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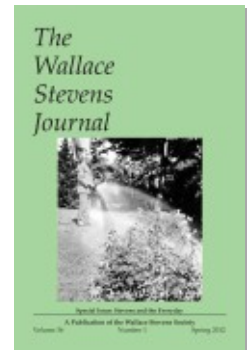
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What's So Ordinary about Stevens' "The Ordinary Women"?

BENJAMIN MADDEN

"THE ORDINARY WOMEN," the ninth poem in Wallace Stevens' *Harmonium*, is often overlooked compared to its much-anthologized neighbor "The Snow Man." Yet "The Ordinary Women" is at least as revealing of the range of concerns addressed by Stevens' early poetry, particularly now that modernist studies is turning its attention to "the ordinary." Whereas "The Snow Man" centers on Stevens' familiar interest in the relationship between the mind and external reality, "The Ordinary Women" addresses a topic closer to the level of everyday life: the emergence of film as a new art form. The poem was first published in *The Dial* (July 1922) as one of six poems grouped under the title "Revue." Each of these poems shares the linguistic exuberance of "The Ordinary Women," but most of them—especially "Bantams in Pine-Woods," "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," and "The Emperor of Ice-Cream"—have acquired a firmer place in the Stevens canon. It may be time to restore "The Ordinary Women" to its rightful place in this set by considering how shrewdly it raises questions about the relationship between low and high culture that are central not only to Stevens' whole oeuvre, but also to literary modernism in general.

The ordinary and the everyday are topics of growing interest in modernist studies and have been the subject of several recent monographs (see Randall; Phillips; Olson). In *Modernism and the Ordinary*, Liesl Olson describes the ordinary as "a mode of organizing life and representing it" characterized by affective traits of inattention or absentmindedness (6–7). The ordinary is, perhaps counterintuitively, "what is most difficult to discover," precisely because it is made up of those things that ordinarily escape our notice (Blanchot 12). Moreover, applying critical attention to the ordinary seems to dissipate its ordinariness. Trying to pin it down may be akin to trying to turn on the light in a room quickly enough to see what the dark looks like.

There is, however, a tradition of intellectual inquiry known as "everyday life theory" for which denaturing the ordinary by applying critical attention to it is a necessary, even emancipatory move. For thinkers like Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau, the inattention that characterizes

the ordinary is a form of ideological mystification. Analysis of routine or habitual practices, and their attendant objects, discourses, and institutions, can disclose the ideological underpinnings of even the most innocuous phenomena, adding up to a vast illusion whereby an historically contingent social formation passes itself off as natural and inevitable. It is rarely appreciated just how well everyday life theory aligns with the critique of popular culture pursued by Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, and other German theorists who would later form the Frankfurt School. The clearest link between these bodies of thought is that each draws part of its impetus from the humanism of the early Marx. For these thinkers, popular culture as a feature of everyday life colludes with bourgeois ideology: mass production is the procedure by which popular culture is made, as well as its hidden subject. By the 1920s, the United States was at the vanguard of global capitalism, and the vertical integration characteristic of Fordist manufacturing was also evident in the film industry.

In his essay "The Mass Ornament," Kracauer anticipates both everyday life theories and the work of the Frankfurt School by arguing, "The position that an epoch occupies in the historical process can be determined more strikingly from an analysis of its inconspicuous surface-level expressions than from that epoch's judgments about itself" (75). In other words, the ordinary is a better guide to the character of an epoch than its products of critical reflection—specifically, the ordinary as embodied in popular culture. This is an aspect of the ordinary that has been largely ignored in existing studies of the topic. Other modernist writers have found figures for the ordinary in the feminine, the habitual, and the domestic (see Fel-ski); in what follows, I will show that Stevens adds popular entertainment to this list.

Stevens was inclined toward giving his poems ironic titles, seeming to delight in putting a proposition at the head of the page that would be undermined by even the first line of the poem. At first glance, this may also seem to be the case with "The Ordinary Women." One immediate question raised by this would be, "What's so ordinary about the ordinary women?" Confronted with a world of "lacquered loges," "girandoles," "canting curlicues," and "explicit coiffures," a reader might justifiably reply, "Not much" (*CPP* 8–9). Some of the more famous critics of Stevens certainly feel that the poem's style goes beyond mere exuberance and tips into bad taste. Even critical adversaries as implacable as Harold Bloom and Hugh Kenner are united in their condemnation. For Bloom, the poem's "gaudy" quality indicates "a kind of desperation" (82–83), while for Kenner the poem forces "the reader, as he puts down his dictionary . . . to reflect that sense can look strangely like nonsense when words do not look as if they meant what they do" (52). In short, the poem's language is anything but ordinary.

However playful, though, the title in this case is not obviously ironic. The poem really is concerned with the ordinary, or rather, with the means

by which we escape from it and suspend it momentarily. Has the time the women spent watching a film been an escape from poverty into a world of aesthetic fulfillment? Or is it a diversion from one kind of poverty to another, film being a hollow artifice, or worse, a vehicle of ideological mystification? How are we to read the poem's linguistic excess: as playful exuberance, relieving the tedium of the everyday, or as garish, hollow embellishment?

In order to address this question, I need to rehearse some details of the poem's setting: a particular form of cinema known as the American movie palace, which lends the poem an excuse for some of its more exotic language. That "The Ordinary Women" is set in a movie theater has been recognized at least since A. Walton Litz's 1972 *Introspective Voyager*. For Litz, the poem is about "the theatre of mere artistry becom[ing] the theatre of the imagination," momentarily at least (110). But no critic has yet shown how important the aesthetic debates surrounding early cinema are to the poem.

Over the twenty years following the invention of the motion picture projector in 1895, early cinema went through roughly three stages prior to the emergence of the Hollywood studio system and the appearance of cinematic styles and genres that we would recognize today. There were the pre-Nickelodeon period (before 1905), the Nickelodeon period (from 1905–1912), and the movie palace period (from about 1912 on). Nickelodeons, or small storefront theaters, began to replace the vaudeville show as the main setting for the presentation of films from 1906, and by 1910, there were as many as 10,000 in the United States (Abel 479). According to Charles Musser, "It is not too much to say that modern cinema began with the nickelodeons" (417).

After 1910, however, a variety of factors conspired to eclipse the nickelodeon. The arrival of multi-reel films from Europe challenged the short-show, quick turnover model of the nickelodeons. Competition among theaters inspired the development of more impressive, attractive, and comfortable theaters (Robinson 147). Some nickelodeons developed a reputation for vice as off-putting to families as the saloons that they had replaced as "the principal social center in many working-class (especially immigrant) residential areas" (Abel 479). The culmination of each of these trends arrived in the form of the movie palace, also known as the picture palace or the palace cinema. The Mark Strand Theatre in New York City is generally considered the first of its kind, opened in 1914 at a cost of one million dollars and designed by Thomas W. Lamb, who would go on to establish himself as the foremost cinema architect of his time. In terms of physical size, seating capacity, and available amenities, the movie palace dwarfed its predecessor, the nickelodeon. The Strand, for instance, could seat 3,500 patrons (Bowser 132).

Beyond their physical size, perhaps the most startling features of these buildings were their wild architecture and extraordinary ornamentation.

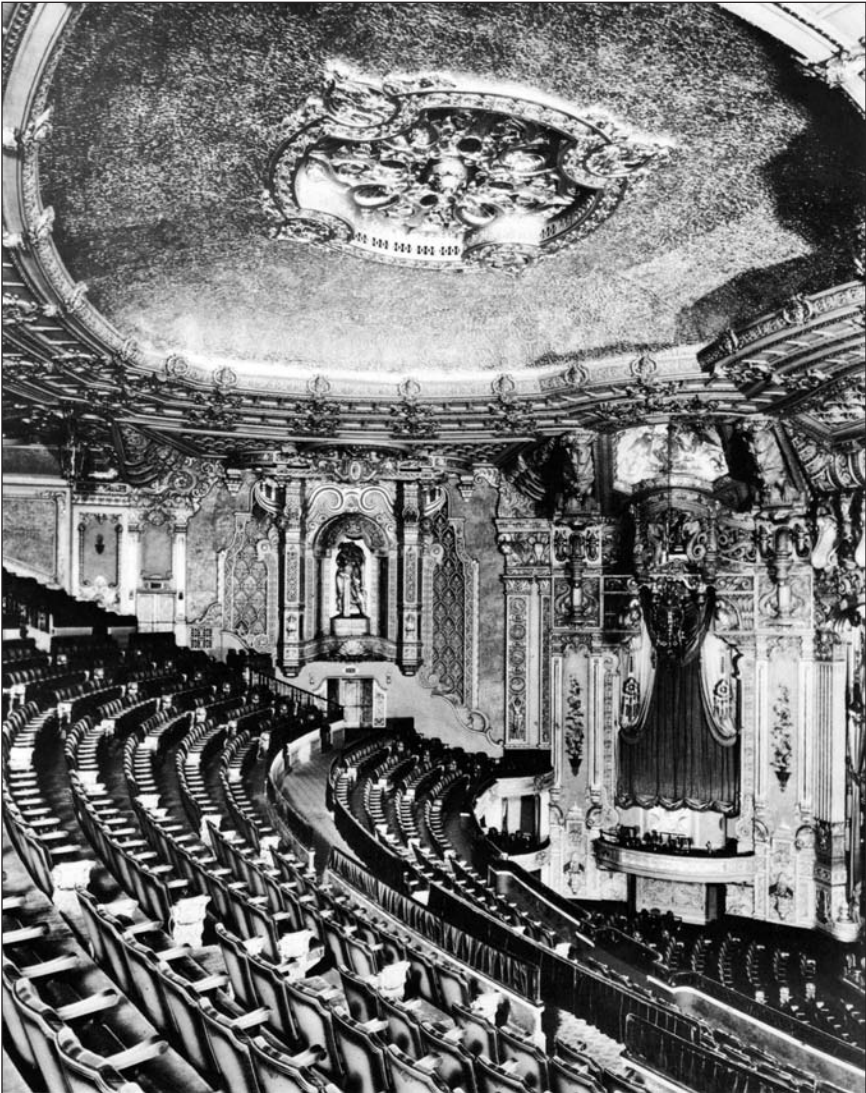


Fig. 1. Oriental Theatre (1926), Chicago. Courtesy of the Chicago Architectural Photographing Co. Collection, Theatre Historical Society, Elmhurst, Illinois, U.S.A.

A capacious eclecticism brought together a mix of architectural styles from every age and culture, producing a kind of fantasy environment. Trade periodicals quickly began to tell a story of “blue-collar crowds . . . being replaced by refined upper-class bejeweled audiences arriving at the theater in automobiles” (Bowser 121). In other words, the nickelodeon as working-class community center had given way to the picture palace as middle-class evening entertainment. These refined cinema-goers might be the kind of pleasure-seekers depicted in “The Ordinary Women,” entering a world of “explicit coiffures,” “diamond point,” “sapphire point,” and sequined “civil fans” (CPP 9).

The palace cinemas embodied a startling disjunction between form and function. The motion picture projector was, of course, a new technology at the time, and emblematic of the wonders of modernity. Why, then, did architects and cinema owners decide that the appropriate architectural form in which to host these new devices should be a pastiche of atavistic decorative forms? It was not until the art deco style of the 1930s became widespread that the function of these buildings was reflected in an architectural style that might be considered fully modern. The cinema architects gleefully discarded Louis Sullivan’s admonition that “form ever follows function” (qtd. in Van Zanten 1). Indeed, the form of the palace cinemas goes so far as to disguise function. The architectural excess of the historic movie palaces emphasizes their remove from workaday concerns. Form overwhelms function through elaborate ornamentation as a deliberate rebuke to more pragmatic styles of architecture.

“The Ordinary Women” is built on these ambiguities. While the poem’s extraordinary idiom is explained by its extraordinary setting—perhaps an extraordinary style applied to an extraordinary setting amounts to the ordinary—that idiom is nonetheless shot through with ambiguities. For instance, in the lines “The canting curlicues / Of heaven and of the heavenly script” (CPP 9), much depends on the definition of the unusual verb “canting.” First, it suggests “tilting, sloping, turning over or about,” a vivid description of gilded ornamentation.¹ Second, “canting” suggests “cant,” or language “taken up and used for fashion’s sake, without being a genuine expression of sentiment.” If the ornaments are canting in this sense, they are lying or dissembling, even disguising something. Third, we might choose to emphasize the Latin root *cantus*, meaning “singing, musical sound” and giving us the word “chanting,” reasserting its aesthetic qualities. The lines “The moonlight / Fubbed the girandoles” present a similar problem (CPP 8). Faced with the unusual verb “to fub,” readers may focus on its aural quality, and think of the moonlight glinting on gilded candelabras (or girandoles). But “to fub” in fact means “to cheat, impose upon, put off deceitfully.”² The sheen of the candelabras, then, is deceptive at the same time as it is beautiful.

It may be that certain anxieties surrounding film as an art form and an institution are also reflected in the design of the palace cinemas. Walter

Benjamin's critique of cinema as a means of technological reproduction gives direct expression to those anxieties:

[T]he technology of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition. . . . The social significance of film, even—and especially—in its most positive form, is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic side: the liquidation of the value of tradition in the cultural heritage.

(22)

In other words, film's capacity to generate likenesses and illusions mechanically and therefore *ad infinitum* threatens cultural tradition by undermining the uniqueness of the art objects that make it up. According to Benjamin's well-known theory, the infinite reproducibility of film is directly antipathetic to the aura that surrounds genuine art.

A further anxiety is apparent in the association of the nickelodeon with the "lower classes" and, due to repeated attacks on the new medium from the pulpit and the press, with vice. However, as film historians frequently note, fixing the demographic makeup of early film audiences is difficult. In the context of a disjunction between the public's obvious enthusiasm for film and its vociferous detractors in the public sphere, the movie palace might nevertheless be read as a hyperbolic assertion of the new medium's cultural validity. Movie palace architecture clads the machinery of technological reproduction in the ornamentation of not just one cultural tradition, but seemingly of every cultural tradition. While ample provision of porters, restrooms, air conditioning, and every other available comfort worked to allay middle-class audiences' concerns about cleanliness and vice, the ostentatious design of the buildings themselves worked to soothe subtler concerns about the cultural legitimacy of the medium—and of modernity itself. To those who claimed that film signaled the death of culture, the palace cinemas proclaimed themselves temples of culture. Indeed, in keeping with the spirit of disjunction, the movie palaces' architects seemed unconcerned with the profound contradictions in their project: the palace cinemas are themselves works of reproduction. Regardless of this particular Benjaminian irony, middle-class audiences flocked to them.

Whether or not Stevens himself was among those audiences is a question that we may not be able to answer due to lack of evidence. Stevens refers to movie theaters only twice in his published letters. In a letter to his wife of February 23, 1934, he describes his impressions of Key West, Florida, including: "The movie theatres are little bits of things" (L 268). More than ten years later, on May 2, 1945, he refers to an advertisement at a cinema in Hartford reading "Wilde and Weird," appropriating the phrase to describe a series of illustrations that would accompany the Cummington press edition of *Esthétique du Mal* (L 498). Neither of these instances give



Fig. 2. Fox Theatre (1929), San Francisco. Courtesy of the Terry Helgesen Collection, Theatre Historical Society, Elmhurst, Illinois, U.S.A.

the impression of Stevens as a devoted cinema-goer, but the first one does suggest that he was accustomed to a much grander style of cinema architecture than Key West at the time had to offer.

Stevens could hardly have failed to notice the emergence of the palace cinemas onto the urban landscape in the latter part of his sixteen-year residence in and around New York (1900–1916). The Stevenses were living at 441 West 21st Street when the Mark Strand Theatre, frequently cited as the first purpose-built palace cinema, opened at 1579 Broadway in 1914, two blocks east and twenty-two blocks north of their home (CPP 961). Stevens would have also had ample opportunity to observe the development of a variety of theatrical architectures along Broadway, particularly clustered around Times Square (Stern et al. 229). Even as late as 1954, Stevens recalled walking along Broadway frequently during his time in New York, and the street is mentioned repeatedly in his letters (L 63, 78, 177, 845). Nonetheless, letters from his period in New York generally characterize Stevens as absorbed in reading and writing. If he was participating in an emerging film culture, he did not regard that participation as important enough to feature in his correspondence.

Stevens' lack of interest toward cinema—in contrast to his well-attested love of theatrical and musical stage performances—might be interpreted as a kind of mandarin disdain for “low culture.” The cultural critics of the Frankfurt School systematized that disdain, arguing that popular culture is not only aesthetically inferior, but actively pernicious. This is the first theory of art that we will set against the poem: popular culture in general, and film in particular, intrinsically embodies a dominant ideology. As Benjamin argues, “*The function of film is to train human beings in the apperceptions and reactions needed to deal with a vast apparatus whose role in their lives is expanding almost daily*” (26). In other words, film extends the repetition and technological reproduction characteristic of capitalist modernity into the leisure time of its subjects, generating the assumption that this mode of production's ubiquity equates with its inevitability. A Benjaminian reading of the palace cinemas would suggest that the relationship such institutions posit between film and high culture is really a strategy for legitimizing social transformation. Few of us today would adhere to an unmodified version of Benjamin's position, but his categories allow us to sharpen our insights into the poem's suspicion toward film, particularly as that suspicion relates to the poem's no less obvious concern with surface, illusion, and repetition. The question posed by “The Ordinary Women,” from this perspective, is: do the women in the cinema encounter something that might properly be called art, or are they duped somehow, seduced by mere appearances?

The poem's structure offers two contradictory answers to this question through the two levels of its organization. The first level is narrational, proceeding by blocks of two stanzas at a time. Briefly: the women leave their “poverty,” flinging “monotony behind” and crowding the “noctur-

nal halls" of the cinema; they observe their surroundings ("they leaned and looked"), the show begins, and the women "read"—that is, view—"right long"; the show continues, intensifying its effects, as the "coiffures" become "explicit"; and finally, "Puissant speech" cries "quittance" and the women go home (*CPP* 8–9). This narrative is linear, suggesting development through time. At the very least, the women arrive at a different point than the one from which they set out. This level of organization may be read in a number of ways—it is probably what the reader notices first, and suggests progress, and the possibility of change.

However, a second, chiasitic level of organization undermines the linear narrative. Chiasmus is a rhetorical trope in which a statement, grammatical construction, or concept is repeated in reverse order, as in Shakespeare's "Fair is foul and foul is fair" (see also Keyser). The components of the statement form an a / b / b / a structure, held to resemble the Greek letter *chi*, or X. Chiasmus suggests stasis, equivalence, and repetition. It is above all a figure for reversibility, one side liable to transform into its opposite. In "The Ordinary Women," the final stanza repeats the first stanza almost completely; the second stanza's "nocturnal halls" become the penultimate stanza's "wickless halls"; and the third stanza's "Mumbled zay-zay and a-zay, a-zay," becomes the seventh stanza's "Rumbled a-day and a-day, a-day" (*CPP* 8–9). The latter two stanzas also share references to moonlight, which respectively "Fubbed the girandoles" and "Rose on the beachy floors." In fact, the whole poem could be diagrammed to show a series of chiasitic correspondences among the 10 stanzas: 1 / 10, 2 / 9, and so forth.

At a thematic level, this structure suggests that the women at the end of the poem, having "read right long" of "beta b and gamma g" are just the same as the women at the beginning of the poem. The poem begins, "Then from their poverty they rose," but the same line also begins the poem's final stanza, suggesting that in fleeing their poverty, all that they found was more of it. The aesthetic is merely another kind of poverty, and the women have been duped, taken in by a world of surfaces and illusions. Indeed, the doubleness of the chiasmus is prefigured in the multiple meanings of words like "fub" and "cant" that I have already noted. This use of chiasmus corresponds to the theory of popular culture outlined above, in which film embodies the repetitious and dehumanizing aspects of capitalist modernity. The women's entertainment is as impoverished as their working lives, "their want," a world of insubstantial simulacra.

The chiasmus, then, is the poem's governing rhetorical scheme and organizational principle. One final consideration further underscores its importance: the chiasitic "X" shape bears a strong resemblance with the camera obscura, a precursor to the modern photographic camera and the film camera as well. In the camera obscura, light passes through a small opening and projects onto a surface at the back of the box, producing an upside-down image, like so:

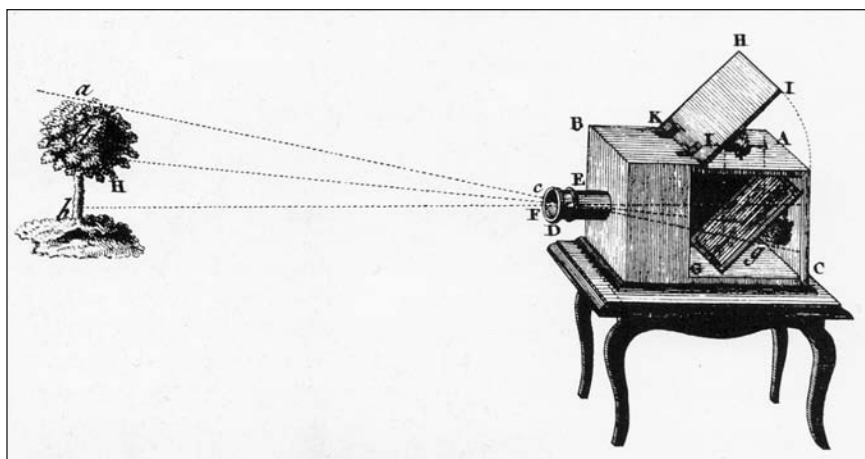


Fig. 3. Camera Obscura, from: Mathurin-Jacques Brisson, *Dictionnaire raisonné de physique* (Paris: Libraire économique, 1800), n.p.

As we have seen, the poem's final stanzas amount to a reverse image of its opening stanzas. The poem's structure thus aligns both film and the ordinary with the scheme of chiasmus, suggesting that stasis and repetition are part of their natures.

However, this reading is interestingly complicated by a crucial consideration: the poem's chiastic structure is notably imperfect. For one thing, the first and final stanzas are not quite identical, in ways that are meaningful. Although the last stanza reverses "From dry catarrhs, and to guitars" to make "From dry guitars, and to catarrhs" (*CPP* 8–9), seeming to give the poem a ring structure, the preceding line of each stanza—"Then from their poverty they rose"—remains unchanged. It would have been easy to turn "from" into "to," completing the symmetry and mirror effect, but Stevens chose not to. More importantly, a properly chiastic arrangement of stanzas would form the pattern 1-2-3 / 8-9-10, but in the poem, the pattern is 1-2-3 / 7-9-10. The eighth stanza breaks the pattern. Again, it would have been easy to switch the seventh and eighth stanzas: the poem, so altered, would read just as coherently. But as I will show, its meaning would change significantly.

The content of the eighth stanza gives us our best clue as to what kind of thematic work this broken chiasmus is doing:

How explicit the coiffures became,
 The diamond point, the sapphire point,
 The sequins
 Of the civil fans!

(*CPP* 9)

The exclamation “How explicit” is appropriate, as the poem centers our attention on its verbal excess. The diamond point and sapphire point are a hyperbolic touch, literal jewels adorning a poem that already drips with ornaments; repetition (in “The diamond point, the sapphire point”) emphasizes their superfluous luxuriance. The stanza also departs from a pattern established throughout the poem, in which the second line of each stanza includes an internal rhyme. In this stanza, rhyme gives way to exact repetition, emphasizing its singularity. The sentence that makes up the stanza is essentially a rhetorical exclamation, devoid of any semantic content beyond sheer emphasis—the whole stanza is an exclamation, not a communicative statement in the ordinary sense.

The stanza therefore bears comparison with another strange exclamation earlier in the poem: “Ti-lill-o!” This is not a stock expression like “tal-lyho,” which it slightly resembles. Whether or not “Ti-lill-o” is meaningful at all is ambiguous. No amount of looking for homophonic clues or speculating about etymology will settle the word’s meaning. Likewise, the chiasmic pair of expressions “a-zay, a-zay” and “a-day, a-day” elude definition. These neologisms are not quite onomatopoeic—indeed, there is no rhetorical term to describe them, underscoring that they have no argumentative function.

In other words, each of these instances can be read as moments of linguistic excess, or exuberance that overwhelms meaning. They might be described as play in the deconstructive sense, gestures of sheer excess that resist the totalizing system of the poem’s structure and mirroring symmetry. The point of the broken chiasmus is to open up a window out of the chiasmus’s associations of repetition and monotony. It rebukes the interpretation of film and the palace cinemas as vapid simulacra, and suggests that just as the rogue stanza breaks out of the poem’s structure, aesthetic experience offers a viable escape from the monotony of the everyday. This is an idea we also find reflected and enacted in other poems from “Revue,” most famously in “A High-Toned Old Christian Woman” and “The Emperor of Ice-Cream.”

If we wanted to push our interpretation of these moments further, we could suggest that they recreate the birth of the aesthetic as a completely superfluous activity, a form of pure surplus. This, then, is the second theory of art that we will set against the poem—a theory that is more frequently associated with “high culture” than popular culture. Goethe gives it a classic formulation in the triumph scene of *Faust, Part II*, where the “Boy Charioteer” declares:

Bin die Verschwendung, bin die Poesie;
Bin der Poet, der sich vollendet,
Wenn er sein eigenst Gut verschwendet.

[I am prodigality, I am poetry;

I am the poet, who completes himself
In the act of wasting his belongings.]
(173; my translation)

In other words, poetry and the aesthetic as a whole are defined by their exemption from forms of value derived from the market. "Even so I am immensely rich," declares the Charioteer, "And consider myself Plutus' equal" (173). Art is valuable precisely because it is useless. Popular culture, by contrast, is inherently degraded because it shackles the artistic impulse to the dictates of the market. Stated this starkly, the argument is quite untenable, of course: when have artists ever been free from the necessities of feeding themselves and keeping a roof over their heads? Nonetheless, the idea that art remains a sanctum of values free from the intrusion of the technological modernity that Benjamin so distrusted still exercises a powerful attraction.

This alternative sense of value is part of the repository of romantic beliefs about the transcendent nature of art that a century's worth of materialist criticism has failed to eradicate completely. "The Ordinary Women" is carefully poised in the middle of this debate. So, to reformulate our original question slightly in light of these reflections: does the women's visit to the movie palace amount to an experience of high art, autonomous and aesthetically pure, or of popular culture, tainted by ideology and the marketplace? I think that no amount of careful consideration of the poem will decide the question one way or the other, and that this ambiguity is central to the poem's appeal.

Kracauer (incidentally, Benjamin's friend and colleague) was perhaps the earliest critic of film attuned to those ambiguities. His essay on Berlin's picture palaces, entitled "Cult of Distraction," neatly summarizes cinema's aspiration to the status of high culture:

To begin with, the architectural setting tends to emphasize a dignity that used to inhabit the institutions of high culture. It favors the lofty and the *sacred* as if designed to accommodate works of eternal significance. . . . The show itself aspires to the same exalted level, claiming to be a finely tuned organism, an aesthetic totality as only an artwork can be.

(327)

In fact, Kracauer proves to be largely indifferent to whether or not film actually achieves its artistic ambitions. For him, its significance rests elsewhere: "Here, in pure externality, the audience encounters itself; its own reality is revealed in the fragmented sequence of splendid sense impressions. . . . its disclosure in distraction is therefore of *moral* significance" (326). Distraction, defined in this passage as an obsession with surface

over depth, or decoration over content, is the characteristic aesthetic response of the modern epoch.

Stevens' ordinary women are ordinary in that, like the cinema audiences of their time, they seek distraction from the workaday world at the movies. What they find there in the "lacquered loges," the "girandoles," and the "canting curlicues," is the glittering reflection of a fragmented and disorderly era (once again we find ourselves confronted with a kind of chiasmus). For Kracauer, if cinema audiences could have approached their experience with the right spirit of critique, they would have stumbled upon the great secret of capitalist modernity: "the masses . . . so easily allow themselves to be stupefied only because they are so close to the truth" (328). Like the theoreticians of the everyday, he believes that the ordinary, the popular, and the commonplace are the domain of ideology. The evidence of Stevens' own life and the sly chiasmic strategy of the poem suggest that he would have inclined toward a dismissive reading of cinema. But as a reader situated in a world more saturated with popular culture than Stevens could perhaps have envisaged, I am loath to relinquish the poem's ambiguity. I prefer a reading that is alive enough to cinema's aesthetic pull to allow room for indecision. This, to me, is the role of the poem's fractured chiasmus, which complicates too straightforward a reflection of reality. The story that the women see at the cinema, of "beta b and gamma g," and of the "marriage-bed," is the story of their romance with the aesthetic. This is "Puissant speech, alike in each": the illusion of the ordinary that is briefly yet powerfully transfigured into the extraordinary through the medium of film.

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Notes

¹"cant, n.¹," "cant, n.³" *Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. Online ed. Nov. 2010. Web. 14 Mar. 2011.

²"fub, v." *Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. Online ed. Nov. 2010. Web. 17 Mar. 2011.

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