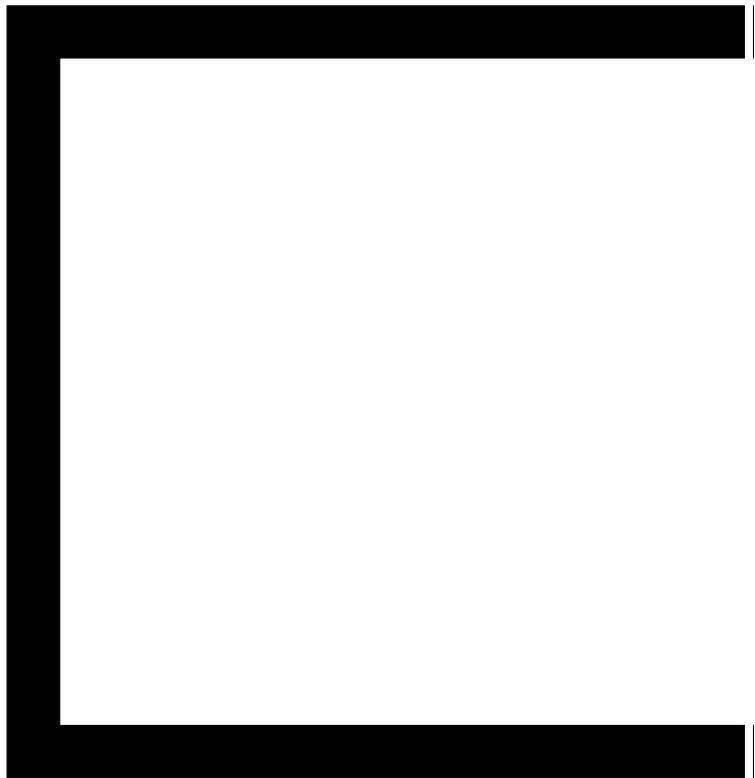


reviews



NATALYA LUSTY

every kind of everyday ...

MICHAEL SHERINGHAM

*Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from
Surrealism to the Present*

Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006

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KATHLEEN STEWART

Ordinary Affects

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Is it our habitual blindness to the everyday that has created an urgency of speaking about it in a way that promises something of its ambiguity and indeterminacy, reminding us of Hegel's assertion that the familiar is not necessarily the known?¹ On the one hand our sense of the everyday is saturated with the ordinariness of habitual routine and domestic ennui; on the other it is witness to moments of quiet reverie and spectacular illumination, often encapsulated by the lyrical language used to describe our experience of the everyday. When Lukács speaks of 'the anarchy of the chiaroscuro of the everyday' we sense something of the chaos that shades our perception of the ordinary.² Or when Blanchot suggests that the everyday 'allows no hold', we understand the ephemeral uncertainty that governs our attempts to seize the intractable.³ Our enduring fascination with the everyday speaks to the surface of modernity itself as a site of permanent paradox, where the promise of experiential knowledge is continually confounded by the mutability of eternal becoming. That is why, for Blanchot, the everyday is 'what is most difficult to discover': as both self-evident and obscure it is an enigma to be deciphered.⁴

That enigma has over the last decade or so seen a flurry of work produced on the everyday, heralding the emergence of 'everyday life studies' within Anglophone cultural studies programs. While there have been formative developments in this field as it emerged within discrete national or regional contexts, a good deal of this work is nevertheless indebted to the French tradition of '*la vie quotidienne*', particularly the pioneering work of Henri Lefebvre and

Michel de Certeau. Of course, there have been other influences and preoccupations that have contributed to a fertile apprehension of the everyday in this context; for example, the Mass Observation Movement in Britain, the sociology of Georg Simmel and the work of Raymond Williams, to name just a few, have been instrumental in fleshing out the heterogeneity of 'everyday life studies'. And yet, this diffuseness, along with a tendency to siphon sources out of one tradition and place them into an evolving field of study, begs the question as to what more or less coherent archive gets lost in the process? Or what kinds of distortion emerge in relation to the translation and reception of work outside its moment of shared historical reference?

In *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present* Michael Sheringham attempts to restore 'the coherence of an intellectual tradition' on the everyday as it emerged in France across the course of the twentieth century, without creating, he assures us, 'a single monolithic view or doctrine on the everyday'. (6) What emerges is an immensely rich and scholarly examination of the central importance of the *quotidien* to French intellectual and aesthetic culture. While the book concentrates on the accelerated development of ideas around the everyday in the period between 1960 and 1980, and notably the four most innovative thinkers of this period, Henri Lefebvre, Roland Barthes, Michel de Certeau and Georges Perec, it provides an important prehistory to this moment through its examination of Baudelaire's concept of *modernité* and its legacy in the Surrealists' fascination with

urban experience, as well as mapping the more negative terrain of philosophical understandings of the everyday by Heidegger and Lukács and the astute and ethical approach to self-realisation in the everyday by Agnes Heller. It ends with an exploration of the proliferation of these theories and practices into diverse fields and media, marking what Sheringham refers to as the post 1980s 'phase of practice, variation and dissemination'. (6)

Sheringham's lengthy chapters on Surrealism—one on Breton's various projects concerned with 'a revolution of everyday life' and the other on the dissident Surrealism of Bataille, Leiris, Queneau and Benjamin—not only provide an important genealogy for the everyday as it came to influence the work of later theorists and practitioners, but also produce an insightful reading of the sheer range of Surrealist contributions to the invention and investigation of everyday life. In tracing the use of documentary photography in both strains of this movement (through Boiffard's different collaborations with Breton and Bataille), Sheringham reveals the subtle similarities and differences that emerge in these two Surrealist approaches. In Breton's *Nadja*, documentary photography functions as a way to record what is there in the everyday—pointing to what we might be in danger of missing precisely because it is ordinary; here everyday space is seen as a site of possibility where the enigmatic and the self-evident collide, alerting us to the photograph as a domain of unconscious attention, unleashing what Breton described as 'voluntary hallucination'. As Sheringham makes clear, '*Nadja* is about convergences, in certain places

and events, between what haunts us and what we in turn haunt, between what we are magnetically drawn to, and what we inject with energies derived from our hidden profile: not our hidden depths but the identity that is ours by virtue of interaction with the world we inhabit'. (93) Boiffard's photographs that accompany *Nadja* testify to the everyday as a site of expectation; by honing in on the irrefutable evidence of actual places and things, these images capture the 'uncanny feelings' that occur when we train our attention on the familiar and ordinary. As such, 'Benjamin rightly insists that surrealist writings were not concerned with literature or abstract theories, still less with fantasies: they were "documents" that related to experiences'. (88) No wonder Foucault, writing in 1966, the year of Breton's death, credited the Surrealist leader with inventing a truly interdisciplinary praxis centred on the domain of experience. (60) In closely analysing Boiffard's 'Big Toe' series, commissioned by Bataille to accompany his essay for *Documents*, Sheringham turns his attention to a different mode of attending to everyday experience, one nevertheless shaped by an emphasis on the ethnographic and primitivist preoccupations already latent within Surrealism—'the arena of primal fears, taboos and desires'. (95) Through the use of close-up, enlargement and intense lighting, Boiffard's images of the big toe reveal the body as grotesque and monstrous, combining what Sheringham calls 'the irrefutable reality of the document with a hallucinatory presence that opens the real to the play of fantasy'. (96) This corresponds with Bataille's larger preoccupation

with the twin pulls of fascination and disgust linked to an everyday familiar made strange through the rearrangement of the high and the low, the ideal and the base. But, as Sheringham argues, the point of these images, and Bataille's purpose in *Documents* more generally, is to privilege 'the base side of human reality', while staying within the realm of the irrefutable real. (101) Rather than take us down the path of the irreconcilable differences between Bretonian Surrealism and its dissident siblings (Bataille and Leiris), Sheringham seeks to understand the complex interactions between these two strains of Surrealism and how they shaped, reshaped and enriched the legacies of a Surrealist insight into the everyday. (95) In attending to the uncanny feelings provoked by those affectively charged everyday occurrences, spaces and objects, the Surrealists, rather than ignoring reality, sought various ways to renew the magnificent profusion of the real.

In the four central chapters devoted to Lefebvre, Barthes, Certeau and Perec, Sheringham draws attention to the historical specificities ('rapid modernization, May '68, urbanism, Structuralism and its decline, cultural policy, a shift towards collective memory') that came to shape new kinds of theories and practices for revolutionising work on the everyday as well as the productive interactions that occurred between these thinkers. Some of this territory will no doubt be familiar to cultural studies readers; however, Sheringham's rich contextualisation of these key thinkers alongside close readings of individual texts opens up the tensions between their work, while enabling a set of consistent

concerns and trajectories to emerge. The discussion of the contributions made by writers such as Baudrillard, Maffessoli, Wittgenstein and Cavell similarly reveals the versatility of ideas developed around the everyday in the wider context of European intellectual thought, often demonstrating the refusal of the everyday to be limited to any kind of fixed category of analysis or disciplinary approach. This is why, for Sheringham, the notions of ambiguity and indeterminacy are central to any comprehensive attempt to think philosophically about the everyday 'as a sphere of human self-realization'. (30) In this context the work of Lefebvre is examined through his evolving ideas on the *quotidien*, which were marked by a practice of revision and re-evaluation in the face of rapid social change and the emergence of different methodological approaches in the newly established social sciences. Across the first two volumes of his *Critique de la vie quotidienne* (1947 and 1961), a sustained preoccupation with the ideas of alienation and appropriation emerges as the most innovative way to critically re-evaluate the site of the everyday, one that initially at least moved away from a Surrealist emphasis on the 'merveilleux', on the extraordinary and the exceptional, toward a full realisation of the everyday as a site of both alienation and de-alienation. (136) For Lefebvre, the topology of the everyday—the dialectic between residue and product—suggests that there is something in the everyday that always escapes the formality of imposed form: 'The everyday protests; it revolts in the name of innumerable particular cases and unforeseen situations'. (149) While Lefebvre

embraced the very ambiguity of the everyday, 'as concept and concrete reality', his own projects were nevertheless continually thwarted by the immense task of 'developing ways of understanding and experiencing it'. (143)

Through what Sheringham calls 'a climate of exchange, rivalry, and, in the end enmity' (159), Lefebvre and the Situationists evolved a way of thinking about the everyday that disclosed an increasing interest in the relationship between the ordinary and the extraordinary ('la banalité' and 'la fête'). (157) In part returning to the legacy of the Surrealists (though with an emphasis on conscious intervention), Debord and others sought to rethink the ground of avant-garde activity in terms of everyday engagements or 'situations' that would spark new forms of experience and behaviour, ones that were designed to counter 'mechanisms of conditioning and constraint'. (161) Here the key activities of *dérive*, *détournement* and *situation* mark the emergence of a psychogeography that seeks to understand how particular kinds of environments and the atmosphere they generate condition particular kinds of desirable behaviours and states of being: 'we must find concrete techniques for shaking up the ambiances of everyday life'. (Debord in Sheringham, 163) As Sheringham notes, often a crude form of 'determinism or behaviourism' is in evidence here, one that risks displacing one form of conditioning and constraint with another, albeit with a new kind of sociopolitical edge. If, for Lefebvre and Debord, resistance came to be seen as an important dimension of everyday life, this becomes one of the defining features of Michel de Certeau's work. From the

first volume of *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Certeau sets out to challenge the resounding image of the passive consumer manipulated by bureaucratic and consumer systems. Influenced by Foucault's analysis of the tiny ruses that make up the operation of power at the micro-level of the everyday and Barthes's influential essay, 'Semiology and Urbanism' (1967), Sheringham reveals how Certeau came to arrive at a concentration on the style and form of everyday cultural activity (rather than its content *per se*), turning his attention to the common elements or properties (styles of action) in everyday practices such as walking, reading, speaking. According to Certeau, 'to read is to wander through an opposed system' (226), and reading and walking are practices that provide the opportunity for creative interaction. The mastery of Certeau's approach, for Sheringham at least, lies in how these modes or styles of action are in essence all metaphorically related to each other: 'Walking is a mode of reading the spatial environment, reading is a mode of journeying; speaking involves narrativization that links spaces together as in walking, and so on'. (222–3) Like the relation of difference that works through metaphor itself, these practices 'cut across established boundaries and hierarchies', (223) forming in the process new kinds of opportunities and connections. In subtle ways Certeau returns to the work of the Surrealists by attending to modes of walking the city that pinpoint the strangeness of the everyday as the 'obscure interweaving of daily routines that always fall outside prevailing representations'. (223) He nevertheless insists that if the ordinary has been

lost to us, buried by formal and instrumental forms of knowledge, in attending to those 'ways of doing' employed by urban subjects we find individual and collective practices of creative reappropriation. While, according to Sheringham, Certeau is sometimes seen as parcelling off small amounts of power to the powerless, giving them a partial licence to play on the fringes of official systems, Sheringham insists that in Certeau's work 'the logic of systems creates an endless dialectic of mastery, submission and creation that denies fixed positions'. (232)

If 'everyday life' was one of Roland Barthes's lifelong concerns, Sheringham nevertheless locates a radical shift in his conceptual approach to the *quotidien*, moving from an essentially ironic and negative approach to consumer culture in *Mythologies* (first published in 1957) to an increasing interest in the creative possibilities embedded within the lived experience of everyday meaning. In his brilliant analysis of the much-maligned *Fashion System* (1967), Sheringham locates Barthes's fascination with 'the prestige of the detail', the idea that in all forms of systemic signification 'a minimal difference can have maximal consequences'. (179) In understanding fashion within the rubric of the everyday, Sheringham traces 'a line in contemporary [fashion] theory, stemming from Barthes, that sees the logic of fashion as a signifying practice that is not tyrannical or enslaving, but potentially liberating'. (192) Earlier writers such as Simmel and Benjamin had also found in fashion a resistance to constraint and regimentation, as well as seeing it as an extension of the quotidian itself,

one that reveals what Benjamin defines as a 'deep affective attitude to historical process'. (182) Barthes's contribution here is to see fashion as a 'truly poetic object' that resists any fixed ideological meaning. Moreover, in focusing on the structural formations of the fashion system Barthes gives us access to the wider context of everyday experience, where, as Sheringham observes, 'tiny details and infinitesimal differences conspire to produce multiple networks and processes of meaning in the thick of the seemingly insignificant'. (179) The attention to the 'everyday present', developed in his analysis of fashion, has resonances in Barthes's subsequent endeavour to connect the art of living with new kinds of writing that do justice to everyday experience. According to Sheringham '[t]he constant crossover between "la vie" and "le texte" in late Barthes reflects a desire to shift the arena of textual play from the book to life itself, to locate "the rustle of language ... in life, the adventure of life, in what life brings in impromptu fashion"'. (199) And if Barthes praises the Surrealists for seeing writing in terms of an experience of the everyday, in combining ways of living with experimental forms of writing, he too is alive to the ambiguity, both textual and experiential, lodged in the everyday: 'So, nothing happens. This nothing has, nonetheless, to be expressed. How can one express: nothing?' (201) Defining the everyday in terms of its refusal and its desire not to be refused, Barthes captures the methodological paradox that haunts subsequent surveyors of the everyday.

In the final two chapters Sheringham takes us beyond the immediate exchange of ideas

between the book's key thinkers, charting instead the diffuseness and diversity with which their ideas and critical tools have spread across a range of genres and media, including film, art, and literature, as well as taking root in a new kind of social theory emerging in the wake of the humanities' drift toward interdisciplinarity. As Sheringham argues, in such a climate of intellectual indeterminacy and free spirit, the everyday has now become 'a guest at every feast, the bride to be escorted down the aisle of every intellectual *chapelle*', (295) still, however, provoking endless methodological debate as to how best capture and represent the all-elusive quotidian. The increasing importance of the everyday to disciplines such as anthropology and sociology has brought renewed attention to the micro-level of ritual and habit as the formative mode of everyday 'lived experience', with Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' attending to the unconscious internalisation of social values and Goffman's 'impression management' registering the tendency of behaviour to become codified through social norms. (301) As Sheringham demonstrates, many of these questions became a central feature of a burgeoning 'proximate ethnography', taken up in Marc Augé's *Un Ethnologue dans le métro* which, Sheringham argues, succeeds where other forms of proximate ethnography have not, precisely because it foregrounds the tensions between anthropological scrutiny and everyday lived experience; rather than pretending to simulate distance and unfamiliarity, it uses the everyday space of the metro to reflect on the method of ethnography itself—'as practice, theory and institution'.

(307) Despite the prodigious task Sheringham has set himself, *Everyday Life* is an exceptional accomplishment in part because it never ceases to underestimate the difficulties and uncertainties that beset the investigation of the quotidian, as well as opening up the manifold possibilities that emerge when we allow our attention to drift toward it. Imparting an unbridled and often contagious passion for his subject, Sheringham allows the everyday to come into view as an indispensable expression of the modern world and our place within it. It is an important book for all scholars and aficionados of the everyday, whatever their disciplinary creed.

While investigations of the everyday have a long tradition of uncovering the affective dimension of lived experience, Kathleen Stewart's *Ordinary Affects* seems to have consciously absorbed the affective turn in cultural studies, and denotes the more recent move from the discursive exploration of the everyday to a figural representation of the affective intimacies and intensities that accrue in ordinary moments of living. At 129 pages, Stewart's *Ordinary Affects* is a slim volume of anecdotal (and auto-ethnographical) vignettes that mine the experiences and encounters that make up the tenuous surface of the more abstract and reifying grand narratives—advanced capitalism, globalisation, neo-liberalism—giving the anonymity of middle America a decidedly physiological presence. Writing through the third person pronoun, Stewart distances the authorial voice in order to foreground the provisional status of narrative and identity:

'She' is not so much a subject position or an agent in hot pursuit of something definitive as a point of contact; instead she gazes, imagines, senses, takes on, performs, and asserts not a flat and finished truth but some possibilities (and threats) that have come into view in the effort to become attuned to what a particular scene might offer. (5)

Borrowing Raymond Williams's definition of 'structures of feeling', itself a kind of bedrock in the affective turn of cultural studies, Stewart argues that ordinary affects 'do not have to await definition, classification, or rationalization before they exert palpable pressures'. (3)

For Stewart everyday affect is both promise and threat, which is why she suggests the ordinary can 'turn us on' in quite unexpected ways: 'Lodged in the habits, conceits, and the loving and deadly contacts of everyday sociality, [the ordinary] can catch you up in something bad. Or good.' (106) Here the simplicity of being caught up in something bad or good reminds us precisely of how the unpredictability of everyday experience is often relayed back into the antinomies of promise and threat that give witness to the conflicts through which everyday affect marks its ordinariness. In this unpredictability a low-level anxiety seems to hover on the surface of so many of the encounters and experiences that Stewart narrates, suggesting that ordinary affect is felt as an acute ambivalence that registers both the familiar and the unfamiliar.

In spite of the charm that flows through many of these personal and estranged encounters, the

attempts to theorise this project (in its opening section in particular) left me rather cold. Although Stewart sets her experiment against what she calls 'a static plane of analysis' (3), the introduction's Deleuzian speak ('shifting assemblages', 'surging capacities', 'circuits and flows', 'lines of potential', 'fixed conditions of possibility', 'pressure points of events', 'flows of power') captured less of the ordinary and the affective (as developed by Williams and Barthes, from whom Stewart draws inspiration) and more of a kind of tired cultural theory rhetoric that has long lost its capacity to ignite fresh observation. Although this says less about the importance or usefulness of Deleuze's work, and more about the faddishness of theory, it nevertheless amounts in this work, at times, to a static jargon that does not do justice to the project's otherwise animated and effective storytelling.

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1. G. W. F. Hegel, 'Preface to The Phenomenology of Spirit', in Stephen Houlgate (ed.), *The Hegel Reader*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1998, p. 58.
 2. György Lukács in Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1988, p. 199.
 3. Maurice Blanchot, 'Everyday Speech', in Alice Kaplan and Kristin Ross (eds), *Everyday Life: Yale French Studies*, 73, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1987, p. 14.
 4. Blanchot, p. 12.