

Semiotics and Hermeneutics of the Everyday

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Edited by

Lia Yoka and Gregory Paschalidis

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: That Bloody Riddle.....	viii
Lia Yoka and Gregory Paschalidis	

Chapter 1: Concepts and Categories of the Everyday

The Everyday is “Insignificant”	2
Hecate Vergopoulos	

‘Twelve thousand breakfasts’: Banalizing Anti-Epiphany – A Mathematical View.....	14
May Chehab	

The Semiotics of Situationist Urban Theory	25
Alexandros Ph. Lagopoulos	

Chapter 2: The Everyday as Marketing Method and Ritual Practice

Lifestyle and Consumerism: Neoliberal Biopolitics and Islamist Experiences in the Muslim World	60
Fotini Tsibiridou	

“Carving the Body”: Ta Moko and the Eternal Play of Being in the Everyday and the Everlasting	82
M.-G. Lily Stylianoudi	

Trivial Objects, Economy and ‘Attainable Luxury’	105
Dimitris Charitatos and Anastasia Christodoulou	

Everyday Fantasy	115
Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou	

Chapter 3: Style versus Constraint in the Languages of the Everyday

The Clay of the Earth: Everyday Objects, Functions and Thoughts in the Poetic Creation of the Generation of the 1880s	130
Georgia Pateridou	

Writing Under Daily Constraint(s): The Case of Administrative Writing.....	142
Helene Campaignolle	

Subtitles: A Dominant Text Type in Everyday Life	166
Anthi Wiedenmayer	

Stilling the Flow of Signs: Everyday Creative Actions and the Discontinuities of Museum and Gallery Display	176
Chris Dorsett with Sachiyo Goda	

Everyday Practices on the Internet and the Expansion of Crowdsourced Translation.....	193
Titika Dimitroulia	

Chapter 4: Representing the Quotidian

The African Quotidian of the Ivorian Society as Seen through the Eyes of <i>Aya of Yopougon</i>	238
Karen Ferreira-Meyers	

Aesthetics of Everyday Life in Two Arab Movies: <i>The Time that Remains</i> , or the Staging of Silence; and <i>Living Here</i> , or the Poetry of Ordinary People	249
Sana Mselmi	

The Visibility of the Other in Greek Everyday Life: A Semiotic Study of Contemporary Greek Cinema.....	260
Rea Walldén	

The Semiotics of Subtitling of Language Variations in Television Advertisements in Greece.....	279
Evangelos Kourdis	

“Any day is a whole story, even when you believe nothing’s happened”: Jacques Réda and the Everyday.....	290
Alexander Hertich	

INTRODUCTION: THAT BLOODY RIDDLE

LIA YOKA AND GREGORY PASCHALIDIS

*'The proposition here is to decode the modern world, that bloody riddle,
according to the everyday'*
—Lefebvre 1987

Genre painters, novelists, ethnologists, psychologists and historians have acknowledged the category of the everyday long before its canonization in the intellectual agenda of the late 20th century. As diverse as their concerns were, they all shared a general appreciation of the everyday as a spatio-temporal backdrop, a framework of action, the *basso continuo* to their leading themes. For cultural historian Johan Huizinga, the latter musical reference would mean much more than a metaphor. Everyday life in mediaeval villages and townships was, according to him, ceaselessly orchestrated by the sound of church bells, whose familiar voices 'now called upon the citizens to mourn, and now to rejoice, now warned them about danger, now exhorted them to piety' (Huizinga 2001: 10).

Huizinga's discussion of the structuring role of bell sounds in mediaeval life may well serve as a preface to the science of rhythm analysis that Henri Lefebvre (2004) conceived seventy years later, with the aim of investigating the polyrhythmia of the modern world. A much earlier entry point to this science, however, can be found in Baudelaire's late work. In his dedicatory preamble to *Paris Spleen*, the series of prose poems he composed between 1855 and his death in 1867, Baudelaire explains that this open-ended, kaleidoscopic work, unconventionally shaped as 'a poetic prose, musical, without rhythm and without rhyme', was born out of his 'exploration of huge cities, out of the medley of their innumerable interrelations' and aimed at 'the description of our more abstract modern life' (Baudelaire 1970: ix-x).

In the midst of composing his unrhythmic tales of modern metropolitan polyrhythmia, Baudelaire most forcefully brought to the foreground the modernist problematics of the everyday in his essay on *The Painter of*

Modern Life. It is here, in the context of his praise of the brisk sketches of Constantine Guys, a newspaper illustrator with a keen eye on contemporary French modes and manners, that Baudelaire defines the objective of modern painting to be the quick capture of the transitory, fugitive and contingent element of modernity (Baudelaire 1992: 393-4). The delayed publication of his essay in the autumn of 1863, a few months after the public scandal provoked by the exhibition of Edward Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* at the first *Salon des Refusés*, makes it the unwitting manifesto of the nascent impressionist movement which was to excel in meeting Baudelaire's demand for a vibrant 'pictorial record of everyday life' (Baudelaire 1992: 407). Baudelaire's emphasis on innovative forms and techniques appropriate to the task of apprehending the complexity and transience of the modern everyday permeates the whole of the subsequent course of visual modernism, generating a series of successive waves and resurfaces, from the audacity of the early avant-gardes and the ceaseless inventiveness of photography and cinema, to the bewildering diversity of postmodern polyglossia, encompassing pop and neo-pop art, Fluxus and arte povera, graffiti and performance art, video and digital art.

Alongside the seemingly boundless fertility of Baudelaire's programme of visual modernism, the question of the everyday became perhaps the most distinctive feature of literary modernism as well. From the investigation of the interface between internal and external world in Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, John Dos Passos and Alfred Döblin to the dense thing-worlds of George Perec or Alain Robbe-Grillet, and the imaginary ethnographies of W. G. Sebald, Don DeLillo and Marc Augé, there is a persistent engagement with and immersion in the full breadth and depth of the everyday, and at the same time, a constant reflection upon and experimentation with the means of its literary representation.

Freud's *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901) focused on the everyday as the site of a systematic forgetting and repression, and on psychotherapy as the *anamnesis* and recovery of forgotten and repressed experiences, thoughts and desires. This prefigured, to a large extent, the way the question of everyday life was posed by its manifold subsequent intellectual appropriations as the site at once of forgetting and recovery, of repression and emancipation. For example, in Edmund Husserl's epistemological 'return to things themselves' (Husserl 1983: 35-37) the everyday is the site of non-reflection and inauthenticity, but also of awareness and illumination. (Many would see here an affinity but, despite their common anti-metaphysical tenor, also a stark contrast to Heidegger's non-phenomenological appreciation of the richness and complexity of the

Alltag as the fundamental structure of our Being-in-the-world in his 1927 work “dedicated to Edmund Husserl” *Sein und Zeit*.) In any case, the combined effect of Freud’s analytics of the dream-world in his *Traumdeutung* (1900) and his approach to everyday parapraxes was not only to expand the remit of psychoanalytic hermeneutics beyond the walls of the abnormal into the realm of ordinariness, but also to effectively transpose the riddle of common behavioral phenomena from the sphere of superstition and mythology to that of psychical dynamics.

The concept of the everyday, with its merging of repetitive, cyclical time with progressive, linear time, predicates a type of historical consciousness that weaves together the micro-level of social experience and action with the macro-level of socio-cultural development. In this way it helps theorize the production and reproduction of norms, as well as the breaking and refashioning of norms. Hence the significance it acquired, in the early decades of the 20th century, for cultural sociologists like Georg Simmel and Norbert Elias, for cultural critics like Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer and Adolf Loos, for both left-wing and right-wing radical civil and moral reform programmes aimed at the construction of the New Man, and for cultural iconoclasts like the avant-garde artists of surrealism and constructivism.

Most of these strands of early 20th century engagement with the everyday can be found tangled together in a series of texts that have all the quasi-journalistic immediacy, brevity and probing energy that, a century ago, Baudelaire demanded from his fellow artists and strove to achieve with his *Paris Spleen*: the self-confessedly ‘highly poetic and idiosyncratic’ short pieces written by Roland Barthes in the mid-1950s and published in 1957 under the suggestive title *Mythologies*. In line with Saussure’s definition of semiology as the science that ‘studies the life of signs within society’ (Saussure 1974: 16) Barthes focuses on a heterogeneous variety of subjects – topical events, toys, popular sports and films, tourist guides, exhibitions, media texts and advertisements – aiming at unmasking the bourgeois ideology underpinning certain pervasive ‘myths of French daily life’ (Barthes 1973: 11). In 1962, Henri Lefebvre also took up the issue of ‘myths in everyday life’, noting the ‘slight difference’ that distinguishes his own ‘methodological interpretation’. By contrast to Barthes, he points out, his approach is ‘more diachronic than synchronic’ (Lefebvre 2003: 102). Indeed, while Barthes takes these myths as a language that, by suppressing the historical determinations of everyday reality, makes it appear as Nature, Lefebvre sees them as the obfuscating products of a disempowering everydayness.

Barthes' *Mythologies* was destined to become the foundational text of post-war semiotics, acting as a template for the subsequent development of semiotics as ideological critique, as "semioclasms" (iconoclasm of signs), as a project of demystifying the social world of signs and meanings analogous to and closely associated with Lefebvre's simultaneously developing project of the critique of everyday life. The confluence of these two projects during the ascent of the problematics of everyday life in the 1960s stamped the way the counter-cultural politics of the period elaborated its distinctively libertarian but also anti-speculative rhetoric. Raoul Vaneigem's aphorism that 'there are more truths in twenty-four hours of a man's life than in all the philosophies' (2001: 21), as well as Guy Debord's key focus on concrete daily life, develop and re-politicise the demystificatory drive inspiring both Barthes and Lefebvre while, at the same time, radicalizing Husserl's call for 'a return to the things themselves' as a return to human praxis.

If Husserl stopped short of unmooring the everyday from the fallacies of common sense, failing thus to validate it in a manner that would make it an effective basis for the critique of rationalism, for Michel de Certeau, by contrast, the everyday is inherently marked by the uncontrolled and covert, 'dispersed, tactical, and makeshift creativity of groups or individuals' (de Certeau 1988: xiv-xv). His path-breaking researches into the practices of the everyday, the shadowy continent of microscopic, multiform techniques of cultural re-appropriation and re-employment resonate closely with what Umberto Eco (1990) had described as 'semiological guerilla warfare', the resistive tactics of media audiences of decoding in unpredictably aberrant ways the dominant media messages.

Michel de Certeau's and Umberto Eco's rejection of the view of an all-powerful institutional-ideological apparatus or *Kulturindustrie*, respectively, suffusing and shaping every aspect of everyday life, emptying it, in effect, of all meaning save the insipid mechanics of domination, formed a crucial element in the evolution of Cultural Studies. From their beginnings, in the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, they were instrumental in establishing the interdisciplinary inquiry and appreciation of the everyday as both medium and narrative of social transformation. A pivotal role, on the other hand, in both de Certeau's and the Cultural Studies' approach is held by the ethnological method and by the anthropological concept of culture, whose expansive scope includes all the diverse forms of life and popular cultural processes and meanings. This eclectic affinity, however, is symptomatic of a much wider and more far-reaching conjuncture.

The canonization of the everyday in the past few decades is largely due to the anthropological turn in the social sciences and humanities. Heavily reliant on the use of ethnography and participant observation, both versions of micro-sociology – Harold Garfinkel’s ethnomethodology and Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical approach – advanced the sociology of everyday life as the inquiry into how people make sense of and construct their social world. The anthropological concept of culture, on the other hand, was the engine of growth of a new range of historiographical practices. Beginning with the rise of new social history in the 1960s, the 1970s and 1980s saw the emergence of the French *nouvelle histoire*, the German *Alltagsgeschichte*, the Italian micro-history, as well as women’s history, new urban history, new cultural geography and new cultural history.

The linchpin of the momentous paradigm shift that produced this new hermeneutics of everyday life was a focus on people as active agents in various cultural contexts, uses and practices, the merging of the conventional distinctions between the private and the public, the local and the global, the material and the symbolic, the bridging of the agency/structure divide marking the grand historical and cultural narratives. In their place a wealth of new kinds of narratives was produced out of what had been traditionally taken for granted, condemned or discarded, unmarked and overlooked as mundane, trivial and inconsequential.

In his conclusion to the first volume of his magnum opus on the rise of capitalism, whereby he introduced the everyday of life into the domain of modern historiography, Fernand Braudel admits that “to encompass all the many and varied constituents of material life would require close and systematic research, followed by much synthesis and analysis. All that is still lacking. What the text says calls for discussion, addition and extension” (Braudel 1992: 559). Despite the wide range of contributions that have advanced the study of the everyday in recent decades, Braudel’s suggestion is still pertinent. The volume at hand is both a response to the need for more ‘close and systematic research’, for more ‘synthesis and analysis’, and a call for more ‘discussion, addition and extension’.

The collection of texts in this volume draws on the dozens of papers presented at the IX International Conference of the Hellenic Semiotic Society held in October 2010, at the University of Cyprus, on the topic of ‘The Everyday’. The fact that we were hosted in Cyprus partly explains its largely Greek, Middle Eastern and North African thematic focus. The conference would not have been realized without the hard work of Professor Apostolos Lampropoulos, then at the University of Cyprus, now at Université Bordeaux III. We would also like to thank Ben Highmore

and Marc Augé for their contribution to the conference, as well as all the authors in this volume,

Concepts and Categories of the Everyday

In the vein of a “third generation” of cultural studies, and also forming part of the inevitable negotiation of semiotic tools and hermeneutical insight, this volume attempts to re-examine dominant and peripheral aspects of the theory, performance and representation of the everyday, pinning a few more flags onto its historical and conceptual map.

Hecate Vergopoulos speaks of the everyday as a category that passes through the semiotic to go beyond the semiotic by claiming Roland Barthes’ category of the “neutral” for the everyday. She speaks of the everyday as social experience of time and space, rather than as the time and space of experience, and provides the postwar critical and philosophical itinerary that would lead to Poirier’s literary phrase: *Instead of searching for the meaning of things, it might be wiser to appreciate their physical gravity: to palpate them, to taste them, to feel them.*

Mathematical tools like statistics, the laws of large numbers, the notion of the “average man”, and the underlying probabilistic reasoning behind using those tools lie at the heart of the concept of “everyday man”. May Chaheb examines this reasoning at the cross-section of mathematics and literature, mainly in the work of Robert Musil and Maguerite Yourcenar. Within the context of the abandonment in modernity of traditional categories of identity formation, the literary strategies of non-differentiation and anti-subjectivism of these writers do not escape the “revenge of the improbable and the insignificant”, the accommodation of chance and the rise of a new radical subjectivism, which opens up anew the dialectics of statistical probability and ethical responsibility.

Alexander Lagopoulos speaks of the contradictions inherent in the discourse of the revolutionary everyday, as exemplified by the Situationists’ early experimentations with planning and geography. The Situationist International’s revolutionary politics and architectural endeavors are examined side by side as part of an overarching project to overcome alienation in the city – the city they explored with the techniques of psycho-geography, as well as the city they envisioned in unitary urbanism. Their attempt to engage with “the micro-reality of the everyday”, both in *derives* and *detournements* as well as in the theory of unitary urbanism, is the catalyst for our understanding of their contribution to theory and politics. Their positions rely on a semiotic reading of space which positions them within the subjectivist currents of postmodern

critical geography on the one hand, and on the other within Marxist and radical geographies that see social revolutionary potential in the transformation of everyday culture.

The Everyday as Marketing Method and Ritual Practice

The anthropologist Lilly Stylianoudi, in analyzing pre-European Maori tattooing practices and their meanings today, proposes a dialectics of the everyday and the everlasting in order to understand the play of collective identity and history in the practice and ritual of “carving” the body, which links its everyday appearance to primordial moments of society.

Fotini Tsibiridou argues that the political production and marketing of religious signifiers amongst the Muslim population, particularly women, in the Middle East (and beyond) has created, since the 1980s, a “new field of bio-power, shaping gender, individuality, personhood, collectivities and civic virtue”. The creation of the identity of the pious Muslim consumer based on manipulating representations of Islam has been the conscious, control-driven collaborative project of both local authoritarian rulers and global market regulators.

Continuing the discussion of Salafi religious representations as branding on the level of economic theory, Charitatos and Christodoulou focus on luxury, another aspect of immaterial capital. Their semiotic analysis of traditional economic categories shows how, in the global brand market, the “loop between the creation of imaginary money and the formation of new luxurious categories” is crucial for understanding the shift of small and medium businesses in crisis-ridden countries of the West towards the so-called “attainable luxury products” necessary for preserving and satisfying the imagery of everyday consumption.

At the other end of the bio-political spectrum of mass consumption, Karin Boklund discusses the solitary practice and social institution of reading popular literature as part of our “everyday fantasy”. Looking at the far-from-quotidian content of what we read for everyday entertainment, which is, in the main, exceptional plots and protagonists placed in non-existent, non-realistic worlds, she reaches a convincing and poetic conclusion that “our everyday is a collage of small, necessary epiphanies”.

Style versus Constraint in the Languages of the Everyday

The battle of the poetic and the constrictive in the languages of the everyday is the topic of the next section. The first two texts talk about the birth of a modern national style in the literary production of 1880s Greece,

a turning point and school textbook reference for national ideology, and in French administrative writing that attempts to create a supra-stylistic register of state language. The next two texts take the game of signification to its extremes: American action film subtitles seem to oversimplify, compress and level a narrative, while museum and gallery display can completely dissociate exhibited objects from signification or interpretation.

Georgia Pateridou examines the new privileging of the “everyday” as object and style of poetry, over the traditional types and narratives of heroic state nationalism. Through little songs, unthreatening form, style at the border of satirical criticism, representations of calm nature and innocent love, the 1880s generation of poets in modern Greece, later to become a prominent part of national literature, were the first to attempt to challenge the heroic moments in the early canonical narrative of the nation-state.

Reversing the inquiry, this structural-anthropological issue of the social meanings produced by the systematics of signification of the everyday is visited by Helene Campaignolle on the same testing ground of style and linguistic functions. Exploring whether one can pinpoint the historical moment of passage from the “singularity of writing” to a “system of rules” she asks whether “style” actually exists as a category for understanding what it is that creates a “sense of everyday routine” in formal administrative writing, as opposed to the de-familiarizing effects of literariness.

Subtitles are the *par excellence* formalized and typified text, subject to specific technical constraints and accompanying to a great extent American action films. Anthi Wiedenmayer points to the fact that translated subtitles are the dominant type of written text in the everyday life of Greeks and wonders about the consequences of this on the norms and ideas of its recipients.

Chris Dorsett dismantles the formal relationship between style, object and signification by turning to contemporary artistic practices and their museum and gallery display context. There, he suggests, Roland Barthes’ formula of “asignification” can help us see objects as reclaiming their autonomous quality of *thinglyness*, and moving beyond the utilitarian instrumentalization of material objects within the semiotic realm.

Representing the Quotidian

The section on representations of the everyday, where the quotidian is treated primarily as *sujet* and theme of a creative work, comprises a series

of media-specific studies. It opens with an exploration of Ivorian everyday life in the six volumes of the comics series *Aya de Yopougon*. Ferreira-Meyers places this sequential story of the 1970s and 1980s as seen by a young woman, her family and friends within the realistic comic book genre thematizing everyday life in Africa.

Sana Mselmi turns to the contradictions of the Arab quotidian, where the banality and repetitiveness associated with the modernist Western everyday are not to be taken for granted. She points to the narrative film techniques which allegorize the silence imposed upon the extraordinary Palestinian everyday life in Elia Suleiman's *The Time That Remains*, or which highlight the interplay of the subjective and the documentary in Mohamed Zran's *Living Here*, about living in a southeastern Tunisian town.

In stark contrast to the Arab filmmakers' expressive intention to inform a global public about their countries, 17 Greek films, all competing for the 2009 Great Award of the Hellenic Film Academy, attempt to critically explore the complexities of self-identity and otherness in contemporary Greek society. Rea Wallden's semiotic study discusses the narrative and filmic techniques that produce views of racism, sexism and homophobia as forms of 'othering' today.

A different point of view of othering, for which the dominant identity depends on promoting and co-opting the diversity of local identities, is provided by Evangelos Kourdis's study of intra-lingual translation in television advertisement. TV product advertisements in historical linguistic variations and accents are a new form of "soft manipulation" by the media of consumers' sense of regional-linguistic identity, based on perceived signs of a diachronic Greek "traditional way of life".

In cinema and on television, realist tactics enable negotiations of identity and otherness, while poetry verging on the naturalist can retain its hope of radical subjectivity. Alexander Hertich reads the contemporary poetic work of Jacques Réda as a vehicle for reclaiming grandeur and monumentality for the quotidian through representing and recording everyday observations and actions. The poet-philosopher, continuing the tradition of the nineteenth-century *flâneur* and preserving the rules and historical autonomy of lyrical city poetry, aims at an "osmosis of writing and walking" and experiences everyday life in Paris at the "borders of the banal and the magical".

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CHAPTER 1:
CONCEPTS AND CATEGORIES
OF THE EVERYDAY

THE EVERYDAY IS “INSIGNIFICANT”

HECATE VERGOPOULOS

Le propre du quotidien, c'est de nous désigner une région, ou un niveau de parole, où la détermination du vrai et du faux, comme l'opposition du oui et du non, ne s'applique pas, étant toujours en deçà de ce qui l'affirme et cependant se reconstituant sans cesse par-delà tout ce qui le nie.

—Blanchot 1969, 361

Till the 1940s, the everyday was not studied nor taken into account by researchers and scientists. It thus did not exist as a scientific object. To be regarded as a coherent and pertinent field of research, to be thought of as a legitimate object that could be put under the human and social sciences' microscope it had to lead quite a few struggles with, on its side, the French Ecole des Annales, Henri Lefebvre, the sociology of the everyday and the Cultural Studies of the Anglo-Saxon world. These fights did have some repercussions on the way the everyday is now offered to scientific research, in the sense that their aim was to provide a series of conclusive proofs which would show how essential it is in our lives and societies, and how important it is to study it in order to better understand our cultures. As a result, the everyday became a political stake. This is what this chapter will insist on. More precisely, it will show the result of the ideological ambitions of the researchers who, starting from the 1940s in France, were willing to institute the everyday, both from a scientific and a cultural point of view, as a legitimate object which had to be regarded. The result of their ideological ambitions was a configuration of the everyday as a daily fact stuck into the conflict of (in)significance. They thus raised a key issue that can now eventually be left aside to better position our actuality in the history of the concept.

In order to do so, the concept provides the everyday with a new scientific framework, and more precisely a semiotic one: the one that had been elaborated by Roland Barthes in the 1970's named “the neutral”. Let us remember that according to Roland Barthes the neutral occupies a tricky position in the world's order. If it were an aliment, says the author through an amusing Chinese image, it would be rice: “not bland nor tasty, not thick nor loose, not colourful nor colourless” (2002, 122). If it were an

animal? It would be a donkey – Nietzsche’s donkey – or, more precisely, “the infinitely sad and soft velvet of donkeys’ eyes”, following Léon Bloy’s formula (2002, 122). This neutral space in which contraries can embrace one another, though it can seem strange and labile at first sight, will allow us to renew our relationship to the everyday as it has been constituted as a scientific object.

For the neutral is, indeed, an entire theory of the insignificant thought, yet not in terms of semiotic values (related to the issue of meaning or lack of meaning) but in terms of social and cultural ones (related to the essential and the non-essential). It circumscribes a place and time where objects and beings are properly inessential though obstinate exactly in the same way objects and beings do go through the everyday. The neutral, as Roland Barthes defines it, has indeed the property to freeze conflicts of values. In that sense, if one starts to consider the everyday as neutral, one has to admit that it can be seized as a place and time where conflicts stop, where the issues concerning its non-essential qualities are no longer relevant.

1. The everyday and the insignificant

In 2010, all of those who walked through Paris got the chance to read, written in capital letters all over the city, the following enigmatic message: “Say no to the everyday everyday”. It was the slogan of an advertisement campaign launched by the French retail chain Monoprix that came with the peculiar changing of the packaging of its own products: a can of carrots would announce “Superfine graded carrots. Even dwarf rabbits think they are superfine”, and a box of reblochon, this French cheese well known for smelling like a sock trapped into a stinky shoe, would suggest “Let its fragrance perfume your fridge”.

This amusing marketing campaign aimed to show that the everyday does not have to be lived through as ordinary or even banal. It can be surprising and unexpected as long as one is willing to avoid one’s own routine. To do so, one has to pay great attention to the countless humdrum details that compose it. For the everyday is, in fact, the realm of details. More precisely, it is the realm of what will here be called “the minuscules”.

Many researchers have indeed defined the everyday as such. Michel Maffesoli explains that it is an “alchemical laboratory of the minuscule creations that do daily life” (1998 [1979], 12) or the sum of “the minuscule daily attitudes, itineraries, discussions, *bricolages*, cooking, walks, clothing researches, i.e. the attitudes through which individuals

acknowledge that they altogether compose a group” (1998 [1979], 13). To Michel Foucault, the everyday is a “space of surveillance” made by “the whole of minuscule technical inventions”, i.e. “disciplines” (1975, 256). To Pierre Mayol, the urban everyday is made of “minuscule repressions” that respond to the injunctions of “proprieties” (1994 [1980], 28). The everyday thus appears to be a space of actions and uses, constraints and repressions that would, at first sight, share a size-related specificity: they would all be very small.

However, this recurrent poetic of the “minuscule” does not exactly refer to a space scale. Paul Davies and Julian Brown noticed:

“The problem of measurement and the observer is the problem of where the measurement begins and ends, and where the observer begins and ends. Consider my spectacles, for example: if I take them off now, how far away must I put them before they are part of the object rather than part of the observer?” (1999 [1986], 48).

In other words, what the observer seizes as a fragment of the world and what he or she studies can sometimes be at least partially configured as the result of his or her own projection onto the world. Taking a closer look at Maffesoli’s, Foucault’s or even Mayol’s researches brings us to understand that what is qualified as “minuscule” is less some property of the daily objects and their daily uses (the everyday as it stands on the other side of the scientific spectacles) than a way to consider them (the everyday as it is being seen through the spectacles). The everyday “minuscules” refer to the difficulties these researchers faced when they tried to seize some fragments of the world that were, till then, rarely taken into account and for which no dedicated theoretical and empirical tool existed. The realm of “minuscules” is thus one of a world somehow almost invisible to science, a world of the evanescent and the fugitive in which social and scientific observation has shown little or no interest. It is that left-aside object that researches had to “invent” (Certeau 1990 [1980]) to better understand it but also to show how dense and complex it was.

To avoid any misunderstanding, I suggest that we call this minuscule “the insignificant”. This new terminology simply aims to enlighten the fact that the everyday has been built up, through scientific work, as a legitimate object fighting against a social representation that had made of it a negligible object of science. The word “insignificant” will thus refer to a structural axiology that came with the “invention of the everyday” when it was first studied: dragging it out of the shadow of nonexistent scientific objects and putting it under the light of valuable and legitimate scientific theories. It will help us in differentiating the object from the scientists’

spectacles. But it will also help in considering the everyday as a place and time that is being lived through, as distinct from the everyday as a scientific and social – shall we here say historical? – construction.

The word insignificant, according to Audrey Camus, has three different meanings: “Is insignificant everything that has no interest at all [...]. Is insignificant, in a second sense, everything that has no importance, no consequences [...]. Is finally insignificant, everything that has no meaning, no sense” (2009, 6-8).

Considering this definition, the insignificant appears to come with a series of social and cultural values as it defines the opposite of what is interesting, important and, let us say for want of anything better, the opposite of what is sensible. These values help us in understanding the way the insignificant circulates as a social representation throughout our societies, as the place of the uninteresting, the unimportant and the insensible. If one accepts the idea that the everyday is insignificant, even if it is in order to better defend the idea that it is, on the contrary, highly essential and significant, one admits that the everyday can be regarded (by others) as a social and cultural space that exists as a negation to the values of fundamentality.

The main issue that this approach raises is the following: should the fact that the everyday is considered as an uninteresting, unimportant and/or “insensible” part of the daily world be accepted or should this point of view be contradicted in a scientific study, since it can be thought of as a depreciation of the everyday or an underestimation of it? In other words, should the social and cultural values that come with the everyday (uninteresting, unimportant, and insensible) be taken into account through the process of construction of the scientific object or should they be put aside if not contradicted, to better build up the legitimacy of the object?

2. The everyday and the neutral

Through what he named in the 1970s “the neutral”, Roland Barthes developed an original approach to the insignificant that will provide us with some key elements to answer the question of values. His neutral, quite different from Husserl’s (1950) or Blanchot’s (1969), is inspired by phonology and linguistics. It has been elaborated as a semiotic concept that aims to specify the way in which some objects do offer themselves to be experienced in the social world or to circulate through it.

Roland Barthes’ approach to the neutral invites us to consider that it is precisely the social and cultural values that qualify the everyday and give it its meaning which should be taken into account. They should be

accepted as a part of the object itself more than rejected and fought against. And after all, before being a noun that designates a time and space of social life, is the everyday not first, grammatically, a qualifying adjective, i.e. a word that comes with the noun to precisely specify the cultural values that make of it a social fact?

Roland Barthes' concept of the neutral was born in 1977, at a time when, since the 1960s, and more specifically with the publication of his book *Empire of signs*, he starts to reconsider the way he gazes at the world that he is analysing. He then stops what he afterwards called “the breach of meaning” (1970), the one he had in fact himself defended in his *Mythologies* (1957) when trying to flush out the way in which “cultural” signs pretend that they are “natural”. As Sheringham notes it (2006), when the neutral emerges, Roland Barthes is more focused on the experience of objects (on the spectacles, again, and on the individual who wears them) than on the object itself.

In this context, he teaches, at the Collège de France in the late 1970s, a lesson entitled “The Neutral” (2002). To do so, he goes about things using a peculiar method of his own: the one of “scintillations”. It consists in presenting, in a non-exhaustive perspective but also in a random way, twenty-three “figures” that, according to him, deal with the neutral: such as benevolence, tiredness or delicacy. These “figures” are not fragments of the neutral, but rather fragments “in which, more vaguely, there is some neutral [that has to be found] a little like those rebus drawings in which one must look for the silhouette of the hunter and the one of the rabbit”.

According to Roland Barthes, what all these figures share is the fact that they refuse to respond to a paradigmatic logic. In order to understand the neutral one has therefore to first focus on paradigms. “What is a paradigm?”, asks Roland Barthes.

« It is the opposition of two virtual terms from which I actualise one in order to talk, to produce meaning [...] »

Wherever there is meaning, there is paradigm, and wherever there is paradigm (an opposition), there is meaning said elliptically: meaning is based on conflict (choosing a term rather than another) and every conflict generates meaning: choosing one and pushing another one aside, it always brings to sacrifice to meaning, to produce meaning, to give it so it can be consumed” (2002, 31).

A paradigm is the principle of contrariety on which language and meaning are based. As for the neutral, it can precisely be defined as a way to cancel or distract the implacability of the paradigm. It offers a new logic to the production of meaning that is not based on conflict nor on

contrariety. According to Roland Barthes, the neutral “does not hide but does not either marks (= quite difficult): all in all, something like *The Purloined Letter*” (2002, 82). If the neutral does not “mark” – if it is not remarked –, it is because it has nothing of a bright garish shade. It is a kind of shape that goes unnoticed though, exactly in the same way the purloined letter was, it is daily present and obviously offered to everyone’s eyes.

One of the “figures” that Roland Barthes analyses is quite interesting, as it helps us to understand some more about the insignificant and the everyday: it is the one of meticulousness. Roland Barthes considers it as a scintillation associated to the greater “figure” of delicacy. He chooses to study it through the way it is been experienced in the Japanese art of tea ceremony. He starts with reminding his audience that Japanese culture of tea has known three different stages through history: tea was first boiled – under the Tang dynasty (618-907) –, it was then beaten – under the Song dynasty (960-1279) –, and finally infused – from the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) till now. Quoting Okakura Kakuzo and Lu Yu, two masters of tea that have both written a book presenting the beverage’s ritual of preparation, Roland Barthes invites his audience to focus on the meticulousness of their description when it comes to boiled tea:

“Ebullition [there are different stages of ebullition]: 1) Small bubbles that look alike fish’s eyes, 2) bubbles like crystal pearls that roll in a fountain, 3) waves furiously leaping in the kettle (the teacake has to be roasted in front of fire till it becomes ‘tender as a small child’s arms’. Then pulverised stuck into two papers; salt has to be thrown during the first stage of ebullition, tea during the second one; and during the third one, a ladleful of fresh water to fix the tea and ‘give the water its youth back again’)” (2002, 59).

Roland Barthes comments: “towards a useless detail or a mysteriously useful one: meticulousness: at the edge of harebrained. All in all: an art of the useless supplement” (2002, 59). Meticulousness is thus a care that can sometimes seem harebrained, not to say superstitious, but that nonetheless works wonders as “an art of the useless supplement”. It is not highly useful to enter so many details since tea can be prepared with fewer words but at the same time it is not highly useless in the sense that it loses a part of its art and ritual when it is not spoken in these terms. The paradigm that the “figure” of meticulousness distracts is, precisely, the one of the (in)significant. The meaning, the strength and specificity of meticulousness rely on the fact that it escapes from the order of values that commonly makes out

of significance and insignificance some principles for reasonable ordering of the world.

As for the everyday, it stands in a similar position as the one of meticulousness: it is not exactly significant in the sense that it does not appear, throughout social values, as being properly fundamental (let us remember that is often thought of as uninteresting, unimportant and insensible); it is not, however, exactly insignificant since it keeps being a great structural part of our lives. Considering the everyday as neutral thus brings us to reconsider it so as to approach it as a time and space that are both non-essential and still persistent, at the same time discrete and ineluctable, invisible or blind and omniscient.

To put it differently, the everyday, from a neutral point of view, is everything that embraces and surrounds us without, though, being remarkable. It happens in all places and times in which no event occurs to disrupt the world's order (Bensa and Fassin 2002), in which things do simply go along their ways without breaking an ordinary course.

This definition brings a new element to the study of the everyday, in the sense that to analyse the way it is lived through by social individuals does not pre-categorize its object as a time and space of our lives; but to do so suggests that the everyday is everything that occurs to social individuals when no conflict of values or meaning is at stake.

3. The everyday and the paradigm

The definition of the everyday as a neutral thus offers an opportunity to consider its object as a time and space that occurs rather than a time and space in which some facts occur. By defining the everyday as a social experience in time and space rather than a time and space of social experience, it allows us to throw a new light on different scientific studies that have analysed it. It enables us, in particular, to illuminate the fact that most of the leading researches on the everyday, and more precisely the sociological ones that were willing to study everyday facts, are based on a paradigmatic point of view that constrains their object to take part in the conflict about social values referred to earlier.

In the 1970s, sociology of the everyday clearly appeared to be, at least in France, a pertinent means to renew the political perspective of sociological studies. After Henri Lefebvre (1968), it indeed tried to abandon the dialectic of domination in order to think about the social world differently. Michel Maffesoli wrote:

“Instead of being obsessed by the couple alienation-liberation, instead of clenching on their perfectly tetanic relationships, it matters to gaze at this everyday life which, up and down, unpredictably, through boredom and exuberance, follows its path in an obstinate and somehow incomprehensible way” (1998 [1979], 23).

As for Luce Giard, she commented on Michel de Certeau’s work on *The Invention of the Everyday* with these words:

“What matters from now on is not ‘scholarly culture’, this abandoned treasure left to the vanity of its owners. It is neither ‘popular culture’, a name given from the outside by clerks who make out stock lists and embalm what a power has already erased [...]. Hence, we must turn toward ‘disseminated proliferation’ of anonymous and ‘perishable’ creations” (1990 [1980], VII).

Sociology of the everyday thus started to analyse what it identified as the ordinary part of social life focusing on the way social individuals shop, cook, are dressed, walk or even read. Some researchers such as Michel Maffesoli (1998 [1979]) and Michel de Certeau (1990) [1980]) do not consider all of these activities and actions as processes of submission of the dominated to the dominators anymore, but rather as processes of production and creativity. However, the domination issue is still taken into account since they both think that individuals live though their everyday lives with a sense of “ruse” in reaction to social domination.

There thus is a political dimension in these researches that can be summarized by Michel de Certeau’s formula: “it is always useful to remind us that we should not think people are idiots” (1990 [1980], 255). In that sense and at that time, sociology of the everyday suggested that social individuals should be given the social means to help them to understand that they intuitively resist the logic of consumption and the social and cultural rules of the market, whether or not these latter are tacit. It moreover aimed to draw the attention of those who are in charge of this market to the fact that their “consumers”, as users, will have no other choice but the one of resistance. The dominated/dominators and the oppressed/oppressors dichotomies had given away to a somehow different one: the markets and their products vs. the operations of social individuals who use the products in a creative way. In a word, in the 1970s, sociology of the everyday raises the issues of uses, giving Cultural Studies a solid ground on which to keep developing their projects.

Everyday uses were however not defined in the same way by these two researchers. To Michel Maffesoli, the everyday is a space of an “à présent”, i.e. of the actualisation of oneself through creativity in daily sociability, of the socialized “presentification” of social individuals. To Michel de Certeau, the everyday is a space thought of in “polemological” terms in which creative individuals, taken as users, can evade institutional strategies. However, in both cases, the everyday is a space of social and creative uses that are considered as standing in opposition to the circulating representation that would then see in daily routines nothing more than an uninteresting field of research.

Since these researches aimed to prove that the ordinary can be extraordinary, both for those who live through it and those who study it, since their challenge was moreover to show that the everyday is always more significant than it could first seem, their approaches to the everyday can qualify as paradigmatic ones. In fact, most of the studies on the everyday are paradigmatic in the same way. Henri Lefebvre thus wrote to present his book *The Everyday life in the Modern World*:

“What is this all about? A wide research on the facts that are despised by philosophers or arbitrarily separated by social sciences. Specialists of fragmented sciences [...] despise the everyday facts as they think that they are unworthy to be study: pieces of furniture, objects and the world of objects, timetables, miscellaneous news, advertisements in newspapers. They thus agree with philosophers, full of contempt for the ‘Alltäglichkeit’.

The objective, initially formulated, is to have these facts that can seem shapeless, entered into knowledge and to assemble them not arbitrarily but according to concepts and a theory” (1968, 55).

The objective is, in other words, “to define [the everyday life], to define its changes and its perspective by keeping amongst the facts that can seem insignificant something that is essential” (1968, 59).

Michel de Certeau also wrote concerning his book *The Invention of the Everyday*:

“The following essay is dedicated to the ordinary man [...]

This anonymous hero who comes from far away. He is the murmur of societies. He has always come before texts [...]. Slowly, he starts to occupy the central point of our scientific stages. The spotlights have abandoned the actors with surnames and social blazons to look at the choir of figurants amassed on sides” (1990 [1980], 11).

The objective of these researchers' studies was to establish the fundamental aspect of this time and space that has for too long been forgotten by science and culture. To do so, they did not hesitate to perform the role of the lawyer who gave the scrivener Bartleby a job: they demand the everyday to signify, and enjoin it to be substantial and consistent. The lawyer, however, had to face it: his questions and exigencies towards the scrivener had no echo. As long as he was trying to apply his own rationality to understand Bartleby's, instead of considering that he (Bartleby) might have another way of reasoning, he misunderstood his employee's motivation and logic. He constructed a framework that could provide him with no suitable answer.

The question that the analysis of Roland Barthes' neutral raises once it is adapted to the issue of the everyday is the following: turning this ordinary object into an extraordinary one, does it not bring one to scarify the object itself? Michael Sheringham seems to share this concern when he writes:

"The oscillation between positive and negative evaluations is endemic to thinking about the everyday. This means that any appeal to everydayness as interesting or valuable is likely to involve rehabilitation or exhortation: look what you've overlooked! See the significance of the seemingly insignificant! Yet, in the sphere of the everyday, such zeal is paradoxical. If we go too far, the everyday ceases to be itself: it becomes the exceptional, the exotic, the marvellous. Transfigured, the commonplace is no longer commonplace." (2006, 23).

Roland Barthes' neutral precisely helps us in avoiding this scientific dead end in the sense that it allows us to find the proper commonplace of the common and insignificant everyday.

Conclusion

In *The Mismeasure of Man*, Stephen Jay Gould reminds us that science, since it is defined as the result of human work, "is socially embedded activity". Thus, "much of its change through time does not record a closer approach to absolute truth, but the alternation of cultural contexts that influence it so strongly" (1996 [1981], 53-54). Frederick Lambert, considering another kind of sciences – the ones that are more "human" and more "social" – invites us to recognize that there is always "a part of I", i.e. of "subjectivity", in sciences. Researchers should "be aware of the touch they leave in their texts and

that reveals their intentions. They have to enounce the place that they occupy towards the observation of the world” (2007, 17).

The cultural context but also the way researchers position themselves in this context are two key elements that play a great part in the process of production of scientific discourses, no matter how strong the ambition to objectify is. If, for quite a long time, researchers who studied the everyday have had to force the “order of discourse” and have written the violence of their will into their objects by defining it through a paradigmatic framework, shall we not today rethink our relationship to the everyday?

This question disserves to be raised as soon as one admits that a tradition of research emerged in the 1960s to be instituted twenty years later, at least in France (Sheringham 2006), and that as a consequence studying the ordinary has lost its heroic or heretic ambition in itself. The stakes have changed. It belongs to us now to reconsider our actuality in the history of research on the everyday, to position ourselves through the scientific literature, in order to enounce the singularity of a contemporary approach to the everyday. In this perspective, Roland Barthes’ neutral can provide us with a relevant framework of analysis. It indeed allows us to define the everyday otherwise than in a paradigm, both at odds with this tradition of research that has tried to establish it as a fundamental and in continuity with this same tradition. The neutral helps us in taking the insignificant out of the paradigmatic game, and it thus invites us to follow Jacques Poirier’s invitation:

“We can inhabit the world only if it has a meaning, and therefore only if every element that composes it, even the smallest one, appears to be ‘significant’: this is what most of artworks seem to repeat – from fairytales to metaphysical fables, or detective novels. [...] Instead of searching the meaning of things, it might be wiser to appreciate their physical gravity: to palpate them, to taste them, to feel them....” (Poirier 2009, 167).

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