

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.

Ben Highmore.

Ordinary Lives: Studies in the everyday.

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 ordinariness 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 unpractical 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)

It is, to my mind, a stunning argument that simultaneously enlivens the practice of art (and fundamentally connects it to the everyday) while ennobling ordinary life by recognising the process of reflection, cognition, description that is an essential aspect of day-to-day living. Creativity, Williams makes clear, is not some special realm of sensitivity and expression, but the daily business of making sense of the world around us, of reflecting on it, of narrating it and communicating to others, of learning about it and adopting and adapting the narrations and feelings available to us.

The quotation above echoes Raymond Williams’ insistence, in 1958, that ‘culture is ordinary’. What he had in mind was neither a sense of ordinary culture as representative of ‘the average Joe or Josephine’, nor of a commitment to a particular sphere of life (domestic life over public life, physical labour over intellectual work, for instance). For Williams ‘ordinary’ signalled a commitment to the messy, provisional and deeply corporeal ‘whole ways of life’ of a community, a culture. And while we may argue about the entanglement of ‘community’ and ‘culture’ in Williams’ formulation, his use of the word ‘whole’ was never intended to signal consistency or coherency: the dedication was to life in its fractured, effervescent, unmanageable totality. ‘Ordinary’ is the world pulsing with life in its very singularity, existing across and in the interstices of the arbitrary and unhelpful distinctions we can’t help making between ‘labour’ and ‘love’, ‘private’ and ‘public’, ‘text’ and ‘context’, ‘art’ and ‘economics’. The term ‘ordinary’ is a flag raised as a commitment to a world in solution (and dissolution), a commitment to the heuristic, prespecialised *gestalt* of life – an unachievable goal, no doubt, but one worth striving for nonetheless.

To name something as ordinary is not without risk. At once the founding act of all that is worthwhile in cultural studies it also marks the source of all its troubles; it is the stigmata of the burden it (often unwittingly and unwillingly) carries. Inevitably bearing the freight of representing the fantasy of ‘average’ life, mobilising the term ordinary is as likely to alienate as to garner assent. Thus a customer review on the website for the online store Amazon can write of Kathleen Stewart’s *Ordinary Affects*: ‘I was disappointed. I was looking for a serious work on feeling and ordinary life. Instead what I found was a literary and post-modernist account of weirdness and banality in America. There are of course people who like that kind of thing.’ This reviewer gave the book one star out of five. ‘Ordinary’, like the term cultural studies, seems to promise something it never intends to deliver; a promise of what it is constitutionally designed to renege upon.

Stewart’s book conjures up a world of humdrum violence, banal perseverance and unexposed tenderness. Its atmosphere is simultaneously small-town gothic, blue-collar naturalism and main-street surrealism. The world that is painted is filled with correspondences and miscommunications, with mounting frustrations and outbreaks of intensity. Stewart is an anthropologist who studies that side of American life that is off the tourist

map. Her book reads like a field diary of someone sensitised to a range of emotional ecologies as they are played out in the localised encounters of individuals, couples and small groups. There is no overarching sense of America here, but also no feeling that you could be anywhere else.

In one of the endorsements on the back of *Ordinary Affects*, Lauren Berlant claims that this is 'a profoundly pedagogic book'. Yet there is nothing explicit here that can simply be extracted and applied to something else, no easily borrowed system of thought or analysis, no quotable paragraph that would underwrite a methodology. Here the pedagogy is deep and performative. As you read the book you become more and more alert to your surroundings. Your skin begins to prickle with the apprehensions of the lives of others, of resonances of care and indifference, of anxiety and ease. It is the pedagogy that Walter Benjamin claims is characteristic of fairground rides, of the mechanism of cameras and the jarring attempts of crossing busy roads. It attunes and reattunes the human sensorium. I read the book on a train journey from the south west of England up to the north western coast (just below the Lake District). Passing through a dozen towns and cities of the English Midlands I saw countless down-at-heel Victorian terraced streets, peppered with corner shops, austere pubs and boarded-up petrol stations. For anyone spending any time in England this is a familiar sight. Yet by about Birmingham the streets began to change: their familiarity was unsettled and I was filled with feelings that new places generate when you first set out on your own. Arriving in an unfamiliar town as an apprentice adult, such streets were never 'mean' or 'impoverished', but the corridors of anticipation, possibility, trepidation and disappointment. I swooned with a strange admix of lonely-excitement that I hadn't felt for a couple of decades. The damp stone and brick of a forlorn landscape began to bristle with the possibility of adventure, with the possibility of endless somethings.

The thing-ness of something is Stewart's insistent object. Her guide is the action of listening-in, of observing, of passing-by and taking-part. She is in a café in Ohio watching and listening as an ill-matched couple strive to get through what looks like a first date. The man is tucking into a high-cholesterol plate of 'biscuits and gravy' while his companion eats a grapefruit and a cluster of vitamin supplements while outlining her extensive fitness regimes. Stewart's practice is descriptive and in a few paragraphs she evokes a meal of awkward exchanges, of embarrassment and disdain. Her final sentence assesses the situation without judging the participants: 'And things were happening, all right, even though "it" was so "not happening"' (2007: 31). The 'thing' of experience here is the materiality of disappointment, of condescension received and given, of wishing away time, of suffering the ill-ease of not getting along. And in our turn, as 'critical readers', what do we do? Do we judge Stewart's descriptions as adequate (or not), productive (or not), analytical (or not)? Such judgements seem to flounder in the face of a much more pressing and immediate question. Do we recognise this scene? Do

we share the hunched-over mumbling awkwardness of the meeting or not? It is the judgement more usually reserved for fiction than academic work, but it is the one judgement that in the face of *Ordinary Affects*, really appears to matter.

The book you're now reading follows in the wake of the work of writers of such different temperaments and styles as Stewart and Williams. While Stewart's work (in *Ordinary Affects*) is primarily descriptive and observational, Williams' writing is historical, more theoretically expansive and more soberly analytical. I can't claim either the economical affectivity of Stewart or the historical erudition and critical acumen of Williams, but I can say that working across these dimensions is not without its awkwardness, its anxieties, but also its productivity and pleasures. *Ordinary Lives* pursues an attention to areas of routine and habit (but also their disruptions and emergence) across areas of work and domesticity, across leisure and necessity. In doing so there are three overlapping themes that are central to the entire book: aesthetics; humanism; and intimacy.

Aesthetics

In 1884 in his essay 'What is an emotion?' the philosopher and psychologist William James described 'the aesthetic sphere of the mind' as the mind's 'longings, pleasures and pains, and its emotions' (James 1884: 188). Had he written such a description a century earlier he might have claimed that the aesthetic sphere of the mind was the arena of the mind's passions; a century before that he wouldn't have used the term aesthetic but might have written about the soul's passions. The terminology changes and with it the kinds of questions and answers that can be directed at human affairs changes too. Yet there are also longstanding concerns that range across the centuries that can rightly be called aesthetic concerns even before that term was being used to designate them. These are the concerns with human activity and human 'nature' that take as their object the forces at work in the world and across our bodies that seem least amenable to analysis by the procedures of reason and logic.

I have already (in the preface) made a claim for the relevance of aesthetics for ordinary life, and in the next chapter I will go into some detail about the various strands of aesthetic thought that seem most relevant to the study of ordinary, everyday life. For now I just want to point to four qualities of aesthetic thinking that will inform the book as a whole. The first is that, for aesthetics, emotions come from without not from within. Rather than assuming that our profound emotional life bubbles up from our 'inner-selves', aesthetics posits emotions and affects as social, collective and exterior. Yet they are experienced as deeply personal. In this sense the terms 'subjectivity' and 'objectivity', as terms describing experience, are simply unfit for purpose. Of course they were never descriptive terms, but philosophical

abstractions that have their proper place in the discussion of epistemology. Yet they do also gesture towards the feeling of experience even if they are inadequate descriptions of it. For instance, weeping while a particularly sentimental movie is playing feels more subjective than collecting your receipts and invoices for a tax claim. Yet the very fact that we cry in response to the television should alert us to the way that emotional life circulates, not from within, but from without, as a response to a public culture determinedly in the thrall of a concern with 'personal life'.

For Immanuel Kant, certain forms of experience and judgement point to the objectivity of subjectivity. This argument is premised on a sense of the universality of certain qualities in the world and in certain forms of attention that take the human subject away from material concerns and concerns of the self. But we do not need to agree with this argument in all its detail to share a sense that what is felt most personally, and what is so hard to share, has a form of objective actuality. For now it is just worth pointing out, first, that if we were 'locked in' to an interiority that is non-social we would be unlikely to have any emotional, passionate life at all. It is by being social beings, by having exteriority rather than interiority, that we feel emotions. Passionate life is learnt through the outward orientations of sympathy and empathy, not by plumbing the depths of 'interior life'.

Second, if it is true that aesthetics emerges as a theorising of the passions, then this theorising doesn't take the passions as passive states of being but as modes of action and orientation. If passions are not always actions themselves they are prequels to actions. The passions (fear, grief, sadness, joy, wonder and so on) are orientations, forms of attunement to the world. They are modes and moods that explicitly describe our attachments and detachments; they name our drawing-towards and drawing-away-from, our attractions, detractions and indifferences. Aesthetics, as a theorising of passion, is concerned with pleasure and pain, virtue and vice: 'passions ... are generally understood to be thoughts or states of the soul which represent things as good or evil for us, and therefore seen as objects of inclination or aversion' (Susan James 1997: 4). What pleases and displeases inaugurates action: we pursue pleasure, turn away from pain. If we are to lead a 'virtuous life' we need to pursue the good and avert the evil.

It was the link between 'feeling' and 'doing' that was central to classical aesthetics and meant that 'taste' (the orientation of our appetites) was never going to designate a purely incidental social arena. Taste mattered because our pleasure and inclination could so easily direct us towards the 'bad', the unworthy, the evil. Aesthetics, in some senses, was always likely to be a utopian arena where people could imagine a world where virtue and pleasure were united. In the real world, however the discrimination of objects of the passions could be resolutely conservative and bent on preserving the authority of the property-owning classes. So while the entanglement of passions, actions, virtue is problematic, its registering of aesthetic life as

something more than a responsive contemplation towards the world, as something that engages us in action, is a central aspect of its productivity for an aesthetics of the ordinary.

Third, aesthetics is an ambitious attempt to approach the human creature as a physiological, psychological and ethical being, through being attuned to sensations, the senses, perception, sentiments and so on. In having a sense of the disparate complexity of creaturely life, aesthetics has a real sense of the confusions of ordinary life as we navigate and register the sensual materiality of the exterior world, drawing it towards us, inclining ourselves towards or away from the world, knowing it from 'below' (from the sensate body) as well as with the discriminating mind. Aesthetics is always an ambition that will remain unfulfilled and unfinished, but it is an ambition that is crucial for engaging in the study of ordinary life.

Fourth, and in the wake of the previous three points, aesthetics turns towards 'style' as something deeply social and significant. Over the last twenty or so years, print and broadcast journalists and entertainers, as well as critical academics, have associated the word 'style' with 'lifestyle' and established the latter as a consumer, 'off-the-peg', choice. Aesthetics reunites lifestyle with something, that while it may be hedged in from all sides by commercial forces, is not simply reducible to it. In his book *The Comfort of Things* the cultural anthropologist Daniel Miller presents thirty portraits of individuals and their relationship to the things they possess (and, as he will suggest, possess them). He writes that:

There is an overall logic to the pattern of these relationships to both persons and things, for which I use the term 'aesthetic'. By choosing this term I don't mean anything technical or artistic, and certainly nothing pretentious. It simply helps convey something of the overall desire for harmony, order and balance that may be discerned in certain cases – and also dissonance, contradiction and irony in others.

(Miller 2008: 5)

Miller uses the term 'aesthetic' to describe his informants' intimate material worlds, and my guess is that this is partly to mark his distance from the way that the term 'style' has been denigrated as a superficial aspect of our involvement with material culture.

Writing in 1968, Henri Lefebvre recognised the problem and potential of thinking about 'style' in relation to everyday life. His argument is familiar: commercialisation has emptied out the link between style and sociality and put in its place a range of superficial choices:

With the Incas, the Aztecs, in Greece or in Rome, every detail (gestures, words, tools, utensils, costumes, etc.) bears the imprint of a *style*; nothing had as yet become prosaic, not even the quotidian; the prose

and poetry of life were still identical. Our own everyday life is typical for its yearning and quest for a style that obstinately eludes it; today there is no style, notwithstanding the attempts to achieve one by resurrecting former styles or by settling among their ruins and memories – so much so that *style* and *culture* can now be distinguished and opposed.

(Lefebvre 1984 [1968]: 29)

But here Lefebvre is remarking on the difficulty of associating his contemporary world with a single unified style. It doesn't follow, however, that the lack of a unified 'national' style results in the hollowing out of our specific lifestyles.

Six years earlier Lefebvre wrote about the way that Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir's relationship was conducted as an 'experiment in transparent relationships and a mutual recognition in freedom, but also in separation'. For Lefebvre 'the essential thing is lifestyle' (Lefebvre 1995 [1962]: 358). Style is no longer the unified aesthetic of social life, but its dispersal doesn't mean that the patterns of one's life have been drained of sensual sociality. Our life practices (our ways of loving, cooking, inhabiting and so on) are not just 'consumer choices' but sensual and ethical responses to a world that makes its own demands on us. We might sometimes hanker after more luxury, but also find pleasure in frugality; we might struggle to pay the rent, but take pride in looking 'well turned out'. The sensual orchestrations and material ecologies that we can control and produce matter precisely because of the limited agency we have in the aesthetic ecology of the larger world.

Humanism

In France, in the 1960s, the foundations of structuralism and poststructuralism were built on a determined refusal of humanism. The luminaries of what became the bedrock of much theoretical work in the humanities and in certain realms of the social sciences declared the death of 'man' as a theoretical entity. For the Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser the idea of humanism could never be anything other than ideological. He argued that in 1845 Marx performed a decisive break (an epistemological break) with humanist philosophy and thereby rendered historical materialism a scientific venture. The humanist Marx gave way to the scientific Marx, and the fundamental character of this rupture was to refit himself as an 'anti-humanist':

One can and must speak openly of *Marx's theoretical anti-humanism*, and see in this *theoretical anti-humanism* the absolute (negative) precondition of the (positive) knowledge of the human world itself, and of its practical transformation. It is impossible to *know* anything about men except on

the absolute precondition that the philosophical (theoretical) myth of man is reduced to ashes.

(Althusser 1963: 229)

Humanism, according to Althusser, by taking 'man' as both the subject and object of knowledge, would always be caught in the grip of idealism, because it had to posit an essential human self that it would then set about explaining:

The earlier idealist ('bourgeois') philosophy depended in all its domains and arguments (its 'theory of knowledge', its conception of history, its political economy, its ethics, its aesthetics, etc.) on a problematic of *human nature* (or the essence of man). For centuries, this problematic had been transparency itself, and no one had thought of questioning it even in its internal modifications.

(Althusser 1963: 227)

The argument was that even if 'human nature' was the object of investigation (and thereby available for competing descriptions) it was always established as a known entity in advance of such investigation.

Three years later Michel Foucault published *Les Mots et les choses* (first translated into English in 1970 as *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*). Foucault's book was an encyclopaedic study of the fate of the study of human culture throughout the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, linking the human subject to a variety of institutional and social arrangements of knowledge. For Foucault such arrangements were the result of accretions and sedimentations resulting in something as seemingly stable as 'the human' but no more stable (in theory) than previous stabilities that now seemed to belong to religion, myth or magic:

If those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared, if some event of which we can at the moment do no more than sense the possibility – without knowing either what its form will be or what it promises – were to cause them to crumble, as the ground of Classical thought did, at the end of the eighteenth century, then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.

(Foucault 1974 [1966]: 387)

For Foucault, in a bid to erase 'man' from the study of culture, replacements to 'human nature' would be found in such terms as 'discourse', 'power' and 'apparatus' (*dispositif*).

We can work backwards and forwards from this point in the 1960s to make a number of claims for humanism that don't necessarily discredit anti-humanism, but certainly suggest that anti-humanists are often over-stating

their case. For one thing, while the earlier 'humanist' Marx wrote about the alienation of man from man, and from his or her species-being, there is no indication of Marx knowing in advance what that species-being consisted of. In fact it would be impossible to know in advance of the endless possibility of humankind's potential as it gets realised and transformed as the material conditions of historically changing life. Thus human species-being is a heuristic device for an experimental approach to life that is dedicated to the process of species-becoming rather than to the fulfilment of a foregone destiny.

The same could be said for philosophers like David Hume writing in the eighteenth century. Hume's humanism, on one level, can hardly be in doubt. His first major study was explicitly titled *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–40). Yet for Hume starting out to study human nature didn't necessitate the sort of self-identical intentional subject that some anti-humanists would point to as being the major heresy for anyone wanting to demonstrate his or her theoretical sophistication. For Hume the human is often a fiction that pastes over our or his understanding of human subjectivity as a dispersal of sensations and perceptions, momentarily held together by something as undulating and hard to maintain as pride. Again so-called humanism begins to look much more like an experiment aimed at destabilising as much as stabilising any essential notion of what it is to be human.

Today the 'human being' is on the theoretical and social agenda, not because it would allow us to return to settled values, but precisely because of the insistent instability of the term 'human'. It is not hard to find reasons for this. At a time in planetary history where scientists can replicate human 'essences' under laboratory conditions; where the extinction of human life can be imagined as a real possibility in the wake of possible ecological catastrophes; where our daily life entangles us more and more with machines as much as with other humans – it would be inattentive to imagine that 'being human' wouldn't be on the agenda. While such social forces have produced a barrage of reaffirmations of the importance and centrality of a known quantity 'humanness', there has been a whole range of writing keener to launch their inquiries with an investigative air, to pursue a more modest, less humancentric version of humanism. The planet we share with animals, with the disparate populations of the globe, with machines, with practices that gobble-up the resources required to sustain life, is looking more and more fragile. It would be arrogance itself to claim that such a moment would benefit from the simple assertion of humanism as unproblematic.

Roger Smith's *Being Human: Historical Knowledge and the Creation of Human Nature*, makes the seemingly tautological point that there is no knowledge of what it is to be human outside the various attempts to know what being human is: 'historical knowledge of belief about what is human is knowledge of being human' and this is because 'writing about being human ... therefore constructs what it is to be human' (Smith 2007: 14). In a certain light this might be called an anti-humanist version of humanism, or a form of inquiry

into what 'being human' is that has digested the lessons of anti-humanism but still sees the urgency of pursuing the question of what it is to be human, and sees that the most productive route to addressing that question is to open it up to the various historical approaches that have sought to answer it. This is the sort of humanism I'm keen to adopt here: one that seeks to address the question of human nature, but one that doesn't want to call time on history, one that refuses to seek the answers simply in, what at the moment passes for, 'best' knowledge.

Intimacy

There is a sense that a phrase like 'the intimacy of everyday life' is tautological: after all the everyday is full of intimate knowledges precisely because the everyday is the arena of the world most closely met. Intimacy connotes proximity, familiarity and habit. At one level intimacy suggests our bodies: our most intimate arena. How and what we eat, how we wash and what we smell like, the care we take of our bodies and those that are our dependents (babies, sick relatives and friends) are intimate concerns. Those that are closest to us (good friends and family) are our intimates. The knowledge we have of the places we live and work, the tools and equipment we most often use, are intimate knowledges.

In this book I am using the term intimate to point to two aspects of life. The first is that arena of life that is materially closest to us: this is to put forward an argument that proximity matters. Here then 'intimacy' suggests a form of attention that looks at the proximetrics of everyday life; the material world of work, for instance, seen in the form of micro-geography might include office furniture, factory humour, coffee and tea breaks, for instance. Ordinary life is life that is inhabited by fleshly beings, not by positions in the corporate hierarchy. Or rather 'positions in the corporate hierarchy' are lived out by fleshly beings in ordinary life. This is a more neutral sense of the term intimacy.

The other sense of intimacy has connotations of emotional, sexual and psychological closeness. This intimacy has traditionally desired secrecy: the trustworthiness of friends, the discretion of lovers, the enshrined secrecy of the confessional, of the doctor's surgery and the psychiatrist's couch. Yet across the centuries our intimate lives have been an object of management and intervention by governmental and commercial agents. What you do in the 'privacy of your own home' is also subject to moral and political approbation and censure. But if bureaucracy extends into the private enclaves of our intimate world and we can seek succour and solace in the publically professional spaces of medicine and religion, can we maintain a clear separation between the public and the private spheres? And if not what happens to an understanding of everyday life in response to a theoretical and material collapse of these spheres?

A phrase like 'public intimacy', which might initially register as either an oxymoron or else as a euphemism for outdoor sex, can now be used to describe a set of conditions that blur the boundaries of public and private.⁴ Symptoms of the suggested collapse of the private/public spheres might be quickly signposted by pointing to the aspects of intimate private life that routinely take place in cyberspace (social networking sites such as Facebook, for instance); the amount of airtime and column inches given over to celebrity life in all its intimate details (indeed intimate details are all that is required, any consideration of the value of a celebrity in terms of professional skills is either of marginal interest or totally off-target); the massive growth of 'reality' formats on television that thrive on capturing the contestants as intimately as possible; and the quasi intimate chumminess that is adopted by politicians, presenters, disc jockeys, news readers and the like.

The media theorist Anna McCarthy, for instance, suggests that if critical studies are to take the massive expansion of reality television as more than a space for interpretive panache, then they will have to acknowledge the aspect of trauma involved in it as well as the aesthetics of neo-liberal governance that it manifests. In discussing the range of reality formats that are in circulation and by attending to the mode that sees its project as altruistic, McCarthy suggests that reality TV works as a form of governance and that 'as a form of governance, these programs are notable in their disciplinary reliance not on the inculcation of virtue but rather on shame and scolding'. Reality TV works to 'retool contempt and other deeply intimate affects into vehicles for lessons in social responsibility' (McCarthy 2007: 18). As an everyday pedagogy, reality TV mobilises the intensity of such passions as shame and contempt for its intimate cultural politics.

But if reality TV and social networking sites are relatively new, 'intimate cultural politics' is not. Eva Illouz's book *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* seeks to give a longer history of the mobilisation of intimacy, a history that takes us back before the neo-liberal reformatting of politics as a form of public intimacy. Illouz's position is useful here as she acknowledges that as soon as you start looking at the politics and culture of intimacy, a sharp separation between public and private breaks down: 'when we view emotions as principal characters in the story of capitalism and modernity, the conventional division between an a-emotional public sphere and the private sphere saturated with emotions begins to dissolve' (Illouz 2007: 4). But this is not just the production of the veneer of 'caring capitalism', it is instrumental as a form of economics too:

Emotional capitalism is a culture in which emotional and economic discourses and practices mutually shape each other, thus producing what I view as a broad, sweeping movement in which affect is made an essential aspect of economic behaviour and in which emotional life – especially

that of the middle classes – follows the logic of economic relations and exchange.

(Illouz 2007: 5)

Illouz's assessment of modern forms of capitalism as producing a 'cold intimacy' is premised on her investigation of the way that a therapeutic culture has been mobilised by management self-help books and the like.⁵

The relationship between economics and affect is nothing new. In the eighteenth century the philosopher Adam Smith made their conjuncture central to his understanding of human civilisation. His book *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) was a precursor to his more famous volumes of the *Wealth of Nations*. In the book on sentiments Smith lays out a theory of the passions that accords with an economic view of virtue. Prudence and sympathy will lay the foundations for a benevolent economic practice, and as such will tie the public-facing sense of virtue to the practices and performance of an intimate and private ethical sense.

The structure of the book

This book seeks to explore the ordinary aspects of aesthetics, humanism and intimacy as they overlap in ways that are often mutually reinforcing but also in ways that produce leakage, contradictions and discord. Often these themes will run implicitly through the chapters rather than receive explicit attention. My intention is not to produce abstract discussions of these themes but to see them as crucial for understanding the material actuality of everyday life as it is lived out in work environments, among the paraphernalia of domestic life, and in our sensual commerce with the world. Most of the chapters veer between theoretical discussion and concrete description, with some chapters staying much longer in one camp than the other.

In the next chapter ('Everyday aesthetics') I lay out more fully the sort of philosophical and theoretical inquiries that can be a rich resource for developing an aesthetics of ordinary life. As I have suggested already, aesthetics is often a bridging conversation between forms of feeling, emotion and sentiment and the complex materiality of the world. By attending to the ways that the sensual world presses upon us, soliciting responses and reactions, and by taking seriously the moods, experiences and energies of the perceiving subject, aesthetics is ideally placed to address life lived ordinarily. Aesthetics, at its best, attends to public feelings that are experienced intimately: it posits our most subjective experiences as social. At its worst, though, aesthetics is snobbish 'taste' dressed up as emancipation. More problematically the best and worst of aesthetics are so intricately embroiled that to separate them is often a violation of the original thought.

In this chapter I give an account of the main tenets of classical aesthetic thought in Britain (concentrating primarily on Hume, Burke and Shaftesbury).

While I recognise the dangers of cherry-picking across such a range of work to find morsels to fit an argument, my aim, as always, is to generate an aesthetics of the ordinary; and if this, at times, means skimping on a more nuanced account of the complexity of individual philosophers than that is the price I pay.⁶ The chapter goes on to look at aesthetic work in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries and particularly the work of John Dewey and, to a lesser extent, Wilhelm Dilthey. The chapter ends by exploring Jacques Rancière's recent aesthetic writing, claiming that Rancière's work links back to the ambition of classical aesthetic thought, but also takes us forward through his attention to the political ecology of technology, representation, perception and sensual distribution.

In chapter three ('Familiar things') I try to get 'in-the-midst-of-things'. While ink has been spilt trying to untangle 'objects' and 'things', here I follow the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda's injunction to study things 'at rest'. Neruda suggests that 'things' are inundated from within and from without, and I put this to the test by offering an 'inundated' account of a chair that I first sat on as an eleven year old. But if this is a subjective account of a chair, I would also claim it as a socio-naturalist account too. The chapter poses a dialogue with Michel Serres' suggestion that rather than dividing the world into subjects and objects we treat many different kinds of object as 'quasi objects' and many kinds of subject as 'quasi subjects'. Theoretically this connects to the work of Bruno Latour and others who have envisaged a techno-social project of tracing dynamic networks across human and non-human actors. But this also connects in a small way with David Hume's suggestion that the human subject is a fiction and that there is no subject, but a scattering of perceptions that finds 'subjectivity' out there in among the thingly world of possessions, of nature, of people.

In chapter four ('Doing time: work life') I look at the world of work and how it shapes notions of time, temporality and temporal experience. Boredom, waiting, anticipating and routine – rhythms that are often established through specific work cultures – produce an experience of time, while simultaneously robbing us of a sense of an evenly unfolding experience of time. Work often produces a sense of time that is at once structured and emptied. This chapter focuses on two women's accounts of work. The first is a detailed account of housework and through this I try to show the connections that are evident between temporal experience and emotional, affective life. Emotion colours time; intensifying it, elongating it, syncopating it, truncating it and filling it. We all know that time flies when you are having fun, but what happens to time if resentment is the dominant mood? The second account follows a journalist who interviews men and women involved in highly routinised forms of labour. She finds it hard to get much information about the working life of typists and ends up getting a job filling out membership forms for the kennel club of America. In her account of routine typing the rhythms of patterned work are seen as both highly

seductive and exhausting (in many respects the exhaustion is the prerequisite for the seduction). But within her account the sensual and social landscape of the typing pool is a constant material presence that extends routine work beyond being merely an accommodation with the instrumentalism of capital.

In chapter five ('Absentminded media') I look at the roles of media in everyday life. Part of this chapter revisits earlier media theory in the form of the work of Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin and their use of the term 'distraction'. Distraction is a condensed term bringing together a sense of dispersal, diffusion and drift with a more evaluative sense of misdirection. After all to be diverted and misdirected by a distracting media is only worth mentioning if what you are being diverted from is deemed important in some way (the political aspect of diversion is nearly always to the fore in this understanding of distraction). Like many others I see distraction as crucial for attending to everyday media. But whereas distraction is often taken as a sort of low-level concentration, or lack of concentration, I follow Benjamin here in seeing distraction as intricately tied up with absorption (rather than the inverse of absorption).

This chapter also casts us back into the drift of the ordinary by attending to the dispersal of attention across a variety of media forms, particularly television and radio (though scouring the internet, sites like YouTube in particular follow similar characteristics). Casual radio listening and TV watching provide better examples of dispersed absorption than watching a film or playing a computer game, precisely because these latter forms often solicit a directed and singular form of attention. The sense of distracted attention, that is often encouraged by the media forms that the twentieth century has supplied, link us back to the aesthetic theory of the eighteenth century where the receptive forms of perception were ascribed to those states of mind that were seen as most vacant.

In chapter six ('Senses of the ordinary') the question of habit and routine comes to the fore in the domestic realm. Here I invoke the literal sense of confusion to describe experiences which meld together sensual and mental experiences. What is happening when you are doing something but not concentrating on it? The body knows what it is doing; it is feeling its way around kitchens, undoing jars, stirring bubbling rice, smelling the aromas, tasting the seasoning. The sensual field of co-mingled bodies and things is an arena where habit allows the body to have the cognitive upper hand. Here care is given and love is practised; frustration is enacted and violence is erupting. This chapter looks in detail at an example of aggressive food consumption in the practice of eating ultra-hot (spicy hot) curries in Britain (a practice that may well be in decline but was a popular aspect of young male Anglo-Celtic culture in the 1970s and 1980s). Here food offers a specific example of the deeply intimate encounter with public affects, and collective passions. Food is always simultaneously both supremely intimate and intensely social as it connects us to the culture of agro-business and global

food markets, and to the body's most immediate aversions and inclinations. But while the practice of aggressive eating is clearly problematic I argue that food eating is a crucial element of actual multicultural environments and is a continual process of adopting and adapting.

In the final chapter ('Towards a political aesthetics of everyday life') I remind myself that ordinary, everyday life is a consistent theme of state politics: it is used in a number of forms, but is primarily used as a vehicle of protection against all kinds of real-and-fantastical threats. Ordinary national life is what xenophobic politics insists must be protected from cultural migrations that might alter its traditions and dilute its character; ordinary family life, for paternalistic culture, must be protected from sexual dissidents, from predatory culture, from the unknowable outside. Ordinary life is the arena of fear and threat as much as it is of reassurance and safety. In other words it is a highly charged political arena.

Political aesthetic inquiry into the ordinary has a responsibility to try and understand the way that the opaque and oblique machinations of global politics (economic, environmental and cultural) punctuate and syncopate the rhythms of ordinary life. Yet perhaps the bigger obligation is to understand and champion forms of ordinary culture that are generous and world-enlarging but that also maintain the securities of habitual life that are a necessity for any ordinary life.

Notes

- 1 For an investigative account of shopping that has a wonderfully everyday sense of itself see Meagan Morris 'Things to do with Shopping Centers' in Morris 1998.
- 2 This, incidentally, turned out to be the case.
- 3 The literature on modernity is too vast to note here, but see, for example Jervis 1998, and Schwartz 1999, and the edited collection Charney and Schwartz 1996, for useful guides.
- 4 See for instance Bruno 2007 and the edited collection Berlant 2000.
- 5 For an account of the links between intimacy and economics in personal life see Zelizer 2005.
- 6 Work in cultural studies has sometimes exhibited an unhealthy jackdaw approach to theory, which has on occasion meant seriously distorting theoretical approaches. In this book I try to balance a careful account of aesthetic theory with maintaining the focus on substantiating 'everyday-life aesthetics'.

Everyday aesthetics

To enter the world of philosophical aesthetics, particularly in the period of the British Enlightenment, is to be plunged into a world that is riven with incompatible values, gendered assumptions and class antagonisms. There is no possibility of assuaging these conflicts or pacifying them. Nor is there much point in scouring this discursive terrain with the 'cleaning power' of twenty-first-century values and concerns (it is just too easy to point fingers at elitism). My aim in this chapter is to offer a very selective account of aesthetic theory (from the early eighteenth century to the present day) in an attempt to articulate a set of concerns and approaches that can help me have some purchase on the more opaque aspects of daily life. In this my approach is shamelessly partial and opportunistic: I want to scavenge among some of the monuments of aesthetic thinking looking for shards of insight that can lay the foundations for an approach to everyday life. I'm looking for theoretical opportunities and philosophical happenstance out of which to pursue an approach to everyday life that can maintain an attention towards the wonderfully disparate (but also troublesome and deflating) textures, rhythms and affects of the ordinary.

It is true, of course, that aesthetics is overly enamoured of the beautiful and by art, yet in its approach to social life as a sensorial realm its essential proclivities are directed towards the ordinary. This chapter aims at encouraging these proclivities. But first it is worth acknowledging that aesthetic thinking, at least in its Enlightenment period, is filled with the kind of patrician assertions that can make twenty-first-century readers wince or giggle. This is Edmund Burke laying out his store of what counts as the constitutive elements of beauty:

First, to be comparatively small. Secondly, to be smooth. Thirdly, to have a variety in the direction of the parts; but fourthly, to have those parts not angular, but melted as it were into each other. Fifthly, to be of a delicate frame, without any remarkable appearance of strength. Sixthly, to have its colours clear and bright; but not strong and glaring. Seventhly, or if it should have any glaring colour, to have it diversified