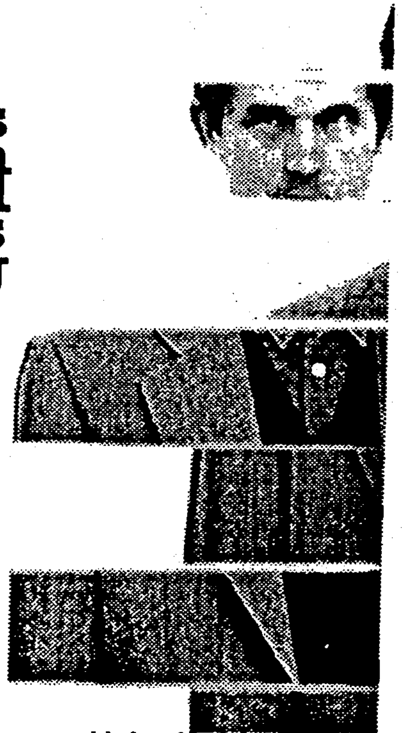
everyday life is always somewhere else

through the writings of both a french cultural critic and gen x guru douglas coupland, greg seigworth discovered that everyday life is more than reruns and cold pizza.



graphic by al palaima

When French cultural critic and philosopher Henri Lefebvre died in 1991 at age 90, he left behind an impressive body of work (more than sixty books) and an incredible life-history. Some of Lefebvre's most enduring ideas can be found in the three books—written in 1947, 1962, and 1968—that he composed on 'everyday life.'

At first, it hardly seems earth-shaking. Everyday life: everybody knows what that is right? Except that the kind of repetitive, mundane activities—like working at a job or sitting in a class, grocery shopping, meeting friends on Fridays for beer or coffee, et cetera—which you and I might think would count as our 'everyday lives' Lefebvre chose to call 'daily living.' Life-as-we-experience-it, Lefebvre argued, really falls into these two distinct categories: daily life and everyday life.

Daily life offers up the routine items—usually comforting and often banal—of our existence. This would include all of our regular, embodied day-to-day actions and predictable responses to the world around us: particularly as these actions and reactions are provoked, channeled, dissipated, modified or, most usually, as these acts are *reproduced* in institutions like the factory, the school, the media, the corner nightclub, or the family.

Meanwhile, everyday life takes place in *the space between* our selves and society's institutions: in the commute to work, in daydreaming at our desks, in the sudden or unexpected break from the routine, in doing a favor for someone, in elaborate fantasies of revenge or heroism, in the rapture of love or throes of loss ...

In sum, daily life is directly accessible to our conscious minds (for example, we can call up a mental list of all the tasks we have to complete today) and it is institutional (there are a series of generic, socially recognizable sites where these tasks need to be accomplished). Daily life carries a certain weight and a certain level of ease; think of how heavy it sometimes feels to drag yourself out of bed to start another day or how reassuring regular Sunday breakfasts with friends or family can be.

Everyday life, however, is not the simple flipside of daily life. Lefebvre rejected any argument that reduced 'everyday life' to a catalog of how our *unconscious* slips into our day-to-day behavior. Rather, everyday life dissolves daily life from *within* its own widely awakened reality. Example: stop and consider those times when, for a brief moment, in the midst of a daydream or in the car singing along with a favorite song you slip free of the gravitational pull of the day-to-day and you are somewhere else.

Or, more exactly, you are no place. ('No place' is the Greek version of *utopia*: 'ou' = not + 'topos' = place). If you could somehow link up the fleeting but revelatory moments of the everyday, you'd might find the means to permanently transform yourself and your surroundings. Uncover a 'theory of moments' and Lefebvre firmly believed that you'd spark a revolution.

Why is that? Because it isn't the everyday that erupts, as 'moments,' into the steady stream of daily life. Rather, the stuff of everyday life already makes up the vast majority of our waking lives. Daily life fits over everyday-ness in the same way that a waffle-iron molds batter. In the end, the *form* taken by our lives may be shaped by our daily routines but the real *substance* of life is found in the everyday.

This may seem a roundabout way to get to Douglas Coupland's latest novel, *Life After God*, but that's what provoked these thoughts on Lefebvre and everyday life. Coupland is best known as the author of *Generation X*: a work of fiction that's ultimately too smart for its own good. *Gen X* is a book that speaks *of* a generation but not always *to* it. More precisely, it is the *way* that Coupland's characters speak—with a non-stop ironic detachment (accurate though it may be)—that blocks almost any chance of real identification or emotional involvement with his readers. There are, however, just enough moments of truth with a small 't' and ambushes of affection in *Generation X* to make it something more than sociology masquerading as fiction.

And more often than not, these moments of truth arrive when his Gen Xers temporarily suspend their disaffected relationships to return home to the bosom of their families: bosoms that aren't necessarily 'clung to' in the fuzzy, nostalgic sense of hearth and home but, instead, 'clung to' in the way that a life preserver saves one from drowning. Apparently, there's something about the internal workings of the family that eliminates irony as an interpersonal defense mechanism (and you don't need me or Michael Stipe to tell you that irony is the shackles of youth: especially post-Boomer youth). Perhaps that's why—when the ironic shackles have been shed—Coupland's depictions of Xer family life nearly always resonate like crazy.

With *Life After God*, Coupland has written a series of unconnected short stories that succeeds most of the time because, with its dimly autobiographical air of reminiscence, it never strays too far from home. The chapter that stands out, in this respect, is 'Patty Hearst.' At heart, it's the story of one young man's search for his older sister, Laurie: a woman who wanted to lose herself in a larger-than-life identity (and escape a middle-class culture that was shaping her in much the same way that a waffle-iron shapes batter) and did. She's been gone for five years.

The young man, known only as 'Louie,' finds out from a friend that Laurie may be working at a ski resort convenience store a couple of hours away. Leaving work early, Louie starts off on his trek. The rest of the story is basically his journey up the mountain to see if it is truly his sister (though there's a definite resemblance, it isn't) and, then, Louie's return-journey. During the trip, Louie's day-to-day life fades into the background as it is consumed by his remembrance of lost

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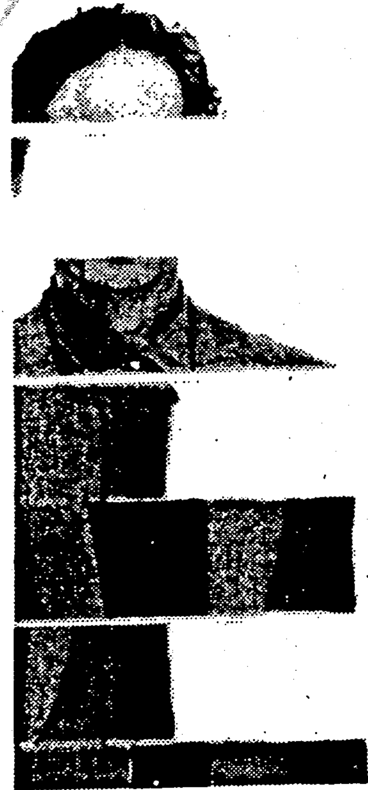

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times with Laurie and his projected fantasies of some future brother-sister reunion (which remains, of course, a daydream deferred).

On the way back home, Louie discovers his own 'theory of moments.' As he drives, Louie thinks about how 'every day each of us experiences a few little moments that have just a bit more resonance than other moments—we hear a word that sticks in our mind—or maybe we have a small experience that pulls us out of ourselves, if only briefly—we share a hotel elevator with a bride in her veils, say, or a stranger gives us a piece of bread to feed to the mallard ducks in the lagoon; a small child starts a conversation with us in a Dairy Queen . . .

'And if we were to collect these small moments in a notebook and save them over a period of months we would see certain trends emerge from our collection—certain voices would emerge that have been trying to speak through us. We would realize that we have been living another life altogether, one we didn't even know was going on inside us. And maybe this *other* life is more important than the one we think of as being real—this clunky day-to-day world of furniture and noise and metal. So just *maybe* it is these small silent moments which are the true story-making events of our lives.'

This *other* life made of moments is what Lefebvre meant by 'the everyday.' And Louie can't help but entertain the thought that, by gaining access to it, he'll find 'that last little moment [with Laurie] that ties it all together.' Failing at this, he's left to construct banal scenarios where Laurie is back in his 'clunky day-to-day world'; he wonders about her hairstyle, her friends, what she had for lunch ...

But there's more going on here than the happy coincidence of one smart alec's generational musings and the theories of a French philosopher old enough to have been his great grandfather. The best 'moments' of Coupland's fiction and Lefebvre's theory also hint at something else: namely that every generation gets a chance to reshape one or more of the institutional locales that has come to define its zone of comfort and routine. Inevitably over the lifespan of a generation, one or another of its previously *secure* sites of daily life wobbles out of place and enters the realm of collective tragedy/fantasy. Once within this realm, this site becomes subject to momentary re-imaginings. For a brief period of time, everyday moments swallow up day-to-day activities.

This is what happens—on an immediately personal level—to Louie. When Laurie vanishes, a dependable site of interaction evaporates and Louie is left to wonder, over and over, where it went so wrong (tragedy) and how it might be resolved (fantasy). And a similar process occurs, at different times and in different places, across our culture as a whole. Lefebvre's generation, for example, got caught up in the heady rush of mass modernization and the struggles of the individual to retain some identity; the workplace or factory was their key place of momentary instability. The actions taken by that generation helped to determine how this wobbly site got sutured back into daily life. The baby-boom generation had to reconcile politics and pleasure. Universities and schools became their prime site for conflict and redefinition. And for the generation of Xers, the one institution that seems to be the most up for grabs is the 'family.' How the family (whatever it turns out to be) gets restitched into the economy of the day-to-day will be one of the key ideological struggles as we pass into the next century.

What should count as a 'family?' It might be surprising to find out that the-family-as-we-presently-think-of-it is a fairly recent invention. Our current notion of family began in the mid-nineteenth century when early capitalist production caused the break-up of traditional kinship groups (with a broader conception of family) and set up shop around smaller and more malleable economic units: dad as worker/producer, mom as homemaker/consumer, and children as future cogs. The family became an increasingly private domain and, because it is attached to capitalism at the hip, the idea of the family as a home, a household, or—to put it bluntly—another form of property was also intensified (the Baby Jessica court battle is one of the most visible illustrations of this evolution: children-as-property).

The typical 'family-values' rhetoric dovetails neatly into both of these contemporary attributes of the family. It appeals to the market-value of the family-as-capitalist-bedrock (stronger families mean a healthier economy) but, equally important, this 'values' rhetoric preempts more tangible forms of social action and shared responsibility by arguing that the family must somehow discover the cure for its ills within its own private realm (why offer public assistance when what we have is really a spiritual malaise or a severe lapse of morals?).

But perhaps the most damning aspect of the 'values' answer to the family question is its cynicism. Unlike Gen X-brand irony which acts as a self-defensive buffer (and turns into a means of shackling one's self), the cynicism of the 'family values' coalition is brandished like an offensive weapon. It is a means for shackling everyone else ... with an ironclad vision of what the family-was-in-the-beginning and which it now-and-forever-shall-be. When the current state of the family is viewed as a collective tragedy, it becomes a thing to be restored and preserved *once and for all.* But if you choose, instead, to perceive this moment as an opportunity for re-imagining and fantasizing (as a time to consider how 'what could be' can lead us from 'what is'), then the family becomes a site for continuous revision and expansion.

One of the ways that this generation might transform itself and its surroundings is by creating the space for a new dialogue on the family. It needs to forego the cynicism that restricts what counts as a family to what's always counted: the kind of cynicism that says 'no' to single mothers, gays, illegal immigrants and their children, the homeless, etc. It needs to swim against the tide that threatens to make the family evermore insular and, hence, increasingly diminished in political power (what would it mean to count the above-mentioned groups not only as families in their own right but also to fight for them as part of *your* family?). It needs to detach family-values from market-values; families don't belong on a balance sheet that evaluates them in terms of cost-effectiveness, profit, and loss.

But, first, the debate over the family will require that this generation discard some small portion of its ironic relation to the world. To live ironically is to live in the day-to-day, to dull the impact of everyday moments, to live alongside one's time but not in it. In order to connect up a theory of moments and draw a new line through time, one must risk falling into the world itself. One of America's great pop music ironists, David Byrne, did this very thing in a song called 'This Must Be the Place (Naive Melody).' Dropping his usual ironic intonation, Byrne sings about trying to find a home and discovers—midway through the song—that he's already there. He sings: 'When you're standing here beside me / I love the passing of time / Never for money / Always for love.'

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