

What Makes Things Banal

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In this paper, I investigate the origins of banality and the reasons why some phenomena appear banal to us. I discuss the issue by analysing three interrelated areas of aesthetic investigation: artworks, everyday objects, and banal things. By identifying the source of banality, my goal is to understand what makes banal things different from other kinds of things. I consider the following questions: 1) when, why, and how does an object become banal?; 2) what happens when something becomes banal?; 3) are banal things aesthetically appealing? Drawing on Wolfgang Iser's notion of anesthetization and Walter Benjamin's account of aura, I argue that banality consists in the absence of both an ontological and an axiological character in objects, which makes them appear trivial or insignificant to us. I conclude by showing that although art, everydayness, and banality represent different aesthetic dimensions, objects constantly move from one of these dimensions to the other. | Keywords: *Banality, Art, Everyday Aesthetics, Aura, Anesthetization*

1. Introduction

Small and insignificant things, phenomena, and moments 'co-create' our daily life and the world as we know it. They are an immanent part of our experience and despite this, we mostly don't care about them. We deem such things as *banal* as if they make up only minor, imperceptible details of the environment where the important things or the things that deserve our attention are set. This may cast doubts on the meaningfulness of my examination at its very beginning: why, indeed, should one need to investigate banal things and search for their origins if these things are actually *banal*?¹

Jan Mukařovský (1966) answers this question clearly enough when he claims that any object, activity, or fact can be the carrier of an aesthetic function, and therefore can be aesthetically interesting and significant. Looking at banal

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¹ This may resemble the question that kickstarted the field of everyday aesthetics, when the main concern was to find methodological arguments able to justify the need for an analysis of everydayness. See for example: Light and Smith (2005); Kupfer (1983); Saito (2008, 2017); Yuedi and Carter (2014).

things from Mukařovský's perspective is refreshing and can redeem banal things from their usual status². Mukařovský's thesis, however, can also be understood slightly differently, as if he was saying that everything that surrounds us can be a potential object of aesthetic inquiry, *even though* it doesn't need to be significant in itself. This, I think, is the way we should look at banality: as composed of marginal things whose character, substance, impact, and scope can be fundamental for us, but whose existence we commonly neglect.

This gives us a compelling reason to explore the nature of banal things and to search for what makes such things banal in the first place. We can assume that banal things are not intentionally created to be banal: they *become* banal.³ Something internal or external is the cause of their banalization. In this paper, I will search for the roots of banality through reference to three related areas of aesthetic investigation. I will focus on a) art, b) everyday objects, and c) banal things, activities, and phenomena. Everyday objects and banal things will not be regarded as derivative or secondary forms of art but rather as subjects of aesthetic investigation in themselves, although I recognize that there is a connection between art and these other aesthetic objects.⁴

An important question in this regard will be whether some quality makes banal things different from other things so that we can identify the source of their banality somewhere in their nature. To address this question, I will consider the following interrelated issues: 1) when, why, and how does something become banal? 2) what happens when something becomes banal? 3) can banal objects be aesthetically appealing?

This will lead me to quest for the basic reasons that lead us to consider banal things as insignificant and replaceable.

2. Anesthetics, Aura and Art

Banal things differ from other objects in something exceptionally trivial; that is why we do not intentionally pay attention to them. This aspect can be a determining factor in order to better understand our relationship with banality. An important point is that banal things represent a set of objects that we, as recipients, are not even able to perceive, because we tend to be indifferent or perceptively immune towards them. In other words, we cannot even see them.

This idea has been notably examined by Wolfgang Iser (1990) in his *Aesthetics and anesthesics*. Iser addresses the issue by considering what he calls the phenomenon of "saturation of aesthetic facts" that takes place in the

² According to Migařov (2016, p. 34) "one crucial aspect of banality is a sense of mundaneness, triviality, insignificance, irrelevance, paltriness."

³ For a philosophical and aesthetic account on the issue of intentions, see Livingston (2007, 2013).

⁴ Pragmatist approaches explain thoroughly the relation of art to life, and in some cases extend the analysis to the role of everyday life in the arts (Dewey, 1980; Shusterman, 2000).

postmodern era of hyper-aestheticization. This phenomenon gives rise to a process of estrangement leading the recipient to 'move' the perceived object to a sort of 'grey zone' where the object is alienated from the domain of aesthetics and even from the domain of perception in general. The recipient, however, doesn't have any other choice, because too many impulses are attacking her senses from everywhere and making a selection between these impulses would request too much energy. That is the reason why she just simply stops 'feeling' or starts to be blind as regards aesthetic stimuli.

According to Welsch, anesthetization can depend on two related factors. In the first place, the fact that (a) we get used to a condition in which certain objects do not cause any mental or perceptual motion in us so that we do not even expect that these objects can arise something anymore. This estrangement is partly caused by the number of images surrounding us and the fact that such images are not real but rather mediate reality by distorting or even alienating it (Welsch, 1990).

In the second place, the fact that (b) the reality we perceive has nothing special or particularly significant to offer, and although it may engender some aesthetic interest in us, this interest can only be superficial and transient.

One could blame modernism for this because estrangement can be regarded as an effect of modernity and anaesthetization as an experience the modern recipient goes through (Jameson, 1991, p. 124). But in this case as in many others, modernism would be subject to an unjustified accusation. Banality is indeed not merely a consequence of modernity, but something that has to do with how things are in themselves.

Therefore, although Welsch's account of anaesthetization offers us some important conceptual tools to understand the phenomenon, his explanation seems to me not sufficient to account for how banal things are created. We need to look somewhere else if we want to find an answer to this question. My suggestion is that we turn to the idea that banal objects can be the result of anesthetization because there is something in their essence, some fundamental quality or attribute, that these objects lack, and that makes them banal in the first place and justify why we overlook them. If this is the case, then one way to understand what this lacking quality may be, I contend, is to call into question the notion of aura and its relationship to aesthetic value.

2.1 Art

Nothing seems more distant to banality than art itself: banality looks like an antonym of art both at the semantic and at the aesthetic level. This, however, can only be true to the extent that we don't accept banal things as an inspiration or material for art, at least when art is understood according to the mimetic paradigm⁵.

⁵ Jana Migašová (2016) surveys the possibility of the presence of banality in art.

Here it may be good to introduce a differentiation that will be further discussed later on in this paper, namely, that between banal objects and everyday objects. One example may be useful to grasp the relevance of this difference. Typically, artists choose to depict things that, in their eyes, are extraordinary. Such things, however, do not need to be extraordinary in themselves or for everybody else.

This gives me a chance to respond to an observation made by Tufan Acil, who commented on a previous version of this paper during the colloquium *Banalities, Aesthetics and Everyday Life* (Presov, October 8th, 2020). In his commentary, Acil refers to Heidegger's famous example of 'Van Gogh's shoes'. This example, I think, shows us that even something seemingly unimportant, like a pair of shoes, can be inspiring for an artist, and remain banal for everybody else. The shoes depicted by Van Gogh are just tools and even worn-out tools, but they are transformed when they are represented on the canvas. However, I don't think these shoes become less banal just because they are now the object of a work of art. Although they may become aesthetically intriguing as a result of this artistic transposition, they still retain their essential banality. In light of this example, we can assume that even though the relationship between art and banality cannot be characterized in terms of a mere opposition, there is no doubt that art works on a completely different level than everyday life. Whatever art is in its nature, it cannot be just a matter of habits, of things that we can encounter anywhere and anytime, but must be something that significantly differs from other things.

Of course, thinking that there must be an intrinsic or essential difference between art and other things seems to lead us back to an elitist artistic approach (Dubuffet, 1988; Shusterman, 2000) such as that pursued by classical aesthetics. Today, it is clear that the borders between different domains, especially between the domain of aesthetics and that of art, need to be reconsidered, for they are much more elusive (see Jameson, 1991) than we thought. But we do not need to accept any essentialist definition of art to claim that there must be something that distinguishes art from banal things.⁶

One way to clarify the issue is to refer to Walter Benjamin's famous discussion on the notion of aura in his *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1969). According to Benjamin, the existence of art is dependent on two categories: (1) space and (2) time, which guarantee the originality of an artwork (Benjamin, 1969, p. 3), represent the proof of its authenticity (see Dadejik, 2009; Šábik, 2009), and differentiate the original from its counterfeit or reproduction.

The notion of aura doesn't represent a defining criterion for Benjamin, and he does not use it to define art. Rather, he believes that since it represents the here and now of a work, the aura guarantees the unique being of an artwork at

⁶ There are many approaches concerning the question of how to define art and many types of definitions have been proposed, of an anti-essentialist, analytical, functional and procedural, intentional, historical, institutional, and cluster type. See especially Beardsley (1983); Danto (1964); Dickie (1974); Gaut (2000); Goodman (1977); Levinson (1979) and Weitz (1956). For an insightful historical analysis of the issue see Davies (1991).

the place of its existence (Benjamin, 1969). “The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity” (Benjamin, 1969, p. 3). Indeed, the authenticity of a certain thing cannot be repeated or copied. Aura, which is interpreted by Benjamin as “a peculiar web of space and time: the unique manifestation of a distance, however near it may be” (Benjamin, 1972, p. 20), is the proof of this unrepeatable authenticity and the unviolated authority of the artwork.

Aura allows for an overcoming of space and time and arouses in the recipients the feeling that art in itself is something strange, demanding and challenging. This can add some distance in the interaction between the recipient and the artwork, and since interacting with art is not always simple, one can wonder whether Benjamin’s recourse to aura complicates an already complicated situation rather than clarifying it. In Benjamin’s text, aura sometimes seems to work more mystically than aesthetically and this makes the process of aesthetic perception and understanding of art to become even less clear and approachable from the point of view of recipients.

But for Benjamin aura is primarily inner energy, a power that preserves an artwork’s uniqueness and irreplaceability and assures its specific place in history and culture. It is an evidence of originality and novelty and corresponds to the value the artwork acquires because of the time and space of its origin. The primacy of an artwork also justifies its position in art history.

To the same extent, when we appreciate theater plays, paintings, or films we judge them based on their inventiveness and novelty. As recipients, we are willing to admit that new artworks can be technically good⁷ but when they copy older artworks, we generally dismiss them as derivative, unoriginal, and so on. Thus, despite all the transformations happening in the modern or post-modern world and despite “the end of the concept of the masterpiece” (Jameson, 1991), the uniqueness of an artwork still has a fundamental role for us.

In Benjamin’s understanding, the evidence of this uniqueness is aura itself, an element which specifies or rather identifies the origin of an artifact by tracing it back to a moment of the past, while at the same time reflecting its ‘existence’. Aura is thus a guarantee of value, but this value cannot be defined, so it is not possible to compare the *aura* of two different artifacts. Aura is indeed an absolute, but it can be more or less present, even if it can be more or less present in a certain object.

An important thing is that authenticity, as a quality generated by the aura, is non-reproducible. This is what Benjamin (1969, p. 3) intends when stating that: “The whole sphere of authenticity is outside technical – and, of course not only technical – reproducibility”. This does not only mean that authenticity cannot be reproduced, but also that the artwork loses its uniqueness when reproduced, that is, it loses its essence or value which are aspects of aura.

⁷ This could bring us to reconsider the distinction between art and craft, not just in a terminological but also in an axiological and ontological sense (see for example Giombini, 2017; Kopčáková, 2020).

Authenticity cannot be the content of technical reproduction: the process of reproduction gives rise to something ontologically new but it cannot recreate aura. In this sense, with the process of reproduction, the artwork itself fades away as it loses its main constituent, namely, its originality or its aura. Benjamin's core criticism of mechanical reproduction is based exactly on this impossibility to transfer 'the substance' of an artwork through reproduction. Technical reproduction causes the aura to vanish or be dissolved in fragments, transferring the object to a dimension without aura. Importantly, this also creates the conditions for banal things to be produced in the first place as changeable and undistinguished objects deprived of any specific identity.

3. The Other (True) Aura

Walter Benjamin admits that even things other than art objects possess an aura. He claims indeed that

The concept of aura which was proposed above with reference to historical objects may usefully be illustrated with reference to the aura of natural ones. [...] If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch. (Benjamin, 1969, p. 5)

In this quotation, the notion of aura is expanded here in two different ways.

On the one hand, Benjamin seems to claim that when he talks about aura, he is not uniquely referring to the aura of *artworks*, but rather to the aura of *historical objects* in general, namely any kind of objects or tools created in the past, including objects that are part of some tradition.⁸ For this reason, all 'images' or artifacts of the past seem to bear the traits of aura. Aura is just like the patina that reveals the age of old paintings and exemplifies their belonging to the past. This aura, the aura of human-made objects, has primarily an ontological character and determines the place of the artifact in history.

On the other hand, Benjamin also assumes that aura – that which relates the object to a certain place and time – can be also perceived, seen, and 'breathed' in natural objects. In this case, the aura does not simply reflect the temporal horizon of the object but rather the temporal and spatial horizon of *perception* itself. What we perceive within these natural auratic objects is the remnant of an aura that corresponds to an original, indescribable experience, one that can be mediated through cult and ceremony. Our inability to fully comprehend the aura's presence and persistence gives the natural bearers of aura a time-resistant value.

Extending the concept of aura in this way leads one to the disturbing conclusion that every object can have its aura; a conclusion, however, that would imply a misreading of Benjamin's thought if further clarification is not added. As a matter of fact, it is not that every object has an aura, but that 'every

⁸ An interesting inquiry in the issue of the images of the past (or past images) is offered by Didi-Huberman (2005) and Aldhouse-Green (2004). A more classical and traditional approach, on the other hand, can be found in Gadamer (2004) and Ingarden (1946).

human-made object' can, including objects that are invented, modified, or altered by human beings. Such objects, which dispose of 'fragments' of aura, can indeed become part of some cultural tradition, enter the sphere of the cult, and acquire in this way some auratic value.

This participation of objects in a cult or activities related to a cult is what Ellen Dissanayake (1995, 2009) calls specialization (see Davies, 2005). According to Dissanayake, specialization, as a process, is a common phenomenon in human praxis, and one that can give rise to an artistic praxis. Through the process of specialization, common objects with an identifiable ontology are distinguished from cult objects whose aura is endowed with a value that is perceivable throughout space and time. This 'aesthetic side' of the aura is neither an immanent nor an arbitrary part of aura but the result of a continuous change, which depends on the processes, practices, and ceremonies in which the objects find their role. These processes, practices, and ceremonies create a tradition that is responsible for the transfer of the sacred and ceremonial character of cult objects to art objects. Aura represents indeed a way by which the relationship that links an object to a cult or tradition is made visible, just like the object's bond with the past.

We can summarize our former considerations by saying that aura, according to Benjamin, works on two levels: (1) as an ontological guarantee proving that the auratic object has been created somewhere and at some time or connecting the object to a cult via an act of specialization; and (2) as an axiological guarantee of value. If this second aspect depends on the former, so that the value of an auratic object resides on its ontology, is hard to say. But certainly, the aura is responsible for the identity of an object and proves its inalterability and specificity with regard to other objects.

Benjamin's critique of mechanical reproduction (1969) as the process by which an original is transformed into a copy and is thus falsified, is based on this assumption. Mechanical reproduction can only give rise to 'clones' or replicas that, although being visually identical to the original, are empty, replaceable, and deprived of value. This repetition in terms of reproduction involves a weakening of the power of aura or even its destruction.

Significantly, understanding this process is also key to explain how banal objects are created.

4. The Absence of Axiological and Ontological Value

The process of banalization itself can be seen as the gradual disappearance of aura from an object, in both its aesthetic and axiological character, which also entails a loss in the aesthetic function of the object.

Welsch's thesis seems to play an important role here because it can account for our non-sensitivity and perhaps even blindness as regards banal objects. However, while Welsch's theory of the anesthetic only interprets banalization as an experiential process resulting from the individual's reception of and interaction with an object, Benjamin's conception of the aura also adds an

important ontological element to Welsch's picture, because it implies that banal objects are characterized by the *absence* of something.

From this point of view, all banal things can be seen as originally possessing an aura that disappeared or was weakened at some point in time. But when, and why? The answer is hidden in the term 'aura' itself. As I have argued, aura is proof of the ontological and axiological uniqueness of an object, which originates in a certain tradition and cult practice. Banal things, on the other hand, have no uniqueness and show instead a character of anonymity, replaceability, triviality, and monotony which is conveyed by mechanic reproduction. Repetition indeed destroys uniqueness and originality and creates things without an identity – homogenous, deformed, and adjustable.

Thus, while aura is created by some special and temporal constants (here and now), banal things are created through the repetition of these constants. Repetition of place can occur quite often: firstly intentionally, and then stereotypically when it becomes subconscious. In this sense, visiting the church and going to work become banal activities when repeated even though one is aware of these actions when doing them. They are banal because they are not specific, unique, or different. If someone always visits the same castle ruins, sits on the same chair under the same tree, and reads, this action becomes merely a habit and all its uniqueness fades away. To the same extent, a flower bouquet on Valentine's Day, chocolates for birthdays, flowers on graves for anniversaries: if these are regular gestures that are repeated every year at the same time, they could turn into banal things. When an action is repeated, time is no more a purveyor of particularity, and the action becomes merely 'one in a row'.

But what makes banal things different from activities, phenomena, and objects that belong to the sphere of everyday life? Let's imagine a black hairgrip. There is probably nothing more trivial, banal, and over-familiar than a hairgrip. It is a small piece of metal which is sold in packages of ten or even more pieces. When we lose a hairgrip, it doesn't matter because we have plenty of them (although we are often unable to find any of them when we need them!). Each hairgrip is very much the same as every other.

However, when a hairgrip features a particular color, material, or even some decoration or shape, then it is distinguished and made unique and special with regard to the group of all the other average hairgrips. According to Mukařovský (1966), in this case the aesthetic function of the hairgrip takes dominance and makes it different from seemingly identical objects. We could say that it strengthens its 'aura'. This also happens when a hairgrip, for example, is used by thieves or private detectives to open locks, handcuffs, etc., as it often happens in movies. These and other similar uses, although not necessarily aesthetic, make an object unique by endowing it with some significance.

As we have seen, the ontological character of the aura is what relates an object to a specific and unique space and time, while its axiological valence is acquired through a process of specialization. Reproduction weakens both the axiological and the ontological aspects of aura. When everyday objects are

mechanically multiplied up to the level that the newly created product becomes interchangeable with all others, they lose their identity as singular objects and become banal, thus invisible to the recipient.

In this sense, while aura in artworks entails the perception of both the special value and the uniqueness of the auratic work *qua* individual object – namely, the axiological and ontological component of aura – everyday objects have lost such value. In turn, banal objects are everyday objects that are deprived not only of their value but also of their ontological individuality as singular, recognizable objects. Banal things, in other words, lack both the axiological and the ontological dimension of aura. As a result, they appear the closest and most approachable as possible to the recipient, so that the recipient does not even need to think about them when she uses them. Consequently, as these things lose their place in the recipient's experience, they are, so to speak, condemned to die.

5. Conclusion

I have argued that there is both an axiological and an ontological difference between art, everyday objects, and banal things, but it is also true that throughout their existence objects constantly move from one field of the aesthetic sphere to another.

In this regard, when answering the question of *what* makes things banal, we do not have to search for an element or feature that all banal things *possess*. Rather, we shall search for what all banal things *lack*. It is the lack of some quality and in particular, the lack of aura, that distinguishes these objects from other objects. Banal objects lack ontological structure, aesthetic function, and even sometimes practical function, at least according to an etymological understanding of the verb 'to practice'.

When it comes to understanding 'how' banal things are produced, I have argued that repetition is what we should look at. But repetition only produces banality when the ontological integrity and identity of an object is destroyed. If we cannot see any difference between two seemingly identical, yet intrinsically different objects, then such objects start to appear trivial, and if they are unnoticed for too long, they become banal.

In this sense, banal things are not valueless by nature, but their ontological status is so fragile that they are constantly at risk of disappearing, as if they were not even present anymore. This sole fact, I think, gives us reason to investigate banality aesthetically.

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