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Exploring the Infraordinary: a lexicon

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As an anthropologist of everyday life, partly concerned with the increasing prominence of digital technologies in our lives, I was struck by the way Meriel Price describes some of her projects. Staring at the Bin in particular, presented as ‘a collection of minuscule performances in public spaces, events so tiny they appear to be coincidences or strange chance occurrences’. The vocabulary used here immediately called to mind a whole set of notions proposed by anthropologists and sociologists to describe or observe the world, and the ways it is reconfigured by digital technologies. Here they are delivered in the form of short definitions, as my personal frame of interpretation of her work.

Infraordinary

The French term ‘infraordinaire’ (infra-ordinary) coined by Georges Perec designates everyday traits, situations and behaviours that we tend to miss or overlook.¹ The prefix ‘infra-’ refers to what is underneath, ‘what happens every day and recurs every day: the banal, the quotidian, the obvious, the common, the ordinary, the infra-ordinary, the background noise, the habitual’ as he framed it. As a writer, his endeavour was to devise various ways to carefully observe the spatial structures and objects that facilitate our daily existence. For him, it was a way to shake us from our sense of passivity, and question the world we live in without thinking. The various instances of *Staring at the Bin*, as ‘a collection of minuscule performances in public spaces’ act as a thoughtful exploration of Perec’s infraordinary. They exemplify how various kinds of contexts (indoor/outdoor, in motion/still, in the countryside/urban) are made of a multiplicity of signs and moments that we tend to neglect.

Alone together

Alone Together is the title of a book by Sherry Turkle, an American psychologist, who attempted to demonstrate how technology is warping our social lives and our inner ones.² Drawing on a series of cases, the author hypothesises that our increasing reliance on networked objects such as computers and smartphones are irreparably influencing our appreciation of encounters and human relationships. While the book’s arguments are sometimes disputable, the expression “alone together” proposed by Turkle is particularly appropriate. It illustrates the new contemporary phenomenon of being simultaneously caught up in an intense relational exchange at a distance, and

¹ Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces* (London: Penguin Books, 1997).

² Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (Cambridge, MA: Basic Books, 2011).

isolated, without direct contact with people in the surrounding environment. The use of mobile phones in public contexts, such as cafés or public transport, with its peculiar and tiny juggling, is a common example of such a situation.

Breaching experiment

Grasping various dimensions of social norms, rules and sanctions in any society is a common goal for sociologists. Erving Goffman for instance, explored how public behaviour in public places, as described by the sociologist follows a certain social order. An order in which individuals in a situation of co-presence perceive each other and act reciprocally in relation to each other.³ Queuing in a shop without making any mistakes, standing in a lift, or talking to strangers in the street are all based on the respect of more or less implicit rules. One of the ways in which social scientists have explored these behaviours has been to carry out *breaching experiments*. This term coined by Harold Garfinkel refers to investigations that seek to highlight generally accepted social rules or norms by disrupting everyday activities.⁴ Examining people's reactions to the violations of modern daily routines undertaken by the observers – 'bewilderment, consternation, and confusion [...] anxiety, shame, guilt, and indignation' – enabled them to 'detect some expectancies that lend commonplace scenes their familiar, life-as-usual character, and to relate these to the stable social structures of mundane activities'.⁵ Presented as 'disturbances in the rhythm of the day', which 'force a pause for thought' and 'an opportunity to reinterpret the everyday routines of urban life', Meriel Price's performances can be seen as a gentle form of breaching, also revealing the general aesthetic of everyday life's choreography.

Code/space

'Code/space' is a concept proposed by geographers Rob Kitchin and Martin Dodge that designates spaces that could not function without their software systems.⁶ Computerised checkout machines at grocery stores, airport check-in counters, QR codes scanning employed for accessing public spaces in the time of COVID illustrate such mutual dependency between code and the production of space. Living in code/space means that we have to use various machines while it was not the case before, and adopt new kinds of behaviour: new gestures: presenting our digital fingerprints or face to recognition systems, waving a smartphone at a camera, setting up one's phone for GPS navigation, etc. Code/spaces are increasingly pervasive in everyday life, with diverse consequences. If the software associated with these spaces crashes, the daily practice that relies on it likewise collapses. Groceries cannot be paid, and airport lobbies get crowded. Even more strikingly, the deployment of this mode of

³ Erving Goffman, *Behavior in Public Places: Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings* (The Free Press, 1963).

⁴ Harold Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁶ Martin Dodge and Rob Kitchin, *Code/Space: Software and Everyday Life* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011).

operation changes our relationship to the world. A shift that Kitchin and Dodge describe as 'transductive', since every component of our daily lives becomes dependent on software, or on the correct respect of parameters chosen by a technological company; which corresponds to a risk that every part of our daily lives will be both monitored and governed by this mode of operation. While Meriel Price's work is not strictly focused on the digital underpinning of our daily lives, the 'interruptions' represented in some of her video pieces can be seen as random occurrences that may interfere in how our increasingly digital lives are designed.

Curious rituals

The term 'Curious Rituals' refer to my own anthropological work about the new gestures and postures that became apparent in our digital everyday in the last decades: the selfie performed with a smartphone, the swiping of a wallet with RFID cards in public transport, the recalibration of a smartphone doing an horizontal 8 sign with the hand, etc.⁷ Such habits look 'curious' as they appear different than previous ways of holding objects and behaving. They slowly shift from being odd to becoming quite mundane and unnoticed. For this reason, these tiny gestures can be seen as ingredients with which technological objects are domesticated by people and integrated into their own daily routines. Fixing strategies, nervous tics, device juggling or courtesy postures, to name just a few, are not only peculiar interaction habits, they reveal how people normalise what used to be 'futuristic technologies' or what seemed magical and complex at first. They illustrate how our bodies adapt to such devices, and they highlight the ingenuity users employ to repurpose and adapt digital technologies to their own context. Meriel Price's work subtly depicts such curious rituals and intriguing gestural ballets, raising awareness of their existence, and the way they characterise urban spaces.

Surveillance

In everyday parlance, the term surveillance refers to the hidden observation of someone's private life and actions, using various means of actions ranging from human observers to recent electronics devices. As shown by various philosophers such as Michel Foucault or Gilles Deleuze,⁸ monitoring people is an act of control, a disciplinary take on their body and subjectivity, with a certain degree of asymmetry – as the person observed is not fully aware of being watched. While the ambient monitoring that everyone engages in as a routine activity of everyday life count as a limited form of surveillance (as attested by Erving Goffman's work), the more systematic intrusion enabled by digital technologies is certainly different. In recent years, digital media have given an unprecedented form to surveillance devices, endowing them with efficiency, a multiplicity of fields of application, and omnipresence – to the point

⁷ Nicolas Nova, Katie Miyake, Nancy Kwon, and Walt Chiu, *Curious Rituals: Gestural Interaction in the Digital Everyday* (Venice, CA: NFL Press, 2012).

⁸ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Random House, 1977); Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on Control Societies." *Negotiations, 1972-1990* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

of significantly modifying our relationship to the world and to reality. These two forms of surveillance can nonetheless be understood as two poles of a continuum, on which a range of modalities for directing attention can be found. These range from maintaining social order in everyday human interactions to monitoring individual activities for state or commercial reasons. Price's performance videos illustrate various steps in such a continuum, revealing the extent to which human beings direct their attention to one another with more or less conspicuous means – from a quick glance to the deployment of complex networked technologies such as smartphones.