

Ordinary Lives

Studies in the Everyday

Ben Highmore



Ordinary Lives

This new study from Ben Highmore looks at the seemingly banal world of objects, work, daily media and food, and finds there a scintillating array of passionate experience. Through a series of case studies, and building on his previous work on the everyday, Highmore examines our relationship to familiar objects (a favourite chair), repetitive work (housework, typing), media (distracted television viewing and radio listening) and food (specifically the food of multicultural Britain). A chair allows him to consider the history of flat-pack furniture as well as the lively presence of inorganic ‘stuff’ in our daily lives. Distracted television watching and radio listening becomes one of the preconditions for experiencing wonder through the media.

Ordinary Lives links the concrete study of routine existence to theoretical reflection on everyday life. The book discusses philosophers such as Jacques Rancière, William James and David Hume and combines them with autobiographical testimonies, historical research and the analysis of popular culture to investigate the minutiae of day-to-day life. Highmore argues that aesthetic experience is embedded in the mundane sensory world of everyday life. He asks the reader to reconsider the negative associations of habit and routine, focusing specifically on the intrinsic ambiguity of habit (habit, we find out, is both rigid and adaptive). Rather than ask ‘what does everyday life mean?’ this book asks ‘what does everyday life feel like and how do our sensual, emotional and temporal experiences interconnect and intersect?’

Ordinary Lives is an accessible, animated and engaging book that is ideally suited to both students and researchers working in cultural studies, media and communication and sociology.

Ben Highmore is Reader in Media and Cultural Studies at the University of Sussex, UK. He is the author of *A Passion for Cultural Studies* (2009), *Michel de Certeau: Analysing Culture* (2006), *Cityscapes: Cultural Readings in the Material and Symbolic City* (2005), *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory* (2002) and *The Everyday Life Reader* (2002).

For Wendy Bonner, love of my life

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This book tries to show how the confusions, routines, intricacies and surprises of daily life, that are felt so 'personally', are always connecting us to a realm of communal (and differentiated) life. Ordinary life is collective even when it is experienced as isolated and desolate. My ordinary life is far

from isolated, far from desolate. It is collective in the most immediate, practical and affective way. So my last and greatest thanks have to go to those who are 'nearest and dearest' (as usual the cliché exceeds its worn familiarity); to Zeb, Molly and Wendy (to whom this book is dedicated).

Ben Highmore
April 2010

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This book contains some material that has been reworked and adapted from previously published work:

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But what sort of sense is constitutive of this everydayness? Surely this sense includes much that it is not sense so much as sensuousness, an embodied and somewhat automatic 'knowledge' that functions like peripheral vision, not studied contemplation, a knowledge that is imageric and sensate rather than ideational; as such it not only challenges practically all critical practice across the board of academic disciplines but is a knowledge that lies as much in the objects and spaces of observation as in the body and mind of the observer.

(Taussig 1992: 141–42)

Everyday life is a life lived on the level of surging affects, impacts suffered or barely avoided. It takes everything we have. But it also spawns a series of little somethings dreamed up in the course of things.

(Stewart 2007: 9)

Preface

This book is about ordinary, everyday life and it is also about aesthetics. Because these two terms might not seem immediately compatible it is worth me initially telegraphing an argument I will make in greater detail throughout the book. Once upon a time the word ‘aesthetics’ was less freighted with the task of policing the corridors of art or evaluating the experiences associated with it. Initially it pointed, with imprecision and unease, to a messy world of sensate perception, a world irreducible to rational meanings or ideation. Aesthetics gestured thought towards the great left-over: the bodily creature; the paths of often unruly emotions; the whole sensual world in all its baseness and brilliance. Emerging as a named area of inquiry only in the mid-eighteenth century, the history of aesthetics can be seen to follow a wayward path of increased intellectual specialisation, increasingly limiting itself to only certain kinds of experience and feeling, and becoming more and more dedicated to finely wrought objects. Once taken out of their lively solution, such discrete objects (artworks, powerful feelings of awe in the face of nature) were left beached on the shores of disciplinary knowledge. Marooned by an attention designed to praise and appraise them, art objects were often shorn of the very thing that aesthetics originally sought to engage with – the sensual, material entanglement with the socio-natural world.

The etymology of the term aesthetics stems from the Greek words *aisthêtikos* and *aisthêta*, and refers to a fundamentally empiricist approach to the world that privileges a concern with sensation and ‘the network of physical perceptions’ (Barilli 1993: 2). Such a root is lost when we associate aesthetics primarily with art, and it is lost when we find beauty parlours and cosmetic surgeons rebranded as ‘aesthetic’ technicians. But it is commonly maintained, albeit in its negative form, in the term anaesthetics – the practice of making insensate or blocking painful sensations. (It is also maintained in less everyday terms such as synaesthesia and hyperaesthesia.) If anaesthetics befuddles and dulls us, causing us to not feel pain or pleasure, it would make sense to see aesthetics as the inverse of this: our lively sensitivity to stimulus from without and within; our sensate connectivity to

a world of things and other people; our responsiveness to a world of feelings.

Aesthetics was born out of Enlightenment philosophy's attempt to understand human 'nature'. Reason alone could not explain the way people lived and loved, the way they sympathised or remained unmoved. Much European philosophical thought, from the seventeenth through to the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, was concerned with the passions and their moral management. Passions included what we would more routinely call emotions, feelings and affects, but also included phenomena such as imitation. Sometimes the invocation of the passions was designed to loosen the shackles of religiosity, sometimes it worked in tandem with religious belief, most often it seems to pull both ways at once. It is easy enough to critique Enlightenment attitudes towards virtue and the good life and to find them promoting values that are heavily classed, gendered and racialised, but I can't help marvelling at the sheer ambition of such an attempt to understand the cultural creatureliness of human life.

If 'aesthetics' only fully emerges as a philosophical term in 1750 in the work of Alexander Baumgarten, it designates an arena in European philosophy that was by then already fully established: this is the intersection of passions, tastes, sentiments and morality. Classical, Enlightenment philosophy couldn't simply describe these intersections, it also felt the need to evaluate them. And it is, I will argue, the values, rather than the forms of attention, that are problematic for understanding the aesthetics of daily life. Some, if not most, of the evaluations from seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth-century philosophy will appear odd, often aristocratic, thoroughly gendered and at times implicitly racial. But this is not something peculiar to aesthetic thinking. On the other hand classical aesthetics (before it ruinously narrows its purview by attending so obsessively and exclusively to art and beauty) is wonderfully attuned to the sociality of subjective experience and to the way that passions and affects circulate across our human and thingly world. This is a dynamic world view, where passions provoke actions, where sympathy attaches us to feelings, and where our most 'internal' feelings turn out to be a part of public culture. And it is this potential to attend to the dynamics of our interpersonal and transpersonal tunings that is so crucial for understanding the liveliness of ordinary life.

But if this means that at times we need to turn aesthetics away from the artwork and away from a consideration of beauty, it doesn't mean that we have to dispatch them to oblivion. In classical aesthetics (as in psychoanalysis) artworks are sometimes called upon to draw out a point and to enliven an account of a type of experience. If they are used as objects of contemplation then they have to take their place alongside shoes, gardens, rivers, houses, faces, plants and so on. As part of our artificial, object world, however, books, plays, music and paintings aren't just objects of contemplation, they are also part of the communal circulation of affects and

passions. If this was true in the eighteenth century it is even more evident today. Novels, poetry and paintings are today coupled with films, TV shows, radio and the internet to mark out an increasingly expansive terrain where culture presents itself passionately. News stories of tragedy and peril are routinely piped into our homes and places of work; sadness and joy animate every story and every song that syncopates daily life. The cultural world is an ecology of optimism and pessimism, of pleasure and pain, and it makes communal subjects of us all.

Such objects don't require a narrow 'aesthetic appreciation', but need to be recognised as a central realm where the orchestration of sentiment and affect takes place. This ecology of 'presented passions' (what some would call the world of representation) is also the arena that has most insistently and viscerally attended to the patterns of everyday life. In *The Practice of Everyday Life* Michel de Certeau suggests that modernity witnesses increased intellectual specialisation. A classical inquiry about 'leading the good life', about passions and affects, becomes atomised and hardened into discrete enclaves of activity and reflection (psychology, sociology, economics, a narrowly defined aesthetics and so on). As a result everyday life (as the subject of intellectual reflection) gets remaindered, falling through the cracks between disciplines. There is, however, one place where everyday life becomes more and more vivid – literature:

As indexes of particulars – the poetic or tragic murmurings of the everyday – ways of operating enter massively into the novel or the short story, most notably into the nineteenth-century realist novel. They find there a new representational space, that of fiction, populated by everyday virtuositities that science doesn't know what to do with and which become the signatures, easily recognised by readers, of everyone's micro-stories.

(de Certeau 1984: 70)

What literature (and we could add here film, TV, pop music and so on) does so well, of course, is to describe the details of life and the pulsings of affect: the risings and fallings of hope, love, hatred and irritation; the minor and major disturbances of life set against and within a world of day-to-day habits, routines and collective sentiments.

While in this book art has to be held in abeyance so that it can return as socially vivid matter, so beauty needs to be deprioritised so that it can be recoded and revalued. It would simply be mean-spirited to permanently delete beauty from the realm of the daily. While few could claim that their daily life was suffused with beauty, many would, I hope, have some sense of beauty punctuating their daily life. Beauty might be a value that is routinely set against the sometimes bland consistency of everyday life: a lovely meal, a wonderful sunset, a dog running in the park, a football match played

exquisitely. Beauty can animate the daily and structure our experiences of it through its relative rarity. Beauty can initiate a sudden effervescence that casts a light which illuminates some things while casting shadows over others. But beauty also circulates in ordinary life as a normative value (think of such magazines as *House Beautiful*, *Allure: The Beauty Expert* and so on) which is as likely to provoke envy as effervescence, as likely to produce anxiety as pleasure. Beauty is often a form of negative discrimination that propagates racial and age-specific values, reinforcing particular articulations of sexuality and gender. It is also tied to the increasingly unsustainable rhythms of commercial culture: three years ago that was beautiful, now it is dowdy. Aesthetics, once it has cut its ties with the automatic privileging of 'beauty', might be able to find new forms of beauty in what had previously been passed off as dowdy and dull, ugly and uninteresting, routine and irregular. It might involve learning to appreciate new forms of beauty that could be more sustainable, more precarious and more world-enlarging. Ordinary life maintains habitual values, but it is also where the body learns to like new things (new smells, new tastes, new sounds). The potential for opening up the senses to the unknown and new (the foreign, the different) is a way of moving away from a cross-cultural ecology that is driven by something as mealy-mouthed as 'tolerance' (and tolerance only has positive connotations when it is spoken in a culture deeply marred by hostility: who would accept 'being tolerated' as a positive value in any other situation?). Aesthetic contact with another culture involves the passions. In what follows my aesthetic approach favours description over evaluation in the hope that such an orientation might result in new appreciations of habit and routine and new forms of inclination and aversion.

In championing an older understanding of aesthetics, and in an endeavour to vitalise this so as to attend to ordinary life, this book finds its materials in a number of places. I use literature, film and TV, alongside philosophy and critical theory (and for the most part purposefully fail to see any essential differences between them). What I value in literature is often what I value most in theory: the ability to call forth an experience through (sometimes exorbitant) description. Rather than this dedifferentiating such a disparate stock of materials, it forfeits the often taken-for-granted demands of genre, focusing instead on the singularities and potential of a presentation. But this is not a book that provides a critical distance on debates so as to scrutinise them rigorously and critically for academic appraisal. My aim is generative: I want to mobilise aesthetics for the task of attending to ordinary life, and this means getting in among things. So while I use theory and literature I also theorise and present descriptions of everyday life that some might feel are far too literary. Literature and theory are rarely 'correct' or 'incorrect': instead both theory and literature put in play a set of values and accounts that we are invited to ascribe to or to recognise as in some ways true, adequate or productive. It is the test of recognition that I want to

prize here. I am less interested in whether something can be generalised and applied universally, than if a description is recognisable and has a shape that is something like the shape of other experiences of the ordinary. This book is empirical (in the sense that Hume gave to the term) but it does not try to be representative (there are no focus groups, surveys, interviews, etc.). The book's task shares the ambition of classical aesthetics (to attend to human creaturely life) but also the modesty of literature (to attend to the singularities of ordinary existence). Such a task could only ever be partially successful: all I can hope is that any substantive achievements mitigate the falling-short that is the necessary outcome of attending to the ordinary. I have also stayed within the orbit of my local culture, which means that most of the examples are geographically English. In a globalised world this may seem peculiarly provincial – I hope that it doesn't and that this sort of necessarily close work could be extended into other geographies.

Introduction

How does everyday life feel to you? Do the habits and routines of the day-to-day press down on you like a dull weight? Do they comfort you with their worn and tender familiarity, or do they pull irritably at you, rubbing your face in their lack of spontaneity and event? When cleaning or cooking does time ricochet past in the half-light of the daydream or stutter and collapse in the stupor of drudgery? Can domestic routines become precious moments snatched from more thoroughly exhaustive work practices, or do their rhythms constantly signal their lack of value? And how, supposing we wanted to, would we call attention to such 'non-events', without betraying them, without disloyalty to the particularity of their experience, without simply turning them into 'events'?

Somewhere a clock is ticking like it always does, you are getting hungry like you always do, the telephone is ringing like it always will, and the TV is playing in an empty room. Somewhere someone is dying, someone is being born, someone is making love; somewhere a war is being fought. Midwives and morticians, paupers and princes, go about their everyday lives. Everything can become everyday, everything can become ordinary: it is our greatest blessing, our most human accomplishment, our greatest handicap, our most despicable complacency.

The almost glacial movement of dust settling is too slow to watch, it's a constant drift of particles building up and becoming visible: however much you polish and vacuum its presence is relentless. The everyday is the accumulation of 'small things' that constitute a more expansive but hard to register 'big thing'. But like fissures in a stream of constancy the everyday is also punctuated by interruptions and irruptions: a knock on the door, a stubbed toe, an argument, an unexpected present, a broken glass, a tear, a desperate embrace. Crowding round these syncopations is the background hiss of the ambient everyday. A mood, a rhythm, a feeling provides a stage on which the ordinary events and happenings of the everyday unfold. It is a field of experience constantly in flux: I was calm but now I am anxious; I was happy but now I am sad; I was daydreaming but now I am just bored; I was frustrated but now I am indifferent.

The everyday may be vague but it is not abstract. Abstractions, however, might allow some purchase on the amorphousness of what tends to pass, and what tends to get passed off in ordinary life. How could we say anything about the everyday that was both general and true without being fatuous, without resorting to platitudes? If everyday life is an endless field of singular moments held loosely in place by the threads of the overarching (power, governance, etc.) then how would we talk about *this* everyday life without excluding *that* one? One way out of this impasse is to suggest that everyday life is a thoroughly relational term and that rather than try and pinpoint its characteristic content we would do better to draw out its grammar, its patterns of association, its forms of connection and disconnection. Rather than analysing shopping, for instance, as a practice separate from other practices (dreaming, for instance) it might be more productive to look at the patterning of desire and routine as they connect and disconnect, and to try and describe the different intersections of memory, need, forgetfulness, humour and so on, as they are played out while buying the groceries.¹ The path I take in this book is to pursue a 'science of singularity' (de Certeau 1984: ix), which means that the particular is studied *as if* it could contribute to a more general account of the world. Of course much hangs on this 'as if': it signals that the contact with the concrete particular will necessarily be the ground for a provisional and contestable account of things.

Boredom, routine, habit and familiarity might characterise important aspects of ordinary life, but what is ordinariness without accident, without anxiety and joy, without surprise? How would we characterise the moods, rhythms and affects of the day-to-day? What are its orchestrations and intensities? How does daydreaming exhaust itself and turn into boredom? And how does boredom sometimes dissolve into spontaneity and exuberance? When Freud claimed that chronic toothache and being in love were mutually incompatible ('so long as he suffers, he ceases to love' [Freud 1914: 75]), he was participating in an age-old understanding of human nature where one passion (pain) blocks out another (love). Yet much of what constitutes ordinary life can't be written in such stark terms. The ordinary is as much characterised by confusion as clarity, as much by simultaneity and complexity as discrete and separable motifs. 'Confusion' isn't the obverse of rational clarity, but a radically different order: con-fusion is the fusing together of disparate material in ways that aren't reconciled into clear and discrete syntheses. The ordinary con-fuses thought and feeling as ideas and sensation, remembrances and hope, and myriad somatic perceptions, fall and rise in pressing their attention on us. The ordinary demands complexity because, at times, nothing is really in the foreground of experience. The dynamic simultaneity of desire (and its sublimations), of confidence (and its undoing), of concentration (and its dispersal) require a mode of description that is more tuned to orchestration than the ascription of meaning.

Nothing much

What's going on when nothing much is happening? If, when asked 'what have you been up to?' or 'what's been happening?' you reply 'nothing much' then what is this 'nothing much' referring to? 'Nothing much' is an odd formula: half of it sounds like the indignant cry of children when questioned by parents or anyone when questioned by the police ('what are you doing?' 'nothing!') [spoken pleadingly or disdainfully, obstinately or innocently, as befits the scene]). The 'much' qualifies the 'nothing', and in the court of ordinary life there is never 'nothing' going on, just nothing 'much'. But perhaps this 'much' is really too much. When nothing much is going on then there is already too much to know where to begin. 'Nothing much', signals a reticence; sometimes this reticence is inviting (you know me, same old thing, the usual complaints, the usual interests); sometimes it is stand-off-ish (there's been nothing happening that concerns you). 'Nothing much' stands in relation to that which can be remarked upon: the trip to the cinema, the shopping excursion, the holiday, the job interview, the visit to a sick relative (the remarkable in the literal sense of the term). But when there is no remark to be made, no event to be marked out, then where would you possibly start, and where could you possibly end, in giving an account of the ordinary?

I take a break from work to enjoy the early summer sun. I take a cup of coffee outside. My head is full of essay marking and a list of things that I should do. I'm fairly sealed off, caught in a maze of preoccupations. The sun begins to warm my skin and clothes; the warmed skin presses 'its' attention on consciousness. I realise I had been staring at the ground, and now I look up and look around, noticing my surroundings for the first time since I had come outside. This is enough to momentarily stop the endless replaying of the cycle of 'to do' lists that had been looping round my mind. For some reason I start to think about my toes and to wiggle them. I realise that really I hardly ever think about my toes, nor do my toes alert 'me' to their presence. So what are my toes doing the rest of the time? Presumably they are firing all sorts of information across my nervous system, just as my skin continues to register the atmospheric conditions no matter if it is sunny or cloudy, warm or cool. The thought trails off as I suddenly remember that I have to organise a meal for the department where I work. Shit; I'm worried that I've left it too late, that few will come.² The sunlight bolts across the grass towards me as someone on the second floor opens their window and my eyes catch the glare. I've finished my coffee: the 'to do' list is playing again ...

If someone stopped me as I was coming inside and asked me 'what was happening' would they really want to hear all this? Most of the time, to be frank, I'd have to say that I haven't got a clue what's been going on, as the endless 'inner speech' is lost almost as soon as it appears. My coffee break could be described as drifting. Mine was a luxurious confusion of sense and

sensation, of ideas and somatic registering, pitted with the demands of a work-a-day world. We all drift, even if the orchestrations of our drifting differ enormously. While Freud overstated the effects of one passion or feeling obliterating everything else, it is clearly the case that the qualities and conditions of our ordinary life will shape not just the pattern of such drifting but the central motifs that press upon our attention. The sense of being cold and hungry or in pain might or might not obliterate drifting: clearly though it would profoundly colour it.

The sense of drifting has been a key to some recent understandings of modernity. The sense that modernity disanchors the human subject and lets it loose on the high seas of modern life, where it will be tossed about on the waves of spectacular culture, is a central tenet of an understanding of modernity as post-traditional culture.³ Alongside this is the sense that drifting is not simply the human subject facing the storm-clouds of industrial culture, but the human subject emptied out: not just adrift but drowned. This is Leo Charney:

Everyone says modern life, coming out of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was about too much happening, things moving too fast, assaulting you, too much stimulation, too many distractions. ... But they have it backward. Modernity's about the emptiness, the drift. All those things going on were a cover, to mask the emptiness. Once people realised life was empty and boring, they couldn't face it. They had to have all those things going on to make them forget, to deny it, make it go away, go back to a time before they knew that life was empty and boring.

(Charney 1998: 13)

The existential loss that modernity generates is filled, for Charney, by the agitated spectacular culture of the modern (cinema, advertising, TV and so on). My argument is different from Charney's. I'm putting my money on a different orchestration of these terms. Here 'the drift' is the ordinary as it is continually hidden and obfuscated by a number of strong forces. One of these forces is exactly the same as Charney's: the spectacular extravaganzas of industrial culture. The ordinary everyday never stood much of a chance against the sensationalism of newspapers, cinema and advertising. However dull and repetitious soap operas and reality TV are, they have a clarity and vividness that often throws shadows over the day-to-day-ness of ordinary life. But alongside this, modernity witnesses the intellectual culture abandoning the ordinary everyday. When intellectual culture shatters into a vast array of technical specialisms, the ordinary, it seems, can only be grasped as problem, as trauma, as something in need of management. The drift, then, isn't the emptiness of the ordinary, but the ordinary submerged, hiding in an expanse of shadows.

Ordinary life, ordinary lives

To write a book entitled *Ordinary Lives* is to court criticism, if not derision, from the start. Whose life is ordinary? Doesn't the attempt to map the ordinary, to establish its contours, immediately throw open the doors to a hundred thousand complaints: But what about ... ? Why have you not included ... ? What happens to your ideas when you consider ... ? The insistence on the ordinary doesn't have to be pursued in the name of normative values, of ascertaining means and averages. The *Oxford English Dictionary* reunites the term with a range of meanings that exceed the reduced sense of ordinary as a depleted form of life. For instance while 'ordinary' is mainly used as an adjective there are plenty of examples of its use as a noun. In the eighteenth century, for instance, 'an ordinary' was a meal that was equivalent to the French term *plat de jour* (the dish of the day). So, in Henry Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling* from 1771, two well-to-do men are walking by a park when 'they observed a board hung out of a window, signifying, "An excellent ORDINARY on Saturdays and Sundays." It happened to be Saturday and the table was covered for the purpose' (Mackenzie 2001 [1771]: 20, capitalisations in the original). There is no sense that the two men are going for the cheap or the measly option here. An ordinary in this sense was the meal on which most care and labour was lavished, that used the freshest produce and the best cuts of meat. It was also what you might eat as a regular customer of the café or restaurant. An 'ordinary' suggests both the care and effort of the cook or chef and a community of diners who know how to choose the best option because they respect the decisions and skills of their patron.

This sense of collectivity is central to thinking about the ordinary. While the everyday might be an endless succession of singularities it is not helpful to understand it as peopled by monads. The ordinary harbours an abundance that is distinct from material plenty: it is there when we talk about something as common, it is there when we talk about society, and it is there when we talk about 'us'. The ordinary brings with it one of the most optimistic but also most daunting phrases from science fiction and horror: you are not alone. And even in the midst of the most desperate isolation, the ordinary can take hold of what seems exceptional and connect it with other 'exceptions'. The ordinary speaks of commonality without necessarily intoning the ideological set pieces of 'the silent majority', or of universality. But the ordinary also carries with it the policing exertions of the normative and the governmentality of institutions who would set out to regulate and regularise your eating habits, your cleanliness, your work routines, your sleeping habits, your political affiliations, your sexual practices and your consumption. To be marked as 'extraordinary' in your ordinarieness is to be marked out collectively, to become one of a collective of people similarly marked-out as 'deviants', 'perverts', as 'idlers', 'unhealthy' and so on. There

is little solace in being marked this way, and such marking increasingly posits a virtual rather than an actual collective, but the history of the twentieth century is also a history of that marked collective coming together to exert their ordinariness as just that – ordinary.

In hierarchical societies, where social status is at a premium, and where novelty is seen as a positive value, what counts as ordinary is often denigrated and felt to be of lowly status. This sense of the term is instantiated in certain of the armed forces where to be an ‘ordinary’ is to be without rank, and in the Scottish higher education system where an ‘ordinary’ degree is the lower of two classes. Yet ordinariness, as this book hopes to demonstrate, is also a positive value, an accomplishment. For something to become ordinary you have to become used to it, it must be part of your regular life, your habitual realm. For midwives and funeral directors, ordinary life includes dealing with people at points in their life that are often far from ordinary and highly emotionally charged. One person’s ordinary is another person’s extraordinary. And yet the ordinary is never set in stone: ordinariness is a process (like habit) where things (practices, feelings, conditions and so on) pass from unusual to usual, from irregular to regular, and can move the other way (what was an ordinary part of my life, is no more). There is always the ‘being ordinary’ but there is also the ‘becoming ordinary’.

For the literary critic and historian Raymond Williams, writing in 1961, to insist that culture is ordinary is to see it as alive, pulsing with the passionate energies of the time. Williams glosses his insistence on the ordinary in the following way: ‘there are, essentially, no “ordinary” activities, if by “ordinary” we mean the absence of creative interpretation and effort’ (Williams 1992 [1961]: 37). Williams’ argument is about the relationship between art and society but is clearly aimed at making a much more general point about human culture in all its ordinariness:

Art is ratified, in the end, by the fact of creativity in all our living. Everything we see and do, the whole structure of our relationships and institutions, depends, finally, on an effort of learning, description and communication. We create our human world as we have thought of art being created. Art is a major means of precisely this creation. Thus the distinction of art from ordinary living, and the dismissal of art as impractical or secondary (a ‘leisure-time activity’), are alternative formulations of the same error. If all reality must be learned by the effort to describe it successfully, we cannot isolate ‘reality’ and set art in opposition to it, for dignity or indignity. If all activity depends on responses learned by the sharing of descriptions, we cannot set ‘art’ on one side of a line and ‘work’ on the other; we cannot submit to be divided into ‘Aesthetic Man’ and ‘Economic Man’.

(Williams 1992 [1961]: 37–38)