Everyday Life Studies: A Review

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Modernism/modernity, Volume 18, Number 1, January 2011, pp. 175-180
(Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/mod.2011.0012

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Review Essay

Everyday Life Studies: A Review.

By Liesl Olson, The Newberry Library


Philosophizing the Everyday. John Roberts. London and New York: Pluto Press, 2006. Pp. 160. $89.00 (cloth); $30.00 (paper).

The Everyday Life Reader. Ben Highmore, ed. London and New York: Routledge, 2002. Pp. 392. $140.00 (cloth); $45.95 (paper).

Everyday Life and Cultural Theory. Ben Highmore. London and New York: Routledge, 2002. Pp. 208. $120.00 (cloth); $37.95 (paper).


With the emergence of several new books, special journal issues, and even a “Reader,” the field of everyday life studies can now be said to have its own canon. The insistent paradox of everyday life continues
to infuse new studies with energy and organization. The paradox can be put this way: to say this is ordinary is to give significance to what is insignificant. How do we discuss the ordinary when by its very nature it should remain overlooked? Scholars generally pursue this question either by prioritizing the philosophies of everyday life or by examining literary and cultural representations of the everyday. In this respect, the books listed above (and many more) fall into two categories: studies that explore, extend, and critique the foundational work of the Marxist sociologist Henri Lefebvre (Gardiner, Highmore, Roberts, Sheringham), and studies primarily interested in examining the texts of literary modernism (Phillips, Randall). Both approaches work to solve the paradox of the ordinary by maintaining a theoretical distance from actual practices or by exploring how we experience the everyday rather than the everyday’s specific manifestations.

The literature of modernism preceded the theories of everyday life and helped to produce them. As Michael Sheringham illuminates in his exceptional and comprehensive study, *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present*, Lefebvre’s theoretical model and those influenced by it grew out of debates regarding *la vie quotidienne* in mid-century France. Decades earlier many modernist writers had noticed the phenomenon by which even the smallest aspects of bourgeois life were shaped by twentieth-century technologies and the insistent discourses of capitalism and consumerism, what the situationist movement led by Guy Debord would later refer to as “the colonization of everyday life.” Lefebvre and others hoped that their theoretical analyses would liberate the everyday from these stifling forces, which modernist texts had accomplished by virtue of simply noticing the everyday. Lefebvre opens *Everyday Life and the Modern World* (1968)—an abridgement of the three-volume *Critique of Everyday Life* (1947–82)—by suggesting that James Joyce’s *Ulysses* achieves something for which his work also strives: “Joyce’s narrative rescues, one after the other, each facet of the quotidian from anonymity” (2).

The movement from the everyday in literature to the everyday as a theoretical subject occurs when literature gives up on it. That is, theorists like Lefebvre begin to write about the everyday when it becomes a question of whether the novel or postmodern writing more generally can represent the everyday through the conventions of realism. For instance, *Ulysses* attempts to catalog all facets of ordinary life while at the same time embracing the impossibility of such an enterprise, the impossibility of preserving the ordinary as ordinary. The extraordinary energy of much modernist experimentation is fueled by the problem of representation as a kind of inevitable transformation. The literature that followed the experiments of high modernism surrenders to this problem and moves in a different direction. Lefebvre’s work thus has a stronger link to the literature of his time and place—Jean-Paul Sartre, Alain Robbe-Grillet and George Perec, for example—than to the literary experimentation of the high modernists.

When we take theories of everyday life and use them as a lens upon modernist literature, there is a dangerous proclivity for causal reversal and historical distortion. Sheringham’s intellectual history is a welcome contextualizing corrective. He focuses on the work and creative interactions among four central writers—Henri Lefebvre, Roland Barthes, Michel de Certeau, and Georges Perec. The decision to include the novelist Perec as a major contributor to theories of everyday life illuminates Perec’s varied body of work as a series of experiments fixated almost scientifically upon the everyday. Perec plays with the everyday’s contradictions, affectations, limitations, cultural functions, and its humor. Unlike modernist literature that motivated theories of everyday life, Perec’s work is a dazzling effect, which Sheringham rightly claims should receive more attention—especially in Anglophone circles. From the five-page catalog *Attempt at an Inventory of the Liquid and Solid Foodstuffs Ingurgitated by Me in the Course of the Year Nineteen Hundred and Seventy-Four* to his tour-de-force *Life a User’s Manual* (1978), Perec’s work is a striking and rare fusion of literature with theories of the operation of the everyday.

There are important differences between the four thinkers at the heart of Sheringham’s project. In one sweeping gesture he notes how each emerged from a distinct disciplinary field: “Lefebvre can be associated with humanist Marxism, Barthes with Structuralism and its evolution into post-structuralism and post-modernism, Certeau with history, anthropology and psychoanalysis, and Perec with the literary experimentalism of the Oulipo group, inaugurated by Raymond Queneau” (9). Sheringham relates each of these orientations to surrealism during the 1930s and 1940s (especially to the work of Andre Breton and Louis Aragon). Lefebvre for instance...
attacked the surrealists in his first volume of *Critique of Everyday Life* (1947) for fetishizing the marvelous, irrational, and dream-like states of existence at the expense of the more mundane aspects of everyday life. Lefebvre's later debates with Debord hinged on how the situationists had adopted surrealist practices. His split with Debord directly impacted Barthes, Certeau, and Père as these thinkers considered the transformations of everyday life in Paris during the crisis of May 1968 and its aftermath. Through a web of cultural, historical, and personal alliances, Sheringham judiciously presents a dynamic, sometimes divisive, but overall coherent French intellectual tradition out of which each of these thinkers emerged.

The critical tendency to draw upon French theories of everyday life sometimes haphazardly and often without historical context is in part a result of the fact that translations of these texts have generally been delayed and sporadic. As John Roberts rightly points out in *Philosophizing the Everyday*, Certeau's model of the everyday overshadows the work of Henri Lefebvre in Anglo-American cultural studies partly because Lefebvre's writings of the 1950s and 1960s were translated into English only in the 1990s, by which time they were understood through the lens of Certeau's later work. In his short monograph, Roberts affiliates Lefebvre's concept of the everyday with earlier theories found in the political texts of the Russian Revolution and Western Marxism before the Second World War. Roberts positions Lefebvre's first volume of *Critique of Everyday Life* at the end of this line (it was written just after the Liberation and published in 1947). Roberts criticizes the usage of the everyday as a concept in contemporary cultural studies where, he says, it loosely refers to "a theory of signs and patterns of popular cultural consumption or the dilemmas or ambiguities of representation" (2). Roberts wants to restore the revolutionary political potential of the everyday to the term's current usage. As Sheringham points out, however, Lefebvre's "critique" of the everyday is not wholly negative. Lefebvre does not argue for a radical rejection of the everyday or for total revolution. At heart Lefebvre is a humanist; his writings are marked by nostalgia for a pre-industrial era, for instance, a rural past in which people live according to seasonal rhythms and communal festivals, which he lovingly describes at the end of the first volume of *Critique*. If modernity has forever altered this way of living then Lefebvre demands that we find, in Sheringham's estimation, "ways of teasing out the complex imbrication of the positive and the negative, alienation and freedom, within the weave of everyday life itself" (12).

The political and ethical implications of the everyday also animate Michael Gardiner's much earlier study, *Critiques of Everyday Life*, in which he explores a "counter-tradition" to a model of the everyday that in his opinion dominates the social sciences (2). Gardiner argues for the primacy of Lefebvre's concept of the everyday, which from the vantage of Roberts's and Sheringham's more recent studies has now been fully acknowledged. He stresses the importance of theorizing the everyday rather than describing it as a set of practices. That is, sociological *description* is not a sufficient critical practice if one seeks to transform the political, social, and economic systems of modern life. Like Roberts, Gardiner perhaps overstates the revolutionary potential of Lefebvre's project—though there is no question that Lefebvre's model was adapted for the radical program of younger French intellectuals like Debord. Gardiner includes in his study not only the French philosophies of everyday life but also analyses of the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, Agnes Heller, and Dorothy Smith. In deep sympathy with these thinkers, Gardiner deftly connects the implicitly utopian elements of their lines of thought.

Ben Highmore's approach to the everyday—like Gardiner's—is more eclectic than Sheringham's. In contrast to Sheringham's Francophone context, Highmore's *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory* begins its examination of the major theories of everyday life with George Simmel and includes the work of surrealism, Walter Benjamin, mass-observation, Lefebvre, and Certeau. The variety of cultural contexts, aesthetic problems, and political aims of these thinkers suits Highmore's sense of the everyday not as specific kinds of activities or conditions but as a mode of attention. "Perhaps then, the everyday is the name that cultural theory might give to a form of attention that attempts to animate the heterogeneity of social life," Highmore writes in his conclusion, "the name for an activity of finding meaning in an impossible diversity" (175). What Highmore means by this claim, I presume, is that *attending* to the everyday amounts to making meanings from it.
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Highmore sustains the everyday’s diversity across cultures and periods in *The Everyday Life Reader*, an interdisciplinary anthology and an invaluable pedagogical resource. His Reader includes over thirty theoretical texts organized in five parts: “Situating the everyday,” “Everyday life and ‘national’ culture,” “Ethnography near and far,” “Reclamation work,” and “Everyday things.” Though largely Anglophone, the texts range from the foundational theorists of post-war France discussed above to classics of modern culture (Freud on slips of the tongue; Betty Friedan on the feminine mystique) to recent critics engaged across disciplines (Xiaobing Tang on post-revolutionary China; Stuart Hall on postwar black settlements in Britain). The last essay by the literary scholar Steven Connor explores in brilliant detail the mysteries of meaning inherent in an everyday object, the bag. “In Britain and America,” Connor writes, “subtle, untaught but unbreachable rules still govern the kind of bags that men and women can feel comfortable holding or carrying” (349). An attachment to bags becomes both a cultural phenomenon and a shared human need, in Connor’s analysis, a dialectic that squares with Highmore’s aim to include in his Reader accounts of the everyday as both particular and universal.

This is the everyday’s Achilles heel: its definitional capaciousness. To my mind, the responsible critic must make a decision to focus on a clearly articulated feature of the everyday if the term is to be at all useful. Sheringham inventories the possibilities, a menu of the everyday’s options, and an elegant survey of the field:

“Does the ‘everyday’ refer to an objective ‘content’, defined by a particular kind of (daily) activity, or is it best thought of in terms of such notions as rhythm, repetition, festivity, ordinariness, non-cumulation, seriality, the generic, the obvious, the given? Are there events or acts that are uniquely ‘everyday’, or is the *quotidien* a way of thinking about events and acts in the ‘here and now’ as opposed to the longer term? If it makes sense to see the everyday as one of the parameters of our lives, can this parameter ever be disentangled from others? If these are the sort of issue that seem to be at stake, how are they addressed in works focusing on the everyday? Is it characteristic of such works to depict the everyday, or do they work on us in ways that train attention on our own experience, so that discourse on the everyday is ultimately pragmatic or performative in character? Do specific genres or media have particular virtues in granting access to, or purchase on, the everyday? Or does the everyday seem to slip between the fingers, so to speak, of established genres and, by virtue of an inherent elusiveness, seem to escape the purview of, say, narrative fiction, lyric poetry, drama, film, photography, pictorial art, reportage, thriving rather on the indeterminacy offered by the transgression of generic boundaries?” (25).

Many of these questions have guided critical works that aim to isolate the everyday in a specific genre. For instance, Laurie Langbauer’s *Novels of Everyday Life* (1999) treats the Victorian “series” novel as conducive to the everyday’s structure. Similarly Bryony Randall’s *Modernism, Daily Time, and Everyday Life* suggests that the novel of just “one day” is particularly suited to the everyday’s temporality. Both lines of reasoning rest on the observation that the everyday is an on-going experience, a repetition of days but not of narrative “events.” Siobhan Phillips in *The Poetics of the Everyday* prioritizes the modernist lyric as a genre that best illuminates recurrent time, specifically diurnal repetitions. Phillips argues against the equation of lyric poetry with timelessness and revises the idea advanced by other critics that narrative is “what happens next” and lyric is “what happens now” (22).

The terrain of Randall’s and Phillips’s arguments about the everyday is literary and their institutional contexts are departments of English rather than a department of cultural studies (Highmore), French literature (Sheringham), or sociology (Gardner). Randall and Phillips both minimize theories of everyday life in favor of philosophies of habit and time originating in the work of William James, Bergson, Pater, as well as (for Phillips) Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Freud. These critical frameworks embed modernist literature in the historical and cultural discourses that very directly impacted the writers whose work Randall and Phillips discuss. And
in this sense, both studies avoid the pitfalls of relying on theoretical models that demand careful
and extended historicizing in order to illuminate the literature of modernism.

Randall's argument foregrounds gender and the long association between dailiness and
women's experiences. She examines the modes of attention paid to everyday activities in the
work of Dorothy Richardson, Gertrude Stein, H. D., and Virginia Woolf. Following Highmore,
Randall suggests that the everyday is characterized less by a specific set of practices (cooking,
washing) than it is characterized by affective dimensions such as boredom or reverie. Most
compelling is Randall's argument that women's writing can present a structural challenge to the
Marxist framework in which mental labor is not sufficiently accounted for as a form of work.
Her chapter on Woolf, for instance, understands the shape of a day that takes place in the home
and is yet dominated by "reading, writing and thinking" (156). Randall's claim is that these daily
activities are also work and that they shed light on the everyday's oscillating modes of attention.
A line of inquiry that Randall's argument might have taken—it does so only implicitly—is to ask
what levels of attention high modernist texts demand of their readers. Is "difficulty" actually a
kind of ordinariness, since it so often produces mental fatigue?

Randall rightly points out that labor often associated with women has been undervalued
or assumed to be mundane to the extent that it has not received sufficient attention, or, even
worse, that women are not aware of the economic and cultural complexities of their daily work.
Lefebvre, for instance, has argued that women are so entrenched in the everyday that they are
unable to critique it—as if it is women's ineluctable fate to generate the phenomenon on which
his theories are sustained. Feminist critics of Lefebvre's work—myself included—take issue with
his intensely masculinist assumptions about domestic and intellectual spheres of labor. Randall's
analysis of the experiences of daily time depicted in the work of modernist women writers very
clearly establishes the compatibility of domestic work with a clear-eyed sense of its limitations
and satisfactions. Randall's concentration upon women's writing, however, left me wondering
if her study sustains rather than eradicates a dichotomy that associates women with domestic
ordinariness and men with the epiphanic revelations of urban life. Modernist representations of
everyday life—from Proust to Woolf to T. S. Eliot—suggest that each sex can be both enmeshed
in the everyday and conscious of it at the same time.

Whereas Randall is strongest when she discusses the affective dimension of the everyday,
Phillips is best in discussing repetition both as a modernist subject and at the level of poetic line
and word. Phillips examines the work of four American poets who treat repetition with a rare
attention: Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, Elizabeth Bishop, and James Merrill. Phillips herself
is a careful reader and her book demonstrates a deep understanding of the workings of poetic
language and the shape of each poet's career. We might ask why other poets are not included in
her study if we think of William Carlos Williams's spare lines or the work of some early imagist
poets. Phillips would argue that the poets of her study are interested in "diurnal repetitions"
rather than "quotidian instants" (8). The intensity of Williams's observances, in Phillips's argument,
paradoxically diminishes the sense that there is an actual observer within the field of the poem.
Alternatively the works of Frost, Stevens, Bishop, and Merrill aim to keep individuality intact
through a poetics of recurrence (9). Phillips suggests that the repetitions of each day—enacted
through lyrical repetitions—are a means through which subjectivity is sustained.

Though Phillips does not dwell upon the question of why these poets turned to the everyday,
her book does suggest that this turn is in part provoked by the loss of religious belief. Fundamentally,
Phillips's selection of poets hinges on an argument that for these four poets the everyday
becomes a kind of substitute for religious faith. "Their twentieth-century wisdom literature,"
Phillips writes, "is drawn from common sense" (16). This suggestion—and the conflation of
the secular with the everyday—opens up an important line of inquiry. Are the aesthetics of the
everyday—Wallace Stevens’s "complacencies of the peignoir"—a substitute for religious aesthet-
ics, or is the everyday primarily a spiritual and ethical category? The conclusion of The Poetics of
the Everyday looks forward to the work of later American poets (John Ashbery, Robert Hass,
Kay Ryan, and Frank Bidart), though a loss of religious belief is a less urgent rationale for how
and why everyday recurrence informs the work of these poets.

Phillips's concentration on the lyric inevitably raises the issue of the limitations and strengths
of other genres in treating everyday time. The nineteenth-century novel, for instance, has long
been viewed as the exemplary chronicler of everyday life from critics like Ian Watt to Franco Moretti. Langbauer's and Randall's arguments grow out of this association between the everyday and particular realist modes. Furthermore, I know of at least one book-in-progress, Thomas Davis's *The Extinct Scene: Late Modernism and Everyday Life*, which treats documentary film as a mode through which the everyday narrates historical change. In the case of each of these excellent studies, the linkage between a particular genre and a feature of the everyday produces an illuminating analysis of aesthetic form, but the cumulative effect of these studies seems to have obscured the everyday's definition.

Claiming the advantages of one genre in treating the everyday, as these literary scholars understand, is a tricky critical endeavor if only because the twentieth century witnessed important works of art that dissolved boundaries between genres. The modernist impetus to *make it new* was balanced by a counter pull to keep the ordinary untransfigured, which often meant playing with form. To return to *Ulysses*: its shifting styles suggest among other things that no genre or style can sufficiently represent an ordinary reality. In many other modernist works, distinctions between poetry, drama, and prose were challenged by writers who aimed to re-think how ordinary experiences might be represented—such as how poetry might include colloquial speech. Dissatisfaction with earlier forms of realism and naturalism (in the line of Virginia Woolf's critique of the Edwardians) fueled stylistic play. Furthermore, a persistent question invigorated literary representations of the “detail”: What is the significance of this insignificance? Central to the experiments of modernist literature was a pre-occupation with how to represent but also embody the everyday. We must take account of the everyday’s affective dimensions, and the ways that a variety of literary genres “work on us,” to use Sheringham’s phrase, allowing for a reader’s affective boredom or disinterest. The different ways that modernism was circulated and received have become crucial to our understanding of the period. Many modernist works of art shocked audiences but many were also embraced and absorbed, becoming in due course part of our everyday lives.

**Note**

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