the fact of rotting and organic decomposition as opposed to our aesthetic sensibility and, at the same time, as an essential part of natural life. How can we exclude or accept the case of the elk's rotten skeleton from our aesthetic appreciation of the natural environment when it is an essential part of the processes constituting natural cycles? Both options seem problematic. But, what is it a rotten body? Scientifically speaking the organic decomposition of a death animal is the transformation of its body into more simple forms of matter. However, in my opinion, it is not necessary to appeal to a scientific stance or point of view in order to aesthetically apprehend that process. Every common farmer knows well what it's going on with organic matter and how to deal with it aesthetically. Maybe he does not know everything about the process, but he understand everything what is enough to inform his practice; for everything he has learnt has been acquired through direct aesthetic practical evidences that were materially available in his surrounding. He knows quite well what are the different appearances of the remainders he manipulates, he knows how to deal with them and process them so as to integrate them within his ordinary labour.

However, it is important to notice that decomposition does not only strike us aesthetically unappealing when we contemplate it directly from living beings. Compare the elk's case, for example, with a beheaded doll, which is in tatters after hours and hours of play. Let's imagine that we open a drawer and we find its head, dirty and scratched, its face painted all over with a marker and, then, we find in a different place its body, without an arm, a crushed leg and the left fingers

beaten fiercely almost unrecognizable. The doll does not stink, as the elk's body does, but we can relate her to death and to organic decomposition in a symbolic way. The broken doll is not beautiful; its dismembered body is Dantesque. If a dared object for us is part of our life and it gets broken, we feel bad about the lost. Even when something useful breaks down (and I am not referring here to something old and worn-out that might possess the beauty due to the passing of time), it becomes aesthetically futile, barren: a glass or a piece of furniture for example. The doll, the glass or the furniture, are decomposed and they cannot be possibly repaired. Following the two kinds of recycling mentioned earlier, we can either reuse one of its parts or to reuse its matter.

Not considering here the case of art... what can we do, from an aesthetic point of view, in front of decomposed objects or bodies, which usually strike us as useless and unpleasant, but whose material state is, as it were, in an optimal condition? In my opinion, in order to compensate for the negative aesthetic value that we typically associate to disintegrating bodies and objects, we need to cultivate a better aesthetic consciousness of the objects' material states and be able to act on the basis of such consciousness. Bare matter is not garbage and stuff's aesthetic qualities constitute as such a challenge for our aesthetic sensibility that we need to face.

In his study about living beings, Aristotle claims: "For, as we said, word substance (entity) has three meanings form, matter, and the complex of both and of these three what is called matter is potentiality, what is called form actuality. Since then the complex here is the living thing, the body cannot be the actuality of the soul (anima); it is the soul (anima), which is the actuality of a certain kind of body. Hence the rightness of the view, that the soul (anima) cannot be without a body, while it cannot be a body; it is not a body but something relative to a body. That is why it is in a body, and a body of a definite kind." (Aristóteles, *De Anima*, II, 414a 15-22) What children understand well about objects, seems to be also pointed out by Aristotle about living beings. Life cannot happen without a body but it is not itself just "a body". When a living being dies we still have its matter as remaining entity to consider because matter is a condition for life, potentiality to form's actuality. In accordance, I believe our aesthetic comprehension of Nature includes the aesthetic consideration of matter by itself, be it linked or not to life.

The elk's case is, looked at within its natural medium, problematic both as an object and as a process. But we need to consider Saito's unscenic case because it belongs to Nature. Although negatively, it highly calls our aesthetic attention, and it readdresses our attention towards nature and life in general, and to death as a process of aesthetic matter transformation in particular. In the case of organic decomposition in human environments, we have already noticed how the experience of the farmer directs our practice and make us manipulate the reminders before they become really disgusting or just making a right and positive use of them.

In urban environments, where the natural medium has been more removed, we cannot but realize that there is a need to create specific zones to regenerate

material reminders. Nature cannot be simply obliterated, and we need to face and must technically satisfy this basic function of Nature as a system.

But now, how can we locate our aesthetic experience of decaying objects or bodies within this framework in such a way that it results pleasing or aesthetically rewarding for us? The daily challenge regarding our house dustbins keeps being something disgusting because to put our bag into a bigger container it does not provide us with any sense of the process that takes place. We cannot enjoy the experience of our action, seeing the transformation of these remains into fertilizer for our plants or for our little garden/orchard, into household soap for our laundry or, why not, for the roost of our block. It is likely that the above examples do not provide any strong reason for someone who cannot still feel aesthetic pleasure in them. Maybe, she can only try to make some effort by appealing to of ecological reasons. As I see it, this is due not to the weakness of aesthetic arguments but mainly to the fact that we live in societies that have a great surplus of materials. This situation leads to a pseudo-reflection about the “why” and the “what for”, of considering matter in a non wasteful way, in which the aesthetic is delayed, disabled, and pushed into the background. Maybe, something would be different if in our daily life we experience a shortage of material resources, if we experience matter as something difficult to obtain and finite. Under these conditions, it is not unlikely that matter were more valued by itself and that we considered as aesthetically agreeable the activity of recycling it. We would enjoy manipulating, taking care, transforming, and, finally, using it cyclically and personally as a part of what we make “ours” in our everyday. This, which might seem a mere hypothesis, is actually not far from truth in societies that experience dearth.

Conclusion

In summary, our everyday aesthetic experience can have a basis in the perceptual state that Arto Haapala calls as “greyness”. The initial sense of paradox and passivity with it associated because of familiarity seems to me, in fact, condition and result of it, becoming positive in our action. That is the reason why “greyness” cannot be applied to pristine nature or to nature seen as general system, because we cannot feel Nature as “ours” and consequently we cannot feel it as “grey”. That’s why both Haapala’s unsuccessful image and Saito’s elk confirm this point, but also Laura’s case. For, if pristine nature is predominant, the weight of the ordinary activity can be overwhelmed by the importance of the natural environment.

The kind of action that, in general, best captures ordinary aesthetic experience is the craftsman one. The craftsman’s experience can be extrapolated to our everyday aesthetics experiences, which fulfil our life even though they have not been cultivated under the aegis of “craftsmanship”. The very process of matter manipulation has at its core the notion of ‘greyness’, which I take as necessary to develop a deeper aesthetic consciousness of the matter through our interplay

with her. Our technical success with her can be, at the same time, technical and ethical. This is something which I take to be essential in order to develop a respectful attitude towards nature from aesthetic basis, whatever the environment, and whose foundation is connected to the basic idea of the material condition of life.

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