

# Ben Highmore: ‘The everyday is always a question, a problem’

*Ben Highmore: “O cotidiano é sempre uma pergunta, um problema”*

Interview with BEN HIGHMORE<sup>a</sup>

University of Sussex, School of Media, Film and Music, Brighton, UK

By GIANLLUCA SIMI<sup>b</sup>

University of Nottingham, Department of Culture, Film and Media, Nottingham, UK

THE EVERYDAY IS as difficult to define as it is to ignore. In its transformation from adverb into an adjective and, finally, into a noun, it became an institution in its own right, featuring copiously in the titles of academic conferences and publications. Buzzword or not, however, it remains a relevant way of looking at the world, following what Edmund Husserl (1970) described as the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*), that is, the realm of immediate experience, ‘the only real world, the one that is actually given through perception, that is ever experienced and experienceable’ (Ibid.: 48-49).

Professor Ben Highmore is undoubtedly one of the household names of Everyday Life Studies in this renewed and explosive interest in the events and routines that do not often – if ever – make the headlines or the front page. A professor of Cultural Studies at the University of Sussex, in the UK, Highmore has written extensively on the most mundane aspects of life, in the intersection between the *micro* and the *macro*. It is, therefore, very unlikely to find a reading list on everyday life on which his name does not feature amongst the very first references. His first book, *The everyday life reader* (2002b), is a collection of writings on the topic by an array of authors from the late 19<sup>th</sup> to the early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. It is in his doctoral thesis, published as *Everyday life and cultural theory* (2002a), nevertheless, that he laid the foundation for his work, later expanded in books such as *Ordinary lives* (2011) and *Cultural feelings* (2017), which treats the everyday less as a self-contained discipline and more as ‘a critical tradition that is specifically antagonistic to triumphalist ideas of progress’, as he argued in our interview.

Professor Highmore met with *MATRIZES* last May in his hometown of Bristol, in the southwest of England, to discuss his work on the everyday, its connection to

<sup>a</sup> Professor of Cultural Studies at the University of Sussex. Email: B.Highmore@sussex.ac.uk. Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7865-5184>

<sup>b</sup> Ph.D. candidate in Critical Theory and Cultural Studies at the University of Nottingham, with funding from CAPES (0937/14-2). Email: gianluca.simi@nottingham.ac.uk. Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2118-4481>

Cultural Studies, and what it implies in terms of academic research. Speaking of everyday life is as intriguing as it is daunting due to its sheer pervasiveness – after all, it is a 'totality of fragments', to use his own words (Highmore, 2002a: 82). The everyday is not, as Professor Highmore insists, a category of phenomena to be unveiled and analysed but, rather, a way of looking at the world 'at the level of experience', as he described it during our meeting. It pays due attention to the most common aspects of our lives – usually, the ones that we overlook or deem unimportant – to understand how our most uneventful errands might echo as well as defy the grand traditional narratives attempting to categorise and explain the utter chaos that ultimately characterises our existence.

**MATRIZes:** If we were to start with the very foundation of the idea of the everyday, how would you define it?

**Ben Highmore:** I might not. I always think that, if you were looking for a definition, if you were looking for a starting point, you would not look towards the world and say that some phenomena are included, and some are not included. It would be about your perspective. So, I would prefer to think about everyday life as a perspective on the world rather than a category of things that exist in the world. For instance, you could have given birth, which is not an everyday experience and, for lots of us, it includes the medical profession, it includes somehow being involved with the state in a very precise way – naming, you have to be named, catalogued. Yet, it both is and is not part of the everyday. Certainly, for people who work in the maternity hospital, it really is a routine, normal thing, but it is still life and giving birth, you are still having a child and you think: 'Oh, my god, this is what they do all the time, this cannot be special to them in the way that it is special to me'. And yet, it both is and is not.

To think about it from the point of view of the everyday brings certain categories, certain aspects of that experience to light: the ordinary care that people give each other, the use of machines, the way that, for instance, a certain Foucauldian understanding of the medical profession does not equate with when you talk to people about their experience of being in the hospital, giving birth, bringing new life into the world. To cut a long story short then, rather than thinking about defining the everyday in terms of phenomena that can be categorised by things that happen every day, things that happen routinely, it would be about a perspective on all aspects of life, I think, including death, birth, as well as those more routine things like commuting or dealing with emails and those kinds of things that have become routine.

**MATRIZES:** How do Everyday Life Studies and Cultural Studies relate to each other?

**Highmore:** I can only have a personal sense of this, which was that the everyday was a way of going back to the foundations of Cultural Studies, in some ways. It was also a way of getting to a longer history of Cultural Studies. Rather than seeing Cultural Studies as something that emerged as this groovy, politically progressive discipline in the early 1960s, it allowed a longer history of people engaging with a difficulty of knowing experience from the ground up.

When I started doing Cultural Studies, there was a lot of emphasis on subcultures and on Media Studies. It seemed very fragmented in terms of how people worked, in terms of the semiotics of the progressive text or certain groups of people. One of the things I really noticed was the way that the word *culture* was often pluralised, so people talked about *cultures*. There was this culture, there was the gay culture, there was the football culture, and there was that culture. These became really specific things to look at and there was not necessarily an overview of how they interconnected. I took as foundational that the word *culture* was always plural, was already heterogeneous, contradictory, and conflictual (see Highmore, 2016). So, to pluralise the word actually did the opposite. It made those things much more homogenous, much more sealed. For me, the idea of everyday life was to take a lot of those things that seemed to have become quite narrow within Cultural Studies and open them up again. But I am also quite interested in the way Cultural Studies has developed in various national situations. For instance, in Australia, Cultural Studies is quite a different thing to what it is in the United States and in the UK. It has much more of a sense of everydayness to it – people do Cultural Studies around food, it might be about generational food experiences and things like that. And that was not really happening in the UK very much under the term Cultural Studies when I was doing my Ph.D., for instance.

**MATRIZES:** How did everyday life become an institution, so to speak, a tradition of critique? And what is the history of that tradition?

**Highmore:** I do not know if there is an answer to that because, for instance, if you speak to an anthropologist, they might say ‘we have always been looking at the everyday, that is our rationale, our reason for being is taking the everyday seriously’. So, one of the questions might be: how does a bunch of questions emerge, mainly across the 20th century, which then take the everyday as their arena? There are those questions. How does it emerge for someone like Benjamin, in Critical Theory, in the 1920s and 1930s in Berlin and Paris? How widely does it operate for someone like Kracauer at the same

time? And, then, how does it emerge again in Paris and how does that change with someone like Lefebvre?

Those questions are never ending – you could go back all the way into Philosophy. The everyday is always a question, a problem. It was with David Hume, Wittgenstein. In Philosophy, the everyday is just sometimes the name for the concrete. It is just the test of concrete existence: 'OK, we have got these ideas. How do they work when you are walking down the street or when you wake up in the morning?' Or even, for someone like Freud, when you are dreaming, when you are forgetting something, all these sorts of things.

What is interesting is seeing a critical tradition emerging that is specifically antagonistic to triumphalist ideas of progress, perhaps – 'life is always getting better because we have got more money, more material resources'. Then, people, from social investigators to critical theorists, will say: 'actually, how is everyday life lived? What is the factory doing in terms of everyday life experience?' There are those historical questions which are much to do with modernity, with things becoming recognised through historical changes. And there is also that idea that a bunch of people will come along at a particular time – for instance, me – and say, 'this is the tradition of the everyday'. And I say it mainly because, as I was finishing the manuscript for my book, *Everyday life and cultural theory* (Highmore, 2002a), the publishers sent me another manuscript to review. It was Michael Gardiner's book, which is called *Critiques of everyday life* (2000), in which he puts together a tradition of everyday theorists. At that moment, I thought that the reason why I am doing this is not because I am smart and because I have picked up on this kind of tradition. It is actually because I am part of a historical moment that allows that tradition to be, for publishers who want to publish it, for other people who want to be engaged in it. I am determined by much bigger cultural forces. The question is then: why did everyday life, as a body of thought, come together in the 1990s and into the 2000s as something that could be looked at as a particular tradition?

**MATRIZes:** As a researcher then, can you only study something that is part of your own everyday?

**Highmore:** I do not think so. No, I would not agree with that because a lot of the work – certainly, a lot of the work that I am really interested in is historical, so that would kind of count that out, but I think it is about what then counts as documents and what counts as a productive way of working. So, if you think of the everyday as something we share, but maybe we share it differently, how then do we go about trying to find out about the everyday? It becomes something of a methodological question.

**MATRIZES:** That is one of my questions, actually. In Everyday Life Studies, and within Cultural Studies, there seems to be an attempt to reinvent or recreate methodologies. Why do you think it is so important for them to try and come up with new ways of studying the world? Where have the other, more traditional methodologies perhaps failed?

**Highmore:** Well, I think in some cases, it is about uneven histories, so it just so happens that, in this country [the UK], when Cultural Studies came about, it came out of a kind of mixture of the study of English, it very much came out of Literary Studies and then a bit of Sociology. More Literary Studies than Sociology. But very little Anthropology. In some ways, there was a real failure to engage especially with Anthropology because it had, at one point, become associated with colonialism, with something that you would be entirely suspicious of, and that you would not want to use their concepts and their ways of working because they were somehow problematic, hugely problematic.

Going back to your question about methodology and the attempt to generate new methodologies or thinking about that as an important aspect of work, I really do feel that, in some ways, methodology is a crucial aspect of what we do. It is normally that one thing that we all have in common, as academics. You might be working on border towns in Brazil, someone else might be working on a historical topic, but what we have in common is questions around methodology, epistemology, the big questions: a sense of how we know the world, how we know the world in ways that can be true to experience or can be incisive about social structures.

There have been times when the very idea of methodology has become very uncreative and almost the main disciplinary aspect. This is how you do it, you belong to Sociology, and therefore you must do this kind of work. Or, within the realm of Cultural Studies, these kinds of methodologies are relevant, and others are not. I taught various method courses and they are always hugely, hugely problematic because everyone thinks that each must include audience research, text analysis, or these kinds of things. What happens is that the very idea of dealing with text or dealing with people can really solidify in terms of how you go about it and what do you do. So, the very act of talking about method, rather than opening method up to being a kind of creative aspect of our work, actually becomes nailed down. I always try to teach methods by starting with a problem and trying to think about how many methods we can think of as being appropriate to this or how the problem and the phenomenon can generate methods, rather than seeing method as something scientific that we can put on top of phenomena.

**MATRIZes:** So, you are saying that, in studying the everyday and in studying culture, there is a scope of methods that can be used, none of which are the only way of pursuing that study?

**Highmore:** Exactly! We might not know. There probably is not an appropriate method because why would there be? Why would there be something that measured up to the life that we are looking at? A method is a way of approaching something, but that thing is always singular and specific.

**MATRIZes:** That brings up questions on the scientific rigour of research. How do you make sure that, regardless of the methodology you choose, it is still a consistent piece of work?

**Highmore:** For me, it is always going to be about qualifying what you are doing. In some ways, I do not think there are some methods that are necessarily more rigorous than others. And I think they can be [rigorous]. The important thing to stress, always, is that you somehow qualify what you are doing by recognising its limitations as much as its productivity. So, one of the things that Everyday Life Studies does is, rather than have an idea of society that then we will look and see if that is replicated in your methodology – have you got a range of classes in your sample? Have you got a range of ages? Does your sample reflect the world, the society that we have already understood? One of the things that Everyday Life Studies do is suggesting that society is always there and it is there both in one person's account of the world as in ten people's account of the world. We do not look at that material to reflect something that we already know. We look at that material because it allows us to see a specific everyday or a specific lifeworld being produced at ground-level, at the level of experience.

**MATRIZes:** The question should then start with what is being said rather than who is saying it, in a restrictive way?

**Highmore:** You start with what is being said or described and, then, you unpack that. You might find things about the person who wrote it, you might look at other things that they have written, other reports they have made.

**MATRIZes:** You will not reject something based on who is saying it?

**Highmore:** No, who said it will not explain what is been said, I do not think so. And that becomes really important in terms of what kind of material then becomes useful in understanding the everyday. And just from my own perspective, I have been particularly interested in those responses that do not seem to start out with opinions, that do not seem to start out with 'this is how

I see the world, this is how I understand the world'. Or, if they do, they are kind of questioning those things at the time, they are kind of problematising them as though the representation of the world that is most available to them does not always measure up to the experience of the world that they are having.

**MATRIZes:** One of the key elements in *Everyday Life Studies* is *resistance*. The idea of us being able not only to observe and describe our reality but also, in doing those things, to alter it. What is your take on resistance in the everyday?

**Highmore:** I suppose where I have written mostly about it is in a book on Michel de Certeau (Highmore, 2006). One of the phrases he uses is 'sheeplike resistance'. And I think it is just a great contradiction, that idea that we might be passively resistant or that resistance might be very, very different to opposition, for instance, or that it might actually have no political valency at all. This is something I was really keen to look at and to try and understand because it did strike me as one of the ways that, I felt, certainly people like Michel de Certeau were getting used, that it was a misreading of what they meant by *resistance* or that more was being made of *resistance* than I thought was true or useful, really.

**MATRIZes:** Because he was talking about a much more low-key kind of resistance.

**Highmore:** Yes, yes. But that then got translated into a sense of re-engagement with things like subcultures, with a whole range of things: 'Oh, look, here are people who are doing graffiti'. The classic example, for me, was thinking about skateboarding, for instance, as a way of responding to restrictions within the city that actually become what allows you to do your tricks, the very things that are setup to pacify the landscape, to stop people using it in particular ways.

Michel de Certeau never has examples like that. When he does have examples, it is of old people walking through the city; it is not subcultural things that he is interested in or that he talks about. So, I was very against that idea of the everyday as being necessarily a site of resistance or that that resistance would necessarily be politically progressive or even politically antagonistic. One of the elements of that is that Michel de Certeau is not looking for resistance; he is looking for excess and that excess is partly to do with explanation. People will explain the world like this and tell you this is how you are leading your life, or this is how life is being led, but, then, there is always an excess. And he – and Lefebvre to some degree – treats that excess that cannot be categorised, that cannot be absorbed in the dominant social understanding quite as often as the everyday.

**MATRIZes:** The everyday could potentially be a realm of compliance as well.

**Highmore:** It could be a realm of compliance and it could be worse than that. It could be forms of racism, for instance. If you think about a country like the UK, where there is various legislation about racism and sexism, there are big institutions of the state set up to police that, to make sure we are not being racist, to make sure we are not being sexist – yet, people still experience that. And where does that exist? That exists in the everyday.

That is one of the things that any understanding of the everyday must cope with; it cannot just say – 'Oh, the everyday, what a great place!' Full of super-progressive, alternative people. There is another idea that the everyday is the carnivalesque compared to a more disciplinary sense of social life as given to us by social theory. But I think you have to see the everyday as sometimes lagging behind what is progressive about the State, sometimes going ahead and being incredibly inventive, creative. I suppose a word that, again, is often used is the idea of the everyday as a space of creativity.

**MATRIZes:** It is a warning against the romanticisation of the everyday. It is not intrinsically a happy-clappy, progressive space.

**Highmore:** No! Well, in the past, it could be like that. There are probably good reasons for how that came about because there is a sense that, when you are thinking about the everyday, you are thinking about those voices that are not normally heard, that are not the voices of the rich and powerful, a much more kind of ordinary life. There has been a certain romanticism around that, that it is the world that is hidden, it is the world of the more vulnerable, of people who are overlooked in society. So, their voices take on a kind of valency that, if not seen as progressive, is certainly seen as being on the right side of politics from below.

**MATRIZes:** How do you, then, move on from just describing the everyday and start trying to interpret it? How do you extract meaning from the everyday?

**Highmore:** In lots of ways, one of the problems I have with academia and academic values – just in my particular kind of experience – is the value that gets placed on description. It is quite often a very low value. People write on students' essays: 'it is too descriptive', seen as a problem. This idea that we are the scientists, we need to be critical thinkers, we need to be analytic, critically interpretive. My feeling, though, is that, most of the time, we are not descriptive enough. Actually, what we often need is just much, much more description. Now, you get to a theoretical point where there is not a great deal of sense



in drawing hard and fast lines between description and interpretation. Any description is, in some ways, an interpretation. You do not describe things from nowhere, you come at them from an angle. For me, this is a really crucial part.

One of the things that I like to do as a very first exercise with first-years is to get them to describe the room we are in and to try and give as much information, as much description as possible. I get them to do that description with various interests in mind, so one group will try to describe the room from the perspective of a real estate agent; another might be thinking about it as a scene for a movie; another might be looking at it from a health-and-safety perspective. So, different things will come in and out of focus: someone who is interested in health and safety will notice completely different things than someone who is thinking of it for a film set. That is a basic condition of life. We notice things that we are attentive to, that we are already sensitised to – which is a long way around to saying that there is no straight description and, then, interpretation.

I am interested in building different kinds of description, how we might describe different experiences from different perspectives to build up layers of descriptions before we then think of analysis. Thinking about what we are asking analysis to do. What is it that we want from these things? Have we already got interpretations in mind that we are looking to apply somewhere? And academia is full of already worked-out interpretations. I think that, again, is one of the issues I have with how theory gets used. Sometimes, theory is used as a form of legitimation to interpret the world in ways that are already being assumed. So, we have a Foucauldian interpretation of the world in terms of how discourse is formed, how power works through knowledge. Then, people do their descriptive work, they go out into the field, they find a text or find a situation and they describe it, but the point of the description is so that the analysis of the interpretation that is already available can fit. That is problematic. Theory is similar, in lots of ways, to novels and films in that it sensitises you to the world. It allows you to see certain things. Sometimes, they will allow you to see different things, but, sometimes, that theory becomes so embedded that you just see the same things over and over again.

**MATRIZes:** There is a tension here between what people are already sensitive to and one of the goals in Everyday Life Studies, which is making the invisible visible. How do you balance that?

**Highmore:** If it is just about creating newness for the sake of newness, then there is something problematic about that as well. Some understandings of the world need to be in place for us to build other understanding of it. Going back to the idea of description, in some ways, that is what forms of Anthropology,

forms of ethnography do. They are not descriptions in the way that a painter might try and describe the scene; they are descriptions that might say 'this is the scene as I see it', but then I want to see what the scene is like from that position over there, from that point of view. You build up triangulations, you build up a three-dimensional picture of it, of a scene.

Where that differs from an interpretation of theory that already has an explanation in mind is that it would not know the protagonists or the agents in advance. That is not to say this is the only way of doing things because there are lots of good reasons for a much more limited approach or for a much more directional approach. For instance, if your main interest was to find out about women's experience, there would obviously be good reasons for concentrating and listening more attentively to women's voices within certain situations. There is a good reason for doing that. And people who study the everyday are often interested in that: what are the voices that are more marginal in the situation? What are the experiences that are normally overlooked?

**MATRIZes:** That also points to the issue of a certain academic guilt. When you become aware of your position and, by extension, of other people's position or of the fact that other people have their own positions – and, still, you are trying to talk about their lives, there is always a time when you question whether those people themselves should not be in your position. It becomes very difficult to reconcile your role as a researcher in that dilemma. So, if I am acting as a vector for those marginal voices to speak up, why not allow them to be where I am?

**Highmore:** Yes, why should not there be lots of people's names on the spine of your thesis or my book? I think that is true, that is a good point to make. There are different ways of doing that. If we put this in the perspective of ethics, of how we respond to people and the ethics of our response to others, then I want to think there is not only one way of responding to this. Because I recognise an asymmetry in terms of what is written, who does the writing, who gets involved, part of my life will be about trying to open up Higher Education to as many people as possible. As part of my job, I am really in favour of inclusivity, of opening programmes to all sorts of people, though I probably do not do nearly enough of this kind of advocacy work.

There is also an ethics of how people write the voices of others, how they use those voices as tokens sometimes. There is very much an ethics of how to write other voices. Sometimes, someone's critical voice is so strong that other voices are submerged, they are simply being used to promote the ideas of the main author, but I think there are much more dialogical ways of writing. When I think about my writing, I like to have other voices besides mine: I use quite

long quotations and I do that partly to allow the text to have space, so it is not just an illustration of something I am arguing. So, there is an ethics of how those voices are used.

**MATRIZes:** You gave a talk in the Netherlands, at the *ArteZ studium generale* (Ben Highmore..., 2016), where you said something that really stood out, which was: 'aesthetics might have gotten a lot further if it had started thinking about the dainty, the dumpy. And I think the dainty, the dumpy, the wonky, the lumpy – all these things are probably much more familiar for us in the everyday than notions of the sublime.' So, my question is: what is the role of aesthetics in the everyday?

**Highmore:** Incidentally, the phrase 'the dainty, the dumpy' comes from the philosopher J. L. Austin (1956). One of the key aspects of everyday life is that there are often lots and lots of low-key experiences. They are not necessarily particularly intense or, if they are, they are kind of routinised in those worlds. So, shifting it slightly from aesthetics to thinking about emotions, feelings, all those sorts of things – we, quite often, have low-key feelings of love, of frustration, which are very different to those that become the material for films and novels, of intense passion, rage, and things like that. If, every day, we went into the kind of blind rage, a kind of road rage, we would be dead, but we quite often have little frustrations, niggly frustrations when driving or when doing all sorts of things.

In the same way, aesthetics is part of the everyday. We sometimes take pleasure in things and, sometimes, they completely go over our heads. For instance, eating food: sometimes you will have a sandwich and not notice it at all, whereas, sometimes, you can have an orange and go 'wow, I am having a really intense fruit experience.' So, all those sorts of things, I would include them in thinking about aesthetics.

It is very rare to find people who are not constantly making aesthetic choices. Sometimes, those aesthetic choices are deliberately unemphatic. Wearing clothes can be about not wanting to stand out, or being about comfort, or wanting to be unnoticeable but comfortable. There would be a range of things that you put together and you would not even think about these things. It would very much be a kind of sensual response to things: what do I like wearing? What do I choose to wear? I really like wearing that, but, actually, the last time I wore it, five people commented on it and I do not want that much attention in my life. I will wear things that people do not comment on. And they are aesthetic choices. They are both to do with how things look, but also with how things feel in a much more ethereal and material way.



**MATRIZes:** Aesthetics has much more to do with the senses rather than just with what is beautiful?

**Highmore:** Yes.

**MATRIZes:** Is that why you decided to write your book on *cultural feelings* (Highmore, 2017)?

**Highmore:** Yes. I suppose I wrote more about aesthetics in *Ordinary lives* (Highmore, 2010). That was more to do with sensual experience, even in trying to describe the experience of not noticing things, things that you see all the time and you do not particularly notice. The idea for the book *Cultural feelings* was to build on that. As well as being about the sensual, it was about the material in a more diffuse way. There are chapters in that particularly on music, on film – so, it would be about using those forms to then try and talk about feelings that have some kind of sensual and sensorial shape to them.

**MATRIZes:** How do feelings relate to culture and society at large?

**Highmore:** I was thinking about it the other day when I went to a talk. Someone was talking about the feelings around Brexit and one of the things that they were trying to work out was around shame. People experienced shame sometimes in relation to their fellow citizens. 'I am ashamed of my country for voting for Brexit', for what seems like a racist, xenophobic idea of the world. At the time, I was thinking that part of the reason why I wrote *Cultural feelings* was as a way of understanding the forces of experience that were not usually given attention by affect theorists. Often, I think, affect theorists are interested in those big affects, particularly things like shame, pride, jealousy, anxiety. When I was thinking about Brexit, I was thinking about what happened in terms of feelings and how that worked. Because they had a referendum and because that referendum was conducted in a particular way – what was called *project fear* versus *project nostalgia* –, it produced a whole range of feelings. Some of those were to do with shame, with aggression. It seemed to give some people legitimacy for their racist feelings that they probably kept hidden. And, in some ways, what it could not be seen as doing was taking the situation that was already there and amplifying it or representing it in a particular way. But it was actually a new thing, a new set of feelings that got produced at that moment. If you go to the period immediately before Brexit and you try to figure why people voted in the way that they did, you are looking at much lower-key feelings and experiences – and a lot more confused ones. You are looking at people who were not so much thinking about the EU as thinking about how they were not being supported by the government in this country.

They probably felt quite ambivalent to a lot of things, but probably one of the biggest feelings that they had was frustration at not having much say in how their future world was being imagined and produced.

Feelings are hugely, hugely important in how we understand our experience of the world and I think that one of the things that we need to look at is the way those feelings are mobilised and heightened by things like the media, by acts of politics. That is why everyday life is always important because, in a sense, everyday life was always a response to that top-down understanding of the world that was produced by newspapers, news programmes, or the media. The question is: is that how people feel? Is that how people experience the world? I was quite influenced by various people working in the US and part of that is that there is a kind of feelings group that was set up with people like Lauren Berlant and Katie Stewart, who are involved in the politics of feeling, the politics of emotion (see Berlant, 2011; Stewart, 2007). They had slogans, for instance, that said: 'Depressed? It Might Be Political'! But there is also all these other low-key feelings – of confusion, a sense of unreality to certain things, which are much more to do with the everyday than those bigger affects of things like shame and pride.

**MATRIZES:** And the media seem to have a big role in mobilising those feelings.

**Highmore:** Oh, my god, yeah, yeah! And, in a sense, now the politicians have become these media figures. So, it is not even that the media are taking political statements and transforming them into something that generates fear, anxiety, or shame. The politicians are now completely entangled in that system. These professional politicians are much closer to the idea of reality TV stars than they are to an older sense of professional politicians.

**MATRIZES:** I was thinking about social media specifically. A lot of our everyday nowadays is about registering and communicating our own everyday. It is almost a meta-everyday. So, we rant on Twitter, we brag on Instagram, we goof around on Snapchat, we even build our political identities on Facebook, perhaps. So, how much of the everyday am I living and how much of it am I spending on documenting what I am supposedly living? At the same time that you have access to this chaotic communication, whenever we are not registering our everyday or communicating it, we might feel bored, 'afraid of missing out' (see Pontes; Taylor; Stavropoulos, 2018), especially amongst the so-called millennials. But that is also symptomatic of a certain kind of era, isn't it? You have said before 'boredom can become a sign of social critique' (Highmore, 2002a: 11). We have



access to so much information and we are producers of the image of our own reality, but, at the same time, depression is on the rise, hopelessness, desperation, frustration. There is a tension between making and divulging the everyday, but also feeling bored and lost.

**Highmore:** There are several things that come up with that and one of them that might be interesting for cultural analysis and [Cultural] Studies is that categories of class, gender, race, sexuality have been very dominant and, yet, the category of age, and generation really, has not really being that dominant. One of the interesting things is just the different experiences that people have these days depending on their age and on their generation. It is now a big thing in this country because it is the first time that the younger generation is going to be financially worse off than their parents' generation. This is the first time that has ever happened. That is a big shift in things, but technology is a huge aspect of this.

You are rightly talking about social media as being such a key aspect of this, but also, when we are looking at the rise of anxiety or mental health issues, again that is a generational thing. It is younger people who seem to be suffering. That is how it appears, I do not know if there are statistics about it, but I certainly see that with my students from the past five years. There have been more mental health issues than I had ever seen before. It is becoming such a routine part of life. It is interesting that some of the ways of responding to this are very much to do with the everyday. For instance, the growth of mindfulness is simply about being present in the everyday, being attentive to what is around you, trying to take stock rather than being in this ambiguous space between the screen and the pavement.

As I am sure, everyone has had the experience of looking around and being on the streets and seeing everyone looking at their phones. Now, that is an interesting thing and I think sometimes it is incredibly fascinating. I work with a lot of Chinese students and I see them walking around with their telephones – as all the other students are –, but I think about it as a spatial thing. They are both in Brighton, in the UK, but also entangled with these networks in China. Living complex spatial arrangements, which is, again, fascinating. Of course, there are huge problems with that as well. The opportunities are amazing to keep these networks and contacts, having a sense of being both away from home and at home at the same time. But I know, from my own obsession with checking my email, that these things can become difficult habits to deal with and they can be very powerful routines that develop. They can be really obsessional, really detrimental to just living your life. So, one of the other things is people going on these electronic detoxes, people trying not to use media for a while.

Something we often do on Media Studies courses that I teach has to do with how you understand mobile phones' endless connectivity as a part of our everyday when it has become so absorbed into it without actually doing something to allow us to recognise it. So, the idea is not to use your mobile for a week, see if you can just stop using any kind of electronic equipment and see how that feels. And people often use the analogy that they are going cold turkey or that there is some sort of drug withdrawal experience going on. The everyday is a place for examining that and maybe doing something with it, altering it in some kind of way.

**MATRIZes:** That also adds another layer of complexity to the everyday. On the one hand, you have to encompass the *real everyday* but, on the other, there is also a *virtual everyday* nowadays.

**Highmore:** And they are more and more threaded through. There is that sense of it not being an after-event, putting things on social media. It is often about me knowing that I will go to this place and I will...

**MATRIZes:** Stream it.

**Highmore:** Yeah. And people can see what I have experienced as well. When I was about 14, I remember seeing a documentary about Edvard Munch, the painter, and his famous painting, *The scream*. A few months ago, one of the things I enjoyed as I went to Norway was, in the main museum, they have got a whole room dedicated to Edvard Munch and they have got *The scream* there. It is really interesting how people go up to the picture to be photographed doing the action of their hands on their cheeks. It is a very funny, really interesting response to what was often seen as a picture of existential despair. There is one picture with a mum and her very small child, both doing the scream together and they look incredibly happy doing it. But this is that kind of afterthought of the experience. It is not like 'I'm going to look at the painting. Oh! I have got social media, I will just take a quick picture here and stick it on Instagram'. People already know, they are already sensitised to the world of social media.

**MATRIZes:** In a way, the knowledge of the possibilities of communicating the everyday already predetermines the ways in which I will experience it.

**Highmore:** Yes, absolutely! But we cannot assume that there is a kind of part before social media where things like that did not happen. They just happened with other things in mind. That is something I will write in my diary, for instance. That then engages you in terms of how you are going to experience that thing. Or you read novels, poetry, so you are more and



more sensitised to certain things having a narrative quality than those other things that are harder to narrativise. This is again something that is key to the everyday: how do we call into existence those very things that seem hard to stick on social media, that are difficult to narrate, that actually we have no opinion about, or that we do not reflect on in the way that we would reflect on what we are going to eat or those kinds of aspects to it?

I have no idea what kind of effects the constant involvement with social media will have. I really do not know. I do not know what comes with that, what aspects of mental health, for instance, come with that. We know about other social changes that have happened and we have a sense of some of those – for instance, the telephone. The mobile phone is a kind of extension of that telephone and you can see that what you are getting is a gradual encroaching of the workplace into the home through the telephone. And, of course, with the mobile phone, there is a sense that I can always be at work, I can always be looking at my emails, someone can connect with me and tell me that they need this, or they need that in terms of my labour, working for an institution. There are huge ramifications around that in terms of the extension of the working day through things like commuting and mobile phones, which are gradually getting larger. The aspect that we are faced with now is how entertainment, communication, and work are all interconnected in things like social media. We go there for our entertainment, but actually, in certain instances, it is work as well. For instance, for academics, a lot of the stuff that is done on Facebook looks very similar to work to me. There are things that we do in terms of sharing things and using social media to produce ourselves in certain ways that are both enabled and severely limited by these technologies.

**MATRIZES:** What are you working on now, Professor?

**Highmore:** I am working on a book about taste and I am looking at how certain kinds of tastes emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in this country. Material practices as much as anything. Plastic gets introduced, certain ideas get introduced: informal eating, clothing changes, bedding changes, all these sorts of things. But what I am interested in is, again, looking at this as a sensitivity developed around everyday life that, rather than thinking about these as somehow responding to changes in society, I want to see them as the material that allows society to develop in certain ways.

So, rather than these being generated or being epiphenomena of bigger shifts taking place in terms of men and women's roles in the family or of the changes that happened at the level of class, I want to see what happens when we look at these things in their own terms. Can we see them as actually being



social agents in their own right or how do we think about the relationship between taste and society? Which partly is my anti-Pierre Bourdieu... I mean, it is not anti-Pierre Bourdieu, but, for him, society is organised, and it keeps itself organised in that way or amplifies in that way through taste, through forms of cultural capital exchange. But those social patterns exist before the taste, so they somehow determine how those tastes get played out. And I am interested in another account to the world.

How comes certain kinds of taste get developed that are not about distinguishing people but are about epochal change? For instance, we might talk about social media: who does not use social media? Social media might have really interesting things to tell us about the amplification of class or how different genders work, but you could not start by saying that social media are, in themselves, distinctive of class or gender because we know that, for certain age groups, it is absolutely ubiquitous. And there are lots of ubiquitous things. The idea of personal communication, the idea of having a car, there is a whole range of things. Or that the value of convenience is more crucial than the value of other kinds of qualities. So, we will listen to music on MP3 just because that is more convenient than doing other things. Or we will buy food from supermarkets because it is convenient. So, those things have developed without a lot of commentary apart from as ways that distinguish people, for instance, by saying that you go to Waitrose and that person goes to Aldi<sup>1</sup>. That might or might not be interesting. I think that the more interesting question is that we all go to supermarkets and that supermarkets have produced certain kinds of effects in the urban scenario that we do not have with local shops, we do not do shopping on a daily basis in the way that we did 70 years ago.

<sup>1</sup> Waitrose and Aldi are both chains of supermarkets in the UK. Whereas the former is seen as attracting an affluent clientele, the latter is advertised as a *discount supermarket*.

**MATRIZES:** My final question, professor. What lies ahead for Cultural Studies and Everyday Life Studies in an era of anti-intellectualism?

**Highmore:** In the time that I have been teaching, Cultural Studies, as a named area, has probably shrunk to a fifth of what it had been when I started out in terms of the number of courses, the universities teaching them in the UK. It is hard not to see that carrying on. In some ways, I think that was partly to do with a question I have posed myself, which has to do with how Cultural Studies deals with success. Now, how does Cultural Studies deal with the fact that, in the 1980s and 1990s, it got taken up everywhere? Geography took it up, Sociology took it up and they all now have people whom they call cultural sociologists, cultural geographers, and they are absolutely no different from Cultural Studies people. There are people teaching, in English departments, courses on the teenager – and these are Cultural Studies courses. So, you are



in a situation where Cultural Studies is everywhere. Why should you have a special thing called Cultural Studies?

One of the things that happened is that Cultural Studies just got so diffused that there was less and less a sense of it as a particular project, unified by particular political ideas. There is a sense that Cultural Studies are becoming more and more something that takes place at the MA and Ph.D. levels, and it is less and less an undergraduate thing. In some ways, that is going back to how Cultural Studies developed in Birmingham in the 1960s<sup>2</sup>. It developed as a postgraduate, specialised thing. I think people who want to hang on to Cultural Studies, as a big undergraduate area of work, they have really got their work cut out if they want to carry on just because Cultural Studies does not have the name or the interest it had in the 1980s and 1990s. It will become more of a specialised postgraduate area and probably get stronger, as far as that goes, I think.

One of the things I was really interested in, in relation to everyday life, is that it partly has an odd relation to academia anyway. There is a sense of a group like the Mass Observation [Movement]<sup>3</sup> purposefully not being something that would happen within academia, that it was outside academia that mass observation happened. And there are lots of examples of those kinds of projects. Libraries and museums collecting materials. In a lot of mainland Europe, there are practices of ethnology, trying to collect folk knowledge that has a relationship to everyday life.

So, I think, in some ways, the future for the Academy can look quite bleak, especially in the UK. It does look like neoliberalism management is so in charge of the whole thing that it is difficult to see a huge progressive spirit countering that anytime soon. But, we always hope that will change. The recent strikes<sup>4</sup>, I think, altered that – people's sense of what is possible. But I also think that the future of Everyday Life Studies and, to a degree, Cultural Studies is not going to be tied to the future of a particular way of doing Higher Education in the UK. I think other people will take it up. I think both Everyday Life and Cultural Studies have always had a sense that it was difficult to think about them as purely academic exercises. It was never going to be a scholarship for the sake of scholarship. Some of the more interesting things recently have been in different ways of publishing materials. A lot of new online journals, blogs – and I think that kind of energy exceeds the Academy. People do not write blogs because they are going to get good Research Assessment Exercise<sup>5</sup> scores. The new Repeater Books, Zed Books, Zero Books, they do a lot of Cultural Studies publishing. They come out as books for seven or eight pounds, which is very different from the 80-pound books that Routledge publish. I think those sorts of things are really interesting to look at. ■

<sup>2</sup>In reference to the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), created in 1964 at the University of Birmingham. The Centre was known for creating the field of Cultural Studies as we know it today. Names such as Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy are closely associated with it.

<sup>3</sup>The Mass Observation Movement is a pioneer research project that has been, as of 1937 and after a twenty-odd-year hiatus between the 1960s and 1970s, collecting voluntary reports on people's everyday lives and opinions across the UK. The archives of the Movement are kept at the University of Sussex, where Professor Highmore teaches.

<sup>4</sup>In reference to the 2018 UK Higher Education Strikes against proposed changes in the pension schemes of university staff. It was taken up in some 64 institutions in the UK, for which it became popularly known as the largest industrial action in British Higher Education.

<sup>5</sup>The RAE is a quinquennial assessment of the quality of research in British Higher Education institutions.

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