The Critique of Everyday Life and Cultural Democracy

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John Roberts, *Philosophizing the Everyday: Revolutionary Practice and the Fate of Cultural Theory,* (Pluto Press, 2006).

Wither Cultural Democracy?

An important study of the possibilities for cultural democracy has arrived in our midst. In his noteworthy short book, *Philosophizing the Everyday*, John Roberts pins down with all the forcible precision of a nail gun sixty years of critical theorising between 1917 and 1975 about everyday life and a conflicted reality.

Against the triumph of the 'creative consumer' and the inflation of representational politics in cultural studies, Roberts returns us to questions of political agency, technological possibilities and a critical hermeneutics of the everyday. His premise is the recovery of a tradition of thought from Marx, Georg Lukacs, Walter Benjamin, Antonio Gramsci and Henri Lefebvre. For them, trivial objects like commodities and everyday banality conceal complex and contradictory realities. They broke with the pragmatic conception of an empirically given 'reality' and advanced a 'philosophy of praxis' to emphasise the ways that self-conscious practical activity mutually transforms both the world and people active in it.

From this side of critical hermeneutics, cultural technologies like film and photography disclose meanings routinely obscured by everyday life. A hermeneutic requirement to interpret submerged meanings in concrete objects prevents any straightforward assimilation of cultural objects directly into immediate political practices or theoretical systems. Instead, it requires getting close to the object at hand in order to learn from it. Intimate attention to the trivial and the banal opens up a critique of everyday life, a critique, that Roberts argues, furthers utopian possibilities by conjoining them with the real.

By adopting a lofty disdain for the everyday as the realm of 'inauthentic' triviality, philosophers neglected to notice that everyday life is lived as a series of knotty entanglements rather than a uniform zone of conformism, boredom and tedium. Everyday life conceals a secret that eludes weighty philosophical categories and systems. It produces an excess, a surplus – what Robert's main interlocutor Henri Lefebvre called 'a trace and a remainder' – lying behind or standing beyond whatever conceptual system is raised to enclose it or, more usually, to bracket it out. The everyday possesses its own double helix of banality and boredom and, at the other edge, something left over in the possibility of breaking out of taken-for-granted routines and habits.

Roberts registers the contradictions of everyday life as unending struggle against suffocating conformism. Cultural politics can only be re-energised by restoring the philosophy of praxis to the everyday, to re-load culture with a transformatory, democratic and, above all, political charge. That this is no easy matter is not simply down to the fetishistic collusion of cultural mediators with commodified consumption. The revolutionary content that Roberts looks to is contained in the largely forgotten world of what was once called 'cultural bolshevism'. At the post-revolutionary moment the collision between western Marxism, modernity and the avant-garde responded to and helped define post-Romantic cultural democracy.

But, a sincere cultural mediator might object, cultural democracy has surely been placed off the agenda, at least for the time being, by a triumphant neoliberalism. Yet, here again, things are not so simple. Once the hidden surplus of the everyday and the source of its production are considered, culture is already being reconnected with politics, even behind the backs of the category-mongers. This has nothing to do with the vacuous forms of cultural democracy where governing elites pretend to be up-to-date and cultural mediators tackle 'social exclusion' by re-branding their merchandise as 'entertaining' and not too challenging either politically or artistically.

There are precursors here, perhaps the greatest being *The Salaried Masses*, Siegfried Kracauer's study of the culture of white collar workers in 1920s Berlin. In his review of Kracauer's stunning essay, Walter Benjamin saw it as 'a landmark on the road to the politicisation of the intelligentsia'. Benjamin might have been talking about today's cultural mediators when, taking his cue from Kracauer, he described reportage and *die neue Sachlichkeit* (the new objectivity) as 'the radical fashion-products of the latest school' who exhibit 'a horror of theory and knowledge that recommends them to the sensation-seeking of snobs'.[1]

Everyday People

Roberts trawls the wide expanse of this more activist sense of everyday life. He pulls out freshly wriggling bait on which to hook a democratic cultural politics for today. In the course of this, Walter Benjamin is placed at the crossroads of clashing perspectives on the relationship between culture and the everyday.

One side is represented by the functionalist approach to cultural form of the Productivists and Constructivists in revolutionary Russia. Productivists embraced industrial technology as a means to liberate labour, rather than subordinate it under bureaucratic managerial regimes of control and domination. Some Productivists like Aratov even saw in the democratic control of industrial technology the utopian dissolution of art into everyday life.

On the other side, Georg Lukacs identified the domination of culture by the objective force of commodity fetishism, through what he called 'reification'. Reification was understood by Lukacs as an objective relationship rather than a subjective or random feeling of alienation. Reified reality could only ever be overcome, Lukacs concluded, when workers rose to the level of class consciousness ascribed to them in advance by the revolutionary Party.

Both the functional folding of art into everyday life and the bracketing out of everyday life as the reified site of commodity fetishism posit the relationship between culture and everyday life in a rather schematic, one dimensional way. While Benjamin learned from each he felicitously refused to endorse either. This enabled him to produce a more expansive vision of the everyday. At the same time, by the 1930s, his was also a more catastrophic vision, with Fascism, Stalinism, and warfare trampling everyday life underfoot.

Despite the straightening of the everyday under such conditions, the new cultural technologies of photography and film helped to recover the trauma of catastrophe of the everyday. In an enlarged and heightened form, photography and film unintentionally brought images forward for critical examination and visceral response, what Benjamin called the 'optical unconsciousness', of what would otherwise escape or be denied in the new authoritarian everyday.

Benjamin has enjoyed an after-life in the western academy. In part this is a career-strategy to help authorise the de-politicisation of an ever-new/ever-the-same culture industry and its study through an appeal to a tragic hero who may have been naively political (Benjamin committed suicide while fleeing the Nazis). Thankfully, Benjamin's political gutting, especially of his

'naïve' Marxism, by cultural mediators has begun to be reversed by the work of more recent critical thinkers like Terry Eagleton, David McNally and Esther Leslie.[2] Roberts continues and deepens the excavation work previously done in this rich seam by relating Benjamin to an even more deeply submerged figure, at least for cultural politics, that of Henri Lefebvre.[3]

Dadaist Taxi Driver and Critic of Everyday Life

Lefebvre's life spanned the turbulent events of the twentieth century. Born in 1901 and dying ninety years later, he became radicalised as the bloody carnage of the First World War opened up. He joined the French Communist Party (PFC) in 1928. Inside the PFC he fitted rather awkwardly with its thoroughgoing Stalinism, finally leaving in 1958, as he put it, 'from the left', though drifting back towards it in the 1980s (presumably 'to the right').

Like so many of his generation, he stuck with the Stalinoid PFC even after it had shown itself repeatedly to be politically and intellectually bankrupt. It lived for a time on the moral authority it pilfered from the October revolution. No party hack, Lefebvre fought in the Resistance, drove a taxi – 'that really was a laugh'[4] – worked in a factory and became a teacher.

Although employed in post-war France as a sociologist, Lefebvre was never a conventional academic. He associated with the Modernist avant-garde, falling in with first Tristan Tzara and Andre Breton of the Surrealists and, later, Guy Debord and the Situationists. Needless to say, both relationships ended tempestuously, with the Situationists ironically denouncing Lefebvre for plagiarism!

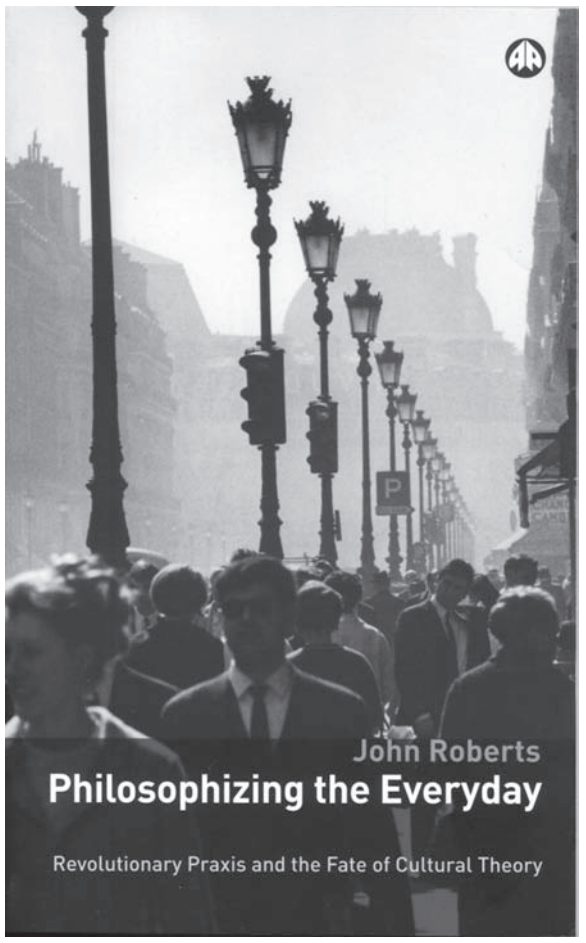
All in all, Lefebvre's critique of everyday life covers the three numbered volumes bearing that title, appearing between 1947 and 1981, as well as *Everyday Life in the Modern World* in 1971 and *Rhythmanalysis* in the mid-1980s.[5] The first volume is marked by the optimism that everyday life could be radically changed in the first flushes of euphoria following the Liberation of Paris. Later volumes cover the transition and limits to consumer capitalism.

Lefebvre does not celebrate everyday life, banality or 'ordinariness' in their own terms. *Critique* for Lefebvre means identifying the possibilities that are present in everyday life rather than simply confirming as unalterable what already appears to exist. In this interventionist sense, 'critique derives not from theory but from praxis'.[6] Unlike praxis, a purely empirical consciousness isolates the shards of life in the form of commodities and money, sundering them from historical and dialectical relationship to society's development. Such fetishism and utilitarianism are the very hallmark of everyday life.

Praxis has both a repetitive side and a creative side which are brought together in everyday life. Repetition across time and habit typify the subject in everyday life as an absent-minded one. Repetition is only alienating under certain conditions. Unmindful repetition and habit do not return to exactly their starting subjects. They also contain discontinuities and differences through moments of disruption, or presence.

A simple definition of everyday life would limit it to an isolated, immutable chunk of reality or abstractly substitute the part for the whole. 'Sometimes the everyday appears to be the sole reality, the reality of realists, dense, weighty and solid. At other times it seems that its weight is artificial, that its denseness is insubstantial: unreality incarnate'.[7] Both aspects one-sidedly hinder the effort to identify and act on the inner movement of everyday life. This involves uncovering what is not yet fully realised but can become possible, converting what is 'virtually' present into an 'actuality'.

So the everyday is something less than totality,



society in its entirety, and something more than any isolated practice like work, culture, leisure, domesticity, technology, consumption, and so on. Lefebvre calls it a *level* since the everyday mediates between the whole of society and the varied fragments of life.[8] At this level, material necessity in the form of social and natural needs and desires enter into perpetual conflict with the alienated means for satisfying them.

Against the 'positive' endorsements of and collusions with immediate reality, Lefebvre adopted Adorno's 'negative dialectic' as the critical moment in praxis.[9] Because it is dialectical Lefebvre's appeal to negation avoids falling into the 'gaping world' of nihilism in the absolute fetishisation of nothingness.[10] But something like nihilism was becoming a governing principle of consumer capitalism. Lefebvre argued that everyday life was increasingly degraded by the penetration of technological objects into every nook and cranny of existence, even personal intimacy.

The Society of Programmed Consumption

In the course of the past half century everyday life was 're-privatised', Lefebvre claimed, not least because of the waning of transformatory possibilities of the Liberation and, later, 1968. Needs were met by an industrial apparatus whose focus was the privatised family and the individual subject. Technology developed apace, relieved many tedious and time consuming tasks and created new needs in its users. But this liberation from one form of tedium only exposed the vacuum at the heart of capitalist modernity. Instead of being lived in its full dramatic possibilities it reduced living to a mere 'life-style' that simply papers over the constant return of banality, tedium and monotony.[11]

Where current cultural theory sees ambiguity as one of its most priceless discoveries, Lefebvre was already on its trail in everyday life, not to celebrate it but to reveal how it stifled and blunted contradictions. Even before the revival of feminism in the 1960s Lefebvre was alive to the specific ways that women within and outside the home were ensnared in the ambiguities of everyday life. Lefebvre argues that since women have to live ambiguously with contradictions and moral hypocrisy, they represent the 'active critique' of everyday life.[12] In women's 'romantic' magazines Lefebvre finds represented the ambiguity of everyday life in the mixing up of the banal with the imaginary. Such ambiguity in practice offered a mutual critique and a mutual support for both aspects. Any attempt to isolate the 'feminine condition' from the analysis of totality ran the risk of creating a metaphysical, occult object out of 'the feminine', a risk that became more apparent with later idealist currents in feminism.[13]

Post-war capitalism evolved into what Lefebvre described as a society programmed for controlled consumption. In the process, a further layer of alienation from the practical, sensuous social self is encrusted onto everyday life. It functions like a closed circuit of 'production-consumption-production', creating atoms of (dis)contented consumers being sold happiness for their enjoyment alone. This is bolstered by a specialised social science now complicit with the organisation of programmed leisure and domesticity.

Town planning, for Lefebvre, shows the shortcomings of a programmatic theory that aggressively identifies its own abstract representations with the real. It leaves no space for play, whose open-ended principles cannot be accommodated by the overweening seriousness and gravitas of the isolated specialisation of professionals: 'every town planning scheme conceals a programme for everyday life'.[14] Today this programme is replayed up and down the country in the planning for 'defensive space', an elaborate security apparatus and remoralised proletarians. Everyday life is thoroughly calculated in terms of functional efficiency and the lowest cost of construction and maintenance and, above all, accumulation. It is life stripped down to basic needs and no more.

Everywhere signals dictate to consumers how to adapt to this life. When traffic comes to dominate the city, the points of transition – the street, the café or the station – become more absorbing than the houses people live in. All the fetishised marvels placed in shop windows or in the rows of superstores express unfulfilled desires. In contrast to this splendour, working class estates express the repetitive functions of labour that put such wondrous things into circulation.[15]

Privatisation and privation are intimately related conditions. In private life at least some mutual recognition of our existence is possible, especially where it is denied elsewhere by 'an overcomplex social reality which oscillates between innuendo and brutal explicitness'.[16] Both 'innuendo and brutal explicitness' are played out in the mass media's fixation with celebrity, a symptom of the deep sickness of alienated living. Television can take anything at all, including the most trivial episodes and dull personalities, and manage to play their anodyne familiarity back repeatedly as something to fill in the gaps.

For Lefebvre, this unmediated repetition of the identical, 'the everyday recorded as the everyday – the event grasped, pulverised and transmitted as rapidly as light and consciousness' was 'still a long way away'. But what he could not contemplate in 1961 has now been perfected:

> It would be a closed circuit, a circuit from hell, a perfect circle in which the absence of communication and communication pushed to the point of paroxysm would meet and their identities would merge. But it will never come full circle. There will always be something new and unforeseen if only in terms of sheer horror.[17]

Unfortunately, we have since seen both the 'circuit of hell' replayed in countless reality TV shows and the 'unforeseen sheer horror' broadcasts of state and private terror.

The Irreducible Remainder

However, social programming does not represent a completely closed circuit. Something 'irreducible' – desire, love, reason, play, rest, poetry, justice, the city – escapes programming. Outside of a social crisis, people learn to ignore fundamental and contentious problems and issues by resorting to conventional banalities, pieties and pleasantries. So long as taking sides is not made a pressing issue contradictions are evaded or wished away by the ambiguities of everyday life. Everyday discourses, where trivia is exchanged about the

weather, family, friends, workmates, neighbours, bus timetables, the price of things, are conventions that express a longing for social intercourse and dialogue. At moments of crisis the irreducible forces its way to the forefront of consciousness.

The circuit does not constitute a finished system but contains 'irreducible remainders', constantly active as a reflective process in the search for self-knowledge. Discontinuous 'moments' are experienced intensely as limited in duration, punctuating taken-for-granted routines through the defence of irony and the mad euphoric moments of breakout like festivals, carnivals, and revolution, from the Paris Commune to 1968. These activate the possibilities of the everyday as a discrete moment of self-identity in time and space. Such moments leave their 'trace' as the mark of the event that temporarily broke with habit and repetition.

Programmatic realism purifies space and leads to cultural stasis and so, paradoxically, it needs what it disowns – the practical, active, sensuous side of reality. In contrast to stultifying theory, dysfunctional disruptions create, innovate and transform. Hence the idea of a programmed 'creative industry' would be anathema to Lefebvre who claimed that the public sphere is already corralled by the programmed society to further inhibit democratic, collective demands.

Alienation therefore does not have it all its own way; the world of things must confront the class-ridden human content of everyday life. The content of everyday life always eludes complete capture by formal structures of institutions, ideologies, culture, art and language. For Lefebvre this excess becomes available as 'a moment of presence'.

Yet there is a sense in which the 'moment of presence' can be hyper-inflated and in other ways utterly trivialised. Roberts dates the decline of the inflationary moment of presence from around 1975. At that point the upswing of industrial militancy gradually came to a halt and a new micro-politics of self-representation supplanted the philosophy of praxis. For all his emphasis on the narratives of subalterns and the 'tactics of the weak', Michel de Certeau's work on the everyday emptied out larger political questions of democracy and the state.[18] Worse was to follow with postmodernism as the modalities of the insignificant and the banal became infinitely preferable to the harsh judgements of active political critique. Hermeneutics was broken from critical praxis and dissolved into facile interpretative strategies of smart-assed consumption. Crisis-ridden neoliberalism left theories of the cultural economy dicing-up superfluities as it stumbled chaotically onwards.

Punk Marxism

As late as the 1940s Lefebvre could still acknowledge that the uneven development of capitalism in France meant that many areas of life were not yet subjugated fully to its priorities. Family life and rural festivals preserved their own 'cyclical' rhythms. These stood apart from the capitalist production of an everyday life based on 'linear time' in the endless growth of mechanically-organised time and the accumulation of commodities. But by the 1980s even the round face of the wristwatch had given way to the numbered clock faces. Today, digital technologies bear down upon cyclical time to install linear, literally 'online' time, as an over-riding priority. Cellular phones and handheld electronic gadgets, as Andy Merrifield put it, are swamping cyclical time and filling in 'free time' more completely without the promised liberation from the 'compulsory time' of waged work:

> The gadget has permeated new millennium daily life, filled in the unproductive pores of the working day, created human personalities permanently online, addictively tuned in, programmed to perform, and terrified to log off.[19]

Public space begins to resemble an open-planned office, where the banal routines of productive subjects network in a frontal display of busy-ness.

Yet cyclical time, based as it is on material processes of planetary, biological and physiological life, cannot be readily eliminated by the linear time of capital accumulation and digital technology. Subordination to linear time is necessarily incomplete. We need to rest and enjoy inactivity from time to time. Moreover, we also stretch periodically against repetitive time. Lefebvre makes a special point of identifying discontinuous 'moments of presence'. These intensified points are reached when the contradiction between cyclical time and linear time approaches breaking point. Roberts might have pushed the musical analogy with rhythmical time further and noted, as Greil Marcus did in his book *Lipstick Traces* (where he paints Lefebve as some kind of a Punk Marxist), those moments of presence that erupted with the first flushes of punk.

Like music, circadian rhythms rise from their depths to reveal the possible within the real of linear time. Out of the real emerges the 'virtual', a possibility that requires practical action against the inadequacy of existing reality. For Lefebvre, only by connecting with everyday life can praxis open space for de-alienated existence as grounded transparently in mutual recognition of social relations. On the other hand, there is no pure, unmediated 'authentic' life already waiting to be unveiled. Instead, there is a living struggle to realise the possibilities contained in the contradiction between the repetition and routine of a banal everyday life and the rupture and contingency of the moment of exceptional events.

Functional dysfunctions

In shifting the argument from a narrow concern with aesthetics and the politics of representation to one of critical practice, Roberts' invocation of Lefebvre performs an important service against the inanities of de-historicised cultural mediators immersed in the permanent present. This doesn't mean that cultural democracy will fall from the branches of neoliberalism like a gift. Nor does it mean that the solutions are already there in Lefebvre's work. His approach to the everyday changed as both the everyday changed and ideas about it changed. At the risk of over-simplifying, Roberts identifies a number of lacunae in Lefebvre as recurring problems for any sense of cultural democracy based on a philosophy of praxis.

First, while he may restore a sense of agency, intervention, commitment and politics, Lefebvre could be notoriously inconsistent. For instance, he struggled to formulate an aesthetic theory that placed consciousness rather than praxis at the heart of cultural democracy. He also became ambivalent about the role of the working class in the 'new realism' and social change more generally.[20] In contrast to Lefebvre's uneven emphasis on consciousness, Roberts returns to that other disgraceful figure, Karl Marx, and his emphasis on 'the rich, living, sensuous concrete activity of self-objectification' as emerging through the living tradition of social groups.

Second, Lefebvre took up a problematic relationship to technology. Because capitalist social relations fail to realise the possibilities inherent in technology, everyday life remained underdeveloped. Here 'a backward everyday life would coexist with a highly developed technology'.[21] Even the most advanced forms of communications technology can be used to shore up the most archaic forms of moral and social life.[22] Such instances for Lefebvre would diagnose a reality one-sidedly colonised by technology rather than interrogating the contradictory nature of technology and everyday life. More enamoured by the legacy of Romantic culture, Lefebvre lacked Benjamin's grasp of the enervating possibilities in socio-technical relations.

Third, Lefebvre overstates the unmediated absolute moment of spontaneity and festivity, and tends to neglect the mediating role played by technology, collective organisation, and the labouring body. Here the danger identified by Roberts is that of fetishising affective spontaneity in 'moments of presence', where 'festivity becomes the tyranny of the spontaneous particular in some hideous compulsion to enjoy'.[23] Lefebvre, like the Situationists, was prone to short-circuit the 'moment' (the 'situation') as the euphoric point of clarity and self-knowledge. This can lead to two dead-ends. On the one hand, in the aftermath of 1968 it became clear that something like a theory of moments/situations could produce disastrous forms of voluntarism like the Red Brigades. On the other hand, as I have stressed, cultural democracy came to be equated with the 'creative consumer' cleverly reinterpreting commercial culture in localised settings.

Still Roberts is rightly generous to Lefebvre. A continuous thread in Lefebvre is the struggle to open-up the possible, to realise the possibilities in a new actuality, to reinstate the necessity for a philosophy of praxis as the basis for cultural democracy: 'Whatever is produced or constructed in the superior realms of social practice must demonstrate its reality in the everyday, whether it be art, philosophy or politics'.[24] All must be returned back to everyday life with the aim of transforming it. As Lefebvre put it: 'Utopia today is the possible of tomorrow'.[25]

Notes

1 Walter Benjamin, 'An outsider attracts attention- on the *Salaried Masses* by S. Kracauer', in Siegfried Kracauer, *The Salaried Masses: Duty and Distraction in Weimar Germany* (Verso, 1998), p. 113.

2 Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin: Or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism*, (Verso, 1992); Esther Leslie, *Overpowering Conformism: Walter Benjamin*, (Pluto, 2000); David McNally, *Bodies of Meaning: Studies on Language, Labor and Meaning*, (State University of New York Press, 2001).

3 A number of introductory studies have begun to appear in English. These include Rob Shields, *Spatial Dialectics: Lefebvre, Love and Struggle* (Routledge, 1999), Andy Merrifield, *Henri Lefebvre: A Critical Introduction* (Routledge, 2006) and Stuart Elden, *Understanding Henri Lefebvre: Theory and the Possible* (Continuum, 2004).

4 Henri Lefebvre, 'Retrospections', in *Key Writings*, edited by Stuart Elden, Elizabeth Lebas and Eleonare Kofman, (Continuum, 2003), p. 7.

5 Lefebvre had begun preliminary work on everyday life in the early 1930s. See Henri Lefebvre and Norbert Guterman, 'Mystification: Notes for a critique of everyday life', in *Key Writings*. A final book on the rhythms and routines of everyday life was published 70 years later, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life*, (Continuum, 2004).

6 Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life, Volume II: Foundations for a Sociology of the Everyday*, (Verso, 2002), p. 137.

7 *Critique II*, p. 194.

8 *Critique II*, pp. 118-125.

9 Elden, p. 66.

10 *Critique II*, p. 263.

11 *Critique II*, p. 217.

12 *Critique II*, p. 223.

13 *Critique II*, p. 14

14 *Critique II*, p. 79.

15 *Critique II*, p. 312

16 *Critique II*, p. 92

17 *Critique II*, p. 77.

18 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (University of California Press, 1984).

19 Merrifield, p. 13.

20 Marc James Leger, 'Henri Lefebvre and the moment of the aesthetic', in Andrew Hemingway, editor, *Marxism and the History of Art*, (Pluto Press, 2006).

21 *Critique II*, p. 316.

22 *Critique II*, p. 146. Against the hype of the Information Society, see Francois Fortier, *Virtuality Check: Power Relations and Alternative Strategies in the Information Society* (Verso, 2001) for an argument that ICTs, far from being vectors of democracy are polarising power relations and accentuating exploitation.

23 Roberts, p. 111.

24 *Critique II*, p. 45.

25 Cited by Elden, p243.