

# Innumerable Inscrutable Habits: Why Unremarkable Things Matter

How do we see the world as the social science observer does? When you are studying your own society, much of what you see around you may seem 'obvious', existing as a mere unnoticed backdrop to your life. So it is tempting to take many things for granted. This temptation is supported by the swiftly changing images we absorb on the Internet and at the movies.

A method used by anthropologists can help us to slow down and look around rather more attentively. When we study familiar situations and events, we can try to make a mental leap and assume that we are observing the behaviour and beliefs of an unknown tribe. The shock in seeing the world as 'anthropologically strange' can help us find our feet.

This is not a new strategy. In the 1930s, some British anthropologists invented an innovative method to study everyday life. Instead of relying on their own observations or doing a quantitative social survey, they recruited 50 helpers through a letter in the press. These volunteers were asked to supply the following:

- a short report on themselves
- a description of their environment
- a list of objects on their mantelpieces (i.e. above their fireplaces)
- a day survey which provided an account of all that they saw and heard on the twelfth day of the month.

This form of research became known as Mass Observation. A contemporary newspaper reported the success of its first project:

Six months after the first meeting, Mass Observation was able to organise a national survey of Britain on Coronation Day. A team of 15 reported on the procession, while from provincial towns and villages reports came in on local celebrations. From these 'mass observations', the first full-length book has been compiled. (*Manchester Guardian*, 14 September 1937)

## 2 Qualitative Research

Eventually Mass Observation had about 1500 active observers sending in day surveys. Here is one extract from a coal miner's description of his day reported by the same newspaper:

At about 12.30 we received a visit from the deputy [i.e. supervisor]. He led off examining our place: it comprises about 50 yards of coalface. My eye follows where his Bull's-eye [miner's headlamp] flashes. He asks what I intend to do at this place, or what is required at that place. I differ with him on one point, and state my method. We argue for a short while, he from the point of view of a breakdown in ventilation. We finally agree, and with a final Do this, and that, and that, and that! he leaves us. We are clothed in a pair of boots, stockings, and a pair of knickers, just around our middles. Perspiration rolls off us, our knickers are wet, of time we have no knowledge. If we continue as we are doing, we shall have a good shift. My six pints of water is being reduced, had better go steady.

Notice the degree of detail in this ordinary coal miner's observations. It is doubtless true that repeated viewings of a video of him at work with his mates would reveal more fine detail. Nonetheless, his account provides excellent observational data which stimulates further questions for investigation. For instance, what shapes his sense of 'a good shift'? Is his team paid by results or is he just concerned with doing his job well or in a happy spirit?

Let us move on from this thoughtful miner. In the rest of this chapter, I'll be using the technical term 'ethnography' rather than 'observation' to describe what many qualitative researchers do. No need to panic. Ethnography simply puts together two different words: 'ethno' means 'folk' or 'people', while 'graph' derives from 'writing'. Ethnography refers, then, to highly descriptive writing about particular groups of people.

In what follows, I'll try to find inspiration for the ethnographer in the work of writers and two photographers. I'll then circle back to the brilliant (sadly overlooked) programme for ethnography that the American sociologist Harvey Sacks laid out in his lectures at the University of California some 40 years ago.

### Looking at photographs

Why consider photographs in a chapter on ethnography? A good answer is contained in the following extract from an exhibition of one photographer's work:

Diane Arbus was committed to photography as a medium that tangles with the facts. Her devotion to its principles – without deference to any extraneous social, political or even personal agenda – has produced a body of work that is often shocking in its purity, in its bold commitment to the celebration of things as they are. (Arbus, 2005)

Like Arbus's photography, I believe that ethnography could have no better aim than 'to tangle with the facts ... without deference to any extraneous social, political or even personal agenda'. Today this view is contested by those who seek to advance their own political and personal agenda and question whether there can ever be any such things as 'facts'. In Chapter 5, I will discuss their arguments and show why I believe them to be misguided.

As I will try to demonstrate in this chapter, good ethnography, like Arbus's work, is 'often shocking in its purity, in its bold commitment to the celebration of things as they are'. Pursuing this line in a school essay written when she was 16 years old, Arbus wrote 'I see the divineness in ordinary things'.

What is involved in seeing ordinary things as 'divine'? In 1963, in a successful application for a Guggenheim Fellowship, Arbus wrote this brief note about her interests entitled 'American rites, manners and customs'. It was the inspiration for the title of this chapter:

I want to photograph the considerable ceremonies of our present because we tend, while living here and now, to perceive only what is random and barren and formless about it. While we regret that the present is not like the past, we despair of its ever becoming the future, its innumerable inscrutable habits lie in wait for their meaning. I want to gather them like somebody's grandmother putting up preserves because they will have been so beautiful. (Arbus, 2005)

Arbus noted that we usually perceive the world around us as, among other things, 'random and formless'. About the same time, the Austrian social philosopher Alfred Schutz was writing that the everyday world is necessarily taken for granted. Setting aside these habits is the key to the ethnographic imagination.

What is involved in treating our 'innumerable inscrutable habits' as 'grandmother's preserves' which are 'beautiful' objects? Like the good ethnographer, Arbus wants us to see *the remarkable in the mundane*.

Let me illustrate this with one of her photographs (I will have to describe this photograph for you as I have been unable to obtain permission to reproduce it here. If you are interested, you can find it in the

exhibition catalogue *Revelations*, mentioned earlier: Arbus, 2005). The photograph has the caption ‘A family on their lawn one Sunday in Westchester, N.Y. 1968’. The photo shows a couple lounging on deck-chairs in the summer sun while their child plays behind them. In one sense, this could not be a more mundane setting. However, like all of Arbus’s images, we are invited to construct many narratives from what we see. If you had the photograph in front of you, you might ask: ‘Why is nobody speaking or even engaged in eye contact?’ Each person seems self-absorbed. It is not clear whether the man in the picture is shielding his eyes from the sun or indicating a kind of despair.

But we do not need to psychologise our interpretation or to construct a closed narrative. Arbus also asks us to consider a basic ethnographic question: ‘How far does routine family life depend on such silences?’ Implicitly, she reminds ethnographers that this sort of question is only available from observation and hence unlikely to be generated by interviews with family members.

So what is everyday family life actually like? The Israeli photographer Michal Chelbin is a good guide. Like Arbus, to whom she refers, her aim is to remind us of the remarkable in the mundane world. As she puts it:

I am drawn to fantasy and fantastic elements in real environments ... Many viewers tell me that the world discovered in my images is strange. If they find it strange, it is only because the world is indeed a strange place. I just try to show that. (Chelbin, 2006: [www.michalchelbin.com](http://www.michalchelbin.com), Artist Statement)

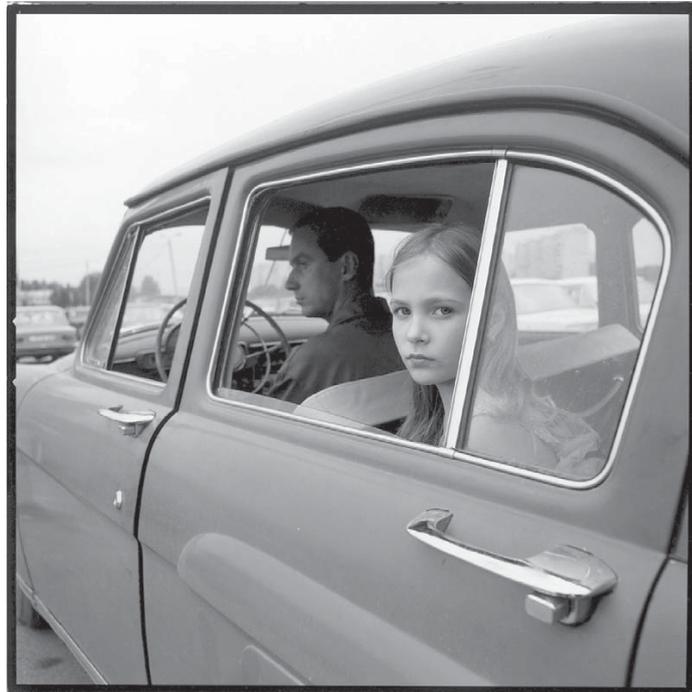
A case in point is provided by a Chelbin photograph called ‘Alicia, Ukraine 2005’.

Alicia stares out at us from the back of her car. Her gaze is ambiguous. Is she a child appealing for our help or a young adult asserting her independence both from us and the driver? Is the man in the front of the car her father or simply a taxi driver?

In a web commentary on these issues in 2006, Eve Wood suggests one answer:

[R]evealed in this young woman’s face is the haughtiness of youth, masking a deeper, more complex awareness of the difficulties in being so young and so beautiful. The girl seems to know something we do not and were we to discover her secret, she might come undone. (Wood, 2006: [www.nyartsmagazine.com/index](http://www.nyartsmagazine.com/index))

Does this photograph show, as Wood suggests, ‘the haughtiness of youth’ and a young woman who is aware of ‘being so young and beautiful’?



**Figure 1.1** Alici, Ukraine, 2005

Chelbin herself tells us of the danger of trying to construct a definitive account of her images. As she puts it: ‘In my work, I try to create a scene where there is a mixture of straight information and riddles.’

To what extent should the ethnographer try to resolve such riddles? In one of his lectures, Harvey Sacks (1992) offers a case where you observe a car drawing up near you. A door opens and a teenage woman emerges and runs a few paces. Two other people (one male, one female) get out of the car. They run after the young woman, take her arms and pull her back into the car which now drives off.

Now clearly there are several different interpretations of what you have seen. Is this a kidnapping which you should report to the police? Or have you just seen a family row, in which case going to the police might turn you into a busybody?

Sacks expands on the problems this creates for the ethnographer:

Suppose you’re an anthropologist or sociologist standing somewhere. You see somebody do some action, and you see it to be some activity. How can you go about formulating who is it that did it, for the purposes of your report? Can you use at least what you might take to be the most conservative formulation – his name? Knowing, of course, that any category you choose would have the[se] kinds of systematic

problems: how would you go about selecting a given category from the set that would equally well characterise or identify that person at hand? (Sacks, 1992, 1:467–8)

Sacks shows how you cannot resolve such problems simply ‘by taking the best possible notes at the time and making your decisions afterwards’ (1992, 1:468). Whatever we observe is impregnated by everyday assumptions and categories (e.g. kidnapper, family member). Rather than lazily employ such categories, Sacks tells us that the task of the ethnographer is to track which categories laypersons use and when and how they use them.

This raises a crucial question. To assemble information on laypersons’ use of categories, do we need to get inside their heads (e.g. to interview them)? This is a big topic which comes to the fore in Chapter 2. At this stage, I will simply suggest that we can often find evidence of category use without needing to ask the people concerned. Think of the terms used by the Mass Observation coal miner to describe his working day. Or consider the rich texture of police reports of kidnappings and/or family disputes or of how they themselves interview witnesses and suspects. Such information constitutes fascinating material on how in real time, in situ, people collaboratively give meaning to their worlds.

### — The remarkable in the mundane

To look at the mundane world really closely can generate boredom. We think nothing is happening and prefer some ‘action’. If we want to be a good ethnographer, the trick is to go beyond such boredom so that we can start to see remarkable things in quite mundane settings.

The early plays of Harold Pinter strike many people as boring in this sense. Take the opening scene of his play *The Birthday Party*. We are in the living-room of a house in a seaside town. Petey enters with a paper and sits at the table. He begins to read. Meg’s voice comes through the kitchen hatch as follows:

*Meg:* Is that you, Petey?

*[Pause]*

Petey, is that you?

*[Pause]*

Petey?

*Petey:* What?

*Meg:* Is that you?

*Petey:* Yes, it's me.

*Meg:* What? [*Her face appears at the hatch*] Are you back?

*Petey:* Yes.

(Pinter, 1976: 19)

'Where's the action here?', we might ask, particularly as much of the first act is composed of such everyday dialogues. Instead of launching us into dramatic events, Pinter writes a dialogue far closer to the tempo of everyday life. Because their expectations of 'action' have been disappointed, many people find the first act of *The Birthday Party* incomprehensible or just plain boring.

But recall Arbus's depiction of a silent family or Chelbin's photograph of a young woman silently looking out at us. In your own home, do your mother and father sometimes become obsessed in their own single projects and fail to listen to what others are saying? Perhaps Pinter, like Arbus, is pointing to the major role that mutual inattention plays in family life?

Moreover, this is not simply a psychological question about family dynamics. Pinter's opening scene reveals something basic to all interaction among families and otherwise. We all tacitly understand that we need to grab somebody's attention before we can raise a topic with them. As Sacks himself pointed out, this is most obvious for children who may struggle to gain a parent's attention and so learn not to launch into a conversation but always begin with something like:

'Mummy?' or

'You know what, Mummy?'

In the same way, in Pinter's dialogue, Meg works to get Petey's attention as Petey appears obsessed with reading his newspaper. But understanding mundane life extends beyond listening carefully to how people speak to one another. It also requires observation of fine detail.

Take the following extract from a weblog discussed by Hookway:

*32-year-old male:* Things i've done recently: been to ikea, been to my local furniture shop, been to ikea again, been to ikea yes i know, ... again ... bought a rug, bought a lamp, bought a bigger lamp ... dug my lawn up, re-sown lawn, bought some shredded bark ... walked along the beach, moved the shelving unit from the lounge to the kitchen, paid for my flight, cut my hair ... had a performance review at work, asked for a pay rise, got laid, filed a years worth of bill ... thats all for now. (2008: 102–3)

Hookway treats this extract as an example of a purely descriptive blog of the kind which non-reflexively recounts the events of the day, from what the blogger:

has eaten for breakfast to who they have seen that day. But the fine detail of this blog suggests even more. Look at how the blogger's use of a list of activities appears to give equal value to domestic tasks, work activities and sexual relationships. In a sense, his non-reflective style constitutes a very clear version of how he wants to be seen – cool, laid back, taking things as they come. (2008: 102–3)

Compare this to another blogger cited by Hookway:

*36-year-old male:* I wish i had the magic to give Janine the life i stole from her. of all the people i've hurt in my life, it's her that i feel most dreadful about. she put so much trust and faith in me ... and i really loved her. i still do. yet i screwed her over and tore that wonderful heart in two. if only i had some way to make it so i'd never happened to her life ... if i could just patch up my era [*sic*] with a big sander bandaid ... so that it had been him that she'd met and not me. admittedly, i'd lose a part of my life that means a lot to me ... but i'd really rather never to have hurt her. and no matter how sorry i am, and how deeply i feel the grief, the apologies i give her can never unhurt her. (2008: 102–3)

As Hookway notes, this second blog is highly confessional and self-analytical. Yet, like the first blog, this man creates a version of how he wants to be seen – not only as remorseful but as someone who values another person more than himself.

Reading the second blog this way means moving on from our immediate response to it and asking how it achieves its effects. In the case of blogs, this involves close attention to the mundane detail of how people present themselves.

But, contrary to blogs and soap operas, everyday life is not just about 'relationships'. It also involves navigating a material world and the objects within it. Take a passage from Paul Auster's novel *Moon Palace*. It is from the point of view of a student who has been employed as a companion by a blind man called Effing:

As soon as we got outside, Effing would begin jabbing his stick in the air, asking in a loud voice what object he was pointing at. As soon as I told him, he would insist that I describe it for him. Garbage cans, shop windows, doorways: he wanted me to give a precise account of

these things, and if I couldn't muster the phrases swiftly enough to satisfy him, he would explode in anger. 'Dammit, boy', he would say, 'use the eyes in your head! I can't see a bloody thing, and here you're spouting drivel about 'your average lamppost' and 'perfectly ordinary manhole covers'. No two things are alike, you fool, any bumpkin knows that. I want to see what we're looking at, goddammit, I want you to make things stand out for me! (Auster, 1990: 117)

The blind man, Effing, understands the importance to sighted people of using 'the eyes in your head'. He insists that his sighted companion describes in detail the ordinary things whose existence the latter finds plain obvious.

Such an attention to how we navigate the objects around us is also a concern of the novelist Rachel Cusk. As a reviewer of her novel *Arlington Park* remarks:

Her writing takes nothing for granted, applying itself to the most mundane objects and moments – the act of parking a car, the look of an untidy bedroom or a fashion boutique – with an attentiveness that again and again provides that primal joy of literature: the sense of things being seen afresh. (James Lansdun, *Guardian*, 9 September 2006)

'Things being seen afresh' is also the hallmark of good ethnographic description. To do ethnography you don't need to enjoy reading novels of this kind. As an alternative, you might look below the surface of blogs and ask how they achieve their effects. At the very least, you will need to appreciate the value (and, ultimately, the beauty) of the fine details of mundane existence.

But ethnography is not only about seeing remarkable things in everyday situations. It also asks us to see the *mundane* elements of *remarkable* events and contexts.

## The mundane in the remarkable

Michal Chelbin has described how people view her photographs as follows:

Many viewers tell me that the world discovered in my images is strange. If they find it strange, it is only because the world is a strange place. I just try to show that.' (Chelbin, 2006: [www.michalchelbin.com](http://www.michalchelbin.com), Artist Statement)

Full address: <http://www.michalchelbin.com/popup.php?m=1>



**Figure 1.2** Mickey and Amir, Russia, 2004

She has recently observed circus artistes backstage in a number of European countries. The photograph of Mickey and Amir is taken from this period.

The Mickey and Amir photograph clearly takes us into a different realm from the earlier image of Alicia in a car. Although the latter generates many puzzles, it shows a quite familiar scene. But a boy with a chimpanzee is not at all routine, particularly as the chimpanzee has his arm around Amir's shoulder, looking, for all the world, like a human parent or sibling.

Eve Wood comments that this image is

overtly eccentric in the same way a Diane Arbus photograph captures a moment of unique tenderness ... Yet, within this exquisite oddness is a quiet harbor, as the chimp poses alongside the little boy like an old Vaudevillian friend. (Wood, 2006, [www.nyartsmagazine.com/index](http://www.nyartsmagazine.com/index))

Whether we see the boy and the chimp posed like variety hall colleagues or family members, Chelbin's photograph reminds any observer that we need not focus purely on the unfamiliar elements in apparently extraordinary situations. Maybe we should not assume that chimpanzees are merely quaint animals. Perhaps we can understand ourselves better in observing how we interact with others.

An experience I had in South East Asia many years ago helps to illustrate this point. I had managed to cadge an air ticket via Bali from people who had invited me to speak at a conference in Australia. Against my better judgment, I went on an excursion to a place advertised as ‘a village where natives live as they did hundreds of years ago’.

On arrival, I discovered a number of thatched huts which all looked surprisingly new. In these huts, local craftsmen could be seen working on various artefacts. Attracted by the sound of Indonesian *gamelan* music coming from such a hut, I entered. Sure enough a Balinese man was making musical instruments. Surprisingly, given this purported trip back in time, he also was using a modern sound system to play *gamelan* tunes. He looked up and noticed me moving around to the music while carefully looking around his hut and said in perfectly understandable English: ‘I think you are anthropologist’!

This episode served to remind me of the limits of that form of tourism which always wants to find something new, exotic and different. In some ways, this kind of upmarket tourism is just as blinkered as the more downmarket British or German tourists who go to Spain in order to live exactly the same life as at home but in the sunshine. Unlike them, I had sought something unfamiliar, only to discover something very routine – a kind of Balinese theme park. Moreover, rather than being a passive object of my gaze, this Balinese craftsman had looked back at me and quickly summed up my own interests.

As before, some literary examples will illustrate the mundane elements we can find in odd situations. Beckett’s short play *Happy Days* (1961) certainly has a most bizarre setting. Two middle-aged characters, Winnie and her husband Willy, are buried up to their necks in sand on a huge, featureless, unpopulated beach. Nearly all the dialogue comes from Winnie.

If we watch and listen carefully, once again very mundane elements emerge from this bizarre setting. Next to where her head emerges from the sand, lies Winnie’s handbag. It turns out to contain the routine artefacts that most women carry around with them. As night falls, Winnie reaches into her bag and takes out a comb and a toothbrush and, like most of us before bedtime, brushes her teeth and combs her hair. Before this happens, we see that, like Arbus’s and Pinter’s couples, stilted communication is the order of the day. For many of Winnie’s remarks are addressed to her husband, who lies also buried in the sand a few yards away. But, like Pinter’s Petey, Willy is self-obsessed and only speaks after several attempts by his wife to engage him in conversation.

Extraordinary episodes in real life usually contain such mundane features. The author Ford Madox Ford tells an anecdote of a meeting between the two great men of early twentieth-century literature, Marcel Proust and

James Joyce, at a dinner party at the Hotel Majestic in Paris in 1922. Proust and Joyce faced one another surrounded by their admirers. They were invited to converse. Eventually, they did. Below, I have translated from the French the substance of what they said:

- M. Proust:* ‘As I said in my book *Swann’s Way*, which no doubt you have read, Sir ...’
- Mr Joyce:* [giving a tiny vertical jump on his chair seat] ‘No, Sir.’  
[Pause]  
‘As Mr Bloom says in my *Ulysses*, which, Monsieur, you have doubtless read ...’
- M. Proust:* [giving a slightly higher vertical jump on *his* chair seat] ‘Oh no, Sir.’  
(Davenport-Hines, 2006: 40–1)

Ford reports that a difficult silence ensued between the two men, broken only when Proust mentioned his many symptoms of illness. Joyce compared his symptoms eagerly. So, far from an extraordinary conversation between two literary giants, their audience heard mundane talk between two hypochondriacs!

But remarkable events are not always humorous like this. The Italian writer Primo Levi’s particular genius was in depicting the mundane features of an unthinkable, horrific event – the Holocaust. Here is his account of how people prepared the night before being sent on a cattle truck to a concentration camp:

All took leave from life in the manner which most suited them. Some praying, some deliberately drunk, others lustfully intoxicated for the last time. But the mothers stayed up to prepare the food for the journey with tender care, and washed their children and packed the luggage and at dawn the barbed wire was full of children’s washing hung out in the wind to dry. Nor did they forget the diapers, the toys, the cushions and the hundred other small things which mothers remember and which children always need. Would you not do the same? If you and your child were going to be killed tomorrow, would you not give him something to eat today? (Levi, 1979: 21)

And this is how he describes the arrival at the camp:

Everything was as silent as an aquarium, or as in certain dream sequences. We had expected something more apocalyptic: they seemed simple police agents. It was disconcerting and disarming. Someone

dared to ask for his luggage: they replied, 'luggage afterwards'. Someone else did not want to leave his wife: they said, 'together again afterwards'. They behaved with the calm assurance of people doing their normal duty every day. (Levi, 1979: 25)

As Hannah Arendt has argued, in some respects, the most mundane features of the horrific events of the Holocaust are the most harrowing. Indeed, Claude Lanzmann's brilliant documentary called *Shoah* is particularly effective because of its focus on the detail of the extermination process. It features interviews with middle-level staff of German railways who tell Lanzmann the routine methods used for charging the Nazi government for transporting people to the camps – an issue still very much to the fore in recent years when the French railways (SNCF) were sued for profiting from similar transports.

The following passage from Primo Levi deals with one mundane aspect of life for those who survived the initial selections in the concentration camp. It shows the potentially fatal link between being sent to the camp hospital and losing one's only eating implement:

The nurses ... make huge profits from the trade in spoons ... it is a law that although one can enter Ka-Be [the camp hospital] with one's spoon, one cannot leave with it. At the moment of release ... the healthy patient's spoon is confiscated by the nurses and placed on sale in the Market. Adding the spoons of the patients about to leave to those of the dead and selected, the nurses receive the gains of the sale of about fifty spoons every day. On the other hand, the dismissed patients are forced to begin work again with the initial disadvantage of half a ration of bread, set aside to acquire a new spoon ...

We now invite the reader to contemplate the possible meaning in the Lager of the words 'good' and 'evil', 'just' and 'unjust'; let everybody judge, on the basis of the picture we have outlined and of the examples given above, how much of our ordinary moral world could survive on this side of the barbed wire. (Levi, 1979: 91–2)

Levi shows us how the horror of the concentration camp can best be understood by appreciating its most mundane elements (e.g. acquiring an eating implement like a spoon). However, such an essentially ethnographic gaze demands very careful observation. As Paul Auster's blind man's companion comments:

I realised that I had never acquired the habit of looking closely at things, and now that I was being asked to do it, the results were

dreadfully inadequate. Until then, I always had a penchant for generalising, for seeing the similarities between things rather than their differences. (Auster, 1990: 117)

Recognising such differences is a useful watchword for the ethnographer. This was also understood by the early twentieth-century German philosopher of language, Ludwig Wittgenstein. A student of his remembers the following comment that Wittgenstein made about what mattered to him:

Hegel seems to me to be always wanting to say that things which look different are really the same. Whereas my interest is in showing that things which look the same are really different. (Drury, 1984: 157)

Wittgenstein's German-speaking contemporary, Walter Benjamin, seems to have been equally fascinated by differences between apparently trivial objects. Hannah Arendt tells us that 'Benjamin had a passion for small, even minute things. For him the size of an object was in inverse ratio to its significance ... The smaller the object, the more likely it seemed that it could contain in the most concentrated form everything else' (1970: 11–2).

Apparently, Benjamin carried around with him notebooks containing quotations from daily living which he regarded as 'pearls' or 'coral': 'On occasion he read from them aloud, showing them around like items from a choice and precious collection' (1970: 45).

## Ethnography in the Internet age

Nowadays, unlike Benjamin, rather than use a personal notebook, we might post our observations on our Facebook wall or on an internet bulletin board, chat room or, as we saw earlier, post a blog. In the past twenty years, the Internet has transformed the way we look at the world. Not only do we have access to more information than ever before but social network sites allow us instant communication with old and new friends and colleagues. Robert Kozinets has sketched the scope of this change and its potentially liberating consequences:

In 1996, there were approximately 250,000 sites offering published content to the online world of approximately 45 million global users, who were mainly located in North America and Western Europe. In 2009, there are now over 1.5 billion users of the Internet around the world accounting for 22 per cent of the world's population. Moreover, these users are not passively consuming published content as they were

in 1996 – they are actively communicating with one another. They are reaching out to form, express and deepen their social alliances and affiliation. (2010: 2)

As Annette Markham notes, such active communication allows us to establish many more identities and to move freely between them:

As I write ... various programs on my computer and my smart phone collaborate to present a snapshot of not only my world, but also my understanding of *the* world. I filter news, I follow links sent by friends, and I follow random or not-so-random paths of information to build my knowledge of the world. I scan and contribute to various social networks. Each context is unique, each post authored by a slightly different version of ‘me’ and targeted to slightly different audiences. I’m a cook posting new recipes. I’m a photographer. I could be a methodologist, but I could also be a birdwatcher, a player of multiplayer online games, a dominatrix in an avatar-based social space, or a microcelebrity, known for my acerbic reviews of YouTube viral videos or my roles in amateur porn video. I could have a team of ghostwriters enacting my identity through Twitter if I were important enough. (2011: 121)

Yet, despite these optimistic accounts, it is still worth asking how far the new technologies of the Internet have supported the ethnographic gaze with its interest in mundane, routine activities. Certainly, we are now flooded by information. But what kind of information?

Take the rolling news stories available on many websites. How often do such stories allow us to grasp the texture of events in all their messy detail? Or does such news often report ‘pseudo-events’ like movie openings: ‘occurrence(s) contrived purely to accrue publicity, something which would not happen if cameras were not pointed at it’ (Andrew Mueller, ‘Defining Moment’ *Ft.Com Magazine*, 14/15 August 2010: 46).

Internet coverage of reality TV programmes like *Big Brother* is a case in point. As Michael Bywater acidly points out, the media will

write about [*Big Brother*] at length, despite saying that they aren’t going to write about it because it’s a flop, which they are saying because nothing will make people watch a reality TV show more assiduously than being told it’s a flop, so it won’t be a flop after all. (2007: 119)

Even when we obtain information about real events, what do we really learn from it? Does the endless coverage of the trials of Michael Jackson’s doctor and of Amanda Knox (see Box 1.1) do any more than reinforce our preconceptions about celebrities and ‘dangerous’ women?

### Box 1.1 Celebrities in the headlines

Will Foxy spare a thought for the Kerchers?

(Daily Mail, 7 October 2011)

Amanda Knox 'Overwhelmed' as She Returns Home to Seattle

(*Good Morning America* – Wednesday, 5 October 2011)

Michael Jackson Doctor called Girlfriend as MJ died

(www.mtv.com – 4 October 2011)

Michael Jackson slept with a doll

- Bedroom full of baby pics
- Drugs bottles litter room

(*Sun*, 7 October 2011)

The history of Michael Jackson's face

(www.anomalies-unlimited.com)

The ethnographic gaze wants to tease out, say, the routine organisation of the courtroom or how lawyers use typifications of doctors and young women. By contrast, such rolling news usually only helps us to understand extraordinary events by unreflective use of stereotypes of 'good' and 'evil' people. As Judith Flanders observes:

Sex sells; death sells. Add the two together, throw in a violent woman, and you have newspaper heaven. The nickname 'Foxy Knoxy' created the image of a young middle class woman who enjoyed sex. From there it was a short step to suggesting that her sexuality made her deviant; then, because she was deviant, she was, in all probability, a murderer too. (The Women's Room, *Guardian*, 7 October 2011)

To make matters worse, the age of social media has established that nothing is significant unless it is interactive. This means that when, say, the BBC website reports a news event, it always appends a request: if you are there, let us know what you are seeing and what you think of it. Even if you weren't there, news websites always make it clear that they welcome your views as in this example noted by Bywater:

BBC website 'Have Your Say' section asks for 'Toronto Air Crash: Your Reaction'. (2007: 26)

As Bywater comments, what are you expected to say about such a disaster? Perhaps ‘Great! Loved it!’ Equally, think how often the unfortunate people who have been involved in disasters are invited to answer the question ‘How do you feel?’.

Such ‘interactivity’ is the very opposite of the ethnographer’s gaze. It invites participants to trot out the socially appropriate response while blocking insights into the social organisation of apparently extraordinary events. Why is it that, when someone dies in tragic circumstances, their family has to make a statement requesting ‘privacy’? It is because now, in the era of interactivity, nothing can be private. We all have an appetite for others’ grief – viewing it, enjoying it, commenting on it and so on.

By contrast, the ethnographer’s gaze is fixed on social organisation. Rather than interview relatives, we might turn to how the fact of ‘death’ is accomplished. As David Sudnow (1968) showed, the routines of nurses’ shifts may mean that, if someone dies on a hospital ward in the early morning, a night nurse may have an incentive to overlook it in order to avoid delaying her return home. In this way, the patient’s ‘death’ does not happen until it is discovered by the day shift.

Or, to take a more extraordinary example, after President Kennedy was shot, he was taken to a Dallas hospital with, according to contemporary accounts, half of his head shot away. My hunch is that if you or I were to arrive in a casualty department in this state, we would be given a cursory examination and then recorded as ‘dead on arrival’ (DOA). Precisely because they were dealing with a President, the staff had to do more than this. So they worked on Kennedy for almost an hour, demonstrating thereby that they had done their best for such an important patient. In both cases, then, the ethnographer’s instinct is to find ordinary features in extraordinary events.

I have been arguing that certain aspects of internet communication may make it particularly hard for us to adopt the ethnographer’s gaze. It is worth noting that this does not conflict with the suggestion that internet material can be a great source for ethnographic research (Kozinets, 2010; and Markham, 2011).

### Overcoming four contemporary cultural impulses

At this point of the chapter, it makes sense to take stock. I have suggested that the ethnographer’s gaze demands two things: being able to locate the mundane features of extraordinary situations and to identify what is remarkable in everyday life. Do not worry if you are having trouble in readjusting your gaze in the way I am suggesting. Even if you are familiar

with the relatively obscure writers, philosophers and photographers I have been considering, your path will not be easy. In part, this is because contemporary cultures, aided by new information technologies, incite us to avoid looking at the world in the way that ethnographers do. Let me explain a little of what I mean.

Precisely because the everyday world is so familiar, it presents itself to us as an undifferentiated, bland sameness. This apparent sameness is reinforced by popular culture's emphasis on dramatic incident. This means that the aspirant ethnographer must resist many of the messages and desires repeated when we are entertained by diverting sounds and images.

What follows is a brief sketch of what I take to be important messages that we find around ourselves in the contemporary world. To test out the accuracy of what I am saying, you can think about what media products appeal to you (e.g. music, movies, books, computer games, internet chat rooms) and consider how apposite my comments are.

### 1. The desire for everything to be the same

This may seem like a strange description of contemporary culture. After all, don't we all have very different tastes? Take our taste in movies. Some people like action movies. Others like romantic comedies or detective stories. Aren't these quite different genres?

Yes and no. The content and structure of these movies may be different but they are all *genre* movies. This means that, even before we enter the cinema or view a DVD, we have distinct expectations about the kind of characters we are going to see and the direction the plot will take. So, for instance, a romantic comedy is likely to feature two lovers whose path to happiness is beset by a number of complicating incidents and characters. Indeed, such genre features are so basic to storytelling that, in the 1930s, the Russian literary critic Vladimir Propp worked out that practically all Western stories can be reduced to half a dozen or so basic structures (see Silverman, 2011: 76–8).

However, it is a mistake to assume that such recurrent structures are limited to the stories we find in movies and books. For instance, think of media reports of real-life tragic accidents and disasters. From a brief study of such reports, I can reveal a seemingly unvarying social fact: everyone who dies tragically has led a very special life. Nobody who dies in tragic circumstances is without remarkable features. If you don't believe me, search your local newspaper or the Web for a relevant report and see for yourself. When you do so, you will become an ethnographer who seeks recurrent, mundane elements in apparently extraordinary events and situations.

What is going on in these reports is the production of stories that contain the kind of basic genre features that Propp identified. So we find heroes and heroines overcome by dramatic or evil people and events despite the best attempts of their helpers. Curiously, while these reports present themselves as giving us ‘news’, in large part, they recurrently repeat the same things.

The same sort of issues arise in celebrity interviews. Take the BBC TV coverage of the Young Musician of the Year competition. In recent years, less and less of the actual performances by these fine artists is transmitted. Instead, we get pre- and post-performance interviews with the players. Instead of hearing music, we learn about the players’ hobbies and how they ‘felt’ during their performance.

Or take interviews with authors – perhaps the upmarket aspect of this genre. Rarely do you find questions about writing as literature or as participating in a particular literary tradition. Instead, you find the same two questions:

- How do you start writing every day?
- How do your stories relate to your own life?

This attempt to reduce artworks to their authors’ beliefs and experiences reflects what the novelist Ian McEwan has called ‘the exultation of the subjective’. McEwan then goes on to point out some sensible rules for reading (and writing) fiction:

[Y]our not ‘liking’ the characters is not the same as your not liking the book; you don’t have to think that the central character is nice; the views of the characters don’t have to be yours, and are not necessarily those of the author; a novel is not always *all about you* [i.e. the author]. (*Guardian*, Letters, 7 April 2007)

A recent British TV interview with the American novelist Philip Roth ignored McEwan’s request to focus on the novel itself rather than its author. The interviewer, Mark Lawson, tried to get Roth to relate his latest novel (*Everyman*) about one person’s illnesses and death to Roth’s own experiences of illness. Roth became more and more exasperated by this line of questioning and eventually responded ironically:

Yes. Everything actually happened that way to me. In fact, it happened in the very same words. All I had to do was to write them down.

Roth’s joke at Lawson’s expense reminds me of an anecdote by the great American songwriter of the 1940s, Sammy Kahn, about a question he

was often asked: ‘When you write a song, what comes first – the words or the music?’ To which Kahn replied: ‘No, not the words or the music – first comes the phone call!’

Kahn’s joke has a serious significance. It shows that our concern for the ‘experience’ of creative artists neglects a central ethnographic issue: how their extraordinary products are located in the social organisation of artistic practice (in Kahn’s case, how the composition of a new song arose from a particular commission).

This means that interviewers’ search for an artist’s ‘inspiration’ in personal events serves to displace an ethnographic interest in literary production. As Pico Lyer has pointed out, such interviews now seem more central than the novels themselves. As he puts it: ‘In the age of celebrity culture ... a writer is encouraged to talk *about* books more than to *write* them, and to turn herself into a commodity the books promote (rather than the other way round).’

He comments on an aggressive answer by the novelist and critic Susan Sontag to an interviewer’s question about her life: ‘I heard in her response the last gasp, perhaps, of the last generation that grew up with a sense of books, and not the chatter about them, the TV profiles or the Google listings, really mattering or having the power to speak’ (*Guardian*, Review, 8 July 2006).

The second impulse which now follows underlines my earlier point that our desire for satisfying, familiar stories is not limited to novels and movies but extends to how we ordinarily observe the world around us.

## 2. The desire for a good story

Two in three motorists admit to ‘rubber-necking’ – slowing down to have a good look at accidents as they pass – and as many as 10% have actually stopped so they can get a better view, while one in 20 has had a crash while rubbernecking, a survey by breakdown company Green Flag found. (Report in the *Guardian*, 2006)

Why do we tend to ‘rubberneck’ in this way? An answer was provided in the 1960s in a classic lecture by Harvey Sacks. Sacks argues that ‘experience’ is not something that just exists inside our heads. Instead, society grades our ‘rights’ to have an ‘experience’ depending on whether it is first- or second-hand. This means that the force of a story depends on the extent to which the storyteller can claim to have ‘experienced’ the events narrated.

Actually seeing a motorway pileup provides far more ‘authenticity’ than simply passing on a TV report of the same event. Hence the prevalence of rubbernecking.

So the desire to own an experience can actually be associated with death on the roads!

This has a clear implication for ethnography. When we return from the ‘field’, do we behave like upmarket tourists using our first-hand rights to an ‘experience’? If so, our accounts will probably focus upon dramatic incidents involving strange people. Alternatively, have we been able to understand the routines of behaviour in our setting and to appreciate the similarities, as well as the differences, between the people we have been studying and ourselves?

### 3. The desire for speed and action

Ian McEwan’s *Saturday* was a recent favourite, such a feat to condense the action into a single day. (‘My Media’, Pippa Haywood, *Media Guardian*, 27 March 2006)

Haywood’s account of her response to McEwan’s novel seems plausible. As she says, while in most novels the action extends over months or even years, the events in McEwan’s book occur on a single day.

But why should it be difficult to think that there is not enough action in any one day to provide a developed narrative? If you have followed my argument so far, the answer should be clear to you by now. In popular culture, everyday life is not perceived to contain enough ‘incident’. By contrast, novelists such as Ian McEwan, like the good ethnographer, can take the events of one day and start to unwind massively complex worlds. Indeed, a whole day can be quite a long timespan. Analysing in detail a brief incident or conversation may turn out to offer a key to understanding everyday interaction in our field settings.

### 4. The desire for closure

I have been arguing that popular culture appeals to our desire to be diverted by exciting images and predictable storylines. This is not something new. Centuries ago, even though the technologies of production and consumption were very different, popular culture still satisfied the same impulses. Think about the appeal of stories about public executions in the eighteenth century, or how fairytales have hooked children for many centuries. As with most modern-day narratives, we know we can look beyond the twists in the tale to a satisfying ending where all the loose ends of the plot are tied together.

Think of the conventions of an Agatha Christie detective story in which all the suspects are ultimately grouped together in a room so that our brilliant detective can explain everything and, thereby, identify the murderer. Or take Alfred Hitchcock's famous film *Rear Window* in which a man in his wheelchair observes a crime through his apartment window. A whole story unfolds as James Stewart watches what is going on in a nearby apartment.

But how realistic is this? Are stories ever really so neat, so immediately viewable? Here is a contrasting view in Andrew Cowan's recent novel about a private detective:

In all the years I have worked as a professional snoop ... I've rarely seen anything so tidily framed, so readily interpreted ... Most of the time I see only fragments – glimpses and snatches, parts of pictures, parts of stories ... It's a grainy, partial view, and mine is not a vivid existence ... but one that requires a great deal of patience, diligence and caution. (Cowan, 2006: 67–9)

To my mind, the sociologist most conscious of the need for such 'patience, diligence and caution' was Harvey Sacks. What follows are a few snippets from Sacks that illuminate this approach. They show that while Sacks is usually associated with the highly specialist approach called 'conversation analysis' (CA), his published lectures are a goldmine for ethnographers.

### Sacks on detail

[P]ursue truth, not rarity. The atypical can fend for itself. ... And very often, when we are looking over several common truths, holding them next to one another in an effort to feel again what makes them true, rarities will mysteriously germinate in the charged space between them. (Baker, 1997: 24)

For Sacks, like the essayist Nicholson Baker, rarity was never the point. The mysterious germination of rarities out of the familiar to which Baker refers is matched by Schegloff's observation that, in Sacks' work, 'previously unsuspected details were critical resources in [seeing] what was getting done in and by the talk' (Sacks, 1992, 1:xviii).

Sacks rejected 'the notion that you could tell right off whether something was important' (1992, 1:28). He uses the case of biology to show how the study of an apparently minor object ('one bacterium') can revolutionise our knowledge.

Why assume, for instance, that you need to look at states and revolutions when ‘it’s possible that some object, for example proverbs, may give an enormous understanding of the way humans do things and the kinds of objects they use to construct and order their affairs’ (1992, 1:28)?

For instance, if you are challenged about your actions, one effective response may be to say ‘everyone does don’t they?’ (1992, 1:23). Here the appeal to ‘everyone’ in this proverb works as a rhetorical device rather than a statistical claim. As such, it serves to limit your accountability for your act because such behaviour can be seen as ‘general’.

Similarly, invoking a proverb (e.g. ‘better late than never’) is a powerful conversational move for reasons quite unconnected with whether the proverb is ‘true’ or even ‘true in this instance’. Sacks notes that using a proverb as a conversational opener typically produces a token of agreement from the hearer. In this respect, it may be yet another effective pickup device.

By contrast, people who fail to agree with an invoked proverb will find that the conversation is abruptly terminated by the proverb reciter. This may be because proverbs are usually treated as unchallengeable and therefore as something any conversationalist will know (1992, 1:25). Hence challenging a proverb is an effective means of resisting an intended pickup by means of a proverb statement.

Like Sacks, Baker refuses to accept the prevailing version of the ‘big’ question. Baker’s (1997) essays on apparently tiny topics from the history of punctuation to the aesthetics of nail-clippings and old library index cards may infuriate some readers. However, behind such seeming trivia lies what I take to be a serious intent – to seek clarity and insight by closely examining apparently ‘small’ objects. No reader of Sacks’s lectures can doubt that, forty years earlier, social scientists had been invited to walk down this very path, eschewing empty accounts of ‘big’ issues in favour of elegant analyses which make a lot out of a little.

Sacks was convinced that serious work paid attention to detail and that, if something mattered, it should be observable. For instance, in a fascinating passage, Sacks noted the baleful influence on sociology of the American social psychologist G.H. Mead’s proposal that we need to study things which are not available to observation (e.g. ‘society’, ‘attitudes’). As Sacks comments:

But social activities are observable, you can see them all around you, and you can write them down. The tape recorder is important, but a lot of this can be done without a tape recorder. If you think you can see it, that means we can build an observational study. (1992, 1:28)

However, ethnographers' praiseworthy attention to detail rarely satisfied Sacks's rigorous methodological demands. In particular, it is dangerous to take for granted what it is we appear to be 'seeing'. As Sacks says:

In setting up what it is that seems to have happened, preparatory to solving the [research] problem, do not let your notion of what could conceivably happen decide for you what must have happened. (1992, 1:115)

Here Sacks is telling us that our 'notion of what could conceivably happen' is likely to be drawn from our unexamined knowledge as members of society. Instead, we need to proceed more cautiously by examining the methods members use to produce particular activities as observable and reportable 'events'. This means that people should not be seen as 'coming to terms with some phenomenon' (1992, 1:437) but as actively *constituting* it. Let us look at a few of Sacks's examples of this.

### Speed on the roads

Take the phenomenon of 'speeding' – how does one know one is speeding? One solution is to look at your car's speedometer. However, another well-used method is to compare your movement relative to other traffic. And 'traffic' is a phenomenon that is actively organised by road users. As Sacks suggests:

[P]ersons can be seen to clump their cars into something that is 'a traffic', pretty much wherever, whenever, whoever it is that's driving. That exists as a social fact, a thing which drivers do ... [so] by 'a traffic' I don't mean that there are some cars, but there is a set of cars that can be used as 'the traffic', however it's going; those cars that are clumped. And it is in terms of 'the traffic' that you see you're driving fast or slow. (1992, 1:437)

Sacks is arguing here that, rather than being a natural fact, 'the traffic' is a self-organising system, in which people adjust their speed by reference to how they define 'the traffic'. The traffic thus serves as a metaphor for how social order is constructed by reference to what can be inferred. It also shows how the ability 'to read other people's minds' (in this case, the minds of other drivers) is not a psychotic delusion but a condition for social order. For Sacks, then, 'traffic' and 'speed' are not natural facts but locally assembled phenomena. The selfsame features

can be seen in medical interviews, where what is ‘normal’ is attended to by doctors on the basis of their elicitation of what is normal for *you* (Sacks, 1992, 1:57–8).

### Observing crime on the street

For Sacks, police officers face the same kind of problem as the Shetland Islanders that Erving Goffman studied for his classic ethnography *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). The problem that police officers share with us all is: how are we to infer moral character from potentially misleading appearances? To solve this problem, police ‘learn to treat their beat as a territory of normal appearances’ (Sacks, 1972: 284) so that they can treat slight variations in normal appearances as ‘incongruities’ worthy of investigation. Throughout, policemen, like criminal lawyers, judges and juries, work with the assumption of the appearances of what David Sudnow has called typifications of ‘normal’ crimes.

The implication of Sacks’s comments is that the study of how members of society use categories should make ethnographers very cautious of how they themselves use categories. For instance, Sacks quotes from two linguists who appear to have no problem in characterising particular (invented) utterances as ‘simple’, ‘complex’, ‘casual’ or ‘ceremonial’. For Sacks, such rapid characterisations of data assume ‘that we can know that without an analysis of what it is [they] are doing’ (1992, 1:429). Forty years on, his comments stand as a criticism of the rapid coding of data that we sometimes find in qualitative research, particularly when researchers analyse interview data.

### Back to mundanity

I will conclude this chapter by returning to my main theme via two more of Chelbin’s photographs. The first is of an elderly adult with a little girl. How can we see remarkable things in this mundane encounter?

Note that the caption uses the membership category ‘grandfather’. This category keys us in to how we view the photo. If we follow Sacks’s suggestion that we try to look for team-like properties between people, this implies that the child on the sofa is not only a grandchild but, in all likelihood, this man’s grandchild.

But immediately a number of puzzles come to the surface. What are we to make of the child’s bizarre appearance, apparently slumped on a sofa with a vacant expression? Is this any way for a child to behave



**Figure 1.3** Grandfather, Russia, 2003

when she is with her grandfather? This is made all the stranger by the fact that she is wearing what looks like a party dress. Even if she is not happy about seeing her relative, shouldn't she be pleased to be dressed up in this way?

Moreover, there is also something strange about the grandfather. Why is his gaze so miserable when grandparents are supposed to derive pleasure from their grandchildren? And why does he stand at some distance from his granddaughter? Aren't meetings with grandchildren supposed to be happy events? If a chimpanzee like Mickey (in the earlier photograph) can put his arm around a child, why can't he have his arm around his own granddaughter?

Looking at Chelbin's photograph gives us no answer to these puzzles – unless we succumb to the impulse to impose some closure on what we see. Instead, its deviation from what we expect asks to ponder the rituals of everyday life.

In a similar way, writers have asked us to look at the contours of mundane existence. Here is Philip Roth on the conclusion of a family funeral:

That was the end. No special point had been made. Did they all say what they had to say? No, they didn't, and of course they did. Up and down the state that day, there'd been five hundred funerals like



**Figure 1.4** Untitled 01

this, routine, ordinary and ... no more or less interesting than the others. But then it's the commonness that's most wrenching, the registering once more of the fact of death that overwhelms everything. (Roth, 2006: 14–5)

Unlike Chelbin or Arbus, Roth takes us straight to the routines of mundane existence without posing puzzles. Nonetheless, he uses his literary vision to bring out what is remarkable about a mundane event. For all three artists, as well as for ethnographers, routines like family funerals are viewable as one of a collection of what Arbus calls 'innumerable, inscrutable habits'.

But, as you may remember, there is another side to this coin. I have been suggesting that extraordinary or remarkable scenes should also remind us of mundane habits. Take another of Chelbin's photographs of circus performers.

In this photo, we see another little girl, this time in a ballet dress. But she balances on a man's hand – an extraordinary scene. Nonetheless, we can retrieve mundane features from this image.

We know that the photograph is taken from Chelbin's work with circus artists. The girl's dress and the man's outfit clearly suggest circus performers. Moreover, we can note the man's proud stare at the camera

and the girl's pose with her arms outstretched. Both seem to be asking us to applaud their performance and, unlike the grandfather photo, both seem happy in each other's presence.

So the strangeness of the scene can lead the ethnographer directly into questions about mundane existence. For example, what are the routines of circus life? What kind of relationship between adults and children does it encourage and/or forbid? Such questions lead us in the direction of an ethnography of different work settings.

So circus life involving acrobats and chimps can coexist with mundanity. The same is true of other apparently extraordinary events such as mental illness. As Alan Bennett comments on his mother's depression and paranoia, 'in all her excursions into unreality, Mam remained the shy, unassuming woman she had always been, none of her fantasies extravagant, her claims, however irrational they might be, always modest. She might be ill, disturbed, mad even, but she still knew her place' (Bennett, 2005: 7).

In my volunteer work with people with dementia living in a residential home, I have, like Bennett, been struck with what they share with us. While these residents (now my friends) may not be able to remember their past lives or even their own names, it would be wrong to assume that they cannot communicate. When they refer to their son as 'my father', we can see this less as a mistake and more as a skill – after all, they have chosen a category from the 'right' collection (i.e. 'family members'). Similarly, even though they may not be able to speak intelligibly, I still have conversations with them. I find that they still recognise basic interactional moves. For instance, when I ask a question, my resident-friends know that an answer is the appropriate next move and produce sounds that serve to do the work of an answer.

When I sing old songs with them, my friends in the home reveal a remarkable ability to remember the words (I am reliant on a songbook!). Even one lady who can no longer speak is still able to show her appreciation of the singing by giving me a 'thumbs up' sign and smiling when I repeat it back to her.

## Conclusion

I have noted elsewhere that the philosopher Wittgenstein has important points of contact with what I have been saying. Like Sacks, Chelbin and Arbus, Wittgenstein reminds ethnographers of how hard it is to question situations that appear to be unremarkable. As he writes, 'How hard I find it to see what is *right in front of my eyes*' (Wittgenstein, 1980: 39e).

Unlike the *Guardian* critic who thought it very difficult to write a novel about a single day, in the following passage Wittgenstein asks us to imagine a drama without apparent incident:

Let us imagine a theatre; the curtain goes up and we see a man alone in a room, walking up and down, lighting a cigarette, sitting down, etc. so that suddenly we are observing a human being from outside in a way that ordinarily we can never observe ourselves; it would be like watching a chapter of biography with our own eyes, surely that would be uncanny and wonderful at the same time. (1980: 12e)

For Wittgenstein, it is wonderful just to observe quite mundane phenomena: ‘People who are constantly asking “why” are like tourists who stand in front of a building reading Baedeker and are so busy reading the history of its construction, etc., that they are prevented from *seeing* the building’ (1980: 40e).

Wittgenstein reminds us that his kind of philosopher (and our kind of ethnographer) needs both to resist the impulses of contemporary culture and to put on one side conventional academic questions. Causal and historical questions, posed too early, will not help us to understand mundane objects. As Wittgenstein remarks:

The insidious thing about the causal point of view is that it leads us to say: ‘Of course, it had to happen like that’. Whereas we ought to think: it may have happened *like that* – and also in many other ways. (1980: 37e)

Alternatively put: ‘God grant the philosopher insight into what lies in front of everyone’s eyes’ (1980: 63e).

This has been a very sketchy excursion into a very well-known territory. At best, I have tried to offer a few compelling illustrations of what many of us know already.

To repeat a phrase quoted earlier, they underline the fact that good ethnography ‘requires a great deal of patience, diligence and caution’ (Cowan, 2006: 69).

Ironically, to the extent that university teaches us that great thinkers deal in theories of history or causation, it makes our task harder. Recalling the work of Mass Observation discussed at the beginning of this chapter, a contemporary newspaper sagely observed:

One fact that has emerged is the difficulty intellectuals seem to have in describing their environment or the daily happenings in their lives.

On the other hand, observation seems to come naturally to people who are living a workaday existence. These take their task seriously and perform it efficiently, perhaps because they recognize the practical value of any attempt to sort out the tangle of modern life. (*Manchester Guardian*, 14 September 1937)

Like ‘people who are living a workaday existence’, as ethnographers we must learn to take our ‘task seriously and perform it efficiently’.