

Preface: Uncovering the Potential of Banality

According to the *Cambridge Dictionary*, *banality* is “the quality of being boring, ordinary, and not original.” Gregory Seigworth would add that banality “is temporal succession tipped on its side: making way for the simultaneous and the subjacent.” Similarly, “banality is spatiality arranged (perhaps deranged) in a manner that allows for a plurality of spaces to inhabit any single space” (234). This book addresses the representation of everyday life from a very different perspective than that of the Spanish authors quoted at the beginning. The focus is on literary texts and artistic forms that help uncover the potential of banality, one of the key aspects of the everyday. Lefebvre proposed in 1987:

In modern life, the repetitive gestures tend to mask and crush the cycles. The everyday imposes its monotony. It is the invariable constant of the variations it envelops. The days follow one after another and resemble one another, and yet – here lies the contradiction at the heart of everydayness – everything changes. But the change is programmed: obsolescence is planned. Production anticipates reproduction; production produces change in such a way as to superimpose the impression of speed onto that monotony. Some people cry out against the acceleration of time, others cry out against stagnation. They’re both right. (“The Everyday and Everydayness” 10)

The everyday is a matter of study and observation, particularly from a social sciences perspective, but much less so from the humanities perspective. Other observers have expressed complementary definitions as expressed in the epigraphs of this book. Orson Welles said that reality is “the toothbrush waiting at home for you in its glass, a bus ticket, a paycheck and the grave” (Welles). Agnès Varda in *Daguerréotypes* spoke of the everyday as a theatre: “Au théâtre du quotidien les stars sont:

le pain, le lait, la quincaillerie, la viande, le linge blanc, l'heure juste, le cheveu court et toujours l'accordéon" (In the theatre of everyday life, the stars are: bread, milk, hardware, meat, white linen, the right hour, short hair and always the accordion).¹ And Georges Perec was puzzled about how to find words to explain what we see: "Ce qui se passe chaque jour et qui revient chaque jour, le banal, le quotidien, l'évident, le commun, l'ordinaire, l'infra-ordinaire, le bruit de fond, l'habituel, comment en rendre compte, comment l'interroger, comment le décrire?" (*L'infra-ordinaire* 7; What happens every day and what comes back every day, the banal, the everyday, the obvious, the common, the ordinary, the infra-ordinary, the background noise, the habitual, how do we account for it, how do we question it, how do we describe it?) The novelty of my approach is to explore four major instances of representing the everyday in literature and the arts: routines and disappearances (chapters 1 and 2), observations of the nearby (chapters 3 and 4), the uses of public transportation (chapters 5 and 6), thanatourism (chapter 7), and food (chapters 8 and 9). Thus, the chapters in the book address instances of banality and its potential for generating alternative meaning.

In the first chapter, "Defying or Defining the Everyday: Poetics of Everyday Life," I start with an overview about the search for happiness and its centrality in everyday life. This is followed by a thorough examination of different views into the study of the everyday. Drawing on the work of theorists such as Ben Highmore and Michael Sheringham, which in turn explored the work of Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, Marc Augé, and Siegfried Kracauer, among others, I discuss the studies and concepts that have been useful to construct the study of the everyday mostly from a sociological perspective. I also introduce the notion of alternative cartography. Maps have a significant political, social, and historical value. Digital mapping allows for interaction and rewriting and goes beyond the flaws of Google maps and other such initiatives and helps us – users, readers – to look at the world from a different perspective.

Chapter 2, "Singing the Everyday, Signing or Signalling the World: On Catalogic Poems," starts with an examination of the presence of lists in our everyday, inspired by Umberto Eco's distinction between the "poetics of everything included" and the "poetics of the etcetera" (7). Similar to Proust's use of enumeration to establish relationships and divisions that also have a therapeutic function, this chapter focuses on, among other examples, three poems: Jacques Prévert's "Tentative de description d'un dîner de têtes à Paris-France" (1931; Attempt to describe a dinner of heads in Paris, France); Bob Dylan's "Desolation Row" (1965); and Jaume Sisa's "Qualsevol nit pot sortir el sol" (1975;

Any night the sun may rise). They are interrelated examples based on the list concept and loosely interconnected as all of them elaborate lists of people who can be found in or are related to specific places. The three poems are written against the grain, opposing the mainstream thinking of the day, and are based on enumeration and chaotic cataloguing and with perceptual attention to the everyday: class differences and the monotony and beauty of working (Prévert); claiming a place in which to live (Dylan); and enjoying friendship, celebration, and happiness as post-hippie values based on a magical childlike world (Sisa). The everyday is filled with the unorganized accumulation of objects and beings, and humans feel the unbearable inclination to make sense of it all. These are long catalogic poems that sing the everyday, signalling alternatives to the world and helping us reassess it.

Chapter 3, “Autopsies of Everyday Life,” draws on a definition by Paul Virilio in *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*. He defined *picnolepsy* as the condition of brief lapses in time, momentary absences of consciousness, or, as he puts it, fleeting instances of life escaping. This is a key concept connected to disappearance that I use to analyse three instances of exploration of the everyday, by Josep Carner, Marta Rojals, and Joan Todó, paying special attention to matters of disappearance, particularly of what we may call invisible traditions as recorded in early twentieth- and twenty-first-century literary texts. The three authors combine newspaper articles (in the style of the German *feuilleton* from the 1920s) with their poetry and/or fiction writing. Carner was an ethnographer of the near past. Rojals and Todó can be read as ethnographers of the near present, and the three of them are able to perform an autopsy of the everyday through *picnolepsy*. These writers look at reality from a very different perspective, as a special kind of mortuary investigation. They assemble the materials of an autopsy, treating reality almost as if it were a cadaver or the contents of a special kind of forensic inquisition.

Chapter 4, “Vicent Andrés Estellés’s *Trencadís*, or Attention to the Infra-ordinary,” analyses a crucial aspect in Vicent Andrés Estellés’s poetry, the fact that it is inhabited by an elementary materiality made of objects and sex, food and smells, death and pain. His attention to smallness produces a very characteristic presence of everyday life. Estellés’s poetry has been linked to a kind of social realism, as it was called in the 1960s, and this established a limitation in the way his poetry has been read. Despite the poet’s social commitment, the reading perspective adopted by most critics is limited in scope. In this chapter I propose to read, or reread, Estellés’s poetry not from the limiting eyes of an extremely ideological perspective but rather by emphasizing the poet’s attention to everyday reality. I am especially interested in

paying attention to the smallest aspects of reality that populate Estellés's poetry, particularly death and life, pleasures and pain, and self-reflective writing. This chapter is inspired by considerations of Nuccio Ordine in *L'utilità dell'inutile* (The usefulness of the useless) and Josep M. Esquirol in *La resistència íntima: Assaig d'una filosofia de la proximitat* (Intimate resistance: An essay of a philosophy of proximity), two essays that are extremely useful in discussing the uses of collage and the approach to the everyday experience in the poetry of Estellés.

More than half of the world's population live in urban areas. For human beings living in such an environment, public transportation is a major need, as I discuss in [chapters 5 and 6](#), where I propose a review of two different urban means of transportation: trams and metros that are obsessively present in an urban everyday. [Chapter 5](#), "Churches and Trams," discusses how artists and writers have tried to express the experience of the modern city, its spaces, the clash of simultaneity, and the anonymity provided by public spaces. I argue in some detail the issues represented in a series of texts: the use of trams as a way of travel and trams as objects with a symbolic meaning, based on the juxtaposition of the old and the new; trams as metaphors of the problems and situations that arise in modernity; the sensations and experiences provoked in this modern world, ranging from fear of dizziness, negative attitudes, visceral rejection, or the innocent and candid acceptance of the urban experience; and the tram as an element that synthesizes the contradiction between the random and the systemic that is characteristic of life in the city.

[Chapter 6](#), "Thresholds in Barcelona's Metro," proposes an analysis of Barcelona's metro system following David Pike's threshold concept, key to the topography of the "vertical city." This is done through reading maps and literary texts that illustrate three closely related issues: an interpretation of Barcelona's metro network and its meanings; the disappearance of some metro stations and underground spaces, such as hidden connecting corridors, which create a shallow presence of the past in the present and are examples of urban spaces that are buried and forgotten; and subway life as portrayed in some literary texts with particular emphasis on the use of mythology.

We are what we eat. And eating is a central activity in the everyday. In the final chapters I address issues related to food and death, issues that belong to the field of environmental humanities. [Chapter 7](#), "Forms of Thanatourism: José Pla and Josep M. Espinàs," uses a reflection on a special version of *Fernweh*, the one that brings you to nearby realities which are observed as if they were distant ones. Starting with a discussion of Xavier de Maistre's book *Voyage autour de ma chambre* (1794)

and Almeida Garrett's *Viagens na minha terra* (1846), I propose a way of reading contemporary books of that nature following the approach of Georges Perec's *L'infraordinaire* and Jean-Didier Urbain's *Ethnologue mais pas trop* (Ethnologue but not too much). I analyse the works of two authors that are representative of exploring nearby territories: *Viaje en autobiús* (1941) by Josep Pla and the many examples of "viatge a peu" (travel on foot) by Josep M. Espinàs, focusing on his *Seguint tot l'Ebre amb un primitiu Velosolex* (1961; Following the entire Ebro river with a primitive Velosolex). Both authors agree on a rejection of faster, more modern means of transportation and in their texts amplify a manifesto in favour of slowness. Pla's book expresses a rejection of postwar situations, manifest in a blurred and indirect way against autarky, but at the same time denies progress and speaks out against the dangers of modernity. In doing so, Espinàs and Pla develop an interest in thana-tourism and a fixation on food.

Chapter 8, "Beggars Can't Be Choosers: From Autarky to Globalized Gastronomy in Spain," addresses five different ways in which food speaks to us: Pardo Bazán's post-colonial criticism expressed through food; a surrealist approach in Buñuel's cinema; table manners as discussed by Larra; the shortage of food and the hunger that were an obsessive and persistent reality during the Spanish Civil War and postwar period of the twentieth century; and the recent sophistication and cosmopolitanism of Spanish cuisine due to the transformation of the country by the presence of immigrants. I am interested in highlighting the passage from a culture of survival during the civil war and the Franco regime to one of greater abundance and sophistication with the arrival of democracy. The current recognition of Spain as one of the gastronomic destinations in the world modifies part of a historical and cultural past, which includes the ethnic transformation experienced by Spanish society. From the perspective of food studies, one can examine the relationships of the individual with food and analyse how this connection produces a large amount of information about a society.

The final chapter, "Food and the Everyday in Spain: Immigration and Culinary Renovation," offers a reflection on two interrelated topics: the modification of eating habits in Spain, a key aspect of everyday life, through the presence of an enormous migration movement that started in the 1990s; and the intervention of migrant workers in the food chain, particularly in rural areas with heavy agriculture development such as Lleida and surrounding towns. It bestows a reading of two recent texts (a film and a book) that deal with immigration and food issues. Both *El próximo Oriente* (The Near East) by Fernando Colomo and *La pell de la frontera* (The border's skin) by Francesc Serés offer evidence about the

transformation of contemporary Spain through food. In these texts food is a powerful device of social and physical control and encapsulates some of the many adjustments that have occurred in Spanish society. The kitchen, at home or at the restaurant, as a private or as a public space, becomes a setting to display the fine line between the familiar and the uncanny, between a domestic and thus safe environment and a hostile environment.

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