

CHAPTER 13

The Everyday at the Limits of Representation. Georges Perec's *Things. A Story of the Sixties* (1965)

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Abstract: This essay argues that Georges Perec's novel, *Things. A Story of the Sixties* (1965) is an aesthetic artefact that helps us to think and experience everyday life. In dramatizing the effects of consumerist dreams and information overload on its protagonists' lives, the text suggests that everyday experience is opposed to mimesis. However, Perec's blanket use of the imperfect tense, together with the work of mirroring effects, prevents us from channelling the everyday into the negative space of representation. Rather, the novel speaks to Maurice Blanchot's suggestion that the everyday is defined by an intransitive escapism. The fabular design of the narrative gives the reader an ethical impetus for tracing the course of this escape, only to find herself ensnared in the text's economy of desires and representations. On shaky grounds for dismissing the false dreams of the characters, she is invited to reflect on the practical use of mimesis in making her own everyday experience.

Keywords: Things, Mimesis, Novel, Aesthetic Capitalism, Good Life

1 Introduction. *Things: A Story of the Sixties*, or, a History of the Present

Georges Perec's *Things. A Story of the Sixties* (first published in 1965 as *Les Choses. Une histoire des années soixante*) is a short novel in which a Parisian couple's dream of *la dolce vita* slides out of view. The plot follows two years in the lives of Jérôme and Sylvie, a pair of university dropouts who have taken up freelance work in the nascent field of market research. For a while, the couple manage to contain a sense of meaninglessness, allowing themselves to be consumed by the belief that the world will one day be theirs, an attitude fed by a move to

an apartment in the Latin Quarter. Living well is an activity they engage in the conditional: obsessing over designer furniture they might one day be able to afford while neglecting basic tasks of household maintenance. But as work dries up and visits from friends become an ever-rarer occurrence, the couple lose their taste for a luxury-bohemian lifestyle. On an impulse, they move to Tunisia, where, at the end of eight melancholic months in the town of Sfax, the story proper comes to an end. An epilogue projects the couple's return to Paris – their initial joy at rediscovering the city's delights soon evaporates into despair – and their ultimate capitulation to the salaried life, as they land jobs at the head of an advertising agency in Bordeaux.

Subtitled “A Story of the Sixties”, *Things* registers the emergence of what Gernot Böhme (2017, p. 14) has called “aesthetic capitalism”; namely, the mode of production in which, following “the economic saturation of the private sphere,” economic growth becomes possible “only through the enhancement of life, through the production of means for staging oneself, that is, through the production of aesthetic values.” As Böhme's theatrical idiom suggests, aesthetic capitalism is closely bound up with the notion of mimesis. It is an alliance evident from the opening chapter of *Things*, a description of the world made in the protagonists' image:

Sometimes it would seem to them that a whole life could be led harmoniously between these book-lined walls, amongst these objects so perfectly domesticated that they would have ended up believing these bright, soft, simple and beautiful things had only ever been made for their sole use (Perec 2011, p. 25).

Indeed, Perec's novel has a claim to historical significance vis-à-vis Böhme's project for a critique of aesthetic capitalism. Written in the early 1960s and published in 1965, *Things* anticipates by several years the theoretical works of Jean Baudrillard and Wolfgang Fritz Haug which, for Böhme, register the advent of aesthetic capitalism in western Europe (Böhme 2017, p. 67). Such a claim is perhaps unsurprising in view of the novel's purposive commitment to realist aesthetics: the subtitle might be translated as “a history of the 1960s”, and Perec had taken direct inspiration for the novel from Lukács's theory of realism and Flaubert's *Sentimental Education* [1869] (Sheringham 2006, pp. 251-52). Moreover, just as Böhme's critique extends to the contemporary moment, so, too, does *Things* suggest a history of the present; one that is produced through a specific configuration of aesthetics, mimesis and everyday life.

2 Aesthetics, Everydayness, and Literary Realism

This essay will argue that it is precisely the status of *Things* as a mimetic artwork that helps us to conceive the relation between mimesis, aesthetics, and everydayness. Given, however, the reasonably assured status of *Things* as an aesthetic object, such a reading risks ignoring the counter-normativity of Yuriko Saito's project (2007) for an everyday aesthetics. Saito has pointed to the duplicity through which Anglophone aesthetics discourse has insisted that "there is no theoretical limit to what can become the object of an aesthetic experience," while simultaneously positing fine art, and particularly "paradigmatic Western Art", as its model for aesthetic experience (Saito 2007, pp. 13-15). "The content of our aesthetic life," Saito argues, "is even more diverse and multifaceted than what can be captured by art-centred aesthetics" (Saito 2007, p. 40). If writing about a French novel cannot but contribute to the discursive weight of an aesthetics centred on Western art, I nevertheless want to suggest that an account of the relationship between novel-reading and daily experience may find an accommodation with Saito's project. For it is not quite my objective to replace fine art with the novel as a paradigm of aesthetic experience *per se*, as Saito argues, "art, whatever its designation [...] is necessarily characterized as an *exception to* or *commentary on* everyday objects and affairs," and as such is an unwieldy paradigm for thinking unexceptional aesthetic experience (Saito 2007, p. 40). Rather, my subject is the very nature of this exceptional and commentative status of mimetic art vis-à-vis the everyday. I want to highlight the affordances of this exceptionality for thinking and experiencing everydayness; a category including, but not limited to, aesthetic life.

If the French tradition of everyday life theory provides rich resources for thinking this category of everydayness, it has tended to cast literary realism in a negative light. Henri Lefebvre, for instance, cites Flaubert's *Sentimental Education* – the inspiration for *Things*, no less – as an example of its author's "denunciation of reality" and a cause of the putative denigration of everyday life in French literary history (Lefebvre 2014, p. 129). And in his seminal account of everyday life in twentieth-century French culture, the late Michael Sheringham (2006) associated realism with a distancing of everyday life. Drawing on Roland Barthes' critique of realist discourse (Barthes 1990), Sheringham argues that "realist fiction excels [...] at drawing our attention to a first-level everyday that can be accessed via the eye" (Sheringham 2006, p. 41), but that it tends to reduce the everyday – defined, following Lefebvre and

Maurice Blanchot, as a level of reality – to “an objectified background on which blanket judgements can be passed” (Lefebvre 2014, pp. 412-19; Blanchot 1987, p. 17; Sheringham 2006, p. 42). Sheringham’s account of literary realism might thus be read as a local inflection of Saito’s argument that art constitutes an “*exception to and commentary on*” everyday life. (Indeed, where Saito acknowledges that “various art objects help us attend to our everyday life aesthetically”, she contends that Western mimetic artforms, such as Turner’s paintings or the realist novel, are less effective than both contemporary experimental forms, such as assemblage art, and non-Western art practices such as the tea ceremony (Saito 2007, pp. 35-40). The present essay may, in turn, be conceived as an attempt to examine the ways in which a realist text seems to exit and comment on everyday life and to ask whether, in so doing, it might take us past “blanket judgements” on ordinary experience.

At this point, it will be helpful to consider some of the ways in which literary works have avoided falsifying everyday life. For Sheringham, “no genre can lay claim to the everyday, but practices that cut across generic divisions have often been productive” (Sheringham 2006, p. 45). Thus, if Perec himself is, for Sheringham, the “most resourceful explorer and indefatigable champion” of the everyday, the endorsement is owed to Perec’s essayistic work and to his *Life: A User’s Manual* [1978], which is cited alongside Joyce’s *Ulysses* [1922] as a rare example of the successful apprehension of everyday life in fiction (Sheringham 2006, p. 47). (Indeed, Sheringham suggests that the relation between *Things* and everyday life is curtailed by the text’s residual commitment to realism: although Perec’s use of literary devices in the novel tends “to subvert representation, engendering [...] circuitous connections between text and world,” the novel “lacks a number of features that Perec’s later everyday-oriented work [...] will possess in abundance: the sense of a total field, direct involvement and experimentation that registers the interaction of subjective experience and objective structures, the need for open-ended questioning” (Sheringham 2006, p. 14). For Sheringham, “it is often where the artifice of fiction is made most manifest that an effective grasp on the everyday is seemingly achieved” (2006, p. 45), a claim which, taken alongside the example of Joyce, might point towards a modernist aesthetics. Although Sheringham avoids the term, it is notable that modernism has enjoyed favour in theoretical approaches to the everyday (Lefebvre 1971, pp. 2-7; Davis 2009) – although not always in its ‘high modernist’ incarnations (Highmore 2006) – and that several recent

studies have read modernist narrative through the lens of ordinary or everyday life (Randall 2007; Olson 2009; Sayeau 2013).

Nevertheless, it is possible to construct an archive of literary thought that has suggested a productive relationship between realism and the everyday. Accounts to have posited an affinity between the realist novel and ordinary life – including Eric Auerbach's *Mimesis* [1946], Jacques Rancière's *Mute Speech* [1998], and Franco Moretti's *Serious Century* [2006] (Auerbach 2013; Ranciere 2011; Moretti 2006) – may not advance an explicit theorization of the everyday as a level of reality, but they nevertheless resonate with certain aspects of the reflexive apprehensions of everyday life in the French tradition, as constructed by Sheringham. Two of these points of convergence will provide a methodological orientation for the present essay. The first, evident in all three texts cited above, is to engage literature through the practice of close textual analysis. Such a practice is closely allied to the works that make up Sheringham's study, which "are as literary as they are theoretical, and vice versa" (Sheringham 2006, p. 398); indeed, it is methodologically central to the thought of Roland Barthes (Sheringham 2006, pp. 199-207) and Michel de Certeau (Freijomil 2009). Such a practice lays the ground for a second point of convergence, which is to blur any distinction between realism and modernism: just as Liesl Olson notes that "modernism is still generally committed to modes of realism and coherence that could be called an aesthetic order" (Olson 2009, p. 5), so, too, might we follow Rancière's rejection of what Gabriel Rockhill has called "the modernist doxa" by attending to reflexive or destabilizing narrative procedures in texts that otherwise seem to conform to the conventions of realist discourse (Rockhill 2011, p. 3; Rancière 2011, pp. 63-64). Indeed, it is just such an attention that Sheringham calls for when he locates the possibility for elucidating the everyday in "the dimension of the novel, linked to the act or art of narration, through which narrator's performance addresses the reader's own relationship to lived reality" (Sheringham 2006, p. 47). Together, these principles will be used to read *Things*, if not quite as a prototype for a realist aesthetics of the everyday, then as a troublesome case for an account that would place literary realism, or mimetic art more generally, at odds with everyday life.

3 The Art of Escapism

In an essay of 1962, Blanchot (1987, p. 15) offered the following dictum: "Despite massive development of the means of communication, the everyday escapes. This is its definition." In setting the intransitive

escapism of the everyday against “the massive development of the means of communication”, Blanchot was glossing Lefebvre’s elucidation of the resistance of everyday life to the technological ordering of the modern world and its correlate in the production of knowledge (Lefebvre 2014, pp. 368-370; 2014, pp. 318-19). *Things*, in turn, picks up on this notion of a gap between representational knowledge and one’s experience of the world: in their capacity as market researchers, Jérôme and Sylvie are professional mimeticists. As the narrator has it:

There was washing, drying, ironing. Gas, electricity and the telephone. Children. Clothes and underclothes. Mustard. Packet soups, tinned soups. Hair: how to wash it, how to dry it, how to make it hold a wave, how to make it shine. Students, fingernails, cough syrup, typewriters, fertilisers, tractors, leisure pursuits, presents, stationery, linen, politics, motorways, alcoholic drinks, mineral water, cheeses, jams, lamps and curtains, insurance and gardening. *Nil humani alienum*...Nothing that was human was outside their scope (Perec 2011, pp. 38-39).

The mere protraction of this list produces an ironic undercurrent, suggesting, on the part of the protagonists, not only a positivist naiveté, but a profound inability to come to grips with the world. Indeed, the occasion for an unpleasant aesthetic experience that could move the couple to ameliorative action is cause and symptom of a slide out of feeling altogether: “for three years”, the reader learns, “an electric point remained unrepaired, without their making up their minds to call in an electrician” (Perec 2011, p. 30).

If this anaesthesia stems from the mimetic life of market research, it points us to the local contingencies of access to the everyday *qua* an experiential domain of practice and of the possibility for aesthetic experience, pleasant or otherwise. The escapism of the everyday in *Things* would, then, be a more unequal business than what is suggested in Blanchot’s (1987, pp. 18-19) “definition”, which hinges about an understanding of everydayness as a universally accessible – if, precisely, subjectless – experience of modernity. At the same time, however, Perec’s total commitment to the imperfect tense (notwithstanding the introductory chapter, written in the conditional mood, and the epilogue, constructed in the future tense) shows what happens if one tries to grasp the everyday as the simple negative of the processes of discretization that characterize market research. While the tense of habit, duration, and iteration may be allied to the uneventful ebb and flow of everyday experience, to encounter the story in the imperfect

is, for the reader, to enter an experience in which the very rhythms of daily existence are black-boxed. The effect is compounded by a total absence of character delineation; the imperfect is always conjugated in the third person plural. So, on the one hand, a discretizing approach not only fails to represent the everyday but impedes one's very experience of it. And yet, if one tries to represent that failure in narrative form, to capture that negative space, one is left with a disembodied and teleological synthesis of day-to-day experience, a mere black box.

As a figure for the way everyday life is remaindered by representation, the black box is itself transformed by Perec's use of mirroring effects. As we have already seen, the couple's jobs as market researchers reproduce, at the level of the plot, the basic mimetic task of the novelist, and *vice versa*, although this mirroring is inflected by irony: "*nil humani alienum*" is not the axiom of a novelist whose *début* scarcely exceeds a hundred pages. We might add that the couple's practice, or increasing lack thereof, as home-builders, enters an analogous relation with Perec's task of producing aesthetic effects: in the first chapter, for example, Perec suggests to the reader the effects of the couple's dream home. While this suggestion is sometimes created through the simple reproduction of an effect – take, for instance, the sensuousity of the language in "you would glimpse thick bathrobes, swan-neck taps in solid brass," which, in David Bellos's translation, is just as indulgent as what it describes (Perec 2011, p. 23) – it does most of its work at a remove. The use of a language one might expect to find in magazines, such as the curtain which "would slide back at the merest touch" (Perec 2011, p. 21) suggests not only a readymade aesthetic ambience but, by metonymic extension, a lifeworld of glossy surfaces; palpable illusions which, like those peddled in the pages of the weekend supplements, will linger for only a matter of days.

The mirroring of the protagonists' representational endeavours and the mirroring-at-a-remove of their aesthetic pursuits are, in turn, complicated by the figure of the narrator, who is also in the business of building a picture of a world and of recreating or suggesting its aesthetic qualities. Complicated, because the vanishing point of the narration suggests the novel may in fact be a confession: the point at which the story proper, recounted in the imperfect tense, comes to an end, and from which the epilogue takes it up in the future tense, coincides with the summer before the couple are projected to move to Bordeaux. On this reading, for the narrator to recount the story in the imperfect is to re-inhabit an experience in which the very circadian rhythms of daily life

had been inaccessible, while, paradoxically, imitating the dynamics Blanchot (1987, p. 14) ascribes to everyday experience: “the everyday is what we never see for a first time, but only see again, having always already seen it by an illusion that is, as it happens, constitutive of the everyday.” As the imperfect is also the means through which the narrator constructs a fabular subject position, its use intimates a desire to compensate for an absence of everyday experience; to engineer a temporal distance that would allow the everyday, in line with Blanchot’s “illusion”, to be seen again. Nevertheless, *Things* is no *roman à clef*: it is possible to read the text as a fable whose contents bear no necessary relation to the life of the narrator – or, indeed, of the author, who happened to be living a “studentlike life” on the Left Bank similar to that described in the novel (Bellos 1993, pp. 306-307). To return to the image of the black box: it is not quite the case that the characters’ everyday life escapes from the systematizing clutches of professionalized or narrative representation into a clearly delimited negative space. It is rather as if the reader is chasing the ‘black box’ of everyday life through consecutive storeys of halls of mirrors; some inflected, some ‘removed’. Suffice to say, Blanchot’s paradox – a definition, or delimitation, to be found only in escape – is played out to a dizzying degree.

4 *Things* and the Good Life

Few readers will encounter *Things* with a view to contemplating the epistemological elusiveness of the everyday. But the invitation, produced by the ‘black-boxing’ effects of the imperfect tense, to consider *where* the life of this couple has gone is, in turn, given an ethical impetus – *how* and *why* did their life slide away? – by a fusion of fabular and novelistic conventions. In constructing a traditionally novelistic timeframe of two to three years, *Things* moves the reader to consider the causes of the sliding away of the protagonists’ life, while its overall design focuses that enquiry at the level of the everyday. Thus, the conditional mood used in the opening chapter intimates the characters’ indulgence in *projections* of practice and aesthesis, while the sustained use of the imperfect tense, vested with all the authority of novelistic hindsight, traces their slide into a space that is adjacent to those domains. The epilogue completes a structure which invites reflection on how far a good life might resemble that described in the novel. This scene, itself a projection, is quite the indictment of the life the characters have been living, and as such is the completion of a tale that would caution against the mimetic life:

They will sort out their flat, have it repainted, get rid of the piles of books, the bundles of linen, the stacks of crockery that had always cluttered it up and beneath which they had often felt they were suffocating. [...] They will see it for the first time the way they had always wanted to see it [...] with its low ceiling, its rustic courtyard, its admirable tree over which, very soon, just as they had in the past, the new owners will fall into raptures (Perec 2011, p. 124).

If the narrator is to be taken at their moralizing tone, the good life entails abandoning mimesis; living ‘in the present tense’, so to speak. There is, to be sure, good reason not to engage home-building that would have as its end the quasi-spectatorial aesthesis figured in the opening chapter: a life imagined to be “led harmoniously among these book-lined walls” is liable only to gather “piles of books.”

Nevertheless, Perec’s narrative machinery simultaneously works against such a moral. As we have seen, it is not entirely through choice that the couple have been unable to live: the effects of cognitive overload and unstable employment can frustrate one’s access to the simple circadian rhythms of existence. And while the epilogue may project a moment of blissful freedom in a thingless home, all “sparkling light and clean”, the vision is no more practicable, or, for that matter, desirable, than the dream of book-lined walls in the apartment of Eden. Still, a practical mimesis akin to that described in the quotation above – a mapping of the world, a “sort[ing] out” of their flat – could become part of the protagonists’ everyday lives, without their having quite to prepare the apartment for sale. On this view, a cartography of the everyday would become a creative practice, and home-building itself an aesthetic and mimetic experience, but one that is non-spectatorial and open-ended. In such a context, the dream sequence, with its projection of aesthesis, could become useful, not as an object of contemplation, but as an aspiration, something to which one can flick back the pages in relief from the prosaic flow of everyday life. And if we pursue the reading that the narrator is speaking from experience, we might say that the simple existence of the story acknowledges that mimesis is useful as a component of practical activity, if not as its own end. Indeed, it would mean that the text, with all its mirroring effects, enacts that principle.

This invitation to an ethical investigation of the protagonists’ plight is vested with an urgency by the reader’s ensnarement in the text’s economy of representations and desires. For the title and opening sequence have allowed the reader to indulge in just the same projection of *things* as that which seems to have paralysed Jérôme and Sylvie; the

development of the story will leave her comparably disappointed. The effect is redoubled by the use of brand names, as in the evocation of “the great staircase of footwear leading from Churches to Westons, from Westons to Buntings and from Buntings to Lobbs” (Perec 2011, p. 39), among which the reader is invited to position herself (which can you afford?). By the epilogue, it will be difficult for her to rise above the “new owners” who are ready to “fall into raptures” over the glorious apartment. Knowing that the thingless life cannot last long, the reader is thus returned, on closing the book, to the projection of a dream apartment that opened the story. Having witnessed the dangers of the spectatorial-mimetic life, she is not quite condemned to repeat the story of the protagonists. But it is no more possible to leave the book satisfied that one needs only an awareness of the machinations of capitalism and, to that end, a handful of realist novels, to go on inhabiting the world of things. Counter to the pretensions of its subtitle, the text has inflicted sustained damage on the idea of redemption through mimesis. If this is what Sheringham (2006) points towards when he speaks of the novel’s engendering “circuitous relations between text and world,” it is also what makes it resistant to the “blanket judgements” associated with realism; insofar as the reader’s judgement is called on, it is made processual and recursive. For the reader who would denounce the alienation of the characters finds herself in a glass house, and if she can figure the deleterious consequences of throwing stones in such a situation, she may also be moved to reflect on her own means of access to everyday life. Getting at it, then, will be an imperfect, if not quite imperfectible, business.

5 Conclusion: Mimetic Art and Everyday Experience

This essay has suggested that attending to aesthetic form may engender a productive relationship between mimetic art and everyday life. On this view, the achievement of *Things* is less to have granted a window onto the historical truth of aesthetic capitalism than to have caught the reader up in the projection of things, an economy of representations which, through the multiple layers of mirroring effects, constantly defers access to the rhythms of life. Thus, if mimetic art will always be a departure from the thick of everyday experience, this need not be considered a one-way route. *Things* puts in question how best to live under conditions of aesthetic capitalism but, contrary to a sociological critique or a self-help book, it does not fully step outside the everyday. The question is rather raised tangentially, as a product of following the plot.

Reading can therefore be seen as a displacement activity, both from being immersed in the everyday and from thinking about it head-on. Two further upshots follow from this insight. First, *Things* calls for an attention to the ways in which mimetic artforms are enmeshed in the everyday: it is possible to imagine, for example, its scenes rising to the surface of consciousness as one goes about tidying one's home or encountering advertisements for consumer goods. Considering how mimetic art can be embedded in everyday life alongside the dialogical nature of the text's exceptionality to everyday life, we arrive at a second upshot; namely, to think the everyday beyond the unexceptional. Ultimately, *Things* encourages us to consider that mimesis and commentary, displacement and digression, are part and parcel of the everyday, and to trace more attentively their relation to unexceptional experience.

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