

Handout English 202 – On the “Everyday”

... As the notion of ‘everyday life’ circulates in Western cultures under its many guises (*Alltagsleben*, *la vie quotidienne*, run-of-the-mill, and so on) one difficulty becomes immediately apparent: ‘everyday life’ signifies ambivalently. On the one hand it points (without judging) to those most repeated actions, those most traveled journeys, those most inhabited spaces that make up, literally, the day to day. This is the landscape closest to us, the world most immediately met.

But with this quantifiable meaning creeps another, never far behind: the everyday as value and quality—everydayness. Here the most traveled journey can become the dead weight of boredom, the most inhabited space a prison, the most repeated action an oppressive routine. Here the everydayness of everyday life might be experienced as a sanctuary, or it may bewilder or give pleasure, it may delight or depress. Or its special quality might be its lack of qualities. It might be, precisely, the unnoticed, the inconspicuous, the unobtrusive.

... If the ‘shock of the new’ sends tremors to the core of the everyday, then what happens to the sense of the everyday as familiar and recognizable? In modernity the everyday becomes the settings for a dynamic process: for making the unfamiliar familiar; for getting accustomed to the disruption of custom ... for adjusting to different ways of living... Radical transformations in all walks of life become ‘second nature’....

This investigation starts, like all investigations should, with a detective. For Sherlock Holmes ‘everyday life’ is decidedly undecided. While never in doubt about the correctness of his own investigative methods, Sherlock Holmes gets bored. He gets bored when the mysterious and enigmatic side of life is not taxing his rationalistic intelligence. ...

‘My mind,’ he said, ‘rebels at stagnation. Give me problems, give me work, give me the most abstruse cryptogram, or the most intricate analysis, and I am in my own proper atmosphere. I can dispense then with artificial stimulants. But I abhor the dull routine of existence.. . .

The non-everyday (the exceptional) is there to be found in the heart of the everyday. Indeed many of Sherlock Holmes stories start with what seem to be ordinary, petty occurrences that hardly warrant the attention of the great detective. But for Holmes, the everyday is not what it seems. Or rather the everyday is precisely the route to be taken in solving the mystery he is investigating. . . .

Holmes is a genius; he is not ordinary. He continually astounds Watson and his clients by his uncanny divination of the details of a person’s life through the mere observation of an everyday object or the outward appearance of a person. In ‘The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle’ (1892), Holmes has been given a hat to examine, and draws the following conclusions about the wearer of the hat:

He had foresight, but has less now than formerly, pointing to a moral retrogression, which when taken with the decline of his fortunes, seems to indicate some evil influence, probably drink, at work upon him. This may account for the obvious fact that his wife has ceased to love him. . . .

The everyday offers itself up as a problem, a contradiction, a paradox: both ordinary and extraordinary, self-evident and opaque, known and known, obvious and enigmatic. In seeing the everyday as bizarre and mysterious, while at the same time distancing himself from such a world, ... Sherlock Holmes ... connects with everyday life as both relentless routine and the marker of social distinction.... What this book concerns itself with are not writers who somehow imaginatively escape the dilemma of a Holmes or a Freud, but writers who, in attending to everyday life as a lived experience, embrace more directly the ability to ‘make strange.’ If the culture of everyday modernity does evidence the process of making the unfamiliar familiar, the group of writers that I am concerned with work to defamiliarize this condition.

Highmore, Ben. Everyday Life and Cultural Theory: An Introduction. London: Routledge, 2002.