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ABSTRACT

The thesis examines various theoretical framings of the relation between the ordinary and the extraordinary in Western thought and art. In particular, it examines the ambivalence of theorizing with respect to its own extraordinary character, i.e. its acknowledgement of the implications of theorizing for mundane social life. Descartes is treated as a pivotal figure in that he attempted the formulation of a Method which would liberate thought from the grasp of habit and tradition, while at the same time advocating an allegiance to the 'customs of the country'. Amongst contemporaries, the cultural critic Slavoj Zizek and the ethnomethodologist Harvey Sacks are treated as resources for alternative formulations of the collective interest in the relations between the ordinary and the extraordinary. Zizek's injunction to "look awry" at the habitual and the commonplace is understood as interventionist, since it calls for a radical shift in our relations to the ordinary by recognizing the place of desire in mundane accounts of the lifeworld. Sacks, on the other hand, can be read as a theorist committed to "affirming the ordinary", to borrow Charles Taylor's phrase, insofar as his analysis of the ordinary segregates it from the artfulness of theorizing. Finally, employing the work of Jeff Wall and our contemporary ways of conceiving the house, the thesis looks at the relation between the ordinary and the beautiful as another site where the question of affirming the commonplace and acknowledging the extraordinary can be asked anew in the interests of a strong sociological conception of the nature of the ordinary.
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I might have been a wise king setting out  
Under the Christmas lights - except that  
It felt more like the forewarned journey back  
Into the heartland of the ordinary.  
Still my old self. Ready to knock one back.  
A nine-to-five man who had seen poetry.

Seamus Heaney  
The Journey Back

The Commonplace and the Affirmation of Ordinary Life

In Sociology, we tend to treat the 'commonplace' as a problem, one which relates to the social situatedness of our reason. Such situatedness is the condition of human life and understanding, one we all find ourselves in, since any formulations we make emerge within the richness of a life world. That is, all thought, speech and action emerges within particular situations, within a context, within specific institutions and practices, and within the vastness of a tradition which forms us and moves us, but whose edges we cannot see.

Descartes was a great believer in the importance of Method for removing us from what he saw as the error of the 'commonplace'. He sought to consolidate agreement concerning the need to leave this error behind us by proceeding in a correct way toward correct, agreed upon ends. Thus he celebrated the engineer as the builder of cities. We might note in this regard that the engineer initially served the modern city as the builder and planner of the roads which carried people to their destinations. The task of the engineer was to build solid and long-lasting roads which proceeded in the most direct and efficient way possible. The engineer's
method marks a manner of knowing which seeks to optimize the application of means to the achievement of agreed upon ends, and to maximize dependability, durability and the securing and consolidation of an edifice of correct and commonly agreed upon knowledge and expertise.

John Brinckerhoff Jackson, however, reminds us that any talk of roads is, in a very broad sense, a consideration of a movement towards desired destinations (Jackson: 1984: 22). He reminds us that 'exodus' and 'method' are related to 'road', and that they all have a common origin in the Greek hodos, which means to "depart from a place" as well as "regular or systematic ways of accomplishing anything, of getting to your end". If we think about both 'road' and 'method' in this way, we can see that both still encompass these two senses, a leaving of something and a passage to something else, a marking out of boundaries and the passage between. Both senses imply connections between the movement of reason and the temporal passage of our human lives from past to future, and both imply that reason and a life are comprised of opposing movements of separation and collection.

In that reason is conceived by Descartes as movement and as a kind of travelling, imagery which can be traced as far back as the Greeks, we can see how old and deep are the roots of the Cartesian understanding. Descartes understood that passage to be one which fled the illusions of the past for the clear sightedness of the future, a passage made possible by his own extra-ordinary individual consciousness. Jackson, however, tells us that the Greeks saw the alignment of roads not as a path forged by individuals, but as a "gift of the gods", as something valuable which had been granted to them (Jackson, 1984: 23). Furthermore, they saw every road ending at not only a shrine, but at a place where people gathered. The road, method, the path of reason, was therefore a movement which gathered together a community as it proceeded to a sought out place or destination. This
desired place was, however, one already known or given to the community in some mysterious way, one preceding any individual traveller and her/his consciousness. Jackson also reminds us that it was the god Hermes who guarded all roads, passages, entrances and exits and all transactions between people, a god known not for his strength, but for his good natured sociability and love of conversation. The passage of reason was thus understood as a passage which gathered together and separated a community of people by means of their ongoing willingness to converse, to collect together and to separate out their differing points of view.

Jackson's portrayal of the movement of reason shows it proceeding along a path already marked out for us, towards a valued destination which serves to gather us together as a community as we pass from past to future. In his book, *Sources of the Self*, Charles Taylor makes the claim that a crucial aspect of the modern identity is a long-standing attachment we have to something we call "ordinary life". Taylor's claim is that in that we treat this "ordinary life" as valuable, it serves us as such a sought after destination. That is, Taylor portrays it as an orientation towards the world which is integral to what we are and to how we are brought together as a community:

"(The) affirmation of ordinary life, although not uncontested and frequently appearing in secularized form, has become one of the most powerful ideas in modern civilization. It underlies our contemporary "bourgeois" politics, so much concerned with issues of welfare, and at the same time powers the most influential revolutionary ideology of our century." (Taylor, 1989: 14)

Taylor locates "ordinary life" within our preoccupation with the everyday concerns of production and consumption, and with the concerns of family life centred around the domestic household. His focus is therefore on the prominence we give to the provision of the material necessities of life and on our concerns for the satisfaction of private bodily needs for food, housing, economic well-being,
health and recreation, all concerns which modernity has raised to the status of public debate and a politics.

However, in turning our attention to this attachment we have to "ordinary life", it is important that we take into consideration the fact that "the ordinary" has many variations and complexities of meaning. Any quick perusal of a modern dictionary or thesaurus reveals this. In this regard, Gadamer has suggested that, "We should never underestimate what a word can tell us, for language represents the previous accomplishment of thought" (Gadamer, 1986: 12). We might therefore take it that our concerns with ordinary life are considerably more complex and varied than Taylor's account might seem to suggest. For example, given the connection Taylor makes between ordinary life and our concern for bodily needs, we should note with interest that 'the natural' is a frequent synonym for the ordinary, one not only used to denote 'the natural world, but also the usual, the expected and the habitual, that which comes to us without thought, as well as that which belongs to us by virtue of our "nature", as that which we 'inescapably' or 'properly' or 'authentically' are. We might also remember the way in which the ordinary can make reference to that which we do not value or to that which is unexceptional -- to that which is dull, monotonous, even pedestrian, and also to that which is commonplace, routine or expected. Finally, we might note too that the ordinary can refer to the average, the everyday, the general, the normal, the regular, the routine, the typical, the usual, the uneventful and the standard.

It is obvious that these latter meanings cast the ordinary in quite a negative light. The blah, the boring, the tedious, the tiresome, the dim, the dreary, the dull, the humdrum are all examples of this. So too are the pedestrian, the prosaic, the trite, the commonplace and the undistinguished. On the other hand, we can refer to the ordinary in ways which are commonly taken in quite a positive way: for example,
as the casual, the familiar, the informal, the relaxed, and the unceremonious. The natural is also frequently used in this way, as in "she acted very naturally". All these can speak to manners or styles, to ways of arranging things or of conducting behaviour which are deemed valuable in modern life.

What might be concluded from this discussion of the various meanings of the ordinary is that the notion is a divided one. That is, ordinary life can call up that from which we seek an exodus, that against which we move and struggle. It is in this regard that we see ordinary life as the dull, the habitual, the commonplace, the trite or the prosaic life. On the other hand, ordinary life also serves us as a way of referring to that which is 'desirable', to the ideal way of proceeding, to the good state of affairs, to a goal or standard or measure of/for our lives.

Contemporary examples of the social usage of the ordinary are revealing in this regard. One recent example from the domain of politics which comes immediately to mind is the recent search for 'ordinary Canadians' to sit as members of the citizens' committee on the constitution. What were wanted were individuals who could be taken as living embodiments of the norm -- a kind of statistical average made flesh and bone. The presumption was that such ordinary Canadians would be capable of speaking for who we are and what we stand for in a most representative way; that is, in a thoroughly ordinary, everyday, average, normal way. They would possess the authentic 'ordinary' voice. In this regard, the government did not seek out the outstanding citizen or the constitutional expert to advise us on what to do, citizens who could be presumed upon to offer either wisdom or knowledgeable advice concerning the merits of the case. What was at stake was not the sagacity of the members' words, not their moral integrity, not any outstanding capacity for insight they exhibited. At stake, and deemed valuable, was their exemplary ordinariness.
In a similar vein, we saw the NDP recently conduct an election campaign in which their appeal was directed to ordinary Canadians -- to those not too anything -- not too smart, rich, beautiful, educated, right, left, old or young. The ordinary Canadian served in this case as a model of the exemplary citizen, as the good average Canadian leading the good average life.

In that the ordinary Canadian can be used in this way to stand for the "good Canadian", it becomes apparent that this attachment of ours to ordinary life can also get rather confusing, since such an attachment could entail orienting to and valuing either what is not valuable or the unexceptional or the average, standard, everyday type of person, deed, or object. In this sense, an affirmation of ordinary life would entail an affirmation of 'ordinariness', and carry with it a thrust to eliminate value altogether, for to value something is to see and show it as standing out from the ordinary, to see it as extra-ordinary. "Affirming the ordinary" could therefore be understood to demand a commitment to a levelling which would make a quest for quality or excellence, even for the notion of a 'good life', suspect. One choice would become as good as an other, and therefore any affirmation of ordinary life would, on a logical level, exist in a state of internal dissension, facing a constant need to undercut its own privileged position.

One arena in which these divisions and tensions inherent in any commitment to ordinariness would become quite obvious is in the construction of the heroic or valued individual. Indeed, the very idea of heroic figures would by ordinary standards be suspect. Is it any surprise, therefore, that we seem to have a predilection for the anti-heroic and for debunking in modern times? Yet, despite that levelling thrust which so frequently seems to surface in our attachment to "ordinary life", we still do find constant reference being made to extra-ordinary people, that is, to individuals who lead lives which are not routine, pedestrian,
monotonous or commonplace, lives in which something out-standing appears, lives which we admire and value. And we might also note that even the representative "ordinary person", as evidenced by the need to search for those who could sit on the constitutional committee, is not just any body. Some people, it would seem, are taken to be exemplary in their ordinariness. In this way, an attachment to ordinariness makes demands which not everyone or everything meets. We discriminate in favour of ordinariness, which means we assess what is authentically ordinary and what is not.

Many and varied are the contemporary solutions which have been offered in response to the perplexing need to establish how lives can be outstandingly ordinary. For instance, a recent edition of Western Living Magazine included a feature entitled "Stylemakers", in which, as might be expected from the title, the lives of extra-ordinary or out-standing Western Canadians were reviewed. In this particular instance, the focus was on the life of Pauline Jewett. She was portrayed as an archetypal Canadian heroine, who, in turn, constituted an example of a model figure of ordinariness. As such, Jewett was proposed as a lover of the natural, straight forward, informal, plain-living, simple in her tastes, a woman of exceptional abilities who, despite them, remained committed to ordinary people and the ordinary things in life.

"I remember her sitting on a carton, surrounded by all sorts of people, chain-smoking, talking away to them, and it was just as if she lived next door....(Pauline) Jewett seems the archetypal Canadian heroine: smart, plucky and kind - snow-shoeing in to her beloved cabin on Lake Constan outside of Ottawa in the winter and practically living in her bathing suit in summer ... reading mysteries, cooking plain food, being ordinary." (Nov 1992: 38)

Yet another rendition of a contemporary heroic figure that comes to mind is the wheelchair athlete. Looked at from the ordinary point of view, this social type can be seen to gain heroic status by virtue of the monumental effort which must be
expended to achieve ordinary status, just to be normal, given *out-of-the-ordinary* physical capacities. At some remove from this heroic type, we can find current popular television anti-heroines like Roseanne Arnold. Roseanne celebrates a truly pedestrian, rather vulgar kind of ordinariness. As the overweight, crass loudmouth, she is the one who doesn't hide her thorough-going ordinariness, the one who is extra-ordinarily ordinary by virtue of the way she's not ashamed to show publicly that she's really a slob.

There are endless ways in which this affection for ordinary life is played out, and the domain of sociology is no exception. It might be argued that sociology itself is an *extra-ordinary* pursuit, one which, like the heroic individual, is oriented to the worth of ordinary life in an unusual way, in a way which we see as standing out admirably from everyday life. We might therefore consider with interest the ways in which the routine and the commonplace have been taken up in sociology, how sociology has been shaped by a quest which pursues the general, the regular, the average, the normal and the typical, and of how these are so often implicit in modern sociological understandings of what constitutes human culture, the *social*.

'Culture' or 'the social, we might argue, has come to function in a similar way to nature in the Cartesian formulation, a formulation to which we shall later turn in greater detail. This is to say that the social came to be regarded as a 'thing' whose nature consisted of various unknown processes which determine its possibilities of transformation. As the inherited and habitual patterns of thought and behaviour which constitute these processes, the social came increasingly to be understood as external and coercive. These processes were seen not as gifts of the gods, but as conditions of unfreedom which needed to be brought to consciousness. They were those ways of thinking, acting and speaking which occurred in everyday life, but of which we are not fully conscious. As such, they comprised a mysterious absence at
the heart of ordinary life which needed to be filled in or recovered by our processes of reason.

Historically, then, enquiry into social life came to be seen not only as enquiry into those important matters of material human welfare of which Taylor speaks. (The word 'social' does, after all, originate with reference to interest groups or societies formed to pursue their shared material interests.) Our enquiry into the social also developed as a concern to comprehend what we are, our self-identity, by establishing and certifying our regular and recurring patterns of behaviour, the things about us which came naturally or without thought. Thinking of aspects of Durkheim's influential sociological studies in this regard, we can see how the ordinary as the regular, the typical or the normal was taken up as a way of delineating the sociological domain, how it came to define that unknown but sought after goal or object of enquiry, i.e. the social. Ordinary life emerged as a reality, as a 'thing' as Durkheim phrased it, through a growing preoccupation on the part of social enquiry with statistical averages and frequencies of occurrence, with aggregates lying outside individual understandings of their actions and accessible only to rigorous methodological procedures. Durkheim's celebrated work on suicide is pertinent here.

Showing a Rift in the Real: Slavoj Zizek

We have said, however, that there are many possible ways of conceiving the movement of reason which seeks to separate us from the ordinary and prosaic life while at the same time "affirming ordinary life". Take, for example, Slavoj Zizek's way of directing our attention to our situatedness in the commonplace. It's not methodologically correct or agreed upon ways of knowing the world that he advocates as a way of proceeding. Instead, he turns our attention to the need to find
ways of dislodging the habitual, of making the familiar strange, reality unreal, the ordinary uncanny. "Looking awry" he calls his way of reason.

"If we look at a thing straight on, i.e. matter-of-factly, disinterestedly, objectively," he argues, "we see nothing... the object assumes clear and distinctive features only if we look at 'an angle', i.e. with an 'interested' view" (Zizek, 1991: 12). One of the ways Zizek has of "looking at an angle" is to turn his attention towards things we don't associate with the particular domain under scrutiny. Thus we find him writing a piece provocatively entitled, "How real is reality?" and then addressing the questions of philosophical import this poses by turning to very ordinary sources found in popular culture. One of those ordinary sources Zizek uses to explore the situatedness of our reason is a story called "Black House" by Patricia Highsmith (Zizek, 1991: 8-9). The gist of the story is as follows:

Just outside a small American town, a desolate old house stands on a hill. The house is a potent space, imbued with a strange power of enchantment. When people gather in the evenings at the local saloon, endlessly telling stories and reliving fond memories and old adventures, they invariably refer to the 'black house'. Tales are told of how men kissed the prettiest girl in town there, of forbidden first cigarettes smoked there, of how it has been the site of illicit sexual encounters. The 'black house' is also a prohibited space. Entry into it is taboo amongst the townspeople. Rumour has it that the house is haunted, inhabited by someone who threatens death to any trespasser.

Into the town comes a newcomer and the hero of the tale, a young engineer. After listening to the townsfolk's stories, the young engineer announces that he intends to explore the house and put an end to the mystery. Not persuaded by the warnings he has heard, he is determined to certify what is really there. The response on the part of the townsfolk to his announcement is silent but intense disapproval.
Nevertheless, the engineer persists in his plans and next evening visits the house. He explores with trepidation the dark ruin, forcing himself to climb its creaking staircase. What he finds is nothing, only empty rooms.

Upon returning to the bar the following evening, the engineer victoriously informs the gathering that there isn't anything at all interesting or out of the ordinary about the house. The reaction on the part of the townsfolk is strange. While relief might have been expected, their response is instead a mixture of anger and horror. As the young engineer begins to leave, he is attacked by the townsfolk, falls to the ground and soon afterwards dies of his injuries.

Just a story, meant only for popular entertainment. This might well be a commensensical response to the story. But Zizek insists that tied into that violent reaction of the townsfolk to the findings of the young engineer is something important pertaining to the movement of reason and therefore to our self understanding. What fascinates him about the story are the two discontinuous realities or "substances" which emerge. One is a blank spot, a space where nothing unusual is seen, a space where everything is normal, as expected. This is the house as the young engineer sees it Zizek calls this familiar, habitual, ordinary world "reality". The other space, that one which opens up when we look with desire, when we look awry, he likens to a screen on which a drama of our desires gets played out. This Zizek calls the "real".

Zizek argues that there is a discord between these two realities that he calls "reality" and the "real". What's more, he argues, this discord is a necessary one. A barrier separates the two, excludes the space of desire from the normal, the expected and the everyday. And any threat to that barrier, any move to eliminate it, is dangerous and foolish, as the engineer learned. In his desire to show the townsfolk things as they really were, the engineer would have collapsed that
difference, put an end to the dreams, annihilated that space born out of nothing but desire, nothing but what we might call the community's pleasures -- their memories, their dreams, their myths, their stories.

We might compare the engineer's actions to those of the child in that story of the Emperor's new clothes, yet another of those stories Zizek provides as an example to illustrate the folly of dismissing communal dreams (Zizek, 1991: 11). The intention, Zizek says, is only to get rid of hypocrisy and pretence. Yet "after the deed, when it is already too late, we suddenly notice that we got more than we bargained for. The very community of which we were a member has disintegrated." Innocent of social conventions and of what is at stake in them, the child sees and proclaims the Emperor's nakedness, whereas the adults see the Emperor's clothes. That is, they are able to "see" the splendour of that which rules over them, where the child sees nothing. The social, the story implies, is tied to our sharing such dreams.

Again an objection might be made against Zizek, this time suggesting that his stories are strange and rather violent accounts of the ordinary, stories of secret desires, of prohibitions and of things hidden within what seems obvious and straightforward. Certainly the way in which he dismembers reality into "reality" and "the real" is rather startling, since two different entities are construed where we might expect a solid and substantial world, one consistently the same. Yet isn't just such a division exactly what we saw in regard to our affection for ordinary life? Didn't we see that in our usage, ordinary life is indeed split into two, into the commonplace and the desired, and that this split in turn constitutes a dynamic or tension which plays itself out in our lives in various ways? And if it's also unsettling that Zizek should designate as "the real" that object-screen of the black house, that fantasy space permeated with desire, we can also see that his uncommon angle serves to reframe the real. No longer is it that which is in hand, the known and
secured; rather it is an absence within the familiar which we seek to recover. It is the missing part of the whole, the object of desire which structures our search and the movement of our reason. Given the story of the engineer's death, it is also an essential and well guarded space, one necessary for human community and a human world.

Zizek provides further evidence for us concerning the import of this mysterious split between reality and the real when he recounts a story of the death by suicide of the American Abstract Expressionist, Mark Rothko. His story not only re-frames the argument concerning the need to preserve communal dreams, but in doing so, it helps to deepen our insights into the importance of "looking awry". This it does by showing how such a difference is necessary if we are to see anything at all (Zizek, 1991: 19).

Rothko was found dead one day in a pool of blood in his New York loft, his wrists slashed. The story of Rothko's growing despair, Zizek maintains, is one that can be read from his paintings. For the most part, these comprised a set of abstract colour variations which drew on a much earlier work by Kasimir Malevich entitled "The Naked Unframed Icon of My Time". Malevich's piece was a geometrical abstraction consisting solely of a primal dichotomy, a black square on a white ground. Given the title and the imagery, we might with justification construe it as an image or 'icon' of painting's task, one reduced to a bare minimum.

In Rothko's paintings, this minimalist icon emerged as an ongoing struggle between a gray background and a central black spot. Grey and black are, of course, a way of formulating the minimum degree of difference necessary to preserve the division between "background" and "object", and thereby to preserve a space of appearance. It is the minimum necessary if some thing is to appear, and if we are to see. Zizek argues that the grey background images what he has termed "reality". It
is the ordinary, the open space, the context, the landscape against and in which things can appear. The black spot is the "real", the lodging or inscription of the desire within a space/object. The struggle which Rothko lost, Zizek maintains, was to keep one from overwhelming the other, and to stop all from fading into a "grey and formless mist". It is Zizek's image of the grey and formless mist which reveals why we need to "look awry". Without the difference between the ordinary and an inscribed desire, nothing can be seen. The desire directs and focuses our seeing.

Reflection and the Commonplace

Zizek's story serves as a warning to us that not only are we collected together within dreams, but that dreams are necessary if we are to see at all and to live as a community. For Zizek, the movement of reason does not lead towards the revelation of the emptiness of our common place and towards a freedom from illusion. Rather, he sees reason as travelling within and oriented towards such illusions, illusions given shape as communal dreaming.

In this regard, we have argued that within modernity a deep attachment to ordinary life orients the movement of our thought and helps to give us our bearings. We have given examples to show how this attachment makes demands which not everyone or everything meets. The inscription of the dream or desire serves to split the given into two opposing fields, into the desired and into the mundane. This also suggests that a reflective or critical stance is made possible by virtue of that very attachment, since the attachment makes it possible for us to assess the worth of our actions by providing us with what we might construe as a measure or standard, one which is itself an integral part of our commonplace, of our shared world. As such, it is available or part of all of us. This is to say that we all share an affection for ordinary life and discriminate concerning its implications.
Michael Walzer argues in this regard that criticism is a feature of everyday life. What is needed, however, is for us to regain an understanding of the critical power of the existing morality. Our commonplace, he argues, provides us with all the resources necessary to critically reflect upon, to reinterpret and to deepen our understanding of that very commonplace, and therefore of the goals and standards and dreams which form and direct us. Our lives, our practices, he says, "embody their own values... values created by conversation, argument and political negotiation in circumstances we might best call social, over long periods of time." (Walzer, 1987: 13). Our categories, relationships, commitments and aspirations -- all are shaped by and expressed in terms of the morality of that commonplace, a morality which has emerged over a long period of argument, dispute, and conversation which has interpreted, revised and elaborated it.

Walzer further proposes that whenever we argue or discuss or dispute, what we are actually doing is giving an account of the existing standards of our community (Walzer, 1987: 21). Such accounts are provided whenever and however we attempt to justify our actions and understandings to others, an undertaking in which we are all constantly engaged.

"Every human society provides for its members -- they provide for themselves through the medium of justification -- standards of virtuous character, worthy performance, just social arrangements."

"The standards are social artifacts; they are embodied in many different forms. In all their forms they are subject to interpretation." (Walzer, 1987: 47-48)

Criticism, argument, discussion are always an interpretation of the existing morality. This means that we are never intellectually or emotionally detached. Rather, as Walzer says, we share not only a common enterprise but also the principles which guide that enterprise, since as we have argued, it is our illusions, dreams, attachments, that which we love and value, which make possible our critical capacity
(Walzer, 1987: 47). It is for this reason that Walzer can say that, "the same men and women who act badly create and sustain the standards by which (at least sometimes), they know themselves to act badly" (Walzer, 1987: 48).

That we all share these standards is not at all to suggest that there are not better and worse accounts or understandings of them. Walzer proposes that the best accounts are those which illuminate that commonplace which we love and value in some more powerful way. Like Zizek, he seems to imply that the task of the thinker is one of deepening our understandings through illumination and clarification of our desires and attachments, one which at the same time sustains, refines and deepens those very attachments. In this way, he too suggests that any thinker must necessarily strive to "look awry" by assuming an extra-ordinary stance, one capable of such illumination.

We have, however, seen that our modern affection for ordinary life creates tensions in this regard. "Affirming the ordinary" has often been understood to require a levelling of differences or a denial of their import. Such a levelling tendency is capable of rendering any quest for quality or excellence, for the discrimination of better or worse understandings, even for any notion of the good life, suspect. Rather than engaging us in conversation which explores and thereby sustains the uncanny and extra-ordinary heart of our common home, such a commitment has frequently fostered instead an understanding and attachment to our mutual ordinarness. At times the very will to converse has been threatened in the name of such a principle. This paper attempts to resist such calls to ordinarness, not by attempting to destroy the communal attachment to ordinary life, but rather by undertaking a series of reframings which allows for reflection upon this attachment as it is embodied in various social artifacts.
Harvey Sacks and the Theoretical Inscription of Desire

It has been argued that within modernity, a great affection for ordinary life gives an orientation to the movement of reason. This affection is not only found across all domains; it also takes a variety of shapes. It is to the sociological domain that we will turn for our first example, to a 1970 lecture by ethnomethodologist Harvey Sacks which frames his concerns with ordinary life.

Entitled "On Doing Being Ordinary", the work begins by opening up a gap between the ordinary and the extra-ordinary in which the theoretical enterprise is lodged. However, this gap is eventually closed in such a way that "ordinary life" and the "ordinary member" are left untransformed by the extra-ordinary task of theorizing. Ultimately, we argue, Sacks' theorizing affirms the "ordinariness" of everyday life and fails to engage the commonplace of which it is a part in a thoughtful conversation capable of exploring and revitalizing our self-understanding.

The lecture began in a strange way: "Usually I start the course by doing what I do in the course... without any indication of why it should be of any interest to anybody." (Sacks, 1984: 413). While "doing what I do" might serve to remind us of those concerns with the structures of everyday life which so preoccupied Sacks as an ethnomethodologist, that opening word "usually" points to a difference between this lecture and his ordinary sociological routine. It's a difference which constitutes that very kind of "looking awry" which Zizek advocates. In this regard, it's also a difference which allows Sacks to show what it is that he usually does by means of a revelation of that which is hidden within the routine practices of his sociological work.
The usual routine for Sacks was to offer no explanation of what he does. Usually, he simply "does". In this extra-ordinary moment, however, he wants to reflect upon what he does. He wants to stand back and look upon it and, in this way, to reframe it from a different vantage point.

"The way I will proceed today is, in many ways, nothing like the way I will proceed throughout the rest of the course. In this lecture I will not be attempting to prove anything, and I will not be studying the technology of telling stories in conversation. I will be saying some things about why the study of storytelling should be of interest to anybody." (Sacks, 1984: 414).

On this special occasion, Sacks chooses to speak about why storytelling is of value and of interest to all (Sacks, 1984: 413). It's not just valuable for him, or a few, but pertains to anybody. As for the "why" of this, it refers to "something that ... could hardly not be of interest" to the students; moreover, this "something" is so good its "worth the price of the course". The promise made by Sacks is that his account will not only be interesting but will also direct us to what is valuable. His account is necessary because, it seems, the interesting and the valuable are aspects of the world which the ordinary, by virtue of its very ordinariness, cannot make manifest.

Sacks directs us towards a sense of something mysterious which lies at the heart of his ordinary work -- something which constitutes his raison d'être for doing sociology. He wants and needs to convince the students of the value of this mysterious something. Somehow, he needs to pass on the desire to search for it in ordinary life. This he cannot do by means of his own ordinary work which is dry and difficult technical analysis, analysis of the "technology of conversation" in which he "tears apart" sequences of conversation "to find the rules, techniques, procedures, methods, maxims etc." that are used by members in the generation of the orderly features of conversation (Sacks, 1984: 413-414). Sacks understands that he must give a shape to that everyday work in a way which will infuse it with mystery, illuminate something extra-ordinary within it. Hence the lecture, through which the
students may encounter that mysterious and exciting thing which animates the routine and the everyday. This is required if they are to stay with the work and become part of the community of sociologists.

Sacks' lecture is therefore the infusion of desire, a putting into play of a chain of persuasion. In fact, it's a story of a persuasion within a persuasion. First, there is the tale of Sacks' own persuasion. "Citing a debt", he says, and hinting provocatively at a mysterious foreign novel entitled "Between Life and Death" as his benefactor. Not a text the students should read, he says, for it's not likely they would find there what he says. That is very different. It's not that the two accounts look at all the same. Still, this novel is a source to which he owes a debt, for it was there he encountered the source of his vocation and experienced that mysterious something which transformed his enterprise from the tedious and routine into something exciting to which he was now deeply committed.

If we take Sacks' lecture in this way as a persuasion, how is it that his persuasion "affirms the ordinary" by inscribing it with desire? We might begin our answer by saying that it constitutes a persuasion about the importance of the ordinary. It serves to impress upon us that everyday accounts of our lives should be of interest to us, that there is something there important but mysterious that we forget and don't usually see.

Thus we encounter in the lecture the suggestion of detective work, of a search for clues. If the students are to see the way in which the novel is a source, they would have to play at being the sleuth, make connections, use their imagination to work at how these disparate things are the same. They would have to bring them together to find this new unity, gather them as Sacks himself had done and work to separate out that mysterious something from all the confusion, for the formal aspects of the two persuasions differ. That is, they don't look at all the same; one's
fiction, a novel, and one's non-fiction, i.e. a sociology lecture. We might argue that in fact they are construed as opposing kinds of writing. Yet both are shown by Sacks to be animated by a concern for the pursuit of what is valuable, interesting and good to do. And both are somehow joined together in his own work.

We see, then, that the students need to come to share the desire to search and Sacks needs to persuade them. The extra-ordinary lecture thus enters the realm of rhetoric, what Plato would have called the realm of beautiful speeches aimed at heart and mind in unison, speeches which cultivate our desires for what is not only beautiful but good. "On Doing Being Ordinary": this title becomes strange and unsettling as we read the text, like Zizek's notion of the real and reality. The ordinary hints at an attachment to the extra-ordinary, the sublime to the banal, and sociological truth seems to be walking hand in hand with fiction.

If as we have argued Sacks' work serves to affirm the ordinary, we might also argue that at the same time it is a persuasion about seeing the power that the habitual has over us. We might argue as well that it tries to persuade us to see how the habitual, the usual and the normal are themselves the result of a prior persuasion to which we have already succumbed. The lecture seeks in this way to dislodge the solidity of the normal and the average. It shows them to have been reached for, to be the unfolding and working out of human desires. We are persuaded to see the ordinary as a way in which we constitute ourselves, and in this regard, the persuasion serves to open up the issue of our self constitution, what we are and can be. "The ordinary" is therefore shown not only as the habitual, but as something we enact, put into play, as a dream or desire which animates us.

"...So I am not going to be talking about an ordinary person as this or that person, or as some average; that is, as a nonexceptional person on some statistical basis, but as something that is the way somebody constitutes oneself." (Sacks, 1984: 413).
"It is not that somebody is ordinary; it is perhaps that that is what one's business is, and it takes work, as any other business does." (Sacks, 1984: 413)

Being ordinary: see it as a doing, Sacks tells the sociology students, as a course of action -- despite the fact that your choosing and your deliberation may well not be apparent to you. Judgment is involved, always. Decisions have been made, always. Don't take the taken-for-grantedness of the everyday world for granted. In this regard he refers to a "powerful mechanism at work", one which structures vision.

"....you can begin to appreciate that there is some immensely powerful kind of mechanism operating in handling your perceptions and thoughts, other than the known and immensely powerful things like the chemistry of vision..." (Sacks, 1984: 418)

Seeing the ordinary or seeing ordinarily are never pure perception, never pure intuition. Sacks urges the reader to be sensitive to the mediation of all sight. Seeing, Sacks seems to say, is always a seeing as. In terms of the ordinary, this means we see things 'as the ordinary', with an eye fixed on the ordinary as the measure of what should be noted, of what and how things demand our attention. It's as though Sacks is telling us that for the most part, the world is focused through the lens of our knowledge of how the world ordinarily is, and that seeing this is our way of understanding what is required. See, says Sacks, that you see things in their usual form. But in doing that, see that you cast your sights forward with the ordinary in mind as your trophy, as your object of desire. Thus he seems to be reminding us that we tend to forget about this desire and longing at the heart of the habitual, the everyday and the ordinary:

"... it is that the cast of mind of doing "being ordinary" is essentially that your business in life is only to see and report the usual aspects of any possibly usual scene.

... That is to say, what you look for is to see how any scene you are in can be made an ordinary scene, a usual scene, and that is what the scene is." (Sacks, 1984: 416)
This is such that in the ordinary frame of mind, even unusual or extra-ordinary experiences get constituted in the way they usually are, in a typical form.

"When you have an affair, take drugs, commit a crime, and so on, you find that it has been the usual experience that others who have done it have had." (Sacks, 1984: 418)

At the same time that he shows the powerful mechanism, the seemingly unthought nature of being ordinary, we can see Sacks to be showing us that it entails a working out of things, a kind of reflection. It is a doing, as he puts it.

"...If you just extend the analogy of what you obviously think of as work - as whatever it is that takes analytic, intellectual, emotional energy - then you will be able to see that all sorts of nominalized things, for example, personal characteristics and the like, are jobs that are done, that took some kind of effort, training and so on." (Sacks, 1984: 414)

"... It is not that you happen to decide, gee I'll watch T.V tonight, but that you are making a job of, and finding an answer to, how to do being ordinary tonight." (Sacks, 1984: 415)

"...watching yourself live in the world -- or watching somebody else, if that is more pleasant -- you could see them working at finding how to make it ordinary..." (Sacks, 1984: 415)

What we might gather from these statements is that the ordinary is a kind of ongoing analytical achievement, a concerted working out which requires intellectual labour. "All kinds of nominalized things", Sacks says, "are jobs that are done". That is, those 'things' that we name and understand as entities, as things with properties, should be seen as social achievements. They emerge by means of our actions, actions in which the projected understanding of what they are ordinarily serves as a guide for what we do. As a choice of action, even the habitual demands analysis, intellectual and emotional energy, since we always are called upon to know it in the moment, in the context, in its particularity. We must know the moment as the ordinary moment, how to make this the ordinary thing, how to be the ordinary
person here and now. What's more, we also know and enact the ordinary from temporally and spatially differentiated angles and perspectives -- e.g. as black women or white men. All these categories and differences have to be incorporated into a joint production of ordinariness. As a result, an integral part of ordinary life, albeit ordinarily an unnoticed part, is that we are jointly involved in making a myriad of judgments and choices through which we enact that life. This happens in such a way that we ordinarily understand ourselves to be just scanning a scene to see what's happening, or merely reporting what we see. We do not see the selection at work, the analytic work involved in seeing through or as the ordinary.

It is also of crucial importance to Sacks that we be aware that the dream of ordinary life is necessarily of the community, communally constituted, a concerted effort. The dreams we follow always emerge from out of a prior persuasion and are passed on by us. We always have a sense of what is important and of the value of things, and this we enact in various ways.

"... And as it happens with you, so it happens with those you know" (Sacks, 1984: 418).

Ordinariness is not then a matter of self-declaration, but is already constituted as communal knowledge of what things are and can be: it is a common or shared place. This communal constitution of ordinariness means that for any number of categories and conditions, its achievement is extremely limited and difficult. For the disabled, the mentally ill, prisoners, the very poor etc., an achievement of ordinary status would indeed be a heroic achievement, one entailing a struggle.

A further dimension of this communal constitution of the ordinary life is that its achievement requires that plot lines be matched with other plot lines, with other ordinary stories. In this way, Sacks reminds us of that aspect of ordinary life on which Walzer commented; that is, it is conversational and even argumentative, in
that what we do is assessed and commented on by others, and their reactions to what we do come back to us and reveal dimensions of our actions of which we may be unaware and which require subsequent rectification. This is to say that our actions are always reframed by others, and these refractions are and indeed must be taken into account as part of our ongoing lives. If ordinary people are to be, it must be worked out so "that each of them together may be ordinary persons". Being ordinary requires concerted effort - playing the tune together, ensemble work. "...It's a job that persons and the people around them may be coordinatively engaged in, to achieve that each of them together, are ordinary persons." (Sacks, 1984: 413).

We might therefore argue that ordinariness is apprehended here not only as habit, but as a powerful commitment. To see it as a commitment is to imply that we find it desirable, see it as good. Sacks' argument is that we constitute ourselves in the light of ordinariness, as the usual, the expected, the average and the normal. As such, it is a self-limitation we impose on each other. We direct ourselves towards being understood by others in this way; that is, we put on a joint production establishing mutual ordinariness. We see to it that we are understood to be doing the usual thing, and we look to others to do the same. We are, he says, always on guard for the ordinary.

"That is, if you come home and report what the grass looked like along the freeway; that there were four noticeable shades of green... then there might well be some tightening up on the part of your recipient.... you might want to check out the costs of venturing into making your life an epic." (Sacks, 1984: 419)

In this portrait of ordinary life we can see echoes of Heidegger's portrayal of "being average" in Being and Time as delineated by John McCumber:

"The world itself is always a shared world and refers to me as an average person. My inherent tendency is to identify myself with the average." (McCumber, 1989: 110)
"Everyone keeps his eye on the other first and foremost, watching how he will comport himself and what he will say in reply. Being with one another in Das Man is by no means an indifferent side by sidedness in which everything has been settled, but rather an intent ambiguous watching" (McCumber, 1989: ll6)

If ordinariness is a communal dream, its achievement entails that we are answerable to the community for what we do. Compliance with the ordinary, the usual is monitored. It is sanctionable, and we orient to that. As might be the case with any dream, there is a need to be alert, to watch others and to watch oneself in order to see that that is what takes place. In this way, we can see how the ordinary as the average and the norm forms a powerful basis of unity, of community, and how it can bind us together.

Sacks' persuasion urges us to see that we story our lives in this way, that ordinariness is biography/autobiography. Being ordinary, runs Sacks' account, is not something one is, as a state of externally driven necessity or nature, or a description of innate or acquired characteristics given by the statistical norm. As self-presentation, being ordinary is an enactment, a putting into play of something, of a notion or an image. Sacks thus posits being ordinary as dramatic play, as analogous to a theatrical production where ordinariness is the issue at stake.

The Sociological Vocation: 'Ordinariness' and Self-Knowledge

"Venturing outside the ordinary has unknown virtues and unknown costs" (Sacks, 1984: 419)

Sacks' evocation of ordinariness is very compelling. There is no denying the emphasis he places on the average, the norm, the expected and the usual as the common understanding of the grounds of social life. A very powerful image of our attachment to averageness and the norm as the basis of modern community is conjured up for us, as well as the pervasiveness of this understanding in our world.
He speaks so powerfully of it as a self-imposed limit, almost as though he sees it as the human limit or the principle which gathers us together, both as individuals and as a human community. Yet I said that it was "almost" as though Sacks sees ordinariness as the human limit because he also serves to make us aware that we always enact an understanding of what is called for, which means that there is an ongoing working out of what that is, through concerted efforts, in dialogue.

In that Sacks shows how the ordinary is in this way always given a specific formulation through a course of action, he also makes it easy to see the possibility that various permutations and different interpretations or understandings might appear, and that some of these will be better and more illuminating than others, as Walzer has argued. Furthermore, Sacks' own response to this limit of ordinariness is complex. While he doesn't openly address the worth of this understanding of the basis of community, we might say that his actions argue against it. He himself does not 'do' the average and the normal thing. Viewing his actions from our vantage point, one from which we are able to see differences between what Sacks says and what he does, we can see that his actions assert the importance of looking awry at the average and the usual and the habitual. The implication of his actions is that there are different and better ways of responding to our communal attachment to ordinary life and to the commonplace. That is, a reflective engagement with ordinary life is taken up as a stronger and better grounding of community. It has, as he says, unknown virtues.

Fundamental to any such reflection is the need to be aware of our immersion in the commonplace. We must see that we are mutually enacting dreams and desires which serve to order the habitual, and attend to these. Sacks' own extraordinary intervention, his persuasion of the students, his attempts to disrupt their everyday ways of seeing and their indifference -- all point to something mysterious
which the habitual and taken-for-granted hide from view. For him the value of that extra-ordinary work which constitutes the task of sociology lies in focusing our attention upon that which we are not able to see when "doing being ordinary".

What Sacks enacts, we might therefore suggest, is a way of social enquiry which responds to our social situatedness by attempting to engage things from a different or extra-ordinary perspective, one which is repressed or hidden by the usual or the normal.

"... I think it is not that you might make such observations but not include them in the story, but it is that the cast of mind of doing "being ordinary" is essentially that your business in life is only to see and report the usual aspects of any possibly usual scene" (Sacks, 1984: 416)

His aim is the cultivation of self-reflection in his students. As sociologist, one stands back from "doing being ordinary", re-presents it to oneself. In this way, one is able to see something the everyday framing excludes and to open up unexplored depths into which we can journey.

What the lecture also makes evident is that ordinary life needs extra-ordinary practices such as sociology to show what it is. The ordinary is not and cannot be shown without continually calling attention to the extra-ordinary. One is only brought into sight by being played against the other. In this regard, we might remember that it was fiction, a novel, that revealed the heart of the factual sociological enterprise to Sacks. Furthermore, his lecture opened with invocations of art and fiction, and his portrayal of doing being ordinary was rendered via the extraordinariness of art. That is, he at first shows ordinary life to be a kind of artful enactment or theatre. In the course of the lecture, however, when sociology is called up as the vehicle through which the heart of ordinary life appears, the artfulness of ordinary life slips out of sight, and sociology takes its place as the extra-ordinary practice. As such, it is also construed by Sacks as a kind of writing.
However, it is one more akin to the documentation and recording of observations found in the natural sciences:

"My notion is that as it is for chemistry and physics, so it is for making distinctive observations about the world and its persons. It is just a thing that, in being ordinary, you do not do." (Sacks, 1984: 416)

Sacks' own sociological work concerned the recording of the most minute and detailed observations of the techniques and procedures through which the life world is achieved and made intelligible.

In that this writing which constitutes the extra-ordinary endeavour of sociology is shown by bringing it into proximity with that of natural science, the study of the social world is at the same time brought into an affinity with the study of the natural world. But in reframing the human world through nature in this way, it could be argued that a certain exchange of properties also occurs, one which has some serious implications. For example, while Sacks casts science as an art of writing in order to show what it is, the analogy yields a very strange version of art. Art becomes a kind of documentation or recording of a tangible world of things already given. Sacks speaks of it, for example, in terms of "observations" and "elaborated studies of small, real objects":

"There are of course, people whose job it is to make such observations. If you were to pick up the notebooks of writers, poets, novelists, you would be likely to find elaborated studies of small, real objects." (Sacks, 1984: 416)

Even those writerly descriptions, the ones which Sacks treated as extra-ordinary and against which he showed us ordinary life, even these take the form of documented observations of natural things or of physical appearances. For example, he speaks of "the play of light on the liquor glasses", "the set of his eyebrows" and "the timbre of his voice" and "what the grass looked like along the
freeway and "that there were four noticeable shades of green". And when Sacks even goes so far as to call up poetry in order to reveal to us his descriptive sociological enterprise, we see quite clearly how the recording of an existing or natural world, a world already given to us, is used to stand for the whole of writing.

"(In) ...the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, there are extended naturalistic observations of a detailed sort, of cloud formations, of what a leaf looks like, looking up at it under varying types of light, and so on." (Sacks, 1984: 416)

In summarizing this, we might therefore argue that throughout Sacks' lecture, two kinds of writing are played off against each other: documentation and fiction. The work begins with the evocation of fiction, but in the course of the work, the fictional writing is repressed, and only factual documentation of the given ultimately remains. Ordinary life as poetic enactment seems to disappear from the frame, while sociology emerges as its more prosaic counterpart, one which observes and records and documents the life world, but does not contribute to its poetic enactment. Its limit is also the ordinariness of the life world.

Further aspects of this can be seen in a paper by Roy Turner in the anthology Ethnomethodology, where that relationship between scientist and sociologist is elaborated in the following manner:

"..."If we take sociology to be, in effect, 'a natural history of the social world', then sociologists are committed to a study of the activities such a world provides for and of the methodical achievement of those activities by socialized members." (Turner: 1974: 197)

The sociologist is able to get a position on what is natural, an angle or framing from which he/she can see the world, even though embedded in that world. The sociologist will see what cannot be seen when doing being ordinary, even though sociology is also socially organized activity or a kind of 'doing', just like ordinary life.
Turner's position is that like all practices, sociology is methodically achieved through the activities of social members. The sociologist uses the same cultural "equipment", as he puts it. Here we might substitute those constituent "rules, techniques, procedures, maxims" etc. to which Sacks makes reference. The sociologist is likened to the natural historian who delineates the ways in which the life world of natural beings is given shape.

Turner's sociologist will be extra-ordinary, however, in that he/she will delineate, as did Sacks, these methodical activities through which the social world emerges. Certainly in ordinary life the observations of such rules, techniques, procedures and maxims would be annoying and disturbing, and anyone undertaking them would find themselves at odds with those around them. Even though these techniques comprise the 'equipment' out of which meaning is made and a story enacted, to draw attention to them would disrupt the task at hand. It would be tantamount to pointing out the grammatical structure of someone's sentences as they are trying to tell you something. We might therefore suggest that to undertake such analysis is to turn attention to an analysis of means and away from what it is that is being said. It is to address the 'how' but not the 'what' of artful practices. What's more, framing the social by means of an affinity with 'equipment' gives not only sociology but the whole life world a certain utilitarian cast, an aura of everyday usefulness. The poetry of life comes to assume more the character of the 'tools' of the craft, and there is a concomitant failure to engage in conversation the question of what the craft is oriented to, what it is attempting to say, what constitutes its purpose or its limits.

We might therefore conclude our reflections within this particular sociological framing by arguing that Sacks' lecture speaks to the commonplace as the space in which our enactment of ordinariness is made intelligible. This is to say
that it treats intelligible ordinariness as the principle which limits the community in the form of social rules, practices, and techniques. At the same time, Sacks' work remains strangely silent concerning the principle or limit to which it, as a specific enactment of sociological practice, is also oriented. This limit, we have argued, is the value of reflection upon the habitual and the commonplace. It is the principle of looking awry, of the reframe necessary to sustain the sense of mystery at the heart of the ordinary which provides reason with the driving force of desire.
FRAME THREE
THE CARTESIAN AFFIRMATION OF ORDINARY LIFE

"Through the brilliance of an image, the distant past resounds with echoes, and it is hard to know at what depth these echoes will reverberate and die away"

Gaston Bachelard
The Poetics of Space

The Commonplace as Error and Illusion

Gadamer argues that the work of reason entails finding the permanent and enduring in what is transient and threatens to pass away. The lover of wisdom must seek to "discover what is common even in what is different" (Gadamer, 1986: 12). He argues that not only must we take this task upon ourselves, we must make it possible with the help of imagination. This is because the past and the future appear differently. Imaginative effort must be therefore be exerted to mediate the two and to establish what it is that is shared, since this is not immediately apparent or naturally given. Just as Walzer says that when we argue we offer an account of the existing morality, Gadamer insists that it is in how we join past and future together, how we "grasp and express the path anew", that we are the bearers of the tradition (Gadamer, 1986: 49). This is to say that tradition lives on in the way in which it is enacted in the present, in the particularity of our understandings.

Within a tradition, certain landmark works serve to make the tradition live on in a powerful way. Time after time, generation after generation, we have felt the need to return to those works, to submit ourselves to their power, to puzzle over them and to try to assess their insights as we have charted our bearings within the
movement of thought. When engaging tradition in Sources of the Self, Taylor emphasized the way in which our affection for ordinary life was displayed in a preoccupation with provisions for material welfare, with consumption, production and exchange, and with a search for well-being in that regard. Historian that he is, Taylor traced this affection for ordinary life back to aspects of Christian thought. Certainly it's hard to think of a more complex condensation of the ordinary and the extra-ordinary than the figure of Jesus, son of God, born of flesh and blood, lowly carpenter's son yet King of Kings. Furthermore, it's clear that a celebration of ordinary life and the ordinary person has been read into that story. While the contemporary examples are many, we might think of how Frank Capra referred to Jesus as "the first John Doe" in that film eulogy of his to ordinary man, or of Pasolini's condensation of the figure of Jesus and the modern poor in "The Gospel According to St. Mathew". Both of these examples connect the story of Christ with ordinary life in terms of wealth and its concomitant social status, or lack thereof.

We might also argue that the writings of Descartes have served as some of the most enigmatic but influential interpretations of that Christian tradition. As such, they have contributed enormously to modernity's self-understanding and developed and sustained its commitment to ordinary life. Descartes' attachment to ordinary life is linked to a radical Christian separation of the physical and the spiritual and of the spheres of God and man. Given such a division between the realm of the divine and that of ordinary life, between spiritual and material being, we argue that Descartes was influential in relocating the task of reason within the precincts of ordinary life by advocating the value of reason's service to material well being and to understanding the solidity and substantiveness of physical things.

This can, of course, be associated with that powerful yearning for the enduring which Gadamer links with the movement of reason. However, if
Gadamer's suggestion is that every work mediates the past and the future, the old and the new in this regard, Descartes sought the enduring in the form of certainty, and saw this to necessitate a radical split with what he saw as the impermanence of the past. He decried the lack of durability and certitude in the tradition of thought which had preceded him, lamenting in his *Discourse on Method* that "I considered that nothing solid could have been built on such shifting foundations." (Descartes, 1968: 32). If his work preserves the past in the present, it therefore does so by setting up the future in opposition to the past. The future was seen to promise all that the past precluded. The task of reason in the present was therefore to effect and secure their separation.

Thus it was *against* a picture of the ugly disorder and uncertainty of the cities he knew and lived in, of the commonplace in which he found himself, that Descartes sketched out the shape of our desires in a vision of a new and beautiful community. He sought to frame an alternate vision of the city, a city which would supersede that ugly confusion of the past and the present. In the old city which he saw around him, people found themselves together not in accord with where or how they had chosen to be, but where history had placed them. This means that Descartes saw the way in which the commonplace is not of our own making or of our own design. Its order is not visible nor under our control, but is instead resistant to our desires and to our notions of what is good. So we find in his picture of the old city of the commonplace that the streets weren't straight and did not proceed directly in accord with any intended destination. Instead, they dallied and bent -- to accommodate what had come before, bowing to the past's authority over the latecomer, to unforeseen circumstances, to changes of mind, to what was dear to other inhabitants, bowing even to various whims, to what was folly and fantasy. The social world was a
community of people bound together through a plethora of old affections, commitments, inherited customs, habits and attachments.

For Descartes, this resulted in a city which was disproportionate, messy and unsightly. Its categories were confused and nothing was in its proper place. The small house sat next to the large and there was a confusion of directions and levels. Furthermore, the city changed endlessly, with parts being added, parts being revised, parts falling into disuse and decay because of changes of circumstances, changes of commitment and changes in ideas of what was good and bad. Nothing seemed to be permanent, nothing fixed or of an order that could be immediately and thoroughly grasped.

"One sees that buildings undertaken and completed by a single architect are usually more beautiful and better ordered than those that several architects have tried to put into shape making use of old walls which were built for other purposes. So it is that these old cities which, originally only villages, have become, through the passage of time great towns, are usually so badly proportioned in comparison with those orderly towns which an engineer designs at will on some plain, that, although the buildings, taken separately, often display as much art as those of the planned towns or even more, nevertheless, seeing how they are placed, with a big one here, a small one there and how they cause the streets to bend and to be at different levels, one has the impression that they are more the product of chance than that of a human will operating according to reason." (Descartes, 1968: 35)

It's hard for us today, altogether too familiar with the modern grid, the freeway and the North American metropolis, to imagine the delight these images of Descartes must have given and the pleasures they promised. Perhaps if we invoke instead the joy felt upon cleaning up a mess, the delight we feel when things are put in proper order, or perhaps the pleasure and promise of the fresh start, the clean slate and the open horizon, we would have more of a sense of their impact, and be better able to experience the power of the Discourses as the incredible rallying call
that they must have been, the call to end the confusion and to put things right once
and for all.

The city 'put right' would be the new and beautiful community ruled by
reason. The beautiful city of Descartes would be a city built on a plain, a level city,
a city without hierarchy, we might say. No dips, no hills, no turns, no peaks and no
valleys. It would also be a city of perfect visibility and absolute clarity. A city of
straight roads offering unobstructed vision. A city in which a clear sight of the
desired destination was always in view. It's a city in which the solidity of things, their
impermeability and otherness, has been opened up and made accessible everywhere
and to all. Its the open city, the city formed as the conscious product of our choices
and the city open to our choices.

That Descartes had such a vision is not to say that he saw himself as a mere
dreamer. The task of reason was to rid ourselves of the insubstantiality of dreams
and illusions, neither of which for Descartes had any solidity and no certainty. He
wanted the beautiful city built. He wanted it to be a tangible city, a real city, the city
lived in. This meant that the dream city was to be reconciled with ordinary life by
becoming ordinary life and in this way putting an end to the difference between the
two. What this required was a definite way of consciously realizing his plan, a way
of guaranteeing that his "dream" would be one which could be brought into being,
enacted. Any dream was to be limited in this way by what was possible to enact in
ordinary life. Such is the Cartesian response to the commonplace.

As for the utility of the practices of the past in this regard, he was dismissive,
seeing nothing of much use to turn to there. Art? Art had yielded pleasure, but no
settled and clear findings about the world. Philosophy? Philosophical questioning
had engendered only endless confusion and more and more questions. Despite so
many important issues having been attended to by the 'best' minds, everything in
that domain remained open to dispute. "Not one of its problems," he tells us, "is not subject to disagreement, and consequently is uncertain." (Descartes, 1968: 32). Even though the works of the tradition had served succeeding generations as exemplary models of human thought, the diversity, variation and dissension was for Descartes an exemplification of the past's failure. Nothing firm or dependable had been established by means of these pursuits, nothing which could be built on.

"There is only one truth of each thing, and whoever finds it knows as much about the thing as there is to be known!" is the claim made (Descartes, 1968: 43). The way of reason entailed the accumulation of dependable knowledge, of fixed truths about things. It required that things be settled correctly. Rather than engaging the works of the past in conversation and letting their resistance to understanding reveal the limits of any contemporary understanding, Descartes treated these works as wrongful thought which needed to be set right. The works of the past are treated not as potential sources of strange and extra-ordinary 'riches' which ask us to tarry, but rather as part of a social legacy of habitual error, illusion and disorder against which reason must struggle. It is therefore not so much within habitual ways of seeing that Descartes located what he saw to be the problem of the commonplace. Rather, it was that erroneous or undependable thought had become habitual. If we don't know for certain what we believe or why, the Cartesian solution suggests that we should rectify this by certifying the one and correct truth of things. These certified understandings could then be removed from questioning. Habit must struggle to become correct habit, and the generations after Descartes would, it seems, accept the certification of those who came before them on good faith, without any continuing need for reflection. His promise is that in the future, the need would be only to accept the norm and the usual, since otherwise, no solid foundations would be available on which to anchor the social edifice. However,
since the Cartesian thrust is to solidify correct knowledge against the error of the past, a chronic tension is generated in the work between this thrust to solidify correct knowledge by means of correct Methods, and that countervailing thrust to seek out and correct the error of the past.

The Commodious City

It was the engineer, we should remember, who served Descartes as the exemplar of rational man, man the ideal builder of cities. The reasoned city, the engineered city, would be built as the product of calculated acts of human will progressing to a clearly specified destination or goal. Within this framework, reason implies planning and the orderly correlation of ways and desired destinations. The prize which Descartes held up for the reader was the finding of the right way, the way leading with accuracy and certainty to the desired end. This was the Method, the missing but absolutely necessary thing required for the erection of this beautiful new city.

If Descartes saw Method as the thing required, we might argue that it was because he saw the city as something which could be built according to conscious design in the same way that any artifact might be built. Any act of production or fabrication requires that effort be geared to the ends which order the process. For example, when Socrates talks with Thrasymachus in the Republic, he says that "we always distinguish one form of skill from another by its power to effect some particular result" (Plato, 1941: 27). If we undertake to build a house, for example, we must know the use for which a house is designed and built. Plato argues that while this knowledge must be in the possession of the producer, it must also be suited to the one who will use the work, for producer and user are logically not the same. Even empirically, they rarely correspond. Socrates' argument goes on to say that the benefit of a skill does not go to the producer, but to the one who needs the good
that the skill brings about. In this regard, "the physician as such, produces health; the builder, a house; ... thus every art has its own function and benefits its proper subject". This points to any practice as a space of shared understandings concerning ends, as well as to its other-directness, its status as "intelligible communication" as Gadamer has said (Gadamer, 1986: 13).

In that he implicitly acknowledged the shared understandings which any notion of the city entails when he addressed the purpose of the city in this way, Descartes also revealed an orientation to the need to persuade others. He does so by presenting a vision of the city as a whole, a whole in which individual parts have been brought together in some way into a unity. In Descartes' city of reason, as in Sparta, this meant insuring that all would tend towards the same end (Descartes, 1968: 36). Such a clearness and singularity of vision would yield proper proportion, symmetry, order and stability. This compliance with a preconceived and carefully constructed plan to which all must adhere, this self-assigned unity and wholeness, would provide the city with the same kind of beauty and singleness of purpose as the well-conceived artifact.

Again, we ask, what is the end or purpose that Descartes held out to us in this regard? What did he see as the limits to which the city should be oriented, that to which all its ends should tend and to which all would be committed? Given that he saw it as an artifact, Descartes didn't envision this measure as one concerned with the moral conduct of the inhabitants. In that regard, he proposed going along with the least controversial, the most ordinary of moral injunctions: he would "form a provisional moral code of only three to four maxims, obey the laws of his country and adapt his behaviour to that of those with whom he was to live" (Descartes, 1968: 45). It seems fair to say that this was not a particularly thoughtful stance about the moral or political life as ordering principles of community.
Descartes turned instead, as did Sacks centuries later, towards that which the city seemed to exclude, that which was missing from it and needed to be recovered. This Descartes posited as Nature: Nature was that which should be studied and pursued. It was the source or cause of our needs and of our capacity to fulfill them. It constituted our limit. This meant that the important task of human reason, its fundamental task, was "no other occupation than that of trying to acquire some knowledge of Nature". A knowledge of the unknown aspects of physical nature was proposed as the planned route to the good society.

"(It is) desired for the invention of an infinity of devices by which we might enjoy, without any effort, the fruits of the earth and all its commodities, but also principally for the preservation of health, which is undoubtedly the first good, and the foundation of all the other goods of this life; for even the mind depends so much on the temperament and on the disposition of the organs of the body, that if it is possible to find some means of rendering men as a whole wiser and more dexterous than they have been hitherto, I believe it must be sought in medicine" (Descartes, 1968: 78).

The invention of an infinity of devices through which human beings can enjoy without effort the fruits of the earth and all its commodities and the preservation of health -- it was these natural ends, these needs of consumption generated by our biological or 'natural' life, which Descartes proposed as the purpose or end which should properly direct reason. The promise made was that even wisdom would grow through our attendance to these natural needs, since it too was grounded in the body's well-being. And since these concerns were 'naturally' those of everybody, for without them no 'body' could live at all, they also offered the possibility of uniting the community in a concerted effort. Agreement about this goal of the ample provision of commodities should readily be secured, since its importance would be apparent to all, and all would stand to gain in a very obvious way from the endeavour. Furthermore, the satisfaction of these needs would offer that clarity and
singleness of purpose, that unity essential to the proper fabrication of any work. "Linking the lives and labours of many, we might all together go much further than each man could individually." (Descartes, 1968: 79). The obligation of the community was to ensure that all individual needs for material well-being would be met; the whole must be committed to the service of these individual natural needs.

**The Naturalness of Reason**

What need is then left for the extra-ordinary insight within the Cartesian community? The initial discovery of the Method defied the ordinary, since it was only by Descartes "looking awry" at the usual understandings of things that its discovery became possible. But once the right way, the elusive 'Method', was found, the subsequent task of reason would only require our common adherence to that straight path already laid out, a commitment to the satisfaction of all individual needs for the commodious life. With such a foundation for the city, there would be no need for the extra-ordinary insight. Doing things in the agreed upon, correct way could take over.

This eventuality was made possible because of that very naturalness of reason which Descartes took such care to sketch out. He constructed our human capacities as those abilities given by our body, capacities which, as we have just seen, were also placed in the service of that body. Reason is "naturally equal in all men" Descartes says. "The capacity to judge correctly and to distinguish the true from the false, which is properly what one calls common sense or reason, is naturally equal in all men..." (Descartes, 1968: 27). In the opening sentences of the *First Discourse*, for example, the grounds of good sense are located in the capacity to think quickly and easily, to form sharp and clear images and to have a good memory -- all features we would associate with the biophysical underpinning which provides for mental abilities or intelligence. It is indisputable that these are criteria for intelligence and
fundamental capacities which human reason demands. Furthermore, barring accidents of fate, human beings as species members do possess such innate intellectual capacities, capacities which provide the ability to be able to express oneself in language and to carry on the activities of an 'ordinary' human life. Moreover, we assume this capacity in granting citizenship, in the demarcation of adulthood from childhood, in holding people responsible for their actions.

This naturally given intellectual capacity is, however, clearly not equally given to all. Some do have exceptional abilities in this regard. Perhaps even more important however, is that such differences in naturally given intellectual capacities do not account for how well that intelligence is used. Nor can they account for differences in wisdom or character or human spirit. While we recognize differences in capacities, that some are quick to learn, others slow, we also recognize differences in insight, and know that sharp intellects can be turned to things not wise, can waste their talents or turn them to harmful endeavours. Sharp intellects can be of poor character and lack understanding of what is good and what is not. We also recognize that intelligent people can be deceived about things, get confused, be led astray, travel up blind paths, take wrong turnings. It is here, we might argue, that the essence of human tragedy is to be found, in fatal errors of judgment and wrong turnings, rather than in deficient intellectual capacity. These, abilities, we might further argue, are not given "naturally" at all, but require cultivation and good judgment concerning what is worthwhile. They are thus neither inevitable nor guaranteed correct, but subject to error and open to defeat.

Given his propensity for certainty and for limiting actions according to what is achievable in the world, Descartes seemed to want to ignore these differences and to fold them all into natural, bodily given capacities of intellect. He was committed to that notion that intellect (as reason) should find what is correct about things, and
that if this were clearly laid out, all could then follow. However, although the naturally given capacity of intellect had resulted in thought, it was also clear to Descartes that it had not been able to guarantee the achievement of correct understandings. In his Second Meditation, therefore, faithful to his directive to turn to Nature and her truths, Descartes sought out that elusive certainty of Method by turning to the ordinary, everyday things around him, things which were solid and natural, which could be touched and seen, and which we presume to know very well, things like our physical bodies.

In one very well known example, Descartes turned his attention to beeswax (108-109). He called it up by speaking not only of all those ways by which we commonly recognize wax, but also by the ways it delights us and gives us pleasure: the sweetness of the honey, the faint perfume of the flowers from which it was gathered, its colour, its shape and size, its hardness, its coolness. Descartes was not, of course, satisfied with these common ways of knowing the world. If the wax is placed near a flame, its shape, color, size, texture all change, he argued. If constancy and the permanent is what we seek, then where is the constancy of such seemingly tangible things? How can we know them correctly?

Descartes attempted to establish this constancy of things while at the same time trying to link it to a specifically human nature. While Nature was construed as the source of both human and animal nature, he posits internal distinctions within it. That is, he posits a distinction between man and animal which serves to differentiate nature and to break up its homogeneity. This also meant that he shifted ground concerning its meaning, treating it in a much broader sense than as the mere physical capacities with which he started. Nature became that which makes animal and man what they are, and this included reason or consciousness.
"Certainly it could be nothing of all the things which I perceived by means of the senses, for everything which fell under taste, smell, sight, touch or hearing is changed, yet wax remains. Perhaps it was what I now think, namely, that the wax was not the sweetness of honey, or the pleasant smell of flowers, the whiteness, or the shape, nor the sound, but only a body which a little earlier appeared to me in these forms...indeed, nothing remains, except something extended, flexible and malleable.....What was there in that first perception that was distinct and evident, and which could not be perceived in the same way by the sense of the least of animals? But when I distinguish the wax from its external forms, and, just as if I had removed its garments, I consider it quite naked, it is certain that...I cannot conceive of it in this way without possessing a human mind. "(Descartes, 1968: 111)

Human nature, Descartes said, was to be found in the distinctiveness of human reason, and this in turn was more than that capacity we share with animals to recognize entities in the world. Such a capacity serves both animal and man in finding food, in tending to their young, in communicating with each other, in providing for life and physical well being. For Descartes, the difference between this capacity and human reason resided in the capacity man has to mentally picture and conceptualize, and in this way to manipulate that natural or physical world.

We might remember in this regard that Descartes gave over one whole Discourse to an account of the circulation of the blood, writing as though to convince his readers that the permanency of human life lay in finding the permanence of such solid, tangible, natural things as our bodies. This permanency, he argued, was to be found in extension and in malleability, or in the processes involved in their transformation. Thus the truth of solid things is found by looking at extension and process, just as the nature of man is found by examining reason.

We must be clear here that this application of human reason to the natural world does not suggest that the nature of human being is just the physical/biological processes of transformation and movement which comprise the life of our bodies. The fundamental thing about human "natural" being as it emerged in Descartes was that it required the additional transformation not only of things into process, but of
processes into mental images, such that the processes can be examined, bit by bit, and put to human use in the production of artifacts. This is required for the manipulation of nature for the production of commodities, of tangible things for tangible human beings. Human mental images are able to portray what happens outside, to document this in mind. The whole is therefore not only the physical world, but its reflection or doubling in its opposite. In this way, we can argue that the Cartesian 'nature' is divided, that it is not one but the ongoing mediation of two according to a principle of utility.

For Descartes, this mediation entailed reason's mirroring of the processes of nature in the service of our biological nature. His guiding principle was utility and dependability. That is, he wanted to facilitate the transformation of the mystery and extra-ordinariness of nature (what we are, but don't know) into "equipment" and "usefulness" and the "correctly known". His desire was the transformation of the extra-ordinary into that which is reliable and familiar and ordinary. Thus we argued at the outset that Descartes gave us a version of the extra-ordinary which provided for a life without question, the life which does not examine that to which it is oriented. The ultimate achievement for this Cartesian picture of human reason was mathematics, and once again we might think of that engineering model he held up for us, and remember how the way of engineering is to transform physical processes into mathematical equations for purposes of ease and accuracy of manipulation. Contemporary engineering is increasingly able to model the natural world in this way. With modern sophisticated computer facilities, a seemingly infinite number of complex changes can now be simulated. In terms of the production of an infinity of desirable commodities for the service of our material well being and in terms of its facilitation of choice and human control over these aspects of our being, the efficacy of this way of proceeding can hardly be denied. Nor can we question the strength of
our modern attachment to those notions of production, consumption and material well-being to which it speaks and to which Taylor has called our attention, any more than we can question our widespread commitment as a community to provide this for all, even though we cannot all agree about the elusive Method which will guarantee this achievement. Talk of optimizing processes, maximizing efficiency and rationalizing procedures has also come to be seen as quintessentially 'rational', as though getting each of us swiftly and directly and without question to such a productive and commodious end is indeed the ultimate limit of human reason.
FRAME FOUR
THE STRIFE BETWEEN THE EXTRA-ORDINARY AND THE ORDINARY

We believe we are at home in the immediate circle of beings. That which is, is familiar, reliable, ordinary. nevertheless, the clearing is pervaded by a constant concealment .... at bottom, the ordinary is not ordinary; it is extra-ordinary, uncanny.

Martin Heidegger
The Origin of the Work of Art

The Questions Raised by Van Gogh's Boots

Both Sacks and Descartes, we have argued, were committed to versions of the extra-ordinary practice of theorizing which ultimately allowed the community to live out, without question, a very ordinary life. However, reading Sacks' lecture, a strong sense also emerges that art and the beautiful, especially the beauty of the natural world, hover phantom-like behind the scenes of ordinary life. While recognized and frequently alluded to in terms of extra-ordinary endeavours, they remain both unexplained within his construction of the social world as intelligible ordinariness, and repressed within his resolution of the extra-ordinary practice of sociology as the recovery of the 'equipment' out of which that ordinary life of the community is constructed. This failure to adequately account for such practices points towards dimensions of human community which exceed his account of it as the useful and the ordinary.

References to art and the beautiful can also be found in the works of Descartes. While he found art to be pleasureable, he held it to be of little utility in
the task of erecting the new and reasoned city, since it was unable to guarantee results and unable to provide correct, agreed-upon and useful knowledge concerning the world. At the same time that he is dismissive of art, however, we find that when he attempts to persuade us concerning the value of the Cartesian enterprise, he calls upon our desire to erect a beautiful city. What's more, his way of formulating this desire was through the pleasure given by the beautiful appearance of the well designed artifact, a pleasure he exemplified in the clarity and order of the open and level city, the city built to service our ordinary and individual needs for shelter, food, clothing and general physical well being.

While both Sacks and Descartes direct us in these various ways towards art and the beautiful as the appearance of the extra-ordinary and the desirable, in the end both cast them out of their own extra-ordinary theoretical accounts and return to a conception of ordinary life for the community which is quite remote from them. If we therefore see this as an inadequate account of the relationship between the ordinary and the extra-ordinary, how might the place of such extra-ordinary pursuits be better formulated?

That art and the beautiful are indeed extra-ordinary is clearly seen if we think of how difficult it is to imagine an art gallery full of everyday, ordinary useful objects -- an art gallery full of boots, perhaps. Such a gallery would be very strange, for the gallery is a special place, a space of extra-ordinary objects, objects which seek to stand out from the things around them. If art works are beautiful and extra-ordinary, this is commonly understood to be because they copy something beautiful. This speaks to a long-time understanding that art has an imitative role, one in which a certain truth capacity is embedded. That is, it is common understanding that art works copy something. Sacks' notion of poetry as a descriptive recording of nature is a version of this notion of art as copy. We might also note that a similar notion of
the work as a copy serves to characterize his version of the extra-ordinary pursuit of sociology, in that he understands that enterprise to entail the recording or documentation of the means through which the ordinary social world is constructed.

Consider, however, in regard to this notion of art as a copy of beautiful things, that on a number of occasions, Vincent Van Gogh sought to paint 'his truth' into a pair of old peasant boots (e.g. his work of 1886: "Old Boots with Laces"). The subject matter Van Gogh chose to paint is familiar and everyday, and therefore quite understandable, it might well be argued, in terms of that affection we have for ordinary life. Yet it's a curious choice, all the same, to make art out of a pair of old boots -- nothing else but old boots. What is it the boots copy and what does the work say? And if it is indeed an affirmation of everyday life, what is it affirming? We have before us only the work and a pair of old boots, reframed, as art. We can't even tell where the boots stand or to whom they belong. Just a worn, empty, unoccupied pair of boots framed in the undefined space of Van Gogh's canvas. Old boots framed in the space of the beautiful and the extra-ordinary. While this notion of the copy has been especially pervasive in modern understandings of painting, even with those boots right there before our eyes, it's not easy to grasp what the notion implies in terms of such a work.

On the surface, the idea of the work as imitation or a copy appears to be a straightforward proposition, it's success a matter of gauging the similarities and differences between original and copy. Timothy Raser, however, has commented on the way in which imitation is a doctrine against which very different artistic and philosophical movements have sought to define themselves. It has served as a highly charged locus around which tasks and truths have been articulated (Raser, 1989: 19). In this regard we might note that this particular choice of Van Gogh's
interested Heidegger. He kept returning to the question of the boots again and again in *The Origin of the Work of Art* (1975).

Why paint a pair of old boots? One approach Heidegger took in order to get at the questions raised by the painting of the boots was to reframe Van Gogh's work by relating it to the Greek temple. This choice too seems a strange one, since the temple was clearly not an art work in the sense that we have art works today, for art standing on its own as "art" is a modern development. Furthermore, the Greeks painted few pictures, and they certainly did not paint images of old boots. This is to say that Van Gogh's work and subject matter are very modern, unthinkable apart from the history of modern Western art out of which they emerge. When Heidegger chose to contrast the temple with Van Gogh's painting of boots, he did so because he regarded the temple as non-representational. As a work of architecture, it would not commonly be assumed to portray something by presenting a picture of it, by imitating it's 'look', something which Van Gogh's painting of the boots could easily be seen to be doing. That is, Van Gogh's work could be seen to be copying boots, giving us a picture of boots. The comparison with the temple can therefore be treated as a way of opening up the notion of the work as a copy of something. That is, the comparison allows for an enlarged sense of art and of the work to emerge, since art is posited as the unity which collects these two disparate works together. At the same time, the comparison allows us to pursue the issue of the affirmation of ordinary life, both in Van Gogh's work, and in a more general sense.

If the temple clearly doesn't portray by giving us an accurate picture of something, what does it do? Heidegger saw the temple in relation to the notions of destiny, saying that: "It is only from and in this expanse .. that the nation first return(s) to itself for the fulfillment of its vocation." (1975: 42). His understanding of the temple was that it was a gathering place, one needed in order for a truth
'experience' to take place. It was a space apart from ordinary life, an extra-ordinary space which provided the occasion for the Greek community to return to itself and in this way to fulfill its calling. The temple, we might argue concerning Heidegger's claim, provided for the Greeks a way of revitalizing and re-collecting the auspices of their communal life.

In this regard, architect Kenneth Frampton has reminded us that the Latin root of *edifice* refers to the installation both of a temple and of the sacred hearth, and that early Greek understandings of a building or work were tied to *edification*, that is, to illumination and to enlightenment and to a movement in understanding (Frampton, 1979). This implies that when Heidegger spoke of the truth of the temple as a "happening", he was also suggesting that truth is something experienced or undergone by virtue of our engagement with a work, rather than, as Descartes and Sacks seem to have assumed, a correct or accurate mental picture or documentation of something. Heidegger's suggestion was also that this experience takes place as a recovery of what we are. This in turn seems to suggest that we are divided beings, beings in some way separated from an *original* self, from a self that we should properly or fully be.

Heidegger suggested that the work induces a self-movement by means of the strife, one which moves us towards a whole self, and in this way, to a *proper* destiny. "The work, Heidegger said, "is the fighting of the battle in which the unconcealedness of beings as a whole, or truth, is won. ...This does not happen so that the work should at the same time settle and put an end to the conflict in an insipid agreement, but so that the strife may remain a strife." (Heidegger, 1975: 49). It is by means of strife that the truth of the work takes place and that we recognize that which is "copied". But if a work is the fighting of a battle in which truth is wrested from its hiding places, how could we relate this to something like the
painting of Van Gogh's boots? How might we see this as a strife which allows for the recollection of the proper vocation of the community?

Heidegger worked at this puzzle by delineating some possible understandings of a work such as the painting of the boots. He noted that one way we could understand a painting would be as a mere piece of physical material. Like baggage, a painting such as Van Gogh's is indeed something that can be packed up and moved, transported from one exhibition to another, just as logs are shipped from the forest to the mill (Heidegger, 1975: 19). Furthermore, the painting has a material nature in that it is comprised of pieces of wood stretched with canvas and covered with pigment. In this way, it has in it something of the texture of pigment and the glow of color. Yet none of these material aspects of the work are sufficient to explain the experience of the work as a work of art. Although they are necessary for the art to happen, and the actual artist must in this way be something of the skilled craftsman as well as a dealer in commodities, the realm of art is something other, something more.

Heidegger reminded us that boots can also be understood as useful things. He refers to them in this way as equipment. In that boots are equipment, they are matter formed or fabricated by humans for dependable use, for our comfort and for the service of our physical needs. It is in this regard that we seek out the regularity of things, so that we can successfully and dependably put them to use. Perhaps, Heidegger wondered, pursuing this line of thought, this could be taken as that which Van Gogh documents for us. That is, his work shows us not just the materiality of the boots, but their usefulness. The picture could be seen as an image of usefulness. Yet as he says, the painting shows us nothing of the way the peasant wearing the boots knows them, or of the way we all know the various kinds of apparel for the feet. We know equipment as we use it, as it serves us, for the way boots cover our
feet, for their suitability to the task at hand, for going to the office, going dancing, going hiking. This is the nature of equipment, its dependability and durability, and this we know in and as we use it. Equipment speaks to that which we can depend upon over and over, and can call up at our command.

The eventual claim that Heidegger made, however, was that while the peasant would wear the boots, unselfconsciously and without thought, Van Gogh's painting does something much more and quite different. His painting re-presents or re-frames those boots, and in doing so, it says something new. For this reason, Heidegger argues concerning the art work that "In the vicinity of the work we were suddenly somewhere else than we usually tend to be" (Heidegger, 1975: 49). The work, as art, is extra-ordinary. But how?

Here we might turn to Gadamer, who says of the art work that nothing real in the sense that a boot is real is produced. Nor has the work any use as such. Its purpose does not reside in utility and cannot be understood in that way. There are things, he says, which we produce simply to look upon or to reflect upon. In this way, the art work "finds its characteristic fulfillment when our gaze dwells upon the appearance itself" (Gadamer, 1986: 13).

If what is important is to dwell upon the appearance of the work, what Gadamer implies when he speaks of appearance is ambiguous. Appearance can suggest the look of a thing, but also the way it is present or in a location such that it can be gazed upon or encountered in some way. Both these senses of appearance could arguably pertain to the work of art. That is, its look is immediately striking, which draws us to the work. It is in this sense extra-ordinary, an endeavour which, like theorizing, seeks to disrupt any comfortable ordinariness. But the art work is also something which needs to be present for us, since we need to dwell upon it. That is, the encounter calls not for the methodical attainment of a goal or for the
achievement of a correct and finished reading, but for a tarrying, a dwelling with the work which allows us to experience it and its "manifold riches".

How is it that the appearance of the work requires us to dwell upon it in this way and is a temporal experience, a kind of passage or journey? Gadamer argues that if the art work is there to dwell upon, it is not because it is something that will lead us to something else. That is, it is not a link in a chain or a means to an end, like a freeway to a correct destination. The experience of the work is the end. For this reason, the work is irreplaceable. Furthermore, it is something we linger over and return to again and again. We dwell upon it in this way not only because it is a delight, as Descartes implied, but because the work remains mysteriously delightful. It does not fully disclose itself to us, but has depths which remain unfathomed. Descartes is therefore right to say that art does not yield a correct and finished answer.

Gadamer says in this regard that the art work is "like something produced according to still unformulated rules... (it is) the creation of something exemplary which is not simply produced by following rules." (Gadamer, 1986: 21). It speaks, he says, of the need for human possibility to give itself shape. In speaking of this need to give human possibility shape, Gadamer points us yet again to the way art seeks to disrupt the ordinary so as to let us experience the extra-ordinary. We see this in a different way when he speaks of the "increase in being that something acquires by being represented" (Gadamer, 1986: 38). In the case of those boots of Van Gogh's, their reframing as a work of art allows for a joint appearance not only of the ordinary, but also of something extra-ordinary. There are no heroes, no beautiful scenes, no prescriptions for a life in the Van Gogh picture. However, mixed in among those mundane boots, that equipment of everyday life, something not
mundane or useful, something nameless but extra-ordinary, even beautiful, also
appears.

In attempting to understand this curious task of art, how it combines the
ordinary and the extra-ordinary, Gadamer's notion of the "symbolic" is helpful
(Gadamer, 1986: 31). The *symbol* was originally a technical term in Greek for a
token of remembrance. When a guest came to visit, the host gave the visitor half of
some object which had been broken in two. If a descendent later entered the house,
the two could be fitted together. The *symbol* therefore operated rather like a pass,
one which allowed that which was unknown to *pass* into a new space by virtue of
that which had gone before. A work, we might say, is symbolic in the way it allows
for the known to pass into the unknown, the old into the new, and the ordinary into
the extra-ordinary.

Gadamer shows the symbolic to be always particular, both a particular work
as well as a movement through a particular thing or things we know. It is our
familiarity with particular things, things like those boots, which allow for this
passage into something new or different. Gadamer also argues that this particularity
makes a work resistant to pure conceptualization. Yet despite its resistance to pure
conceptualization and the lack of rule in its origin, an art work is still purposeful,
intended, disciplined and ordered. It has *something* to say and sets itself up as
requiring a response. That is, if the work asks to be understood, it means something
is there which sets us a task in this regard. For this reason, Gadamer reminds us
that the proper response to a work is not to make of it anything we wish it to be. We
are instead asked to engage the work, to submit to its otherness and to be limited
not by our own desires, but by what the work says. In this way, the work asks for our
active intellectual and spiritual engagement.
This also means that the understanding of the work is not something guaranteed by certain formal criteria, by any listing of the rules or techniques by which it can be understood, such that everyone will experience it alike and correctly. Gadamer argues instead that a work's meaning is secured only by the way in which we take the construction of the work upon ourselves, by the way we enter into the play of the work (Gadamer, 1986: 28). This happens not by abiding by rule, but by the openness of the work to differences. Gadamer uses the description of the staircase in *The Brothers Karamazov* as an illustrative example. His argument is that anyone who reads the novel will see the staircase in a distinctive way and be convinced that he/she sees it as it really is. "This is the open space creative language gives us and which we fill out by following what the writer evokes. .. It is always like this." (Gadamer, 1986: 28). The work remains open to variations in readings or in performance, yet still retains its oneness or its unity as a work. Various interpretations are possible because of this open space within the work, yet at the same time, they are all limited by the need to be true to the work. Gadamer speaks of the way "one senses how everyone is gathered together before what they encounter -- not just all in the same place, but rather in the intention that unites us and prevents us as individuals from falling into private conversations" (Gadamer, 1986: 28).

With this reference to the gathering of the community through a work, we return to the way in which Heidegger saw the work as a vehicle for returning us, as a community, to a proper vocation. The work, Heidegger said, is constituted as a strife, and it is by means of this strife that an unconcealing takes place. It is the experience of this which serves to return us to a proper vocation and, we might add, to reflect upon the auspices of collective life. When speaking of Van Gogh's painting of the boots, we said in this regard that both ordinariness and extra-
ordinariness emerge when the boots are reframed as art. The boots were rather ugly, tattered and dirty from use, and it's not that this changes in the picture or that the boots become pretty or refined or elegant. But -- under the skillful and loving hands of the painter, in that extra-ordinary space of the work, something other and different also emerges, something strange and mysterious, even beautiful. Against the illuminated ground, the darkness of the boots' interior opens up. Unplumbed depths appear, new dimensions are added, and a mysterious beauty becomes visible, one which the art work struggles to bring out of concealment both within and against the ordinariness and usefulness of the boots.

But what does this mysterious beauty point to and how does it relate to the ordinary life of the peasant, that life of toil and hard work and production which the boots seem to exemplify? How could we understand such strife between the two as a vehicle which reorients us towards a proper vocation and to the auspices of social life? To probe these questions and in this way extend the depth of our foray into the heartland of the ordinary, we will take a route which stops for a while in Plato's Republic, one of the oldest and most extra-ordinary works of our tradition. We argue in doing so that ordinary life has always required thought and a renewal of understanding. To this extent, reflection on those various aspects of ordinary life which have concerned us here -- that is, the habitual and the taken-for-granted, our social situatedness, issues of utility and of our material dependence -- such reflection appears in many different guises and in many times and places. The Republic is one of those, and particularly relevant to this reflection of ours upon the relationship between the extra-ordinary and ordinary life.
Plato and the Social as Human Excess

The Republic can be read as an intervention concerned with our need to engage such questions in thought by means of conversation. The deepening of our understanding concerning that which constitutes a good life, as opposed to the unthought acceptance of the one given "naturally", is brought to the fore. Like Sacks' work and like Descartes' work, the dialogue is also, therefore, a form of persuasion. It leads us through an enquiry into what is good about things we already love and desire, with the understanding that we are loving and desiring beings, and that we are always already committed to a way of life and that we always have limited understandings of that life and of our commitments. What it is that we actually love we find elusive, not readily apparent to us or clearly understood or easily articulated. This, it could be argued, is the case for most of the things we hold dear. The dialogue proceeds by opening up to view this rift between our desire and our understanding, that is, by showing how they are not one. It then proceeds to try and reunite them through a process of argumentation and mediation.

If the work is in this way dialectical, it is also dialogical, a gathering of a community by means of a conversation concerning the good life. The dialogue makes readily apparent how our understanding of this comes in many but always limited (i.e. particular) forms, as individual and distinct renderings of the various analytic possibilities available in the community. The dialogue seeks to gather these together, to frame them in a way which allows us to move to deeper, renewed and more thoughtful understandings of communal life. In this way, it serves as a passageway for the recollection of the auspices of social life.

The dialogue begins with simple understandings of the good life. Socrates, for example, is encountered in conversation with the old man Cephalus about the good things in life which Cephalus is able to see when looking back upon life from
the vantage point of old age. Cephalus speaks of his growing fondness for "things of the mind" as "bodily pleasures lose their savour". "A great peace comes when age sets us free from passions of that sort." (Republic, 1941: 4). The argument Cephalus offers is that freedom from the pleasures of the natural body yields a freedom from bondage for human beings. This freedom, however, is one delivered by "natural" means and not as a result of any growth in understanding concerning the comparative worth of those pleasures. The alternative to such naturally given freedom, not stated but implicit, would be the freedom gained through reflection, and the consequent reasoned choice based on a deeper understanding about what is worthy.

Once the questions concerning the good life are posed in the Republic, a series of various analyses concerning its constitution are first presented and then overcome. The arguments presented are familiar enough ones in our own world. In the dialogue with Cephalus, for example, the value of material well-being is opposed to the value of good character. In response to Socrates' questioning, Cephalus states that riches will not make a bad man contented and cheerful. Nevertheless, when pressed by Socrates about the value of wealth, he offers an explanation concerning its "utility" in saving us from actions which would merit punishment in the afterworld. Within the analysis presented by Cephalus, the good human life is presented not as a self-enforced commitment based on an understanding of what is good to do, but as one granted from outside, by nature or chance or good luck. It is a life led rather more as an insurance policy for a better life in an 'other' or 'after' world.

By the time we encounter the argument of Thrasymachus, the question of the good life has been reframed. It emerges, greatly enlarged, as the search for an understanding of the value of the just life. The conversation has moved beyond the
limits of private concerns for one's welfare evinced by Cephalus, to an orientation to moral principles, i.e. justice. In fact, the dialogue with Thrasymachus could be treated as an effort on Plato's part to turn the question of the good life towards the good in a way which seeks to transform our concern for individual life and well-being and to reframe it as something much more. It shows human life to include an affection for principles like justice. In this way, it now speaks with an understanding of the good life which is intrinsically social, in that shows a concern for others oriented to principle. That is, it now shows a community gathered together through its understanding of principles.

In order to achieve this transformation, Socrates needed to first defeat Thrasymachus' position, one which we might characterize as the case for injustice. Thrasymachus argues that what we call justice is whatever serves the needs of those in power. It's the position of "might is right". Socrates counters the argument with that analysis which we spoke of earlier in relation to Descartes and the question of the unity of the city. That is, Socrates points us to the way any practice serves not the practitioner, but a commonly recognized good. Medicine serves health, and the doctor and the patient come to a shared understanding of that good within the practice. The same, the argument goes, is the case for the art of ruling. That art also serves the common good, and not the good of the ruler. It is in the orientation to this common good that the nature of justice is to be pursued.

When Thrasymachus remains convinced that injustice is more profitable than justice, Socrates again argues that it is not, this time on the basis that injustice results in a divided whole: "Injustice has this effect of implanting hatred wherever it exists". In saying this, Plato drew upon knowledge of an implicit support which can be found for justice, a widespread sense that it is right and best, even though not, by any means, ordinary practice. He himself admits that he finds it difficult to find
convincing arguments for why justice is best, but at the same time, he is not able to sit by and let the cause of justice be defeated. This is further substantiated when Plato proceeds with an argument from Glaucon, in which Glaucon wishes to strongly argue the case for injustice even though he believes justice is best. That is, while Glaucon believes justice is best, he too can't say why in any adequate way. Glaucon's hope is that Socrates will be able to show him what he holds to be superior, but cannot speak adequately about.

Glaucon's argument remains tied to an understanding of the good of justice based on its utility. Yet it is also apparent here that utility, rendered as the success of the just action in life, does not adequately explain why we love and seek out the just. Our standards or principles are thus shown to exceed any capacity we have to implement them in the world. Glaucon does not argue that it is good to be unjust, as did Thrasymachus. Rather, various scenarios are drawn by Glaucon and by his brother Adeimantus concerning all the ways in which injustice is what actually succeeds in the world, about how the just are often punished, how difficult is the path of justice, how it may not "pay off" in the world at all. "What reason, then, remains for preferring justice to the extreme of injustice .... is it only lack of spirit or the infirmity of age or some other weakness that makes men condemn the iniquities they have not the strength to practice?" (Plato, 1941: 51-52). Why we love justice is strange and mysterious, but it is evident that in the world and to various degrees, this love can be found.

Up to this point, the dialogue has proceeded largely through the negation of arguments in which injustice is addressed. Injustice was to be defeated by attempting to show the good of justice, a good which remains mysterious. When Glaucon demands, however, that justice itself be addressed, Socrates is faced with the problem of how to show what justice is. His solution is to reframe the search,
and to turn attention instead to our understandings of the foundations of the social, to the question of what it is that holds a community together.

In the initial formulation of the state which is offered in the dialogue, the principle of unity is given as the co-operative exchange of skills, such that notions of utility once again come to the fore. Humans have differing capacities and utilize and develop these naturally given abilities so as to provide in the best way for the basic needs of food, clothing and shelter. However, in that the naturally given is transcended through these co-operative actions which seek to implement something better, even this simple formulation of the state exemplifies a certain level of reflection upon the natural. It shows reflection which differentiates the naturally given according to what is good and not good within it, and therefore according to an understanding of what is best. A mediation of the given is pointed to, one which transforms it in the light of something 'better'.

While such a state would provide for the simple life, Glaucon is profoundly dissatisfied with it as an analysis of the auspices of the social. This would be a community of pigs he insists, not of humans. In saying this, he points as Descartes did to that excess which human "nature" has over animal "nature". His response is not, however, the same as the Cartesian one. Glaucon insists that the human community is more than the co-operation for the satisfaction of simple needs. The human community must encompass luxury, he argues. This luxury is not just that luxury of plentiful commodities which yield a certain measure of freedom from natural necessity. In the luxurious state of the Republic, there is "a whole multitude of callings not ministering to any bare necessity: ... artists and sculpture ... paintings and music; poets, actors, dancers, producers, including everything for women's adornment." (Plato, 1941: 62-63). The human community includes and is grounded
in something beyond the provision of what is necessary in the sense of the adequate provision for our material life and sustenance.

This excess, which Glaucon sees as essential to any notion of the social, results in the foundation of practices like poetry and painting. While these might be thought of as "useless" indulgences, Glaucon's argument suggests that it is in the communal fostering of such useless endeavours that we are able to transform what is merely given to us into a human world. We make a life not for the sake of life alone, but one transformed according to our understandings of what is good and beautiful. Gadamer has thus said of art that it "is only 'possible' because the formative activity of nature leaves an open domain which can be filled by the productions of the human spirit" (Gadamer, 1986: 88).

But we might remember that 'art' as art is a fairly recent phenomenon, one which arose along with a diminished understanding of the place of the good and the beautiful within all the human practices. In Glaucon's city, this love for the good and the beautiful seems to infuse all the practices serving necessity, even those basic ones providing food, shelter and clothing. Embroidery and adornment, for example, are added to clothing, not just for protection or to attract mates, or to gain power, but for the sheer love of what they are. There is a pleasure to be gained from the well done and the beautiful which cannot adequately be explained by notions of utility or by the idea of seeking advantage.

Plato's address of justice must be situated in this light. If Descartes was committed to an understanding of the social as one in which reason served the transformation of nature into commodities and the unknown into the useful and the dependable, this opening section of the Republic urges us to see that the social exceeds such utility and the service of physical necessity. It shows the way to the social through this human excess.
With this in mind, we might now reframe that affirmation of ordinary life which Taylor sees as so central to modern community. We might see it as an affirmation of the human need to transform the naturally or habitually given, the routine, the necessary, into that which is chosen because of its own intrinsic worth. To "affirm the ordinary" would be to allow for the good and the beautiful to appear in such ordinary enterprises. In order for this to occur, the ordinary has need of the extra-ordinary, and it is here that the strife Heidegger points to occurs, through the temporal movement in which the ordinary is mediated by the extra-ordinary such that the good and the beautiful can appear or re-appear. In terms of Van Gogh's painting of the boots, this takes place by framing those boots as art, a reframing which asks that we linger with the work. In doing so, we are led to reflect upon the way in which the life symbolized by those boots is, on the one hand a difficult and ugly life of toil, yet at the same time, is an appearance of something worthwhile, even beautiful.
FRAME FIVE

CHOOSING THE BEAUTIFUL

Poems are made by fools like me

But only god can make a tree!

Joyce Kilmer

Trees

Showing the Good of the Ordinary

If we see the affirmation of ordinary life as a way of reorienting us to the auspices of social life, we might also argue that it sought to redress a historical imbalance in this regard. Gadamer argues, for example, that "one of the basic impulses of modern art has been the desire to break down the distance separating the audience, the 'consumers' and the public from the work of art." (Gadamer, 1986: 24). Gadamer sees this as a desire to transform the distance of the onlooker into the involvement of the participant, and in this way to have the work directly impact on our lives. While Gadamer's view locates this in terms of more recent trends in the arts, we might also see it part of Modernity's broader reorientation to the relationship between ordinary life and the extra-ordinary tasks of art and theorizing. Here we might take painting as an example.

Looking back historically to developments during the four hundred year period from late medieval times to the Renaissance, we can see that enormous changes took place as painting developed into a major art form. Increasingly, it moved away from the evocation of a 'substanceless' divinity and more and more to employ individually distinct representations which adopted an iconography and settings drawn from ordinary life. By the time not only of Rubens and Frans Hals,
but of Bacon, Descartes and the early formulators of modern science, painting largely drew for its representational imagery either upon the characters and pleasures of courtly life or, increasingly, upon those of the domestic life of the growing merchant class. Painters employed images which, in their tactile qualities and wealth of visual detail, called up the materiality and solidity of people, objects and places of the everyday world surrounding the artist. Not, of course, that we today would recognize these as images of our everyday world, since courtly life or the life of rich merchants is for us antithetical to ordinary life. But the space of appearance framed in the paintings was increasingly one set within the painter's everyday life, a world laid out like a view of the world immediately around us, a world of things and people easily recognizable and familiar, a world the viewer could have just 'stepped into'.

This movement 'into the ordinary' is shown quite clearly in the changes which were effected by the paintings of Duccio of Siena and the Florentine, Giotto. Art historian H.W. Janson, for example, in his standard text, History of Art, writes about their innovative nature (Janson, 1964: 270-274). He calls Giotto's art "daringly original" and Giotto "a radical innovator". While the works of both artists retained the familiar Christian iconography, Janson notes that both effected radical changes within the pictorial space of the traditional icon.

In works prior to those of Duccio, most notably in the tradition of the Byzantine icons, architecture had merely served as a flat backdrop. Duccio, however, deepened the pictorial space such that the architecture actually came to enclose the figures. In this way, the surface of the painting became more like a transparent window through which one could peer, as opposed to a flat surface. A floating perspective was maintained, however, one which continued to separate the
spatial planes of the picture from the viewer and denied to the viewer any specified, physical vantage point within the pictorial space.

Even more than Duccio, Giotto's work transformed that traditional architectural framework which had ordered the Byzantine icons. He continued to deepen the pictorial space in such a way that a connection was achieved between the viewer and that space which had previously been unknown. This was done by moving the action in the pictures into the foreground in a way which allowed the viewer's eye-level to fall within the lower half of the picture. The viewer's space thereby became continuous with the pictorial space. What this allowed, as Janson again points out, was for the viewer to "feel so close to the event that we have a sense of being participants rather than distant observers". "We can imagine," he says, "ourselves standing on the same ground plane as the painted figures." (Janson, 1964: 270-271).

While modern painting came in this way to depict ordinary things and ordinary scenes, this must be differentiated from any notion that the paintings themselves become ordinary, as we have seen in the case of Van Gogh's boots. Furthermore, given that generations of us have treasured what we have judged to be the best of these and kept them safe from harm, it is obvious that over the generations we have been able to experience this extra-ordinariness in the works.

Consider those luxurious spaces of Rubens, joyous spaces of human laughter and sociability. Think of the delight evoked by his renderings of embroideries and silken cloth, by his depictions of cool marble and the colours of jewels, in that soft pink flesh and the caress of fur he shows us. Or ponder works which are quite different, those dim, silent, austere interior spaces of Dutch and Flemish works, spaces in which a single shaft of sunlight makes the ordinary radiant. Think of how it burnishes the copper pots, makes blue delft glow and wood gleam, allows the
polished plates, the lace caps and starched linen aprons to shimmer within their dark ground. We experience something quite extra-ordinary amidst the everyday domesticity. Yet, just as Glaucon found it difficult to explain what he loved about justice, it's difficult to try and speak about what that is, to name it or articulate that wonder and the pleasure, and the nature of that beauty.

To point to this extra-ordinariness is not to suggest that it is the worth of the rare and expensive commodity. Such a way of understanding the value of the art work remains tied to the utility of the work, seeing it not as art, but as commodity. Nor is it that such works are valuable as documents which record a particular historical period, such that the 'image' realized is an accurate copy of the ordinary scenes and objects of a particular time. It is true that the works are particular and also temporally situated, but Van Gogh's work is not just a painted copy of a particular pair of peasant boots, or a document of Van Gogh's personal interests or of his historical times. In them appear that 'excess' which continues to stimulate our desires and longings while at the same time binding us together across the ages.

Jeff Wall: The Ordinary and the Beautiful

While it is difficult to formulate this excess, a photographic 'landscape' by local artist Jeff Wall can serve to provide the specificity of an example to which our reflections can be tied, one embedded in the particularity of our own time and place and its dreams and longings. Like the works of Sacks, Descartes and Plato, Wall's work is an extra-ordinary undertaking, one which "looks awry" at the familiarity of this city in which we live. Not that the work is particularly beautiful. On the contrary, it presents a very ordinary view, a typical scene of a neighbourhood which could be the very one I live in. In the gallery domain, however, where the extra-ordinary is the usual, the shock of my own initial encounter with the work hinged
upon the unexpected sight of my everyday world in a place dedicated to the extra-ordinary, the exalted and the beautiful (Lost Illusions, Recent Landscape Art, Vancouver Art Gallery: 1991). Wall's piece heightened awareness of a gap between such extra-ordinary domains and the ordinary life which it depicts.

It was within and against that ordinariness, among things quite familiar to me, that a strange space of desire like those sketched out in Zizek's eerie tales became visible. It was as though a familiar scene had been framed in one way by my ordinary life, reframed by Zizek, and then reframed once more by Wall -- and that these reframings rendered the familiar mysterious and uncanny, such that what was known very well was no longer known for certain. This was such that, the more I thought about Zizek's stories, the more Wall's picture and my own everyday world became a curious place.

Wall's piece is entitled "The Pine on the Corner". It consists of a very large cibachrome transparency, mounted in an aluminum display case and backlit with fluorescent lights. Although it was shown as part of a landscape exhibition, it differs from the traditional landscape. That is, it is not one of the usual scenic views of mountains and sea, trees and woods we have come to associate with that tradition, with the Group of Seven or Emily Carr. Nor is it by any means one of the more contemporary landscapes of the Tony Onley variety -- or abstract like a Shadbolt. Nor is it the type of scenic shot we associate with the beautiful landscapes of Super Natural British Columbia which our tourism ministry employs to lure visitors. Nor is it a landscape of the kind seen from a view lot, a feature of real estate which can command an elevated price because of its beauty. In other words, like Van Gogh's boots, it's not at all a copy of something that would usually be considered photogenic or beautiful or 'artistic' material.
It seems to be very much a document of ordinary life and ordinary things. If I choose to say "document", it's because the work has at least the first appearance of being an accurate record of things, as opposed to something which has aesthetic or expressive aims. As a genre of photography, it most resembles a casual snapshot someone would take of their house, or the type of photo that would be taken when a very ordinary house is put up for sale by real estate agents, the kind in which what is merely there has been quickly recorded. Such photos fill the pages of the Real Estate Weekly and the classified ads. Seemingly, they are without any great concern for the photo's composition or visual allure, being merely a tool of a utilitarian commercial transaction.

On the surface at least, then, Jeff Wall offers us a thoroughly ordinary snapshot of everyday urban residential life in contemporary Vancouver, a kind of domestic landscape of this city. On the lower right hand side of the photo is the usual paved city street, complete with all the service paraphernalia of the modern street: fire hydrant, mail box, telephone poles and street lights. On the lower left hand side of the work is a cross street with parked cars, while a few more telephone poles punctuate the predominantly horizontal thrust of the street. Behind the parked cars, facing the street, stand a number of houses.

Again, to anyone familiar with the Vancouver landscape, these houses would be entirely commonplace. They would not in any way stand out or be surprising. It's only reframed within the art work that they become so. The two largest are Vancouver Specials, a vernacular form of the modern house which can be found all over the city in various guises. While very common, it is also a building style which has received a great deal of criticism. For example, in their book on heritage homes in Vancouver, Kluckner and Atkin speak of the Special as a style "much maligned" in Vancouver, one which has been the recipient of considerable dislike but which is
also extremely common. "Regrettably the closest Vancouver has ever come to producing an indigenous architecture..." is how they characterize it (1992: 110).

The history of the Vancouver Special which Kluckner and Atkin provide is that of a cost-effective, commercial evolution of 1930's and 1940's International-Style houses first built in Los Angeles. The International style was picked up locally by architects like Ron Thom and Arthur Erickson, who developed it into a 'West Coast style' with flat-roofs and post and beam construction. While Thom's and Erickson's homes are quite exceptional and striking, the Vancouver Special would hardly be called that. It has, however, been hard to surpass in terms of its cost and its utilization of available space. For example, a front page article in the West Side Edition of the Real Estate Weekly of January 27, 1989, reported the failure of a five year long competition to design a replacement for the Special, something more aesthetically pleasing but equally cost effective. The conclusion of the report was that "the economic success of the Special cannot be denied: it provides the most house for the least money. For the prospective home buyer, the house is an unparalleled bargain."

The houses in Wall's photograph are no exception to the unenticing, utilitarian prose of the Special. The one on the left of the photo, with two sets of screened entry doors, appears to be an up and down duplex, perhaps a rental unit. Both houses are functional, stark and relatively unadorned composites of mass manufactured parts quickly and cheaply assembled, with two-tone stucco exteriors, regulation aluminum framed windows, a balcony with aluminum railings and sliding doors, a flattish tar and gravel roof and an absolute minimum of trim. As though erected solely to provide for basic needs for shelter and essential services, they show little evidence of any concern for visual beauty or charm.
If the houses are not striking in any way other than that they should be shown in a photo in an art gallery where the beautiful or the outstanding are the norm, there is something in the work which is: that pine on the corner of which the title speaks. The surprise is not so much because of what it is, as a tree is common enough in the city. Rather, it's because of the way the tree has been situated within the frame. It stands slightly to the left of the central vertical axis of the picture, at a focal point derived from classical canons of painterly composition. This calculated, strategic location within the frame, the unusual camera angle it demands, belie the work's allusion to the casual snapshot. Which is to say that the tree gains its prominence precisely because of its location within a very carefully arranged formal structure. In this way, the apparent documentary function of the work is interrupted with a calculated artifice which orders the elements according to dictates of rhetorical intent. The work thus shows itself as purposeful intervention, as an excess over what has been given. It has something more to say which we in turn must address, something other than the mere documentation of everyday life. It reframes that life as art, and in doing so, makes demands upon us to attend to the connectedness between art and our everyday life, between the ordinary and the extra-ordinary.

The pine is situated at the point where the two streets intersect, so close to the house that the lower branches overshadow it. The crown towers high above, up, into the empty blue of the sky. Extending from near the very bottom of the frame to the very top, the huge dark tree ruptures those horizontal lines of the city streets. This clash of horizontal and vertical near the visual centre of the frame, the contrast between the organic shape of the tree and the straight lines of the streets and houses -- both impart great energy and vitality to the tree and exacerbate an already obvious tension between the tree and the houses.
Far too big for the small city lot, the tree looks entirely out of place in such a tiny domestic space. It's hard to decide whether the house as a latecomer to the scene is crowding out the tree which rightfully belongs there, or whether the enormous vitality of the tree was so unexpected that it merely exceeded its allotted place in the domestic world. Whatever the case, the tree exudes a sense of almost uncontainable power. In that horizontal urban landscape, sweeping out and up so high into the expanse of sky, the pine stands monumental yet enigmatic, a dark, swirling, rather mysterious realm fracturing the ordinary. The natural, rendered sublime, has been ensconced within ordinary domestic life.

This fracturing of the ordinary by the tree marks a strife at the core of the work, one which sets the work in motion and provides for its internal dynamic. The dynamic does not only reside in this tension between tree and its domestic setting, however. There is further divisiveness in the work which parallels the rift between the natural beauty of the tree and the cultural utilitarianism of the Specials. Wall's technique is one case in point.

In terms of our expectations concerning the work of art, that technique is rather offputting. The artist has borrowed the notion of the mounted and backlit cibachrome transparency from the realm of advertising; such visual installations are common in air line terminals, fast food restaurants and supermarkets. A certain residue of that world remains with the work. Speaking in this 'high-tech' language of commerce, advertising and the marketplace, the art work itself assumes aspects of the ordinary, the usual and the mundane. If the artist and the art gallery are expected to cultivate the lofty, the beautiful and/or the sublime, the adoption of this technique developed by the laboratory and adapted to stimulate consumption serves to afflict the work with a certain air of inappropriateness. It is as though it were tarnished in a way which serves to forever remind the viewer of art's questionable
gestation and ancestry, and of a mundanity and ordinariness that art opposes yet, at the same time, to which it is irrevocably tied as to its shadow. In relating it back to Heidegger's account of the work, we might say that the technique serves to keep alive the strife, and in this way unsettles us and stimulates our reflective capacities.

A further sense of ambiguity and divisiveness results from the quality of light and the use of colour in the Wall piece, as well as from their connection with the photographic status of the work. They show, we might argue, the work's artfulness and therefore its excess. That is, they show how it contains a space for beauty and the mysterious within the seemingly accurate replication of what 'exists'. As such, they further disturb assumptions we might have about the work as a mere documentation of reality.

For example, the backlighting from the fluorescent tubes illuminates the photo with a clarity, a sharpness, a quality of light that is thoroughly contemporary. It's a light that seems capable of exposing everything, that leaves nothing in the shadows. This sense is heightened by the brightness of the cibachrome color, and also by the fact any photograph carries with it a variety of modern assumptions about being an accurate document of the real. The work exudes an air of speaking in the clear light of day, declaring itself to be no dreamscape. There are no dark corners here where the unknown can hide. We cannot, however, escape that commercial lineage of the technique, its reference to the marketing of facades, its association with the world of advertising and commerce, with mass production -- these impart an unsettling reminder of those very illusions and hidden purposes that the clarity of light, the brilliant accuracy of the color and the photographic image work to dispel.

What's more, at the same time that the work invokes both documentation of the real and advertising, copy and illusion, it is further complicated in that, as a
color photo, it alludes to the historical struggle of artists with the awesomeness of color and light. This struggle constitutes a history for which the color photo is often heralded as the supreme technical achievement. In as much as the goal of art has been understood as a documentation or replication of what is, the color photo has greatly enhanced our capacity to 'capture' our world accurately and correctly.

Despite this, Roger Seamon describes the use of color by Wall as "a breach of documentary decorum", in that it opposes the aim of documentation to which his works also allude (Seamon, 1992: 13). In addressing Wall's use of color in this way, Seamon points to the complexity of their deployment and to the tensions generated in the work (and therefore in the viewer) as a result. Seamon notes that within the tradition of art and art photography, color has tended to be the reserve of painting. Documentary photographers have shied away from its use. Why is this the case? Partly it's due to the technical difficulty of accurately copying colors. But it's also because color carries with it a strong sense of artifice which documentation eschews. Color is one of the most potent technical means which the artist can employ in the creation of a visual image. As such, it has also lent itself to being understood as an intrusion of artifice upon the authentic, the original, the genuine or the natural, a foreign substance added to an essential unity. Colour is an uncontainable excess, jouissance, as Julia Kristeva refers to it (Kristeva, 1980).

Since the document aims to encapsulate the authentic and nothing more, the supplementary potential of color and lighting has frequently surfaced as a problem for accurate representation. This has been accentuated by the tradition of the visual arts, where color has more often served not so much aims of accurate documentation as it has those aspirations which reach towards the beautiful, the grand and the sublime. Hence colour's traditional restriction to painting. One need only think here of the glory of stained glass windows or of a Byzantine icon, of the
delight given by a lush Rubens' nude, of the grandeur of Turner's seascapes, of the almost ecstatic joy of a Matisse. Color is fundamental to the splendour of all these works, to their ability to create a world which stands out from the ordinary and the everyday. It speaks of joyousness and playfulness, and of the pleasure of tarrying with what delights us. Its potential for sheer beauty is a source of amazement and awe, and defies encapsulation. Along with this amazement, perhaps hinging on it, on that wonder and pleasure which comes from seeing things afresh, of seeing them transformed, color and light have carried inescapable metaphorical implications of transcendence and of truth. Aren't 'enlightenment' and 'illumination' two of the most common images of that human experience?

If color and light move us to this experience of delight and wonder concerning the beautiful and the truthful, an experience which is not at all easy to contain within the conceptual or to articulate, it is also true that advertising, from which Wall's technique has emerged, relies deeply upon their supplementary capacity for its effectiveness. It has need of their 'excess'. While advertising's use of color implies accuracy of depiction and, in fact, is dependent upon fostering this sense of the real if it is to achieve its task, (i.e. making you believe that the glory that you see is what you'll get), a powerful part of its allure also comes from the ability color has to foster desire in the viewer, to suggest and represent the good things or pleasures of the world. Advertising makes use of the color technology developed by both the fine arts and by the laboratory as a vehicle for the transformation of the everyday and the ordinary into the desirable. What is merely there, color can elevate to the desirable and extra-ordinary. In this way, we can be tantalized, our desires for what is illuminated as superior in life stimulated -- desires for the gourmet meal, the scenic landscape, the beautiful face, the designer house. Color
and lighting can be used, we might therefore say, to conjure up images of the good life rather than of the ordinary life.

Perhaps what should be said here, in a way which speaks more directly to our chronic anxieties about advertising and its influence, is that advertising is able to dress up the ordinary life as though it were the good life. When Roger Seamon makes the point that Wall's use of color in his art helps us to resist "our unselfconscious efforts to classify images as either fine art or documentary", it should be added that the work also asks that we resist the inverted rule of the lofty by the mundane and of the sublime by the banal (Seamon, 1991: 13). Advertising can exploit our love of the beautiful and make it a means to a banal end. It can make the beautiful into a tool, one which subverts that desire for freedom which arises through the reflective effort we undertake to understand and mediate what is given to us in the light of what is worthwhile. Advertising can serve as a perverted form of this desire, since it is driven not by a love for reflection upon the beautiful, but by the demands of commerce and utility. In employing the techniques of advertising in the service of art, the Wall work seeks to cultivate our efforts to invert that inversion. To borrow Hegel's terms, we might say that the work seeks to negate the negation of our reflections upon the beautiful which advertising accomplishes in the world, and to restore that which should properly rule.

Nature: The Notion Divided

This returns us to that central tension of the work, the one lodged in the opposition between the prosaic houses and the splendour of the tree. We have said that the ascendancy of the natural beauty of the tree over the houses and streets seems to mark a triumph of beauty both over utilitarianism and over the commercial exploitation of art and our love of beauty. Yet this dynamic of ugly houses and
beautiful tree is not easy to grasp. As an art work, however, it demands a response and asks to be understood, and as such we are required to react to it with what Gadamer refers to as both "the free play of imagination" and "the constructive accomplishment of the intellect" (Gadamer, 1986: 21/28).

It is, in fact, this peculiar characteristic of the work which will serve to direct our reflections upon that polarity of house and tree, since it brings us back to a consideration of that division within nature to which Descartes referred, that division between human existence and natural existence. It was a division, we remember, which allowed Descartes to ponder the human endeavour and the foundations of the social in human reason. Gadamer, too, speaks to this difference when he tries to formulate the work of art (Gadamer, 1986: 30-32). In terms of natural beauty such as that exhibited in the tree, Gadamer argues that it is a contrast to a human work, which we always try to recognize and to interpret as something. With natural beauty, Gadamer argues, this is not the case. Natural beauty is the ultimate representation of beauty without purpose, of beauty as good in itself. The tree, for instance, has no intention, no goal in life and for this reason cannot go astray. It just is, expressing itself and, in doing so, expressing the order of things which determine it, since it has no self-determination. Human being is not like this since it has a self-determination, a freedom of movement, a self-movement, denied to the tree. The work of art, as human artifact, is addressed to this self-movement. Thus we saw how Heidegger connected the work to our proper destiny and to our reorientation to our communal auspices, to our direction or ends.

In the introduction to his book concerning our sense of place, Paul Shepard also addresses this difference between human life and natural life, doing so in the following way:

"An earthworm, flung upon the sunlit ground, does not scamper up into the bushes, lunge into a stream, or bask on a hot rock. It squeezes
underground as quickly as possible, where we may suppose it is more comfortable. Not at all sharing St. John's metaphysics, it flees from light as from the devil."

(Shepard, 1967: 28)

Shepard reminds us that for 'natural' beings, their place, where they belong, where they are comfortable and at home, is given by the physical characteristics of the species. Thus does the earthworm squeeze underground away from the light, the lizard bask upon the rock, and the fox scamper into the bushes. Each locates its comfortable place and is content. As for trees, they remain forever "pressed against the earth's sweet flowing breast" as poet Joyce Kilmer says in that banal yet ever popular poem of his.* Trees are at one with their origin.

This means, Shepard says, that not at all does the earthworm share St. John's metaphysics. But what does this allusion to St. John and metaphysics suggest about the different nature of man and animal? To point to saints and to metaphysics as Shepard does is surely to say that unlike the earthworm, the lizard, the fox and the tree, human beings inhabit the world as saints and as sinners, or with a sense of right and wrong. To take this back to that Garden of Eden metaphor which Kilmer draws upon in his eulogy to the tree, it was upon eating of the knowledge of good and evil that humans were cast out of Eden and came to know shame for the first time. That is to say, with knowledge, comes the division of right and wrong. We might remember as well that the eating was brought on by desire, by the desire invested in the forbidden apple. The human world is divided in the light of our desire, a desire which, following that initial separation which occurs with the division of the world into good and bad, right and wrong, seeks to reinstate our oneness with what is good. The movement of reason can thus be read here as one of separation and a subsequent regathering in the light of what is held to be desirable.

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* Trees by Joyce Kilmer, i.e. "The tree whose hungry mouth is pressed, Against the earth's sweet flowing breast"
While the earthworm seeks out its physical comfort and is satisfied, human life questions the worth of life, perhaps even chooses discomfort and unhappiness in the name of something it sees as better to pursue. So too does human being recognize getting lost, going wrong, being foolish, as it recognizes that ends and means can be rethought or understood differently, and that all ways and means aren't exchangeable or equivalent. Human being thus serves us as a standard for being, one which demands the examination of our lives and ends.

Given this distinction between human life and natural life, the division of house and tree in Wall's work is strange in the way it pits the ugliness of the human city against the beauty of the natural tree. How are we to read this? Might it be suggesting that we stand in awe of that beauty and lament our own inferior human efforts? Is it saying that we ought to return to some primordial state of 'natural man' which would yield to us the comfort of an original oneness with nature, with that natural source, one which the tree exemplifies?

Such a conclusion might be read from a poem called Binsey Poplars by Gerard Manley Hopkins. It speaks beautifully and poignantly of the way human endeavours are forever doomed to be instrusive and destructive of an original and beautiful 'natural' world:

O if we but knew what we do
When we delve or hew -
Hack and rack the growing green!
Since country is so tender
To touch, her being so slender,
That, like this sleek and seeing ball
But a prick will make no eye at all,
Where we, even where we mean
To mend her we end her,
Where we hew or delve:
After-comers cannot guess the beauty been.

Or we might consider a more recent and somewhat unintentionally humourous rendition of this call to stand aside in favour of that which came first. This plea was
made by a young and ardent environmentalist during televised coverage of a recent Portland conference on the forests. Arguing the case for the need to stop logging, the young man pleaded "but the trees came first". It's as though he were saying that as "after-comers", what we rightly and justly must do is to preserve that which temporally preceded us.

In response to such calls for oneness with nature, we might turn yet again for insight to those remarks of Gadamer's concerning natural beauty. Hegel, he argues, rightly grasped that natural beauty is a reflection of artistic beauty (Gadamer, 1986: 30). Our capacity to see the beauty in nature would be impossible without the constructive and imaginative reframing which human culture has accomplished. Gadamer reminds us of how the Alps were described in travel diaries of the eighteenth century as terrifying mountains whose ugly and fearful wildness was a denial of beauty, humanity and the security of human existence. Even in early Western movies, we can see traces of this fear of the wilderness. Yet today, the Alps speak of sublimity and for many there is nothing which exemplifies the finest of human undertakings better than our preservation of such wilderness.

In considering this legacy which endows us with our sense of beauty, we might also consider that 'natural' pursuit of gardening. We all know it is not enough to merely plant in a patch of ground. The garden must be watered, tended, given ample nourishment. It requires an understanding of the needs of the plants, of their growth habits, nutritional requirements, that is, of the human knowledge which has been gathered in the service of that end. Everyone who aspires to be a gardener must come to terms with this.

The above holds true even for those recent trends in gardening which favour the natural or 'wild' garden. For example, CBC radio carried some news stories about a year ago concerning a woman in a Canadian suburb who transformed her
garden into what she saw as a patch of wild woodland. She argued that since her street was called Woodland Drive, woodland it should be. This was much to the annoyance of her neighbours, who in turn called in the public health officials on the grounds that the garden disregarded local health regulations and thereby endangered the neighbourhood. The point here is that even this most natural of gardens, this 'natural woodland' required careful intervention and nurturing, the historical knowledge which allowed for the separation of what was wild from what was not, and perhaps most fundamental to our point, a guiding aesthetic vision of what constitutes the beauty of nature and the wild woodland.

That such an understanding of the place of nature in our lives, such an elevation of 'naturalness', is a very particular interpretation of nature's beauty becomes obvious if the wild woodland garden is contrasted with the Zen garden (as in Slawson, 1987). In Zen gardening, the beauty and order of nature is understood to be revealed only through the most artful and studied human endeavours. These are known to require not only an enormous amount of technical skill, but even more importantly, a fineness of character and intellect which is not assumed to be ordinary or that of everyone. Thus entry into the art is carefully guarded by the masters, and the knowledge of the 'order of the cosmos' which the practice seeks to make visible requires an exceedingly long and disciplined apprenticeship. This is ultimately to say that the knowledge of Nature is by no means understood here as something 'naturally' given to all, or 'naturally' visible, although all are held subject to that order. It is also to say that the order is conceived in terms of beauty and goodness, a beauty and goodness which requires human effort if it is to be made visible.

A further argument concerning natural beauty also offered by Gadamer helps to show how any conclusive reading of Wall's work is impossible. Gadamer
argues that natural beauty can serve as a corrective against too much art (Gadamer, 1986: 30-32). It reminds us, he says, "that what we acknowledge in a work of art is not all that in which the language of art speaks." We can interpret this to say that natural beauty is a corrective against any understanding that treats art as not limited by an order outside or other to itself. Gadamer argues that it is through the beautiful that we experience the presence of an order which we do not fully grasp or understand or conceptualize, one which we understand to exceed us individually, but to which we nevertheless understand ourselves to be subordinate. The experience of the beauty of nature helps to place us in a space similar to that of Glaucon and Socrates, who understood the beauty and good of justice and their subordination to it, although they could not adequately say why. Thus he says that "the ontological function of the beautiful is to bridge the chasm between the ideal and the real...we learn that however unexpected our encounter with beauty may be, it gives us an assurance that the truth does not lie far off and inaccessible to us, but can be encountered in the disorder of reality with all its imperfections, evils, errors, extremes and fateful confusions" (Gadamer, 1986: 30-32). Natural beauty serves to remind us that art doesn't by itself create the order, but seeks to bring to appearance that which cannot be said or totally grasped.

If we return again to our questions concerning that dynamic of houses and trees, it is to emphasize yet again that Wall's work is a complex condensation of ideas which are difficult to conceptualize or put into words, and which remain indeterminate and open to re-evaluation and reinterpretation. Nevertheless, in thinking about the work and trying to understand what it says, a sense of unease keeps surfacing. Largely it does so in response to the unrelenting ordinariness of those houses. Human achievement seems so paltry in their light. Descartes housed his pleasure, we remember, in the engineered city with its level grid and stone
foundations, its flat plane and wide open views, its facilitation of ordered and unencumbered movement. How different from this city of Jeff Wall's, which represses that pleasure, and shows us human life in its ugliness, as paved streets, cars, telephone poles and those ugly houses. Wall shows instead the old, mysterious power and beauty of the tree, even hinting that we are a threat to its continuation through the ugliness of our cities.

It is important here that we remember that peculiarity of the human mode of being, how human being is synonymous with understanding. Understanding is the way man is, Heidegger has argued. It is the nature of human existence, our ontology. Weinsheimer, translating Heidegger's words, says that human being "interprets itself". This is to say that human being exists as it understands its possibilities and enacts them in the world, through our concerted actions. Human being is not in this way a fixed being, but a being which reaches forward, projects itself, understands itself (McCumber, 1989: 179). As such, we are always on the move, transforming ourselves in the light of our understandings of our possibilities and on the basis of our understandings of what we are and ought to be.

Weinsheimer portrays this understanding which is human being in terms of metaphor. We always see a thing as something, by locating the entity as some particular thing, in some particular form, he says (Weinsheimer, 1991: 77). In his discussion, Weinsheimer points out that when we construct something metaphorically, we articulate what it is by looking away from, looking at, seeing together as. He also suggests that this speaks to an irreducible tension of similarity and difference at the heart of our reason, and that this further implies that the "hermeneutic circle of alienation and reunion" characterizes all our perceptions of the world (Weinsheimer, 1991: 70-80).
Like Gadamer, Weinsheimer argues that it is only in application that one comes to understanding, within the specificity of a particular application in the world. In this regard, we can think back to our earlier discussion of Sacks, who in theorizing the foundations of the social, conceived it 'as ordinariness'. He showed this to be a kind of self-portrayal, and therefore a way of understanding what we are, our human being. Thus Sacks asserted that ordinariness didn't reside in any of our properties, but in the way we constituted ourselves. It was the limit we took upon ourselves.

Zizek has also argued that the idea of identity in fact means this process of alienation in an other followed by a subsequent return to self. He illustrates this in the form of an equation: for example, "the city = x, with x necessarily being other than the initial term, since "the city = the city" yields nothing, says nothing, cancels itself out. The familiar or the known always results from a process of estrangement: familiar, unfamiliar, familiar.

Given that in metaphor one notion is related analogically to another to form a whole, Weinsheimer argues that neither of the paired notions will fully contain the other. A rift or difference remains, constituted by what cannot be assimilated by one to the other when we try to mediate the two so as to form a new whole. This was evident both in Sacks' construal of the theorist as the detailed observer and in his analogy between the social theorist and the poet. The metaphor which constituted Sacks' version of the theorist resulted from a mediation of two original terms, but came to rest on the side of one, with the theorist of the social made analogous to the writer of natural history. Fundamental aspects of the social initially posited were absent in the final mediation.

If we take this back to the question of the houses and tree in the Wall work and the reason for my unease, we could construe the 'identity' at play as the city or
the social. The city, however, seems to have first been construed as nature, although in the photo this is split into two: nature as the drives of biological beings and as the human artifacts which realize those drives (i.e. the houses, the streets, services etc.); and nature as the natural beauty of the tree. It is important in this regard to see that the opposition also has a high and a low side, and that the work is itself (as a human artifact) a mediation of the two, one which also implies a certain degree of triumph of the high (a thoughtful adherence to beauty) over the low (unthought ordinariness). It is also, as we have said previously, an incitement to viewers to carry out such a triumph in their own lives.

Yet in the particular form of Wall's reconciliation of the ordinary and the extra-ordinary lies a danger that the extra-ordinary will affirm our ordinariness. Since any inner beauty in the houses remains undisclosed behind those ugly facades, the worry is that this human ordinariness could only ultimately be overcome by our disappearance or total effacement into a natural world. Such an effacement would, it is argued, be the negation of human nature, for as we have consistently seen throughout the various arguments in this paper, human being divides the world into the better and the worse and seeks to transform the world in the light of its understandings of the difference between the two. Our effacement into 'naturalness' would end our estrangement, which would also end those extra-ordinary tasks of reflection and the renewal of our sense of wonder and mystery at the heart of ordinary life which Wall's work itself undertakes.

As though speaking to a need to redress this imbalance in the work, a desire to look awry at Wall's framing of our houses remains. This venture into the heartland of the ordinary will therefore undertake its final reframing of ordinary life through those houses and trees, a reframing which seeks out the extra-ordinariness at their heart.
The house moves us at unimaginable depths ....

...it shelters our day dreaming..

Gaston Bachelard

The Poetics of Space

The House and the Inscription of the Social

It must be granted to Jeff Wall that if we turn our attention to the city around us, houses just like those ugly Specials can be found. I have them in my own neighborhood, passing them every time I go to the store or for a walk. They aren't houses to which I generally give much thought. Rather, they seem to fade into the background. Indifference might therefore be the best word to describe my own relationship with them, an indifference of the kind Wall's photograph jolts. His work makes us aware of how unmindful we can be of features of our everyday world.

That such houses as Wall shows us give little pleasure is also crucial to the work, for the many pleasures that houses yield have been withheld, repressed in this work. This constitutes a very potent repression which the work plays upon, for our houses are heavily invested with dreams. Doesn't the Patricia Highsmith story of the "black house" recognize this potency of the house-space and of that image in our lives?

In his work, Poetics of Space, Gaston Bachelard sought to plumb this the deep attachment we have to houses.

"(The house) moves us at unimaginable depths! It is our first world; it maintains us through the storms of the heavens and through those of life; it shelters (our) day dreaming" (Bachelard, 1958: 6).
It is easy for me to recognize my own passion for houses. I love to look at them and to read about them. I keep a watchful eye out for what should befall the ones in my neighborhood, as though in a sense they all belonged to me, facing the street and offering themselves to public view and judgement as they do. I notice all the changes in them, the new windows and doors, new roofs and siding, houses torn down, new houses going up, houses undergoing renovation, new people moving in, old ones moving out.

As for that day-dreaming to which Bachelard points, this too is quite apparent. It's especially so for me when, reframing the house, I think not of Vancouver Specials, but of one particular neighbourhood house. Not that this house is grandiose or expensive or a great work of architecture. It's only a cottage really, yet it speaks to me in some special way. A tiny, white-sided house with a red roof and leaded windows, it's almost hidden behind a stone wall and a bank of rhododendrons, so that you have to peek over the gate to see inside. This I love to do, although even then only a glimpse of it can be caught, since it's secluded behind a gnarled old wistaria which shelters within its lacy branches the whole side of the house and the walkway. I love the house's mystery, the seductiveness with which it hides its charms from the prying eyes of the world, its coziness.

"In the house," says Bachelard, "memory and imagination remain associated ... each one working for their mutual deepening. Through dreams, the various dwelling places in our lives co-penetrate and retain the treasures of former days." (Bachelard, 1958: 6). An association of memory and imagination -- there's a looking forward and a looking backward here which Bachelard points to, a meeting of past and future, the real and the imaginary, which occurs in the house. It is in this way that this particular house is able to speak, calling up that which is imagined and yearned for, as well as the pleasures enjoyed, the two all mixed together,
inseparable. Memories and dreams are somehow entwined in such a place, fixed fast in this 'object'; the house allows for their preservation and serves to keep alive the delight. This makes the house a form of remembrance, a remembrance not only of houses lived in, of ones seen in travels, of houses from old landscape paintings, of cottages encountered in stories and poems, but also a remembrance of unformulated and incoherent experiences, desires and imaginings which have need of such resting places. The house gathers together in its distinctive form not just personal experience, but the whole tradition which forms us.

This cottage has about it something of those black and white timbered cottages of a kind familiar from Constable's paintings and Romantic landscapes, from visits to the English countryside, the kind we associate with Thomas Hardy's novels or Masterpiece Theatre. These are the kind draped in ivy, with tendrils of mauve wistaria wrapped around the eaves and an oak door framed in climbing roses. The garden, and there is always a splendid garden with such houses, is a soft haze of colour, overgrown with masses of purple lavender and blue delphiniums, pink hollyhocks and the white and yellow of shasta daisies.

Something in this little house also recalls those houses of the Mediterranean, houses suffused with all the pleasures of colour and sun that the Impressionist painters drew upon. On my kitchen wall hangs a watercolour of just such a place, a rustic home reminiscent of Monet's Giverney. It's a house-image which is able to gather up all the pleasures of blissful, sunny days, with its walls of softly weathered stone and its terracotta roof, its green shuttered windows and its courtyard in which brown and white chickens scratch among pots of geraniums.

Not many houses in my neighborhood have the impact of these, or of the little white cottage. But still there are many which stand out and which yield a certain pleasure, all for different reasons, all of which reveal the complexity of our
love of houses. Some houses stand out because they are so obviously well loved and cared for, which infuses them with a special glow and presence. Some stand out because they have architectural features which fire the imagination, like leaded windows or an inviting front porch, or a beautiful garden. With others, they do so because they have a look of faded splendor which lets us dream of their revival to former glory. With yet others, it's simply that they're the home of friends, and for this reason, familiar and dear. I can even think of a recently built Vancouver Special, unusual in its simplicity, with a red tiled roof and pale pink walls, which is able to brighten up grey days with its hues from a sunnier clime.

The house, as we see, offers us some of the great pleasures of daily life; it's a space which can shelter our dreams and makes life worth living. There's nothing much of purpose in my own deep affection for them, about the way they awaken my sense of delight and wonder and stir up dreams and longings. The longings are indeed for a snug rootedness in a beloved place, for a certain sensual fullness, for comfort, sanctuary and stability, for a sense of joy, well-being and contentment, and for the pleasure of extra-ordinary spaces and enchanted moments. While there's a mystery to that delight and wonder houses can yield, there's also a conviction that their appeal reaches far beyond the mundane and everyday service of biological needs and into our dreams.

It is clear too that the delight I experience in this particular house is not just a delight in its appearance or its physical beauty. That is, it invokes a delight in the lives and moments lived or imagined in such houses, for the beautiful, as we have said before, is akin to the good, and has a moral dimension. Gadamer points out that in German, fine art also means beautiful art, a linguistic phenomenon which brings to the surface more clearly than in English the ethical and moral dimensions which come to bear on what we find beautiful (Gadamer, 1986: 15). The beautiful
bears a relation to the life lived well, and the house loved and found beautiful speaks to its capacity to shelter a 'good' life.

That this is so is evident in the variations in our attachments to houses, how some houses we love, some we are indifferent to, some we dislike. For instance, I can think of a neighborhood house which I disliked intensely. I use the past tense because this house is now gone, replaced with one of the ubiquitous Vancouver Specials. Like Highsmith's 'black house', this one was derelict, and also like the 'black house', invested by me with a certain horror. It was neglected and unkempt. The paint was peeling and blankets hung in the windows. Old bottles, papers and discarded bits of furniture had piled up in the long grass and weeds that passed for a front yard, as though its inhabitants merely threw out the window what they no longer wanted. A look inside revealed a dingy little room with walls plastered with nude female pinups, and a television set blared, whatever time of day or night you passed. It made me shudder, not just to see the ugliness of the exterior, but to think of the life lived out inside, as though the ugliness of the two had become inseparable.

In that brief foray into Plato's Republic, we tried to speak about the extraordinary at the heart of the ordinary by suggesting that our love for the beautiful infused all the realm of necessity, and that it did so in the form of an 'excess' which sought to transform the necessary or given in the light of what is held to be good. In the light of what is good, it was argued, things are gathered together and the world is brought into focus. This vision of beautiful excess we located as the heart of the social.

Sacks showed us this beautiful excess as the way we enact ordinariness, showing us how it was something reached for, how its achievement is a kind of enactment of what we saw to be good. Sociologist Steven Karatheodoris shows us
how even such ordinary things as houses and the technical and utilitarian skills associated with them are shaped through this moral and aesthetic excess which constitutes the heart of the social. He does this by speaking of that difference between human nature and the natural world which, as we have seen, provides us with a means for delineating our understandings of the good life. Karatheodoris makes use of the Promethean legend of the human taming of fire in his endeavour, since for as long as we are aware, the use of fire and the technical skills which were developed through and around its use have been associated with the advent of human community.

How is it that the use of fire marks the human world off from the natural world of animals? In the Ionian dialect, Karatheodoris tells us, the primary unit of collectivity was called *epistion*, and denoted "those who draw near a hearth". We might note the close connection between this term and our modern word 'epistemology', which refers to the study of the sources, origins or coming into being of knowledge. This coming of knowledge comes through dwelling by the fire, for this dwelling transformed the community and the dwelling place and initiated a circular process of new understandings and new skills. These in turn demanded new orientations to collective life and a whole series of new obligations and duties emerged.

Karatheodoris argues that the overcoming of fire reveals that divided nature of human being:

"At the very core of our understanding of man's mastery of fire lies the problem of explaining how and why we overcame the impulsive desire deeply rooted in our nature to run away from the fire. ...(this) marks the distinction between the aggregative impulsive of the herd and the reflexive requirements of self-denial and self-mastery instrumental in the achievement of social life." (Karatheodoris, 1979: 190)
While beasts fear fire and can be counted upon to react to it in a predictable or standard way, he says, humans learned to overcome this fear and to avail themselves both of fire's terror and its wonder. The overcoming of those instinctual fears of the beast, coupled with the capacity to project the possibilities for fire and to foresee its transformation from enemy to friend, all epitomize that fundamental movement of alienation and return which we spoke of previously as the metaphoric structure of human thought. Such a movement speaks to the human capacity to gather what is alien and feared into a kinship with itself. It also speaks to our capacity to be more than we have previously understood ourselves to be.

With the adoption of fire, Karatheodoris argues, new skills came into being. These newly required skills are the prototypical professional and technical skills, the vocations of the human community. These were the skills needed to tend the fire, to keep it burning. Human life, life with fire, called for devotion to new techne and demanded "concerted, cooperative and deliberative action" (Karatheodoris, 1979: 193). These were skills with which we confront the intractability and otherness of the world, as any tending of a fire demonstrates. They are the way in which that natural world is known to us, the ways of meeting and understanding its resistance to human efforts, its otherness of being in which we must find ourselves, out of which we must enact the good life and that difference in the world which is us.

The new obligations which arose with the tending of the fire also offered new sources of pleasure and gratification. Zizek, for example, argues that in fact all human enjoyment is experienced as a form of transgression: it has this divided nature, pleasure in the pain of self-overcoming. "In its innermost status it is something imposed, ordered. When we enjoy, we never do it spontaneously, we always follow a certain injunction" he tells us (Zizek, 1991: 9). Karatheodoris argues in this same way that fire comes to stand for this new pleasure in the overcoming of
self in the name of that which is good, an overcoming of self which marks out the
distinctiveness of human being. "Fire acquires the status of *logos* as that which must
be attended and heeded" writes Karatheodoris. "It offers to those who use it an
occasion to suffer the ordeals of reflection, conflict, self mastery, dread" (Karatheodoris, 1979: 192).

Karatheodoris points out the kinship between befriending fire, the technical
skills it demands, and moral notions such as choice, commitment, duty, restraint and
self-mastery. Dwelling by the fire, or dwelling with reason, requires effort and
violent self-denial in response to a desire for something which is understood to be
good. If the community is to exist as fire dwellers, that fire must be tended and its
worth protected. Out of which arises not only these new pleasures which constitute
moral life, but also a new sources of division within the community which is always
concerned to foster the tending of the fire, to not let this new found joy and wonder
fall away. "Humans", says Karatheodoris, "forget their ordeal by fire. They hear and
speak, do deeds, but remain inattentive to the fire" (Karatheodoris, 1979: 203).
"Although it is the most common, the most obvious, the most taken for granted
reality, though it dwells in every home, in every community, it lies unseen, ignored,
forgotten." While everyone is called upon to tend the fire and to dwell reasonably,
because the tending is so common and everyday, it becomes invisible, unseen.

It is therefore possible to see that the befriending of fire refers us to that
struggle we have with our 'situatedness'. The tending of the fire entails an ongoing
need to be reminded of its beauty and wonder, a need which both theorizing and art
address, as the works of Sacks, Descartes and Wall have shown us in their various
ways. Wasn't it because of this very forgetfulness, of the way we cease to notice the
way we tend the fire, that Sacks was required to show the students the artful
practices through which they enacted their everyday world, how those actions were
oriented to an understanding of 'what was called for' and how things 'needed to be done properly', and of how this involved a watchfulness on the part of the community.

The befriending of fire only occurs by means of a difficult struggle in which self must overcome self, self here referring not only to instinct, habit, impulsive desires and fears, but also to the loves and desires and understandings which constitute our capacity to overcome. The befriending of fire entails a struggle between the urge to reflectively engage these, the dread of what that reflection entails, and the subsequent resistance to such engagement. While the way in which that struggle gets played out is never guaranteed or settled once and for all, it is through this struggle that the social is achieved and sustained.

**The Particularity of the Inscription**

Karatheodoris tells us that the hearth gave its name 'epistion' to the most basic form of human collectivity. If the hearth gathers the community which tends it, which comes to adore it, to dwell upon its splendor and upon how it is good, this means that the space in which that tending occurs constitutes a fundamental inscription of the social. If Modernity has a particular affection for 'ordinary life', if this is fundamental to the way in which we see the world, the particularity of that affection should be evident in the shape of our houses. It should also be evident in the moral divisions of the community concerning our houses, since it is through those divisions that the *logos* is tended.

Architect Jacquelin Robertson, for example, insists that in the North American urban order the individual house on its own plot of ground has enormous power, that it is an archetypal inscription of our understanding of the social. Robertson argues that the house, "is the site of our greatest civic allegiance: our
polis and our institutional buildings are always marshalled around it” (Robertson, 1989: 141). Robertson even called his paper "The House as the City", suggesting in this way how our understandings and conceptions of our houses reveal fundamental aspects of our social bonds. Trying to rame the city in a way which was able to show the power of the house, Robertson made use of the long-running television show, Dallas; he sees that show as constituted through a moral dynamic embodied in two opposing images: the house, and the glass towers of the downtown city core. Robertson's contention in the paper is that each of these images was imbued with a moral life and assumed a role as central as any of the characters.

If as Heidegger has maintained, any work is constituted through the way it allows us to experience a struggle, Robertson sees the struggle in Dallas as one between the house and its domestic concerns and the skyscraper with its connotations of commerce and the pursuit of material wealth. A structural similarity with the dynamic of "The Pine on the Corner" seems obvious, although in Wall's work the ground-hugging house on its small city lot is opposed, not by the powerful heights of the ultra modern, man-made skyscrapers which we find in Dallas, but by the natural sweep of that old and enormous pine. And of course Wall's houses, those Vancouver Specials, are not only low in the horizontal sense; they also lack the vertical hubris of the towers and are, as we have stressed, mundane and unseductive newcomers to the urban scene, crowded together on small city lots as they are, and fronted only by those parked cars, telephone poles, fire hydrants and mail boxes which speak of the modern concerns with ordinary life of which Taylor speaks.

While the moral dynamic in Dallas involves the ongoing mediation between the houses and the urban towers, Robertson argues that historically the essential juxtaposition within the North American urban order "was of small buildings set
against an enormous panorama of Nature and striking natural phenomena" (Robertson, 1989: 143). Certainly the spread of small individual landholdings into mountains and forests has characterized the dynamic of settlement and growth of our Canadian communities -- especially here in the West, perched out on the last frontier as we are, where wilderness settlement is a very recent memory. The individual house, properly situated on its own piece of land, has provided us with a very condensed image of the city, of its movement from past to future, and of the proper balance between the opposing forces which constitute it.

Through the particularity of those divisions and of our attempts to resolve them we have tended the logos. It is the case, for example, that for almost a decade now in Vancouver we have seen a struggle waged between the two moral protagonists which comprise this archetypal North American image of the city: house and tree. In what has often been heated argument and has on occasion even erupted into open hostility, we have seen one element pitted against the other. It is also within this dynamic, as part of the movement of this 'debate', that Wall's "Pine on the Corner" can be situated, as yet another local protagonist in the drama through which our particular understanding of the city (that is, of the social) has been given its contemporary life and that we have given form and shape to that modern affection for ordinary life.

If we go back to Spring of 1990, approximately a year after Wall completed his landscape, we can enter this Vancouver tale of the house and the tree at one of its most antagonistic stages. The confrontation at that time concerned the felling of two old and enormous sequoia trees located in the yard of a very expensive home in Kerrisdale. A series of escalating protest actions had been carried out by a group of local homeowners in an effort to save the trees. These included public meetings, letter writing campaigns and lobbying, tying yellow ribbons round the trees to
remind passers-by of their impending fate, and finally, as a last desperate resort, obstructing the workers who came to cut the trees down such that the police had to be called in.

The owner of the trees had only just bought the particular piece of property on which they were situated. He defended the removal of the trees on the claim, one disputed by others in the community, that "they were damaging the foundation of his house" (Hendrickson: The Province, May 4, 1990). The owner of the trees was angry at the publicity and angry at the interference of neighbours in what he considered to be his private affairs. Besides citing the damage the trees were doing to his house, he made frequent assertions about the trees being only his business, since he now owned them and the land. His claim was that he should be left in peace to cut them down, asserting as justification his private rights of property and taste (Godley: The Vancouver Sun, March 5, 1990).

The protagonists on the side of the trees offered opposing reasons to substantiate the value of the trees, ones which stressed the great importance of the trees to the neighborhood. Of prime importance in this regard was their beauty and what they referred to as their "symbolic value". While no effort was made to clarify what exactly was 'symbolized' in them, there was talk of how the trees formed a familiar landmark in the neighbourhood, of how they were part of the way the neighborhood knew and remembered itself, and of the great attachment people had for the trees. "When members of the group tied yellow ribbons around the trees a few days before they were felled, people driving by stopped and got out to look at them. Some even walked over and touched their trunks. They were a kind of symbol in the neighborhood, a landmark -- they were that important" one said. "I couldn't believe someone could come along and do that. They were such beautiful
trees" another added, as though a lack of susceptibility to their beauty was beyond comprehension.

There was a great deal of antagonism toward the owner for what was seen as his lack of concern for neighbours and for his unwillingness to consider both their affections for their neighbourhood and their concern for their past, 'symbolized' for them in the tree (e.g. Letters to the Editor, The Province, Apr 18, 1990). A common rallying cry of the forces opposing the felling of the trees was to call for a law which would prevent such actions from occurring again. This in turn initiated a whole new flurry of action concerning the law's pros and cons. There was also a concerted effort made to plant trees on both private and public land. A tree planting ceremony, for example, was held to commemorate the two giant trees which had been felled, at which a child read a poem extolling the virtues of trees which was modelled after Joyce Kilmer's poem.

The incident of the giant trees was not an isolated phenomenon, but was embedded in a history of rapid change as Vancouver grew, became more densely populated and moved from woodsy suburbs to urban residential neighbourhoods. The latest battles which have arisen over these changes have largely centred around the building of very large houses in residential areas of the city. These houses have changed the appearance of the city, especially in the affluent West Side, where aesthetic considerations have been paramount, and large lots, gardens, trees and green space have traditionally been plentiful. Major complaints against the new large houses have centred around the way in which they have entailed the removal of small existing houses, on the fact that they occupy most of the space on the lot and that they also therefore entail removal of the existing landscaping, which has included many very old and large trees. In the popular press, these large new houses have come to be known as "monster houses", a reference which allies them
with the likes of Frankenstein's monster, and conveys that same sense of dreams run amok and turning into nightmares.

We can see the conflict as one of excess on both sides of the house and garden duality: monster houses with few trees, and giant trees with small houses. This is to say that both the house and the tree appear to have fractured into opposing configurations, with the battles being waged over their proper mediation. "The Teardown", an article in the March edition of Western Living, offers a fine example of the object of affection on the "small old house" side of the confrontation (Sutherland, 1993: 114). Featured in the article is "a two bedroom bungalow with a large and pleasant garden" for sale in Kerrisdale. This small Craftsman Style house was named the Ideal Cottage of 1924. A small, low, white stucco mock tudor with leaded windows, it is reminiscent of that little white house in my own neighbourhood. The writer of the article maintains that during the period when it was built, middle class homes actually shrank in size, a trend he attributes not to austerity or shortages of materials, but to aesthetic and moral considerations. The Craftsman style, Sutherland argues, was inspired by the idea of small, relatively inexpensive but well built houses. "So that even ordinary folk could own a place they were proud of" is the way he articulates that appeal. "In England, the impulse was rooted in nostalgia more than any democratic tendency, and there the rural cottage reigned. In Canada, we found the inspiration in both camps," Sutherland claims (1993: 114). What is interesting here is the way in which this interpretation of the Craftsman style constructs it as an affirmation of interconnected dimensions of that modern affection for ordinary life: the ordinary as the average or as the "not too anything" (i.e. modest houses for ordinary people or folk, those who are not too anything) and the ordinary as a return to the source, envisioned here as temporal firstness (i.e. nostalgia for the past, nature and the 'folk').
On the other side of the argument we find those "monster houses". These houses are huge, luxurious, expensive, ultra-modern and replete with the latest technology to service bodily comfort, convenience and pleasure. For the same reasons that pertain to the proliferation of the Vancouver Specials, the maximum amount of space possible given the lot size has been a predominant consideration in these houses, coupled with a dedication to the provision of all the latest in modern conveniences: bathrooms, luxurious yet high tech kitchens, garage space as well as proximity to shopping centres, transportation and places of work. Even in the local *East Side Real Estate Weekly*, where the houses advertised for sale tend to be more modest, many ads can be found for houses of enormous size. The March 12, 1993 Edition, for example, lists one new house whose selling points are listed as 5100 square feet, 7 bedrooms, 5 bathrooms, a detached double garage and space for a multiple car park. Another called, "Best House, Best Buy", has 7 bedrooms, six bathrooms, 2 Jacuzzis, a penthouse with ensuite, large sundeck and large kitchen. Its "a fully loaded house, has all the new toys", the ad says.

How do these houses embody the good life? They exemplify the house as a moral standard by means of its commodious service not only to the new and the technically sophisticated, but to the application of this new and sophisticated technology in the service of our physical well-being and comfort. The affection for ordinary life which shapes them seems to be centred around the pleasure of servicing our biological or bodily needs, the needs of life itself. If these houses seek to elevate themselves above the run-of-the-mill to a state of grandeur, as one would expect of any embodiment of notions of the good life, it could also be argued that they largely do so by their sheer accumulation of rooms and garages and appliances, rather than through any originality or coherence of vision. In fact, for many of these houses, grandeur seems to elude them -- as though in their conception an error had
been made between quantity and quality, or as though a point of balance between scarcity and abundance had been overstepped, and more had turned into less. In Aristotelian terms, we might argue that they miss the golden mean or point of balance between the two. The sheer volume of space and materials they consume also gives to many of them a certain air of belligerence, as though the voracious appetite they seem to exemplify threatened to consume everything in sight.

In the debates around the houses, many of the complaints concern the way so many of them don't fit in with their neighborhoods, about how obtrusive they are. This is not only attributed to their excessive size; it is also frequently attributed to their ugliness, as though this ugliness itself were indicative of their offense to the community (i.e. The Province: May 28, 1989). The debate shows us in this way that the beautiful appearance of the home emerges as a very important ethical consideration, one that community members are beholden to. This we might find curious, for in modern thought the beautiful is often taken to be a matter of purely subjective opinion concerning matters rather superfluous or trivial, a matter of personal preference for which no reasonable arguments can be offered. What one likes, another doesn't, and that's the end of the matter. Michael Seelig, for example, refers to this common position in an article concerning the monster houses (The Vancouver Sun, November 14, 1989 (A9)):

"Many people argue that the debate is an argument over taste...and taste is subjective. What seems ugly to one person may be beautiful to another. Therefore, some argue, there is nothing we can or should do. In a democratic society, everyone has the right to express his or her own sense of beauty."

It would seem from this account that while we do honour and love beautiful looking things, while this is indeed a fundamental part of our modern conception of the 'good life', we have some difficulty articulating the moral and ethical place of beauty in social life and its relation to reason. Gadamer is again illuminating in this regard,
for he locates a significant change which took place within post-Kantian philosophical solutions to questions about the nature of human reason. Kant figured as a watershed figure in this debate since he denied to taste, as the capacity of human reason which judges the beautiful, any significance as knowledge of an object. However, as Gadamer goes on to say of Kant's analysis, this subjective relationship to the beautiful was held by Kant to be, in principle, the same for all of us. This suggested to him that while the beautiful did not constitute knowledge of an object, its consideration could form the basis of a communal discourse, since taste, although individually located and experienced, could be understood by others. Indeed, Kant pointed out that the presumption we make is that it should be shared by others. That this is so is substantiated in the battle of the monster houses and giant trees. What is judged good by one's own judgment is always assumed to hold for others as well. In this way, taste can be and is talked about, cultivated and rendered common or shared. Through reflective cultivation, others can be aided in the process of experiencing a particular beauty. This again is evident the case of the beauty of Nature. Thus Gadamer writes that the beautiful:

"...is universally communicable and thus grounds the claim that the judgment of taste possesses universal validity. Taste is reflective. It imparts no knowledge of the object, but neither is it simply a question of a subjective reaction, as produced by what is pleasant to the senses."

(Gadamer, 1991: 43)

Gadamer also argues that significant transformations in our relation to the beautiful occurred with post-Kantian analyses, changes which had far-reaching consequences for contemporary thought. Schiller, for example, related our pursuit of the beautiful to an anthropological "play impulse" in individuals, one which hinged on the pleasure of the encounter with beautiful things. Cultivation of this sensibility came to define the purpose of an aesthetic education. While Kant himself had maintained a source of the beautiful in our actual perception of nature
(i.e. in the real) and had linked that perception to the moral and to the movement of human transcendence, what began to develop with Schiller was a notion of an ideal world of art and beauty separated from the real, one without a source of beauty within the practical reality of our lives. Schiller's ideal world was one in which the aesthetic play, the harmony of the beautiful art work, was treated as an alternative to the harsh 'realities' of our lives. Gadamer argues that art gradually came to be cast as appearance and set in opposition to practical reality, as the high to the low. From this perspective, it was only within the freedom of art works, as an achievement within and through their harmony and beauty, that any human perfection would be achieved.

Out of this, we might postulate the emergence of a new kind of social character who began to draw moral strength: the aesthete. Such a character lives in opposition to the ordinary, the everyday, the banal and the normal by being dedicated to a version of the good life as the refined life, the cultured life, a life in which the finest objects in life are cultivated -- the finest food, beautiful clothes, beautiful surroundings, refined entertainment. It's a life of beautiful consumption, a life we can glimpse in Vogue Magazine, Architectural Digest and Western Living.

Reverberations of this particular ethic of the beautiful are also apparent in the way we have come to conceive of our houses. Fundamental to this is a moral imperative to transform them from the merely useful into the aesthetically attractive. In the New Homes Section of The Vancouver Sun of June 14, 1991, for example, a little article talked about a hot new company rated No. 18 in Entrepreneur's list of the fastest growing franchises, a list which includes such huge operations as MacDonald's and Kentucky Fried Chicken. For up to $30,000, it reported, people can buy a house-decorating franchise which includes seven days of design training at the company's Life Style University, followed by 12 weeks of home
study and a "perky little ColorVan which, packed with wallpaper, fabric and rug samples, can be driven right up to a customer's house. "They serve," says the article, "the thousands of middle-class North Americans who suffer from Fear of Decoration; who covet the rooms they see in national shelter magazines but don't know how to achieve them on their own."

The article provides a glimpse of that contemporary power the 'good looks' of our house has to evoke both love and fear. The appearance of our house is something we both need and want to get right. It is the basis of moral judgements. It also shows, in a way Wall points to in his art, how this is manipulated cynically for others' financial profit. A cursory glance at local newsstands would serve to confirm the extent of the contemporary preoccupations with the beautiful house. At almost any newsstand, we might find at least thirty-five different magazines about houses offered for sale at any one time. The magazines reveal how many and varied are our dreams about houses. They speak of how we delight in the house's endless possibilities, how we spend time talking and reading about houses, how we worry about our houses, decorate our houses, renovate our houses, plan new houses, dream of having the perfect house, the dream house.

Just what kinds of 're-imaginings' of the house do these magazines cultivate? Not surprisingly, a considerable number of the magazines on the newsstands are self-help books, books for the 'handy-man' and do-it-yourself type books, books to guide us individually through our constant home improvement and renovation pursuits. About a half dozen more magazines present home plans, plans for cottages, starter homes, luxury houses, city homes, ranchers and holiday cabins. These include homes for every locale, every taste, every way of life, with titles like: "Designs for Flexible Living", "Build This Backyard Cottage for Someone You Love" or "How to Get the Most for your Building Dollar".
Equally familiar to us are those magazines at the opposite extreme to the practical magazines; these are high style magazines like *Architectural Digest: The International Magazine of Fine Interior Design* or *HG: House and Garden Magazine*. These magazines specialize in the luxurious and exotic, bringing to us pictures of the homes of the grand and the famous. It's not any real concern with practical hints which is the motivation for our interest here. Rather, these magazines are paeans to the sheer wonder and delight of beautiful looking houses and furnishings. They cultivate the pleasure of the house as a beautiful object, the house as one of our age's fundamental icons of 'the good life'.

The 'high style' fostered in these latter magazines also exemplifies another familiar and popular aspect of the way in which the contemporary house is conceived. Indeed, a plethora of different styles exists, one to suit every lifestyle imaginable, each with a 'look' which characterizes it. In the magazines we can find references to Southwest style, Colonial Style, English Style, Swedish Style, Industrial style, Victorian Style, even to a West Coast Style with its cedar and glass houses submerged in dense vegetation. It's no wonder that the Decorator franchises require a 'lifestyle university' at which to train their operators. Nor is it any surprise to find that the contemporary house has become the turf of the *haute couture* set, that Bill Blass, Ralph Lauren and Laura Ashley offer whole lines of mass market 'designer' items for the home, and that we have witnessed the entry into the home magazine market of high style fashion magazines like *Vogue Living* and *Vogue Decoration* and *Elle Decor*.

In order to pursue in more depth this affection of ours for style, we might look at the March 1993 edition of *Western Living*. Included here were some "recipes for style" used to design kitchens in four different homes in western Canada. In the design of a kitchen built in a renovated Calgary industrial warehouse, for
example, the magazine claims to take its "style cue" from the work of the Modernist painter Mondrian.

"Were Dutch painter Mondrian alive today and living in a warehouse, his cooking room would look like this one. The kitchen is characterized by heavy black outlines that frame large chunks of color. Here the black outlines can be seen in the grout, window frame and appliances. Slabs of color are provided by the cabinets and counters." (Rule, 1993: 53)

The kitchen draws on fine art, but transforms it into a 'look', such that those harmonic relationships of color and space which Mondrian spent his life investigating become an eye-pleasing arrangement of shapes and colored surfaces. According to the owner/designers, the kitchen is "fun and only slightly industrial". Presumably, such 'fun looks' as Mondrian's could be applied to anything, yielding an appearance which is both entertaining and pleasing to the eye. Unlike Mondrian's art, nothing is offered here which might upset anyone or persuade them to reflect upon their understandings of the good life.

Another one of the Western Living kitchens, (in this case called a "cook's room" so as to mark its distance from ordinary kitchens), is labelled "farmhouse fresh" and described as follows:

"Like the old farmhouse kitchens that influenced its design, this modern cook's room is made of simple basic materials. When ordinary maple, steel and linoleum are used with finesse, they look refined. ...It's a design soup, but every ingredient reinforces the visual package. From the '40s, the Turners borrowed the cabinet profile, exterior hinges and utilitarian linoleum; from the Amish, they adopted a no-frills attitude. They brought the screen door inside, and added restaurant-style appliances." (Rule, 1993: 50-51)

Again, it's the refinement of the total "visual package" and the pleasure this yields which seems paramount. The signature components of the old kitchen have been updated into a big commercial stainless steel range, a rectangular butcher block table and exposed stainless steel pots. The visual unity of the "package" is achieved by means of textural qualities, color, shape and surface appearance, so that the look
will please. From the simplicity of Amish furniture to ultra modern restaurant-style appliances, things are brought together according to their visual possibilities, yielding a minimalist, efficient, clean-lined and aesthetically harmonious rendition of the old utilitarian farmhouse kitchen. We are given ordinary life made to look pretty, the farmhouse with 'finesse', the farmhouse still useful but now beautiful looking.

This high style farm house kitchen doesn't only make visible that contemporary concern with transforming the 'merely' useful into the beautiful however, that concern to which Wall's work draws our attention. It also allows us to see how complex is the relationship between beautiful looks and other dimensions of the 'good life'. Take, for example, the current popularity of 'Country Style'. Almost all the contemporary style magazines include a requisite article on the 'country home', and there are at least four country home specialty magazines: Countryside, Country Kitchen, Country Home and Country Living. These have articles like: "Escape to Real Country Inns", "Nature, Food, Houses and Gardens", "The Cottage Garden", "Blue and White in Illinois", "Cottage Style in Nantucket" and "The Rock Musician's Rustic Retreat".

If, as we argued, the house reveals our attachments and our belonging to a way of life, how is it that country style shows us the beautiful? It might be assumed from the variations in these magazines and their styles that the house emerges out of needs which differ with locale, with time and place and with way of life, and that the house takes on its particular 'look' through meeting these needs in particular or 'local' ways. When we look at the country style homes, however, it is intriguing to find that they needn't be located in the country at all, nor need they pertain to a rural way of life. In fact, a perusal of the magazines show few of those who live in country style homes to be working farmers or ranchers or fishermen. A country
style home can in fact be a penthouse in Manhattan or in the West End of Vancouver.

Again, as we have said of style in general, country style seems to emerge in response to a desire to gaze upon and immerse oneself in a setting which is lovely to look at. However, this is so, at least in part, because country style is able to affirm the beauty and goodness of the 'natural' life. Thus a certain concordance can be seen with Wall's celebration of the natural beauty of the tree. In country style, however, the beauty and goodness of the natural life is conjured up by the replication of some popular and very condensed *images*. Frequently, the look is an achievement of the original design of the house itself, through the renovation of a house from a period which was simpler and 'closer to nature', such as an old log cabin or an old farm house. Or it might be attained by the close replication of the 'look' of such houses in new materials or by copying old house designs. The aesthetically pleasing assemblage of various accoutrements of country life is also an important component—rustic, antique or primitive looking furniture is very popular, as is wicker, old pine, gingham and chintz, and plenty of plants, dried flowers, baskets and displays of spices, old tin containers and home made preserves. Furthermore, everything which is *not* in keeping with this look tends to be hidden away out of sight. Antique wardrobes, for example, once relegated to the dump in exchange for streamlined fitted cupboards, have recently enjoyed a great surge in popularity, finding new life as 'entertainment centres' which look appropriately old and simple and country, but which serve to remove from sight all the unwanted high-tech signs of modern living like TVs, VCRs and stereos.

The way style serves in this way to conjure up the desirable place and time for us is evident in a short newspaper report on the 1991 British Interior Design Exhibition *(Vancouver Sun*, New Homes Section, New York Times New Service,
July 1991). Two examples from the article reveal opposing dimensions of the trend. The first example, American, is directed nostalgically to the past and the foreign. So little chintz, so much design!” the Assistant curator of the Victoria and Albert is quoted as saying. "Strangely, it's that American chintz and the bedroom with the blue and white Ralph Lauren fabrics by Countess Monika Apponyi of M.M. Design that look most English. It's a vision of England that's more English than the English." If the Americans are in this way producing and selling homey, comfortable 'chintzy' dreams of England, the English themselves are dreaming up and selling something quite different as the latest choice in lifestyle. Since England is that country where the latest reports say over half of the population would rather live somewhere else, it's no surprise to find not nostalgia for a dream of the beautiful past, but a dream of a very radical break with that past in favour of the fresh start and a brand new future. We find not chintz, but agitation for revolution, conceived, that is, as high style in the drawing room:

"You may not like what you see here, but you've never seen it before ... Visitors are greeted in Nick Allen's neoclassical anteroom by apparently bloodsplattered shutters and a padlocked door proclaiming No War For Oil by the artist Burhan Dogancay"

"The room makes a clashing counterpoint", the exhibition's director added, rather understating the case.

Style's propensity to seek out the nostalgic past or the perfect future is a source of worry for Canadian architect Witold Rybczynski. Thus he complains about the way in which the currently popular 'designer' houses have become more like stage sets on which fashionably costumed characters play out their self-chosen roles. Living the good life seems to be a matter of donning the appropriate clothes and buying the right furnishings, as though the life the house sheltered was a beautiful tableau presented for others to gaze upon (Rybczynski, 1986: 1-12).
Take the case of designer Ralph Lauren, Rybczynski says, who recently developed four home product lines for the mass market. The products, displayed in mock-ups of houses in Bloomingdale's in New York, were entitled "Log Cabin", "Thoroughbred", "New England" and "Jamaica". Like those 'English chintz' homes of Lauren's at the British Interior Design Exhibition, these drew on highly simplified and nostalgic images of more 'natural' lives: on the rustic log cabin, the country estate house, the early American colonial home and the plantation mansion from the southern U.S. sun belt. Rybczynski takes care to point out that these 'mock houses' of Lauren's are not derivative of any specific historic houses. Instead, they are that kind of condensed and simplified image we found in country style; they are more 'log cabin' than any log cabin ever was, more 'colonial' than any colonial house. They are like a distilled essence, a dream of a beautiful looking life which the messiness and unsettledness of contemporary life denies.

In this regard, Rybczynski points out that "what they leave out is as revealing as what they include", that as in country style, all the signs of contemporary high tech life, like computers, toasters, VCRs and telephones are eradicated. So too, it should be noted, are any hints of unpleasantness or hardship associated with the lives lived out in such times and places, as are any references to the ethical and moral choices such lives entailed. The life behind the 'look' is not asked after, and nothing is allowed to spoil the pleasure-power of those house images.

In response to Rybczynski's worry, it could be argued that style is a necessary response to our need to give shape to our commitment to the good and the beautiful. It serves as a way of keeping that commitment alive by allowing for us to exist by making a difference between what we do and what is just given to us. This difference can also provide for our reflection upon the particularity of the commitments previously displayed. It allows us to speak, for example, of aspects
previously repressed. Furthermore, the difference lets us experience the beautiful and the good anew, something which, as argued a number of times in this thesis, the usual and the same prohibit.

At the same time, however, we might agree with Rybczynski that style currently constructs this renewal as though its achievement were merely the exchange of one novel 'look' for another, as though the choices of lifestyle could be made as freely as time and money and desire dictate, and that this constitutes a good life. That is, 'lifestyle' seems to ask for no more of an understanding of that which it finds beautiful and good than do the novelties and changing whims of fashion, the purchase of beautiful stage props or the eating of a fancy meal.

In our earlier reading of the opening chapter of Plato's *Republic*, we argued that the human life entailed reflection upon what we hold to be good. Our commitment to understanding the good of what we love was what was important. We were persuaded to attend to our desires, our commitments, our actions through a kind of self-resistance. That which we find beautiful is part of this call for self-resistance, since we yearn for the beautiful, love and desire the beautiful and are enthralled by beautiful appearances. Yet such appearances might hide very ugly things. A beautiful looking city, for example, might well be an evil city, while the appearance of a high style house offers no guarantee that it will shelter a good life.

We might argue that this is of significance for the way Plato begins the dialogue *Protagoras*. It opens with Socrates addressing the youthful beauty of Alcibiades, who, while physically beautiful, was less than beautiful morally and ethically. Thus Plato contrasted his physical beauty not only with the beautiful wisdom of the old man Protagoras, but with the beauty of the ugly Socrates. Both these men, while old and ugly, were much more 'beautiful' as human beings. The difference between these is set into play in a way which invites readers to engage
their understanding of beauty and its relation to wisdom and knowledge. That
tension which we experience with an encounter with the beautiful is invoked, a
tension which speaks to the need for internal resistance and self-division which is
able to resist the beautiful looking by virtue of our love for the beautiful.

These references to Plato are intended here to help to show that while
'lifestyle' promises the openness of choice, it is at the same time a limited way of
conceiving of the grounds of community. Style seeks freedom of choice and an open
world -- as though it belonged to that open city Descartes dreamed of, where all
would be available for us without the infringement of any hierarchy or barriers.
Style, we might say, speaks to the value of choice, but constructs that as if it were
good because it is able to maximize our capacity to be and do whatever we wish.
This freedom is then postulated as the good life. The implication is that we should
be free to make choices without regard to our circumstances and history, to ethical
and moral restraints, and without reflection upon what grounds the choices we have
made.

Rybczynski's desire to turn his attention to the house speaks to his resistance
to the temptations of style and its pursuits. He invites us to reflection, asking us
what it is that we seek in these lifestyles which are sold to us in the guise of a house.
In doing so, he urges us to see that what we glimpse in the house is always a version
of "how things ought to be". In doing so, it is argued here that Rybczynski points us
to the moral grounds of the house and to the way any human work gives concrete
form to that 'human excess' pointed to in the Republic. That is, he shows us how
any work is always a particular embodiment of an understanding of the good life.

While Rybczynski concedes that even in the stylish house there is something
good, he argues that this requires reflection, since it must be separated from the
confusion in which it occurs. Ralph Lauren, for example, sells an image of the
house as it 'ought to be', Rybczynski says. However, this is an image of another time, a lost time, one from which we seek to regain something we feel we have lost. Style, Rybczynski seems to imply, addresses a certain lack, *some thing* which entices us but which is *beyond* things as they are given to us in the present. In this way, we might say, he shows us how style encompasses that essential difference between reality and the real of which Zizek speaks. Rybczynski, however, takes up the issue of this gap, this difference between the two, as a problem of the here and now which needs to be properly solved. What is required is that the house be 'put right'. What are we missing that we look so hard for in the past is the way Rybczynski formulates the problem. If our houses lack *some thing* which the dream houses have attempted to provide, what is it? This implies that what is wanted is to eliminate the difference between the 'ought' and the 'is'.

The answer to Rybczynski's operative question unfolds through his book. Like the slave boy in Plato's *Meno*, the one who knows the answers to individual questions but has to follow Socrates' line of questioning to get the whole answer, Rybczynski *already knows* that answer, although he still must carry out a search for it. After all, in looking for that missing something, he needs to separate it from all which is *not* part of it, separate the wheat from the chaff, so to speak. So Rybczynski knows but he doesn't know. He posits the object of desire, knows the nature of the desire, but must still do the looking, since that blank space of the 'ought to be' remains open, and this he feels called upon to properly fill. As Socrates had to fill out the notion of justice in the *Republic*, Rybczynski must fill out the good of the house. In filling out that empty space with his reflections upon the house, Rybczynski tells us why the house is something we value in our lives.

Just what is the value which Rybczynski sees in the house? It turns out to be 'comfort'. This is the good thing which must be recovered from Ralph Lauren, what
Lauren entices us with, Rybczynski says (Rybczynski, 1986: 221). Most modern houses lack important aspects of "comfort". Lauren is popular because he promises a very 'casual' and abundant physical comfort, a comfort reinforced by images of sufficient wealth, a good measure of stability and the solidity of tradition sufficient to foster and support it. If the house addresses or embodies comfort, this also means that when we search the past, we should look not for house styles (their various looks), but for how each age understood, developed and cultivated this cultural idea of "comfort". Thus "the Dutch bourgeois interior, for example, has much to teach us about living in small spaces." (Rybczynski, 1986: 221).

"It is an idea that has meant different things at different times. In the seventeenth century, comfort meant privacy, which lead to intimacy, and in turn, to domesticity. The eighteenth century shifted the emphasis to leisure and ease, the nineteenth to mechanically aided comforts -- light, heat and ventilation. (Rybczynski, 1986: 231)

It's not that the development of such a "cultural idea" ceases, Rybczynski contends. It remains open, available for re-imagining and for transformation. But the earlier meanings persist, they add layers, and in this way, the notion grows and its depth accumulates. "Comfort" is the totality of all these layers; it is all the ways we have envisioned it in the houses of the past. "At any particular time, comfort consists of all the layers, not only the most recent." (Rybczynski, 1986: 231). As the whole of the various ways in which it has been understood, it includes but is not limited to convenience, efficiency, leisure, ease, pleasure, domesticity, intimacy and privacy, all of which have, at various times, been the way we have translated "comfort".

As for those designer dream houses, or the contemporary orientation to high style and aesthetic appeal, or the tendency to define comfort scientifically, as ergonomics and efficiency -- all these offer only partial views of "comfort". None completely grasps it, although each knows "comfort" in the sense that it reaches for it
and has formulated an aspect of it. Each view has therefore added to the notion, developed a certain dimension of what we understand by "comfort", although each has excluded parts.

Rybczynski's analysis of the house can therefore be seen to be a kind of collecting and separating according to a notion of comfort. First the valuable parts are separated out; then he gathers them together into something more, something better, something more complete. "Comfort" remains the *some thing* we desire and pursue, but it is the *whole* of it which is desired and which must be gathered together for the promised renewal of the house. The house which finally grasps this mysterious thing, this whole, will be the house which 'ought to be', the dream for which we search, that which is *more* than we now have, more than our partial views. "We must rediscover for ourselves the mystery of comfort, for without it, our dwellings will indeed be machines instead of homes." (232).

To extrapolate from what Rybczynski says, it would seem that our desire reaches out to encompass the whole of things and to draw them together 'properly' within our works. But if we return with this in mind to those kitchen designs we spoke of previously, something in them is puzzling in light of this construction of the work. What's puzzling is that a movement towards wholeness and a desire to collect the essential *is* apparent in all these kitchen designs. At the same time, they are also partial in the way Rybczynski complains of, since the collecting which each kitchen entails seems to take place *within* a dominant notion or unifying idea. Not that these 'notions' are at all easy to pin down or name, given their embodiment in these sensuous forms. But there is a uniqueness to each "kitchen" -- the fun and aesthetic pleasure of playing with colour and shape in the case of the Mondrian kitchen, the ultra modern, sophisticated luxury of the "Posh and Polished" kitchen, the pristine freshness and cleanliness of the "farmhouse fresh" one. The unique look
of each kitchen says *something*, reaches for *something*, not just for *anything*. In doing so, each is limited, is distinguished, is not *every* kitchen. Each design seems to be an attempt to gather together the whole, but according to a particular quest, in the light of its own desire. Each remains a particular enactment or ordering of the whole; each remains partial.

If we relate this back again to Heidegger's conception of the work in order to deepen our understandings of our enterprise, we can see the struggle to also entail a mediation of the oppositions. The experience of the work is one of a mediation or proper reconciliation of oppositions. To better illustrate, let's turn to the details of the kitchens. Take, for instance, the "farmhouse fresh" kitchen design. We talked previously of how this design retained the major icons of domesticity and comfort from the old farmhouse kitchen, what was seen to be essential to the kitchen: the large stove, the window over the big sink, the open cupboards, screen doors, the large wooden table, rows of pots, the kettle. In the new 'designed' kitchen, these have been recast in keeping with the angular lines and stark functional simplicity of modern high tech design and its concern with efficiency. But they are not only evidence of modern functional simplicity. The 'design' also displays a certain sensitivity and concern for the aesthetic play of shape, color and texture, one which it integrates with that efficiency. Then there is also an attempt to reconcile the pragmatism and practicality, the easy comfort of domesticity with the aesthetic pursuit. And further, there is the inclusion of the unadorned 'natural' maple of the table and countertops, and the simple screen cupboard doors borrowed from the Amish which are brought into co-existence with the industrial stainless steel of the stove, an ultra-high-style kettle and a deluxe Italian cappucino machine. Given that these are highly calculated, 'designed' interiors, don't these contrasts reflect a certain need, conscious or not, to collect and/or unify many differences, even polarities?
Doesn't the design bring together what is seen to be valuable in the natural, the
country, the farm, the old fashioned, with what is found desirable in high design, in
the manufactured, in urban life, in industrial technology, in the new? And
moreover, aren't all these brought together within a logic of an affection for
'ordinary life'? And don't they therefore constitute a particular and unique
mediation of opposing understandings of the kitchen's possibilities?

Evidence of the same thing is obvious in the photos of the other two kitchens.
Take the "posh and polished" kitchen, for instance. It might be characterized as
sophisticated understatement, with its rows of plate glass windows, discrete spot
lighting, glossy black surfaced appliances discretely hidden in the counters, subdued
grey marble counters, grey tile floors and grey melamine counters. "Sleek, elegant
and contemporary, looks as good as it cooks", is the caption. Designed for a couple
"who don't seriously cook at all", it is recognizably up-town, sophisticated and
urbane, part of a 'Howe Street' kind of life style (Rule, 1993: 46-49). Sleek, elegant,
modern and urbane as it may be, the kitchen still employs 'natural' granite for its
counter tops, has 'natural' marble fruit dishes sitting on these counters, includes a
display of unshelled 'natural' nuts, and spotlights an old and ornate silver urn spilling
out a trail of flower petals across the counter's length. And of course there is that
solid bank of green trees, the one which completely fills the modern plate glass
windows, as though country, the natural, the organic, all that this kitchen is not,
insists on stealing back in, insists on being included -- albeit as a beautiful object to
gaze upon and within the dictates of style.

Even that high art warehouse cum home, that "Mondrian" industrial kitchen,
(a unity of opposites in itself) exhibits this. On an industrial steel shelf, like a high
art painting, a small still life display is arranged. The first item is a plain pottery
bowl filled with a display of fresh red peppers and aubergines. Is this not the
ordinary, natural, unprocessed stuff of cooking arranged as a piece of 'art'? And
don't the vegetables echo, but in more subdued natural shades, the bright modern
opposing primary colors of Mondrian's art? The middle item in this 'still life' is an
abstract landscape print, a piece of that 'high art' which the kitchen emulates but in
doing so, transforms into its own understanding of art as the pleasure of beautiful
surfaces. Finally, the still life includes a very natural basket woven out of long grass,
a basket which is repeated further along the shelf in a larger cane version, this time
holding a weeping fig. All these mementoes of things primitive, hand made artifacts
of a by-gone era, the natural, the unprocessed -- aren't they the repressed refusing
once again to stay away, but re-entering here under the limits of visual design, of
good looks, of artistic arrangement, of the pleasure of touch and smell and taste?

Our analysis of these kitchens suggests that while a sense of the whole is
brought to bear through the selection and retrieval of what is felt to be valuable or
essential to that whole, each particular work remains at the same time a gathering
done within limits. That is, each kitchen is a limitation of the whole, in that it says
some thing, and does not babble incoherently, as would be the case if it tried to say
every thing at once. Even Rybczynski's analysis is an attempt to gather the whole
within the limit of what is seen to be valuable; in his case, this is the limit or value
of "comfort". At the same time, what comfort is emerges in its specificity by virtue of
the particular search he initiates.

It must therefore be suggested that Rybczynski's view of the house is not any
less partial for all its desire to be whole and despite the way in which it 'enacts' the
movement towards wholeness by gathering things together. He wants us to see the
house as the embodiment of our high esteem for "comfort", as though comfort and
the whole had blended together. That is, comfort has been made to stand for the
whole. Yet, since comfort has its own specific and limited meanings, this is not the
case. The Oxford Dictionary, for example, says of comfort that it can refer to "being in possession of things which make life easy such as good food, clothes, etc.". In that comfort can suggest being at ease in the world in this way, in that it carries with it connotations of material and physical well being, in that it seems to carry an air of contentment with the way things are, it is in fact worrisome. Is a notion of comfort able to speak to the state of divided beings who dwell by the fire and tend the light of reason? Is there not in fact a desire in such a notion to resolve the extra-ordinary into the ordinary, to close the gap between reality and the real? Does Rybczynski display in this way an affection for ordinariness?

In this regard, Karatheodoris also reminds us of how we are always only 'partially' committed to the undertaking of dwelling by the fire, and of how there is always that countervailing desire to be at rest, to fall back into the comfort and security of what is natural or habitual or 'instinctual'. There is always a resistance to engaging our understandings of that which we already love and value, as Zizek's stories revealed. There is a countervailing desire to be comfortable and at peace, to preserve the time and place in which 'all's right with the world'.

Yet, like Sack's theorizing, Rybczynski's own actions are at odds with his words. His enterprise did not emerge out of a sense of comfort, of things being complete and alright, but out of a certain discontent with what has been given to him, out of a longing and a lack. In critically engaging the house, Rybczynski cast out its perfection. He instilled a lack, one which required his action of recovery. It was that work of recovery which provided both him and his readers with the occasion to explore their understandings of the house and to ask after what comprised its excellence. This in turn allowed for a movement which was able to collect (and separate) the community by turning attention to our various understandings of what we are. In this way, it served as extra-ordinary, as a way of
reorienting the community to the auspices of social life which Heidegger pointed towards in his analysis of the work.
FRAME SEVEN
TENDING THE HEARTH FIRE 'ORDINARILY'

The Threat to the Social

Despite our desire for such comfort and peace, the everchanging, temporal and particular nature of human being precludes such ease. Tensions between the familiar and the alien, the new and the old, between our own loves and commitments and those of others are always confronting us. The discord over the giant trees and the monster houses serves us as an example. In this regard, we note how a couple from that Homeowners' Association which fought the removal of the giant trees had returned to Vancouver after spending some time in New York City, and how what they most wanted upon their return was to settle down in a nice, old-fashioned house to raise their family. They wanted one "in an established neighborhood with older homes and tree-lined streets." (Blain, The Vancouver Sun, April 16, 1990). Theirs was a dream of continuity, stability, of a familiar and loved way of life which they could pass on to their children. They had found a home which epitomized this life in an older house in Kerrisdale, but "settle down" they could not. About six months after they moved, the couple said, bulldozers began to arrive and "Houses started coming down left, right and centre".

Those tensions emerge here, tensions which the changing landscape, the loss of the old trees, the coming of the 'monster houses' in place of the smaller older homes and the rising prices have aroused. Many have read these as 'symptoms' of a malaise which threatens the very bonds which hold us together, a threat which has been understood to demand a concerted response on the part of the community to guard the fires of logos, the hearth which draws us together. A powerful illustration
of this can be seen an interview with a woman called Joyce Diggins and her family (The Province, July 8, 1990 (FA15)).

Diggins was born on a farm on what is now 40th Ave, and for five generations, we are told, the family "called Kerrisdale home". For Diggins, the continuity of a whole community and a way of life seems to be threatened by the developments in the city. For example, the neighborhood high school was understood to be under threat of demolition. She feared that Point Grey School would be gone when her grandchildren were ready to attend.

Since a school building could easily be replaced, this might not seem like much for concern. The anxiety we find here seems to speak to fears much deeper than a mere change of buildings would warrant. Diggins' story is presented like a version of a horror story, and clearly intended to frighten us. She warns us not only that the current chapter in the story of Kerrisdale is the saddest ever, but that it also appears to her to be the final one. "Kerrisdale died last year -- a lot of people don't feel it should be called Kerrisdale any more" she says. Images are invoked of a community in which callousness and brutal disregard are all that hold sway, a desperate attempt on her part to incite us to act now before all community threatens to pass away:

"What they are doing is evicting lifelong friends from rental apartments, offering pensioners the brutal choice of buying million-dollar condos or leaving the neighborhood where they were raised. They went through two world wars and a depression, and now they're being told, "There's no room for you".

With this invocation of those who served in the wars, she also seems to be saying that in such a 'disposable' city, the gifts of the past to the present are forgotten. What lasting worth for all those lives given in the war, for the lives of our predecessors, for ourselves if this is the case? And what would be left to hold the family together across the generations? To what purpose would any of us be
directed, without a future which gathers us together in an understanding of what is of lasting value? The social itself is treated as though it were threatened with disappearance, for the social is that which reaches out for that beyond the moment and beyond the individual life. It is that which gathers all into a lasting whole.

In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt offers some insight into this worry of ours concerning the disappearance of the social when she speaks of the human need to erect a sufficiently solid and stable world, a world whose "very permanence stands in direct contrast to life" (Arendt, 1958: 138). A sufficiently permanent and stable human artifice, Arendt maintains, is the condition of a life which is not futile, a life which is not merely a never-ending process of consumption, growth and decay. Given the biological dimension of our existence, humans cannot exist without taking from the natural world, consuming, using up that world in the never-ending processes which reproduce life itself. As such, our lives are not possible without doing violence to things, without in this way defending and securing ourselves against the concomittant processes of decay and physical dissolution.

Arendt, however, warns about the danger of succumbing to such a life. Like Glaucon, she wants to show us that the human life is much more than a life in which human reason is dedicated to the satisfaction of natural needs, much more than the ordinary life in which our biological needs are satisfied through plentiful production. One of the dangers of such a life is that it would entail devouring and discarding things almost as quickly as they come into the world. Architect Kenneth Frampton, drawing on Arendt's work, picks up on this fear in relation to the status of contemporary architecture. He notes Antonio Sant Elia's 1914 prophecy that "our houses will last less time than we do and every generation will have to make its own", and Constant Nieuwenhuys' prophecy of the "New Babylon" (1964) "where urban change would be so accelerated as to render it pointless to return home"
Frampton's claim is that through prophetic exaggeration, these writers have projected "the fundamental placeless tendency of our present urban reality", a reality in which "the space of public appearance comes to be increasingly overrun by circulation, where the potential for rapid amortization, convenient demolition and replacement" results in the blurring or loss of the traditional distinction between *meubles* and *immeubles*, the consumable and the enduring.

In her analysis of the way this addiction to frenetic circulation and consumption pertains to that demise of the social which Diggins fears, Arendt distinguished between two aspects of human life: human work and human labour. Labour provides for our biological being, for our natural life, for the life given through production for consumption. Work, however, is the human activity which corresponds to the 'unnaturalness' of human existence. It is the activity which provides an artificial or *human world*, a stable and more enduring world. This world is inherently different from all natural surroundings:

The things of the world have the function of stabilizing human life, and their objectivity lies in the fact that ... men, their ever-changing nature notwithstanding, can retrieve their sameness, that is, their identity, by being related to the same chair and the same table (Arendt, 1958: 140).

Arendt's argument is that since we are mortal beings, not only biological beings but historical beings, a durable and stable human *world* is needed to hold fast against the continual change that such mortality entails. Such a *world* can 'stand against' the voracity of our immediate needs and wants. The human *world* holds fast against our individual passing out of existence in that it is able to gather together, in the present, the old and the new, the dreams of the past and the hoped for future. In this regard, we might go back to Diggins' fears concerning the passing of the school. In the same way that the table and the chair to which Arendt makes
reference gather us together, the school had gathered together five generations of the Diggins family, each of them having known or experienced it in their own way. Houses, too, can offer this stability, since their durability gives them the capacity to gather together and to relate the different lives lived out within them. This is true in terms of individual human lives, of succeeding generations and in terms of a changing or transient community.

A glimpse of the gathering power of the house when it is preserved from consumption can be seen in the story of the modest old manor house in Cambridgeshire, claimed to be the oldest continuously inhabited building in England (Period House and Its Garden, Vol. 1, #1, 1992: 94-99). Purchased by the current owner just after the Second World War, it was rescued from the neglect it had for a little while fallen into. While the main core of the house dates back to 1152, the house today comprises a series of different facades and segments from the intervening centuries, from an original Norman core to a late Georgian section to Victorian additions and finally, to the incorporation of the modern conveniences which we as contemporaries find so essential. Over the centuries, generations have seen something of worth and beauty in this house; they have made it their own, tended it, and in turn, preserved it from the onslaught of time.

Diggins' anxiety speaks to a fear that in a city cut adrift from its past, such preservation would not occur. The many artifacts which generations have invested and reinvested with their dreams, like the trees and those familiar houses and the neighbourhood school, would be eliminated in face of the perpetual onslaught of the new. Arendt's point in this regard is that people find their sameness in being related to the same things, to things which endure and persist beyond individual lives. This permanence can be found, we might go on to say, because the durability of such objects allows for that process of alienation in the other and the return to self which
constitutes that way of human being of which Gadamer and Weinsheimer speak. That is, the permanence of such artifacts necessitates a movement into the unknown and the recovery of the excess which is human being (excess in that we are always more than we know ourselves to be). When we encounter that which is other and resistant to our initial understandings, we are better able to see our own particularity and limitations of which we are not aware. In this way, our sense of what we are and of what we stand for grows and is transformed, such that we now include what had previously been alien. In this way, what is transient becomes enduring.

'Ordinariness' and the Issue of Choice

The conflict over the monster houses and the giant trees serves to remind us that the movement of alienation and return is always fraught with resistance, that we are always inclined to sink back comfortably into the known and the familiar and into oneness with what seems to us to be natural. It also shows us that we are always committed and attached, and in this way limited beings. The conflict also shows us that this resistance is further exacerbated by the great affection Modernity has for ordinary life. If ordinary life is understood in terms of our biological or natural life, a life which uses up and consumes the world in order to give us life itself, a continual 'moving on' can be fostered, one opposed to dwelling with things and to penetrating beneath their first appearances. An affection for ordinary life which sees it in this way can lead us to neglect and dismantle the durable and lasting edifice we have made which is capable of gathering us together and resisting our individual inclinations and preferences. In that an affection for ordinary life also inclines us to elevate the usual, the ordinary, what comes 'naturally', what is habitual or what is temporally first, these tendencies are even further exacerbated.
While the implications reach well beyond the confines of this paper, some of the tensions generated by our desire to tend the fires of reason in the light of 'ordinariness' are quite evident in the debate over the houses and trees. We might remember in this regard that the owner of the sequoias was indicted not only for failing to subordinate himself to the beauty of the trees, but also for his resistance to entering into a conversation in which he would be open to the otherness of his new community. His response was that it was his personal right as property owner to do what he did. We might argue that this is not only to treat taste as a matter of personal choice and/or individual assertion based on a standard of what one is accustomed to, but that it is also to treat the good city as the one which would guarantee and safeguard those personal preferences. In that these reasons were offered as justification for actions, it can be assumed that the owner understood, indeed expected, that they would be commonly understood as legitimate grounds for doing what he did.

That this position is indeed a common understanding is substantiated by writings of City Council member Carole Taylor concerning the conflict of houses and trees. A similar worry concerning the importance of preserving personal freedom of choice emerges. Taylor talks of the tensions as those between the preservation of what is valuable versus "growth and progress" (The Vancouver Sun, May 28, 1991; July 5, 1991).

"There is no better symbol for British Columbia at this time than trees. Nice, big, old trees. It was through the mass destruction of hollies and sequoias in Vancouver's neighborhoods and on West Vancouver's hills that we all became aware of the fact that the Lower Mainland was changing.

As many builders coursed through our residential areas leaving devastation in their wake, because, of course, it was quicker, easier and cheaper to build by clearcutting a lot -- Vancouverites howled. Myself included. If growth or progress meant losing something so important, then forget it."
The big, old trees are taken not only as the symbol of British Columbia as it has been, and consequently of the way we value our history and our origins. Their preservation also allows us to show the way in which we value beauty over sheer utility. This is what we as a community ought to stand for, Taylor seems to be saying. The problem this poses for Taylor, however, is how to establish what is beautiful. This difficulty she casts in turn as one of 'who' is going to decide, rather than as one concerning the merits of the decision. Trees are good, she has no doubt of that, but their retention should not entail massive intrusions upon people's lives and choices.

We could hear Taylor's objection as a reminder of the value which persuasion and the use of reason have over force. Her objections would then constitute an affirmation of the high esteem which we hold for the understanding of the good of what we do versus unreflective compliance with events. Heard in this way, Taylor's worry would be a way of speaking to our commitment to reflection and to the pursuit of self-understanding of the sort to which Plato refers in the Republic. That is, her worries would speak to the merit of the examined life.

Yet it seems quite clear that Taylor speaks more to the high value we contemporaries place on the freedom of individual's to make their own choices, not to be limited. Taylor worries, for example, about the legislation curtailing "individual choices": "Might it impose a bureaucratic sameness on the gardens of Vancouver and curtail individual choice?" she asks, echoing the sentiments underlying the objections of the owner of the sequoias over the questioning of his choices. The same is true of the way Taylor constructs the dispute over big trees versus views. If an area of the city values views more than trees, will there be room for the necessary amendments in any legislation that is enacted, she worries. A real tension emerges between a real desire to choose what is beautiful, and the limits this might place on
the freedom of choice. If the attempt to understand what constituted the beautiful choice was held to be paramount rather than the good of having unlimited choice, an individual would have to submit to the demands of justifying their taste to the demands of the community debate.

We note in terms of an affection for ordinary life that it is not the Sameness of all the gardens which is desirable. The gardens should not aspire to ordinariness in this way. They should look beautiful, but they should do so in a way which exhibits an individual distinctiveness. While it's difficult to articulate what precisely is held to be valuable about such individual distinctiveness, and while the implications of the argument would take us far beyond the limits of this thesis, the issues do seem to be tied to a particular understanding of the relationship between ordinary life and the extra-ordinary. Is it that the beauty of the gardens must carry with it an indication of the individual having chosen a particular garden. Is such distinctiveness required in order to reveal the way every individual must personally enact, understand and be responsible for the transformation of the ordinary into the beautiful (as that which looks good)? Gadamer speaks of the way in which each individual must "develop his sense for the beautiful in such a way that he comes to discriminate between what is beautiful to a greater or lesser degree". (Gadamer, 1986: 18). But why must each individual have a different garden and house in order for this discrimination to be understood to have been exercised? Why do we so value this kind of individual distinctiveness in a way which many other people do not? Even the widespread dislike of the Vancouver Special seems in many ways to speak to just such a dislike for its repetitiveness, for the way it is such a common way of building houses.²

² We might consider in this regard that 1960's song of Pete Seeger's "Little Boxes" which berated our propensity for uniformity... "and they're all made out of ticky tacky and they all look just the same". Jeff Wall has some early
It is also curious how so very often we do not see this need for distinctiveness to apply in the same way to communities other than our own. For example, we think many European houses, Greek villages, for example, quite lovely, even though the houses are all virtually identical and very 'traditional'. They are of course exotic for us, which is a way of being distinctive. Yet it also seems that our own need for distinctiveness is tied to our conception of our own history and tradition, one which sees it as a matter of habit and as that which is imposed from outside and therefore not a matter of choice. Part of the ethical dimension of demanding that all the houses be distinctive would therefore stem from a perceived need to exemplify the way in which we individually stand out from this imposed ordinariness and have chosen to transform our houses and gardens. 3

The particular way in which Taylor casts the issue of individual choice is interesting in this regard. "What if I want a peaceful Japanese garden and you want a wild English landscape with roses, not trees?" she asks. We would argue that here she treats "the Japanese garden" and "the English landscape" as matters of style and personal preference, in a manner reminiscent of those decorating magazines and their invocations of "lifestyle". Both garden types are taken as equally good and exchangeable choices we might want to make. Take this one today, and that one tomorrow, perhaps?

The way Taylor asserts the value of the "Japanese" or "English" garden is also curious, for such a characterization seems to deny those very individual preferences which at the same time her perspective assumes the good community should

3 It also may be related to our understandings of ourselves as members of a 'mass culture', with all its implications of machine manufacture, the new, the modern, the commodity, utility, greed. Thus the similarity of 'older', more natural cultures is acceptable, while ours must be resisted?

writings in a similar vein on suburban housing developments (see bibliography).
safeguard. That is, it is arguable that either type of garden constitutes a matter of individual preference. We may individually appreciate their beauty or not, but in both cases, what we are being referred to is a long tradition of particular works. As part of a tradition, this means there is something to be known and understood in the achievement of either type of garden, something alien we must encounter and to which we must submit. Each, for example, requires extensive knowledge and the mastery of many technical skills. We spoke previously of the long apprenticeship involved in the Zen garden, of the strict guidelines for admission as a gardener, of the moral and ethical considerations entailed, and of the way the garden's secrets were guarded. Only gradually, never completely, and only in the particularity of individual appearances does any such tradition relinquish its otherness.

Furthermore, to speak of the 'Japanese' or 'English' garden is also to speak of a community which is able to see itself in those gardens. It is a community which has taken pride and distinguished itself as a community through those works. Gadamer speaks of the way the Greeks were able to see themselves in the human world around them. "The ethical life of the people found expression in all forms of community life, giving shape to the whole and so allowing men to recognize themselves in their world". (Gadamer, 1986: 14). So it is that such gardens are Japanese gardens and English gardens. To say that they are so is not to see them as an imposition, or as the result of the lethargy of habit and custom, but rather as a source of pride for the whole community. Like a distinctive way of building houses, such gardens gather a community together by giving form to what is valuable to that community. To cultivate such gardens is to show one's commitment to a community held together through the love of a particular way of life. They are able to bring to appearance, albeit always in particular and specific ways, what lies beyond any individual understanding or choice, and they are enduring because of that. To
choose either one as a personal lifestyle of the moment is hardly to speak of the same ethos or the same moral commitment.

Resistance to the need to submit ourselves to the community dialogue about what is good and adherence to a notion of the moral worth of individual free choice is pervasive in the debate over the houses and the trees. In a slightly different form, it surfaced in that article by Michael Seelig to which we referred earlier when speaking of our understandings of the beautiful. While Seelig's article constituted an obvious attempt to rally the community to action around the 'ugliness' of the monster houses, the justification he offers for his effort is interesting in regard to this moral issue of choice.

"One can hardly spend a social evening these days without the issue coming up, usually with unanimous agreement that monster houses are terrible and something should be done" Seelig argues. Seelig insists on two points concerning what is required to rectify the situation. The first point is that there is agreement in the city on the part of the majority of the people about the beautiful and on questions of taste: most thought the houses ugly and that the trees should be kept. Secondly, he insists that the judgement of this majority is what should be respected and taken as the basis of action necessary to rectify the situation. Why? Because "individual rights are beginning to create a chaos that disturbs the democratic majority" he says. By insisting as he does on the majority belief that the houses are ugly, Seelig manages to neatly bypass the difficulty of having to decide between the value of a beautiful neighborhood and the value of honoring a majority decision, just as Taylor bypassed this difficulty by talking only of the beautiful choices which might be made and not the ugly ones. What either of their decisions would be given the alternative scenario we don't know.
Seelig goes on to argue that a decision needed to be made to prevent "chaos". Is this to suggest that in the absence of everyone being in agreement, (i.e. his 'ideal' scenario, where no conversation is necessary because we all agree), the judgement of the greatest number is what should be honored, since the important task is to have a way of securing the necessary agreement which settles things? It is interesting that Seelig asserted this position despite the fact that in his article he offered *reasons* for his judgements against the monster houses, *reasons* about the worth of living graciously, and *reasons* for the worth of good building, good planning and good design. Furthermore, he did this as though he understood matters of taste to involve a community discussion in which reasons are offered for one's assessment of what is beautiful and what is not, since it is through the offering of reasons that our understanding of the value of things is brought out into the open for discussion and refutation.

As for Seelig's own justifications, they pointed to three things he held valuable: first, having beautiful looking neighborhoods, second, getting the issue of what was beautiful settled, and finally, making this decision on the basis of the preference of the greatest number. Rather than opening up conversation concerning the commitments which underlie our choices and thereby helping us to think more deeply about them, Seelig ends up asserting the average and the normal as the standard of measure. We might then well argue that he too ends up affirming ordinariness rather than a shared need to love the beautiful by travelling together on the difficult path of reasoned conversation.

Yet another dimension of the way our affection for ordinariness inclines us towards particular ways of tending the fires of *logos* emerged in a *Vancouver Sun* article of October 6, 1992 (B8). "Is it subtle racism, or simply a case of Vancouver trying to make a neighborhood more liveable?" the headline asked. The article then
goes on to raise the possibility that any objections to the monster houses or to the removal of the sequoia trees could actually be a veiled dislike of certain groups of people and of their 'cultural' traditions. Given the noted preference of many recent immigrants from Asia for the monster houses, this has been taken as a relevant possibility, and a series of charges and counter-charges have been thrown about in various debates. Some of those who favoured the large houses made claims that the strategies aimed at preserving the 'heritage' of the neighborhood by limiting the size and style of the houses were simply designed to exclude groups who were racially or ethnically different. In turn, these charges were subject to counter charges that racism was only raised as an issue so as to advance the cause of the monster house builders and to discredit opposition.

For example, proposed guidelines to downsize the zoning regulations on houses brought charges from a builder at City Council hearings scheduled in late 1992 that "they offend people with large families and could be interpreted as an attempt to raise the drawbridge" (The Vancouver Sun, October 6, 1992: B8). What is of interest is the way these charges could be seen to make a claim that a difference of opinion as to the merits of the houses is "offensive" in itself, as though it were inherently wrong to assert that something more is at stake here than the mere assertion of preference. There also seems to be a hint here that attempts to 'raise the drawbridge' against certain things is also inherently wrong and shouldn't be done. The implication is that one's cultural preferences should not have to be subjected to criticism, that they need merely be asserted and then accepted, as though their value and worth was NOT a matter for reasoned discussion, something which always asks for renewed thought and which even justifies heated arguments.

The author of this article gives a slightly different slant when she complains that "the new guidelines would make it difficult for people to build the kind of large
houses that extended Asian families like to live in". In saying this, she too correlates
the variations in house preferences with differences in ethnic backgrounds. The
logic of the argument is that houses address the functional necessity of adequately
housing a family, and understandings of what that entails vary along ethnic lines.
Certain groups value large or extended families, and therefore need large houses.
The corollary seems to be that our preferences constitute 'our culture', and that it is
good enough to justify one's commitments and preferences by asserting that 'This is
my culture and not yours'. It further suggests that the different preferences which
underlie the various house styles are what we are comfortable and familiar with,
that they are known to us in a manner which seems natural and our own. While
within a 'culture' we may argue over such issues as taste in houses, whether it is
reasonable for one 'culture' to assert its understandings of things like the family
against those of another 'culture' is the issue at stake.

The inadequacy of just such a view of 'cultural' traditions is also contested,
for example, in a newspaper interview with a sociologist concerning the charges of
racism (The Vancouver Sun, Feb 18, 1989: The Vancouver Sun, February 22, 1989:
A13). If the battle over the shape of the city is one concerned with the preservation
of tradition, this sociologist wanted to turn our sights to the underside of 'tradition'.
"Physical changes in neighborhoods where small, older houses are razed and
replaced with bigger, new ones have unleashed a whole tradition of anti-
Orientalism" is the claim explored in the article. That same 'tradition' which
produced those nice little cottages has included "property covenants excluding non-
white ownership in the best neighborhoods like Kerrisdale, Shaughnessy and the
British properties" he argued, reminding us of what most of us already know, which
is that what we inherit, the understandings we come by naturally, the things we love,
also have a dark side and can never just be asserted without resistance. Our
preferences may not be well thought out, and reflection upon their worth is always required and hopefully, always resisted. In this way, he speaks to that self-resistance which the tending of logos entails.

In terms of that modern affection for the ordinary with which we have been concerned, what's also interesting about this particular article is the way the conflict over the houses and the trees gets situated within an opposition of 'privilege' versus 'ordinariness'. The argument proceeds in the following way. First differences in taste concerning the houses are assimilated to differences of wealth: "One of the things that is interesting is where the strength of the reaction is coming from ....It's coming from the most privileged sector. The response is almost one of jealousy." After this point is made, the differences between most immigrants and the existing citizenry, that is, the so-called ethnic or racial differences, are minimized by stressing the ordinariness of most of the immigrants. This ordinariness is construed not ethnically, but once again in terms of wealth: "While the wealthy immigrants have the highest profile, they are in a minority and most of the people moving here are just ordinary people". The extra-ordinary, by implication, becomes the undesirable, not as the ethnically different, but as the economically privileged. Exclusivity or privilege thus emerges as the real culprit at work in the city. Since differences in judgement arise out of the privileging of certain things, and imply a hierarchy of values, such a levelling tendency could render judgement itself suspect. Is the good society of this sociologist the one in which everything will be equally valued, the one in which nothing is privileged except ordinariness itself?

Rather ironically given the above claim, a celebration of the equality of treatment of different groups is also offered on the part of the business community (Constantineau, B., The Vancouver Sun, February 18, 1989 (A8)). The claim this
time is that the business community is proud to show that it doesn't care about color; it's all just a matter of money to them.

"British Columbia's business leaders say the color of money is irrelevant .. It's all great for the economy, they say, so if Asian investment in Vancouver is increasing, then "let it soar." "Foreign ownership controls would be anti-free market and anti-business at a time when we want to deregulate and open up the economy. We have to allow the system to wash out the problem itself".

To allow the system to take over and wash out the problem is the solution -- one which poses the social, in a way by now familiar to us, as a natural force, a force metaphorically equated with the tides of the ocean, a force which will wash the world clean if only we submit ourselves to its power. To do so would of course be to totally abdicate judgement about the form our community takes, to refuse to submit our passage from past to future to any reflection about what is worthy and what is not. It would be to cast the citizen as the one who seeks only to facilitate the unfettered circulation of goods and services; the citizen would become the citizen consumer who stands for nothing and is limited by nothing except the unceasing ebb and flow of the tides of production and consumption.

The vice-president of the Hong Kong Canadian Business Association argues in a similar vein that "Canadians can't have it both ways". "We can't say, 'We'll take your money, but we won't accept you into our society. We don't like the way you dress. We don't like the way you eat,'" (Bramham, D, The Vancouver Sun, February 18, 1989:A8). It must be granted that the selling of real estate to a stranger is an acknowledgement of the newcomer and the beginning of a joint enterprise into which both the old and the new agree to enter. But to say this is only to say that it is a place at which the joint enterprise which forms community might begin, for the signing of a financial contract does not concede to the buyer the right to live as they so desire, subject only to the limits of the law, any more than it concedes to the old
community the right to stay unchanged. It initiates a process of transformation on the part of both.

The vice-president herself acknowledges the insufficiency of her initial stand when she adds, "We as Canadians are going to have to learn about these new immigrants and they are going to have to learn about Canadians". The questions remains whether this is only to imply that to learn about strangers is necessarily to like and agree with them, or that learning about another leaves one's 'self' intact?

Lt. Governor David Lam expresses similar sentiments, although he places the need for understanding firmly within the natural image of the inevitable temporal flow of time to which we must submit. "The old British Columbia has passed," and "the new era is upon us", he says. If understanding is the way of human being, the seeming inevitability of our passage from past to future need not be one of resignation as to history's inevitability or one of submersion in the tides of time, or one of absorption into what is given 'naturally'. To 'tend the hearthfire' through understanding is to ask more from our lives than the passive acceptance of our own and our neighbour's preferences and habitual understandings of the world. Human being asks that we distinguish ourselves from what is given, and that we do so by inserting oneself into the world in a way that seeks to make a difference. It is to engage the world in which we find ourselves not as one who is indifferent, who doesn't care about the bonds which hold us together or about the path we take, but as one who is committed to the well-being of that world. Human being asks us to 'tend the hearthfire' by engaging our understandings and affections in reflection which is able to show how we are always more than any given understanding.
CONCLUSION

Descartes preferred to deal with our social 'situatedness' by becoming a stranger in his own land. His metaphor for the movement of thought was that of taking a long journey further and further away from home, in a way which sought to leave the familiar and the loved behind. We argue that such a commitment is one which would make thinkers indifferent to the consequences of their work, since they were to be undirected in their endeavours by any attachments or concerns.

Michael Walzer, on the other hand, urges us to see that the commonplace in which we are situated, the place where we make our stand, is always some place of value, or else we would never have settled there (Walzer, 1987: 14-16). Walzer compares our commonplace not with entrapment in the already given, but with the pleasure of being in a loved and familiar place, among friends, and undertaking a common enterprise. He too makes use of an analogy with travel, but speaks of the traveller and the hotel room rather than of the journey into strange lands. The hotel room, which is the traveller's abode, is the generic home, the home designed for the average, standard, ordinary person. Clean, comfortable, perhaps even luxurious, it provides sufficiently for our needs. Away from home, as strangers in a foreign land and for brief periods of time, we are happy to have its shelter and convenience. Yet the hotel room can never substitute for being at home, among friends, among the familiar things we love and are intimate with. "What we want is not to be permanently registered in a hotel, but to be established in a new home, a dense moral culture within which (we) can feel some sense of belonging" Walzer says. Home is always special, particular, a place in which we have taken what is given and transformed it, such that it's strangeness has become part of us, and we part of it. We care about our home and are committed to its well being.
Zizek travels the path of thought by trying to 'look awry' at ordinary life, at the familiar things we love and 'understand' and 'know'. In them, he seeks to show us unknown facets of our desires -- not in order to reveal the emptiness of our dreams or to destroy the community he understands those dreams to gather together, but to renew a sense of the uncanniness and mystery at the heart of things. He shows us the need to pursue that mystery by comprehending how this ordinary life which is home to us is also always strange, always not quite our home.

Zizek also showed us that such looking awry is fraught with difficulties. In his strange stories, forays were made into dangerous domains, into the dwelling places of the repressed and the forbidden side of the familiar. Encounters were often violently resisted, and opposing camps of friends and enemies arose. Yet ultimately, it is not dangers and uncertainties which we experience in Zizek's writings, but rather the pleasure and excitement of the journey. He shows us that any venture into the heart of ordinary life promises that an interior vastness and richness will open up which, at the outset, we can barely imagine.

This thesis draws unashamedly on our shared attachment to ordinary life, an attachment Charles Taylor has portrayed as central to Modernity, an attachment which gathers us together as a community, an attachment through which, it is argued in this thesis, we 'see' the world. At the same time that the thesis shares this fondness for ordinary life, a certain dissatisfaction with understandings of this attachment which see it as a call to ordinariness constitutes a reason for exploration. The dissatisfaction is related in part to sociology's adherence to methodologies which conceive the movement of reflection as a disengagement from that which we hold dear in order to make correct descriptions of the world, pronouncements which would ultimately serve to close down conversation rather than to provoke it. It is
also tied to sociology's propensity to seek out the average, the usual, and the habitual.

This thesis takes a stand alongside Walzer, in that it argues that it is the same commitments which make us part of a community that allow us to be critical of that community. Such commitments do not merely serve to confirm what has been given to us, i.e. our inherited understandings. Instead, they are understood to provide us with standards through which we can critically address the well-being of the community. Such critical analysis is taken to be an ongoing part of everyday life, one we see most commonly in the form of complaint or gossip. Sociological theorizing, we argue, is a more intensely reflective form of such common endeavours, endeavours which seek to reframe everyday life in order to reaffirm our commitment to the examined life.

The assumption of this position further reveals our commitment to Zizek's argument that the task of reason is not to dispense with the community's dreams, for dreams are necessary if we are to see at all. The task is taken as one of engaging the dreams from within, by looking awry in a way which makes our usual understandings seem strange and uncanny.

Given this perception of the task at hand, attention was turned to a work by ethnomethodologist Harvey Sacks, one in which he reframes our understanding of the social by showing us how ordinary life enacts what is valuable and good, 'what ought to be'. Sacks understood this as a principled commitment to an intelligible or communicable 'ordinariness', and in terms of the reflective task of sociology, he saw it to demand the documentation or description of the means by which 'principled ordinariness' is enacted and made intelligible in the world.

Such an understanding of reflection as documentation of the world is traced back to a Cartesian conception of the relationship between the ordinary and the
extra-ordinary. In the Cartesian version, this documentation is placed at the service of concerns for individual material well-being. In an effort to explore the extra-ordinary nature of theorizing (as exemplified in the actual undertakings of both Sacks and Descartes although not in their words), this conception was contrasted with Heidegger's and Gadamer's conceptions of the work of art. Both these show the work of reflection to be the experience of a struggle through which a transformation of self takes place. The work, they argue, places demands upon us to engage imaginatively that which is alien to us and which resists our understandings. Thus both these thinkers take the experience of the work to be a recovery of what we are, a journey which returns us more fully to ourselves. This is, in turn, premised on an understanding that human being is always more than any current or past understanding it has of itself.

As an example of an extra-ordinary work which seems to exemplify our attachment to ordinary life as well as the desire to engage our everyday conceptions of the world, the thesis turns to analysis of a photographic landscape by local artist Jeff Wall. Wall's photograph is treated as a work which serves to remind the community of the need to exceed that which is given to us. This entails transforming the merely necessary or useful into the beautiful. The work asks that we see the beautiful as our guiding limit, and that we submit to its demands.

The analysis of Wall's work is undertaken in relation to an analysis of the opening section of Plato's Republic. Here, it is argued, the social (as that which binds us together) is also shown to be enacted by means of the various transformations that we make upon the given world in the light of that which we judge to be valuable. This transformation is clearly illuminated in our propensity for luxury and for beautiful but useless endeavours, of which poetry and decoration are
examples. The same commitment to the beautiful and the good is, however, understood to infuse all human endeavours, even the most ordinary.

While this is 'human excess' is shown in Wall's work via its own enactment of the struggle between the utilitarian and the beautiful, the work's attachments remain ambiguous. In that it seems to present the human artifact as inferior to the natural, a concern arose that the work might affirm ordinariness and ugliness at the heart of human endeavours. Any resolution of this ugliness seemed to suggest a merging of man with the natural. A reflection upon the difference between human being and natural being was therefore undertaken. It served to reaffirm that human being, as Zizek too has shown us, is a divided being, a being constituted out of an internal difference. Zizek argued in this regard that the preservation of the difference between reality and the real is essential for reflection, that it is the gap between the two that makes any 'truth pursuit' possible. In that we retain the separation, we are able to reflect upon the worth of our own endeavours. In this thesis, this divided being is treated as akin to moral being, in that it allows us to address the worth of things and to ask after what is good and bad. As such, human being is never 'at one' with the world, or fully comfortable in the world.

Our final journey took us into the heartland of ordinary life by way of our affection for houses. On the surface, the house seems to be the most ordinary and utilitarian of human works, a necessary artifact for the maintenance of ordinary biological life. Yet the explorations undertaken in this thesis found it to be a complex embodiment of our moral commitments. Indeed, the centrality of the house in modern life speaks strongly to our attachment to those 'ordinary' pursuits concerned with material welfare.

The particularity of this modern commitment to ordinary life was explored via the ongoing struggle which has ensued in this city over monster houses and giant
trees. The oppositions within this struggle are conceived as opposing sides of this attachment to ordinary life, especially to ordinary life conceived as the 'natural life'. The dynamic unfolds through contrasting conceptions of the house in relation to its 'natural' surroundings. The 'monster house/no trees' side is grounded in a version of the good life as the ample provision of physical well-being through our knowledge of the recurring patterns of nature (i.e. its 'equipmental' aspects), while the 'giant tree/small house' side of the conflict celebrates the good of our natural being by seeking to maximize our proximity to the natural world (as country, the folk, the primitive or the antique).

The conflict over the houses and the trees was found to be particularly revealing in the way it showed our conception of beauty to be one of 'beautiful looks'. In contemporary life, this moral attachment to 'beautiful looks' is most commonly encountered in the form of 'style', and this is shown to be true even in our houses. The thesis considered some implications of style in terms of its implied understanding of 'the good life'. Style was seen to reveal commitments to notions of freedom of individual choice, a freedom which was seen as running counter to a commitment to a reflective engagement with the life world. This lack of concern for reflection was also seen to be partly due to the way style privileges the beautiful appearance as the basis of choice and does not oppose it with any notions of what lies underneath or behind the surface. This is to say that there is little dialectic between surface and depth which could give style a critical edge. As such, style is committed to a version of the good life which is aligned with consumption rather than reflection. This in turn was seen to have some serious implications for the preservation of the social, which transcends the individual life and moment and gathers us together against the separation of time and place and individual bodies.
Despite these shortcomings, it must be remembered that style exemplifies our commitment to life as it ought to be. It too is an enactment of that commitment. Particular examples of style were therefore engaged in way which tried to show how each was a unique undertaking which sought to reconcile alternative understandings of the good life. It was noted that while each particular work aimed to gather together a whole, this was always a particular and limited achievement. Rybczynski's understanding of the house in terms of the principle of comfort was used to exemplify this particularity.

Style's privileging of individual preference and its resistance to reflection was encountered in a number of different forms in the debate around the houses and the trees. The thesis concluded with a brief examination of these in an attempt to illuminate this affection we share for ordinary life while at the same time resisting it.

While the affection for houses is clearly a shared affection of the community, the journey through the house was also a personal journey; that is, it speaks out of the particularity of a life world inhabited as a woman in a particular time and place. My attachment to ordinary life has therefore sought not to condemn that world which has formed me, but to deepen my understanding of that which I already love and cannot leave behind. These particular affections are understood to be those which make the commonplace my home rather than a 'hotel'. They are my abode, and I have treated it as valuable and worthy of reflection.
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