

Considerations on the Everyday as an Aesthetic Category

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“The everyday is covered by a surface: that of modernity,” wrote Henri Lefebvre in an article of 1972 which summarised in crystalline fashion many of the concepts he had laboriously forged over a twenty year period.¹ According to Lefebvre, both here and elsewhere in his voluminous work on this topic, the concept of the everyday is born specifically of the widespread changes ushered in by the onslaught of the modern era in occidental nations. The surging populations that gradually imploded congested urban centers in Europe during the nineteenth century necessarily resulted in a systemisation and homogenisation of life down to the smallest particulars of existence, he argues. This process resulted in a predictable regularity of living that we have come to know as *la vie quotidienne*.

Even while he insists that it is only within the periodisation of modernity that an experience of the everyday can be said to evolve for the first time, Lefebvre also admits that those same forces of temporal change likewise render the concept of the everyday a frustratingly mercurial notion. Later in the same article, he ponders, “The days follow one after another and resemble one another, and yet - here lies the contradiction at the heart of everydayness - everything changes.”²

Indeed, following Lefebvre’s lead, it can be said that the everyday is a highly unstable and contradictory category when viewed through the lens of the cultural construction of modernity from whence it stems. It is arguable that the reception of the everyday has been characterised by a profound ambiguity within the aesthetic dialogues of the avant-gardes and neo-avant-gardes over the last century, as well as within the crop of debates that arose simultaneously within the realms of critical thought during this historical period. Placed under the extraordinary pressures of modernity, the notion of the “everyday” takes on a manifestly paradoxical character, resulting in what Lefebvre calls in the aforementioned article a “deep structure” of simultaneous conflict and complementarity.³

If we take as our starting point a basic working definition of the everyday - necessarily reduced here in nuance for the sake of brevity - as that which has become exceedingly familiar and unexceptional as a result of repeated exposure, it can readily be perceived that such a concept runs counter to many themes that were central to an avant-garde understanding of the radical cultural transformation termed modernity. While certainly we can still agree with Peter Bürger that the avant-garde sought a rapprochement of the artistic sphere with the "praxis of life" - a dissolution of the boundaries carefully guarded by academicism - both the pre- and post-War avant-gardes also collectively underlined the way in which everyday life had been profoundly altered under the influence of modernity.⁴ Indeed, if the avant-garde can be characterised as a conscious flooding of the visual plane with both readymade and depicted reflections of everyday existence contra the hermeticism of hegemonic aesthetic discourses, this trend must also be attributed to the deeply contested nature of the category of the everyday itself in the early twentieth-century context.

Modernity poses an unmistakable challenge to notions of the banal, the familiar, the average, the comfortable, what could be termed the most overlooked aspects of the fabric of living. In the standard narrative employed in current cultural histories to describe the gestation of a capitalist economic structure in society, it is precisely the boredom of the daily life of bourgeois consumers that is targeted and seized as a valuable opportunity by increasingly ravenous production cycles. Novelty, then, becomes the commercial panacea to the monotony of everyday work routines. As culture becomes more ensconced in the framework of industrialism over time, this mantra of novelty infiltrates quotidian existence in such a thorough manner that even the familiar itself often appears alien in various capacities.

In an essay surveying the development of the concept of the everyday in French post-War philosophy, Kristin Ross points out that in Henri Lefebvre's first volume of *Critique de la vie quotidienne* in 1947, the experience of the everyday only arises with the formation of the bourgeoisie and the decline in power of the aristocracy and the church in the nineteenth century. She explains that in Lefebvre's reading, the routines and patterns that characterise the everyday result from the flooding of the urban space with masses of individuals, who in turn seek labor that subjects them to a preeminently quantifiable existence, which equates the passage of time with the accrual of value.⁵

A later incarnation of industrial capitalism must also be taken into

consideration when scrutinising the everyday and its impact as a modern aesthetic concept: that of the years immediately preceding and postdating World War I, when a newfound commercialism sought to provide the masses with various forms of consumption that might distract them from the oppressive banality of the daily work schedule. Thus, it can be said that the very formation of an experience of the everyday in early modernity results in the opposing desire to evade the everyday through the excesses of total commercialism in later decades.

Hence, one is reminded of Charles Baudelaire's rather strained search for the eternal within the humble framework of the contemporary everyday, and his ultimate capitulation to the vagaries of ephemerality, which he finally crowned as the sovereign concept of his *modernité* in his analysis of the work of artist Constantin Guys.⁶ Yet, the idealised notion of the eternal was not solely questioned by the productive thrust of modernity. On the contrary, society's growing material mania challenged the dependability of the most mundane of routine habits. As modernity progressed, the everyday was no longer the predictable confrontation of individuals with a limited series of objects, activities, and social mores. Instead, at least by the commencement of the twentieth century, commonplace existence was flooded with a ceaseless parade of machinic inventions, advertisements, media sensations, fashion crazes, data transmissions, and so on. Indeed, in a paradoxical turn of events, novelty itself had become everyday within twentieth-century modernity.

In Lefebvre's reassessment of the everyday in the 1960's, the conundrum presented by the concept of the everyday was due in part to the radical shifts in patterns of daily life across broad historical periods - the way in which many aspects of modern life were simply too new to yet become prosaic.⁷ As mentioned above, however, Lefebvre likewise noted that the evasive nature of the everyday in modernity resulted from the continuously morphing character of the quotidian. Indeed, in the modern era the fundamental nature of duration, continuity, and repetition are subject to highly unique conditions, even on a daily basis. Where comfortably conventional circadian rhythms dissolve in the hectic pace of modern life, the contrasting experiences of commercial sameness and linear progress doggedly arise in parallel fashion.

Acknowledging this last point during the same immediate post-War period in which Lefebvre's first critique of the everyday was published, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer lambasted the oppressively monotonous structure of infinite repetition through product standardization

as a primary consequence of the culture industry in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.⁸ Their searing invective against consumer society underlined the way in which experiencing repetition in the everyday had been fundamentally altered from cyclical recurrence to the endless tautology of a society inundated by the assembly line principles of Fordism. Given these tensions, an uncomfortable dialectic between the poles of the new and the old, repetition and diversion, variation and sameness, and boredom and distraction, soon formed in the critical arena of everyday modernity that still has not been resolved. As Maurice Blanchot aptly said in a 1959 article devoted to the quotidian, "...one...is henceforth incapable of deciding if there is a lack of the everyday, or if one has too much of it."⁹

It is arguable that all the European avant-gardes of the first half of the twentieth century were preoccupied with the radical transformation of everyday reality in modernity, although they each heralded these changes through the filters of myriad attitudes, political views and aesthetic aims. From the outset then, the fascination with the everyday in Modernism must be understood as based largely in the widespread upheaval in platitudinous patterns of being, which in themselves were fairly new on the horizon of cultural memory. In this light, the appearance of the theme of the everyday in avant-garde visual arts is not merely a question of the subversive alteration of the mimetic languages of Realism and Naturalism through the tactics of collage and the Duchampian readymade, as has recently been suggested by J. Watkins in his essay of 2000, 'The Continuity of Realism and the Everyday'.¹⁰ Rather, avant-garde culture in general, including cubism, futurism, Apollinarian orphism, and so on, can be said to reflect upon the way in which the baseline understanding of the natural and the real have been altered within the modern era. In such a reading, the revolution of the aesthetic sphere in modernity is instead directly contingent upon changes within cultural life itself, therefore eclipsing in importance the notion of art as an entirely autonomous sphere transgressively pierced by the vulgar patina of the everyday. The everyday thus becomes not so much a low culture that invades high culture. Instead, the everyday is a comparably destabilised category that reflects the same fragmentation and decomposition plaguing the societal notion of an autonomous aesthetic sphere itself.

1 H. Lefebvre, 'The Everyday and Everydayness', C. Levich, K. Ross, and A. Kaplan (trans.), *Yale French Studies*, No.73, 1987, 10. This article was originally published as "Quotidien et Quotidienneté" in *Encyclopaedia Universalis*, 1972.

- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid., 11.
- 4 P. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, M. Shaw (trans.), (Minneapolis: 1984), 22 and in passim. This text was first published as *Theorie der Avantgarde* in 1974.
- 5 K. Ross, 'French Quotidian', in L. Gumpert (ed.), *The Art of the Everyday: The Quotidian in Postwar French Culture*, (New York: 1997), 21.
- 6 Baudelaire called the eternal the "other half" of the ephemeral in his essay, 'The Painter of Modern Life', written in the last months of 1859 and the beginning of 1860. This essay was first published in *Le Figaro* in a series of installments in 1863. C. Baudelaire, 'The Painter of Modern Life', in J. Mayne (trans.), *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, (London: 2005), 1-41. See in particular, 12-13.
- 7 I refer to Lefebvre's 1947 text, *Critique de la vie quotidienne*, and his reconsideration of some of these themes in, *La vie quotidienne dans le monde moderne*, published in 1968. This last book has been translated as: H. Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, S. Rabinovitch (trans.), (New York: 1971). See in particular, 24-6. Also relevant here are Lefebvre's second and third volumes of *Critique de la vie quotidienne*, published in 1961 and 1981.
- 8 M. Horkheimer and T. W. Adorno, 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception', in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, J. Cumming (trans.), New York, 1972, 120-67. This book was first published as *Dialektik der Aufklärung: philosophische Fragmente* in 1944.
- 9 M. Blanchot, 'Everyday Speech', S. Hanson, (trans.), *Yale French Studies*, no.73, 1987, 16. This article was originally published as 'La Parole quotidienne', in *L'Entretien infini* of 1959.
- 10 J. Watkins, 'The Continuity of Realism and the Everyday', in *Quotidiana: immagini della vita di ogni giorno nell'arte del XX secolo = The Continuity of the Everyday in 20th Century Art* (Rivoli: Charta, 2000) 53-56.