Editors’ Introduction

ELISE THORSEN AND THEODORA KELLY TRIMBLE
Editors

Everyday life is easily graspable, as an imagined set of objects readily to hand and habits ingrained at the level of muscle memory. Everyday life is eminently elusive, difficult to articulate in symbolic language and a challenge to the elaboration of literary narrative through its rootedness in the descriptive. Everyday life, in other words, presents its prospective scholar with a problematic, as much as a resolvable problem.

Everyday life extends all around us as Bourdieu’s habitus, the transparent conditions of being that predicate the production of culture at all levels. The power that control over such conditions would offer is clearly attractive to any number of actors coming from a variety of aesthetic and ideological positions. The early-twentieth-century impulse of zhiznetvorstvo, the creation of new everyday practices and values through art, gave shape to such disparate aesthetic modes as pre-revolutionary Symbolism and Soviet Constructivism. Constructivism in particular is characterized by a broad scope: in their focus on material culture from architecture to factory-print calico, its members sought to surround the sovereign subjects of the Soviet Union in a new Soviet habitus. Such endeavors are often also short-lived; this fact points to the robustness of hegemonic organizations of relations among subjects, but also facilitates recognizing the pervasiveness of hegemony in the first place.

The goals of recognizing and enunciating habitus have invited novel theorization and practices, oriented toward the systematic uncovering or even disruption of the processes of everyday life. The Lettrist International’s practice of dérive and psychogeography explored human flows in cities and other manmade structures. More actively, “happenings” could be considered loci in which the naturalized flows of everyday life are temporarily opposed to alternative formations of human bodies.

While some discourses underscore the power of everyday life to shape subjects, other discourses divide away the objects and practices of everyday life from the more intentional, aesthetically-marked workings of man. Such divisions typically serve to set apart less privi-
leged subjects of hegemony, the deprecated ends of hierarchies of class and gender. By virtue of its very association with modes of alterity, however, the realm of everyday life can offer up the means for empowerment for its subjects within hegemony. Complimentarily, in mimetic representation, the periodic turns to everyday life as object are received as revolutionary.

In this issue, four authors address a variety of texts which bear a direct, mimetic, or mixed relationship to everyday life:

In “The Role of Symbolic Clothing in Ukrainian Gender and Power,” Terri Van Orman identifies a number of factors underlying young Ukrainian women’s everyday decision to present themselves in ultra-feminine ways: traditional decorativeness in Ukrainian folk clothing, with its symbolic functionality; the ways in which representations of the ideal feminine act as a vehicle for pre-Christian, Christian, and secularized notions of power; the Soviet and post-Soviet experience of feminism and Ukrainian identity. In Van Orman’s analysis, the combination and interrelation of these factors offer a potential arena for alternative feminine engagement, including that of FEMEN.

Andrew Chapman, in “Trojeinost′ and the Phantasmagoria of Everyday Consumption in Late Soviet Culture,” addresses a more specific context, the queue and patterns of Soviet consumerism. These elements can be conceived as both an element of the habitus through which Soviet mentalities are produced and the material from which rich and self-conscious discourses are drawn. Taking up the concept of trojeinost′, which is given by sociological studies as the set of behaviors produced by economic shortage in which the acquisition of rare items serves as proof of the possessor’s ability to navigate the system, Chapman examines the cultural and textual discourses around these behaviors and the unintuitive valuation and plasticity of objects.

Cassio de Oliveira’s article “‘As if in Search of a Happy Human Life’: Personal Life in High Stalinism in Yuri German’s ‘Lapshin’” discusses the literary representation of domestic and everyday details in German’s aesthetic treatment of the lives of a group of Cheka officers in the 1930s. De Oliveira captures German’s work as it stands at the locus of contradictory demands centered around byt in this period, from the mandate to depict ordinary Soviet citizenship, particularly the realization of the implicit social contract to the new professional class, to that of depicting extraordinary heroism and Stakhanovism as itself typical of everyday life. Going beyond situation the story in its historical and critical context, de Oliveira also examines
how these discourses of byt allowed German to hypothesize a space for personal, literary self-realization within the Soviet project.

In “The Performativity and Importance of Women’s Byt in Smirnova’s ‘Narodnyi roman,’” Justine Gill analyzes Natal′ia Smirnova’s story about a woman who, in valuing her own skills within the female-coded realm of byt, attains the wherewithal to separate from her husband. Though byt can constrain the women with whom it is generally associated in literary schemata, Gill’s article reflects how the practices of—and even the mimetic codes for—byt provide the resources to undermine the power differential between male and female in an institution like marriage. Gill’s close reading of Smirnova’s story reveals a number of textual moments in which byt can be manipulated, structurally inverted, or extended.

***

POP AND PROPAGANDA is the theme of SJSC’s twelfth issue. The editors welcome submissions of graduate-student work investigating drama, film, linguistics, music, or any other aspect of the topic in relation to Slavic culture.