

Review:

Highmore, Ben: *Ordinary Lives: Studies in the Everyday*, Routledge, 2010. ISBN: 9780415461870.

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Volume 8, Issue 1 (May 2011)

As Highmore says at the opening of this book, it is 'about ordinary, everyday life and it is also about aesthetics' (x) and within this seemingly straightforward statement is the challenge of the text itself. For, to bring aesthetics and the everyday together he has to re-think how the former is traditionally seen. He wants to get back to an earlier sense of aesthetics bound in closer to the 'messy world of sensate perception', one not tied to reason or, indeed, only to the beautiful defined through works of art. To do this he creates a genealogy from the Enlightenment of Baumgarten, Shaftesbury and Hume, through James and Dewey, to Jacques Rancière. Though art is part of a 'world of feelings' it must take its place, according to Highmore, alongside 'shoes, gardens, rivers, houses, faces, plants and so on' (xi) – or in the examples drawn from in the book itself, chairs, popular music, curries, and housework.

This is an ambitious work interested in giving presence to 'the pulsings of affect: the risings and fallings of hope, love, hatred and irritation; the minor and major disturbances of life set against and within a world of day-to-day habits, routines and collective sentiments.' (xii). Such poetic turns of phrase are, for me, the really exciting aspects of this book and where it offers up a fascinating shift in new cultural studies. These are moments where the academic collides with the poetic and a different type of work emerges that looks to operate in the space between the two. This is a device I think he has learned, in part, from De Certeau, Raymond Williams and, more recently, from the similar work of Kathleen Stewart's *Ordinary Affects* which he comments on in his introduction and whose author endorses this book. Stewart's descriptive writing makes you, claims Highmore, 'more and more alert to your surroundings. Your skin begins to prickle with the apprehensions of the lives of others, of resonances of care and indifference, of anxiety and ease' (8). This descriptive energy is alive too in Highmore's autobiographical attention to the world around him making these the most interesting sections of *Ordinary Lives*, for this is where he 'attunes and reattunes the human

sensorium' (8). Whether discussing his favourite chair or recollecting the impact of *Tubular Bells*, Highmore makes us remember and feel the world again, feel it differently; noticing and responding to disregarded or 'remaindered' things that we have been conditioned to see as unimportant or unworthy of aesthetic consideration. In the intimacy he encourages with the everyday, with 'quotidian aesthetics, a new scale of feeling emerges which can be usefully explained by the adaptation of a phrase from Rancière, the 'redistribution of the sensible'. In rejecting and challenging the hierarchies of significance ('the visible and the sayable') attached socially and institutionally to certain things and not others, Rancière encourages us (as Highmore does too) to act politically to redistribute the sensible and give presence to the unrecognised and diminished.

Highmore's book performs this politics in the 'thingly world' (58) through the recognition and response to objects and activities many would see as insignificant, but through which and in which he uncovers untold histories and poetics. Developing from Adorno and Benjamin, in distraction, for example, he finds 'a scattering-outward of attention' (119) which permits a more progressive, responsive relationship to the world than one always conditioned and concentrated by established channels. Ultimately, his goal is an aesthetic politics of the ordinary that produces 'imaginative acts for thinking the seemingly impossible' and contributes to a 'culture that encourages habits of generosity and world-enlarging improvisation and adaptation, while also maintaining habits of comfort and stability' (171).

Highmore acknowledges that his examples are local and English and this is noticeable (and might restrict the book's readership a little), however, he admits that his intention is that his 'close work could be extended into other geographies' (xiv). Hopefully this will be the case. As I suggested earlier, I think the book is most impressive and at its strongest when it is poetic and less tied into the case studies employed as groundwork. Although these are probably necessary, given the project at hand, it was the 'pulsings' of the everyday that seemed most innovative in Highmore's digressive or 'distractive' style – what Dave Hickey in *Air Guitar* (1997), a book this one echoes in some ways, calls 'the ordinary stuff – the ongoing texture of the drift' (10).

References

- D. Hickey *Air Guitar: Essays on Art and Democracy*, Los Angeles: Art Issues Press, 1997.
K. Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.