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THE HUMDRUM¹

— *To give the mundane its beautiful due* — John Updike

“Popular culture” is usually taken to mean the culture of everyday life; albeit that the focus of a great deal of popular cultural studies tends to be the occasional spectacular spikes that can occur in the rather dull and uniform wave pattern of the mundane. In an important sense, Harry Potter, Lady Gaga, *Game of Thrones* and so on are almost the obverse of the everyday as such, as the *every* day-in-day-out kind of day. And yet, at the same time, even sex and drugs and rock ’n’ roll — and the rest of the more dramatic phenomena we may or may not know and love — have their completely prosaic qualities (Byrne 2012). Someone has to buy the condoms, hide the stash and hump the amps: ordinary activities as much as any others. So it seems to me that, if we’re serious about making investigations of popular culture, we ought to be able to get some kind of handle on this quality of ordinariness: the humdrum, as it is, in all its confronting ordinariness.

Against this, perhaps because of a fashionable will to “theorize” in the contemporary social sciences and humanities, perhaps out of laziness, we are compelled — are we not? — to go searching for theories of the everyday as a fast track to what it might be all about, rather than making laborious studies of actual everyday life, in situ, where it lies before us for all to see and hear in the quotidian course of ordinary affairs. The main stations on the line are, of course, Lefebvre and de Certeau where, respectively, we are invited to consider the everyday in terms of dialectics and poetics. Arriving there, we may even be sent off down side tracks to such figures as Barthes, Bataille and even Freud. Before too long, anything that even vaguely resembles everyday life has been transformed into the rubrics of the semiotic, the immanent, the unconscious and a host of other unfamiliar.

An example perhaps? I suppose most readers of this chapter will have been to the cinema. What was it like last time you went? What can you remember about it? When you go again, if you were to keep notes, what would they look like? What would best describe your experience? I'd be concerned about the seat I sat in, given my optimal focal length; the relative noise levels of my fellow viewers; whether the popcorn was any good; the quality of the print and the sound system ... and a host of ordinary cinema-going bits of business. Not to mention the content of the film itself. This (below) is probably the last thing I'd record in my notebook:

Cinema has been studied as an apparatus of representation, an image-machine developed to construct images or visions of social reality and the spectator's place in it. But, insofar as cinema is directly implicated in the production and reproduction of meanings, values and ideology in *both* sociality and subjectivity, it should be better understood as a signifying practice, a work of semiosis: a work that produces effects of meaning and perception, self-images and subject positions for all those involved, makers and viewers; and thus a semiotic process in which the subject is continually engaged, represented and inscribed in ideology. (de Lauretis 1984: 37)

The film section of my library contains thousands like this; many even more distant from what cinema means to the vast majority of people who go there. I dragged it up from my wilder days when such things seemed to make sense. But imagine saying anything like *that* to a companion on the way out!

In this chapter I want to suggest another way of going about things. And I think we can begin by jettisoning both the appeal of the spectacular and, at least in the first place and in the usual sense, theorizing. If the reader wishes to step ahead to the end from here, I shall sum this up by saying: just go and have a bloody good look at some ordinary events in detail and describe what you see. Now I'll get on with saying why I think this is a good policy for finding out about everyday cultural affairs: the truly "popular" in the sense of "general," "common" and "prevalent"; as opposed to the merely "well-liked," "desired" and "fashionable."

To go on, I need to take a step back. Just now, I suggested the obviation of "theorizing." And I can already hear the quick reply from anyone with a pass in Cultural Studies 100: but no-one can avoid theory; you can't say anything about anything without some underlying theory. There is no pure description; no one-to-one adequation between a description of something and that something as such. Etc., etc. The long arm of Immanuel Kant reaches far it would seem.

So let me begin by trying to put a wedge between (bad) "theorizing" or *speculation* and (unavoidable) "theory" — the necessary underlying *field propositions* of any inquiry.²

The former, it seems to me, is a rather specialist kind of activity — a special form of far-from-everyday life — that has certain institutional sanctions and imprimaturs. It is a very specific mode of addressing life. And I think we can explain how it comes about in the following way.

The great phenomenological thinker, Alfred Schütz, was undoubtedly a social theorist in one sense. In another, he draws a distinction that might lead us to see how he (or anyone

for that matter) might have some, as we know, unavoidable *theories* and yet, at the same time, eschew *theorizing*. Schütz proposed that there were two distinct domains of inquiry and that proposal is one of his (and my) underlying field propositions (Schütz 1962: 4-7).

In the first domain of inquiry, the investigator comes upon his or her proper objects as objects which do not have interpretations of themselves and then super-adds interpretations to them. Physics is a typical example. Atoms do not have conceptions of themselves as possessing atomic mass, atomic number or electric charge. The physicist, quite properly, has to supply these by observation, measurement and so forth. Ditto for electrons. They do not conceive themselves as having line spectra, orbital angular momentum or spin. Again, these have to be supplied by the investigator. And so the constructs of the physicist are constructs of the first order.

In the second domain of inquiry, the investigator's proper objects are among those in the world which *have* pre-interpreted themselves; most notably cultural beings, i.e., human beings — though there may be some others that need not interest us for now. In this case, it is an error to approach them as if they were first-order objects. Instead, in this (primarily human) domain, it is the business of the investigator to — at least in the first place — come to understand and describe what we can now call “members’” pre-understandings, pre-interpretations or pre-constructs of themselves. This kind of investigator — typically but not exclusively the social scientist — has constructs that are dependent on the constructs already formed by those he or she is investigating. They are constructs of the second order and they utterly depend on what we can now call the “endogenous” constructs of those under investigation.

For the second type of investigator to act as though he or she were working under the same conditions as the first — with a “blank slate” of un-pre-interpreted objects — is, then, a fundamental mistake; though it covers a surprising amount of what passes for social science today. To work in such a way is often called “ironic” or taking an “ironic stance,” in the sense that it produces results which are at odds with anything that would be expected by, or recognisable to, the “participants” (the members) themselves. Little wonder, then, that, as ordinary folk, we frequently find social-science “results” about ourselves to be amusing. For instance, when we are told that something called “life” is merely biological, that we are nothing but one species among many, or that we are the products of our “selfish genes.” That is surely far from anything we might associate with “having a life,” let alone “getting a life”? (Though it still beats me how many these days are falling for the wiles of the psy professions and respecifying themselves as monadic individuals ruled by brain chemicals and neurological processes.)

To take ordinary, everyday practical affairs in non-ironic ways (attempting to find the methodic properties of those affairs that any members could find out about themselves), then, involves *theory*. It has to have its field propositions, as we have just seen. To take a cultural practice ironically simply *is* theorizing. It is speculating, without endogenous grounds, about what may be going on in the ordinary everyday world. The dialectics, poetics, semiology and psychoanalysis of everyday life, among no small list of others, are mere *theorizing*. To use a metaphor, they can’t see the difference between projecting pictures of things and projecting pictures of things that project their own endogenous pictures of themselves. Accordingly, they find orders (for example “structures” or “systems”) of social life that are hidden from ordinary members. They find what Eric Livingston calls “the hidden order” (2008). This as opposed to the “witnessable order”:

that which can be found in ordinary everyday materials for anyone to see or hear (though not to exclude, where relevant, the other human senses).

What then are “members” members of? We might be tempted to say “a culture.” But we would first have to say what that was. And here the work of our next non-theorising (non-ironicising) social theorist, Harvey Sacks, is helpful. Rod Watson (1994: 172) summarises Sacks’s position on culture as follows, also bringing him into a rough rapprochement with Schütz:

Sacks’s view of culture was virtually inseparable from his views concerning the actual and potential alignment of the discipline of sociology to a given culture — and Sacks was most interested in developing an indigenous [= endogenous] analysis. His position is that the sociologist, in seeking to describe or interpret the social world, unavoidably “encounters” a world that has already been described and interpreted, not by other sociologists but by society-members themselves in their everyday activities. To a certain extent, Sacks in his early work follows Alfred Schütz’s (1962) argument that these descriptions comprise a store of ready-made, already-constituted, socially derived constructs and characterizations — not only typifications of persons and conduct, but also typified methods of describing the environment, of typical means for bringing about typical ends in typical situations, etc. The stock of practical, mundane knowledge — “knowledge-in-action” — comprises the culture, and language is the medium for the transmission and use of this stock: language is *the* typifying medium *par excellence*.

Members, then, are whoever it may be — on witnessable inspection — that share a stock of practical knowledge. And here the emphasis is on “practical”: members have shared methodical *ways of getting things done*. They are not so much identifiable by knowing *that* such-and-such as by knowing *how* folks-like-us conduct themselves and putting that “knowledge-in-action” to practical use, day-in-day out, remorselessly and such that “this is who we are” is marked by the proper conduct of “our culture.”³

Members, we can say, are those collections of persons in deep accordance vis-à-vis how to act. They may even be in equally deep disagreement about knowing or believing some *substantive* thing(s) and often are. This is not where we can go looking for everyday (i.e., popular) culture. Heidegger — though in other respects the theorizer *par excellence* and therefore of negligible importance to us here — has occasionally insightful moments on this notion of accordance running deeper than merely shared substantive knowledge, opinion and belief:

Accordance in this essential sense is even the precondition for divergence of opinions, for disputes; for only if the opponents mean the same thing in general can they diverge with regards to *this one thing*. The concord and discord of men are accordingly based on fixing the same and the stable.... [M]isunderstanding and lack of understanding are only deviant forms of accordance. (Heidegger 1987: 91)

Still, we can probably construct this argument without recourse to St Martin (useful as he may be, in passing, for reminding us that we do not mean simple *agreement* in opinions or beliefs) and simply return to the notion that a culture is constituted out of members’ *accordance* re witnessably displayed orders of practical knowledge-in-action. Another

way of putting this would be to say that ordinary everyday actions (as opposed to mere “behaviors” perhaps) are not only methodic but that, in order to be the specific actions that they are, display their methodic properties *in and as* their very doing. For this aspect of methodicity, Harold Garfinkel uses the term “reflexivity” (1967). Now that’s a very easily misunderstood term unless we take it, *qua term*, with a pinch of salt. It’s something I’ve written about elsewhere in some detail, though I’d prefer to skip some of that detail here.

Let’s just put it this way for now: any methodical, practical, everyday activity will not only *be done* methodically (i.e., have witnessable methodical properties), it will also — in and as its very coming to be done — *account for* (make itself witnessable as) its methodicity. Hence the term “reflexivity of accounts” (Czyzewski 1994). But “accounting” does *not* mean something like a voice-over track or commentary running alongside the activity. Something like, to foreshadow our upcoming example: “And here I am now waiting for a bus; I’m not just standing around here in this bus shelter, maybe to get out of the rain; I’m actually waiting for the number 252 to Byford; you know, the one that comes along about 10:30 though it’s often quite late” And, as they say, “blah blah blah,” where the “blah blah blah” could go on indefinitely if you think about it. No, that kind of accounting would not do at all.

And so, to that very example. It’s one I’ve used before and will no doubt use again for its clarity and relevance. Remember, above, we touched on Eric Livingston’s distinction between the hidden social order (associated with ironic approaches to the everyday) and the witnessable social order (associated with ethnomethodological approaches). Here, then, is Wes Sharrock (1995: 4) discussing the question of precisely that: witnessing social order:

Social order is easy to find because it's put there to be found. When you go about your actions ... you do them so that (or in ways that) other people can see what you're doing. You do your actions to have them recognized as the actions that they are. When you stand at the bus stop, you stand in such a way that you can be seen to be waiting for a bus. People across the street can see what you're doing, according to where and how you're standing.... [Y]ou're standing at a bus stop and somebody comes and stands next to you and they stand in such a way that eventually you can see that these people are standing in a line and that one person's the first and another is the second, and some person's at the end. People stand around at bus stops in ways they can be seen to be waiting for a bus.

So two ordinary activities: "waiting for a bus" and, contiguous with it, "forming a bus queue." In everyday life, we do audio-visually witnessable social practices that are chock full of social order. And we do them in ways that *account* for the particular bit of social order being done. And that is done *in and as* part of the very social practice itself. But note that, in Sharrock's example, not a word has been said. The social practices are indeed, nevertheless, *account*-ably the particular ones that they are. The reader might like to think about — or better go out and observe — just what it is that people do at bus stops that makes what they do accountably waiting for a bus; as opposed, for example, to just hanging around there with no intention of taking the bus. See, even intentions are visible; they're not ghostly head-contents!⁴

On a related matter: there is much talk in popular cultural studies about the production and consumption of cultural goods, artefacts and the like. But what of actual everyday

practices? Presumably they are also produced and consumed. Or rather, produced and (as our example shows) *recognised*. When I first came to Fremantle, it was the time of the Americas Cup. The place was full of yachties watching TV screens, especially in pubs and at countless street parties. People were commenting, loudly, on the races out in Gage Roads on the coast out there on the edge of the Indian Ocean. All I could see was a few boats sailing on the sea. I was, to all intents and purposes, not a member. But they could see actually socially-accomplished practices happening; practices to which I was utterly blind. Eventually, after much questioning — and to the annoyance of the aficionados — I came to recognise such things as “tacking into the wind” and, a little later still, things such as “tactical tacking into the wind.” I could never do those things or be part of them. But I knew that if I *had* to do them, *this* would be how I would do them. There was, then, some kind of dovetailing between the *production* of the practices (by yachtsmen and -women actually out there on the ocean) and the *recognition* of them by the fans in the pub watching on TV. Being a socially competent member of just this, as it were, crew consisted in just that: the absolute identity of the methods (or procedures) for producing and the methods (or procedures) for recognising the activity as just that very specific activity as against some other, or as against just meaningless behavior; which is all that I’d been able to see at first sight.⁵

This is another of Sacks’s crucial insights. The methods for the production of everyday actions and the methods for their recognition are identical. And that, too, is what a culture *is*:

A culture is an apparatus for generating *recognizable* actions; if the same procedures are used for generating as for detecting, that is perhaps as simple a solution to the problem of recognizability as is formulatable. (Sacks 1992 v1: 226)

And so, we now have a whole bunch of *field propositions* — the term is Heidegger's (1987: 41-42) and it's worth looking at what he has to say there about the distinction between these bits of, again loosely, "theory" and the practical work of doing science. The reader could go back and count them if desired. But I prefer to take the whole of the path from first vs second order constructs, via the reflexivity of accounts, to the production-recognition assumption as a gestalt contexture forming the ethnomethodological field.

It's equally clear what has to be done on the basis of this gestalt contexture: go and find out about any particular ordinary everyday practice, or array of practices, that might interest you. The field propositions (aka gestalt contexture) won't have to alter much, but the utterly massive range of things they (or it) can be used to find out about is legion. Here's one that anyone could do right now. The inspiration is, to an extent, "philosophical" — nothing wrong with that; some philosophy does have some uses — but it suggests a range of possible observational studies:

Two boys fairly swiftly contract the eyelids of their right eyes. In the first boy this is only an involuntary twitch; but the other is winking conspiratorially to an accomplice. At the lowest or the thinnest level of description the two contractions of the eyelids may be exactly alike. From a cinematograph-film of the two faces there might be no telling which contraction, if either, was a wink, or which, if

either, were a mere twitch. Yet there remains the immense but unphotographable difference between a twitch and a wink. (Ryle 1971 v2: 480)

Let us hypothesise then, on the basis of our field propositions, that the distinction between a wink and a twitch (in Ryle's sense of these *actions* — or is the latter a mere *behavior*?) has to do with the methodic production of “doing winking” in, and as part of, a culture. How would one collect a number of instances from actual everyday scenes and then go about finding the features of the methodicity of winking? I strongly suspect that this could be done and, in the course of the investigations, it might be possible to find some clues as to the production and recognition of “intended messages” in a more general sense.⁶ No amount of considerations of the dialectics of winking, the poetics of winking or, indeed, of the semiotic analysis of “codes” for the winked message, or speculations on the unconscious activity underlying intentional winking vs involuntary twinges could do that.

Yes, it's humdrum. But the humdrum witnessably reveals — it is produced to be recognised as — part of the indefinitely fascinating background hum of everyday knowledge-in-action going on all around us as popular culture (aka the witnessable social order) to which all speculative theorizing is necessarily blind. The word “popular” comes from the Latin, *populus* (people). The Greek is ἔθνος (*ethnos*). And if culture, as I have argued, is a bundle of apparatuses, procedures or methods, then “popular culture” means ethno-methods. So the study of popular culture is ethno-method-ology. No?

Notes

1. This chapter draws on a previous conference presentation and its subsequent write-up (McHoul 2009). It also makes liberal use of ideas from Harold Garfinkel, particularly his *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (1967). Not all of these borrowings are cited in the text as they are far too numerous to mention in detail, and some are but Garfinkel-inspired ideas. Those who know their Garfinkel will recognise them for what they are, where they are. Those who do not should read the book.
2. The notion of “field propositions” will be returned to its proper home later in this chapter.
3. On the distinction between “knowing how” and “knowing that” see Ryle (1949: 25-61); though it can also be found in Heidegger (1996; orig. 1927) whose work Ryle obviously knew (Ryle 1971 v1: 179-214; orig. 1946).
4. This is among the myriad of reasons why the last thing studies of everyday popular culture need is the psy disciplines.
5. I had similar problems, at first, understanding Australian Rules football. It came gradually but the big breakthrough came when a fellow English migrant told me: “Just imagine real football for 36 goalkeepers”. The artfulness that this one remark opened up was immense. On the other side of the coin, I have recently found how difficult it is to get

someone “membershopped” when trying to explain — to the point of appreciation — what goes on in televised test cricket.

6. A parallel study that could be informative for our prospective one is Lincoln Ryave and Jim Schenkein’s “Notes on the Art of Walking” (1974). How do we recognise that someone is producing the action “walking down the street” as opposed to “walking down the street *in company with another*”? We do do this and we equally know the moral consequences of getting it wrong. The moral order, too, is witnessable (Jayyussi 1984). For a good list of ethnomethodological studies, check Paul ten Have’s (2013) website.

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