Abstract: Of late, everyday life has emerged as a significant issue for a diverse range of fields and practices. The quotidian – usually characterized as the ordinary, the unremarked and the ubiquitous – has become a gravitational centre around which various disciplines – each with particular claims upon and ways of investigating the everyday – have found themselves drawn together. For design, the everyday has loomed ever larger, becoming increasingly woven into the fabric of a broader but related series of transformations that emphasize research, human-centredness and the cultural contexts of consumption and use. The myriad interactions between design, anthropology, psychology and qualitative social science, are all – in part at least – testament to the subject’s attempts to address and make sense of everyday life. Within mainstream design and design research discourse, these developments are usually presented unproblematically; as indicators of a growing disciplinary confidence and maturity. In this paper, however, I argue that the relationship between design and everyday life is only partially articulated, and that this partiality masks important aspects of the socio-political function of design in the contemporary world. In particular I argue that, as it is currently used and understood, the concept of everyday life obscures a particular political agenda; the reproduction of capitalist social relations through an ever increasing commodification of more and more areas of our social and personal lives. Seen in this light, recurrent themes within contemporary design – for example, human-centredness, innovation, emotional design, socio-cultural research – themes that are, like the everyday itself, treated as self-evident and obvious, open themselves to critique, revealing as they do so contradictions and conflicts between form and content, intent and outcome, rhetoric and reality. The main aim of this paper is to explore these contradictions and in doing so, suggest ways of clarifying the complex and veiled relationships that connect design and everyday life with the broader social reality of which they are part. To achieve this I make use of ideas, approaches and concepts drawn from Marxism, in particular, Marx’s own work and dialectical method, and that of the neo-Marxist philosopher of everyday life, Henri Lefebvre. The resulting critique sets out to provoke discussion and debate about an aspect of design discourse that is currently conspicuous by its absence; politics.

Key words: Everyday life, Design, Marxism.
1. Design and Everyday Life; preferred narratives

In its preferred narrative, design’s relationship with everyday life is transparent, unproblematic and sometimes even noble. In “Toothpicks and Logos: Design and Everyday Life”, for example, John Heskett [5] sets out to establish a social significance for design that is grounded in the everyday: “if considered seriously and used responsibly, design should be the crucial anvil on which the human environment, in all its detail, is shaped and constructed for the betterment and delight of all.” Here design’s twin historic missions – improvement and pleasure – are artfully interwoven into the very fabric of our material existence. The human environment – in all its scales and modalities – is, Heskett tells us, the product of a species-specific ability similar in significance to language; design. It is the designer – a modern Prometheus – who civilizes nature through the creation of that seemingly infinite complex of objects, systems, messages and environments that together form the ground against which our daily lives figure.

Yet whilst Heskett is eloquent and often convincing in his elaboration and promotion of design, he is strangely silent about the flip side of his theme, everyday life. This is surprising given the prominence of the concept in the book’s title and the allusions to something called the everyday that are sprinkled throughout the text. Yet unlike design – which is carefully considered, historically situated and theoretically grounded – the everyday remains unexplained and untheorised. Design is deconstructed linguistically to demonstrate its range and significance, but the everyday appears only in passing. What are we to make of this peculiar absence – or, perhaps better put, ghostly but persistent presence – of one half of the book’s nominal content?

One way to make sense of this is to accept that the book simply reflects a set of commonly held assumptions about everyday life: firstly, that everyday life is self-evident, obvious, natural even; and secondly, that everyday life is beyond question. Consequently it is enough to state that this book, this project, this design plays out in everyday life, is about everyday life, is inspired by everyday life, to establish a common bond of understanding between writer and reader, designer and user, curator and audience. Perhaps this should not surprise us. After all is this not how lived experience feels to us; is it not the natural attitude, to borrow a phenomenological concept [17]? When challenged to consider our own everyday lives our first response is “It is what it is! How could it be otherwise?”

According to the British cultural theorist John Roberts [19], however, the treatment of everyday life as “a simple cognate of ‘ordinariness’” – a given – has seeped out of common sense and into that broad range of disciplines and practices – from anthropology to fine art, from urban studies to architecture – that are intermittently drawn to the everyday. In part at least, contemporary design – both research and practice – shares this common sense understanding. Yet what if everyday life is not a straightforward, ordinary and benign level of social reality? What if there is more to that ensemble of ubiquitous and mundane activities – as unremarkable as they are unremarked – than meets the eye? Henri Lefebvre, the Marxist philosopher of everyday life, spent much of the twentieth century asking and often answering such questions. In Volume Three of his monumental series Critique of Everyday Life, he wrote [14]: “There is an awareness that consideration of these isolated acts [eating, drinking, dressing, sleeping and so on] does not exhaust everyday life, and that we must attend to their context;
to the social relations within which they occur. Not only because each action taken separately results from a micro-decision, but because their sequence unfolds in a social space and time bound up with production.”

Under analysis, the everyday discloses a peculiar, doubly determined reality; on the one hand a compendium of insignificances, on the other a rich and complex social phenomenon pregnant with possibilities, contradictions and conflicts. Like the commodity, it is a reality that befogs other realities. Throughout and beyond the Critique, Lefebvre unpacked the dual nature of a rapidly changing everyday life, always seeking a new couplet to draw our attention to its essentially dialectical nature; platitude and profundity, banality and drama, baseness and exuberance, irrationality and rationality, passivity and creativity, tragedy and heroism, residue and production, adaptation and compulsion. This perspective has implications for design. If, as Lefebvre’s work suggests, there is more to the everyday than the ordinary, then claims about design’s contribution to the construction of the quotidian need to be urgently reconsidered. At the very least, we require a critical engagement with the other dimensions and modalities of everyday life that lay hidden behind a mask of ordinariness.

2. The Production of Everyday Life: Tati, Marx, Lefebvre

The non-obviousness of everyday life reveals itself most clearly at times of social change. It is at such moments that the veil of ordinariness is lifted and we encounter the hidden dimensions of the quotidian. In this section I want to illustrate this through a short vaguely phenomenological description of some thematic material from a well-known feature film, Jacques Tati’s Mon Oncle [20]. The narrative takes place in 1958, a pivotal moment in the history of postwar capitalism [4]. Writing about this period, Michael Kelly [8] noted that austerity and scarcity were cross fading with a wave of postwar prosperity driven by “the emergence of a consumer society which brought the wonders of modern technology into the domestic sphere.” This moment of change – its implications and effects, meanings and possibilities – was Tati’s major preoccupation.

In the opening sequence we are taken on a journey between two very different yet coexisting versions and visions of urbanity in provincial France. Trailing a motley pack of dogs, we pass through the seemingly unplanned streets of a ‘traditional’ town before entering the rigorously planned world of the ‘new town’ at its border (see figure 1). In this short sequence, Tati constructs two very different stages upon which his comedy of social change will play out. Despite – no, because of – its timeworn appearance and seemingly haphazard structure, the old town paradoxically appears to us as a kind of unity. There is diversity here, but the various parts we encounter appear almost organically integrated. The place has what Lefebvre often called a ‘style’ of living or organic coherence. As the film progresses the town’s inhabitants fill the streets, following the day’s rhythms; shopping at the market, drinking coffee or pastis, leaving and returning from work, playing, but above all walking, chatting, arguing or simply watching the world go by. As Lefebvre wrote of his own home town of Navarrenx [12], the street here is “not simply there so that people can get from A to B, nor does it lay traps for them with lighting effects and displays of objects. It is a place to stroll, to chinwag, to be alive in.” The public and private realms are also richly interwoven. Houses open onto the street and to “sit watching at the window is a legitimate pleasure. But the passers-by get their own back by staring down the corridors and into the courtyards.” And design? Conspicuous by its absence. This is an environment of vernacular architecture honed
in response to local needs and traditions, of notices set by the printer, of painted signs, of improvised creations in response to changing requirements; here the artisan still flourishes.

In contrast to the openness, spontaneity and ambiguity of the old, the new town appears closed, controlled and self evident; it is already ‘finished’ whereas the old town is still a work in progress. And design? Everywhere. This is a human environment that has been ‘shaped in all its detail’ by design. Almost everything has been professionally designed and signs of all kinds proliferate – images, words, signals, clothing, food, products, buildings and even social interactions – all speaking as one of lifestyle, status and modernity. Uniformity and homogeneity are the order of the day despite – or perhaps because of – the prodigious possibilities for consumption we are beginning to glimpse here. The variety of products masks a poverty of experience; there is no choice but to choose, as Anthony Giddens once put it. Paradoxically, despite this totalized and systematized environment, the human milieu appears dislocated and disjointed, human experience atomized. Streets here are simply for getting from A to B, where A represents the gated, inward looking home and B the office, factory or shopping mall.

How are we to make sense of this depiction of social change, to grasp this dystopic vision of an emerging everyday life? One starting point could be to revisit Henri Lefebvre’s assertion that everyday life is somehow ‘bound up with production’. At first sight this seems a counterintuitive claim. Everyday life appears to us as categorically and practically distinct from the productive realm. So, what is Lefebvre suggesting here? In this statement, Lefebvre is revisiting a fundamental component of Marxist thought, its philosophical materialism. In the German Ideology [15], Marx and Engels stated that “The production of ideas, concepts and consciousness is first of all directly interwoven with the material intercourse of man, the language of real life [...] Consciousness does not determine life: life determines consciousness.” In A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy [16] they clarified and extended this theoretical position:

In the mode of production of their material life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production, which correspond to a definite
stage in the development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness.

What does this mean? At the risk of oversimplification, that changes in the economic structure of a given society modify the ways in which people live, and that this in turn, transforms the ways in which they make sense of themselves and their world. Or, as Lefebvre [14] put it, “The mode of production involves and entails a mode of existence.” Now, whilst Lefebvre thought the ‘base-superstructure’ couplet of social structure and change still necessary, he became increasingly convinced that it was not sufficient to apprehend the epochal changes in capitalism that he was beginning to detect in the 1950s. Central to his concern was the absence of everyday life from the theory (an elision similar but far more serious than the one mentioned in section 1 above). For most Marxists, the everyday was a political poor relation, something to be considered once far bigger issues like the state or ideology had been put to bed. Lefebvre, however, saw things in a radically different way. Everyday life was not some philosophical sideshow, but the main event.

The state is now built upon daily life, its base is the everyday. The traditional Marxist thesis makes the relations of production and the productive forces the ‘base’ of the ideological and political superstructures. Today – that is to say now, the state ensures the administration of society, as opposed to letting social relations, the market and blind forces take their course – this thesis is reductionist and inadequate. In the course of major conflicts and events, the relations of domination and the reproduction of these relations have wrested priority over the relations of production that they involve and contain. [14]

Here, Lefebvre [9] introduced what is perhaps one of his major but largely overlooked theoretical formulations; the Bureaucratic Society of Controlled Consumption. Whilst much has changed since Lefebvre formulated that idea in the 1960’s and honed it into the 1990s, it still has great explanatory power and provides powerful tools with which to engage contemporary social reality. We already encountered its genesis and glimpsed its emerging contours in the homogenized, fragmented and hierarchical everyday life of Tati’s new town. Lefebvre argued that in subsequent decades, this systematic construction and programming of everyday life was optimized and generalized on a global scale. It was, he proposed, the dominant mode of social being in our times. Let’s look at his argument more closely.

Lefebvre [9] contended that capitalism had transformed the everyday, and with it the world, first by rationalizing it (fragmenting, sub-dividing, atomizing), then by industrializing it (transforming each fragment into a production-consumption circuit) and finally by imposing this new reality upon it (through advertising, the media, ideology and myth). In response to this he built and sharpened a set of conceptual tools with which to analyze the resulting social phenomena: functions, forms, systems and structures. In Everyday life and Everydayness he characterised the quotidian as a “set of functions”. For Lefebvre functions are – amongst other things – the recurrent activities of everyday life, be they “physiological (eating, drinking, sleeping)” or “social (working, traveling)”. Functions require forms for their realization. In their simplest sense, forms are most often spatial,
material and semiotic artifacts – products – of various kinds. Thus the function of personal hygiene requires soap, razor and shampoo. Well at one time maybe. Now it might just as easily require conditioner, hairdryer, hair gel, body lotion, electric razor, pre-shave, shaving foam, after shave and so on and so forth. Together these functionally derived product constellations, form systems, the bathroom system, the kitchen system, the car system, and sub-systems, the hair care sub-system, the dental-care sub system, for example. As Lefebvre [10] put it “a system groups products around various functionally specific household appliances such as the refrigerator, freezer, electric oven”.

Functions also serve to “connect and join together systems that might appear to be distinct”. For example, the personal hygiene function directly connects the bathroom system with the supermarket system, the medical system and even the entertainment system if my daughter’s Barbie toothbrush is anything to go by. Indirectly it integrates with the broader social infrastructure and the production and distribution system as a whole. Systems are nested within each other and within other systems to establish a fiendishly complex network that has its base in everyday life. This is shaped and held together by the final term structure, “whose task it is to organize elements within a whole” [11]. These include transport and information infrastructures which directly and indirectly connect domestic systems, local, national and global policy, urban planning and the market. In general, structures do not emerge by accident but through the conscious and unconscious practices of planners, managers, technocrats, politicians, bureaucrats and powerful corporations working in conversation with the economic base. Structures are political and ideological even though they are not necessarily perceived as such by originators or users. Seen in this way, what is hidden behind the veil of ordinariness is nothing less than capitalism itself, internalized and distributed across the gamut of social and private practices that comprise the everyday. As Lefebvre [9] put it: “The commodity, the market, money with their implacable logic seize everyday life. The extension of capitalism goes all the way to the slightest details of everyday life.”

Let’s return momentarily to the two worlds set out in Mon Oncle. In the sense sketched above, these distinctive worlds are expressions of two different forms of capitalism. The first was focused on the enterprise and fulfilled its need for accumulation by appropriating the surplus value produced by the workers. At the risk of oversimplification, everyday life was a relatively autonomous social realm and developed unevenly in relation to production. Around 1960, however, a modified capitalism began to emerge [7, 9, 14]. In the austere postwar years falling rates of profit forced capital to seek alternative ways to satisfy its systemic necessity for inexorable accumulation. Postwar prosperity was both the result of and motor for the commercial colonization of everyday life. As Lefebvre [14] chillingly described it: “Everyday life managed like an enterprise with an enormous, technocratically administered system [...] every moment anticipated, quantified in money terms and programmed temporally and spatially.”

3. Design and the Production of Everyday Life

Seen in this light, design’s postwar history and contemporary reality are cast in different hues. The immense growth of design during the postwar period was no accident. Neither was it the result of the genius of individuals nor the collective efforts of the field overall (although these factors were and are crucial in determining the form and potential of the design disciplines). As we have seen, during the 1950s capitalism increasingly found that the
mass production of identical objects for mass, undifferentiated markets – so-called fordism – was no longer able to generate the surplus necessary for the reproduction and expansion of the system. In its place a modified capitalism began to emerge. This was based on increasingly flexible and internationalized production directed towards ever more variegated, specialist and niche markets [4]. It is here that Lefebvre’s notion of functionally integrated and programmed systems of consumption gains traction and the dark side of design’s social function discloses itself. This epochal shift was predicated on a number of developments that only design was able to deliver. Firstly, the manufacturing and mobilization of needs and desires for increasingly varied types of products, the prerogative of communication design. Secondly, the rapid creation of – increasingly rapidly obsolete – products of all kinds, the province of industrial design. Finally, all of this unfolded in carefully planned, constructed and integrated social environments – for example, the mall, the motorway, the suburbs and the home – the birthright of interior design, architecture and urban planning.

As noted above, the success of this shift required repeated incursions into ever more areas of our everyday and private lives for the purpose of identifying new possibilities for commercial exploitation. In this way, design both reflected and increasingly drove the rationalization of everyday life through the transformation of poorly commercialized or un-commercialized everyday activities into functions. During the 1960s and 70s, this process was generalized and optimized to such an extent that, as the American theorist Frederic Jameson [7] argued, design had “become integrated into commodity production generally: the frantic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel seeming goods (from clothes to airplanes), at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function to aesthetic innovation and experimentation.” Jameson wrote this in the mid-1980s. Yet it is difficult to see how this state of affairs has substantively changed other than in its discovery of new areas for commodification, the optimization of existing production-consumption circuits and the discovery of new ways of mining the everyday for ‘design opportunities’. Indeed, one could argue that recent developments within design and in design’s uncritical relationship with business, have served to consolidate the field’s structural function within capitalist production.

In relation to the former, for example, recent developments such as user-centered and human-centered design, emotional design, and other such research-led approaches – developments which are usually understood as progressive extensions of design’s scope and interests – might alternatively be viewed more critically. Anthropologically inspired research, for example, is usually presented as a way of developing a deeper understanding of users and the contexts of use. Such research is said to produce richer and thicker pictures of everyday life so that new products, systems and services are fit for the various needs of the user (physical, psychological and socio-cultural). And in many cases I am sure that this noble aim is fulfilled. Yet as we have seen above, design both meets and generates needs, both reflects and hastens the increasing fragmentation of everyday life. In this context, one might also see in such research – as business increasingly does – powerful means of generating ever more detailed knowledge about the rhythms, patterns and content of everyday life for the purpose of identifying new opportunities for commercial exploitation. As for the latter, prior to the latest cyclical crisis of capitalism, design’s role vis-à-vis business was changing rapidly and profoundly. Business it seemed had cottoned on to the immense potential of design for not simply clothing and feeding innovations but locating and leading them. The MfA was proclaimed as the new MBA, business publications and management
gurus alike fell over themselves to celebrate and harness the commercial potential of design, and design began to
figure prominently in governmental discussions about the creative economy. Design responded in kind,
welcoming the challenge to work at the ever-quickening speed of capital and recasting itself as an equal partner,
sometimes even a leader, where innovation, the humanizing of technology and the creation of knowledge about
end-users and everyday life was concerned.

This is more or less where we find ourselves today. Yet the optimism of the 90s and early years of the current
decade seems a trifle hollow now that the twin ideologies of growth and consumption appear wounded and the
cult of innovation momentarily undermined. The myth of inexorable growth appears irrational in the face of
looming ecological crises caused in large part by growth built on the relentless promotion and programming of
consumption in everyday life. Many more people from a whole range of perspectives – political, religious,
ethical and so on – have begun to question the ideology of consumption and its role in flattening, homogenizing
and promoting a deadening “organized passivity” in everyday life. Moreover, there is also a growing unease with
postmodern arguments about the creativity of consumption, which, as Bonsiepe [1] noted, tend towards quietism,
conservatism and “an attitude of surrender that no designer should be tempted to cherish”. For Roberts [19] such
approaches, though dominant in contemporary cultural studies – and valuable in that they remind us of the
everyday as a site of resistance to dominant ideas – tend to reduce the everyday “to a theory of signs and patterns
of popular cultural consumption, or the dilemmas or ambiguities of representation”. Such postmodern positions
have perhaps influenced design’s view of the everyday as much as the default position of ordinariness. In fact
they are each sides of the same coin, the one supporting the other whilst simultaneously sedimenting still further
the broader reality of everyday life.

Where does all this leave design and design research? In the same place they have always been, between a rock
and a hard place. Professional design is a product of modernity, which as Lefebvre [10] describes it, covers the
everyday like a “surface”. It is impossible to opt out of the world in which we live. Neither it is desirable. So – to
borrow a phrase from Lenin – what is to be done? Given the above discussion, I believe that choosing to carry on
in blissful ignorance that a significant aspect or by-product of this piece of user research, this advertisement, this
product – this discipline even – is deeply political, is not an option. Some, such as the signatories of the 1964
First Things First Manifesto [2], publicly stated their opposition to the commercial colonization of everyday life,
and rejected advertising, and the professional value and prestige accrued by those “who have flogged their skills
and imagination to sell such things as: cat food, stomach powders, detergent, hair restorer, striped toothpaste,
aftershave lotion, before shave lotion, slimming diets, fattening diets, deodorants, fizzy water, cigarettes, roll-ons,
pull-ons and slip-ons”. The signatories of the reinvigorated manifesto of 2000 [3] were even sharper in their
critique, polemising that “designers who devote their efforts primarily to advertising, marketing and brand
development are supporting, and implicitly endorsing, a mental environment so saturated with commercial
messages that is changing the very way citizen-consumers speak, think, feel, respond and interact [...] We
propose” they went on “a reversal of priorities in favour of more useful, lasting and democratic forms of
communication – a mindshift away from product marketing and toward the exploration and production of a new
kind of meaning”. These are small steps from one particular region of design. Yet they attest to the fact that there
are alternative visions and versions of design and these might yet if not seize, then at least begin to appear on, the
design and design research agenda. And they will, if enough of us recognize the mess we are in. Alone, however, such initiatives are not enough. For one thing, as Gérard Mermoz [18] has argued, they “unwittingly keep the debate anchored within the same narrow terms of reference” and are “couchèd in the same ‘uncritical language’ that they seek to transcend”. Mermoz himself proposes a more radical reconstruction of design grounded in issues, ideas and approaches from beyond traditional and currently fashionable territories, where “more complex ‘problématriques’ are developed with the help of sophisticated methodologies across the arts, literature and the human sciences.” The above discussion of design and everyday life shares this sentiment and attempts, in some small way, to articulate such a problématicque. By unraveling a crucial yet hidden facet of a ubiquitous concept – the everyday – I sought to draw attention to the profoundly political role that design plays in the contemporary world and the immense difficulties design faces in revising the terms of its settlements with its economic and social partners. Yet revise these it must. Perhaps design’s location at the intersection of the economic and the quotidian makes it peculiarly well situated to become a critical force for change, rather than the uncritical and active promoter of capitalism that it has increasingly become. Perhaps a critical, more politically aware design, might set itself the task of contributing to the reinvigoration of the everyday, might put its collective shoulder to cultivating the richness, spontaneity, contradictions and fluidity of everyday life so valued by Lefebvre and so travestied by capitalism.

4. Coda
In 1999 IDEO’s famed ‘deep dive’ approach to design was the subject of a twenty or so minute segment on ABCs Nightline program [5]. The segment celebrates IDEO’s left-field thinking, non-hierarchical structures and approaches, and – for the business community at least – the company’s novel ways of generating unique and often profitable design concepts. In an office not unlike a collection of young boy’s bedrooms, a large group of engineers, anthropologists, marketers and possibly even designers, focus their attention on a new project; the redesign of the supermarket shopping trolley. It’s a demonstration project but never mind; the company will use it as an opportunity to promote their research-led approach to design to a business world increasingly eager to find the holy grail of innovation. They’ll do it for real. For twenty minutes we watch as a team of America’s most highly educated young professionals research, deconstruct and generally think around, behind and through this ubiquitous everyday artifact. But of course, this is TV time! In fact, hours and days of mental, physical and creative labour are expended in the investigation, acres of paper and post-it notes spent on visual thinking, large quantities of wood, foam, resin and metal used up in the creation of models and prototypes. Under sage (but non-hierarchical) leadership, almost every aspect of the device, its context of use, potential for technological extension and integration, ergonomics and aesthetics are unpacked, reconsidered and made use of by a team seemingly wired on the adrenalin of design. Someone intones gravely that there is no such thing as a stupid question here, no such thing as a wrong answer. Yet among the thousands of questions and answers flying around the studio, some are conspicuous by their absence: why are we doing this, who really benefits from this, what does this project mean and what value does it add to the world? Because, in this hedonistic, ultra-optimistic, almost evangelical environment, the everyday world is an ocean of opportunities for design and little else – it appears – matters. No doubt critical thinking would slow things down, introduce conflicts, raise doubts, and as we have already seen, this would run counter to capital’s imperative for perpetual motion and risk desecrating the altar of the cult of innovation. In a break from the frenetic pace of the project, a number of children’s
products – fruits of a similar process – are introduced. Monster Shoelaces that displace the trauma of learning to tie one’s shoes up, a guitar that any fool can play, a cunningly modified American football that always flies true, thus removing the need for all that time wasting practice. Childhood parodied, commodified and carved up for consumption. At one point a senior figure announces proudly “We are the crazies here!” and one cannot help but agree. If this – and things that resemble it – are emblems of what we have come to, perhaps we all are.

5. References