

On The Oddly Satisfying

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Abstract. In this paper, I propose a novel theory for why we find certain mundane everyday experiences, objects, and phenomena satisfying aesthetic experiences. I refer to these as *oddly satisfying* experiences and argue that they assert themselves as aesthetic in being suggestive of the cinematic. This cinematic quality is the product of everyday experiences' gesturing towards a kind of careful artistic intent.

What does it mean for something to be *oddly satisfying*? There is much about everyday aesthetic experiences that seems *obviously* satisfying, but what can we say about those subtle experiences which so often flutter past our conscious endorsement, and whose value seems ineffable and, frankly, odd? I am thinking, here, of the lid to the board game box which rests gently on the trapped air inside before softly and evenly settling on the box, and the perfectly sized book-jacket that sits taut on the resting hardback, never to get caught on a precarious corner and tear. For you, there might be something immensely satisfying about the makeup compact that snaps shut with a clean crisp click that communicates the finality of the act, or you might find your daily moment of transcendental bliss in streaming videos of folks pressure-washing their driveways. Is there something about these kinds of experiences that unifies them; that makes them all *oddly* aesthetic? Surely we don't engage with the everyday object with the expectation of aesthetic experience, but it presents itself in flashes of perfect fit. Isn't that what we really find at the bottom of these experiences? It is trivial to point out the role of fit in the case of the board game box and the book jacket, but where is the fit in the snap of the compact? I'd like to think that something about the sound *just fits* with the task of closing it.

I once heard a story about the design of a German luxury car. The designers felt that there was something about the experience of driving the car that was missing. After months of attempts to discern the nature of this luxurious *je-ne-sais-quoi*, one of the more intrepid designers sought refuge in the arts. It was at the movie theater that it dawned on them. When we open a car door, the interior lights come on, and they turn off when we start the engine. After several return trips to the movies, the designer realized that the interior lights should fade off, and it should take exactly three seconds (the time it takes for the theater lights to dim). This was the secret to the luxury experience. It gave a sense of the cinematic to the experience; your commute home from work is now a journey, and you are the star of the show. If you ever have the privilege of sitting in the driver's seat of such a car and, perhaps, never heard this story, you might yet find the dimming of the lights synchronized with the starting of the car to be an oddly satisfying experience.

This 'cinematicity' is, in my view, why certain mundane experiences can (sometimes violently, sometimes subtly) assert themselves as objects of aesthetic engagement. The kind of fit that connects the compact closing and the sound of the compact closing is exactly the kind of fit that is the work of Hollywood sound designers (or, apparently, the designers of luxury cars). In the movies, Dad never struggles to close the board game box, and the *femme fatale's* gestures never lack for drama. This, as the case of the dad with the board game box should indicate, often runs contrary to the aesthetic qualities of our everyday experience at large. I would argue that the resting level of clumsiness experienced by Dad is less 'anesthetic' (as might be argued by Dewey), and more merely aesthetically banal. As such, the cinematicity account of the oddly satisfying is consistent with the kinds of stories about everyday aesthetics which emphasize defamiliarization and the casting of auras. It seems that, given the resting banal aesthetic conditions of our everyday experience, we would be forgiven for failing to engage with the everyday as an aesthetic medium. Sometimes our experience of the everyday seems like the kind of film we would rather have on in the background while we work on other things than the kind we might dedicate two hours of our attention to. However, it is these small, subtle bursts of cinematicity and perfect fit that best provide us with the means to re-familiarize ourselves with the aesthetics of the everyday. In this way, we are drawn back into engagement with the cinemas of our lived experience.

Perhaps this account cannot be generalized to capture every oddly satisfying experience, but it does seem to, at least, unify many of those experiences which assert themselves in this way. These oddly satisfying experiences are the invasion of the cinematic into the everyday, and they remind us of what we love about art. At the same time, the cinematic may also be the distillation of all of these everyday moments into an idealized vision of how life could be if we were more graceful (and, perhaps, secret agents), and everyday life was less banal. While many films and television shows struggle to establish a reality where the stars could be the everyman, the oddly satisfying does much to fool us into thinking that we could be the stars. Perhaps, then, the relationship between the cinematic and the everyday is yet another case of perfect fit.