

The Significance of Banal Things: A Reply to Makky

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This short paper comments on Lukáš Makky's article *What Makes Things Banal*. The argument is divided into two sections. The first section reconstructs Makky's understanding of banality, which he develops based on aesthetic theories by Wolfgang Iser and Walter Benjamin. The second and more critical section examines the validity of the arguments Makky uses for his definition of banality. Although this commentary attaches great value to Makky's insightful analysis of the term banality and agrees with identifying it as a historical and processual concept, drawing on writings by M. Heidegger and J. Derrida it eventually proposes a different understanding of the relationship between the arts and banal things and underlines the importance of banality for the creation and perception of the arts. | Keywords: *Banalities, Authenticity, Aura, Perception, Repetition*

Lukáš Makky's paper *What Makes Things Banal* (2020) tackles the question of why some things, activities, and phenomena in daily life and also in the arts are banal or are meant to be banal. The author mainly argues that banal things remain the most insignificant aspects of reality that we rarely reciprocate. The text begins with the justification of the necessity and importance of scientific research on banality despite the fact that banal phenomena and activities (supposedly) constitute only 'minor details' in our daily life. For Makky, the research on banality should methodically focus on the underlying reasons and conditions of banal things and activities in daily life and aesthetics. These are indeed not intended to be created as 'banal' from the outset, but rather gradually become banal or are banalized under different social, cultural, or political circumstances. The main purpose of the paper is therefore to demonstrate how banal things get different from other things and facts in daily life and aesthetics.

Makky argues that the banality of things should originate either in relation to our perception, that is, in our aesthetic (im)perception, or in the fact that these things themselves lack something. He explains the first part of this two-sided hypothesis by referring to the notion of anaesthesia, which was systematically

developed by Wolfgang Iser (*Ästhetisches Denken*, 1990). In the light of Iser's well-known concept of anaesthetization and its dialectic relationship with the aestheticization process of modernity, Makky makes it plausible that banal things or phenomena should be directly connected with anaesthetic phenomena. According to Iser, the infinite number of aesthetic inputs that recipients have been used to experience in the last century are pushed out on the periphery of aesthetic interest, so they become imperceptible and do not cause any mental or perceptual motions in us anymore. Consequently, Makky concludes that this process characterizes the nature of banal objects and activities. They also lack perceptibility and are merely ignored by the recipient.

Makky develops the second part of his hypothesis with regard to the concept of 'aura' which was introduced by Walter Benjamin as the essence of fine art. The concept of the aura is interpreted as "inner energy, a power that preserves an artwork's uniqueness and irreplaceability and assures its specific place in history and culture". (Makky, 2020, p. 98) As in the case of anaesthetic phenomena, the author uses once again this notion *ex negativo* in order to define banality: Aura is for Makky in an axiological sense the exact opposite of banality because banal things lack the unique space and time that would guarantee their authenticity. In opposition to the notion of aura, the process of banalization or that of creating banal actions originates in the reproducibility and repetition in time and space.

It is important to note that Makky's two-sided hypothesis, which has been briefly introduced so far, does not aim to offer two different theories of banality, but one in which these two sides are internally related and complementary to each other. The author starts consistently with Iser's concept of anaesthetization of daily life in order to demonstrate that banal objects are aesthetically inaccessible to us and they are not seen or perceived. In the subsequent step, he shows that the reason why banal objects are overlooked by the recipient is directly linked to their negative property, which is imperceptibility. Since banal things lack authenticity and uniqueness in time and space, they do not offer anything special to our perception; therefore, they are not perceived and are merely ignored.

Concerning the arguments presented above, one should first of all examine if the author really answers his own question *What Makes Things Banal*, which appears in the title of the paper. The hypothesis on banality that Makky tries to construct by referring to Iser's and Benjamin's aesthetics does not directly demonstrate what banality is, but mainly what it lacks. Banal objects lack the quality of being perceptible, lack authenticity, uniqueness, and so on. It is certain that Makky's ontological approach makes a solid distinction between banal objects and other objects of daily life. However, the essential question on what banality *has* at its disposal still requires further research. At the end of the paper, Makky attempts to define banality also in terms of the property of being repeatable and reproducible. But here one should admit that not all reproducible objects, let us think for example 'books', are banal objects per se only because they are materially reproduced.

Secondly, the negative characterization of banality, as opposed to aesthetic perception and works of art, should be examined in a more detailed way. If we define banality with respect to the concept of reproducibility and repetition, then we should further clarify how it contradicts with art and with individual works of art. Isn't it the case that the arts permanently repeat or make recurrent use of the same or similar artistic forms from the art tradition? As Jacques Derrida would critically remark on this point (Derrida, 1978), it is impossible to imagine a work of art that has no reference to any other forms, styles, or subjects in the art tradition. Works of art need necessarily to be variously connected with (pre)existing works of arts and especially with artistic genres, otherwise one would never recognize them as works of art in the first place (Derrida, 1980). If we consider different aesthetic or artistic movements in the art tradition, we can easily realize that an endless number of individual and authentic works of art continuously repeat and recreate pre-existing forms. For example, impressionism can only be acknowledged as an art movement insofar as the works of different artists repeat similar forms such as the depiction of emotions and representation of 'the moment'. Thus, it is clear that the arts depend on repetitive forms, continuous recreation of the old forms and styles through new instruments and media. If we agree with the author that repetition and reproduction contribute to the process of banalization in a general sense, then repetitive motifs and forms in the art should also be considered banal. Therefore, one could finally ask: Is it possible to omit banality entirely from the arts? Can art gain the special status of being completely independent of banality?

Thirdly, it is necessary to consider that the relationship between the arts and banality is different from mere opposition. Given the fact that we are continuously surrounded by banal activities and objects, as the author well explicates, we should ask what arts can teach us about the banal reality of our times, so that this reality might gradually become less banal and banal objects might also acquire some meaning for us. Makky refers at the beginning of his text to an author, Martin Heidegger, whose aesthetic theory could offer a different understanding of the relationship between banal objects and works of art. In his famous essay *The Origin of the Work of Art* (1960), Heidegger discusses how art provides a basic understanding of ourselves and our relationship with the world that we cannot obtain in any other way. His well-known analysis of *A Pair of Peasant Shoes* by Van Gogh results in an understanding of the real essence and the truth of these pair of shoes (or banal things) as 'reliability' (Ger. *Verlässlichkeit*) in daily life. In other words, art reveals the underlying functions and truth of banal things and objects. Without art, and living only within the realm of banal objects, we would continue to ignore the underlying meaning of such objects' existence and could never gain true knowledge about their essence and real function. In a continuous relation with banal objects and acts, art does not only manifest their intern reality but also gradually takes out or eliminate their banality for the recipient. Finally, its effect goes beyond the sphere of aesthetics and helps the recipient perceive these objects less banal also in their daily life.

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