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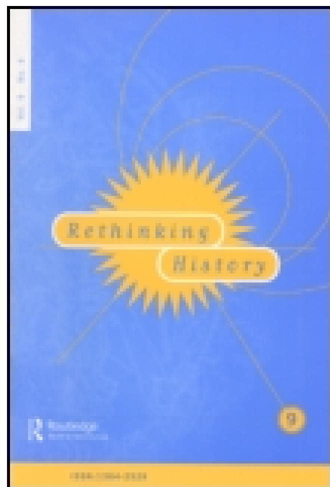

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# History, memory and the everyday

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# History, Memory and the Everyday

Joe Moran

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*This article explores the relationship between history, memory and everyday life with particular reference to the theories of Henri Lefebvre and other French critics, who use the everyday as a way of making sense of particular kinds of cultural change in Western societies. For Lefebvre, the everyday is significant because it is a sphere in which the modern and residual can co-exist: it shows how the apparently universalizing processes of modernity are shot through with historical survivals and local differences. However, this relationship to history is concealed beneath the invisibility of the everyday, the fact that it 'evade[s] the grip of forms' (Lefebvre 1971, p. 182). The value of a certain kind of involuntary memory, I want to argue, is that it can denaturalize the everyday and connect it again with historical processes. The essay concludes by examining material culture as a particularly fertile ground for investigating this sort of memory. When the commonplace objects of the recent past survive accidentally into the present, they conjure up unstable and elusive meanings and provide fragmentary evidence that routines have histories.*

*Keywords: Everyday; Memory; Modernity; Heritage; Nostalgia; Rubbish*

## Introduction

In the past few decades, the everyday has been a category frequently invoked by historians as a way of questioning the traditional assumptions of their discipline. The British tradition of 'history from below' aims to rescue the everyday life of the working classes from the 'condescension of posterity' and the elitist concerns of top-down history (Thompson 1980 [1963], p. 12). The German field of *Alltagsgeschichte* ('the history of everyday life') similarly focuses, in Alf Lüdtke's words, 'not just on the deeds (and misdeeds) and pageantry of the great, the masters of church and state', but

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on ‘the life and survival of those who have remained largely anonymous in history—the “nameless” multitudes in their workaday trials and tribulations’ (1991, pp. 3–4). In common with the *History Workshop* tradition, *Alltagsgeschichte* promotes vernacular historiography in the form of adult education, museums and local publishing. More specifically, it aims to challenge the macrocosmic emphasis of structuralist analysis by focusing on the day-to-day experience of German workers rather than on large-scale institutions, class structures and market mechanisms. The work of *Annaliste* historians such as Fernand Braudel, meanwhile, associates the everyday with two specific aspects of the lives of ordinary workers: their material culture (houses, clothing, agricultural tools, food and drink) and their informal ‘infra-economy’ of self-sufficiency and bartering which exists independently of the market economy (Braudel 1992).

Although there are obviously differences in approach, there are also areas of common concern in these recent histories of everyday life. In each case, the everyday is used to refer to an extremely wide range of mundane activities undertaken by ‘ordinary’ people. It is evoked, often polemically, in opposition to ‘History with a capital letter’ (Braudel 1992, p. 29), with its emphasis on great political figures and cataclysmic events, and its intellectual remoteness from more human-centred disciplines such as anthropology and sociology. The aim of this kind of history of the everyday is the recovery of overlooked material, what Braudel calls ‘*para-historic* languages . . . which are usually kept separate from each other and which develop in the margin of traditional history’ (1992, p. 27). In this article, I want to examine a slightly more specific notion of the everyday which has not received as much attention from historians, but which connects with and extends some of these concerns. In the work of cultural theorists such as Henri Lefebvre and others, the everyday is not simply associated with ordinary or working-class people—although they may experience its routines and compulsions in their most basic form—but is seen as an inescapable fact of life in modern capitalist societies. Whereas Braudel connects everyday life with the slow time of repetition and the stalling of historical development, Lefebvre suggests that it has a much closer, dialectical relationship with modernity and social change. The theorists I want to examine share some common ground with the ‘history from below’ tradition—particularly in their attention to the mundane and unnoticed, the local and contingent—but they also raise other important questions about the relationship between time, modernity and memory.

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**Everyday Life, Time and Modernity**

Although the 'everyday' has been a theoretical category since the birth of sociology as an academic discipline in the late nineteenth century, I want to concentrate primarily on the upsurge of interest in everyday life in the post-Second World War period, when theorists began to use it as a way of making sense of particular kinds of cultural change in Western societies. The work of one of the most influential theorists of daily life, Henri Lefebvre, was formulated in response to a particular historical moment: the rapid transformation of France's largely rural traditions in this period, under the pressure of a technological and economic revolution. In the wake of an unprecedented post-war consumer boom, France entered what Elsa Triolet, in a trilogy of novels beginning in 1959, dubbed 'l'âge du nylon' (Kelly *et al.* 1995, p. 148). For Lefebvre, such changes were exemplified by the phenomenon of the 'Ideal Home', the transformation of living spaces into conspicuous displays of modernity in the form of new electrical gadgetry, synthetic fibres, streamlined surfaces and designer décor (1991, pp. 8–9). Lefebvre's work, along with contemporaneous French texts such as Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* (1957) and Jacques Tati's film, *Mon Oncle* (1958), showed how modern forms of domesticity could become a kind of benign tyranny, invading the previously unpoliced aspects of daily routine with new expectations about stylishness, cleanliness and efficiency.

Lefebvre argues that the ideological project of this new 'bureaucratic society of controlled consumption' (1971, p. 68) is obscured behind the routine, unexamined nature of everyday life. The everyday is drained of historical meaning because it seems to be constituted by the always-new (the stylish and fashionable) or the endlessly repeated (routine tasks of maintenance or sustenance). Apparently situated within dis-located, ahistorical time, it comes to seem natural and inevitable, without origin or future direction. For Lefebvre, the chief characteristic of everyday life is recurrence (1971, p. 18). This repetitiveness is generated by bureaucratic and economic systems which disguise their artificiality by connecting themselves with the daily cycles of nature: 'It is in everyday life . . . that *the natural and the biological are humanized* (become social), and . . . *the human, the acquired, the cultivated, become natural*' (1991, p. 95). For Lefebvre, this confusion between the natural and the social is evident not only in the controlled and segregated time of the workplace, but in the increasingly mechanical and synchronized enjoyments of leisure time.

Lefebvre suggests that the everyday has a closely interconnected but complex relationship with modernity. It is interesting, for example, that he focuses more on the 'unglamorous' figures of modernity such as the

white-collar commuter or the suburban housewife, rather than more charismatic personalities such as the metropolitan *flâneur*, who experiences the city as a series of phantasmagoric sights and sensations. He suggests that the accelerated pace and dramatic possibilities of urban culture find their necessary complement in suburban, provincial and peripheral spaces, where people grind out a daily existence of *métro-bulot-dodo* (commuting-working-sleeping). Significantly, the period in which Lefebvre was writing about the everyday also saw the large-scale uprooting of workers, immigrants and other minority groups from French cities and their relocation to mass housing estates in the suburbs and new towns. Between 1954 and 1974, for example, the number of workers living in Paris fell by 44 per cent, while the number of *cadres supérieurs* rose by 51 per cent (Ross 1995, p. 151). In fact, Lefebvre's work on the everyday was particularly influenced by his dismay at the development in the late 1950s of a new town, Lacq-Mourenx, near his birthplace in the Haut Pyrenees (McLeod 1997, p. 15). For Lefebvre, the suburb and the new town are where the everyday is experienced in its most intrinsic form, as here the routine is favoured over the event and life is 'organized, neatly subdivided and programmed to fit a controlled, exact time-table' (1971, p. 59). Writing in a French context in which the suburbs are occupied primarily by low-paid, low-status workers, Lefebvre suggests that this new kind of place is home to the invisible others and residual spaces of modernity.

As a Marxist, Lefebvre argues that the everyday reveals capitalism to have been an incomplete revolution, in that the dramatic transformation of industry, technology and business has not been matched by equivalent progress in people's ordinary lives. He asks us to compare a power-station with an average house: in the former, there is 'hyper-precise technology, light, and a dazzling cleanliness; power methodically condensed into strictly contoured appliances'; in the latter, 'all is petty, disorganized; dusty nooks and crannies; mean, pretentious furniture; petty-bourgeois knick-knacks . . . dark rooms' (1991, p. 231). Leaving aside Lefebvre's snobbish disdain for the interior design tastes of the lower middle classes, this comparison makes a more substantive point. It is that the everyday offers a corrective to the spectacularizing discourse of modernity, its self-promoting emphasis on the latest design or technological innovation. If the public face of modernity is the steel-and-glass skyscraper, the high-concept car or the streamlined house, its less obvious manifestation is what Marc Augé calls the 'non-place', the bland, collective space of everyday activity in which people are either in transit or engaged in faceless, contractual activities (1995). In these non-places—grey, non-specific landscapes of warehouses, retail parks and distribution depots created by ribbon development;

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monotonous rows of planned housing in satellite towns; long stretches of identical-looking motorways and dual carriageways—life is reduced to what Lefebvre calls its 'zero point' (1971, p. 84). Such environments are often allowed to deteriorate because there is little collective or individual investment in them, unlike more upmarket residential areas or the landmark sites of tourism and regeneration agendas. Within these prosaic, unnoticed settings, the everyday exists as a kind of residuum which lags behind the historical possibilities of modernization: 'Even in its apparent and pretentious "modernity" ... our culture drags in its wake a great, disparate patchwork which has nothing "modern" about it' (1991, p. 192).

In a sense, then, the everyday is modernity's embarrassing underside, that which it attempts to conceal through compensatory narratives of innovation and abundance. For Lefebvre, modernity is the 'surface' that 'covers' the everyday: 'News stories and the turbulent affectations of art, fashion and event veil without ever eradicating the everyday blahs' (1987, pp. 10–11). These narratives conceal the fundamental connections between modernity and the everyday, in which 'the one crown[s] and conceal[s] the other, revealing and veiling it': 'Everyday life, a compound of insignificances united in this concept, responds and corresponds to modernity, a compound of signs by which our society expresses and justifies itself and which forms part of its ideology' (Lefebvre 1971, p. 24). If modernity is the acknowledged face of the contemporary, the everyday is its less glamorous other, a reminder that not everyone resides in air-conditioned, high-tech offices and push-button showhomes, and that consumer luxuries are often bought at the expense of crippling debt and the impoverishment of more basic needs.

For Doreen Massey, similarly, the mundane activities of everyday life provide a useful counter to the technologically determinist visions of post-modern theory and writing:

> Amid the Ridley Scott images of world cities, the writing about skyscraper fortresses, the Baudrillard visions of hyperspace ... most people actually live in places like Harlesden or West Brom. Much of life for many people, even in the heart of the first world, still consists of waiting in a bus-shelter with your shopping for a bus that never comes. (1992, p. 8)

As Massey suggests, many accounts of the contemporary emphasize its relentless novelty and frantic transformations. The value of the everyday, though, is that it shows how the apparently universal processes of modernity—the expansion of multinationals, the redevelopment of cities, the increasing mobility of populations and the growth of high-tech media—are shot through with historical survivals and local differences.

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Harry Harootunian, a historian of modern Japan, suggests that the study of everyday life represents a challenge to Western historians who have seen modernity as an inevitably linear process in which 'peripheral' societies gradually assume the characteristics of Euro-American capitalist societies. Since the everyday is 'the site of unevenness' (2000, p. 56), in which the sedimentary remains of repeated daily activities are visible on the surface of the modern, it offers a way of negotiating the inevitable tension between the globalizing imperatives of capitalism and local, lived experience. The persistence of daily life shows that modernity is 'always a doubling that imprint[s] the difference between the demands of capitalism and the force of received forms of history and culture' (2000, p. 111). Harootunian argues that the traces of the past which are contained within the everyday undermine a continuist, processual notion of history, a 'belief that relies on the fixity of the past and its capacity to yield a historical knowledge that can reveal how the present developed from it' (2000, p. 15).

This is an important point, because it partly answers those critics who have suggested that Lefebvre's notion of the everyday is too loosely defined and universalizing, or who have detected in his work a simplistic nostalgia for vanished rural communities in which daily life was governed by the cycles of nature and the eternal time of tradition (Homer 2001, p. 130; Langbauer 1999, pp. 234–235). It is true that Lefebvre's conception of the everyday brings together a wide variety of experiences, activities and places, and does suggest a kind of descension narrative in its emphasis on the relentless standardization and routinization of modern life. But the most significant aspect of his work, I would suggest, is that he uses the everyday to open up modernity to historical difference, showing how it carries within itself both survivals from previous eras and the possibility for further change. As Kristin Ross points out, this characteristic of the everyday is directly contradicted by the ideological project of modernity:

> Modernization promises a perfect reconciliation of past and future in an endless present, a world where all sedimentation of social experience has been leveled or smoothed away, where poverty has been reabsorbed, and, most important, a world where class conflict is a thing of the past, the stains of contradiction are washed out in a superhuman hygienic effort, by new levels of abundance and equitable distribution. (Ross 1995, p. 11)

From the point of view of history and memory, the everyday is therefore significant because it is a sphere in which the modern and the residual can coexist. However, this relationship to history is concealed because of the relative invisibility of the everyday, the fact that it 'evade[s] the grip of forms' (Lefebvre 1971, p. 182). The everyday remains unnoticed because it

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is practised thoughtlessly and dismissed as banal and boring; it is made up of intangible, transitory phenomena such as gestures, habits and routines; and it evades conventional forms of knowledge, which tend to abstract and intellectualize experience, overlooking the phenomenology of concrete experience. As Lefebvre puts it, everyday life is 'in a sense residual, defined by "what is left over" after all distinct, superior, specialized, structured activities have been singled out by analysis' (1991, p. 97). Unseen and taken for granted, everyday experience escapes the linear, ordered processes of knowledge and narrative. In Susan Stewart's words, the temporality of the everyday is 'drowned out by the silence of the ordinary' (1993, p. 14).

## Heritage, the Uncanny and the Everyday

It is not surprising, then, that the everyday should be a concern of those critics who have sought to challenge the idea of history as simply a series of event-driven, dramatic interruptions to normality. For Karel Kosík, the invisibility of the everyday leaves it open to a mystification which separates it from broader historical processes:

> Naïve consciousness considers the everyday to be a natural atmosphere or a familiar reality, whereas history appears as a transcendental reality occurring behind its back and bursting into the everyday in the form of a catastrophe into which an individual is thrown as 'fatally' as cattle are driven to the slaughterhouse. . . . While the everyday appears as confidence, familiarity, proximity, as 'home,' History appears as the derailment, the disruption of the everyday, as the exceptional and the strange. This cleavage simultaneously splits reality into the *historicity* of History and the *ahistoricity* of the everyday. History changes, the everyday remains. (Kosík 1976, p. 44)

The effect of this mystification, as Kosík suggests, is to make daily life seem eternal and inevitable. History, conceived as a sweeping, macro-force which periodically punctuates the everyday with violence, illness, death and other disasters, becomes 'an absurdly *powerless* giant' (1976, p. 45) which cannot change the fundamental conditions of people's lives.

The value of a certain kind of memory, I want to argue, is that it can denaturalize the everyday and render it visible, disrupting the illusion of the timeless routine and connecting it again with historical processes. Clearly, though, the invisibility of the everyday means that the memories it evokes are likely to be fragmentary and elusive. It may be useful to compare this with the more controlled meanings of the heritage industry, since several critics have linked the popularity of heritage to a revived interest in the neglected experiences of daily life. For Raphael Samuel, the heritage

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industry manifests itself not only in the elite culture of the stately home and country house, but in a whole range of mundane phenomena: flea markets in Portobello Road and Camden Lock where knick-knacks are reinvented as antiques; the trend for 'retrofitting' in interior design; old photographs and postcards; and new museums with exhibitions on the glories of Bakelite or the lawnmower. Samuel's emphasis, though, is on active remembrance, on the retrieval of visual and material traces from the past and the weaving of engaging narratives around them. The past is still being made an object of scrutiny, albeit by 'ordinary' people rather than professional academics, tourist administrators or heritage marketers. At the same time, Samuel recognizes that heritage's interest in the informal, vernacular and sensual means that it is not always reducible to its intended effects. Even within commodified versions of heritage there is a kind of memory surplus which is neither purposive nor easily recuperable by dominant ideologies. Traces of the everyday past can float free of preferred meanings, surviving instead in fragments and lacunae, 'memory's shadows—those sleeping images which spring to life unbidden, and serve as ghostly sentinels of our thought' (Samuel 1994, p. 27).

Following the work of Walter Benjamin, Ann Game makes a useful distinction between the voluntary memories of the heritage industry and the involuntary memories which emerge at unexpected times and places and which are not so easily readable within a nostalgic or sentimentalizing frame (1991, p. 141). Everyday life, I would suggest, is particularly receptive to this latter kind of memory. The location of the everyday within marginal spaces means that it can point to the existence of the often unacknowledged, nonsynchronous elements within modernity. The jarring nature of this discovery perhaps explains the peculiar, inarticulable feeling of pathos experienced in commonplace environments, when the anonymously functional is exposed as a product of time and an object of memory: pedestrianized shopping precincts with vacant lots and whitewashed windows; crumbling high-rises and housing estates; poorly kept suburban parks with disused putting greens and bandstands; down-at-heel high streets with subsistence shops and bricked-up windows.

One way of theorizing these feelings is in relation to Freud's notion of the 'uncanny'—the return of the repressed, the discovery of the unfamiliar in what was once familiar. Freud, though, discusses such feelings in relation to the survival of primitive beliefs (for example, the idea that inanimate objects can spring to life) or, more commonly, infantile complexes (1985 [1919], p. 372). Freud's *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1975 [1901]) similarly suggests that everyday actions, thoughts and conversations are psychically motivated, ways of avoiding pain or fulfilling repressed wishes.

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In a manner taken up later by the Surrealists, his work aims to show the concealed extraordinariness of the ordinary, the disruptive traces of the unconscious that lie beneath the surface of apparently normal behaviour. The significance of the uncanny, for Freud, is that it is where this concealment fails.

The notion of the everyday which I have been exploring, though, cannot be so easily explained in terms of the individual psychic trauma that lies behind the compulsion to repeat ordinary experiences. In Lefebvre's work, banality is not so easily stripped away to reveal the reality of hidden desire. The whole point of daily life, he suggests, is that it is made up of experiences which are generic, anonymous and unowned. We cannot simply break through the façade of daily existence and discover a higher truth about ourselves: 'Man must be everyday, or he will not be at all' (1991, p. 127). The intersubjectivity of everyday life provides little outlet for the solipsistic aspects of memory or therapeutic narratives of the individual life course. Memories of daily life will inevitably connect with personal histories, but they are also unavoidably linked to social practices and routines. As such, they reveal something which is more prosaic but no less significant than death-wishes or castration anxieties: the reality of collective ageing and decay even within the repetitive, cyclical experiences of the everyday.

For Lefebvre, the semi-coordinated, shared manoeuvres of daily life—the swelling and dispersal of traffic, the intersecting movements of pedestrians, the synchronizing of domestic routines—are both a problem and an opportunity. On the one hand, they point to the existence of the social, and the possibility of a collective response to the alienation of the everyday. On the other hand, these phenomena actually lead to the denial of collectivity because they seem to occur naturally and spontaneously. They create forms of accidental, anonymous community in which we are encouraged to view the everyday as self-generating and inevitable. One example is the modern traffic jam, in which people 'congregate and mix without meeting . . . each element remaining enclosed in its own compartment, tucked away in its shell' (Lefebvre 1971, pp. 100–101). Private life becomes the place in which one retreats from this alienated togetherness and achieves a sense of belonging and self-identity, but, deprived of any sense of collective humanity, it becomes 'literally a life of "privation" . . . a life for which everything human is alien' (Lefebvre 1991, p. 149).

The potential value of involuntary or 'uncanny' memory is that it can expose this division between public and private spheres as artificial—as, in fact, one of the defining characteristics of everyday life in the modern world. For Lefebvre, the everyday offers an opportunity for the relatively prosperous to retreat from social space into the *apparently* private space of

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leisure and consumption. This private sphere, though, can also provide traces of collective experience. We can see this in the dead fashions at the back of a wardrobe or the kitsch décor of an unrenovated house. Disconnected from their individual histories and denaturalized through the passing of time, the outmoded habits and lifestyle choices of the recent past become part of a shared history of the everyday.

These aspects of everyday life open up a series of familiar questions about the complex relationship between history and memory. Against a traditionalist emphasis within the discipline on written sources, chronological causation and the historical event, recent historians have often been willing to explore memory work as a way of emphasizing the diversity of potential source material, the validity of nonlinear historical explanation and the overlooked experiences of daily life. The French historian Pierre Nora has been one of the most impassioned advocates of memory over a more narrowly defined professional historiography. In his contribution to *Realms of Memory*, the massive collaborative project produced under his supervision, Nora argues that memory and history are fundamentally opposed: the former is emotional, spontaneous, unselfconscious, and provides an organic link between the present day and the traditions of the past; the latter is narrowly intellectual, linear and causal, and considers the present to be disconnected from the past by the force of historical change (1996, p. 3).

But if memory can usefully challenge the restricted concerns of academic history, Nora argues that it has also recently been contaminated by historical consciousness, torn away 'under the conquering and crushing pressure of history' (1996, p. xviii). He suggests that modern memory is contained in recognized *lieux de mémoire*—rituals, monuments and symbols such as the Tricolour flag, Bastille Day, the Eiffel Tower and Verdun—which fulfil intentionally commemorative purposes. A living memory has been transformed into a dead-and-buried history, a sense of 'things tumbl[ing] with increasing rapidity into an irretrievable past', which is 'how modern societies organize a past they are condemned to forget because they are driven by change' (1996, pp. 1–2). Nora relates this to the declining idea of time as cyclical and repetitive, common to rural societies, and a new notion of memory-cum-history as a symbolic way of marking the empty, irreversible time of modernity.

Nora's simple opposition between 'true', lived memory and 'false', historical memory is complicated by the persistence of memories of everyday experience, which survive in fragmentary and incomplete forms. It is useful to compare Nora's position with that of Michel de Certeau, who similarly argues that memory can challenge the 'labor of separation'

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between present and past which motivates modern historiography (1988, p. 2). De Certeau's comments about memory need to be placed in the context of his argument that everyday life can evade the 'scopic and gnostic drive' of modernity, its desire to place, order and temporalize the world (1984, p. 92). Alongside the imposed routines and confined spaces of the office or commuting train, for example, the everyday contains nonsequential, desultory moments, such as time-wasting and daydreaming at work, or strolling aimlessly around the city. De Certeau suggests that memory is fragmented and dispersed across these unnoticed routines and contingent moments, subverting 'the modern mutation of time into a quantifiable and regulatable space' (1984, p. 89). Unlike Nora, then, he does not see memory as a sphere of purity and immediacy, a way of returning to an 'eternal present' (Nora 1996, p. 3), but as a 'a sort of anti-museum' which is 'not localizable' (de Certeau 1984, p. 108).

There is a specific kind of sadness which attaches to these memories of everyday experience, as they puncture the myth of the timeless routine, and force us to contemplate the transience of unacknowledged lives. This type of feeling is particularly unsettling because, by fastening on 'boring' objects and places, it is resistant to either individualized nostalgia or the organized narratives of the heritage industry. As Lefebvre writes, memory and the everyday are often viewed as opposites, because the former is seen as 'a typical process of accumulation and therefore an essential component of mechanisms that materialize and technicalize such a process'. Lefebvre is referring to a particular kind of memory, embodied in commodified forms of heritage and nostalgia, in which lives and histories are filtered through the ordering devices of narrative. Everyday life, by contrast, is

> not cumulative. . . . Emotions and feelings change but they are not stored up; neither are aspirations. . . . Everyday life, when it changes, evolves according to a rhythm that does not coincide with the time of accumulation. . . . Thus an illusion is created of the unbroken continuity of houses, buildings and cities from the oriental town of proto-history down to the present day. (Lefebvre 1971, p. 61)

The value of memories of the everyday is that they can shatter this illusion of timelessness, erupting into the present with evidence of old habits and dead routines.

## The Memory of Rubbish

Material culture offers a particularly fertile ground for exploring these kinds of memories. Indeed, the recent shift in emphasis within academia from design history to the study of material culture reflects a declining

interest in the aesthetically pleasing or culturally valued object. Instead, scholars of material culture tend to focus on the more mundane material of the everyday, and the relatively unexamined afterlife of things, once they are no longer state-of-the-art commodities (Attfield 2000, pp. 4–5). Material things not only offer visible and durable evidence of the more intangible gestures, habits and routines of the everyday; as they outlive their fashionability or usefulness, they can also reveal the temporality of daily life. In this section, I want to explore this characteristic of material culture by looking at particular notions of 'rubbish'.

Maurice Blanchot suggests that the everyday is made up of the detritus and marginalia of people's lives, that which is discarded, ignored or left behind: 'The everyday is platitude (what lags and falls back, the residual life with which our trash cans and cemeteries are filled: scrap and refuse)' (1987, p. 13). Blanchot's comment makes a suggestive connection between the capacity of the everyday to gradually accumulate residual traces of repeated experiences, and rubbish as itself the most everyday of phenomena. Almost all daily activities generate rubbish, as is shown by its three most common constituents: newspapers, disposable nappies, and food and drink containers (Rathje & Murphy 1992, pp. 161–162). But the everyday accumulates more than mere refuse. 'Rubbish' is also formed when much-used objects become less visible, or assume unpredictable meanings and functions, as they outlast their status as commodities and become part of the random clutter of everyday life. Needless to say, these transformations are likely to occur more often and more quickly within a disposable culture in which the lifespan of technology and fashion is much shorter than the physical life of objects.

The unplanned afterlife of objects is obviously different from the intentional preservation of antiques, the hoarding of childhood souvenirs or the assembling of collections, where there is an attempt to impose order, seriality or biographical significance on a potentially chaotic accumulation of matter (Stewart 1993, pp. 151–169). When the commonplace objects of the recent past survive accidentally into the present, though, they conjure up more unstable and elusive meanings. The sorts of objects which accumulate shambolically in garden sheds, lofts or the backs of wardrobes, or which end up in charity shops or car boot sales, are interesting as repositories of everyday experience because they do not follow the conventional logic of market value, antiquarian interest or personal nostalgia.

In the centre of my home city, there is a converted warehouse accommodating several 'antique' shops which buy and sell 'large or small items: anything considered'. The floorspace is sizeable enough to contain huge piles of junk, and the shops are something of a dumping ground for

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house-clearers who would rather not hire a skip or go to the tip. Some of the objects I have recently come across here are surely unsellable and could never be included within even the most capacious definition of 'heritage': a naked doll with one eye and no arms, a deflated spacehopper caked in dirt, a single roller-skate, a typewriter with no carriage return and several keys missing, an unstrung wooden tennis racket, some wrought-iron steps leading up into thin air. These random collections of stuff are a testament to the levelling effect of rubbish: outmoded fads and celebrity merchandise suffer the same fate as more mundane household goods, since they are all shoved into a bargain bucket and stamped with a handwritten '15p' sticker. The term 'bric-à-brac', which comes from the French phrase *à bric et à brac* [at random], perfectly captures this emphasis on casual abandonment and fortuitous survival. These objects are disconcerting because they are located at the end of a temporal process which, caught up in the cyclical rhythms of daily habit, we were not even aware was occurring. Amidst the leftover material of daily life, we encounter the unsettling evidence that routines have histories.

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Christine Finn, a British archaeologist, recently investigated the durability of everyday ephemera by undertaking a year's fieldwork in the unlikely site of Silicon Valley, California. Finn's research examines the climate of easy disposability created by this boom-and-bust, high-turnover environment. The tech workers who populate the area are constantly exchanging jobs, houses and lifestyles, filling their living spaces with geek playthings and other transient objects, and even demolishing perfectly presentable homes in smart areas to make way for swanky rebuilds.

Finn practises a kind of anticipatory archaeology, imagining how she would sift the evidence of the Siliconites' lives after some hypothetical 'e-Pompeii' (2001, p. 23). She suggests that the material remains would be confusing to archaeologists, who tend to look for singular explanations about the lives of dwellers in the surviving debris—the smudge of black on pottery providing evidence of a hearth, for example (2001, p. 65). They would be puzzled by the apparently wanton destruction of objects with no evidence of fire, war or earthquake, and would find it hard to disentangle the evidence of individual lives from that of an accelerated marketplace in designer lifestyles which 'creates a bewildering array of cross-temporal and cross-cultural objects' (2001, p. 68). Constant innovation produces a multi-layered effect which suggests that future archaeological evidence from this area will not be able to be straightforwardly excavated from a completed past.

As the ultimate expression of Silicon Valley's throwaway culture, Finn shows how the state-of-the-art computer can become a mundane, everyday

object and then a technologically extinct dinosaur within an unprecedentedly short period. For Finn, old computers are interesting because, apart from the few self-confessed geeks who run the chaotic computer museums that she visits, people do not generally value them as nostalgia objects. Last year's model is passed down the market chain to a less fussy user, before being ransacked for its few valuable spare parts or ending up abandoned in a garage or landfill site. The obsolete PC becomes detached from its original context, 'intriguingly anonymous' (2001, p. 146), apart from the personal histories encrypted in its indestructible hard drive. The computer's material survival is a reminder that rubbish incorporates not only refuse but the less easily disposable remnants of daily activities.

Michael Thompson provides such an inclusive definition of rubbish in his book *Rubbish Theory*. As Thompson argues, objects have an unrecorded second life when they stop being commodities and enter that kind of limbo in which they are no longer loved or valued, but still hang around on the edges of people's lives. For Thompson, there are three main categories of material culture: the transient (the usual status of commodities, which enter the market at their highest value and then gradually decline in worth), the durable (the role assumed by antiques and other kinds of collectibles) and rubbish (objects which have no value, such as run-down houses, car wrecks or obsolete fashion items). Unlike the transient and durable states, in which an object's membership of either of these categories decides our attitude towards it, rubbish belongs to the 'region of flexibility', in that it is not subject to social controls or attachable to cultural meanings (Thompson 1979, p. 8). In this informal economy of rubbish, the most common objects are the ephemeral items of everyday life (clothes, magazines, household objects) which have survived physically but are no longer fashionable or usable.

Thompson's definition of rubbish is superficially similar to Mary Douglas' classic description of dirt as 'matter out of place'. For Douglas, dirt is 'the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter', in which all kinds of inappropriate material which fall outside the taxonomic systems of 'civilized' society are lumped together as a homogeneous 'other' (1984 [1966], p. 35). Thompson differs from Douglas, though, in seeing rubbish as fully part of an established system rather than an unassimilable auxiliary to it. He suggests that the boundary between transient, durable and rubbish objects is permeable and responsive to social factors. Transient things can become rubbish and rubbish can become durable, although there is no direct route from the transient to the durable: objects have to become rubbish first (Thompson 1979, pp. 9–12). Indeed, it is the apparently intractable otherness of rubbish that makes it 'able to provide

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the path for the seemingly impossible transfer of an object from transience to durability' (1979, p. 9).

One might question the certainty of Thompson's categorizations, not least this assumption that objects have to become rubbish before they can make the 'all-or-nothing transfer' into durability (1979, p. 25). What seems to give rubbish this key role as a conduit between transience and durability is that it is such a catch-all category, covering everything from household refuse to objects which could arguably be regarded as 'transient': run-down properties, rusty old cars, unwanted vinyl and so on. But this inclusiveness is also the most valuable aspect of Thompson's definition of rubbish, because he shows that it forms part of the everyday economy rather than simply being supplementary to it. In fact, Thompson is more interested in rubbish as the residual matter of everyday life, that which we have failed to remove completely, rather than rotting garbage safely hidden away in closed bins. While 'something which has been discarded, but never threatens to intrude, does not worry us at all', rubbish in the wrong place produces unexpected meanings because it is 'emphatically visible' (1979, p. 92).

Arguing for Thompson's account over Douglas', Kevin Hetherington has suggested that the conventional definition of 'waste' is inadequate to describe the complex process of consumption and disposal in capitalist societies, since it suggests simply 'something that we have got rid of' (2002, p. 2). While Douglas' work suggests that the boundaries between dirt and non-dirt are carefully policed, Hetherington argues that the former functions as an 'absent presence' in society, which is never permanently removed (2002, p. 6). He points out that it is not simply bins which are used for disposal, but attics, basements, garages, wardrobes and sheds, where objects can be placed and forgotten about, often for quite long periods. Disposal is not just about getting rid of unwanted material but about 'how we manage absence—how we order it, where we place it, when we use it as a source of value' (2002, p. 10). Drawing on Jacques Derrida's argument that capitalism produces 'spectral moments' which disrupt the effect of linear time (Derrida 1994, p. xx), Hetherington suggests that, because rubbish is not always finally discarded, it can evoke involuntary memories which draw attention to the historicity of the everyday:

> We encounter the unexpected presence of absence as a ghost. In consumption practices there are many ghosts. Things we threw out before we should, things we held onto long after they should have been disposed of. . . . Ghosts do not only moan and rattle their chains, they also speak the language of credit, debt and value. Commonly we understand haunting as an unacknowledged debt and feel a sense of guilt in its presence. It is a debt that we, heirs to past

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> consumption, owe for the failure to dispose of in the proper manner (Hetherington 2002, p. 11)

This notion of waste as a surplus which escapes formal mechanisms of remembrance is a useful way of thinking about memories of the everyday, which are also contained in unlikely things and places whose histories are unacknowledged: nondescript buildings, characterless suburbs, 'non-places' and 'rubbish'.

## Conclusion

I want to conclude by summarizing why theories of everyday life might be of particular interest to historians. Significantly, the work of Lefebvre and other French theorists locates the everyday not only in ordinary, mundane experience (the more general meaning assumed in the historical traditions I mentioned in my introduction) but quite specifically in *le quotidien*, the routines and activities which we literally do *every day*. These critics have tried to situate these routines within a dialectical process, by viewing the everyday as a complex entity whose disparate aspects are interrelated and always evolving. The everyday is, in Susan Willis' words, 'our site of convergence with the historical' (1991, p. 158): it is the point of dialogue and interaction between the local and global, the habitual and fashionable, the individual and social.

By emphasizing conflict and change, these theories of the everyday complicate any notion of the past as dead and buried, disconnected from the present. Carolyn Steedman explains this in terms of the difference between dust and waste: while the latter suggests something that can be easily discarded, the former 'is about circularity, the impossibility of things disappearing, or going away, or being gone' (2001, p. 164). Certainly, dust is one of the unnoticed constants of everyday life and the most visible expression of its temporality. The embarrassment of dust descends inevitably on the streamlined, laminate surfaces of modernity: the tiny particles of dead skin, lint, decayed wood and soot that settle on domestic surfaces or swirl around in shafts of light; the dirt that accumulates in the cracks and corners of neglected everyday objects; the gritty air of city streets and other public spaces. As Steedman points out, we can never remove dust completely, only disturb it until it is eventually deposited elsewhere. This is a good way of thinking about daily life, in fact, as something that remains, despite our attempts to overlook or discard it: the everyday, we might say, is where the dust settles. But as Lefebvre argues, the everyday is not simply a residual sphere of boredom and drudgery which lags behind the modern; it contains within it an elusive communality and a utopian potential. By

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thinking about the everyday as a dialectical process, we can see how the routines of the present are connected to both historical struggles and future possibilities.

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