

THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL

A Class Act: Class and Taste in the Work of Grayson Perry

being a thesis submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
in the University of Hull

by

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August 2016

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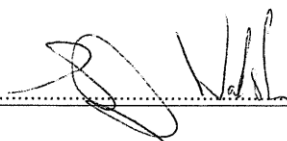
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*For Nancy who has always been there through the all the high and lows*

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## Introduction

The focus of this thesis is Grayson Perry's treatment of class. The division between elite and popular forms of culture is a longstanding interest of mine. Initially my concern was with matters of aesthetic taste and found its expression in questions about how museums and galleries respond to their perceived publics. Who gets to decide which art should be on display and why? Why does it all matter so much and what does it all mean? With hindsight, I recognized that these questions about aesthetic taste were also questions about class and power relations. Grayson Perry is fascinated by matters of taste and he believes that we feel the most acute discomfort about our taste preferences when we 'move between social classes' (Perry, 2013, p: 12). He also points out that what really separates the classes is 'culture and education' (ibid. p: 16). This thesis explores the way in which concerns with class differences permeate Perry's work. I argue that his work reflects the eye of an ethnographer in charting the differences between the classes, the nature of social mobility and the changes from class relations based on occupation and production to those based on power and consumption. Perry's art makes visible ways of imagining difference, which continue to inform our contemporary ideas about social hierarchies. There is a radical political sensibility in his determination to democratize art by making work that is accessible to a wide audience, and in his determination not to objectify the working classes but rather to make them subjects of history by bringing them into the centre of the art world. He brings to this task all the resources of a visual artist steeped in the conventions of art history combined with the craftsmanship to produce exquisite and beautiful objects. In Perry's art we find a challenge to the purportedly 'objective' canons of aesthetic taste.

The question of how class differences are understood and theorized is, of course, a thorny one. This question, together with an exploration of the intersections of class

and taste is addressed in Part One of the thesis. Here it is argued that the attention to difference theorized within poststructuralist thought, including attention to ‘Desire, the metaphysics of difference, hybridity and otherness’ (Arshi, 1996, p: 39) terms intended to represent an alternative form of political ‘engagement’ based on ‘the question of personal identity (racial, sexual, class)’ (ibid.) is not adequate when addressing class inequalities. There is no ‘economic vocabulary within the discourse of cultural theory’, which in effect means that economic inequalities are not visible (ibid. p: 38). I argue that class is inextricable from economic inequalities, and suggest that this view is also clear in Perry’s engagement with class, whilst his practice shows an awareness of the insights of poststructuralist thought.

In exploring, as he does, the intersections of class and taste his work shows clear affinities with the writings of Bourdieu and these parallels are brought out in Part One of the thesis. In his determination to democratize art by making work that is socially engaged and accessible, Perry reveals how taste interweaves with class and power relations. Art provides us with new ways of communicating and making sense of the world. One might say it reminds us who *we* are by defining our relationship to ourselves. There is an assumption of community in this statement but just who or what, is being represented? Art has the power to unite us but it also has the power to divide us because categories of taste are also categories of cultural power. The question of whether someone is judged to have good or bad taste appears to be fairly subjective and not something one might regard as ‘an asset which can be accumulated and exchanged’ (Savage, 2015, p: 95). But as Savage points out, ‘the key issue is whether one’s taste and interests are *legitimate* – socially approved – and seen as respectable and worthy’ (ibid.). Ross draws our attention to the fact that:



Cultural power does not inhere in the contents of categories of taste. On the contrary it is exercised through the capacity to draw the line between and around categories of taste. To define where each relational category begins and ends, and the power to determine what it contains at any one time (1989, p: 61).

This distinction between ‘high’ and popular forms of culture and the capacity to exercise taste is not restricted to the arts but extends into all areas of everyday life where we find the same structuring opposition between legitimate taste and popular (or vulgar) taste. The stakes are high because our cultural preferences and taste choices mark social distinctions. Our taste choices are highly social and operate as a kind of visual semaphore which signals to others not only who we want to be, but also more importantly, who we do not want to be. During the course of his research, Savage observed that certain forms of popular culture were seen as ‘inherently deficient’ because they lacked aesthetic qualities (2015, p: 122). These included cultural pursuits such as ‘bingo’ and TV talent shows which were judged as ‘‘banal, ‘mundane’ ‘obvious’ or lacking in ‘substance’’ (ibid.). This social distancing on grounds of aesthetic judgement can slip easily into a dislike and disparagement of those individuals who do not share our preferences. The people who watched these shows were often subject to criticism on grounds that they lacked the ability to make freely informed choices. More worryingly, amongst the ‘wealthier and better educated respondents’ these ‘cultural tastes’ were seen ‘as powerful indicators of pathological identities’ which invoked ‘a tangible sense of contempt and even disgust’ (ibid. p: 123). As Bourdieu points out, the ability to understand and decipher visual codes is not the result of an innate ‘natural’ capacity rather it is the outcome of education and/or inherited cultural capital. The denial of this social relationship has invested this ‘pathologically stratified spectrum of taste’ with ‘an ineluctable power not unlike that conferred by natural

religion' (Ross, 1989, p: 211). Ross made these comments twenty-five years ago, but the Great British Class Survey (2013) has revealed how this system of classification and categorization has become even more deeply entrenched in society. In this thesis, I suggest that Grayson's Perry's work on taste and social class offers one possible response to the question of how we might challenge what Ross refers to as 'this *system* of cultural power' (ibid. italics in original).

Grayson Perry is alert to the ways in which our taste choices function to mark social status and superiority and he recognizes that it is access to 'education and culture' is that really supports and reinforces class divisions. What really fascinates Perry about matters of taste is the strength of feeling that accompanies the topic: the fact 'that people really *care*' (Perry, 2013, p: 9). In this thesis, I will argue that Perry's work offers us a way of understanding class, which recognizes class as a set of objective material structures and as an aspect of lived subjectivity and identity with affective content. I will suggest that he shows himself sensitive to the changing nature of class throughout the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I will also suggest that in his later work he explores other aspects of identity but always shows them as interwoven with class.

As I have explained in the Afterword, the main inspiration for this thesis was my concern to follow up the many issues that I had found so fascinating in my undergraduate studies and my subsequent MA. I am particularly indebted to David Cannadine's *Class in Britain* (1998). Other research resources used in this thesis include David Kynaston's series of books entitled *Tales of a New Jerusalem*, which cover the period 1945 to 1979. To date there are four volumes: *Austerity Britain 1945-51* (2008); *Family Britain 1951-57* (2009); *Modernity Britain: Opening the Box, 1957-59* (2013); and *Modernity Britain: A Shake of the Dice, 1959-62* (2014). These books are of particular significance as they provided the historical context for many of the

images discussed in this thesis. Another valuable resource was Selina Todd's *The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working Class 1910-2010*. Additional resources include biography, television programmes, an encounter with the objects and exhibition catalogues. I was fortunate in being granted an extensive three-hour interview with the artist on January 4 2016 during which we discussed attitudes to class and its links to other aspects of identity. This interview has also provided a key resource for the interpretation of his work.

### **Thesis Summary**

Part One (Chapters 1- 3) discusses the theoretical and historical development of our ideas about class and the intersections of class and taste. Part Two (Chapters 4-8) focuses on Perry's work. Chapter One explores the differing conceptions of class that are used in contemporary theorising to form a background to my discussion of the role of class in the work of Grayson Perry. Chapter Two looks at models of class: the way in which class has been imaged/imagined in both the popular and political imaginary. The social imaginaries of class are an important context for the discussion of Perry, for his work makes use of and reinvents these models. This chapter also discusses how the language of meritocracy has shaped political policy and influenced how people perceive social mobility. In Chapter Three the focus is on class and taste with specific reference to Bourdieu's work *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste* (1986). Bourdieu's thesis draws attention to the way in which the exercise of taste (both in art and in the realm of everyday life) functions to reinforce and legitimate existing social divisions. Here, the aim is to highlight the way in which Bourdieu's theory can throw an illuminating light on Perry's position, as expressed in his *Reith Lecture* series and elsewhere and in his artistic practice. Taken together these chapters provide the context for the detailed discussion of Perry and class in Part Two of the thesis.

The chapters that make up Part Two are as follows. Chapter Four provides a biography of Grayson Perry. These details about Perry's early life are important because it is here that we find the foundations of his future success as an artist. This chapter also discusses a selection of Perry's pots. Chapter Five discusses Perry's exhibition *Unpopular Culture* (2008). Based on a detailed discussion of selected exhibits my aim is to show that although Perry's work is not explicitly political, it does carry an implicit politics of class. The influence of Walter Benjamin is important here. Benjamin recognized that 'culture' was not an 'independent realm of values' that gave representation to the nation as a whole. His aim was to find images that revealed '...the bald economic determination of existence' (Benjamin, 1999, p: 43). I argue that we can find this same political sensibility in Perry's approach. Many of the photographs in this exhibition reveal how class is an objectivist category anchored in material and social conditions.

Perry's decision to define his role as an artist-ethnographer enables him to make work that is responsive to his subjects. Chapter Six focuses on Perry's television documentary series *All in the Best Possible Taste* (2012) in which we accompany the artist as he travels to the different regions of Britain to find answers to the question of what people like and why. The answers he elicits to this apparently simple question form the basis for his tapestry series *The Vanity of Small Differences* (2012). Chapter Seven presents a detailed analysis of the six tapestries that make up *The Vanity of Small Differences* (2012). Taken together these tapestries reveal the ways in which class is both made and unmade through culture. Chapter Eight presents a discussion of Perry's exhibition entitled *Who Are You?* The fourteen portraits that made up the exhibition were on show at the National Portrait Gallery in 2014. These works were also the culmination of a three-part documentary series *Grayson Perry: Who Are You?* Perry

said that during this research he wanted to speak to people on a more individual level and to hear their personal stories. Here the focus was not ostensibly on class identity but on ‘modern British identity in all its complexity and diversity’ (Brown, 2015). But as we shall see, these complex identifications are always criss-crossed by class differences, not least because as Perry himself acknowledges, class ‘does so inhabit you’ (Perry 2016). This statement reveals what really lies at the heart of Perry’s art and his politics.

## Chapter One: Theories of class

‘The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles’ (Marx and Engels, 1998, p: 34).

‘Class is a communist concept. It groups people as bundles and sets them against one another’ (Thatcher, 1992).

In this chapter, I will explore the differing conceptions of class used in contemporary theorizing, to form a background to my discussion of the role of class in the work of Grayson Perry. The above two statements on class could hardly be more opposed. For Karl Marx, class was the central concept in all accounts of recorded history, because it explained the evolution of human societies and it explained the true, that is to say, communal nature of human behaviour. Whilst for Margaret Thatcher, the communist concept of class is based on a mistaken view of historical development and a perverted view of human nature which denies that people are ‘...individuals with feelings’ (ibid.). Moreover, for Thatcher, (who was responding to John’s Major’s call for a ‘classless society’) ‘the more you talk about class – or even about “classlessness” – the more you fix the idea in people’s minds’ (ibid.). Despite their apparent denial of the reality of class, Thatcher and Major were both preoccupied with the topic.

The historian David Cannadine (1998) takes up the issue of class by attempting to answer the question ‘...what, exactly, is this *thing* class with which the British are undeniably so obsessed?’ (1998, p: ix). The form of the question acknowledges that there is no consensus about this most allusive and yet pervasive concept. In *Class in Britain* (1998) Cannadine charts the historical evolution of our ideas about class by looking at how meanings of the concept have changed over time. He observes that during the period 1978-1998, Marxism the ‘once fashionable’ and generally held belief that ‘class analysis and class conflict’ were crucial to understanding the ‘economic,

social and political history of modern Britain' and modern British life was 'disregarded' by most historians and 'abandoned' by most politicians (ibid. p: 1). For Cannadine, the two opposing statements by Marx and Thatcher are evidence of a profound shift in how the British think about class. In place of Marxist accounts, a different explanation of history is generally accepted, which is not 'always explicitly Thatcherite', nevertheless it reflects her belief that class should be:

...downplayed, disregarded and denied, and that grouping people in confrontational collectivities is a subversive rhetorical and political device rather than an expression or description of a more complex, integrated and individualist social reality (ibid. p: 2).

Class-based accounts of Britain's history have lost credibility and disappeared from most academic departments and class has largely disappeared from mainstream political discourse. Nevertheless, class has continued to be a national obsession along with 'the weather and the monarchy' (ibid. p: 1) but it remains a notoriously hard concept to define. Cannadine directs us to Stein Ringen who offered the following definition of this '*thing*' called class:

'...what is peculiar to Britain' he suggests, 'is not the reality of the class system and its continuing existence, but class psychology: the preoccupation with class, the belief in class, and the symbols of class in manners, dress and language'. 'This thing they have with class' he continues, is a sign of closed minds, and it is among what is difficult for a stranger to grasp in the British mentality'. 'Britain' he concludes, 'is a thoroughly modern society with thoroughly archaic institutions, conventions and beliefs' (Ringen 1997, cited in Cannadine, 1998, p: ix).

For Cannadine, Ringen's remark implies that '...class is rather like sex, and in the British case, takes place at least as much inside the head as outside' (ibid. p: ix). One thing is clear, most British thinking on class is 'vague, confused, contradictory and lacking any historical perspective' (ibid. p: x) nevertheless class 'is still with us, still

around us, still inside of us, still part of each of us' (ibid. p: 1). Through the work of Grayson Perry, this thesis will argue that the idea of class is ever-present and is continuing to inform how we think about different identities. The traditional language of class still shapes our political thinking and public affairs. Crucially, class references a reality in which economic inequalities are a determining factor in people's lives including access to health care, education, employment opportunities and length of life.

### **Marx's theory of class**

From the Second World War until the mid-70s, the 'class-based account' of British history was largely dependent on the categorical schema and ideas devised by Marx. In *Capital* (1867) Marx placed everybody in one of three categories determined by their relation to the means of production:

The owners merely of labour-power, owners of capital, and land-owners, whose respective sources of income are wages, profit and ground-rent, in other words, wage labourers, capitalists and landowners (Marx, 1978, p: 441).

For Marx, these three basic classes constituted 'three big classes of modern society based upon the capitalist mode of production' (ibid.). The basic class divisions are between those who have little but their own labour to sell and those who have the wealth (often inherited) to buy the labour of others. Marx is adamant that there is nothing preordained and therefore immutable about these class divisions but they are often justified on grounds that:

In times long gone by there were two sorts of people; one, the diligent, intelligent, and above all, frugal elite; the other, lazy rascals, spending their substance, and more, in riotous living ... Thus it came to pass that the former sort accumulated wealth, and the latter sort had nothing to sell except their own skins. And, from this original sin dates the poverty of the great majority that, despite all its labour, has up to now nothing to sell



but itself, and the wealth of the few that increases constantly although they have long ceased to work (ibid. pp: 431- 432).

He continues, 'Such insipid childishness is every day preached to us in defence of property' (ibid. p: 432). For, Marx, the idea that poverty is attributable to some inherent moral failure on the part of the individual is a myth which works to obscure the underlying relations of power and exploitation. He points out, 'In actual history it is notorious that conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, briefly force, play the greater part' (ibid.).

In order to explain how the working class will unite against its own exploitation Marx proposes a twofold theory of class: class 'in itself' and class 'for itself' (Marx, 1961, p: 149). These terms 'in itself' and 'for itself' refer to the opposition between '*consciousness*' and '*self-consciousness*' ... the opposition between '*object* and *subject*' (ibid.). When applied to class, the term 'in itself' refers to class viewed as an 'objective social category' in which individuals are grouped together on the basis of 'their shared economic characteristics: their source of income, the extent of their wealth, and the nature of their occupation' (Cannadine, 1998, p: 3). This is a description of class as an 'inert, inanimate social aggregation' (ibid.) of the kind that might appear in a national census. Sociologists who are interested in the make-up of society in modern Britain use this basic conception of class as a structural and economic category. As Cannadine points out, these classes cannot be made to disappear 'as long as there remain inequalities in income, differences in occupation and variations in wealth which can be objectively observed and measured' (ibid.).

Marx is not only concerned with class as an objective description of social and economic conditions but also with class as a subjective experience: class 'for itself' (Marx, 1961, p: 149). Marx had predicted that the working class would become a 'class

for itself” by becoming class conscious (by recognizing that as members of the proletariat they had a shared interest in improving their conditions). As Cannadine observes, for Marx, the battle ‘for rent, for profit and for wages’ between ‘class-conscious classes’ would inevitably result in ‘economic conflict over the spoils of production’ leading to ‘social conflict, which would in turn lead to political conflict’ (1998, p: 4). As a class *for itself* the working class would be propelled towards emancipation through revolutionary activity. Marx predicted a revolution of the proletariat in which the industrial working class would overthrow the bourgeoisie and provide the foundation for communism (a form of social order without the state and without class divisions) which ultimately, of course, failed to materialize. The working class seemed unwilling or unable to play the ‘world-historical role’ that Marx had in mind, ‘as their class in itself disappointingly refused to become a class for itself’ (ibid. p: 6).

The idea of a mass organization (a party) of workers whose political efficacy lay in their potential to mobilize has always been central to Marxist politics. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the British working class was re-born, not in the guise of a ‘revolutionary movement ... but as a more reformist body which found its expression in two conjoined institutions’ (ibid. p: 7). The first institution was the trade union movement, which expanded rapidly during the 1880s and 1890s and again, on the eve of the First World War. The trade union movement ‘which gave a powerful collective voice to the organised working man’ continued its popular rise throughout the war and into the immediate post-war period (ibid.). The second expression of solidarity was the birth of the Labour Party in 1918 and Clause Four: ‘to bring about the common ownership of the means of production’ (ibid.). The fall of the Liberals in 1914 created an opportunity for class struggles between the Conservatives (the party of industrial

capitalists) and Labour (the party of organised workers). The economic, political and social battles of the twentieth century culminating in the General Strike of 1926 and the coalminer's strikes in 1974, have their roots in these developments (Cannadine, 1998). From 1945-79 which marked the beginning of Welfare State, there was a generally held belief among both social historians and sociologists that Marx was right when he asserted, '*the relations of production in their totality constitute what are called the social relations, society, and specifically, a society at a stage of historical development*' (Marx, 1978, p: 207, italics in original). Changes in economic relations were the essential element in historical progress and in social change and political change.

### **Ideology, Images and Identity**

In *The German Ideology* Marx argued that German philosophy 'which descends from heaven to earth' thereby becomes form of ideology in which 'men and their circumstances appear upside down as in a *camera obscura*' (ibid. p: 154, italics in original). By contrast, Marx's own philosophy made its ascent 'from earth to heaven' (ibid.).

That is to say, we do not set out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real, active men, and arrive at men, and on the basis of their real-life process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life process. The phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life process which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises' (ibid.).

In Marx's formulation the economic base is foundational and culture and subjectivity an effect of it: 'sublimates of material life processes' (ibid.). As a result, 'Morality, religion, metaphysics, all of the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence' (ibid.). This

statement leads us to one of Marx's most frequently quoted aphorisms 'Life is not determined by consciousness but consciousness by life' (ibid. p: 155). More recent commentary suggests that Marx's analysis of how class consciousness develops (as a direct response to the conflicts inherent in the capitalist mode of accumulation and market competition) fails to take account of the fact that material (economic) interests are not necessarily the determining factor in the formation of the beliefs and behaviours which form part of an individual's sense of self-identity. The ways in which we come to *understand and interpret our experience of class* (Hall, 1987) (my italics) are always ideologically defined.

This claim can be discussed with reference to 'the tangled knot of race and class' that exists in America (Lustig, 2004, p: 45). Lustig points out that there are obvious 'signs of class society' in America and yet 'the militant working class foreseen by traditional social critics is missing in action' (ibid.). In America, the continued importance of race 'disproves the prediction that working people would develop a single homogeneous identity and that the social structure would become simplified over time' (ibid. pp: 56-57). Lustig suggests that the 'experience of racism' should act as a warning against the automatic assumption that 'people's interests can be deduced directly from their position in the economic structure and that objective laws can be deduced about them' (ibid. p: 57). Lustig seems to be echoing the claim made by Hall (1987) when he points out that 'between stimulus and human response, consciousness intervenes; and consciousness is a product of history and politics' (ibid.). In America, social mobility also plays a crucial role, it does not eliminate class but it does disrupt '... the cultures that might help us to understand class situations...over time' (ibid.). As Lustig points out, if class is no longer seen as the central issue then many people may choose to attribute their problems to '...workers of colour, or immigrants, or even the

government' (ibid.). These multiple social divisions create a situation in which 'the very idea of "identity" with its implications of singularity may be misleading' warns Lustig (ibid.). These arguments demonstrate that there are many different ways to present and explain political and social struggles. As a result, 'Class never appears in pure form' (ibid.). There are differences not only between classes but also within classes:

...people possess multiple, overlapping, self-conceptions. They may simultaneously identify with their job, their region, their ethnic group, the nation (as patriots), the middle class (as consumers), or the working class (as producers) (ibid.).

These multiple and overlapping identity categories have implications for traditional class politics based on the idea of class solidarity and homogeneity. Lustig contends that in order to appeal to the widest possible range of social groups 'a political vision ... would have to be built up out of their different identities and the different ways they live class now' (ibid. p: 58). A number of Perry's pots including '*them and us*' (2001), '*barbaric splendour*' (2003), '*taste and democracy*' (2004) '*good and bad taste*' (2007) and '*the tragedy of ordinary life*' (1996) make these conflicting class identifications visible.

Hall made a similar claim in 'Blue Election, Election Blues' (1987) when he argued that there was a need to rethink class identities and political allegiances in British politics. In this article, written shortly after Margaret Thatcher began her third term in office, Hall was trying to analyse why Labour had been so thoroughly defeated. In view of the Labour Party's most recent defeat at the hands of the Tory Party in the 2015 elections, Hall's comments have acquired a new significance. In Hall's view, the Labour manifesto had presented the electorate with a 'broad political choice' between the party of caring, collective provision and the underprivileged' (Labour) and 'the party of

greed, privilege and self-interest' (Conservative) (Hall, 1987, p: 30). Labour's subsequent defeat or rather, Thatcherism's victory was 'rooted in the deep movements and tendencies which have been reshaping the British political map' (ibid.). By way of explanation, Hall suggests that since 1983, a large number of voters had 'consistently' declared themselves in favour of Labour policies on 'unemployment, health, housing, education – the 'welfare' issues' (ibid. p: 31). However, when 'asked about *image* – 'who was doing a good job', 'giving the country a lead', making people '*feel* good to be British again' – a majority consistently said 'Maggie'' (ibid. italics in original). This apparent contradiction between what was said and how people actually voted might be explained by the fact that 'the electorate is thinking politically, not in terms of *policies* but of *images*' (ibid. italics in original). This does not mean that policies are insignificant but 'it does mean that policies don't capture people's imaginations unless constructed into an *image* with which they can identify' (ibid. italics in original). Images here mean not just visual images but the shapes or forms, which structure the way the actual or possible world is experienced.

Hall suggests three reasons for the importance of images. First, political decisions are 'both complex and remote, and the big bureaucracies of state and market' exert control over large areas of social life (ibid.). Secondly, the media infiltrates every area of our lives, to an even greater extent today than was the case in 1987. Consequently, the electorate is subject to 'ceaseless massaging by the media and to disinformation from the politicians' to the extent that politics is 'being absorbed into this game of impression management' (ibid.). Thirdly, voters are aware that once in power, 'a five-year mandate will be interpreted any way the party in power likes' (ibid.). Thatcherism counter-posed the concept of choice to democracy 'precisely because whereas the latter is public and social, the former can be defined in wholly

private and individual (i.e., ‘family’) terms’ (ibid.). Hall suggests that in this situation ‘people aren’t wrong to imagine that what is required of them as citizens is simply to express a broad, undefined ‘preference’ for one scenario or another, this image or that’ (ibid.). Whilst this might be regarded as a ‘trivialisation of politics’ Hall contends that ‘images are not trivial things. In and through images, fundamental political questions are being posed and argued through’ (ibid. p: 33).

All politics relies on image building but as David Harvey pointed out, ‘the rise in a mediatized politics shaped by images alone’ gained added impetus by the ‘active use of public relations firms to sell a political image’ (1990 p: 330). Both Hall (1987) and Harvey (1990) acknowledge the consummate media manipulation skills demonstrated by the Conservatives. The imaging of Thatcher by Saatchi and Saatchi during Autumn 1978 is a notable example. When Saatchi and Saatchi first produced the infamous campaign poster showing a picture of a lengthy ‘dole queue’ and the slogan ‘Labour Isn’t Working’ ... unemployment was an explosive political issue’ (Shipman, 2015). Not only was a certain ‘photographic sleight of hand’ involved in creating ‘the never-ending dole queue from a cast of 20 young Conservatives’ (ibid.) the poster also conveniently overlooked the fact that the fall in full employment had begun under the previous Tory government led by Edward Heath. The renamed ‘Labour *Still* Isn’t Working’ (my emphasis) poster was used again in 1979 (ibid.). Regardless of the underlying statistics on unemployment and the fact that no unemployed people were actually used in the making of the image, this rebranding exercise was a success (the Conservatives were re-elected in 1979) because it located the problem of unemployment with the ‘irresponsible trade unions’ and their excessive wage demands (ibid.). It also promoted the idea of ‘people helping themselves into work’ rather than relying on the government to create employment (ibid.). The Saatchi campaign testifies that images

are important not just in determining who is elected but also in shaping how people experience their own identities. As Hall points out, 'political imagery is not just a matter of presentation but of *ideology*' (1987, p: 33). He writes:

Electoral politics – in fact, every kind of politics – depends on political identities and identifications. People make identifications symbolically: through social imagery, in their political imaginations. They 'see themselves' as one sort of person or another. They imagine themselves as one sort of a person or another. They 'imagine their future' within this scenario or that (ibid.).

This analysis and the example of the Saatchi campaign, illustrates that people do not vote just in terms of how much they have, (their material interests), but in terms of how much they would like to have in some imaginary future scenario. Contrary to Marx, Hall claims 'Material interests, on their own, have no necessary class belongingness' (ibid.). Hall also makes the point that any appeal to 'the 'real experience' of poverty or unemployment or under-privilege' will not necessarily gain votes because these experiences have to be 'ideologically defined' (ibid.). Someone who is unemployed may take this to mean 'you should vote and change the system' or they may interpret the problem more narrowly by taking unemployment as a sign that 'you should throw your fortune in with the breadwinners and look after 'number one'' (ibid.). Hall's account explains why Thatcherism was able to build a 'new social bloc' out of groups which were widely varying 'in terms of their interests and social positions' (ibid.). The Conservatives were able to create 'an image of the new, share-owning working class' and they were able 'to expand the bloc symbolically' around the notion of 'choice' (ibid.). As Harvey points out, 'The imaging of politics by public relations agencies' '... matched the politics of imaging in powerful ways' (1990, p: 348). These comments were made almost thirty years ago but they remain as relevant today, especially in the



light of the 2015 election and the current austerity programme. When times are hard, society becomes more divided and more competitive, as a result, today's politicians are increasingly dependent on the power of the image-producers to win elections.

Thatcher's alternative image of the working class was so successful partly because it harnessed a trend that had begun back in the 1950s when standards of living had gradually started to improve after the Second World War. These material improvements meant that working class people began to identify themselves not so much in terms of occupation but in terms of income: the focus shifted from production to consumption. Actually, this point applies to all the classes except perhaps the old aristocracy. Class, was increasingly being defined in terms of expanded consumer choice and lifestyle by the two main political parties. Having once proudly declared himself 'Old Labour' John Prescott's subsequent claim that 'We're all middle class now' was intended as an appeal to aspirational voters with shifting political allegiances (BBC 2007). This comment reflects what was happening within the Labour Party where the language of meritocracy had replaced 'a more egalitarian politics which insisted that equality itself was an issue that needed to be addressed' (Savage, 2015, p: 398). This statement, coming from a Labour politician, implies that everyone *should* aspire towards social mobility by becoming middle class whilst being working class is something to *escape* from (my emphasis). Fuelled by the idea of aspiration, in my view, a useful term that conveniently disguises the underlying material realities of class differences, the official consensus is that everyone should *take the opportunity* (my emphasis) to become socially mobile by scrambling up the social ladder. The claim that society is meritocratic supports the myth that opportunities are available to everyone who has sufficient motivation to take advantage of them.

In an article written in 2014 for The New Statesman (guest-edited by Grayson Perry) anthropologist Kate Fox provides evidence for the pervasiveness of this consensus view on the desirability of becoming middle class. Fox notes that:

...social mobility has remained static, at best, since the 1970s' and yet, around '...70% of us now call ourselves "middle class", including 55 per cent of those in what market researchers define as C2DE (manual work) occupations' (2014, p: 47).

Fox observes that 'given a choice, 23% of these skilled and unskilled manual workers even reject the modest "lower- middle" category and opt for "middle"' (ibid.). The author suggests that one explanation for these self-identifications is the increase in low ranking jobs in the service sector. As Fox points out, 'call centres are the new coal mines' but as they do not involve the type of manual labour associated with the old industrial working class they can be viewed as 'white collar or pink collar' so even these low paid, menial, precarious and badly paid jobs allow people to see themselves as middle class. As a consequence, many 'low paid, low status workers have been fobbed off with the illusion that they are middle class' (ibid.). Fox highlights the way in which both Labour and the Conservative-led coalition governments have consistently promoted negative messages about what it means to be working class. This relentless negative stereotyping is a phenomenon identified by Owen Jones – the media identification of working class people with 'chavs' (Jones 2011, p: 2). A young hairdresser (an occupation that would otherwise define her as working class) told Fox she did not want to be identified as 'just some lazy chav' (ibid.). As Jones points out, 'chav bashing' is so prevalent that 'This form of class hatred has become an integral, respectable part of modern British culture' (ibid. p: 8). The desire to reject a stigmatized identity makes any basis for working class solidarity difficult, and yet, as Leslie Hanley points out in her recent book *Respectable: The Experience of Class*:

There remains a strong and structured class bias to how people 'get on' which underpins their decisions to embark on the escalator of social mobility, how far they feel entitled to ascend and, of course, whether they can get on it in the first place (Hanley, 2016, p: 185).

What attention to the role of images in the formation of identities serves to highlight is something that is missing from the Marxist account of class-consciousness: namely the role of *affect* in people's consciousness of their class position and in the determination of the political choices they make. Images not only structure the way we think they also influence the way we *feel*, about ourselves and the choices open to us. In his tapestry series *The Vanity of Small Differences* (2012), Perry's aim is to make these structural, affective and symbolic dimensions of consumer class relations visible via his anatomy of taste.

But images are open to reading and interpretation and can be variable and shifting. I will return to this point below. Although these reflections pose problems for Marx's account of ideology, and class consciousness by foregrounding crucial issues of interpretation, image, and affect, in other ways they reinforce Marx's belief that 'The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class' (Marx, 1998, p: 59). In other words, as long as the bourgeoisie are economically dominant their ideas will remain dominant in the legal, political and social spheres. Although Hanley suggests that some people may view 'as insulting and deferential the very idea of climbing a ladder away from their roots towards a supposedly elevated position' (2016, p: 185), the rejection of a working class identity has become increasingly pervasive throughout the later twentieth and the twenty first century. This trend would seem to support Marx's claim.

## **Differences within classes**

A class-based interpretation of British history (founded on Marx's concepts of 'class formation, class identity, class consciousness and class struggle') continued to hold sway throughout the late 1970s (Cannadine, 1998, p: 7). Today, Marx's account has fallen out of favour, partly because of the fall of communism. For many scholars, the demise of the Soviet Union during the late 1980s sounded the final death knell for Marxism as a 'comprehensive intellectual system' that could explain the whole of history and human behaviour (ibid. p: 14). The argument against Marx follows the pattern: 'Communism is dead, therefore Marxism is dead, therefore class is dead' (ibid. p: 14). In the twenty-first century 'class consciousness and class conflict' are no longer seen as key drivers in the progress of history but that does not mean we should reject Marx's three-tier class system. Instead, we should view these categories with caution as 'ideal types, historical abstractions', which attempt to simplify a messy and far more complex social reality (ibid. p: 9).

The labels working, middle and upper classes that are still in use today provided a method for classifying the social divisions that arose during the Industrial Revolution when the first industrial proletariat came into existence. Marx's division of the classes in terms of their relation to the means of production relied on 'shared class characteristics and clear-cut boundaries' which in reality never existed' argues Cannadine (ibid.). People were not necessarily motivated by a desire to identify with workers in the same occupational group but by a desire to ascend the social scale. There was no 'deep and unbridgeable divide between the country house and the counting house' because prosperous middle-class business men were keen to reinvent themselves as 'broad-acred gentlemen' (ibid.). There was often intense competition between 'aristocrats and landed gentry' as they vied for the same markets – another

division that Marx did not consider and there were multiple differentiations within the categories of 'skilled and unskilled labour' (ibid.). Cannadine argues that both during and since Marx's time the number of occupational groups has increased. New groups have emerged to include people like 'rentiers, managers, professionals, domestic servants, and the whole of the lower middle classes' and these occupations cannot be easily accommodated by Marx's three-tier class model (ibid.).

Cannadine contends that the central role that Marx gives to labour is also a problem. For Marx, labour is the unifying activity in the creation of class-consciousness. He cites from the view put forward by the historian E. P. Thompson in which the latter argued that "class eventuates" as 'men and women live their productive relations' (Thompson, 1968, p: 10). Cannadine contends that not only was the organization of work a more complicated topic than Marx had assumed but also life was never only about work 'even for the working class' (1998, p: 10). In *The Making of the English Working Classes* (1968) Thompson argued that:

The class experience is largely determined by the productive relations into which men are born – or enter involuntarily. Class-consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas and institutional forms. If the experience appears as determined, class-consciousness does not (1968, p: 10).

For Thompson, there is a '*logic* in the responses of similar occupational groups undergoing similar experiences, but we cannot predict any *law*' (ibid. italics in original). There is a 'cultural superstructure' through which the 'recognition' of class-consciousness 'dawns in inefficient ways' (ibid.). Thompson emphasizes that 'Class is a relationship, and not a thing' which is shaped by the ideas, aspirations and battles of individuals who are trying to improve their living conditions (ibid. p: 11). For Thompson, it is through these cultural struggles, which are not simply passive responses

to objective (economic) circumstances that ‘Class is defined by men, as they make their own history’ (ibid.). Thompson’s insistence ‘that class was as much a cultural as an economic formation’ (McNally, 1993, p: 7) underlies his refusal to privilege one aspect over the other. Thompson is clear that class relations are ‘always embodied in real people in a real context’ (ibid. p: 9). McNally argues that since the late 1970s, Thompson’s work has been used as a theoretical basis for ‘the anti-materialist currents in social theory ... a trend he would probably have disowned’ (ibid. p: 8). Thompson’s account emphasizes the important role that is played by culture and agency but, as Cannadine points out, it is still the ‘productive relations’ that provide the primary foundation of subjective class experience (1998, p: 10).

Another factor to take into account concerning the relationship between labour and class relations is the role of technology. Marx was writing his *Communist Manifesto* in 1848, at a time when, as noted, the population comprised largely a huge army of wage-paid industrial workers. Nevertheless, the Manifesto is a very accurate description of ‘...massively globalized capitalism’ in its twenty-first century incarnation (Hobsbawm, 1998, p: 18). But Marx’s prediction about the proletariat becoming ‘the leading class of the nation’ was far from accurate, not least because it derived from ‘a philosophical – indeed, an eschatological argument about human nature and destiny’ (ibid. p: 22). However, Marx did correctly envision the move towards the ‘increasingly labourless economy’, which is now a central feature of ‘modern-capital-intensive high-tech production’ (ibid, p: 19).

Harvey (1990) is concerned with how these changes at the level of economic production have changed the role of labour in people’s lives. He observes that since about 1970, ‘...in the transition from Fordism to flexible accumulation’ based on the ‘new entrepreneurialism, something has changed’ in the way capitalism functions

(Harvey, 1990, p: 173). Today capital is both ‘speculative’ and ‘transformative’ argues

Harvey:

Capital is a process and not a thing. It is a process of the reproduction of social life through commodity production, in which all of us in the advanced capitalist world are heavily implicated. Its internalized rules of operation are such as to ensure that it is a dynamic and revolutionary mode of social organization, restlessly and ceaselessly transforming the society within which it is embedded. The process masks and fetishizes, achieves growth through creative destruction, creates new needs and wants, exploits the capacity for human labour and desire, transforms spaces, and speeds up the pace of life (ibid. p: 343).

Post-industrial capitalism is developmentally unpredictable: it is based on ‘...new products, new technologies, new spaces and locations, new labour processes (family labour, factory systems, quality circles, worker participation)’ hence ‘...there are many ways to make a profit’ (ibid. p: 344). As a result, this system appears to offer a ‘seemingly infinite capacity to engender products’ which in turn, ‘feeds all the illusions of freedom and of open paths for personal fulfilment’ (ibid.). As our ‘experience of space and time’ has shifted within these newly configured relations of production:

...aesthetics has triumphed over ethics as a prime focus of social and intellectual concern images dominate narratives, ephemerality and fragmentation take precedence over eternal truths and unified politics, and explanations have shifted from the realm of material and political – economic groundings towards a consideration of autonomous cultural and political practices (ibid. p: 328).

These illusory freedoms offered by post-industrial capitalism support the view that ‘people are free to make their own history’ and, *contra* Marx, they can do so in ways that are compatible with ‘...their values and aspirations, their traditions and norms’ (ibid. p: 344). Harvey argues against the claim that economic determinism is no longer a consideration on two grounds. Firstly, these speculative and entrepreneurial developments have been accompanied by capitalism’s ‘system of mirrors’ ... ‘the

equally speculative development of cultural, political, legal, and ideological values and institutions ...’ (ibid.). Secondly, ‘...profitability, (in either the narrow or broader sense of generating and acquiring new wealth) has long been implicated...’ (ibid.). Whilst there may be nothing inherently ‘predictable’ about how this system develops, one thing is certain, ‘capitalist social relations’ have ‘widened and deepened’ ... ‘with time...’ (ibid.). Virtually every area of cultural life is ‘within the grasp of the cash nexus and the logic of capital accumulation’ (ibid.).

According to Harvey, ‘this system of production and consumption’ creates a strange kind of ‘class relations’ (ibid. p: 347). Harvey contends that what is striking here is that ‘sheer money power’ has become ‘a means of domination rather than direct control over the means of production and wage labour in the classic sense’ (ibid.). In part, these asymmetrical relations of power arise because there is a need to generate:

...cultural creativity and aesthetic ingenuity not only in the production of a cultural artefact but also in its promotion, packaging and transformation into some kind of successful spectacle (ibid.).

Harvey is talking about the idea of an economy based on creative labour rather than productive labour. The creators of cultural artefacts are still producers but the production conditions are very different. Harvey refers to Daniel Bell’s claim that ‘the cultural mass of producers and consumers of cultural artefacts shape attitudes different from those that arise from conditions of wage labour’ (Bell in Harvey 1990, ibid. p: 347). Harvey contends that even when there are huge economic inequalities these conditions do not automatically awaken ‘class consciousness’ but rather ‘demands for individual liberty and entrepreneurial freedom’ (ibid.). For Harvey, one key difference is that ‘This cultural mass adds yet another layer to that amorphous formation known as ‘the middle class’’ (ibid.) which is constantly shifting and fragmenting. Late capitalism



brings together producers who are attracted by the power of money and consumers with money to spend who are looking to acquire 'a certain kind of cultural output as a marker of their own social identity' hence their identities are 'amorphous' (ibid. p: 348). For Harvey 'the politics of the cultural mass' are crucial because they define the 'symbolic order through the production of images for everyone' (ibid.). If one or other class becomes dominant in terms of popular representations, then the 'symbolic and moral order tends to shift' (ibid.).

Harvey argues that during the 1960s with the rise of popular culture, the working-class movement became dominant in the cultural mass. Since the early 1970s there has been a move away from a working class identity based on solidarity that was more often than not based in an industrial work place towards a conception of identity based primarily on self-interest and self-fashioning driven by 'money power, individualism, entrepreneurialism' and so on (ibid.). These developments have contributed to a shift away from the traditional preoccupation with people as collective producers to the alternative notion of people as individual consumers. As Cannadine points out, Thatcher's political speeches 'more positively and predictably' referred to the individual and the consumer: a rhetorical ploy effectively displacing and discrediting 'class and class conflict as the languages and concepts of political discussion' (1998, p: 175). The purpose of production, Thatcher argued was 'to discover what the customer will buy and to produce it'... 'People must be free to choose what they consume in goods and services' (cited in Cannadine, 1998, p: 175). The market economy was not about collective groups of producers it was all about the *power* of consumer choice (my italics). Today, the politics of the cultural mass are overwhelmingly middle class.

These changes in class identity have gone hand in hand with the rise, since the 1960s of the exploration of sources of oppression in society other than class, and the emergence of a socially liberal civil society in which other aspects of inequality have come to the fore. Feminist scholars argued that Marx's concept of class left out women and failed to acknowledge that women's experiences of life and work were not the same as men's experiences. They also pointed out that 'existing tensions and conflicts between the sexes' worked against any notion of class solidarity that women might otherwise experience (Cannadine, 1998, p: 7). Radical politics has diversified to include other marginalised groups. Crucially ethnicity, race, gender, religion, sexual preference, age, and dis/ability have been the basis of social campaigning in addition to class. These different social groupings and identities intersect to yield a complex web of social and individual identifications in which prioritising class difference is an anachronism: a throwback. The claim that 'multiple sources of oppression and multiple foci of resistance to domination' can be identified has been 'imported into the heart of Marxism itself' (Harvey, 1990, p: 47). The 'concern with 'otherness'' (which is a central characteristic of postmodern and poststructuralist discourse) has required a re-appraisal of the Marxist program intended to replace 'universalizing presumptions' with a new vocabulary of terms for reconstructing and representing the voices and experiences of subjects who had been previously marginalized or excluded within it (ibid. p: 48). Perry addresses questions of national identity and diversity in two exhibitions: *Unpopular Culture* 2008 and *Who Are You?* (2014).

### **The linguistic 'turn'**

Alsop, Fitzsimons and Lennon point out:

The widespread attention to difference was one of the spurs to the shift from social theorizing of differences by materialist

accounts, 'things', and towards a concern with 'words' (Barrett 1992 in Alsop, Fitzsimons and Lennon, 2002, p: 79).)

“‘Things’ here refer to women’s position in the [labour] market’ and “‘Words’ refers to the turn to ideology or discursive constructions” (ibid.). According to Alsop, Fitzsimons and Lennon, there was an increasing emphasis placed on evaluating the *meaning* of identity categories. One of the main reasons for this shift was a recognition that [Marxist] accounts had focused on ‘the practices generating social division’ but they failed to accommodate *subjectivity* (2002, p: 79). Marxist accounts did not explain how [class] ‘as an aspect of self-understanding was produced or how this subjective understanding’ crisscrossed with the material and economic divisions he had stressed (ibid.). ‘The role of culture and language is central’ to recognizing class as a process: ‘a structure of subjectivity’ (ibid.). Language and culture serve to constitute people’s subjectivity, their own understanding of themselves. The focus on identity as a ‘process shifts attention to exploration of how meaning is constantly being reproduced and negotiated, and can have unexpected and contradictory effects’ (ibid.). This approach gives us a structure ‘for understanding social change and the way in which individuals, through this process of negotiation with meaning, are constituting their world’ (ibid. pp: 79-80). If the meanings we give are never fixed or closed, then many conflicting and contradictory ways of understanding the world are current at any one time, even within one person. These meanings are open to contest and debate and can vary according to context and over time:

Many narratives ... make evident the complexities and contradictions and changes which individual subjects undergo, as well as the multiple strands which interweave to make up individual identities (ibid. p: 81).

This conceptualisation of gender subjectivity as a site that is multiple, overlapping and contested, could be applied to class and it:

...finds echoes in postmodernist theories which are rejecting notions of a coherent unified self, capable of rational reflection and agency, in favour of a model of a self which is fragmented, constantly in a process of formation, constituting itself out of its own self-understandings (ibid.).

A major challenge to the Marxist view of class, then, comes from the emergence of postmodernism and post structuralism in which the main concern is with questions of identity rather than economics, hence the focus is on the *production of language* (my italics). Class is no longer understood in terms of the relation between ‘land, capital and labour and the political conflicts arising out of them’ (Cannadine, 1998, p: 11) but rather as a discursive construction. On this view, the meaning of any signifier is always discursively and contextually constructed, therefore it can only ever be ‘partial, fragmentary and incomplete’ (ibid.). If our access to ‘reality’ is always mediated through language and meaning is always contested, then the concept class is ‘neither an objective guide to social reality nor to a shared subjective experience’ (ibid.). If social perception is ‘ultimately the product of language’ (and not necessarily ‘the language of class’) there are myriad different ways in which people can explain the social hierarchy to themselves. Cannadine contends:

Thus regarded, the history of all hitherto existing society is no longer the history of class struggles rather, it is the history of a limitless number of ...categorisations and ... social descriptions – of which class is only one among a multitude of competing and frequently changing vocabularies (ibid. p: 12).

The assault on and subsequent demise of Marxism as an instrument of ‘class analysis and practice, *par excellence*’ is taken up in an article by Diana Coole: Is Class the Difference That Makes a Difference? (1996, p: 19). From a poststructuralist

perspective, Marxism constitutes a ‘reductionist and economistic account of social stratification and a class analysis suffused with a grand-narrative privileging of one class’ (ibid.). The binary and antagonistic opposition between proletariat and bourgeoisie is accused of ‘supressing difference’ and failing to capture the complexity of twenty-first century class relations (ibid.). Coole offers Laclau and Mouffe’s description as an illustration of the poststructuralist position on class: significantly, the term class is not used. For Laclau and Mouffe:

Every antagonism, left to itself, is a floating signifier, a ‘wild’ antagonism which does not predetermine the form in which it can be articulated to other elements in the social formation (cited in Coole, 1996, p: 21).

This description uses the idea of mobility and fluidity, which conveys the idea that individuals are themselves free-floating and able to transgress borders of time and space unencumbered by any restrictions of class and location. Coole points out that when Laclau and Mouffe describe the current state of industrial societies they speak of:

...the ‘proliferation of widely different points of rupture’ and the ‘precarious character of all social identity’ resulting in a ‘blurring of frontiers’ and revealing the ‘*constructed*’ character of the demarcating lines’ (ibid.).

Harvey (1990) explains the predominance of postmodern theorizing (which employs highly abstract language in an attempt to capture the complex nature of contemporary experience) with reference to Bell and Touraine’s ‘theses of the passage to a ‘post-industrial’ information-based society’ (Bell & Touraine cited in Harvey, 1990, p: 49). Their thesis ‘situates the rise of postmodern thought in the heart of a dramatic social and political transition in the languages of communication in advanced capitalist societies’ (ibid.). There has been a proliferation of ‘new technologies for the production, dissemination and use of that knowledge as a ‘principal force of

production” (ibid.). Harvey admits that ‘knowledge can now be coded in all kinds of ways, some of which are more accessible than others’ (ibid.). One might describe this situation in terms of the new forms of class polarization that have arisen between the knowledge-rich and the knowledge-poor. In an information society, those at the bottom of the knowledge hierarchy are vulnerable to different kinds of subordination by those at the top. I will return to this topic in the discussion of Perry’s work in Part Two of this thesis.

Harvey cites Derrida’s work as a powerful influence and suggests that what he offers is ‘less a philosophical position than a way of thinking about and ‘reading’ texts’ (ibid.). Harvey contends that for Derrida, all experience can be understood as ‘textual’ in the sense that for both writers and readers of texts, these cultural artefacts are written and read ‘on the basis of all the other texts and words they have encountered’ (ibid.). From this perspective, ‘cultural life is then viewed as a series of texts intersecting with other texts, producing more texts’ and so on ... (ibid.). This ‘inter-textual weaving’ (ibid.) is independent of both producer and consumer because before and after the text leaves its author its meaning is open to multiple re-interpretations and re-inscriptions. For this reason, any attempt to master a text by an author or a reader will always fail. Harvey notes that Derrida cites ‘collage/montage as the primary form of postmodern discourse’ with its ‘inherent heterogeneity’ (ibid. p: 51). Collage/montage has an inherent heterogeneity ‘whether it be in painting, writing or architecture’ or, one might add, tapestry because it:

...stimulates us, the receivers of the text or image, to produce a signification which could be neither univocal nor stable. Both producer and the consumers of ‘texts’ (cultural artefacts) participate in the production and signification of meanings... (ibid.).

For Derrida, ‘each cited element’ in a cultural artefact:

...breaks the continuity or the linearity of the discourse and leads necessarily to a double reading: that of the fragment in perceived in relation to its text of origin; that of the fragment incorporated into a new whole, a different totality. Continuity is given only in ‘the trace’ of the fragment as it moves from production to consumption. The effect is to call into question all the illusions of fixed systems of representation (Foster, 1983, p: 142) (Foster & Derrida cited in Harvey, p: 51).

This does not mean there is nothing outside of the text but rather that our experiences are always textual or rather contextual i.e. mediated by language in a specific context: social, cultural, economic, political and so forth<sup>1</sup>.

However, the mode of thought that underpins many of these assumptions stems from a linguistic model – the idea that differences of all kinds result from the workings of what Derrida calls *différance*. As Coole points out, following this model:

...there would be no positive identities or meanings, but only shifting, open and provisional nodules of unstable sense, caught in a restless play of signifiers in which identity is negatively inscribed through its relations with what it is not (Coole, 1996, p: 20).

Coole argues that if we adhered fully to the logic of this analogy ‘there would be no identities or recognizable differences’ (ibid. p: 20-21). As we cannot dispense with language we are obliged to communicate using ‘a metaphysical symbolic that gives the illusion of stable meaning’ whilst at the same time the workings of *différance* force us

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<sup>1</sup> Whilst Derrida could legitimately be called a poststructuralist his work is not postmodern in the sense that it is not concerned with simply producing multiple readings of texts. Derrida generalizes what was originally a linguistic model in Saussure so that *différance* is not restricted to language but makes its imprint on everything – the worldwide web, the body, institutions, politics, indeed whatever comes to mind. According to Critchley in *The Ethics of Deconstruction* (1992) this is not the claim that all of these things are linguistic but rather that *like* language, all of these structures are marked by the play of differences, by the “spacing” of which *différance* is one of the names. This is why he uses the term trace and not the signifier to indicate a generalized concept of the text. For example, to live and work within an institutionalized setting is to be placed within the differential spacing of the hierarchy. Wherever one is placed within this play of differences will define in advance the power and the voice of the individual in question. Critchley suggests that one definition of deconstruction would be that it is ‘the effort to take this limitless context into account’ (Critchley, 1992, p: 262).

to recognise that our identities are always provisional and open. That is to say, identity is always shifting and subverted by re-inscription and re-contextualization. I am in agreement with Coole's criticisms: when the radical theoretical insights of *différance* are applied to social and political relations, they are hard to grasp. Coole suggests that groups are 'obliged to claim identities' on the basis of this linguistic model 'but ideally they do so in recognition of their open and provisional nature' (ibid. p: 21). In other words, identity is a self-differentiating phenomenon, put plainly, I can claim to be me insofar as I am not you nevertheless I should recognize that the putative 'you' is still part of my claim to an identity. The central claim is that this form of recognition will help to create non-homogeneous social groupings which are not based on oppositional relations of inclusion and exclusion because they recognize what Derrida terms 'this impossibility of being at one with oneself' (Derrida, 1997, p: 14).

### **Derrida's view of class in *Specters of Marx***

In *Specters of Marx* (1994) Derrida addresses the inheritance of Marx without relying on traditional Marxist class politics. He suggests that the form of critical analysis we have inherited from Marxism is that of a 'socio-political antagonism' (Derrida, 1994, p: 55). This antagonistic relation is one in which we should be 'suspicious of the simple opposition of *dominant* and *dominated*' just as we should be wary of 'the final determination of the forces in conflict, or even the idea that force is always stronger than weakness' (ibid. italics in original). However, Derrida contends that it is not 'out of the question' for a selective critique to filter the inheritance of Marx 'so as to keep this rather than that' (ibid.). When referring to the 'critical inheritance' of Marx:

...one may thus, for example, speak of a dominant discourse or of dominant representations or ideas, and refer in this way to a hierarchized and conflictual field without necessarily



subscribing to the concept of social class by means of which Marx so often determined, particularly in *The German Ideology*, the forces that are fighting for control of the hegemony. And even quite simply of the State (ibid.).

Here Derrida is suggesting a selective reading of Marx's text, which remains faithful to 'something that resonates in Marx's appeal – let us say once again the spirit of his injunction' (Marx's call for justice) (ibid.). Derrida is keen to point out that it is not sufficient to read Marx's texts, rather it is necessary to think about how Marx's critique of capitalism can be updated. What is to be done, today, with this legacy of Marxist thought? For Derrida a 'selective critique':

...may continue to speak of domination in a field of forces not only while suspending the reference to this ultimate support that would be the identity and self-identity of a social class, but even while suspending the credit extended to what Marx calls the idea, ideal or ideological representation, indeed even the discursive form of this representation. All the more so since the concept of the idea implies this irreducible genesis of the spectral that we are planning to re-examine here (ibid.).

In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida not only questions the value of traditional class-based party politics he also refuses to concede that Marx's science of historical materialism will ultimately eliminate ideology. In *Marx & Sons* (an essay written in response to his critics in *Ghostly Demarcations*) Derrida argues that during the 1960s the 'the concept and principle of *identification* of social class current in the Marxist discourse' was 'problematic' (1999, p: 236). However, he is quick to point out that this statement should not be read as evidence that he considers the problem of class as 'outdated or irrelevant' (ibid. p: 236). His rethinking of class rests on his contention that the concepts and principles of class identifications have become:

...susceptible of transformation and critical re-elaboration, in a situation in which a certain capitalist modernity 'ruins' the most sensitive defining criterion of class (for example – but a great

deal more needs to be said here about this, for everything is hanging in the balance here – the concepts of labor, worker, proletariat, mode of production, etc.) (ibid.).

One of the key issues here is that technological development produces changes in the economy. Marx's formulation of the capitalist mode of production is now outdated. In *Capital*, Marx attempted to explain how the law of value operated through a movement of abstraction to create value and surplus value by making the worker '...absorb the greatest possible amount of surplus-labour' (Marx, 1978, p: 362). For Marx, 'Capital is dead labour' (hence the theme of spectrality) 'that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks' (ibid. pp: 362-3). The workings of capital have a *spectral* quality because the system transmutes living labour into a product that has exchange value, which becomes surplus value. Surplus value is turned into capital or money. One hundred and fifty years ago the Marxian solution to the inherent exploitation in capitalism consisted in '...the revolt of the industrial working class, re-appropriating those riches produced – in order to reform the productive praxis as well as the subjective, the human one...' (Negri, 1999, p: 7).

Today this response is inadequate because the labour paradigm has changed beyond all recognition. The shift to an information or knowledge-based economy has not only blurred 'the division between intellectual and manual labour' (ibid. p: 8) it also calls into question how we quantify and value such knowledge. Consequently, in relation to the concept of labour '...the postmodern is certainly not just an ideological image, but the recording of a deep and irreversible transformation in which all of the Marxian critiques of value ... stop short' (ibid. p: 8). Negri suggests that *Specters of Marx*, introduces us to a 'new phase of relations in production, to the world of change in

the labour paradigm' ... 'a world where time is no longer a measuring gauge of value, nor use-value its real referent' (ibid.).

In response, Derrida proposes:

...a new theory of spectrality which corresponds with the common experience of the everyday and/or of the masses: the experience of a mobile, flexible, computerized, immaterialized and spectral labour (ibid. p: 9).

It seems important to point out here that not everyone is part of this 'flexible, computerized, mobile immaterial labour force' (ibid.). People still work in appalling conditions in factories in the UK and across the developing world, a point to which Derrida himself draws attention. Derrida defends his reading of Marx by pointing out that Marx called for '*the transformation of his own theses*' in the Manifesto. (Derrida, 1994, p: 13). He claims to be speaking in the 'spirit' of a 'certain Marx' (ibid.) by including in his text not only 'Those specters that appear in Marx's Capital but above all, those specters that give shape to a society unanimously defined as capitalist by political economy and public opinion' (Negri, 1999, p: 6). One of the key arguments in *Specters of Marx* is that with the spread of mass communications technologies we can never eliminate ideology because our access to *reality* (my italics) is increasingly mediated through fictional devices so the line between virtual reality and actual reality (lived experience) cannot be drawn with any certainty<sup>2</sup>. To take account of these technological changes and their effects at the level of both production and social relations, we need to rethink our political concepts and what we mean by them.

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<sup>2</sup> Derrida discusses the way in which sophisticated media technologies have altered our experience of 'reality' (space and time) in an interview held in Paris in 1993 to mark the publication of *Spectres of Marx*. See 'The Deconstruction of Actuality: An Interview with Jacques Derrida in *Deconstruction: A Reader* edited by Martin McQuillan, 2000.

Having abandoned many of the central tenets of Marxist theory and practice, the question of how to facilitate political change becomes a matter of contention between Derrida and his critics. In place of the traditional conception of class Derrida speaks of a 'New International' and he argues that 'the alliance or 'link'' which forms this International can be forged, and indeed is being forged 'without common belonging to a class' (Derrida, 1999, p: 240). This New International is a transnational alliance that 'belongs only to anonymity' (Derrida, 1994, p: 90). Derrida contends that this does not mean 'an absence of class considerations' or the 'neutralization of what used to be called a class' but rather it is an acknowledgement that in light of the current social and economic forces 'we need, it seems to me, more refined analyses' (Derrida, 1999, p: 240). Both Negri (1999) and Jameson (1999) suggest that in jettisoning the traditional concept of class, Derrida has deprived himself of the resources to deal with this most intractable of inequalities. Jameson argues that the denunciation of the concept of class has become 'an obligatory gesture' even amongst Marxists. Class has given way to race, gender and ethnicity, which are seen as somehow 'more satisfactory' or 'more fundamental, prior, concrete, existential experiences' (Jameson, 1999, p: 46). This idea seems to imply that social classes in the old nineteenth century sense no longer exist under the new multinational division of labour, or in the newly automated and cybernetic industries (Jameson, 1999).

However, Jameson argues that class is:

... not at all a primary building block of the most obvious and orthodox ontologies ... but rather in its concrete moments something a good deal more complex, internally conflicted and reflexive than any of those stereotypes (ibid. p: 47).

Jameson also notes, it is unsurprising that 'the system' should have a vested interest in distorting the categories '[whereby we think class and in foregrounding its current rival

conceptualities of gender and race which are far more adaptable to purely liberal ideal solutions' (ibid.). Jameson points out that 'class consciousness' is often over simplified and yet, it is as internally conflicted as the other categories in question, not least because the defining feature of class consciousness is that it revolves around the 'experience of inferiority' (ibid.). Jameson explains this claim by suggesting that the 'lower classes' carry around in their heads 'unconscious convictions' about the superior status of 'hegemonic or ruling class expressions and values' (ibid.). These expressions and values are equally transgressed and repudiated in ways that are 'ritualistic (and socially and politically ineffective)' (ibid.). Jameson contends that hegemonic or ruling class-consciousness also bears within itself:

the fears and anxieties raised by the internalized presence of the under-classes and symbolically acts out what might be called an 'incorporation' of those dangers and class hostilities which are built into the very structure of ruling class consciousness as a defensive response to them (ibid. p: 48).

For Jameson, 'Class is thus, both ongoing social reality and an active component of the social imaginary where it can be seen to inform our various, mostly unconscious or implicit, maps of the world system' (ibid.). The 'internalized binary oppositions' of class assimilate all other 'phenomena to the play of class antagonisms' (ibid. p: 47). As such, these class mappings provide 'inevitable, allegorical grids through which we necessarily read the world' and they are 'structural systems' containing essential components' which 'determine each other and must be read-off and defined against one another' (ibid. p: 48). Jameson contends:

...class categories are not therefore examples of the proper or the autonomous and pure, the self-sufficient operation of origins defined by so-called class affiliations: nothing is more complexly allegorical than the play of class connotations across the whole width and breadth of the social field (ibid. p: 49).

In Jameson's view, although he agrees with Derrida's claim that we cannot view class as an objective category by picking out objective relations untouched by meaning and metaphor, we nonetheless need to retain class as a way of both articulating social relations and as a key feature of the way in which subjectively we make sense of the world and in this I follow him. In this thesis I will be arguing for a conception of class understood as a set of objective material structures and as an aspect of lived subjectivity and identity with affective content.

Jameson, moreover, criticises Derrida for responding to social inequalities in a formal and textual way by arguing that:

...it makes sense to talk about something like an *aesthetic* of the Derridean text: a way of describing the philosophical dilemmas it raises as a kind of 'form problem' whose resolution is sought in a certain set of procedures, or rather, in consonance with all modern art, in a certain set of taboos (ibid. p: 32).

Derrida rejects Jameson's use of the term 'aesthetic' by claiming that what is at stake in his texts is 'not a matter of aesthetics, and even less of the order of some minimalist aesthetic' (1999, p: 248). And he goes on to defend himself by arguing:

At issue is the question of how one writes or argues, of what the norms that apply here are (especially the academic norms). This question is anything but 'aesthetic'; it is particularly, and perhaps above all, political (ibid.).

Derrida's political practice is textual, that is to say, it is a practice of writing. The central concern is with how one writes or argues whilst rejecting all traditional systems of knowledge (all forms of ontology). Derrida claims that he is advocating a certain practice of writing which is radically *transformative* (my emphasis) in the sense that it rejects ontological claims and is vigilant to the openness and indeterminacy of the categories we employ. This is the basis of his claim to be speaking in the "*spirit* of a

*certain Marxism*’ (Derrida, 1994, p: 13) in *Specters of Marx*. According to Critchley, deconstruction is ‘a form of ethical aggravation within a social context’ (2012, p: 12) and he considers that *Specters of Marx* goes a long way towards answering ‘the question of politics, of what justice is, i.e. what should be done in this particular context in this particular time’ (ibid. p: 13). Derrida is drawing our attention to the inherent instability of language and meaning when he argues that the ‘question of politics’ has to be re-defined without recourse to any existing notion of community or the state. However, his central concern is with producing increasingly refined concepts. My own view (accords with both Negri 1999 and Jameson 1999). In dispensing with these categories which, as Critchley admits, ‘form the current horizon for politics even within the European Union’ (2012, p: 17) in favour of an ethical formalism which is ‘context-transcendent’ (ibid.) Derrida actually evades the political question of what constitutes justice in a specific context at a specific time.

### **What Are We To Make of Class in the Light of Such Poststructuralist Moves?**

Cannadine argues that one consequence of the shift in theory towards poststructuralism is that ‘...in British history, class consciousness and class conflict are rejected as the essential motor governing and driving the historical process. Culture now matters more than class’ (1998, p: 15). As an economic category of analysis, class is seen not only as being too reductive on a theoretical level but also it is thought to bear no relation to this new phase in capitalist relations of production and consumption. Cannadine suggests, however, that class understood as economic inequality might well have disappeared from theoretical and political discourse, but that does not mean that it no longer exists as an objective social reality. He points out that class ‘has never existed solely in the head or in the eyes or the words of the beholder. Social reality always keeps breaking in’ (ibid. p: 11).

This is a claim that I will support in this thesis. Through the work of Grayson Perry, I will be exploring how culture and class are interwoven as an objective category and how class is lived subjectively. I am suggesting that Perry's work is a response to the question of how we might articulate conceptions of class following critiques, which have:

1. foregrounded the importance of image and the imaginary, laden as it is with affect, in our understanding of both the social field and our subjective sense of our identities;
2. foregrounded the role of language and meaning in mediating all of our understanding of the world and ourselves so that it no longer is possible to think of our concepts, including the concept of class as simply reflective of an unmediated reality;
3. highlighted the openness and lack of determinacy of such linguistic meanings;
4. highlighted the changing nature of the workings of capital, so that the power relations it wields are often obscured and not open to view, and so the groups which are exploited within it become fragmented;
5. highlighted the multiple dimensions of differences and inequalities between people and
6. shifted attention from the domain of production to the domain of consumption.

As mentioned earlier, Diana Coole's article is an attempt to evaluate our understanding of class following the rise of poststructuralist theory. Coole's argument rests on her claim that the predominance of postmodern and poststructuralist theorizing has given 'hegemonic status' to the discourses of multiple difference and this development has, in turn, led to the eclipse of class. In the list of possible subjectivities 'notably race and gender followed by a whole range of lifestyle and identity diversities, all of which lend



themselves to the more cultural focus' class has often been the least discussed (Coole, 1996, p: 17). While this omission might lead one to believe that class is no longer a significant difference, there is an abundance of statistical evidence, which testifies to 'the intransigence and even enhancement of class differences across the industrialized world' (ibid.).

In a challenge to the poststructuralist orthodoxy Coole offers the following definition of class:

*Class refers primarily to material differences between groups of persons, where these differences are stable over time and reproduced within a group whose membership is relatively stable (i.e. it is not like a bus, a container for different individuals who simply pass through it). Material differences include measurable indices that can be summarized as life chances (income and wealth, job security, mortality rates etc.) In addition, although less crucially, these material differences sometimes correspond with cultural differences: values, perspectives, practices, self-identity. But the major phenomenon with which I want to associate class is that of structured economic inequality' (ibid. italics in original).*

Coole's aim is to reintroduce class as an economic category but she guards against accusations of determinism by stating it cannot be assumed that there is any necessary relation between a person's class background and their values, perspectives, practices and self-identity. This is a problematic aspect of her thought, of which more below. As we shall see in this thesis Perry's work explores exactly these links. What Coole does assume, is that there is a stable relation between class and material differences and on this point I agree with her. Poverty is a class issue. Poverty is indeed a problem of gender and ethnicity and ability and aging, and these aspects need highlighting, but these other axes of difference can be highlighted only as far as they intersect with class.

Coole points out that throughout the 1980s inequalities widened, not only in Britain but also in 'New Zealand, Sweden, Japan, West Germany and the United States' (Guardian, 10 February, 1995, p: 7 cited in Coole, 1996, p: 24). These indicators reveal that during the period of its discursive eclipse, 'the material indicators' of class were becoming 'more pronounced' (ibid, p: 17). Coole points to the fact that a Rowntree Inquiry into Wealth and Income (1995) indicated an increasing gulf 'between rich and poor in Britain where since 1977 the proportion of the population with less than half the average income has trebled' (ibid.). These reports and statistics reveal that our individuality and personal life chances are shaped – limited or enhanced – by the economic and social class in which we have grown up and in which many of us still exist as adults. All of which suggests that class is far from being an insignificant or redundant category of analysis. Coole argues that 'The decentring of class and of the materialist approach it involved' has rendered economic inequalities 'largely invisible or at least mute and marginal' (ibid. p: 19). Coole is right to point out that in the desire to move away from the restrictions of old left politics (most notably as represented by the communist parties and 'orthodox' Marxism) the New Left regarded itself as *a cultural as well as a political-economic force* (Coole, 1996). The intersection of culture with socio economic positioning, and therefore with class is, I shall suggest, the key to exploring the work of Grayson Perry which is the focus of this thesis, but it is not quoted with approval by Coole.

Coole notes that at a theoretical level the Marxist conception of class as an oppositional and binary division 'between proletariat and bourgeoisie' has given way 'in (non-Marxist) literature' to more differentiated measures such as employment (i.e. the division of the population into A, B, C1, C2, D and E.). This type of survey is determines 'class-based *attitudes* (that is cultural diversity) such as voting or product

preference' (ibid. p: 18). On this model, the population is distributed according to '*sheer difference*' that does not convey 'any political implications of conflict or hierarchy' but rather it suggests that class is determined solely by consumer and lifestyle choices (ibid.). Coole identifies two distinct groups as having a special claim to being recognized as suffering class inequalities under the status quo: the 'underclass' which makes up the one third or poor and the 'working class' as heir to 'anti-capitalist struggles for equality and non-exploitative labour' (ibid.). Coole sees the development of an underclass as a phenomenon closely linked to a decline in the traditional working class. The underclass includes the unemployed, or those without steady jobs, lone parents, 'pensioners', those with disabilities, along with 'ex-service personnel, young people and certain ethnic minorities' (ibid.). For these individuals, poverty results in 'a deficit of objective life chances' which means that it effectively 'cuts across other differences' such as gender and race 'to render the underclass a marginalized and virtually disenfranchised group' (ibid.). The poverty that results from this economic and social exclusion is notable for its lack of change rather than its fluidity. The division between an underclass and the rest of society ranked in terms of 'productive employment or its lack' is not the same as the division that existed between 'working class and middle class which depended on a person's role *within* production' but level of income is important here (ibid.). The lowest ranks of the working class overlap with the underclass when wages are minimal and the work is not reliable. (Zero hour contracts would be a contemporary manifestation of this type of employment).

### **Identity and difference**

Coole accepts that class is 'the site of multiple antagonisms' (cross-cut by other relations of difference) but her central argument is that class membership remains '... fairly stable in terms of economic indicators' (ibid. p: 23). Class identities are

overlapping and multiple which might make their boundaries and distinctions more difficult to locate in terms of self-identity, but class itself (i.e. class understood in terms of structured economic inequalities) cannot be understood as either 'simple diversity or a mosaic of incommensurable but equally valuable differences' (ibid.). I agree with Coole that class is rooted in hierarchical relations of inequality and not in horizontal distinctions between different but equal types. Economic inequality is always patterned on a horizontal 'scale of more and less' (ibid. p: 22). Regardless of where individuals are positioned on this vertical scale, it is generally acknowledged that within a free market economy it is preferable to be at the top rather than the bottom. Aside from its objective material deprivation, Coole acknowledges that class is discursively constructed. The underclass is frequently represented as the 'antithesis of respectable, hard-working society', not least because it is seen as 'outside of any normalizing regime' (ibid.). She points out that even Marx describes the underclass imagined as 'The dangerous class, the social scum passively thrown off by the lowest layers of the old society ...' (Marx, 1998, p: 48).

An acknowledgement of the structural features of this situation and the barriers caused by poverty makes it clear that these features cannot be overcome simply by re-imaginings or destabilizations of the categories in terms of which we understand them. Class relations are positions 'allocated within a single economy where there are complex structural relations which tend to operate a zero-sum game', in other words, there can only be 'winners and losers, not an agonistic jousting game' (Coole, 1996, p: 22). It is not simply that rich and poor belong to distinct groups but rather that the system requires a division in which 'the gains of the better-off are often made at the expense of the worse-off' (ibid.).

## **Concluding Comments**

Many of the key points that Coole makes above are accepted in the use that this thesis makes of the concept of class, particularly the stress on class as having anchorage in objective material relations which are hierarchical and in which the poverty of those at the bottom of the hierarchy structures and constrains their life chances. But there are further points to be recognised to accommodate the lessons which we have learnt from the critiques of Marxism, articulated above. My thesis is concerned to recognise that our understanding of what Coole terms the underclass and the current working class, and indeed a division into those two categories, is informed by the images and discursive meanings which society as a whole, and those who are so categorised, attach to these terms. While articulating the reality of class, Coole recognizes that the depiction is nonetheless informed by its discursive construction. In current political discourse, it is hard working families or individuals versus the benefit scroungers who are the modern incarnation of this threat to respectable society.

We find in Coole's work an insistence that although our understanding of reality is mediated through discourse, this discourse must remain accountable to a real outside of itself, which cannot be modified simply by processes of destabilisation and parody of the key categories in terms of which we understand it. This accountability is an aspect endorsed in the account of class used here. Poststructuralism claims meaning as constructed and not objectively given. That is to say, although the existence of things is independent of language they have meaning only as in so far as they are discursively

apprehended. Coole claims that class is a difficult difference for poststructuralist discourses to accommodate not least because:

...even if it is pared down to no more than an economic index of structured economic inequality, this implies that: 1) there is a reality which can be represented objectively; 2) this reality exists regardless of our discursive ability to articulate it; 3) its discursive representation should be evaluated according to how adequately it represents the real; 4) there is therefore an independent reality to be excavated from beneath appearances; and in principle all could agree on the evidence regardless of their positioning or politics (ibid. p: 23).

Coole contends that consequently 'class cannot be reduced to surface inscriptions of ritual and repetition, and it cannot be subverted by parody' (ibid.). Class cannot be destabilized by upsetting the meanings and images that are associated with it, although this too might be an important process. There is however a key aspect of class, which is missing from Coole's analysis: namely a sense of class as culture, class as a feature of the lived experience of those living in the social fields she describes. Coole acknowledges that class is never 'an autonomous difference' but nevertheless she views class solely as a question of objective economic position rather than as an internalized component of the social imaginary where it is inextricably intertwined with culture and identity (Savage 2015). These are aspects of class which I address in Chapter Three with the help of Bourdieu, and which the thesis as a whole explores through the work of Perry.

Coole points out that Marx began 'not with some abstract post-Cartesian ego but real, sensuous embodied persons with basic needs' (1996, p: 24). This thesis will present Perry as an artist who begins from the same starting point. He is an astute observer of contemporary society who recognises the fragmentation, change and ephemerality of the postmodernist aesthetic but his art is not a self-referencing construct. Perry presents us with a way of seeing ourselves (a kind of mirror of society)

because his art is accountable to a reality beyond itself, is recognized by his subjects, and acknowledges his own working class roots. It is a body of work which this thesis will suggest is centrally concerned with the realities of class as an intertwined phenomenon of economic positioning and culture, in the sense of cultural articulation, and culture as the texture of everyday life. In Chapter Two I shall be looking more closely at the models of society which the language of class and other languages ‘articulate and bring to life’ (Cannadine, 1998, p: 166).

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## Chapter Two: Changing Models of Class in Britain

The previous chapter discussed the ways in which class has been theorised. In this chapter, I look at the way in which class has been imaged/imagined in both the popular and political imaginary, and at how these ideas about class have framed political policy and shaped how people understand their position in society. These social imaginaries of class provide an important context for the discussion of Perry, for his work makes use of and reinvents the models that I will describe here. They are evident in *the Vanity of Small Differences* (see Chapter Seven) which is a key focus of attention in this thesis, but also in *Unpopular Culture* and many of his pots (see discussion in Chapters Four and Five). Perry's work charts the changing models of class in operation after the Second World War and the way in which these began to fragment with the development of mass consumerism. In spelling out the development of these conceptual models and the historical shifts, I am particularly indebted to the work of historian David Cannadine.

On Cannadine's account, the term British includes the four nations of England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales. He points out that for much of the last three hundred years Britain was an imperial power with a larger identity as Great Britain with 'British-spawned nations across the seas ... which both mirrored and distorted the social structure of the homeland' (Cannadine, 1998, p: 18). Whilst these British communities might be geographically scattered nevertheless it is still possible to identify 'three very different yet equally plausible accounts of the same contemporary social world' (ibid. p: 19). Cannadine's work provides new insights by focusing on how class is conceptualized and how these ideas have changed over time. His central argument is that:



...class is best understood as being what culture does to inequality and social structure: investing the many anonymous individuals and unfathomable collectivities in society with shape and significance, by moulding our perceptions of the unequal social world we live in (ibid. p: 188).

The structural aspects of class such as ‘numbers, occupation, wealth and location’ are continually changing and evolving over time but class is not just a structural feature it ‘is also a matter of politics and perceptions, rhetoric and language, feeling and sentiment’ (ibid.). As a result:

...the meaning of social structure is disputed, not so much in terms of language, as in terms of the different models of it that are employed by different people at different times for different purposes (ibid.).

For Cannadine, it is not language that is the ‘real issue’ but rather the models of society the language of class and other languages ‘articulate and bring to life’ (ibid. p: 166). His central claim is that over the last three hundred years ‘British society has been observed and imagined, envisaged and understood’ by most of its population using three basic models of class:

...the hierarchical view of society as a seamless web; the triadic version with upper, middle and lower collective groups; and the dichotomous, adversarial picture, where society is sundered between ‘us’ and ‘them’ (ibid. p: 19-20).

### **Class as hierarchy**

These three conceptual models have provided Britons with what Jameson refers to as our ‘mostly unconscious or implicit, maps of the world system’ (Jameson, 1999, p: 48). Historically, British society has always been highly stratified and one of the earliest models of social stratification is hierarchy. In a hierarchically ordered society all living things are seen as linked together in a seamless web that is ‘providentially ordained,

hierarchically ordered and organically interconnected' (Cannadine, 1998, p: 25-26).

This view of the social order dates back to the middle ages when 'all sorts and conditions of men' occupied a 'pre-assigned position' on the social scale. This idea of social stratification was generally held by 'monarchs, aristocrats, courtiers, heralds, lawyers, clergy and scholars – those who enjoyed prestige and wielded power' (ibid. p: 26). And it was shared by most citizens as the 'time-honoured and authoritative way of seeing their world, and of understanding their place within it' (ibid.). During the Tudor and early Stuart periods, the metaphor most commonly used to describe this 'social taxonomy' was the Great Chain of Being (ibid.).

The Great Chain of Being was a popular perception that carried over into the Hanoverian period during which time English society was divided into:

...the five different ranks of titled nobility down to baronets, knights, esquires, gentlemen, leading citizens and professionals, to yeomen husbandmen and artisans, and so finally to cottagers, labourers, servants and paupers (ibid.).

For those at the top of society, this elaborate system of social divisions provided 'what they regarded as an objective account of their world and their place in it' (ibid.).

Everyone had an allotted place that was of equal importance in the grand design but this equality did not automatically extend to power, wealth or status in earthly terms.

Metaphors such as the Great Chain of Being fulfilled a twofold purpose by explaining and justifying social inequalities, often by an appeal to the concept of original sin. From the angels to the lowliest creatures everything was in the order 'which it has pleased God to allot them' (ibid.). The resulting inequalities were seen as irrefutable. This perception was widely held and it governed how people behaved and how they graded themselves and others. Cannadine cites the writer Soame Jenyns (1790) for whom existed, a 'wonderful Chain of Beings; ... from the senseless clod to the brightest

Genius of Human Kind' (Jenyns, 1790, p: 179). Here the divinely ordered ranks have been are recast in the secular form of 'a traditional, agrarian society, ordered, immutable' (Cannadine, 1998, p: 27). It is the presumed 'immutability' of such social and economic inequalities that Marx challenges in *Capital* (1867).

Cannadine points out that these 'vernacular descriptions' were frequently expressed using the terminology of 'order, rank, station, degree, or estate' (ibid.). During the eighteenth century the 'word class: *class as hierarchy*' was also used but at this time 'it carried no connotations of collective social categories or shared group identities, still less of deeply rooted social antagonisms' (ibid. italics in original). This categorisation simply meant an allotted place in the social order based on prestige. Cannadine points to the historian George Watson (1973) who observed that this idea of rank and hierarchy was very illuminating when applied to the 'models and languages' that were being used to describe class during the Victorian period. According to Watson (1973) the Victorians and the Hanoverians shared similar views about rank and hierarchy. During the Industrial Revolution, the idea of rank and hierarchy as somehow immutable and pre-ordained became a useful tool for justifying the huge inequalities between the industrial working class and the increasingly prosperous middle class.

Cannadine cautions that this view of eighteenth century England as a hierarchy in which everybody occupied a position in a linear ladder is compelling but nevertheless it was 'indeed an image' (1998, p: 28). As a guide to the reality of social relations, this vernacular model became increasingly unreliable the further down the social scale it was applied: it viewed society as individualistic not collective, it was based on inherited rank, it did not allow for 'social mobility' and it did not include 'non-rural life' and 'non-rural professions' (ibid.). In reality, the actual social ordering was far too complicated to be analysed in terms of a single criterion. Cannadine also acknowledges

that there is disagreement amongst historians about whether these ‘eighteenth century social worlds’ should be seen as ‘narrowly English’ or part of a more broadly imperial British world which included ‘not only Wales, Scotland and Ireland, but also the eastern seaboard of North America and large parts of the Caribbean’ (ibid. p: 25).

The historian Penelope Corfield notes that as the population of England increased during the eighteenth century there developed an increasing awareness of ‘social mutability’ which was frequently expressed in ‘generalized terms such as ‘innovations in dress and deportment, ‘externals’ that were of significance for rapid social assessment in an emergent mass society’ (Corfield, 1991, p: 105). These ‘difficulties in social recognition led to a much attenuated public expression of inter-personal deference’ (ibid. p: 106). The exaggerated mannerisms of eighteenth-century society are satirized in Hogarth’s famous series of paintings *A Rake’s Progress* (1733) which is the historical reference point for Perry in *The Vanity of Small Differences*. Corfield suggests that as the economy diversified various opportunities for ‘advancement’ emerged such as ‘trade, commercial services (especially banking), some professions, government, and, increasingly industry’ (ibid.). This rapidly growing economy encouraged an increasing sense of ‘social competitiveness’ and an increasing interest in money (ibid. p: 106-7). As Corfield points out, ‘land and landed titles retained a considerable allure as well as affluence’ but the idea of the ‘gentleman’ had already begun its famous social peregrination, losing its connotation of ‘gentle’ birth and ‘idle’ living’ (ibid. p: 107). The broader distribution of wealth sparked moral concerns over a population that was becoming ‘besotted by ‘luxury’’ (ibid.). Corfield states that the eighteenth century marked the point at which ‘the gulf between rich and poor was filled by the increasingly numerous and socially visible ‘middling’ interests (ibid.).

Historically various attempts had been made to map these changes in occupational structure by adding a small number of ‘collective categories’ to replace the ‘innumerable gradations of individual placings’ in the hierarchical model (Cannadine, 1998, p: 28). In the mid-eighteenth century, Joseph Massie proposed a seven-tier classification: ‘(noblemen or gentleman’ to labourers and husbandsmen)’ (Mathias, 1979, cited in Cannadine, 1998, p 28). In light of these rapid changes in occupational structures, another model was needed to create a less complex system of social stratification.

### **The three-tier model of class**

During the eighteenth century, a second way in which the English saw their society was as broken up into three collective groups. Cannadine points out that as with the hierarchical model, there were many precedents including Aristotle’s ‘virtuous social middle’ moderating between two extremes thereby holding society together (ibid. p: 29). Another historical precedent is the three-tier medieval estate in which individuals were categorised as ‘those who prayed, those who fought, and those who worked’ (ibid.). By the second half of the eighteenth century, the three medieval orders had been replaced by the secular collectives of ‘sorts’ or ‘ranks’ words which are also used in the hierarchical model (ibid.). By the 1750s Defoe had modified his seven-tier classification in favour of ‘the ‘labouring sort’ the ‘middling sort’ and the ‘landowning sort’’ (Defoe cited in Cannadine, 1998, p: 29.). As with the hierarchical model, Cannadine cautions that these ‘idealised divisions’ are attempts at imposing order on a messy and more complex reality (ibid.). By the latter part of the eighteenth century, the ‘triadic’ picture of Hanoverian England was described using the vocabulary of ‘ranks or sorts’ whilst at the same time it was being articulated in class terms (ibid.). During this

period the words ‘rank’ and ‘class’ are being deployed in both the hierarchical model and the three-tier model (ibid.).

### **Them and us: the oppositional model of class**

Cannadine suggests that ‘an even more simplified model of English society’ has been in existence since medieval times (ibid. p: 30). This two-tier model was based on:

... one single, deep division, in which people were polarised between high and low, the few and the many, gentlemen and non-gentlemen, superior and inferior, polite and common, learned and ignorant, rich and poor, nobility and commoner, ‘laced waistcoats’ and ‘leather aprons’ and so on (ibid.).

The above quotation reveals that many different criteria can be used to divide societies into two opposing sections. If these divisions use an economic criterion, the distinctions might be between ‘those who were increasing the wealth of the nation’ and ‘those who were lessening it’ (ibid.). If the distinction is based on ‘prestige’ the world might be divided into ‘the nobility and the gentry’ and ‘multitudes of people of low life’ (ibid.). If the criterion is religion, then the world might be divided into ‘the saved and the damned’ in which the battle is between flesh and spirit as a moral dilemma (ibid.). In whichever way these divisions are imagined, the result is ‘a powerfully adversarial model of a deeply riven society’ (ibid.) that is not bonded together by either a ranked hierarchy or a middle class to bridge the gulf that exists between those at the bottom and those at the top. This idea of a world divided into the oppositional terminology of ‘them’ and ‘us’ is a recurring motif in Perry’s pots.

By the second half of the eighteenth century, as with the hierarchical and the three-tier conceptualisations, class-based terminology was also used in the oppositional model. Cannadine cites Cesar de Saussure’s division of the population which was based on: ‘the lower classes’, who he claimed got drunk in the daytime on liquor and beer,

and ‘the higher classes’ who he thought preferred to get drunk at night on port and punch’ (de Saussure cited in Cannadine, 1998, p: 31). In de Saussure’s somewhat tongue-in-cheek example, it is not the behaviour of individuals that provides the criterion for social stratification but rather the taste preferences of the drinker. The hierarchical, the triadic and the dichotomous models outlined above provided the ‘three basic vernacular models’ that were used to describe social stratification during the eighteenth century (ibid.). Again, it is important to stress, that these models are ideal types.

### **‘The boundless chaos of living speech’**

Cannadine suggests that the range of different vocabularies used across all three models support Dr Johnson’s ‘lament’ in his Preface to *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) in which the latter refers to ‘the boundless chaos of living speech’ (Cohen, 1977, p: 92). As a lexicographer, he was lamenting the fact that new words entered the lexicon so quickly and so randomly that his *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) could not keep pace. Another word that was in more frequent use was class. Cannadine suggests that Dr Johnson’s *Dictionary* identifies two meanings of class: ‘one individualist and hierarchical, the other collective’ (1998, p: 31). Dr Johnson’s primary definition of ‘class’ was ‘rank or order of persons’ but he also recognized class as ‘a set of beings or things, a number arranged in distribution, under some common denomination’ (ibid.). The foregoing account reveals that it would be a mistake to assume that these conceptual models were in use exclusively simply because they relied on different criteria to describe the same social inequalities. The mood of the times was characterised by innovation and change (Corfield 1991), which was being reflected by linguistic practices. As a result, the vocabulary of class was in such widespread and indiscriminate use during the eighteenth century that it was impossible

to deduce simply from the word itself the model of class to which it referred (Cannadine 1998).

### **Contemporary models of class**

Cannadine contends that the three ‘vernacular’ models outlined above are still informing how we think about class. (ibid. p: 20). According to the sociologist George Marshall:

...the class-consciousness of the majority of people is characterised by its complexity, ambivalence and occasional contradictions. It does not reflect a rigorously consistent interpretation of the world (Marshall, *et al.* 1988, p: 187).

The terminology of ‘rank, station, order and degree’ associated with hierarchy is also used to describe bipartite and tripartite societies. Similarly, the language of class generally associated with collective categories and identities has applied to all three models including hierarchy – a practice that continues today. When people talk about class, they might be referring to any one of the three available models. For example, when politicians talk about a ‘classless’ society do they want to abolish hierarchies, eliminate the divisions between upper, middle and lower or dispense with the binary divide between ‘us and them’? As Cannadine points out, the language alone cannot tell us, but what it does tell us is that a ‘complex and contingent’ relation exists between ‘social vocabularies and social identities’ (1998, p: 166). This point is discussed in detail in Chapter Four with reference to Perry’s triptych of pots entitled ‘*them and us*’ (2001). Thus, the history of class is not ‘the history of class struggles as classes come into being and do battle with each other. Nor is it the history of multiple and overlapping social subjectivities constituted by language’ (ibid. p: 20). Rather, it should be understood as the history of our changing perceptions about class:



...a history of the three different ways in which, across the centuries, most Britons have visualised their society: the history of three models of social description which are often, but not always expressed in the language of class (ibid.).

As noted, these models do not provide us with ‘real social knowledge’, rather they are ‘imagined constructions’ or ‘rhetorical devices’ (ibid. p: 165). Each of the conceptual models ‘carries with it an implicit temporal dynamic and perspective which is part of its appeal’ (ibid. p: 170). Hierarchy presents ‘a backward-looking picture of an ideal way of ordering the world, which needs to be preserved or restored’ whereas the two-tier model is often concerned with social improvement: ‘how society *might be*, perhaps for the better’ for those of a revolutionary persuasion (ibid.). The three-tier model ‘tends to be about how society *is*: especially when viewed as is usual, from the vantage point of those in the middle’ (ibid.). This will be an especially important point in relation to Perry’s series of tapestries: *The Vanity of Small Differences*.

Cannadine contends that since the eighteenth century, it is class as hierarchy that has exerted the most powerful and enduring hold on the popular imagination. The history of modern British society will make little sense to us unless we acknowledge the ongoing ‘existence of hierarchy’ as the pre-eminent model (ibid. p: 167). During times when hierarchy has held less appeal, one or other of the two models comes to the fore. Cannadine cautions that it would be a mistake to believe that the emergence of ‘class distinctions’ based on collective classes in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had somehow abolished the traditional hierarchy because ‘class, like rank, often meant hierarchy’ and it continues to hold this meaning today (ibid. p: 166).

Cannadine suggests that the enduring power of hierarchy can be explained partly by the existence of the British monarchy which sits at the top of the hereditary peerage: an ‘elaborate, formal system of rank and prestige’ (ibid. p: 22). The persistence of

hierarchy can also be explained by the fact that a person's class status is determined by multiple factors including 'ancestry, accent, education, deportment, mode of dress, patterns of recreation, type of housing and style of life' (ibid.). These 'signs and signals' make it possible for us to place ourselves and others in certain social categories (ibid.). The British class system comprises 'these formal and informal hierarchies of prestige and status' (ibid.) hence it is a far more intricate social classification than the two or three-tier models.

Whilst all human societies employ some form of social ranking it is certainly true that there has been far less evidence of class consciousness and class conflict than Marx 'erroneously' predicted (ibid. p: 23). There may be scant historical evidence of the revolutionary fervour that Marx so confidently foretold nevertheless the British are always preoccupied with thinking about social class. Whilst there have been widespread disagreements over the meaning of class, these conflicting opinions have always taken place 'within very limited parameters and perspectives, and they have often and increasingly been articulated in class terms and class terminology' (ibid.). As a result, it would be mistaken to assert that class has disappeared, on the contrary, Cannadine argues:

...there has been a great deal of *consciousness of class* as social description and social identity: most usually of class as hierarchy; sometimes of class as 'upper', 'middle' and lower; on other occasions of class merely as 'upper' and 'lower' (ibid.).

Class has been neither, the 'essence of history' as Marx asserted nor the 'perversion of history' as Thatcher claimed. For Cannadine, the history of class lies in the relationship between changes in popular perceptions of class and changes in British society itself.

To understand class in modern Britain, the focus needs to be on the 'evolving

relationship between these social perceptions and social structures' (ibid.). I will suggest in this thesis that this relationship is exactly what Perry's work brings to light.

### **The Great British Class Survey 2011**

*Social Class in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (2015) by Professor Mike Savage is the most recent attempt to evaluate class in the light of these economic, political and social changes. The book is linked to the Great British Class Survey, which began as a web survey by the BBC in 2011. Savage and his team downloaded the first set of results in April 2011 and 'spent nearly two years trying to make sense of its patterns' (Savage, 2015, p: 5). In April 2013 the team produced a new sociological model of class based on a seven-tier classification. The book was written in response to the fact that 'In the first quarter of the twenty-first century, inequality is firmly back in the public eye' (ibid. p: 3). Our society is 'more affluent' and yet 'longstanding problems such as poverty appear to be getting worse' (ibid.). The Great British Class Survey 'provoked astonishing interest across the globe' (ibid. p: 5). Over 161, 000 individuals responded to the survey which included 'a battery of arcane questions on their leisure interests, cultural tastes, social networks and economic situation' (ibid.). As Savage points out 'People in Britain are aware of, interested in and also upset about class' (ibid. p: 6).

According to Savage, social divisions have widened and 'the traditional language of class still pervades public affairs, shapes political thinking and influences our personal careers' (ibid. p: 25). Yet, people were very ambivalent about claiming any particular class identity. He agrees with Cannadine (1998) that the distinctions between the 'upper, middle and working class' have never 'been straightforward' or unchallenged (ibid. p: 26). 'Nonetheless ... in Britain, there has been an enduring preoccupation with the centrality of the boundary between middle and working class

over the past two centuries' (ibid.). The upper classes with their 'aristocratic affiliations' are not caught up in these tensions because they exist as a 'special group' set apart from everyone else, 'defined by their privileges of birth and with their own rules and etiquette' (ibid.). But 'the terms in which the working classes and the middle classes come to understand themselves are more fluid and contested' (ibid.). The historic expansion of the middle classes and the uncertainty over what it means to be either working or middle class has turned these identities into 'potent symbolic and cultural forces' (ibid.).

Savage argues that we must understand 'the proliferation of cultural markers of class ... if we want to understand class today' (ibid. p: 44). The author used a theory first developed by Bourdieu in 1984 to argue that:

...classes are indeed being fundamentally remade ... we have moved towards a class order which is more hierarchical in differentiating the top (which we call the 'wealth elite') from the bottom ('which we call the precariat' (ibid. p: 4).

Savage contends that a new social order has arisen:

...from the concentration of three distinctive kinds of capital: economic capital (your wealth and income); cultural capital (your tastes, interests and activities), and social capital (your social networks, friendships and associations) (ibid.).

Bourdieu's theory made it possible for the authors to avoid seeing class as a phenomenon only associated with the old stereotyped industrial occupational groupings. On the basis of Bourdieu's three-dimensional analysis of capital Savage has produced a highly differentiated seven-tier model of class which aims to connect economic inequalities to the social and cultural differences embedded in our social structure (Savage, 2015).

- Elite – the most privileged group in society, distinct from the six other classes through its wealth. This group has the highest levels of all three capitals.
- Established middle class – the second wealthiest, scoring highly on all three capitals. The largest and most gregarious group scoring second highest for cultural capital.
- Technical middle class – a small distinctive new class group which is prosperous but scores low for social and cultural capital. Distinguished by its social isolation and cultural apathy.
- New affluent workers – a young class group which is socially and culturally active, with middling levels of economic capital
- Traditional working class – scores low on all forms of capital but is not completely deprived. Its members have reasonably high house values, explained by this group having the oldest average age at 66.
- Emergent service workers – a new, young, urban group which is relatively poor but has high social and cultural capital
- Precariat, or precarious proletariat – the poorest, most deprived class, scoring low for social and cultural capital (ibid. p: 174).

Savage points out that ‘within a week seven million people – roughly one in five of the British adult population’ had visited the online Class Calculator to check which social class they were in (ibid. p: 6). These staggering numbers prove that ‘social class is now a very popular force in the popular imagination’ (ibid.). So powerful, in fact, that Savage was ‘deluged’ by email complaints from people who thought they had been placed in the ‘wrong class’ (Savage, 2013). Above all, the Great British Class survey

reveals that ‘far from being a classless society, as Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair both claimed some years ago, we have seen the reworking and consolidation of new kinds of class inequality’ (Savage, 2013).

This new model enables us to see how ‘a more hierarchical class order has arisen, in which ‘the wealth elite stands clearly above the rest’ (Savage, 2015, p: 20). Whilst at the opposite end of the scale, the precariat consists of people who have barely enough resources to sustain them on a day-to-day basis. Burgeoning economic inequalities are undoubtedly central to shaping the lives of individuals, as Savage points out, these ‘...economic divisions stamp themselves decisively in people’s identities. However, the way they do this is complex ...’ (ibid. p: 64). Savage regards economic inequality as a central feature of class but he points out that ‘people were hesitant about identifying themselves economically...’ (ibid.). In part, this reluctance to think of class as an economic category is due to the factors highlighted in Chapter One which explains how the politics of difference has effectively displaced the politics of class.

In addition, the language of meritocracy has encouraged the belief that Britain is a socially mobile society in which a person’s life prospects are not determined by the circumstances of their birth. The dominant message from politicians of all parties is that individuals can achieve social mobility (improve their economic and social status) through hard work and determination fuelled by *aspiration*. At the same time, there has been a widespread acceptance (across all political parties) of the fact that inequalities are an inherent feature of a capitalist system. As a result, greater *equality of opportunity* is seen as more important than an equal distribution of wealth and income. Within the Labour Party this ‘meritocratic ethos’ supplanted ‘a more egalitarian politics which insisted that equality itself was an issue that needed to be addressed’ (ibid. p: 398).

According to Lesley Hanley, New Labour policy was underpinned by the ‘Third Way – a sort of anti-ideology ideology’ which offered a vision of the future ‘as a fantasy compendium of unlimited choice that could be unleashed subject to the removal of a few pesky socio-economic barriers’ (Hanley, 2016, p: 162). Hanley notes that New Labour encouraged ‘a sense of diversity of opportunity’ (ibid.) which ‘perhaps encouraged a sense of agency’ (ibid.). Not everyone saw this as a positive thing, because it condemned people to be the ‘authors of their own lives’ according to sociologist Ulrich Beck (Beck cited in Hanley, ibid.). Within this discursive political framework, it is not surprising to find the idea of class operating as a ‘highly-loaded moral signifier’ not least because it ‘contaminated cherished notions of meritocracy, openness and individuality’ (Savage, 2015, p: 375). Respondents preferred to claim that they were not part of the class system’ by emphasizing their ‘ordinariness’ (ibid.). The idea of class belongingness as a structural position/location was rejected as too deterministic: ‘by being ordinary they could assert their autonomy, their control over their lives’ (ibid.). As this thesis will argue, aspiration and social mobility provide a smokescreen which obscures the fact that the idea of ‘being in control’ makes little sense if individuals lack the material resources to make such agency possible. Savage found that the significance of class was being denied while at the same time the idea of class was ever-present in people’s minds:

...in the minutiae of discussions about everyday life (about family, taste, neighbourhoods and politics), when people were drawing boundaries between different neighbourhoods (Based on whether they contained ‘big houses’ or council estates), between people sitting down to eat dinner in front of a television rather than round a table, or on class being literally under the skin through piercings or tattoos (ibid. p: 376).

Politicians are keen to downplay the significance of class but as these responses show, class continues to be an internalized part of the social imaginary where it is a deeply felt presence.

Class continues to be an emotive subject, not least because class distinctions are always visualized hierarchically ‘*based on the values and morals associated with the dominant class*’ (ibid. p: 366, italics in original). As Savage points out, the closer people were to the ‘real bottom of the class structure order’ (ibid. p: 385) the more critical they were of those whom they judged as beneath them and the more anxious they were to draw boundaries. Class anxieties inevitably focused on the precariat, ‘which became the brunt of negative characteristics’ (ibid. p: 376). Savage refers to these judgements as the ‘emotional politics of class’ in which ‘it matters more which class you do not belong to, rather than which you think you do belong to’ (ibid. p: 366). It remains to be seen whether Savage’s seven-tier classification will grip the public imagination. He acknowledges that whilst his new model gives a more ‘muted importance’ to the distinction between ‘middle and working class ... its cultural legacy persists’ (ibid. p: 392). He contends ‘This is the kind of snobbery which proliferates in a market-based consumer society such as ours, where our display of taste is both paramount and mundane’ (ibid. p: 45). In Chapters Six and Seven I will discuss how Perry confronts this ‘new snobbery in *The Vanity of Small Differences*.

### **Concluding Comments**

Each of us carries around a set of preconceptions about the society we inhabit which amount to a model; such a model is linked to our understanding of our own social identity and our responses to the social order (passive, knowing our place, thinking we deserve it; angry, resistant and so on.). The Great British Class Survey (2013) revealed



that class position has continued to be a major factor in shaping the way individuals experience and understand class relations. Class identities are divided and contradictory precisely because, as Savage points out, once people have accepted ‘meritocratic values’ then the ‘emotional effects’ of inequalities (anger, fear, resentment and hostility) between the classes can be presented as ‘problems to do with individual responsibility’ (2015, p: 366). Those individuals who ‘fail to succeed’ may well ‘internalize the shame associated with it’ (ibid.) which is lived as stigmatized identities. The language of meritocracy conveniently masks the way in which cultural capital (class privilege) is transmitted through the generations, thereby allowing it to retain its power. The desire to claim ‘an ordinary unclassed existence is a response to the high stakes and sharp realities of class divisions’ (ibid. p: 376). Those at the top of the social scale can conveniently avoid accusations of class privilege by claiming that they come from an ‘ordinary’ background and their success is the outcome of hard work and determination. By contrast, those at the bottom who lack similar economic, social and cultural resources (class privilege) can be accused of not working hard enough. It is notable that the seven-tier model uses the term Precariat (a term ‘borrowed’ from Guy Standing (2014) in an attempt to show how the vulnerability of such groups is connected to ‘their structural location in society’ (ibid. p: 352). Savage used this term ‘deliberately’ to avoid the negative connotations attached to the term underclass ‘...which has been used to stigmatize the poor and deprived for decades’ (ibid. p: 171).

This thesis is concerned with how the reality of class differences can be captured in a visual way. Class identities are internally divided and conflicted precisely because ‘They hold out images and values, often unattainable, remote or locked in the past’ (ibid. pp: 366-7). If we want to understand how such relations of hierarchy and solidarity are produced and maintained then we need to pay close attention to the

images that shape our world, and the ways in which these images are used to both inform and justify (or challenge) social ordering. In this thesis, I suggest that Perry's work focuses on the different ways we live class now. His work makes clear how class is still a relation of exploitation and domination and how wealth interweaves with other aspects of social differentiation. He also provides us with *the rich texture of people's mode of living class*: one of the ways Perry does this is through a focus on *taste*. This will be my concern in the following chapter.

### Chapter Three: Class and Taste

Becoming class conscious ...could be compared to learning a foreign language: that is, it presents men with a new vocabulary and a new set of concepts which permits a different translation of the meaning of inequality from that encouraged by the conventional vocabulary (Parkin, 1971, p: 80).

The above comment was quoted in the catalogue of the exhibition: *Rank:*

*Picturing the Social Order 1516-2009*. Rank was the first exhibition to chart how British artists have represented the shape of their society from the Renaissance to the present day. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss the exhibition in any great detail except for the two catalogue images which explore the interweaving of class and taste in ways which illuminate the concerns of this chapter: *Public Opinion* (1867) by George Bernard O'Neill and 'The door which leads to rank' (1902) by Cynicus (Martin Anderson). These early images are interesting because they make visible ways of imagining differences, which have continued to inform our contemporary ideas about social hierarchies.

*Public Opinion 1867 by George Bernard O'Neill* (2009, p: 31).

The National Gallery opened in 1824 marked a point at which there was a growing acceptance of 'a new concept of the nation in Britain' (Duncan, 1995, p: 41). The National Gallery was 'a monument to the new bourgeois state' during a time when the word "nation" was normally used as a universal category designating society' (ibid. p: 42). Art galleries had previously been the province of privileged elites and art collections were not easily accessible to those who did not belong to the upper ranks of society. In principle, the Gallery was a ceremonial space that belonged not just to the middle classes but the whole nation. In the words of Sir Robert Peel, the National Gallery would make the pursuit of culture available to all and, in so doing, would

‘cement the bonds of union between the richer and poorer orders of the state’ (Mount, 2005, pp: 225-6).

O'Neill's painting was produced at a time when the Victorian middle classes were living in fear of the uncivilised industrial masses with whom they were bound up in an exploitative union of economic interdependence. This army of underpaid industrial workers provided the foundation upon which the bourgeois state depended but this social relationship was being denied. In the Victorian imaginary, these workers were:

A class, which not respecting itself, does not respect others; which has nothing to lose and all to gain by anarchy; in which the lower passion, seldom gratified, are ready to burst out and avenge themselves by frightful methods (Charles Kingsley 1857 cited in Raban, 1974, p: 153).

The National Gallery committee were of the unshakeable belief that exposure to art ‘could improve the morals and deportment of even the lowest social ranks’ (Duncan, 1995, p: 43). Henceforth, to encourage a love of art in the nation as whole became a matter of political expediency. A situation perhaps best summed up by Walter Benjamin who was under no illusions about the moral and political purpose of ‘culture’ when he asserted that ‘Culture...comforting and lulling, serves to keep alive the bald economic determination of existence’ (Benjamin, 1999, p: 43).

Redfield suggests that historically the role of the state has been to ‘*represent* the community to itself, thereby giving the community form...’ (Redfield, 2003, p: 46). The form of this community must correspond with the ideal of ‘the best self’ in other words, the community or nation. It is not surprising to discover that the working class is not represented in *Public Opinion* (1867). The painting is realistic in the sense that it is probably an accurate depiction of the Victorian gallery-going audience. In Victorian

England, hats signified status: high top hats indicated high status. Similarly, cloth caps signified low status. The painting is not a panoramic view of society because the excitable crowd of spectators gathered around the painting are identifiable as belonging to a high social rank. The men are wearing top hats and the women and children are equally well dressed. No cloth caps are visible and there are no other visual signifiers of working class identity. O'Neill's painting serves to illustrate the way in which art galleries were sites which effectively sanctioned 'politically organized and socially institutionalized power' (Duncan, 1995, p: 6). In *Public Opinion* (1867) the middle classes are identified with universal humanity as the natural and legitimate bearers of culture. The painting serves to illustrate the Victorian belief that the social order could be strengthened not by improving the economic conditions of the industrial poor but by acculturating them into citizenship. As we shall see, this much has not changed.

***'The door which leads to rank', 1902 by Cynicus (Martin Anderson)*** (2009, p: 119).

As Robinson points out:

...all of our language to describe social difference is based on visual imagery. In English as in most world languages, hierarchies are always expressed as spatial metaphors. 'Higher' is preferable to 'lower': to make a value judgement or to rank things is to have an imaginary vertical axis already in mind (Robinson, 2009, p: 8).

Here Anderson is showing how social distinctions are marked through mastering the established rules of social etiquette: 'a mode of ranking which maintained the coherence of the upper classes' (Fyfe, 2009, p: 84). The desire to obtain social capital by copying the mannerisms of the upper classes reflects the belief that some people are innately superior to others (through birth and blood). Anderson's 'visual parable' works by pinpointing the paradox in the idea that certain qualities are innate, yet nevertheless, they can somehow be acquired. Thus, the image mocks the 'stupidities' of those who

bow to ‘imagined ‘superiors’’ to improve their social status (*Rank*, 2009, p: 119). The image invites us to consider why individuals born into high status positions are seen as more worthy of respect than individuals born into low-status positions. It is precisely this struggle ‘over the definition of cultural nobility’ that Bourdieu addresses and which, I shall suggest, is manifest in Perry’s work: *The Vanity of Small Differences* (Bourdieu, 1986, p: 2).

### **Bourdieu and Perry on Taste and Class**

In this chapter, I will be discussing Bourdieu’s work *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste* (1986). In this thesis, I provide an account of Perry’s work as an artist, informed by Bourdieu’s position. In particular, I explore the relationship which Bourdieu makes between taste and class, as it seems to me that it throws an illuminating light on Perry’s own views (as expressed in the Reith Lecture series and elsewhere) and his artistic practice. Bourdieu links the manifestation of taste in all the humdrum aspects of everyday life to the general workings of social power, rather than to a greater or lesser initiation into universal aesthetic practices. Perry is both seduced by what we would consider high art, and he recognises that such seduction is a consequence of a particular form of education and social positioning. He recognises that taste is one way in which class distinctions are reproduced and maintained and he refuses to confer legitimacy on one manifestation of taste over another. He discusses the ways in which transformations in the economy and in wider society have affected the institutions of visual art and the ways in which these institutions, in turn, constrain and determine what art we see and how it is valued (particularly in *Unpopular Culture*, *The Vanity of Small Differences* and in his Reith Lecture series).

Perry argues that:

The British care so much about taste because it is inextricably woven into our system of social class. I think that – more than any other factor, more than age, race, religion or sexuality – one's social class determines one's taste (Perry, 2013, p: 9).

Within this framework, taste operates 'as a sort of social orientation, a 'sense of one's place'' which steers the occupants of an allotted place in the social hierarchy 'towards the social positions adjusted to their properties, and towards the practices or goods which *befit* the occupants of that position' (Bourdieu, 1986, p: 466, my italics). For Bourdieu, individuals have a practical anticipation of what the social meaning and value of a chosen practice or thing will probably be, given their distribution in social space (class position) by means of a kind of practical knowledge which is largely unconscious (termed by him a *habitus*). The habitus is:

... a system of internalized embodied schemes which, having been constituted in the course of collective history, are acquired in the course of individual history and function in their *practical* state, *for practice* (ibid. p: 467).

The habitus is a mode of embodied negotiation of the world. It orients 'practices practically' by mediating between material conditions and the level of meaning (ibid. p: 466). Bourdieu contends that:

The schemes of the habitus embed what some would mistakenly call *values* in the most automatic gestures or the apparently most insignificant techniques of the body – ways of walking, or blowing one's nose, ways of eating or talking – and engage the most fundamental principles of construction and evaluation of the social world, those which most directly express the division of labour (between the classes, the age groups and the sexes) or the division of the work of domination, in divisions between bodies and between relations to the body which borrow more features than one, as if to give them the appearance of naturalness, (ibid.).

He argues:

If a group's whole life-style can be read off from the style it adopts in furnishing or clothing, this is not only because these properties are the objectification of the economic and cultural necessity which determined their selection: but also because the social relations objectified in familiar objects, in their luxury or poverty, their 'distinction' or 'vulgarity', their 'beauty' or 'ugliness', impress themselves through bodily experiences which may be as profoundly unconscious as the quiet caress of beige carpet or the thin clamminess of tattered, garish linoleum, the harsh smell of bleach or perfumes as imperceptible as a negative scent (ibid. p: 77).

### **On *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste* (1986)**

In *Distinction* (1986) Bourdieu describes his sociological approach as 'more akin to social psychoanalysis' (ibid. p: 11) because it reveals the way in which class position is not just an objective location within an abstract structure but 'is progressively inscribed in people's minds' through 'cultural products' including systems of education, language, judgements, values, methods of classification and the activities of everyday life (ibid. p: 471). For Bourdieu, all of these behaviours (practical knowledge of the social world) reveal an unconscious acceptance of social differentiation and awareness of hierarchies, a 'sense of one's place' and behaviours of self-exclusion (ibid.). These hidden classificatory schemes, which Bourdieu refers to as 'mental structures or symbolic forms' are functioning 'below the level of consciousness and discourse' nevertheless they are shared by all members of a society and they are what 'make possible the production of a common, meaningful world, a common-sense world' (ibid. p: 468). Bourdieu suggests that the book *Distinction* can be read as 'a sort of ethnography of France' (ibid. p: xi) which takes France or more specifically, French high or bourgeois culture as its 'empirical object' (ibid.). However, Bourdieu believes that what is being said about the social uses of art and culture should not be regarded as merely 'a collection of Parisian curiosities and frivolities' (ibid.). Whilst



acknowledging that the specificity of the 'French tradition' arises from 'an aristocratic model of 'court society'' Bourdieu goes on to argue that:

The model of the relationships between the universe of economic and social conditions and the universe of life-styles which is put forward here, based on an endeavour to rethink Max Weber's opposition between class and *Stand* (German word for status) seems to me to be valid beyond the particular French case and no doubt for every stratified society, even if the system of distinctive features which express or reveal economic and social differences (themselves variable in scale and structure) varies considerably from one period, and one society to another' (ibid. p: xi-xii).

His central thesis is that 'the preferences of each class or faction constitute coherent systems' and that 'the mode of expression characteristic of a cultural production always depends on the laws of the market in which it is offered' (ibid. p: xiii). This, I will argue is also the position we can find in Perry. Bourdieu influenced by Marx, makes the connection between 'intellectual products and producers' and 'their social conditions of existence', thereby transgressing one of the basic 'taboos of the intellectual world' in which intellectual and cultural values are treated as universally valid. In light of his transgression, Bourdieu acknowledges that the rules of 'academic or intellectual propriety' will 'condemn as barbarous any attempt to treat culture, that present incarnation of the sacred as an object of science' (ibid.). Bourdieu defends his approach on grounds that 'there is no way out of the game of culture' therefore, one must proceed by 'objectifying the true nature of the game' by exposing 'as fully as possible' the ground on which that objectification rests (ibid. p: 12). In *Distinction*, Bourdieu is therefore seeking to provide:

...a scientific answer to the old questions of Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, by seeking in the structure of the social classes the basis of the systems of classification which structure perception of the social world and designate the objects of aesthetic enjoyment (ibid. p: xiii).

Although there are many parallels between Bourdieu and Perry, as I will suggest below, Perry is not trying to claim any scientific ‘objective’ validity for his analysis. Rather he freely acknowledges that his approach uses ‘autobiography as analysis’ (Perry, 2014, p: 5).

### **Kant and Universal Taste**

Kant calls aesthetic judgements ‘judgments of taste’ (2000, p: 16) and states that although judgments of taste are based in the subjective feelings of individuals, they also claim universal validity: ‘a claim to *everyone*’s assent, as if it were an objective judgement’ (ibid.). Kant’s argument rests on his claim that human beings are simply able to appreciate beauty without the need to find some function for it. Judgements of taste can be seen as universal precisely because they are disinterested. In other words, our individual needs and wants do not come into play when appreciating beauty and this aesthetic response will be universal if the appropriate attitude is cultivated. For Kant, aesthetic pleasure is a harmony of senses and understanding. We detect beauty through our senses but when appropriately trained, all senses will respond in the same way to appropriate objects of good taste.

George Bernard O Neill’s painting *Public Opinion* (1867) illustrates the way in which art galleries functioned to make social and political power seem part of the natural order of things. As noted, the cultivation of an aesthetic sensibility is historically, linked to the wider project of producing universal cultivated citizens.

Redfield points out that within the discourse of aesthetics:

The harmony among mental faculties produced during an aesthetic judgement modelled the potential harmony of the social order because this act of judgement, in its disinterestedness, positioned the judging subject as

representative of the fundamental unity of humanity itself (2003, p: 75).

The importance of art within this account is that it acts as a means of acculturation which:

...does not mean to educate in the sense of imparting knowledge or skills; rather it means to produce a subject capable of transcending class identity by identifying with what Arnold famously called “our best self,” which is to say, “the idea of the whole community, the *State*”. Representing “the nation in its collective and corporate character” (ibid. p: 75-76)

Arnold defined ‘culture’ as the ‘best that has been thought and known in the world’ (Arnold, 1993, p: 79). Although this definition implicitly privileges the literary and philosophical over the visual, it has provided the basis for the high/low culture distinction in the visual arts and heritage. Arnold did not see culture as something to be acquired or possessed but as an active force in its own right. Hence, culture is defined as the study and pursuit of ‘*harmonious* perfection, general perfection’ (ibid. p: 62, italics in original). For Arnold, culture *conceives* of perfection ... as ‘an inward condition of the mind and spirit’ and ‘a harmonious expansion of human nature’ (ibid. p: 63, italics in original). Arnold believed that culture had a social purpose to fulfil which was not ‘to indoctrinate’ but rather to bring ‘sweetness and light’ to the ‘raw unkindled masses of humanity’ (ibid. p: 79). He is talking about an ideal of human life, a standard of excellence and fullness for the development of our capacities, aesthetic, intellectual and moral. However, as Collini points out, Arnold’s own Victorian morality caused him to vacillate between two opposing viewpoints:

...on the one hand, affirming the possibility of a harmonious development of *all* our impulses, and, on the other, endorsing the view that the self was a battleground where the forces of the higher self of conscience and rationality were perpetually at war with the forces of the lower self of appetite and animality (Collini in Arnold, 1993, p: xxi).

In *Distinction* Bourdieu challenges such universality concerning the standards of good taste and makes the link between art and politics explicit by arguing that ‘There is an economy of cultural goods, but it has a specific logic’ (1986, p: 1). He points out that, for sociology, the aim is:

...to establish the conditions in which consumers of cultural goods and their taste for them, are produced, and at the same time to describe the different ways of appropriating such of these objects as are regarded as works of art, and the social conditions of the constitution of the mode of appropriation that is considered legitimate (ibid.).

For Bourdieu, this sociological project leaves a central question unanswered. He argues that in order to develop a scientific explanation of cultural practices it is necessary to understand how culture is produced. We can reach this understanding by replacing the Arnoldian ‘restricted, normative sense’ of culture with an ‘anthropological sense’ of culture (ibid.). Culture in its anthropological or expanded sense, refers to ‘relations between elements in a whole way of life’ (Williams, 1958, *Foreword*). For Bourdieu, this expanded notion of culture allows ‘the elaborated taste for the most refined objects’ to be ‘reconnected with the elementary taste for the flavours of food’ (1986, p: 1).

Arnold had argued that ‘[Culture] seeks to do away with classes, to make the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere’ (1993, p: 79). He does not claim that ‘culture is innate’ rather that it should be available to everyone, but he does take for granted the existence of a ‘higher or common reason transcending individual preferences, in some purportedly fundamental principles’ (Collini, ibid. p: xxii). Bourdieu is challenging this assumption by arguing that legitimate or high culture (bourgeois culture – literary, artistic and philosophical) tends to be regarded as ‘a gift of

nature' whereas 'scientific observation shows that cultural needs are the product of upbringing and education' (1986, p: 1). Thus:

To the socially recognized hierarchy of the arts, and within each of them, of genres, schools or periods corresponds a social hierarchy of the consumers. This predisposes tastes to function as markers of class (ibid.).

Bourdieu contends that 'The manner in which culture has been acquired lives on in the manner of using it' (ibid.). He suggests that even in the classroom:

...the dominant definition of the legitimate way of appropriating culture and works of art favours those who have been in early contact with 'legitimate culture, in a cultured household' (ibid. p: 2).

As a result, 'every material inheritance is, strictly speaking, a social inheritance' (ibid. p: 77). This immediate familiarity with the objects of 'legitimate' culture not only produces 'taste' it also 'consecrates' a social identity based on:

...the sense of belonging to a more polished, more polite, better policed world, a world which is justified in existing by its perfection, its harmony and its beauty, a world which has produced Beethoven and Mozart and continues to produce people capable of playing and appreciating them (ibid.)

He asserts that in order for a culture to be accepted as legitimate it must 'manifest the rarest conditions of acquisition, that is, a social power over time which is tacitly recognized as the supreme excellence' (ibid. p: 71). He continues, 'to possess things from the past, i.e. ...aristocratic names and titles ... stately homes, paintings and collections, vintage wines and antique furniture, is to master time' (ibid.).

Bourdieu points out that in the struggle over the different ways of acquiring culture, 'the dominant groups' will always favour this 'most insensible and invisible mode of

acquisition' (ibid. pp: 72-73). He wants to challenge the idea that good taste is 'innate' and is somehow magically conferred by 'order of succession' (ibid. pp: 71-2) by arguing that taste is acquired through 'insensible familiarization within the family unit' – i.e. a process of acculturation, a view shared by Perry (ibid. p: 3). As Bourdieu points out:

The 'eye' is a product of history reproduced by education. This is true of the mode of artistic perception now accepted as legitimate, that is, the aesthetic disposition, the capacity to consider in and for themselves, as form rather than function, not only the works designated for such apprehension, i.e. legitimate works of art, but everything in the world, including cultural objects which are not yet consecrated –such as, at one time primitive arts, or, nowadays, popular photography or kitsch –and natural objects (ibid.).

It is precisely this 'historical culture' that provides the necessary reference point against which aesthetic judgements are made either consciously or unconsciously. Cultural competence is generally acquired through contact with works of art or '...implicit learning analogous to that which makes it possible to recognize familiar faces without explicit rules or criteria' (ibid. p: 4). In Bourdieu's terminology, aesthetic appreciation is a form of habitus or 'embodied cultural capital' (ibid. p: 70). These social practices reflect a pattern of sensibility, dispositions and taste, which are not innate but are the outcome of social positioning:

And ... it is an immediate adherence, at the deepest level of the habitus, to the tastes and distastes, sympathies and aversions, fantasies and phobias which, more than declared opinions, forge the unconscious unity of a class (ibid. p: 77).

As a result, the habitus appears to be part of the natural order of things rather than an effective principle of social division which perpetuates and legitimates relations of inequality.

## **The ‘popular’ aesthetic versus the ‘pure gaze’**

In order to unpack the underlying logic of the aesthetic disposition, Bourdieu makes a distinction between the ‘popular aesthetic’ and the ‘pure gaze’ (ibid. p: 41). He suggests that when re-constructing the logic of ‘the ‘popular’ aesthetic’ it appears as the ‘negative opposite of the Kantian aesthetic’ (ibid.). Bourdieu argues that for Kant, the specificity of aesthetic judgement rests on his distinction between ‘disinterestedness’, the sole guarantor of the specifically aesthetic quality of contemplation and ‘the interests of the senses’ which defines ‘the agreeable’ (ibid.). Bourdieu argues that the disinterestedness of the ‘pure gaze’ signals a break with the ‘ordinary attitude towards the world which, given the circumstances in which it is performed, is also a social separation’ (ibid. p: 4). The social separation occurs because the ‘pure gaze’ insists on the autonomy of art which ‘also means a refusal to recognize any necessity other than that inscribed in the specific discipline in question: the shift from an art which represents nature to an art which represents art’ (ibid. p: 3). Put simply, the ‘pure gaze’ views art as separate from life in the sense that it perceives and judges art within the framework of past and present art historical tradition, not in terms of how far it approximates to ‘an external referent, the represented or designated reality’ (ibid.). As a result, ‘aesthetic perception is necessarily historical, inasmuch as it is differential, relational, attentive to the deviations (*écarts*) which make styles’ (ibid. p: 4).

Bourdieu suggests that Ortega y Gasset ‘was right’ when he saw in modern art:

...a systematic refusal of all that is ‘human’, i.e., generic, common—as opposed to distinctive or distinguished—namely, the passions, emotions and feelings which ‘ordinary’ people invest in their ‘ordinary’ lives (ibid.).

He argues that by contrast with the 'pure gaze' the 'popular' aesthetic seems to be based on 'the affirmation of the continuity between art and life' (ibid.). The 'popular aesthetic' applies 'the schemes of the ethos' which apply in everyday life to 'legitimate works of work' (ibid. p: 5). Bourdieu is suggesting that popular taste demands that art should imitate life, 'every image should 'perform a function, if only that of sign' (ibid.). As far as artistic appreciation is concerned, in place of the 'moral agnosticism' of the aesthetic disposition, 'popular judgements' generally make reference to 'the norms of morality or agreeableness' which apply in daily life (ibid.). Bourdieu suggests that working class audiences lack the necessary cultural competence to appreciate works of art as experiments in form which are intended to create a social space between artist and viewer. This social space facilitates the 'detachment and disinterestedness' that is deemed 'the only way of recognizing the work of art for what it is i.e. autonomous' (ibid. p: 4). The 'popular aesthetic' appears as the 'negative opposite of the Kantian aesthetic' because it 'naively' ignores or refuses the refusal of 'facile' involvement and 'vulgar' enjoyment' (ibid.) thereby effectively reducing 'the things of art' to 'the things of life' (ibid. p: 5).

The aesthetic disposition is presented as 'universally valid' and it 'takes the bourgeois denial of the social world to its limit' but as Bourdieu points out:

The detachment of the pure gaze cannot be dissociated from a general disposition towards the world which is the paradoxical product of conditioning by negative economic necessities – a life of ease – that tends to induce an active distance from necessity (ibid.).

The aesthetic disposition is not limited to art but rather it manifests itself in the stylization of every area of life. This disposition is made evident by Perry in *The Vanity of Small Differences* as I argue in Chapters Six and Seven. Bourdieu points out that



whilst art offers the greatest scope to the aesthetic disposition there is no area of practice in which:

...the aim of purifying, refining, and sublimating primary needs and impulses cannot assert itself, no area in which the stylization of life, that is, the primacy of forms over function, of manner over matter, does not produce the same effects (ibid.)

The principles of the pure aesthetic can be applied to most everyday choices in life where ‘oppositions similar in structure to those found in cultural practices also appear in eating habits’ (ibid. p: 6). As Bourdieu explains, the ‘antithesis between quantity and quality, substance and form’ corresponds to the ‘opposition between the taste of necessity, which favours the most filling and economical foods’, and the ‘taste of liberty—or luxury— which shifts the emphasis to the manner (of presenting, serving, eating etc.) and tends to favour stylized forms to deny function’ (ibid.). If we ‘abolish the sacred frontier’ that designates ‘legitimate culture’ as a separate sphere, we find ‘the intelligible relations’ that link together seemingly ‘incommensurable ‘choices’ such as preferences in music and food, painting and sport, literature and hairstyle’ (ibid.).

Bourdieu contends that:

Pure taste and the aesthetics which provides its theory are founded on a refusal of ‘impure’ taste of *aesthesis* (sensation), the simple, primitive form of pleasure reduced to a pleasure of the senses, as in what Kant calls ‘the taste of the tongue, the palate and the throat’ a surrender to immediate sensation which in another order looks like imprudence (ibid. p: 486).

He goes on to assert that the entire discourse of aesthetics ‘is contained in a fundamental refusal of the *facile* in all the meanings which bourgeois ethics and aesthetics gives to the word’ (ibid. italics in original). He continues:

...pure taste’, purely negative in its essence, is based on the disgust that is often called ‘visceral’ (it ‘makes one sick’ or ‘makes one vomit’) for everything that is facile—facile music, or

a facile stylistic effect, but also ‘easy virtue’ or an ‘easy lay’ (ibid.).

Pure taste refuses anything that is easy, in the sense of too simplistic ‘and therefore shallow, and ‘cheap’ because it is easily decoded and culturally ‘undemanding’ (ibid.). The refusal of anything deemed too easily available ‘naturally leads to the refusal of what is facile in the ethical or aesthetic sense’ (ibid.). In other words, ‘everything which offers pleasures that are too immediately accessible is dismissed as ‘‘childish’ or ‘primitive’ (as opposed to the deferred pleasures of legitimate art)’ (ibid.). Bourdieu offers the example of what is called ‘light music’ which might also be called ‘easy listening’ or a performance of classical music which might be rejected because it expresses ‘vulgar sensuality’ or ‘Casbah orientalism’ (ibid.). Works that are dismissed as ‘vulgar’ will often be described using words such as ‘‘frivolous’, ‘futile’, ‘shallow’, ‘meretricious’’, or ‘in the register of oral satisfactions’ as ‘‘syrupy’, ‘schmaltzy’, or ‘cloying’’ (ibid.). Bourdieu observes that not only do such works constitute ‘a sort of insult to refinement, a slap in the face to a ‘demanding’ audience’, they also ‘arouse distaste and disgust’ because they use ‘methods of seduction, usually denounced as ‘low’, ‘degrading’, ‘demeaning’...’ (ibid.). These art forms which are ‘attuned to bodily rhythms’ turn ‘the pure knowing subject’ who is assumed to be ‘free from subjectivity and impure desires’ into ‘a willing subject, subject to every desire every servitude’ (ibid. p: 487). For Kant, such popular entertainments are a form of ‘violence’ against the viewer because they force ‘a real participation which is quite opposed to the ‘distance’ and ‘disinterestedness’ of pure taste (ibid.).

For Bourdieu, Kant’s principle of pure taste is founded on ‘an immense repression’ which ‘is nothing other than a refusal, a disgust – a disgust for objects which

impose enjoyment and a disgust for the crude vulgar taste which revels in this imposed enjoyment' (ibid. p: 488). Bourdieu notes that the opposition between pure and impure taste is ideologically powerful precisely because it 'refers back...to the fundamental oppositions within the social order' (ibid. p: 469). These fundamental categorical oppositions or 'classificatory schemes' shape and organize 'the idea of the social world in the minds of the subjects belonging to that world' (ibid.). The ideological mechanism at work in Kant supports the opposition established between the social classes, described as stages in an evolutionary progress from nature to culture. For Kant, 'Taste that requires an added element of charm and emotion for its delight, not to speak of adopting this as the measure of its approval, has not yet emerged from barbarism' (1952, p: 65). For Bourdieu, pure pleasure is empty in the sense that it is 'pleasure purified of pleasure' and this capacity for asceticism is:

...a symbol of moral excellence, and the work of art a test of ethical superiority, an indisputable measure of the capacity for sublimation which defines the truly human man' (1986, p: 491).

As the above comment makes clear, the stakes are high in aesthetic discourse because, as Bourdieu observes, it attempts 'nothing less than the *monopoly of humanity*' (ibid.).

He argues that for Kant:

The negation of enjoyment – inferior, coarse, vulgar, mercenary, venal, servile, in a word natural – implies affirmation of the sublimity of those who can be satisfied with sublimated, refined, distinguished, disinterested, gratuitous free pleasures' (ibid.).

The opposition between those who are subject to their natural appetites and those who are capable of sublimating or repressing 'their own biological nature' (ibid.) is used to 'legitimate claims to dominate social nature' (ibid.). Bourdieu contends that 'Art is called upon to mark the difference between humans and non-humans' (ibid.). The

person who is unable to understand or appreciate high culture is seen as naturally inferior and somehow less human than the aesthete. For Bourdieu, in contrast, Kant's analysis of the judgement of taste is a 'misrecognized form of social difference', that finds its real basis in a set of aesthetic principles, which are the 'universalization of the dispositions associated with a particular social and economic condition' (ibid. p: 493).

He concludes:

Taste classifies and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed (ibid. p: 6).

It is just such a view, I shall suggest, that also underpins Perry's treatment of class.

### **Perry on Class and Taste**

Perry is 'fascinated by the notion of taste. Differing tastes are one of the things that most strongly divide social classes' (Perry in Klein, 2013, p: 78). As this statement makes clear, Perry shares Bourdieu's view that 'No judgement of taste is innocent' (Bourdieu, 1986, back cover). In the course of everyday life people are making choices between what they consider is 'aesthetically pleasing and what they consider tacky, merely trendy or ugly' (ibid.). As a practising artist, Perry's job includes making aesthetic judgements and he is acutely aware that there is always discomfort around this issue. One area in which this discomfort is most keenly felt, is art appreciation. As Perry points out 'When we talk about the culture we consume it is often a dance around how we wish to be seen: what we enjoy reflects on who we are' (Perry, 2014, p: 15). When Perry was invited to present the 2013 Reith lecture series the artist used this opportunity to explore the division that exists between the contemporary art world and the wider public. Perry made it clear that he was using the term 'art world' to refer to:

...the culture surrounding the Western model of fine art, artefacts dealing with aesthetics or lack of them. I'm really talking about visual art, but as we shall find out later on not all of it is visual (ibid. p: 6).

The series was made up of four separate titles under the main heading *Playing to the Gallery*: Lecture 1: Democracy Has Bad Taste; Lecture 2: Beating the Bounds; Lecture 3: Nice Rebellion: Welcome in and Lecture 4: I Found Myself in the Art World. All four lectures were broadly concerned with matters of taste and the role of art. Perry explained that his overarching aim was 'to reach out and attempt to explain some of the values and practices that shape something I love' (ibid. p: 7).

Perry says he titled his lecture series *Playing to the Gallery* and not *Sucking up to an Academic Elite* because he firmly believes that:

Anyone is eligible to enjoy art or become an artist – any oik, any prole, any citizen who has a vision that they want to share. There is no social qualification, no quarter of society that you need to belong to. With practice, with encouragement, with confidence, YOU can live a life in the arts (ibid. pp: 2-3).

This statement constitutes a direct challenge to the idea that making and/or appreciating art is reserved for certain sections of society. Perry's instinct towards democratic inclusiveness is partly a response to the fact that it took him a long time to overcome his feeling of not belonging to this world of high culture and museums and that being successful in the arts was for a privileged minority. The artist acknowledges that he is now 'a tribal member of some thirty-five years standing' (ibid. p: 7) but he remains acutely aware of the ways in which the art galleries and institutions that delineate good taste also function to mark and legitimate social distinctions. His overarching aim is to question and destabilize these internal hierarchies and divisions. Perry points out that as

a practising artist, he is ‘not necessarily an expert in the wider sense’ therefore he is free to ‘use autobiography as analysis—something that is often seen as a sin by many academics. I am going to extrapolate from my own personal experience to wider generalizations’ (ibid. p: 5). These comments make it clear that he is not going to be providing a set of hard and fast rules for judging what constitutes good art: quite the reverse. Part of Perry’s project here is to demystify the ‘grandiloquently opaque’ (ibid.) language that is used by art world insiders and ‘to ask – and answer! The basic questions that might come up when we enter an art gallery’ (ibid. p: 2).

In the first lecture, Perry discussed the tension that exists between popularity and quality, noting that the two often seem at odds with each other. Underlying this tension is the idea that popularity is synonymous with bad taste, in a way that echoes Bourdieu’s discussion of the popular aesthetic and the pure gaze. According to Perry, ‘The idea of good taste works within a tribe. The art-world tribe has its own set of values that aren’t necessarily the same values as those of a more democratic wider audience’ (ibid. p: 39). Perry points out:

...we come to art somehow accepting the system that got the art into the museum, or the gallery, or whatever. If the public chose the art work that was in art galleries, would it be the same? (ibid.).

Perry is convinced that it is important to question the judgements of art- world insiders because one of the most crucial issues around art is ‘how do we tell if something is good? What are the criteria by which we judge art made today, and *who* tells us that it’s good?’ (ibid. p: 10). In Perry’s view, ‘thinking about those questions helps the enjoyment and understanding of art’ (ibid. p: 2). He cautions that whilst it is often thought ‘important – to have definite, strong opinions and be a certainty freak’ this

ignores the fact ‘that many of the methods of judging are very problematic and many of the criteria that are used to assess art are conflicting’ because they include ‘financial value, popularity, art-historical significance and aesthetic sophistication’ (ibid. p: 10). Aesthetic sophistication is one particularly contentious issue between art world insiders and the gallery-going public.

According to Perry, ‘worrying about what others will think about our aesthetic choices is part of the DNA of modernism. By modernism, I mean the 100 years of art leading up, say, to the 1970s’ (ibid. p: 15). Perry sees this ‘self-consciousness’ as an integral part of what it means to be an artist today, it means ‘examining not just *what* to make and how, but what is this business called art?’ (ibid. p: 18). Whilst many people assume art appreciation is based on ideas about beauty, this is a very suspect term in the art world. The roots of this suspicion can be traced back to Marcel Duchamp (viewed as the hero artist of the contemporary art world) who warned that ‘aesthetic delectation is the danger to be avoided’ (ibid. p: 14). In selecting an ordinary everyday object and giving it a title that obscured its usefulness, Duchamp created a different way of thinking about objects. The issue of craftsmanship suddenly lost its relevance because the ‘art’ lay in the fact that the artist chose it. Does ‘art’ reside in the object or the idea? This was the philosophical puzzle left by Duchamp and it set a new precedent for a huge amount of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century art.

Perry contends that whilst most artists want to make work that is beautiful, ‘To judge a work on its aesthetic merits is to buy into some discredited, fusty hierarchy, tainted with sexism, racism, colonialism and class privilege’ (ibid.). To use the terms ‘beautiful’ or ‘pleasing’ is also to risk being regarded as ill-informed or gauche by art world insiders. According to ethnographer Sarah Thornton, amongst the art students that she interviewed there was agreement that words such as ‘*beautiful* or *sublime* or

*masterpiece*’ were ‘embarrassing’ (Thornton, 2008, p: 63, italics in original). As the students were keen to point out, these terms would only be used ‘by people not professionally involved with art’ (ibid.). As a result, today’s contemporary art scene includes many works that do not aim at being either visually pleasing or beautiful. For Perry, ‘Beauty is very much about familiarity, reinforcing an idea we have already. It’s a constructive thing built up on shifting layers’ (2014, p: 14). These ‘shifting layers’ are made up of ‘family, friends, education, nationality, race, religion, politics – all these things help shape our idea of beauty’ (ibid. p: 15). Perry goes on to point out that ‘unlike the taste buds on our tongue our aesthetic taste buds can change’ (ibid.). He therefore both acknowledges the pull of beauty and recognises that what we count as beautiful is anchored in our social positioning.

Although he described himself as ‘a sucker for a crumbling stately home’ (Perry, 2012) Perry was also keen to demystify the hold that upper class taste still has over us. He went on to point out that what mattered most to the aristocracy was ‘the historic affiliations their possessions displayed’ (ibid.). Perry observed that the almost magical power of the aristocratic aesthetic of ‘refined entropy’ relied on there being ‘No intervention of the here and now’ (ibid.) (a theme that he went on to illustrate in *The Vanity of Small Differences*). Here, we are reminded of Bourdieu who also saw aristocratic taste as an ‘attempt to lay down absolute final differences by means of the irreversibility of time’ (Bourdieu, 1986, p: 72).

Perry has described his work as an attempt to ‘illustrate the emotional structures that inform taste’ (Perry, 2012). He does not reject the idea that art should be an object of ‘aesthetic delectation’ (Perry, 2014, p: 14) and he explains his own love of traditional art by linking it back to what he calls his ‘emotional memory’ (ibid. p: 43). As a schoolboy whose own taste in art tended towards Victorian narrative painting by



William Powell Frith and George Elgar Hicks, Perry went through ‘all sorts of contortions’ to justify his aesthetic preferences (ibid. p: 15). The artist finally decided he liked these paintings because ‘They’re very English, lovely craftsmanship, social history, good frocks’ (ibid. pp 15-17). Given that childhood or emotional memory played a role in developing his own taste, Perry is keen that people should rely on their own judgement and ‘look for themselves’ when deciding what they like.

### **Perry’s aesthetic**

Perry’s own aesthetic sensibility, which he describes as ‘barbaric splendour with an edge’ (Perry, 2007) puts him very much at odds with much of the contemporary art world, not least because to indulge in any kind of visual overload (decoration, precious materials, or ornate pattern) ‘is seen as morally inferior’ precisely because ‘class is central’ (Perry in Klein, 2013, p: 68). In contrast to ‘restraint’ which is seen as having a high moral value and is one of the ‘premier middle class virtues’ Perry is drawn to the sensuous qualities of art, describing himself as a natural ‘maximalist’ (ibid.). Here we might be reminded of Bourdieu’s contention that the Kantian antithesis ‘between culture and bodily pleasure (or nature)’ finds its origins in ‘the opposition between the cultivated bourgeoisie and the people, barbarously wallowing in pure enjoyment’ (1986, p: 490). Perry is clear that his aesthetic reflects his working class origins. The contrast between ‘making lovely, delicate ceramic things and yet being a working-class man’ provides precisely the kind of oppositional tension that fuels his creativity (Klein, 2013, p: 79).

Perry rejects the idea that it is necessary to ‘fully ‘understand’ an artwork’ before passing judgement (2014, p: 33). He notes that this misconception is ‘particularly strong when dealing with conceptual art, where a lot of the works are little

more than support systems or stage sets upon which prompts for ideas are played out' (ibid. pp: 33-34). In stark contrast to the allusive and often highly abstract nature of much contemporary art, Perry fills his work with text and narrative and references to popular culture, making work that is unashamedly 'about your mother-in-law or poverty or war' (Klein, 2013, p: 9). As the artist himself pointed out, he is not reacting against the disciplinary or formal boundaries of art:

My own personal experience regarding the definitions of art has revolved not so much around formal boundaries – for example, that art has to be something done by an artist – but around boundaries concerning taste. I think of it as a form of snobbery. Beneath the sophisticated tolerance – 'Yeah, everybody can make art and everything they do can be art' – there's an interesting kind of class snobbery. Like a urinal – bringing that into art, that's really radical. And a shark, bringing that into the gallery – oh my God, that's an amazing thing. But a pot, now that's craft (Perry, 2014, p: 55).

What is interesting here, is that he sees in the movements of contemporary art, which would take themselves to be rejecting the universalist Kantian aesthetic, which was the topic of Bourdieu's critique, a parallel division into what counts as legitimate art practice, and what is 'art for the masses'. My goal is to show how this process of legitimation is intertwined with the workings of class.

### **Concluding comments**

Perry therefore opposes an account of taste as disinterested and universal and, along with Bourdieu, insists that taste (culture) is cultural (in anthropological sense). Consequently, he both resists categories of high and low culture and reveals how these oppositions are structured. For him our culture of origin (our social class) is 'imbibed' as we grow up and the effect of this acculturation process is that everyone has 'a default setting' on their taste. This 'default setting' comes into play when we think we are not

making a decision but simply doing what seems ‘natural’ and ‘normal’ to us (Perry, 2013, p: 12). Perry commits a ‘barbarous reintegration of aesthetic consumption into the world of ordinary consumption’ (Bourdieu, 1986, p: 6) by using food metaphors such as ‘We drink in our aesthetic heritage with our mother’s milk’ and ‘A childhood spent marinating in the material culture of one’s class means taste is soaked right through you’ and ‘Cut me and beneath the thick crust of Islington it still says Essex all the way through’ (Perry, 2013, p: 11).

Perry is alert to the fact that taste is a site of strong emotions, including anxiety, disapproval and disgust. These emotions arise from the need to establish class boundaries through cultural differentiation. Amongst the middle classes (notably the non-professional middle classes) there is an acute anxiety about getting taste right or wrong which derives from the idea that there are taste rules and the higher classes are a source of authority on this. This belief arises from the sense that there is a connection between taste, morality and social worth. Consequently, the aspiring middle classes are anxious to distance themselves from lower class taste, which can become a source of visceral disgust. Perry is clear, in his essay accompanying the exhibition *The Vanity of Small Differences*, that he is fascinated by the strength of feeling that accompanies the issue of taste. He talks about the ‘revulsion’ people express about taste choices that they regard as ‘vulgar’ and their desire to define themselves against an awful ‘other’. Amongst the liberal, educated middle classes, Perry identifies ‘a desire to show the world that one is an upright moral citizen’ by means of taste choices that express bourgeois restraint (ibid. p: 17).

Perry, therefore, along with Bourdieu, claims that it is possible to read material culture as a visual language that expresses:

...the present and even the past state of its occupants, bespeaking the self-assurance of inherited wealth, the flashy arrogance of the nouveaux riches, the discreet shabbiness of 'poor relations' striving to live beyond their means (Bourdieu, 1986, p: 77).

And it is this visual language which we will see in the work discussed in Part II of this thesis.

In Bourdieu's account, capitalist economic structures play a central role in shaping social existence but this imbrication of the economic and the cultural is never mechanistic or final. His account of the relations between class and taste allow us to view class as a structured process of negotiation 'that is always present in an explicit or latent form in the antagonisms and conflicts of daily experience' (McNay, 2008, p: 155). McNay contends that such work makes it possible to look at 'the ambivalent forms of identification and affective force that characterize social relations by making visible the fundamental structures from which they emerge' (ibid.). I think it is possible to argue that Perry literally makes these 'ambivalent forms of identification and affective force' surrounding class identity visible by examining the operation of taste in *The Vanity of Small Differences*.

One of the criticisms that has been raised in relation to Bourdieu's general account of the habitus is that his picture is too determinist. McNay points out that the idea of habitus implies that oppression is rooted in 'psychological and physical dispositions' (ibid. p: 12) which are the result of 'the incorporation of the regularities and tendencies of the world into the body' (ibid. p: 14). Individuals live-through these embodied tendencies which 'serve to endlessly sediment naturalized social hierarchies' (ibid. p: 35). If this objection were right, Bourdieu's account points to 'the perfect coincidence of practical schemes and objective structures' which seems to leave no space for resistance or change (ibid.). Certain relations of power and domination

internalized by the *habitus* will be ‘operationalised’ or made manifest in various forms of behaviour, speech, dress and patterns of consumption in ways that are deemed as appropriate to that class. The criticism is that the account of habitus is too oriented towards explaining social reproduction and does not offer an adequate account of how social change or disruption might take place within the social structure.

However, Bourdieu himself argues that:

...the naively reductive reading, which would reduce Kant’s text to the social relationship that is disguised and transfigured within it, would be no less false than the ordinary reading which would reduce it to the phenomenal truth in which it appears only in disguise (1986, p: 494).

We cannot simply reduce the content of text, the meaning of a practice to the social and material structures that condition it. Against the charge of determinism, McNay contends that ‘the active-theoretic concept of habitus’ expressed by ‘the alternative notion of practice’ provides an interpretive dimension (2008, p: 156). Individuals negotiate power relations in their daily lives where cultural and social forces act as both ‘constraints and resources for action’ (ibid.). For example, ‘the unequal distribution of economic resources is lived as the ‘shame’ of the class habitus or an awareness of the ‘superior taste of the middle classes’ (ibid.). This ‘future-oriented or anticipatory dimension’ implicit in the notion of habitus provides ‘the source of potential creativity and innovation in daily life’ (ibid. p: 182). We can see that this change, creativity and innovation in response to objective features is a central feature of Perry’s work as he shows the *changing ways in which class is lived* alongside its evolving material structures. Although taste is a non-economic form of domination and hierarchy, its manifestations have material consequences, not only because certain people are judged as naturally inferior to others on the basis of their taste choices but also because of the pressure to acquire consumer goods and the acute anxiety this generates.

Bourdieu shows us how we consistently make taste choices ‘which strengthen the social patterns that condition these choices in the first place’ (1986, p: 305). I will suggest that in Perry’s work we see him performing the same task. But, more potently, Perry’s work refuses to fulfil the ‘social function of legitimating social differences’ (ibid. p: 7). We can see Perry’s work as an *intervention in and disruption to the dominant relations of power* both in the art world and within the perception of social power relations more generally. In his relation to and depiction of those who form the subject of his art, there is nothing reductive in his approach. These people are anchored in and conditioned by their material and social environments but they are not reducible to them. The richness of his depictions makes it impossible to see these lives as any kind of mechanical reflection of their economic conditions.

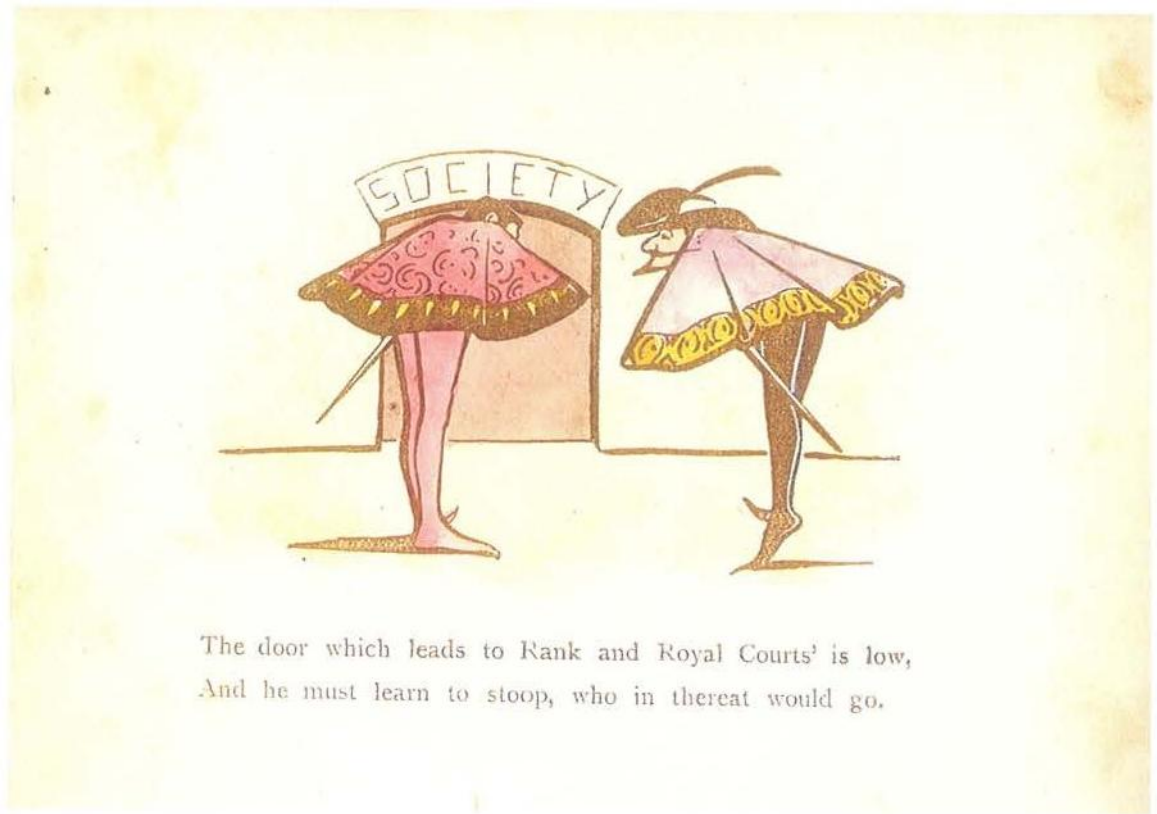
**Figure 1.** O'Neill, G. B. (1867) *Public Opinion*



Courtesy Leeds Museums and Galleries

(Rank, 2009, p: 31).

**Figure 2.** Anderson, M. (1902) *The door which leads to rank*



Working Class Movement Library, Salford

(Rank, 2009, p: 119)



## Chapter Four: The Early Life of Grayson Perry

Since winning the Turner Prize in 2003, Grayson Perry has been widely recognized as one of the most ‘thoughtful and provocative’ artists to emerge from the contemporary art scene since the early 1990s (Klein, 2013, p: 65). Winning the Turner Prize marked a major turning point in Perry’s career. Looking back at that night when he found himself ‘in a dress at a ball’ he has often been heard to say ‘My life is like a fairy tale’ (Jones and Perry, 2007, p: 4)<sup>3</sup>. And it is in these fairy tale elements ‘a lost parent, a step-parent, chores, banishment, apprenticeship, adventures’ (ibid.) that we find the real foundations on which his future success as an artist was built. Perry has said that these early experiences provide the fuel for the ‘engine’ that ‘drives’ him as an artist (ibid. p: 5). The artist likens himself to Hans Christian Anderson whose tales are also ‘autobiographical in many ways ... in that their psychology seeps out, often undiluted, often unchanged into his fables’ (ibid.). Perry identifies a similar process taking place in his own works which, in their earliest incarnations, provided him with a safe refuge from the ‘emotional chaos’ of family life (ibid. p: 19).

Perry was born in Chelmsford hospital, Essex on 24 March 1960. His mother was a house wife and his father was an engineer in a local factory.

In 1965, Perry’s father discovered his mother was pregnant by the local milkman, at which point he ‘upped sticks and went back to live with his mother’ (ibid. p: 9). Perry remembers the night his father came to say goodbye because the details are seared into his visual memory. He remembers that he was ‘in a hideous, solid bed that my father made, with a beige Formica head-board and built-in bedside tables’ when his father ‘whispered ‘I’m going to go on holiday now.’’ (ibid.). Perry also remembers in

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<sup>3</sup> *Grayson Perry: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl* (2007). ‘When people are looking at my work, I would like this book to sound as a hum in the background, the hum of my artistic engine’ (Jones and Perry, 2007, p: 5).

exact detail that he had been on a day trip to Dungeness power station and was sitting in the back of his father's car driving past Sandon High School when he was asked "Do you want to live with your mother or your father? You've got to choose between me and your mother" (ibid. p: 10). Perry was five years old and his sister was three; 'we were unable to make that choice' (ibid.). As Perry points out, in the face of 'an impossible bind' which was 'too painful to consider' ... 'I mumbled, 'iwantostaywithmymum'' (ibid.). In retrospect, Perry can see that nothing was explained, 'Nobody took responsibility for us. It felt as if no one was adult enough to see what was going on' (ibid. p: 11).

Perry describes his stepfather as someone who embodied:

...a patina of glamour. He was attractive in a brutal, brooding way. He was dangerous, he was flashy and he drove a flash car – a poor man's Tom Jones. It was a relative glamour I suppose (ibid. p: 12).

Perry's stepbrother Neil was born in 1967 and he 'became the golden boy' (ibid.).

Perry continued to see his father until 1967 when 'My father made the decision not to see my sister and me anymore' (ibid. p: 11). Perry was 'bereft' and he considers the loss of his father as 'the event that has had the largest impact on me in my life.

Emotionally I went numb, I closed down. And that's when I handed everything over to Alan Measles' (ibid. p: 13). Perry's bear, Alan Measles was a 'workaday lump of foam' but he became the king of Perry's 'imaginary realm' (ibid. pp: 14-15). Between the ages of four to fifteen Perry increasingly withdrew into his elaborate fantasy world to keep his emotions numbed. Around the age of ten, he began working out the ground rules for complicated games, often involving intricate Lego constructions. In one role, he was 'designer, engineer and manufacturer' for a 'factory that assembled every artefact in the kingdom' (ibid. p: 17). For Perry, these activities were a 'restful, almost

meditative creativity that involved solving technical problems that had no sentimental content' (ibid.). Nevertheless, the worlds he built were 'seriously crafted' (ibid. p: 110) and this level of craftsmanship has remained a characteristic feature of his work.

Alan Measles also acted as a conduit for the relationship between Perry and his stepfather. Perry's stepfather was an amateur wrestler: a man he describes as 'strong and hairy in his shiny leotard and covered in rope burns from being flung around the ring' (ibid. p: 59). The man was 'a brooding presence, like a sleeping dragon you shouldn't disturb' and he was violent towards Perry who was 'a scrawny, pale blond' (ibid. p: 64). What Perry lacked in brawn he made up for in brains. He determined to outwit his stepfather 'by being clever, by escaping as soon as I can, by not giving them any of my talents' (ibid. p: 65). Perry practised his stealth techniques against the enemy with his trusty bear who became both 'underground guerrilla' and later, 'more of a spy' (ibid. p: 19). Perry invested in Alan 'all of my noble masculine traits of a high achiever, a winner, a lover even' (ibid. p: 20). Crucially, Alan Measles embodied all the qualities his parents (especially his male parents) lacked: he 'had to be perfect, with perfect morals' he was 'the ultimate male presence' (ibid. p: 19). As Perry points out, children need their parents in order to survive and in this sense, Alan Measles fulfilled the ultimate childhood fantasy by being invincible.

Perry has described himself as inhabiting 'Alan Measles's realm' and he has also described his 'creativity and art practice' as a 'mental shed – a sanctuary as well as a place of action' (ibid. p: 23). It was here that Perry's 'subconscious was schooled in the concept of making' (ibid.). This metaphorical shed has its physical counterpart in the shed that belonged to Perry's father, a space for 'my dad and me, just the two of us together' (ibid. p: 21). The shed was dark and safe and seemed to contain the feeling of limitless possibilities. Perry remembers the colours his father tested out for decorating

and the ones he chose ‘I think of as wine gum colours: black, burnt orange, lemony yellow, bottle-green and a slightly winy red, and I have an affection for them’ (ibid. p: 22). These patches of colour were like an ‘abstract painting on the wall’ and the artist recognizes that this was the first time he had thought of the idea of painting as ‘something I might want to look at’ (ibid.).

Perry’s father was an ‘industrial craftsman’ who came from an era ‘when men could mend every appliance in the house’ (ibid. p: 22) because they had undergone an apprenticeship and learned the basic principles of engineering. He refers to these skilled manual workers as ‘Utility Men’ (ibid.) for whom he has great respect. Perry’s aesthetic practice and his own tastes in art are very much shaped by these childhood memories but at the same time he is aware that ‘over-determination’ is a risk (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1988, p: 292). Perry acknowledges that it can be tempting to ‘mythologize the past’ to fit with the artwork (Perry, 2014, p: 110)<sup>4</sup> and he is wary about claiming that there is ‘some literal link from my childhood experience to the form of my art’ (ibid.). He also admits that his childhood memories are unreliable, they are only ‘fragments’ that have ‘expanded to fill the space’ (Jones and Perry, 2007, p: 28). Hence, the few memories that remain amount to ‘a series of idealisations really’ (ibid.). Perry explores the complex and contingent relationship that exists between our memories and our sense of self in *Who Are You?*

Perry found another refuge in the home of his Aunt Mary, the older sister of his mother. Aunt Mary lived on a council estate in the Essex village of Broomfield, ‘the space, the light, the little houses on the lawns’ was the landscape I grew up in’ (ibid. p:

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<sup>4</sup> Perry discusses the link from art to life with reference to the artist Joseph Beuys who made up a story about being rescued by Tatar tribesmen after his plane had crashed. Beuys claimed that fat and felt were his ‘signature materials’ because the tribesmen had wrapped him in fat and felt blankets to keep him warm (2014, p: 110). Perry draws attention to the fact that his plane did crash, ‘but no Tatar tribesmen, or fat, or felt, were involved in his rescue’ (2014, p: 110).

41). Aunt Mary was ‘very ritualistic’ and obsessively house-proud and Perry felt safe here. He describes a ‘particular atmosphere of afternoon’ with the ‘clock ticking, the budgerigar cheeping, and the gas fire hissing – phewww – while the afternoon faded’ (ibid.). Perry played on the floor with ‘Lego bricks and a toy car’ as ‘the twilight came through the net curtains between the two china dogs and the brass monkey’ (ibid.). Arthur Mee’s *Children’s Encyclopaedia*, given to him by his Uncle Arthur, provided another ‘comfort and an escape’ (ibid. p: 38). Between these pages, Perry discovered a ‘very old-fashioned, Imperialistic view of the world as all Wonga-Wonga land’ (ibid. p: 37). He notes:

...the print was miniscule, the pictures compact. The quaintness and richness of these volumes affected my aesthetic, playing a symbolic part in shaping the way in which I oriented myself in the world (ibid. p: 41).

The artist recognizes that as a child he inhabited ‘a pseudo-1950s dream world’ (ibid. p: 39). When he thinks about his father, he sees images of ‘plough horses, traction engines, thatched cottages and vicars on bicycles’ (ibid. p: 42). He contrasts this vision of a ‘quaint old fifties England, pre-consumerism, pre-mass ownership of cars’ with the world he associates with his step-father in Bicknacre which he imagines as ‘bleak flats and the tinny modernity of that time’ (ibid. p: 42-43). He returns to the theme of nostalgia versus modernity in *Unpopular Culture*.

Despite his working class roots, Klein suggests that Perry has a ‘complex and fluid relationship with class’ (Klein, 2013, p: 65). Perry describes himself as an ‘Essex boy’ from a ‘culturally working class family’ (ibid.) but there were class tensions at home. Perry’s mother ‘who was staunchly working class, almost aggressively so’ often came into conflict with his stepfather who ‘aspired to middle class values’ (Jones and

Perry, 2007, p: 61). These early domestic disputes alerted Perry to a world divided in terms of 'them' and 'us' (Klein, 2013, p: 65). Perry remembers the day Mrs Thatcher came into power because he accompanied his mother to the polling station whereupon she announced 'Here come the Labour voters. Yes, yes, we're the Labour voters' (Jones and Perry, 2007, p: 62). His mother voted Labour and his stepfather voted Conservative and Perry believes that 'a lot of my rebelliousness, the style of it comes from her' (ibid.). His late teens were played out against the backdrop of Thatcherism when Britain was in the grip of social unrest and widening economic divisions. Class conflict was rife in Britain under Margaret Thatcher, with violent industrial disputes on the one hand and the rise of big business, rampant individualism and personal greed on the other. Perry soon came to realize that class tensions were not restricted to the domestic domain.

According to Klein, Perry has always managed to remain 'stubbornly outside the strictures of class' partly as a consequence of 'his all-consuming fantasy world, devoid of the usual influence of adult authority and led instead by his trusty teddy bear' (2013, p: 66). As Philippa Perry points out 'He didn't get the usual scripts that we typically get passed on from our parents. He didn't get this good and bad lens through which to see the world' (Perry 2008, cited in Klein, 2013, p: 66). Perry's parents did not offer a source of guidance, moral or otherwise, nor did they offer any kind of role model with which he could identify; his fantasy world developed in response to this *lack* of parental input. Klein also notes that Perry benefitted from a good education at an established grammar school. In addition, the decision to go to art college in 1979 was the 'ticket out of Essex' enabling him to 'escape my roots through art' (Jones and Perry, 2007, p: 116). Perry's decision to go to art college placed him in a social context in which the

typical signifiers of class ‘money, wealth and property ownership’ had less value than ‘the currency of ideas and personal expression’ (Klein, 2013, p: 66).

Klein suggests that Perry’s ‘semi-classlessness’, has given him ‘a freer eye than most over the world around him’ (ibid.). Perry’s success as an artist has enabled him to overcome the material limitations of his class background and given him both physical and intellectual distance him from his working class roots nevertheless he continues to refer to himself as an ‘oik-usurper’ (Perry, 2016). This tongue-in-cheek self-description is a way of acknowledging that this is ‘an elective belonging ... a mode of middle class relationship to place which recognizes the possibility of leaving and moving somewhere else’ (Savage, 2015, p: 264). Perry admits using this term ‘as an identity weapon, because I know it gives me licence, to keep me an outsider in the art world’ (Perry, 2016), when in truth, he has an insider’s knowledge of how the art world functions. By labelling himself ‘an oik usurper’ he is signalling not only that he remains alert to the connotations of inferiority that are often synonymous with a working class identity but also that he is aware of his own accumulated cultural capital. This insider/outsider position is perhaps what Klein means by her term ‘semi-classlessness’ (2013, p: 66).

In Klein’s account, the term ‘semi-classlessness’ is associated with a notion of social mobility. Perry’s own journey of social mobility through education has taken him from his working class roots into the very middle class milieu of the contemporary art world. But he remains acutely aware that such a journey is much less common today, not least because despite all this ‘talk of a classless society ... the class system still thrives’ (Perry, 2013, p: 11). In maintaining his own somewhat ambivalent relationship to class, the artist has demonstrated that he is adept at finding new ways to explore this age-old topic. As someone who ‘always had a perspective about ... his own... aspirations’ (Jones and Perry, 2007, p: 192) Perry uses his own experiences to explore

wider issues, including the nature of aspiration, the pressures of consumerism, the idea of social mobility as an act of class betrayal and the prejudices underlying this assumption in *The Vanity of Small Differences*. As he points out, ‘A clever artist is one who can still keep it fresh and can look at where they are and who they are and not pretend they’re still the outsider’ (Perry, 2016).

Klein also views the ‘freer eye’ that Perry is able to ‘cast over the world around him’ as a form of ‘classlessness’ which is partly due to the circumstances he found himself in as a teenager (2013, p: 66). Perry was an outsider in relation to his own family, a situation that placed him in the role of an observer rather than a participant in family life. In addition, the round of menial jobs foisted on him by his stepfather provided him with the perfect opportunity to gather information about the social worlds of his neighbours. He took a keen interest in what papers they read, what jobs they did, their family connections and how they lived (Klein, 2013). These biographical details show that Perry’s childhood was shaped by the material and symbolic structures of working class life. He has travelled a long way from his class roots but it is clear that these early experiences have continued to inform his art-making practice and his sense of identity. The emotional memories and habits of thought linger on. As he himself observed, ‘Class is an interesting thing because it does so inhabit you’ (Perry, 2016).

Here, we are reminded of Bourdieu’s claim that:

...it is an immediate adherence, at the deepest level of the habitus, to the tastes and distastes, sympathies and aversions, fantasies and phobias which, more than declared opinions, forge the unconscious unity of a class (1986, p: 77).

Perry makes these affective and imaginary dimensions of class visible through his anatomy of taste in *The Vanity of Small Differences*.



## **The internal hierarchies of the art world**

Perry regards *Transvestite Jet Pilots* (1980/81) as his first ‘real piece of art’ (Klein, 2013, p: 13). Klein points out that this ‘strange assemblage of found and hand-crafted objects’ (ibid.) was a portent of what was to come. Almost forty years later, Perry’s extensive body of work includes tapestries, prints, drawings, sculpture, photography and of course, pottery. His subject matter not only reflects his own concerns but also engages with a wide range of issues including consumerism, sexual practices, fetishism, religion, war and class and culture. According to Klein (2013), Perry’s popularity now rivals that of other high profile artists such as David Hockney and Lucian Freud. As noted in the previous chapter, Perry has not always been comfortable with his place in the art world and this discomfort is directly related to his own internalized sense of class inferiority as he himself points out:

It took me until fairly recently to get over what I would call “imposter syndrome”: the idea that high culture, museums and being successful in the arts wasn’t something for the likes of me (Perry cited in Klein, 2013, p: 65).

My own view is that the nature of Perry’s art and aesthetics lies in this statement. The artist does not just offer us one model of class, for example, in some of his pots, class is envisaged as a dichotomous social world polarised between two the extremes of ‘them’ and ‘us’. In the tapestries, Perry offers us a triadic notion of class divided into upper, middle and lower classes. In his exhibition entitled *Who Are You*, class is shown as intricately interwoven with other aspects of identity. Class divisions are also an integral (albeit largely unacknowledged) aspect of the art world. Sarah Thornton points out that despite its apparent openness to new ideas and experimentation the art world is far from being ‘egalitarian or democratic’ (Thornton 2008, p: xiii). Thornton contends that:

The contemporary art world is what Tom Wolfe would call a “statusphere”. It is structured around nebulous and contradictory hierarchies of fame, credibility, imagined historical importance, institutional affiliation, perceived intelligence, wealth and attributes such as the size of one’s collection (ibid. p: xii).

Perry inhabits this ‘statusphere’ but his determination to make work that appeals to a wide audience continues to divide opinion within the arts establishment. As Perry points out, accessibility is often synonymous with the banal or mundane. Tracey Emin gave voice to this position during the Turner Prize television broadcast. When asked about Perry’s work, Emin offered no assessment of its artistic merits, merely stating ‘Grayson is pretty popular with the masses’ (Klein, 2013, p: 9).

Klein suggests that two more facts are important when considering how Perry divides opinion: ‘that he is a potter and that he is a transvestite’ (ibid.). Perry’s artistic output covers a wide range of media, but his pottery undoubtedly made his name. This particular choice of medium is significant precisely because it occupies a liminal space between art and craft: it is neither the one nor the other. More importantly, pottery represents ‘a particular affront to the art world and Perry deliberately exploits its scandalously unfashionable associations with decoration, domesticity and craft’ (ibid. p: 9). At first glance, Perry’s vases look like random household objects that might be picked up at a country fair or in the pottery section of a department store. Closer observation reveals that his pots are far from harmless decorative objects. Each pot presents us with a clash between medium and message with questions of good or bad taste forming an integral part of their meaning. I agree with Klein’s point that Perry is using this medium in a reactionary way but, as he points out, his own experience of art is very much concerned with reacting against the ‘boundaries concerning taste’ (Perry, 2014, p: 55). Part of the attraction of pottery and craft (a category that includes

tapestry) is that they are dangerously ‘close to art’ (ibid.). And they carry ‘middlebrow’ associations with ‘resonances of the suburban bourgeoisie who might see art as aspirational by association’ declares Perry (ibid. p: 56). For ‘highbrow defenders’ of the claim that anything can be art, being ‘middlebrow’ is ‘the sin of their opponents’ (ibid. p: 56). This is the phenomenon that Perry labels the ‘narcissism of small differences’ as it manifests in the context of the contemporary art world (ibid. p: 55).

Challenging the disciplinary boundaries of art and thinking about what they mean in terms of social divisions and social identities has brought Perry up against how he sees himself as an artist:

I struggle with a vision of myself as an old fuddy-duddy, pre-twentieth century arty type but conversely, I’m coming to realize that in many ways I myself am a conceptual artist masquerading as a craftsman (ibid.).

The artist has previously stated that he does not identify himself ‘at base level’ as a potter but rather as ‘an artist who uses ceramics’ (*The Eye*, Illuminations, 2007). Whilst Perry remains very connected to the realities of making art (he handcrafts his works without the aid of studio assistants) he is unwilling to be held up as ‘a poster boy of the handmade’ (Perry, 2014, p: 35). As he points out, there is a danger that ‘things which *are* handmade could become overly fetishized’ because people are too focused on ‘the idea of authenticity or artisanal uniqueness’ (ibid.). As a contemporary artist Perry’s ‘default mode of working is with ‘new media’’ (ibid. p: 100). Technologies such as Photoshop have vastly expanded the range of possibilities in terms of his art-making practice. As he points out, his tapestries are woven in a few hours on digitised looms. Whilst technology has the potential to make everyone into an artist, Perry suggests it also means the ‘*approach* of the artist is more and more relevant’ (ibid. p: 103, italics in original).

## Cross dressing and class

At the opening of his second Reith Lecture, titled *Beating the Bounds*, presenter Sue Lawley asked Perry to describe his outfit for the benefit of his radio audience. The artist said his outfit was ‘very short, in bone satin, with kind of renaissance style heraldic motifs of, sort of orgies and teddy bears’ with ‘a little bit of the Siena Palio maybe’ (*Reith Lectures*, 2013). Perry accessorized this ensemble with pop socks and bare knees, a flash of bare thigh, high heels, pink eyebrows and heavy sequinned eyelids (*ibid.*). When asked whether Claire was ‘a work of art’ Perry answered, ‘No, I use my artistic power to deny that’ (*ibid.*). Given the visual spectacle that this description of Claire would undoubtedly have conjured up in the minds of his radio audience, this answer may well have come as a surprise. Dressing up is another area in which Perry enjoys challenging people’s assumptions. This exchange is also a witty reference to Duchamp’s claim that anything could be art because the artist says so. Perry was making his own views about conceptual art clear by joking that he would like the power to point to something and say ‘No, it’s no longer art, that there’ (*ibid.*). Perry’s cross-dressing has always divided opinion, with many commentators dismissing it as little more than a ‘shrewd publicity stunt’ (Klein, 2013, p: 10).

My own view is that Perry’s decision to focus on class the great unmentionable means that his choice of subject matter is equally divisive. Perry is distinguished by the fact that he is virtually the only contemporary artist to make class the central theme in his work and his cross-dressing. He thinks of his dressing up ‘as the heraldry of my subconscious, an outwardly worn manifestation of what is happening within’ (Jones and Perry, 2007, p: 50). He began borrowing his sister’s clothes when he was twelve years old. The clothes were always too tight and he wore them whilst acting out detailed bondage fantasies in his bedroom. From the outset, there was always a fetish element

involved but initially Perry remained unaware of the sexual nature of his activities. With hindsight, he understands that his bondage fantasies were filling the void left by his parents in the sense that a fetish 'is an object that takes the place of normal human relations' (ibid. p: 57). This fetish element attracts Perry to certain clothing and fabrics. He describes finding a 'prim, demure dress in a distasteful Crimplene material' that was outwardly repulsive, but nevertheless, seductive, in its '...foreignness, the femininity and the feel, the scratchiness and the unyieldingness' (ibid. p: 53). For Perry, the dress provided a form of protection, 'a carapace of femininity' (ibid.).

By the time he was fifteen, Perry had discovered that he was not alone in his dressing-up activities and that they were a recognized phenomenon. Once he realized there were other men involved in similar activities he decided that his transvestite persona needed a 'fem' name to use in transvestite clubs (Klein, 2013, p: 124). A girlfriend suggested the name Claire because it 'suited her look and character' (ibid.). The earliest photo of Claire is dated 1979; as Klein points out, '...in her earliest manifestations (and the connections to Perry's own mother can hardly be overlooked) Claire was the embodiment of an Essex housewife' (ibid.). Perry describes Claire as 'the sort of woman who would head up town to do a spot of shopping, the sort of woman who would go to Debenhams' (Perry cited in Klein, 2013, p: 124). My contention is that the class connotations are equally significant. During the 1980s and 1990s Claire frequently appeared in the guise of the dominant social types and personalities of the time, wearing a blond coiffure, 'a prim suit, head scarf and pearls – part Margaret Thatcher, part Camilla Parker Bowles' (ibid. p: 124).

Claire also plays a major part in Perry's early films such as '*Bungalow Depression*' (1981) which shows a day in the life of a Women's Institute member. There are nine vignettes in which Claire appears as an outwardly respectable, lower

middle class housewife. Perry describes this film as realizing ‘another of my eccentric fantasies’ (ibid. p: 20). With the benefit of hindsight, this film seems to provide us with clues about the future direction of Perry’s interest in class and voyeurism. The location is a new housing estate, the interior décor includes ‘net curtains’ and ‘knick-knacks’ and Claire is wearing ‘curlers’ and a ‘floral housecoat’ (ibid.). These visual clues immediately place this woman in a particular social class whilst the title of the film suggests there might be hidden depths lying beneath the veneer of respectability. The sense of bleakness and futility is reinforced by one vignette in which the camera invites the viewer to join Claire in peering ‘through the net curtains, a big part of the day’s activities’ (ibid.). In Perry’s later work, he becomes a ‘pseudo-ethnographer’: a more legitimate form of voyeurism.

Klein notes that rather than dismissing Claire, it would be more accurate to read her multiple reincarnations ‘...as signs of Perry’s own, more personal, emotional development’ (ibid. p: 127). In 2000, Perry underwent a shift in his ‘thinking about and expression of his transvestism’ when commissioned to produce a ritualistic object for a touring exhibition, ‘A Sense of Occasion’ (ibid. p: 124). Klein notes that Perry was in the middle of a course of therapy that was helping him to make sense of ‘his complex and competing gender identities’ (ibid.). The ‘bespoke dress’ that Perry designed for this occasion also became ‘part of his very own coming out ceremony’ (ibid.). Since the early 2000s Claire has continued to make regular appearances in little girl outfits and more exaggerated ‘panto-dame-cum-geisha-girl’ costumes but she has also appeared in more ‘sexualized’ bondage outfits that are familiar from pornographic films (ibid. p: 126). As Klein points out, many of these costumes are a ‘provocative embodiment of sexual cliché and deliberate subversion’ (ibid.) but primarily these outfits are Perry’s way of acknowledging that his transvestism is about the desire to

elicit a 'specific type of attention' (Jones and Perry, 2007, p: 50). As Perry points out, 'If a man puts on a little girl's dress, he wants to be treated as a little girl and handled with care ... we all want to be surrounded by the emotion we associate with the clothes we are wearing' (ibid.).

Perry describes himself as one of the '...crackheads of the trannie world. For us, it's the pure drug; we don't mess about trying to be women' (Klein, 2013, p: 124). He admits that his little girl fantasy is 'ludicrous' but it risks humiliation, which is 'one of the most powerful turn-ons' (Jones and Perry, 2007, p: 48). His desire for humiliation is generally thwarted by the fact that:

The only consequence of dressing as Claire at the Turner Prize, for example, is whether I blush because I think I look stupid. If I think I look ridiculous it's horrible, although simultaneously, the disgrace is fantastic – it's a turn-on (ibid.).

Perry admits:

The reality of the situation is never as shameful as the fantasy because my personality kicks in and I'm having a lovely time so I don't get the abasement I'm seeking. I don't want to be humiliated, I just want the fantasy (ibid.).

As it is impossible for a grown man to pass as a little girl Perry suggests that the attention he craves can only be 'symbolic' ... 'If I try to be a girl I always end up being Grayson in a dress no matter what I'm wearing' (ibid. p: 50). Humiliation has always formed a necessary part of Perry's dressing-up fantasy and this emotion has played a central role in terms of developing his creativity. As he makes clear, the compulsion to place oneself in embarrassing situations from an early age makes one immune to embarrassment. Consequently, he has enjoyed greater creative freedom because he has 'never been concerned about fashion or being cool' (*The Eye*, Illuminations, 2007).

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss Perry's cross dressing in any great depth but there two issues I should like to raise in relation to Klein's account. For Klein, Perry's transvestism represents another blurring of boundaries, this time between 'male and female, intellectual and sensuous, serious and comic' (Klein, 2013, p: 9). I agree that his cross-dressing is often very humorous and it can be both 'intellectual and sensuous' as is the case with his Reith Lecture outfit described above, but Perry is clear that when he dresses up as a little girl:

...the boundaries aren't blurred. People are a lot happier and more comfortable with me dressed up as a child than as a woman because it is much less ambiguous: I am a bloke in a ridiculous frock and that's nice and clear (Jones and Perry, 2013, p: 50).

Also, for Klein, the factor differentiating Perry's dressing-up from 'a mere artistic device or marketing ploy is its 'unnerving authenticity' (2013, p: 127). The 'power, pathos and oddness of his transvestism lies not in its status as performance' rather it lies in the fact that Perry's cross-dressing is a 'publicly played-out compulsion – one rooted in 'rejection, unhappiness and the need to be loved for oneself' (ibid.). As a general concept, authenticity concerns a person's relation with the world and the extent to which that person is true to their own inner self, personality, spirit, or character despite external pressures. It seems that for Klein, Perry's cross-dressing is 'unnervingly authentic' because he is 'compelled' to act out these fantasies in public, in other words, the psychological desire or impetus arises from within and is creatively expressed through the medium of Claire. One might say that in this creative impulse Perry is being 'true' to various aspects of his personality. However, my argument is that Perry's cross-dressing works not just as a manifestation of some psychological obsession but also as a means to explore issues around identity. Perry's early reinventions of Claire



offer us class identity as well as gender identity as a matter of performance, in the sense that it is reproduced by our everyday making of ourselves in terms of our imagined or desired identity. This performative aspect seems to play a key role in Perry's cross-dressing.

Jones points out that during the series of interviews she conducted with the artist:

...Grayson appeared almost physically malleable. It seemed that sometimes he would look like a First World War pilot, then a medieval minstrel, then a housewife suffering from ennui, then an elegant hurdler. He was always morphing – I hadn't come across that before and I doubt I shall see it often again (Jones and Perry, 2007, p: 3).

Perry is clear that 'Transvestism is not about being a woman; it's about dressing as a woman' (ibid. p: 151). In *Bungalow Depression* (1981) Claire's character is 'unnervingly authentic' not only because the visual details (the location, the interior design, the clothing, the activities Claire engages in) are so accurate but also because of Perry's insight into the emotional contours of the situation. Gilbert notes that aesthetic conflicts about how to react and what codes of behaviour are the correct ones are also political conflicts over who has '...the power to impose the dominant definition of reality' (2010, pp: 146-147) and crucially what limitations are imposed by certain social conditions of existence (ibid.). There is a level of material security depicted here but also ennui and a sense of the woman being isolated. Depending on the viewer, the film might raise a question about what happens when someone ignores their own moral and aesthetic objections in order to secure a more comfortable existence. Perhaps the woman in the film is sacrificing other aspects of herself in order to maintain this lifestyle.

Whatever we might choose to call our inner being, our 'true' self or character is always multiple, diffuse and shaped by both gender and culture: on Perry's account,

more specifically by class as culture. The ‘authenticity’ of Perry’s art also derives from his refusal to become declassed by making many of his works ‘elliptically autobiographical, like a dream of my childhood’ (Klein, 2013, p: 204). In recycling the material and symbolic elements of working class life and making them the subject of his art he is attempting to give working class culture equal recognition as culture. These issues are explored in greater depth in relation to class identity, taste and consumerism in *Unpopular Culture*, *The Vanity of Small Differences*, *Who Are You?* and in Perry’s pots.

### **Perry’s pots**

Klein has suggested that Perry’s pots can be seen as ‘self-portraits of a sort’ which serve not only to chart his own ‘creative universe’ but also present us with ‘vivid 3-D reflections of our own world’ (ibid. p: 11). Perry acknowledges that:

...as a contemporary artist, part of my job is to be all too well aware of the world around us and I have to balance my primal need to create with an adult fascination with contemporary society (Perry, 2011, p: 13).

As someone who has engaged with psychotherapy, a process he describes as being ‘like someone coming into my mental tool shed and tidying it out’ (Perry in Klein, 2013, p: 199) Perry is acutely aware of his own internal contradictions. The therapy process provided him with greater access to his imagination and signalled a major shift in his work (Klein 2013). From around 2000, he began to ‘confront head-on’ the oppositional tension between the opposing aspects of his personality (ibid. p: 199). Perry explains the workings of his creative process:

I see my art made in partnership between two parts of my personality whom I have nicknamed the *hobbit* and the *punk*. I always try to balance my love of intricate historic detail (the hobbit) with social comment on my own time (the punk). I still

cling on to the notion that somewhere, somehow, all my work belongs not to here and now but to some other place and time (Perry, 2011, p: 13).

In his attempts to balance and represent these oppositional tensions within himself Perry has developed a complex, multi-layered and highly distinctive visual language<sup>5</sup>. After his course of psychotherapy, Perry used the textual metaphor of the map as a way of representing his own inner psyche. His inner psyche is an inherent feature in many of his pots: an internal vanishing point conveys the ‘idea that all of the action is somehow going on inside’ (Perry in Klein, 2013, p: 200). Hence, the pots are ‘self-portraits’ of a kind but, as Perry points out, his punkish spirit makes him ever-alert to current social attitudes, perhaps most notably, our national obsession with class. He is only too well aware that for many people ‘psychotherapy is intimately associated ... with middle class self-obsession’ (ibid. p: 199). As a result, psychotherapy has at times, become the topic of his work and a target for his wit and self-mockery. Whilst his pots might be mapping his own consciousness, as we shall see, they are never simply reflecting his own inner obsessions, they are also reflecting ‘more universal truths about contemporary life and the human condition’ (ibid. p: 43).

Perry began experimenting with ceramics in 1983 and in September of that year, he attended his first pottery evening class. Perry was attracted to pottery because it was ‘unhip, *really* uncool’ (Jones and Perry, 2007, p: 192). Pottery signalled ‘twee, middlebrow and parochial’ and, as a result, it provided him with the perfect opportunity to prove his punkish credentials by demonstrating to the art world ‘just how rebellious and naff he could be’ (Klein, 2013, p: 16). When Perry began making clay pots, he deliberately ignored much of its 30,000-year history, its connections ‘with everything

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<sup>5</sup> See *Map of an Englishman* 2004 in Klein 2013, p: 211. Perry describes this work as ‘the most sophisticated bit of art therapy I’ve ever done’ (Perry in Klein 2013, p: 211). See also *A Map of Days* (2013).

from bricks and altarpieces to teacups and urinals' (ibid. p: 39). With his characteristic sensitivity to the boundaries of taste Perry chose to concentrate on 'just one ceramic trope, perhaps the most awkward in terms of its liminal status between art and craft: that of decorative display pottery and its most precious and iconic object, the vase' (ibid. p: 39). As a result, many of his earliest ceramic works were display objects such as plates and vases rather than functional objects such as cups and saucers (Klein 2013). From the outset, Perry modelled his pots on classical forms that he subverted with explicit sexual imagery and 'punk icons, such as skulls and swastikas' (ibid. p: 17). The works 'occupied a sort of cultural no-man's land, unnervingly bringing pottery into the rarefied space of the gallery' (ibid.). For Perry, these deliberately ambiguous works were an attempt to disrupt the formal boundaries between different artistic traditions: between 'sculpture and vase, art and craft' (ibid.). The vases were neither the one nor the other rather they were, one might argue, something else entirely. This cutting-edge work (a kind of two-fingered salute to both the art historical and craft traditions) brought him to the attention of the London art world.

Perry's inner 'hobbit' manifests in his 'love of intricate historical detail' and his fascination with historical artefacts (Perry, 2011, p: 14). He confesses that whilst we live in a 'high-tech culture' it is really 'old art, whether a Rococo church, a Bruegel or a seventeenth century Norwegian farmhouse, that moves me the most' (ibid.). He goes on to observe that 'despite the mockery and mischief making of 'the punk', a strong thread of overt historical reference survives as one of the constants of my work' (ibid.). In order to unite his love of the past with a critical eye on the present, Perry's art has evolved into an 'iconoclastic mix of the new and the old, the venerated and the throwaway... the collision of opposites, and awkward juxtapositions' (Klein, 2013, p:

11). It is this visual language that gives his work the distinctive style and imagery he has referred to as ‘Grayson Perry-ness’ (Perry, 2012).

Having spent his ‘entire career under the influence of the past’ (Perry, 2011, p: 11) Perry is alert to the way in which material artefacts function as emotional repositories which not only reflect the concerns of previous generations but are open to new, multiple readings. His pots are responding to these earlier artefacts whilst at the same time they are an attempt to create something new. As noted, Perry’s pots always bear the imprint of historic archetypes, ‘for the most part what he calls ‘classical invisible’ shapes of indeterminate oriental origins’ (Klein, 2013, p: 39). His own ideas are filtered through these generic forms, which according to Klein, ‘act like frames to a painting, unnoticed surrounds that are subservient to the content and meaning they contain’ (ibid.). This ‘act of framing’ enables Perry to ‘actively exploit’ and, ultimately, to confound the ‘built-in cultural preconceptions’ that we, as viewers, bring to the works (ibid.).

As discussed in Chapter Three, Bourdieu describes the ‘pure gaze’ as a mode of encounter with art that is ‘disinterested’ in the sense that it ‘signals a break with the ordinary attitude towards the world which, given the circumstances in which it is performed is also a social separation’ (1986, p: 4). Perry’s pots draw our attention to the fact that art objects are always understood inter-textually and they function within other frames of reference, which are in turn, constituted by other texts and practices. Here, we might be reminded of Derrida’s notion of ‘The Parergon’ published in *The Truth in Painting*. I think it can be argued that what Perry is doing is not simply an act of reframing but rather what Derrida refers to as ‘working the frame’ (Derrida, 1987, p:

12).<sup>6</sup> To work the frame is to draw attention to the boundary between the theory of aesthetics and the material objects constituted by this activity. There is a reciprocal relation between art theory and art objects in the sense that each is constituted by the other but is not reducible to it. Perry's work is already framed by the two aesthetic traditions of high art and craft but his art is not reducible to either in terms of its form and content.

In his determination to make work that is firmly rooted in the everyday, Perry's work refuses the 'social separation' demanded by the 'pure gaze' (Bourdieu, 1986, p: 4). Many of his pots are critiques of the contemporary art world and its 'narrow orthodoxy' about which art forms are deemed worthy of recognition at any given moment (Klein, 2013, p: 227). His decision to focus on class and taste as his subject matter is in recognition of the fact that art objects and their theoretical traditions are established not only within disciplinary boundaries but also within limits set by different social and cultural practices (Derrida, 1987). These aesthetic limits concerning taste and beauty are what he sets out to challenge. At first glance, the pots seem to epitomise 'the middle-class drawing room aesthetic' but closer observation reveals that each pot, 'presents us with an intentionally uncomfortable clash between form and content, while questions of good or bad taste are never far from the surface' (Klein, 2013, p: 11). Klein points out that Perry has very accurately labelled his vases 'stealth

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<sup>6</sup> In "The Parergon" published in *The Truth in Painting*, Jacques Derrida critiques Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, notably the *Analytic of the Beautiful* in this particular excerpt. Derrida uses his discussion of the *parergon* to address 'the great philosophical question of the tradition ("What is art?" "the beautiful?" "representation" "the origin of the work of art" etc.)'. He questions Kant's notion of the universal value of beauty by drawing attention to the limits of aesthetics using the notion of the *parergon*. The frame or *parergon* is discussed both in a literal sense as the frame around a painting and in a metaphorical sense as a sequence of framings which are attempts to mark the boundaries between the philosophical discipline of aesthetics and other disciplines such as politics, literary criticism and so forth, all of which take place within limits established by specific cultural and social practices. Thus, for Derrida, one cannot mark the ends of the art object because the *parergon* is 'neither work (*ergon*) nor outside the work [*hors d'oeuvre*], neither inside nor outside, neither above nor below, it disconcerts any opposition but does not remain indeterminate and it *gives rise* to the work. It is no longer merely around the work (Derrida, 1987, p: 9).

bombs', objects that initially appear innocuous but on closer viewing 'explode in a mass of impropriety and perverse humour' (ibid. p: 39).

### ***Taste and Democracy, 2004***

In *Taste and Democracy* (2004) Perry marks the point at which he won the Turner Prize in 2003 and much to 'his delight' was labelled the 'People's Princess' (ibid. p: 225). The Turner Prize put Perry in the media spotlight and, as he was 'transported from the art world into the popular consciousness' he noted that the general public and the gallery-going public were 'two very different animals' not least because they shared what were often opposing views about what constituted good art (ibid. p: 247). This pot can be seen as a kind of visual illustration of many of the themes that Perry returns to in his series of Reith Lectures 'Playing to the Gallery' (2014) and in *Unpopular Culture* (2008).

The pot is another example of Perry reproducing a classical shape to give the pot an elegant but not delicate appearance. The colour palette is a riot of different colours that are very eye-catching but not luxuriously ornate or excessively decorative. The background of the pot is 'a painterly landscape, the cliché of what most people think art is' (Perry in Klein, 2013, p: 227). The inter-related themes in *Taste and Democracy* (2004) include celebrity culture and how modern communication technologies have altered our experiences of ourselves and the ways in which we experience art. We might agree with Perry's claim that it was 'about time a transvestite potter won the Turner Prize' or we might agree with the claim that 'this time they've given the Turner Prize to someone who isn't really an artist' (ibid. p: 224) but on what grounds are we making these judgements? Perry is particularly critical of contemporary conceptual art, especially, 'those who create 'art by phone': works which might well be witty or

intelligent whose execution lacks any relationship to traditional notions of aesthetic judgement or craft' (ibid. p: 227).

Perry admits to courting the Turner publicity machine (when he accepted the Turner prize he was dressed in a Little Bo Peep outfit) (Klein, 2013). So it is perhaps not surprising that the coverage 'was not necessarily about the art' (Perry, ibid. p: 247). The drawn imagery of the pot depicts characters quoting sound bites rather than engaging with the actual works. The quotations actually came from a wide variety of sources including Perry himself, his critics and celebrities including the TV presenter Jonathan Ross (Klein 2013). Like the painterly clichés some of these aphorisms are verbal clichés which have mass appeal because of their humour, such as the 'Hairy Potter', 'Pottery is the new video' and 'sincerity is the new shocking' (ibid.). Often these slogans serve as exhibition titles 'which have become as vacuous and copy-friendly as advertising slogans' argues Stallabrass (2013, p: 152-3)<sup>7</sup>.

Perry has also voiced criticisms about the way in which the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern has focused its sights on showmanship rather than 'any meaningful encounter' with the art on display (Klein, 2013, p: 227). This pot is referencing the fact that modern communications technologies play a role in allowing us to consume art without directly experiencing the works themselves. In Perry's own mind, his celebrity status has 'a parallel existence' to his art practice and he is aware that many people 'who've never seen my work in the flesh know who I am, and that's fine' (ibid. p: 247). As he points out, being an artist 'is not just a matter of having ...a burning, unconscious desire to express your humanity' but rather the 'artist's job is to make new clichés' (Perry, 2014, p: 117). In *taste and democracy* (2004) he is making a serious point but not in a

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<sup>7</sup> In 'The Branding of the Museum' Julian Stallabrass discusses the way in which museums have become recognizable brands. He asks 'what does branding do to the way viewers see and think about art?' He identifies 'branding' as a phenomenon associated with neoliberal economies in which museums have become 'business-like' (2013, p: 149).



moralising or didactic way. Perry is someone for whom art is ‘a way of accessing spirituality almost by stealth – being tricked into all the colour and loveliness of the art’ but he is not naïve about how the culture industry works for both artists and viewers (ibid. p: 129). Whilst this situation may not provide the ideal conditions for experiencing art works, nevertheless ‘It’s the nature of our culture’ (Perry cited in Klein, 2013, p: 247).

### ***Good and Bad Taste, 2007***

In *Good and Bad Taste* (2007) Perry is exploring the way in which taste divides the social classes by bringing together two sets of motifs that would be regarded by one group as good taste and by the other as bad. The pot is modelled on the shape of a nineteenth-century Japanese Imari bottle. This particular frame of reference gives the vase a restrained and formal elegance which is further reinforced by the delicate blue-grey and lemon colour scheme: deliberately chosen by Perry because it ‘spoke to me of upper middle class drawing rooms’ (ibid. p: 79). The surface of the vase contains a series of finely drawn pornographic images contrasted with photographs from a 1980s shopping catalogue. Commenting on this curious pairing, Perry observes that

...the chattering classes might be titillated by the radical chic of the porn while being revolted by the dowdy wares in the catalogue. Conversely, the knitted waistcoat-wearing collector of Royal Doulton figurines might be scandalized by the drawings of sadomasochism (ibid.).

In many of his early pots Perry was keen to distance himself from the studio-pottery movement by sending up what he saw as the philosophical pretensions of the ceramicists, including ‘a subservience of decoration to form’ and ... ‘an authenticity arising from the potter’s ‘truth to materials’ approach’ (ibid. p: 40). In *The Potters Book* ‘the great father of studio pottery Bernard Leach’ asserted that:

...the finest ceramics should always have ‘an intrinsic fitness for purpose’, a practical utilitarianism, to complement their perfection of form, their understated beauty and visual restraint (Leach cited in Klein, 2013, p: 40).

In a very punkish and deconstructive spirit Perry mocks the ‘much-vaunted mythical associations’ of clay by borrowing the signifiers of the pottery movement and re-inscribing them in new settings (ibid. p: 52). He dispenses with the rather austere ‘Leachian principle of less is more’ in favour of his own ‘counter-philosophy: ‘When in doubt bung it on’’ (ibid. p: 41). This philosophy influences the majority of Perry’s pots: they are often full of decoration and colour and bursting with different ideas and scenes from ordinary life. Klein points out that for Leach, there was a virtue in handcrafted objects, not least because they represented a ‘gesture of defiance against the perils of his own age, specifically mechanization and industrialization’ (ibid. p: 43). Leach believed that making things by hand constituted ‘a moral activity’ because one could ‘read in such art the emotional and spiritual authenticity of its creator’ (ibid.). Leach asserted ‘the pot is the man: his virtues and his vices are shown therein – no disguise is possible’ (Leach cited in Klein 2013, p: 43).

Unlike Leach, Perry does not reject technological innovation nor does he see his art as a way of expressing any kind of refined aesthetic or ‘disinterested’ sensibility. As Klein points out, ‘Perry’s pots certainly do not shy away from showing us his vices’ (Klein, 2013, p: 43); in this sense, they are a rejection of the view that ‘the work of art should be a test of ethical superiority, an indisputable measure of the capacity for sublimation which defines the truly human man’ (Bourdieu, 1986, p: 491). Bourdieu cites a comment by Mikhail Bakhtin (apropos of Rabelais) in which Bakhtin points out that the:

...popular imagination can only respond to sublimation by a strategy of reduction or degradation, as in slang, parody, burlesque or caricature, using obscenity or scatology to turn arsy-versy, head over heels, all the 'values' in which the dominant groups project and recognize their sublimity, it rides roughshod over difference, flouts distinction, and, like the Carnival games, reduces the distinctive pleasures of the soul to the common satisfactions of food and sex (ibid. p: 491).

Perry's pots refuse the Kantian primacy of 'pure' form 'over colour and its quasi-carnal seduction' (ibid. p: 487) instead they reflect:

...something deeper and more elemental. With their unique blend of sexual fantasy, political satire, shocking subversion and emotional rawness, they have at their core an authenticity that Leach himself might have recognized (Klein, 2013, p: 43).

In a deliberate challenge to the pure gaze Perry unashamedly embraces the populist aesthetic by replacing artistic sublimation with a Rabelaisian celebration of all that is negated by the aesthetic disposition as 'inferior, coarse, vulgar, mercenary, venal, servile, in a word natural...' (Bourdieu, 1986, p: 491). In my view, what makes Perry's work 'authentic' is his resolute determination to subvert the hierarchies and conventions of aesthetic traditions. One could argue that by employing all of these Rabelaisian 'strategies of reduction or degradation', Perry's pots refuse the social separation between art and life by allowing the return of those pleasures which high art sublimates (ibid. p: 491).

### ***Barbaric Splendour, 2003***

Perry is acutely aware that visual overload and 'emotional excess' signal moral inferiority 'precisely because class is central' (Perry cited in Klein, 2013, p: 68). He describes himself as a natural 'maximalist' who enjoys making 'things that are incredibly ornate and shiny' (ibid.). Perry refers to '*Barbaric Splendour*' (2003) as 'a

deliberate provocation to my audience in the art gallery' (ibid.) not least because it rejects the cool intellectualism of minimalism in favour of something altogether more messily humane. Here the working class aesthetic is designed to appeal not to the taste of a gallery-going audience but rather 'to fit in a home with patterned wallpaper, a patterned three-piece suite, patterned carpet and a reproduction of Constable's *Hay Wain* on the wall (ibid.). The imagery of the pot depicts 'a depressed northern working class landscape' dotted with puddles (ibid.). A couple are kissing in the centre of the pot while the figure of a woman sits with her back towards a baby in a pushchair. Two placards are visible: one reads 'Holiday of a Lifetime' and the other states 'Dream Homes' (ibid.). The signs indicate that a nicer world exists but perhaps it is likely to remain an escapist fantasy for these people. The vase includes decorative roundels that Perry describes as 'the typical trashy dinner-plate motifs of the working class wedding present' (ibid.).

Mourning is a major theme in this work and although Perry's stated aim was to give the pot 'a luxurious ordinariness' (ibid.) the colour palette is, in fact, rather muted and sombre. A small shrine (a sort of roadside memorial) with a photograph of a younger looking Perry is perched on the top. The inspiration was the public outpouring of grief after the death of Princess Diana and the 'whole Dianafication phenomenon' (ibid.). In contrast to the controlled and highly ritualised expressions of grief shown by members of the Royal Family, Perry suggests that this event 'was seen as an example of barbaric splendour by the middle-class media: you can cry at the right opera, but to cry at the wrong thing like Diana's funeral is common and misplaced' (ibid. p. 69).

### ***Them and Us, 2001***

Perry sees the world as socially stratified and many of his works explore the nature of our modern day social divisions. The title of this pot echoes Perry's earliest experiences of class and his growing awareness that there was a binary division between 'us' and 'them' (ibid. p: 65). However, the work itself takes the form of a triptych of pots about the tense relations between the three classes. This apparent mismatch might remind us of George Marshall's claim that most people have a complex, ambivalent and contradictory idea of class (Marshall cited in Cannadine, 1998, p: 165). In *'Them and Us'* (2001) Perry reproduces the classical shape of an eighteenth-century three-piece porcelain set and reworks it as:

...a class triptych, a dialogue between the two larger side vases, the lower and upper classes, and the central middle class vase which has a landscape of Dungeness in Kent, a place with its fair share of friction between poorer locals and trendy weekenders (Perry in Klein, 2013, p: 72-73).

In *'Them and Us'* Perry depicts the landscapes of three different social worlds: upper, middle and lower. The three pots are sumptuously decorative and share an eye-catching gold and pale blue colour scheme with a luxurious sheen to the surface. The two larger side vases represent the upper and lower classes and the smaller central vase represents the middle class. Each vase features the imagery that is most closely associated with the different classes. A Pit Bull terrier sits atop the working class vase whilst the upper class one 'has a rather triumphant horse and rider' (ibid. p: 72). The central vase shows the Dungeness landscape, which is both geographically and symbolically significant as a site of oppositional tension between the two groups; it is also a highly significant location in terms of Perry's own personal mythology. The drawn imagery on the middle vase includes a church, a shed, a boat and a car with a

large spoiler. A caravan and curiously, a pair of discarded high heeled shoes and a chair are also depicted. Two small planes are flying low overhead. The two larger vases include the 'trashy dinner-plate motifs of the working class wedding present' (ibid. p: 68) but they are not depicted on the un-lidded middle vase. No visual detail is left to chance and this omission is intended to signify bourgeois restraint. Notwithstanding the dialogue written onto the surface of the pots, there is a certain irony in the fact that there are more similarities than differences between upper class taste and lower class taste.

Perry informs us that the dialogue taking place between the two larger side vases contains 'all the insults I could think of that each of the classes might say about, or to, the others' (ibid. p: 72) whilst the smaller and more restrained central middle class vase is caught between these two opposing factions. The working class vase shows 'lots of skateboarders in a derelict landscape' whilst the wording states 'elitist parasites', 'soak the rich', 'Fat cat Sloane', 'toffs out of art now' and 'stuck-up do-gooders' (ibid.). The upper class vase depicts a countryside setting and here the wording takes the form of equally insulting epithets including 'noisy slags', 'unhealthy dysfunctional underclass' (ibid. p: 64) and 'violent drunks', 'illiterate scum', 'criminal classes', 'social security scroungers' and 'Lazy thickies' (ibid. p: 73). These insults are not based on actual knowledge about the behaviour of such groups rather they are an example of what Cannadine refers to as the 'complex and contingent' relation that exists between 'social vocabularies and social identities' (1998, p: 166).

Here we might also be reminded of Jameson's contention that class consciousness always revolves around 'the experience of inferiority' which in turn 'can be seen to inform our various, mostly unconscious or implicit maps of the world system' (1999, p: 48). According to Jameson, the 'internalized binary oppositions' of class 'assimilate all other phenomena to the play of class antagonisms' (ibid. p: 47).

This internalized oppositional class relation, as described by Jameson, consistently reappears in the visual language of Perry's work. Although there are three vases here, crucially, the central vase is silent. For Perry, '*Them and Us*' was an attempt to reject 'the idea that the working classes are somehow the 'real' world ... and that rich people live in a kind of fantasy. No they don't – they just live in a much nicer real world!' (Perry cited in Klein, 2013, p: 72). In '*Them and Us*' Perry gives us an example of class as a 'socio-political antagonism' in the Marxist sense but he also illustrates how class is both 'an ongoing social reality and an active component of the social imaginary' (ibid. p: 48). Each pot depicts the landscape of a very different social environment and reveals the language and imagery used by one class to describe the other.

***The Tragedy of Ordinary Life, 1996*** (Klein, 2013, p: 75).

Perry found the inspiration for this pot in '...the dissonance between a beautiful piece of music and seeing a poor downtrodden person trudging past my window, a bag lady or a drunk old man' (ibid. p: 75). This quotation is important because it seems to capture a concern and a tension found in much of his art. He chose the title to illustrate 'that schism between uplifting great art and everyday working-class reality' (ibid.). The classic shape is used but *the tragedy of ordinary life* has a more solid than elegant appearance, which seems in keeping with its subject matter because it hints at functionality rather than decoration. Similarly, the colour palette is muted, almost drab and quite lacking in sensuous overload and lustre. The emphasis is not on creating visual beauty rather the intentional ordinariness of this pot serves to emphasise the 'schism' between high culture and the anthropological culture of 'everyday working-class reality' (ibid.). The idea of ordinary culture as anthropological also implies another question about power relations: who is doing the looking and who is being looked at?

Perry picks up this theme in the drawn imagery of the pot in which a series of figures and faces are in close-up; one man is making direct eye contact with the viewer. Perry observes that ‘art often has a voyeuristic quality, if you think about art lovers peering at works in smart galleries’ (ibid.). He suggests that there is ‘also voyeurism in relation to the working classes, where people often think ‘Oh, look at the charming poor people going about their drudgery!’ (ibid.) Perry admits that he ‘quite likes drudgery’ (ibid.) whilst being aware that there is a world of difference between drudgery as a choice and drudgery as an enforced daily reality. The artist returns to the theme of voyeurism and the working classes in *Unpopular Culture*.

***What Things Say about Us, 2002*** (Klein, 2013, p: 84).

This pot is another example of Perry reframing another ‘classical invisible’ shape by setting up an obvious clash between form and content. ‘*what things say about us*’ (2002) is an elegant vase with an attractive colour scheme of dark blue, ochre, pink, beige, and yellow which, at the risk of sounding gauche, is a beautiful object in itself. The main theme of this pot is how consumer durables function as social signifiers. The imagery of the pot depicts a countryside landscape that is scattered with abandoned consumer goods that are ‘saying things like ‘Fashion victim’ or ‘Boring Macho Wanker’, ‘Label Queen and ‘Fat and common’ (ibid.). Perry described this pot as ‘quite literal: it shows consumer goods saying what they think of the people who buy them’ (ibid.). In the popular imaginary, the gradual fragmentation of the working class and the expansion of the middle class are associated with the move to mass consumerism.

This pot is an example of the ‘anti-consumerist strand’ in Perry’s work, which brings to mind a comment by Andrew Marr. Marr contends that since 1976 ‘modern Britain [has been] a story of the triumph of shopping over politics’ (Marr, 2007, p: 8).



In 1975 Margaret Thatcher began advocating the move towards a more highly individualised, acquisitive society and people were being encouraged to think differently about social inequality (Thatcher, 1975). As the pot illustrates, consumerism has changed how we see ourselves and how we see our relations to the society in which we live. This pot invites us to think about the basis on which we define our social identities to each other and to ourselves. We might also question whether the free market society has delivered its promise of greater equality of opportunity. Is consumerism the route to greater social mobility or, a system that actively exploits those who have the least capital? Perry addresses this question in *The Vanity of Small Differences* 2013.

### ***Ultimate Consumer Durable, 2005***

This pot was made for a show in Venice; Perry drew his inspiration from the history of the city and its role as a commercial trading centre. The classic shape of this pot references the kind of jar used to store the spices or essential oils traded in Venice. The four lugs and sturdy appearance of this pot emphasize its functionality. The colour palette is predominantly a wash of greens, blues and turquoise that bring to mind the Venetian canals. The surface of the pot reinforces this theme using shapes that appear like reflections on the surface of water. Venice is also the meeting place for the art elite: a closed circle of people who prefer intellectual abstraction to emotional difficulty. This preference is ‘mainly a class thing’ observes Perry (Farndale, 2011). Perry has frequently referred to this inner circle within the art world as ‘a distinct, tribal micro-culture, a little village of witch doctors who make artworks about their belief system and concerns’ (Perry cited in Klein, 2013, p: 225). He incorporates this anthropological theme in the drawn imagery of the pot using ‘traditional animal motifs taken from different periods and cultures’ (ibid. p: 63). Perry re-appropriates and reframes these

symbols of traditional ethnic cultures by giving each one ‘an international brand, so there’s an Aztec Sony and a medieval Chanel, for example’ (ibid. p: 61).

Perry explains that this pot takes as its subject the way in which the ‘creative industries swallow-up indigenous cultures’ by turning them into commodities (ibid.). The fashion and music industries are identified as the prime culprits here, the former might ‘have a year of going all Russian peasant’ whilst the latter might ‘give their new album a Balinese gamelan feel’ (ibid.). The pot was made to ‘reflect [s] the rapaciousness of the globalized consumer machine’ (ibid.). Venice was once at the centre of the Orient/Europe trade route; today this distinctive cultural identity has been largely eliminated by ubiquitous international brands such as ‘Gucci handbags and Chanel perfume’ which are ‘gew-gaws to the wealthy tourist’ argues Perry (ibid.). Here we are reminded of Bourdieu’s claim that ‘the mode of expression of a cultural production’ will invariably be shaped by ‘the laws of the market in which it is offered’ (1986, p: xiii). As Stallabrass (2013) points out, in a neo-liberal economy these ‘brands sell life-styles and experiences (or at least images of them) as well as products’ (2013, p: 150).

Stallabrass contends that as art and business become ever more entwined ‘the artist is the paragon of self-fashioning which serves the new spirit of capitalism’ (ibid. p: 155). As someone who is claiming to be both artist and critical social commentator, Perry acknowledges the inherent irony of his position, ‘Of course, art, above all, is the ultimate consumer durable’ and ‘pots are, I suppose, my own brand’ (Perry in Klein, 2013, p: 61). I think it is possible to make the case that far from serving the ‘spirit of capitalism’ Perry’s work can be seen as a response to Bourdieu’s contention that ‘there is no way out of the game of culture’ (1986, p: 12). Therefore, one must proceed by ‘objectifying the true nature of the game’ by exposing ‘as fully as possible’ the ground

on which that objectification rests (ibid. p: 12). I would argue that in producing ‘*ultimate consumer durable*’, his own highly desirable mock-ethnic artefact Perry is trying to objectify ‘the true nature of the game’ by revealing what he calls the ‘double-edged thing: I was critiquing the vacuousness of brands but also admitting that I’m a brand as well’ (Klein, 2013, p: 61). Perry returns to the theme of consumerism and how brands are shaping our lives in *The Vanity of Small Differences*.

### ***Jane Austen in E17, 2009***

Often I open the kiln and hate the piece. It’s the search for the perfect pot. It’s the fight against the terrible cruelty of the material reality in the traumatic birth from my imagination. I’m not in love with my pots; I’m in love with the sensual beauty they can give (Jones and Perry, 2007, p: 191).

As noted, beauty has become a ‘suspect’ term in the art world; Perry attributes this development to the fact that ‘there is an over-privileging of ideas in contemporary culture’ (Klein, 2013, p: 60). For Perry, the object is important and creating something ‘for visual and sensual pleasure is a worthy thing for any artist to aspire to’ (ibid. p: 232). *Jane Austen in E17* is one of Perry’s largest vases: made ‘as a kind of technical tour de force’: a way of demonstrating his mastery of technique (ibid. p: 63). Perry wanted the pot to be ‘an aesthetic whole’ with ‘a kind of flawless, watery beauty, for the imagery to look almost as if it was underwater’ (ibid.). Here the focus is not on creating ‘visual dissonance’ but rather the balance is tilted towards creating ‘pure visual beauty’ (ibid. p: 60) by carefully controlling ‘colour, texture and fluid lines’ (ibid. p: 63).

The vase takes as its theme ‘the clash between middle class polite culture and the world of North London outside my studio window with its rows of council houses’ (ibid.). Perry’s love of historical detail is evident in the drawn imagery of the pot, which features ladies in ‘classic Georgian dress doing things like taking tea’ (ibid.). In

place of an overt oppositional tension between form and subject matter, here the delicate, fragile beauty of the vase seems to complement rather than clash with its rather gentile subject matter. Look a little closer and the vase becomes more ‘troublingly beautiful’ (Kennedy 2003) and not quite as aesthetically whole as it first appears. There are modern-day faces captured in tiny roundels decorating the surface of the vase and signs that read ‘CCTV warnings, ‘satellite dishes’ and ‘No dumping’ (ibid.). The clue is in the title: this is Jane Austin meets the ‘the urban grit of Walthamstow’ (ibid.).

### **Concluding Comments**

Despite earning his credentials as a contemporary artist who is more than capable of ironic detachment when required, Perry observes that:

Many of the things I like about my own work are pure craft things, like texture, a combination of colours or the proportion of a line: the old fashioned stuff. Those instant decisions can often be where the organic, spontaneous sensitivity is – where the art is (ibid. p: 147).

Perry wants his pots to bear his fingerprint, not out of any fetishistic desire but rather because he enjoys the process of working with the raw materials of his craft. He describes this connection to his materials as ‘...a symbiotic relationship between making and thinking’ (ibid. p: 55). For Perry, ‘Art isn’t just a calculated thought process’, it is a ‘visceral dialogue’, which he very much enjoys (ibid. p: 55). These comments make it clear that his art practice is a combination of deep feelings and emotion and the hard-won perfection of a technique ‘over a lifetime of creative experimentation’ (ibid. p: 43). In light of Perry’s biography, it should perhaps come as no surprise to hear that in his own ‘personal cosmology the idealized craftsman is the shadow burnt by my unreliable father before he left’ (Perry, 2011, p: 23). As someone who is a self-confessed lover of the handmade rather than the readymade Perry cannot help but find a delicious sense of

irony in the fact that Duchamp's urinal – 'the artwork that started it all' no longer exists because the original was destroyed and the model is no longer commercially available. What the visitor sees in its place are urinals that were 'handmade by a potter' (Perry, 2014, p: 73).

As these pots illustrate, there is always a dissonance and tension in Perry's art: between his own love of beauty and his awareness of the hardships of everyday life, between a recognition of the class-based nature of taste, and a love of high art, between the pure aesthetic and sensuality and barbarity, between a critique of consumerism and the recognition of himself as a brand, between art and craft and between artifice and reality. The pots show him negotiating these oppositional tensions using a highly sophisticated visual language. His works are often very complex, multi-layered and characterized by a near obsessive attention to detail. He is a contemporary artist for whom cool intellectual abstraction holds little attraction, instead he describes himself as someone who worships at temple of art and this is evident in his pots which reference both art historical and craft traditions. He plays around with the dictates of high art because he can and because he enjoys doing so but underlying his punkish playfulness is the more serious intent to subvert its hierarchical codes and conventions.

The pots include multiple layers of meaning, a technique not done to exclude the viewer but rather to appeal to different audiences, for example, by including narrative content. He is the consummate craftsman; the pots are often beautiful objects in themselves and an immediate sensuous pleasure can be derived from an engagement with them, which does not require any prior knowledge about the multiple works they are referencing. His works are accountable in the sense that they engage with the reality of working class life without being voyeuristic (a theme that concerns him). This accountability is apparent in his determination to acknowledge his own class journey by

making things that adhere to a 'more 'working-class' aesthetic' (Perry cited in Klein, 2013, p: 68). He displays the utmost skill and has a complete command of his materials and their conventions, which means he is in the perfect place to subvert them. As he points out, 'I can be as outrageous as I like here because the vice squad is never going to raid a pottery exhibition' (Jones and Perry, 2007, p: 193).

**Figure 3.** Grayson Perry *Taste and Democracy*, 2004



Courtesy the Artist and Victoria Miro, London © Grayson Perry

**Figure 4.** Grayson Perry *Good and Bad Taste*, 2007



Courtesy the Artist and Victoria Miro, London © Grayson Perry



**Figure 5.** Grayson Perry *Barbaric Splendour*, 2003



Courtesy the Artist and Victoria Miro, London © Grayson Perry

**Figure 6:** Grayson Perry 'Them and Us' 2001



Courtesy the Artist and Victoria Miro, London. © Grayson Perry

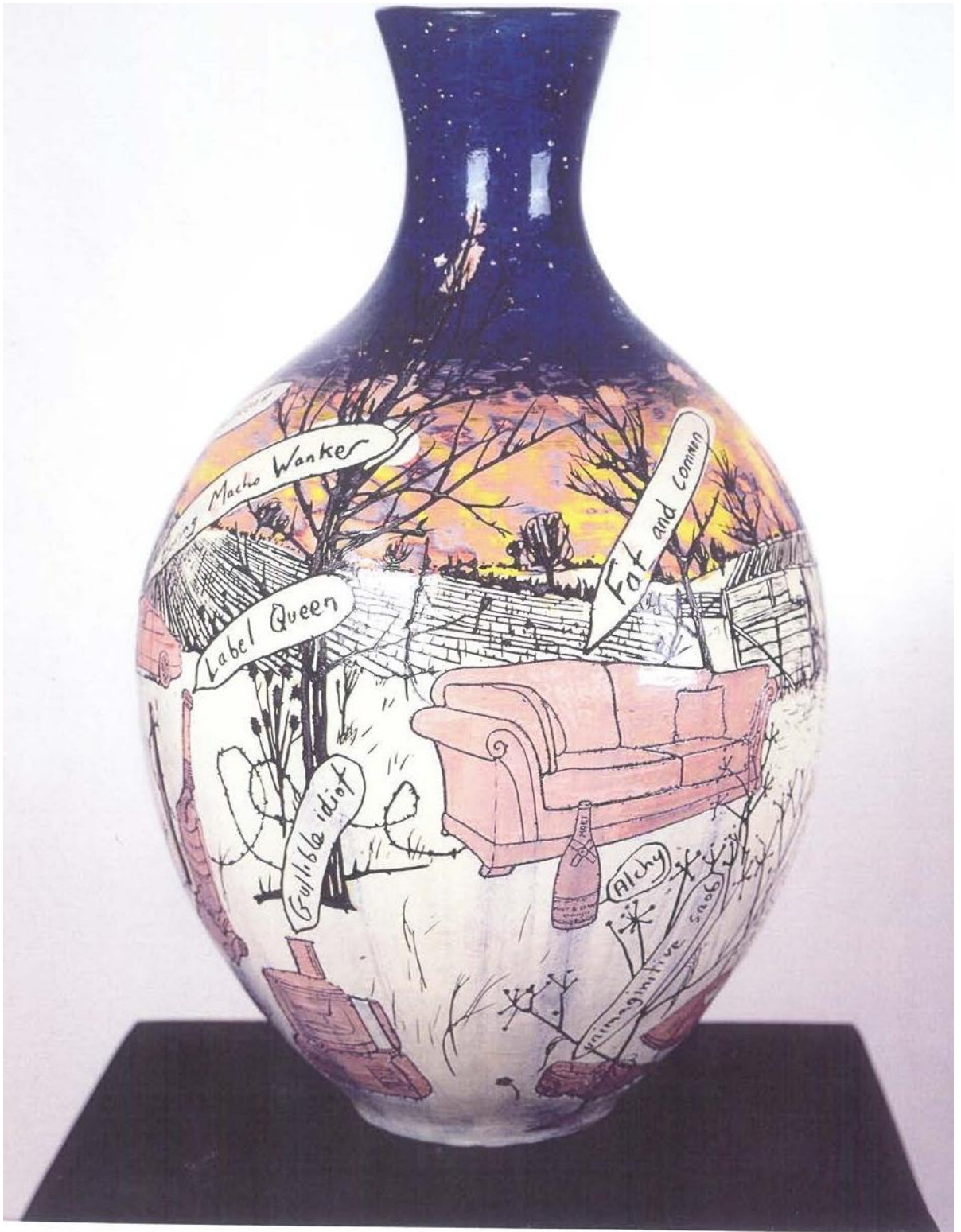


**Figure 7.** Grayson Perry *The Tragedy of Ordinary Life*, 1996



Courtesy the Artist and Victoria Miro London © Grayson Perry (Photography Stephen White)

**Figure 8.** Grayson Perry What Things Say about Us, 2002



Courtesy the Artist and Leeds Museums and Galleries (City Art Gallery) ©Grayson Perry



**Figure 9.** Grayson Perry *Ultimate Consumer Durable*, 2005



Courtesy the Artist and Victoria Miro, London (Photography Stephen White) © Grayson Perry

**Figure 10.** Grayson Perry *Jane Austen in E17*, 2009.



Courtesy the Artist and Victoria Miro, London (Photography Stephen White) © Grayson Perry

## Chapter Five: *Unpopular Culture*

My main argument in this chapter is that although Perry's work is not explicitly political, it does carry an implicit politics of class. His work reveals how class is both an objectivist category anchored in material and social conditions and a social imaginary that informs how people experience their class position and class identity. Bourdieu is quite pessimistic about the prospects for the working class to form themselves into the subjects of history on grounds that they must adopt the language of the dominant class in order to express their political demands. Although Perry does not use the word politics, in his refusal to privilege one manifestation of taste over another, he does in fact, turn the working class into the subjects of history.

Perry's exhibition entitled *Unpopular Culture* (2008) was a selection of paintings, documentary photographs and small sculptures selected from the Arts Council's extensive collection of home-grown art. The artist admitted that in putting together the show, 'I have chosen chiefly to please myself, but in so doing, I have perhaps betrayed my attitude to trends in society and contemporary art' (Perry, 2008, p: 11). Perry's final choice of works was guided by two main principles: firstly, his determination to include a strand of British culture that had previously been neglected by official art historical narratives and secondly, his desire to represent a period of history before communications media and advertising technologies made British art fashionable. In stark contrast to the brashness and thrill-seeking nature of much contemporary art Perry chose works that he characterised 'as subtle, sensitive, lyrical and quiet' (ibid. p: 7). The art was chosen from 'three distinct categories: figurative painting, bronze sculpture and documentary photography' (ibid.). They covered the period 1940-1980 and they shared 'an ineffable sense of mood' (ibid.). The artists on show may have lacked the 'intellectual audacity and visual showmanship' (ibid.) that

would have made them headline news as far as art history was concerned but in Perry's opinion 'as a group these artists speak eloquently of Britain in a time between the trauma of the Second World War and the onset of Thatcherite selfish capitalism' (ibid.). Perry recognizes he is running the risk of being judged 'reactionary or nostalgic' (ibid.) and is unapologetic on both counts. These works are resonant for Perry because they serve to remind us of an age 'before our experience of ourselves was muffled completely by the commercial and sophisticated intermediaries of television, advertising and digital communication' (ibid.).

The title *Unpopular Culture* stemmed from the fact that during the period represented by the show, art was not an everyday feature of press stories nor did contemporary artists provide daily fodder for the gossip columnists. Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore were attracting international attention but modern art did not have a mass audience, it was viewed as a 'more rarefied activity, practised and appreciated by other-worldly bohemians and intellectuals' (ibid. p: 9). Perry acknowledges that whilst 'British Pop Art did enjoy a flurry of fame' during this period, he has deliberately excluded works by its leading exponents such as Peter Blake, David Hockney and Richard Hamilton (ibid.). He did not want to subscribe to 'the hackneyed nostalgia for a psychedelic, World Cup-winning, Mini-driving, miniskirt-wearing, Beatles-loving supposed golden age' (ibid.). He strongly suspects that the 'groovy glory' (ibid.) associated with this period was a very London-centric phenomenon. Perry admits he may be guilty of making wider generalizations on the basis of his own experience but he is convinced he is not alone in being a distant witness of, rather than a participant in, the 'Swinging Sixties' (ibid.).

In order to counter the idea that Britain was in the grip of a widespread cultural revolution, Perry refers to an article in *The Guardian* by Liz Jobey (2004) who



describes the photographer Tony Ray-Jones on his return to Britain after five years in the United States. Jobey notes that ‘The country he left behind was still recovering from the Second World War, but New York was buzzing with newness’ (Jobey 2004). Whilst London was ‘swinging’ it was clear to Ray-Jones that the rest of Britain was ‘still clearly divided by class and tradition’ (ibid.). A description that seems to match Perry’s own experience. During the 60s he claims he never visited an art gallery and was unaware that ‘recreational drugs or homosexuality existed’ (Perry, 2008, p: 9). For Perry, ‘the 1960s blend with the preceding decade’ with the result that he views this period in equally ‘...clichéd terms of austerity and anxiety’ (ibid.). Perry cites Cyril Connolly’s closing editorial for the magazine *Horizon* in 1950 as one which best epitomizes ‘the gloomy intimations of mortality in the national post-war psyche’ (ibid.). Connolly said ‘From now on an artist will be judged only by the resonance of his solitude and the quality of his despair’ (Connolly cited in Perry, 2008, p: 9).

Lynton (1989) confirms this view, noting that the dominant theme of post-war art ‘was that of survival, often joined to anxiety in view of the continuing threat of local or national destruction...’ (1989, p: 258). This theme was given expression in the works on show at the 1952 Venice Biennale. The British Pavilion included sculpture by Lynn Chadwick and Kenneth Armitage. For Herbert Read, a supporter of the Modern Movement in England during the 1930s, abstract works contained within them the potential for a revolution in culture. Read saw in these sculptures, ‘Images of flight, of ragged claws “scuttling across the floors of silent seas” of excoriated flesh, frustrated sex, the geometry of fear’ (Read cited in Perry, 2008, p: 9). According to Lynton, ‘One of the precarious advantages of abstract art is that it can claim to embody a grim view of the world and yet thoroughly beguile us with its aesthetic charms’ (ibid. p: 260).

Writing in 1935, Read viewed modern architecture as ‘revolutionary’ in the sense that it was ‘intimately bound up with the social reconstruction that must take place under a Communist regime’ (1992, p: 502). Read saw in modern architecture and abstract art ‘universal formal qualities’ which, in his view, indicated that modernism was ‘the way of the future – the art of the new *classless* society’ (ibid. p: 506, my italics). But there was a downside, ‘One of the most damaging charges that that can be made against contemporary modern artists is that their work is accepted only by a few initiates. The masses cannot understand them’ (Leger, 1992, p: 641). For Leger, who was interested in the potential of formal experimentation, it ‘was modern capitalism, not modern art, which lay at the root of the problem’ (ibid. p: 640). The artist was convinced that if ‘factory workers and clerks’ and shop workers (ibid. p: 641) had more free time at their disposal they would develop their sensibilities and become fans of modern art. According to Leger, having undergone a period during which ‘taste and choice be formed and exercised ... The ascent of the masses to beautiful works of art, to Beauty, will be the sign of a new time’ (ibid. p: 642). This comment echoes Arnold’s notion of culture as the perfection of human nature that *necessarily* has its expression in the putatively universal qualities of high art<sup>8</sup>. Perry rejects this view of culture and its implicit hierarchy of taste by arguing that the elitist high art narrative represents only one strand of English culture. His aim was to reveal another version of Englishness, one that was often excluded from our official history and, in so doing, he showed us precisely what the ‘masses’ chose to do when they had leisure time at their disposal. To

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<sup>8</sup> Herbert Read identifies two ‘distinct elements’ in art: a formal element appealing to our sensibilities for reasons which cannot be clearly explained but which are certainly ‘psychological in origin’; plus an ‘arbitrary or accidental element of more complex appeal which is the outer clothing given to these forms’ (1992, p: 503). As Read points out the purely formal elements i.e. ‘harmony and proportion’ remain constant and can be found ‘in Greek art, in Gothic art, in Renaissance art and in the art of the present day’ (Read, 1992, p: 503). The idea here is that that the working classes can be civilised: taught to recognize these universal qualities as Beauty. Bourdieu and Perry are both offering explanations of how such ‘sensibilities’ or tastes develop and how they are used to maintain social and economic divisions.

this end, he included a series of photographs and paintings depicting a ‘strand of urban proletarian subject matter, the working class at play’ (Perry, 2008, p: 9).

For Perry, these works are equally representative of the nation’s post-war mood but he admits that he feels ambivalent towards them. Work by David Hepher, William Roberts, Alan Lowndes, Tony Ray-Jones and Patrick Ward are ‘glimpses of a lost world of close-knit communities but also gritty domestic horrors’ (ibid.). If the viewer is tempted to feel nostalgia for such a ‘lost world’, this response might be tempered by the knowledge that these lives were severely limited by material deprivation. Perry’s own mixed emotions about these images are heightened by the fact that on the one hand, these compositions trigger his own ‘memories of fetes, jolly singsongs and days out in Southend’ whilst on the other, ‘in the worried, weathered faces’ he can ‘recall poverty and intolerance’ (ibid.). Perry admits that the ‘poignancy’ of these images is ‘tempered perhaps by a feeling of voyeurism towards the working classes, an uncomfortable remnant of my own class travelling and abandonment of my roots’ (ibid.).

Perry has undoubtedly travelled a long way from his class roots, but he has hardly abandoned them. As Klein points out:

...his attitude towards class differences distinctly colours both the tone and content of his work ... He sees elements of class warfare discreetly embedded in every aspect of contemporary life (2013, p: 67).

The artist’s acute sensitivity to the ‘elements of class warfare’ embedded in the arts establishment coupled with his desire to acknowledge his own class roots was very much in evidence in *Unpopular Culture*. The exhibition is not autobiographical but the ideas and themes it presents are informed by Perry’s own experiences (see Chapter 4). None of the exhibits are used to convey a romantic vision but rather a particular understanding of England as it was in Perry’s youth in the 1960s and 70s. Caroline

Douglas suggests that, in this exhibition, Perry ‘has honed a visual argument about a very personal notion of Englishness that bravely skirts stereotypes, and reaches towards something more difficult, and more true to history’ (ibid. p: 5).

*Unpopular Culture* was about national identity, the stories we tell ourselves and others about our heritage. As noted, many of the subjects featured in the exhibition would never be included in any official narrative of Englishness, indeed, their stories and their lives would be hidden and this is precisely why Perry has chosen them. Perry also made his attitude towards contemporary art and celebrity culture clear by stating that *Unpopular Culture* was not designed to appeal to those ‘adrenaline addicted consumers’ who are looking for ‘a quick fix of visual stimulation’ (ibid. p: 11). It would be more accurate to say that the defiantly unfashionable works on show were an antidote to the idea of art as instant gratification. The aim was to remind us of a time ‘when life was slower and when, maybe, we were more civic and more humane’ (ibid.). In the event, *Unpopular Culture* failed to live up to its name by being wildly popular. The exhibition was shown in eight different venues across England during a tour that ran from 10 May 2008 until 3 January, 2009.

### **General comments on *Unpopular Culture***

There is a rising popularity of contemporary art and an increasing number of visitors at our major art venues. Television, advertising and the widespread use of digital communications technologies also facilitate the focus on visual imagery. The combination of these factors has resulted in a population that is visually literate to an extent that would have been unthinkable fifty or so years ago. In addition, celebrity culture has welcomed many artists and made them household names. Perry reminds us that if we travel back just fifty years, it is obvious that the artists represented in

*Unpopular Culture* were making work under very different conditions, not least because the idea of culture had not yet become synonymous with celebrity and popularity. Perry's curatorial strategy was to select works dismissed as too banal or too suburban and juxtapose them with works considered as high art. This approach was a means of highlighting the tensions 'between differing political and intellectual positions' (Douglas cited in Perry, 2008, p: 4). A number of the works are nostalgic, but this effect is always carefully counter-balanced to achieve a critical as opposed to a sentimental narrative. The England evoked by *Unpopular Culture* is not all 'long days in the sun, slim volumes of verse' but it is not all 'grim, kitchen sink' nor swinging Sixties either' (ibid. p: 5). By avoiding these easy stereotypes, the exhibition does not present a simple narrative of straightforward themes but can best be understood as an attempt to capture the 'emotional texture of a period that still significantly informs our sense of identity' (ibid.). Perry describes *Unpopular Culture* as a show about 'the intangible visual language of Englishness' (Perry cited in Klein, p: 169) which includes notions of 'place and environment, issues of identity and class, and ideas about form' (De La Warr Pavilion, 2008).

### **Discussion of exhibits**

In Perry's view, today there is no real consensus about what the term Englishness means in terms of a national identity. 'We no longer have a clear folk identity, so when we talk about ethnicity it's always about non-Englishness, about the 'other' (Perry in Klein, 2013, p: 169). The artist made two works that are concerned with exploring national identity, both of which he describes as 'responses of mood' (Perry, 2008, p: 10). The first work, a pot entitled *Queen's Bitter* (2007-08) (ibid. p: 86) explores the interweaving of national identity and class in a celebration of craftsmanship skills and traditional leisure pursuits. The colour palette references '*After the Meal*'

(1952) by Jack Smith, the painting that Perry identifies as ‘central to the tone of the exhibition’ (ibid.). *Queen’s Bitter* also pays homage to the ethnographic photographs of Tony Ray-Jones and Patrick Ward, which bring to mind, ‘a more innocent Britain of clubs and hobbies and Mackeson stout’ (Perry in Klein, 2013, p: 80). The pot references an earlier industrial age when apprentice potters would produce a ‘show-off piece’ (ibid.) to demonstrate their skills. Perry included the two lugs on the vase because he wanted it to appear as a functional object ‘– a primitive drinking flagon, dedicated to beery Britain in the second Elizabethan age’ (ibid.). During the 1950s there was a ‘revival of folk culture’ (ibid.) which Perry sees as a deliberate attempt to re-establish a post-war ‘national identity’ (ibid.). This emphasis on ethnicity is captured in the ‘pearly kings and queens with their pigeons and lots of Union Jacks’ depicted in a ‘deliberately folky style’ (ibid.). We can view this pot as a visual expression of the post-war mood described by the historian David Kynaston as a ‘pride in Britain, which had had stood alone, a pride even in ‘Made in Britain’ (2008, p: 59).

Kynaston suggests that ‘at the level of generalization, one can plausibly argue that in some sense British society was frozen during the ten or so years after the war’ (2009, p: 133). This is the ‘quaint old fifties England’ that Perry remembers from his childhood (Jones and Perry, 2007, p: 42). This was a world in which the old social divisions remained firmly in place and a person’s accent and style of clothing immediately marked them as belonging to a particular social class. The leisure pursuits depicted on *Queens Bitter* are very definitely working class along with the decorative medallions (a reference to ‘trashy’ working class dinner plate motifs) featuring pictures of Claire ‘in different headscarves, celebrating one of my earliest fetishes’ (Perry in Klein, 2013, p: 80).

Britain's imperial power began its steady decline immediately after the end of World War Two and her entry into the European Community in 1973 marked the formal end of the imperial age (Darwin, 2011). Perry's second piece, *Head of a Fallen Giant* (2007-08) (Perry, 2008, p: 85) is a reference to this history, when ideas about English identity and civic unity were very much informed by imperialism. This piece was inspired by the idea of the country as a 'giant of maritime power that was the British Empire' (Perry cited in Klein, 2013, p: 169). British imperialism also played a role in Perry's own 'pseudo-1950s dream world' (Jones and Perry, 2007, p: 39). The form of *Head* draws inspiration from the sculptures of William Turnbull and Eduardo Paolozzi and it was designed to appear 'like something that's been dragged out of the sea' (Perry cited in Klein, 2013, p: 169). Here, the maritime theme is together with the theme of tourism and the heritage industry. *Head* is a bronze cast to give it the appearance of an ethnographic object but, on closer inspection, the 'wartime mine' is encrusted not with marine life but with the 'desiccated, boiled-down essence of empire in the form of tourist tat' including:

Union Jacks, the three lions of the English football team, Routemaster buses and kings and queens, Beefeaters, the Post Office, the famous architecture of Tower Bridge and Buckingham Palace ...the all-hallowed tribal symbols of England, barnacles on *homo anglicus* (ibid.).

Taken together these two works offer two different views of national identity. *Queen's Bitter* is a view of class and national identity that finds its expression in quintessentially English (ethnic) folk pursuits rooted in the collective organization of everyday life. By contrast, *Head of a Fallen Giant* embodies a version of Britishness that is based on national institutions including Buckingham Palace, Parliament, Tower Bridge architecture, Routemaster buses and so on. These cherished symbols that Britons hold close to their hearts 'are both ancient and modern' (ibid.). We might see in this

sculpture a rejection of the simple distinction between an ethnic English folk identity and a British national identity. As Stein Ringen pointed out, Britain is a 'thoroughly modern society, with thoroughly archaic institutions, conventions and beliefs' (cited in Cannadine, 1998, p: ix).

The strand of critical British documentary photography represented here by photo journalists such as Thurston Hopkins, David Hurn, and Martin Parr is the key to understanding the entire series of works on show in *Unpopular Culture*. In the years following the Second World War, and into the 1980s, these men set out to record the daily life of Britain. The resulting anthropologically detailed photographic studies revealed some hidden truths about our island nation and the lives of its inhabitants which go a long way towards challenging the myth that post-war Britain was a more classless and equal society. The photographs are black and white silver bromide or silver gelatin prints. The 'ineffable sense of mood' Perry identifies in these works sets the emotional tone for the other pieces on display in *Unpopular Culture* (2008, p: 7). Perry's decision to include these photographs constitutes a twofold challenge to the high art narrative. Firstly, it gives artistic weight to painting, sculpture and photography, ignoring a view of photography as a lesser art form. Secondly, the photographs raise a question about what is an 'appropriate' subject for art. Should art be 'high' culture understood in Arnold's terms as 'the best that is thought and said'? Or should art also celebrate the banal, the mundane and the everyday? In his own art practice, Perry challenges the division that exists between high and low culture by working with an anthropological notion of culture, in which the term 'culture' is taken to mean 'a theory of relations between elements in a whole way of life' (Williams, *Foreword*, 1990). These photographs are crucial to the mood and tone of the exhibition and they provide the means by which Perry instigates a dialogue between documentary photography and



Modernism (represented here by sculpture and painting). This dialogue reveals that all of the art on display can be understood as a form of social commentary, albeit some works are more eloquent than others. Note that these image pairings were taken from the exhibition catalogue.

The first image is of Kenneth Armstrong's sculpture entitled *Figure Lying on its Side (No 5)* (1957) (Perry, 2008, p: 18). Armstrong is an artist who had 'an instinctive concern for the human condition' (De La Warr Pavilion, 2008). This piece is an experiment in representing the human form in which the artist is testing the limits of his subject matter. The sculpture is a bronze of a woman (I think it's a woman). The head is disproportionately small and the legs and the folded arms are quite stick-like. Armstrong's Second War World experiences, which involved aircraft training and tank identification, were an influence on his work (ibid.). These experiences manifest in the 'flat shapes which defy the conventional roundness of sculptural figuration' (ibid.). *Figure Lying on its Side (No 5)* has a body that appears to resemble 'the shape of a tank' with limbs that look like 'the thin horizontal lines of guns' (ibid.). War is undoubtedly a theme but Armitage's work also embodies a feeling of warmth and humanity 'that opposed the sense of anxiety characteristic of his time' (ibid.).

My own impression of this work was rather different. The catalogue places *Figure Lying on its Side (No 5)* next to an untitled photograph by Thurston Hopkins which created a different set of associations for me. When I looked at the Armitage work in relation to the documentary photograph the flattened disc of the sculptural form immediately brought to mind an image of Kafka's cockroach in *Metamorphosis*. The colour and shape of *Figure Lying on its Side (No 5)* conjured up a memory of Kafka's 'monstrous verminous bug' with its 'many legs, pitifully thin' (Kafka, 2002, p: 5) but perhaps the significance of this analogy resides equally in the emotional tone of both

works. *Figure Lying on its Side No 5* can be appreciated aesthetically (as a Modernist experiment in form) whilst at the same time, as a comment on the human condition, for me, it conveys a similar sense of helplessness and vulnerability.

Perry has acknowledged that his own sense of nostalgia for this inter-war period should not blind him to its horrors. The photograph by Thurston Hopkins *Untitled* (1947-56) (Perry, 2008, p: 19) is a silver bromide print of a small girl asleep in a bed in what is obviously a slum. The floorboards and walls are bare and it is a scene of desperate poverty. The child is lying on a metal bedstead, which appears to have no mattress. The bed covering looks filthy and is topped by a sheet of newspaper no doubt to provide extra warmth. The paper is advertising 'Slimming Methods' which reads ironically in this context. A wooden rocking chair with a cloth folded to make a cushion stands next to the bed. Is the child ill? Is the child dead? Was someone here to watch over her? My imagination conjures up a bed full of bugs, perhaps cockroaches (looking at the Armitage work heightens this impression) and the prevailing attitude of this small figure is helplessness and vulnerability.

This photograph bears witness to the fact that post-war Britain remained a nation divided into two halves. Can one look at these photographs in the context of an art exhibition and view them simply as historic documents which provide a window onto what Perry describes as 'a lost world'? Or does their inclusion in the exhibition inevitably raise questions about voyeurism? In Perry's opinion, such questions might well arise in the context of the exhibition because they reflect our contemporary preoccupations, but the job of these early photographers was 'to tell the story in as objective a way as possible ... so that change can happen' (Perry, 2016). From this perspective, the photograph is a snapshot in time: an ethnographic inventory of poverty at a particular moment in history, in a context referred to by Kynaston as the 'condition

of the people' (Kynaston 2008, p: 20).<sup>9</sup> However, in the context of *Unpopular Culture*, my view is that these photographs inevitably raise questions about how to look. Should these images be viewed as art, i.e. in terms of their aesthetic properties as images or should they be viewed in terms of their documentary function?

My own view is that in bringing together abstract art and documentary photography Perry has drawn attention to different political and intellectual positions not only within the arts establishment but also in the wider social world. Read argues that the concerns of abstract artists were 'plastic, objective and ostensibly non-political' (1992, p: 505). The supposedly *universal* appeal of abstract art is, in fact, inherently class-based and elitist. Perry has admitted to feeling ambivalent about these images but he has managed to temper the potentially voyeuristic aspects of the photograph by bringing it into a dialogue with the Modernist piece. The imaginative associations sparked by this relation actually serve to highlight the gap that existed between the rhetoric of the politicians and the people who are the recipients of such actions. These people are subject to *objectification*, in the sense that they lack agency and their lives are under scrutiny whilst at the same time, this pairing raises the question of universal humanity and who is included in this definition. Where is the humanity in allowing working class people to live in such extreme deprivation?

Another critical dialogue is instigated by pairing a second photograph by Thurston Hopkins entitled *Harassed father left to cope with the family, Liverpool 1955*, (1947-56) (Perry, 2008, p: 41) with a Modernist sculpture by William Turnbull entitled *Head*, 1955 (ibid. p: 40). The photograph shows a worn-looking man in shirtsleeves

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<sup>9</sup> Kynaston points out that by 1951 it was generally assumed that 'poverty was a thing of the past' (2009, p: 31) but this was not the case for many working class families. Those charged with improving the 'condition of the people' faced a huge task (2008, p: 20). Three quarters of a million houses had been destroyed or severely damaged during the war. There were many appalling Victorian slums in major cities and 'large pockets of inadequate to wretched housing almost everywhere' (Kynaston, 2008, p: 20).

cradling a baby. His gaze is downcast. A small girl grins up at him and a boy in the bottom right of the photograph looks out of the frame and points towards the camera. The home is unmistakably working class. The background detail is unclear but the wallpaper is stained and possibly damp. A cheap paper calendar is hanging just below the frame of a mirror or a picture. Again, in the context of the exhibition, this image raises questions about voyeurism because the subjects appear objectified. It is the working classes rather than the middle classes who are the focus of intense and often judgmental scrutiny. I am recalling the detailed survey, *Patterns of Marriage* 1951 by Slater and Woodside<sup>10</sup>. During this period, it became common practice for the middle classes to *investigate* all aspects of working class life including intimate relationships.

The camera lens in this photograph is intrusive. The two children on the right are out of focus, which in turn, serves to emphasise the prurient curiosity of the viewer (who might peer more intently at the image to uncover the details). As a historical document, this photograph bears witness to the fact that austerity and extremely 'limited material resources' continued to blight the lives of the poorest communities long after the war had ended (Kynaston, 2009, p: 133). The camera is intrusive but not objectifying. These people are without agency, in the sense that they are victims of their circumstances, but as the images clearly show, the circumstances are not of their own making. The idea that material resources should be directed towards the working classes was more readily accepted in the broadly socialist climate of reform that existed after World War Two than it would be today in our *supposedly* more socially mobile society.

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<sup>10</sup> *Patterns of Marriage* by Eliot Slater (a psychologist and Moya Woodside (a psychiatric social worker) published in 1951. An investigation into the politics, values and intimate family lives of working class soldiers and their wives mainly from the London area. This text is notable for the patronizing attitude of the researchers towards their working class subjects. For example, when confronted with a lack of concern about broader political concerns, the researchers decided that 'laziness' rather than extreme material deprivation was the main factor in shaping people's attitudes.

On the opposite page, a bronze sculpture by Turnbull is lying on a white plinth. The piece is entitled *Head*, (1955) (Perry, 2008, p: 40). *Head* is a Modernist experiment in line, shape, materials and form in which the artist is testing the limits of his subject matter. Turnbull said his aim was to ‘explore how much load the shape will take and still read head; head as a colony, head as landscape, head as mask, head as ideology’ (De La Warr Pavilion, 2008). The two pieces share the same period but again, the focus of their concerns is completely different. There are aesthetic considerations in the mirroring of colours, shapes and forms but there are other analogies too. The documentary photograph can interpreted as another ethnographic inventory but my own view is that when placed next to an image of *Head*, the sculpture begins to resemble an ethnographic artefact: the sort of child carrier used by Native Americans called a papoose. The man is serving as the child carrier in the photograph. There is a hierarchy of power made visible in these images. In the context of the exhibition, this pairing alerts us to the fact that voyeurism is about the inherent tension and asymmetries of power that exist between objectivity and subjectivity which are of concern to both the artist and the ethnographer. The working classes were anthropological curiosities: a different species to be observed and categorized.

A photograph from the same period by Bert Hardy entitled ‘*A fight springs up between dockers waiting for work in the Pool of London, 1949*’ (Perry, 2008, p: 49) also deals with the theme of poverty and desperation but this time the reaction is not one of helplessness. As Slater and Woodside discovered, the fear of unemployment existed like a ‘malignant bogey that must dog the steps of every working man’ (Slater and Woodside, 1951, p: 83). The docks, the mines, the shipyards and the steel works are the key symbols of the old industrial working class. Whilst one might be tempted to feel nostalgia for the loss of these industries, as this image shows, the working conditions

were often brutal, extremely dangerous and insecure. For me, this image brings to mind David Cameron's comment about the need for the middle classes to stop using their 'sharp-elbows' to claim services 'like Sure Start' that are targeted at 'poorer families' (Hope, 2010). By way of contrast, for many working class people, during this period, it was brute force and bare knuckles that made the difference when trying to access material resources.

Perry's decision to include images of working class leisure pursuits provides a visual record of what Kynaston refers to as 'the instinctive retreat to familiar ways, familiar rituals, familiar relations' after the war had ended (2009, p: 133). Perry's own experience and these documentary photographs testify to the fact that, in certain parts of the country, these traditional ways and customs - along with high levels of material and economic deprivation - persisted throughout the late 60s, early 70s and into the 80s. One of the most enduring images of British life is surely the outing to the seaside. This is a cherished social ritual 'that neither two world wars nor all of the other upheavals of the twentieth century' could destroy (Morrison, 2008, p: 14). Throughout the 1960s, English seaside resorts continued to be regularly packed with holiday-makers, so it is hardly surprising that Tony Ray-Jones chose to direct his camera lens towards Brighton beach. According to John Szarkowski, documentary photographers like Ray-Jones were guided by a central aim: 'not to reform life but to know it' (cited in Jobey, 2004). Ray-Jones captured not only 'the chaos of these groups' but also 'a whole range of human emotions' (Jobey, 2004).

*Brighton Beach* (1967) (Perry, 2008, p: 34) is a typical example with its row of pensioners warmly clad against the chill whilst sprawling in striped canvas deckchairs. One woman is knitting and her companions are tucking into picnic sandwiches accompanied by the ubiquitous flask of hot tea. A small boy dressed in a woollen

cardigan plays on a sandy bank behind them. The beach is littered with other small groups engaged in similar activities. Jobey (2004) notes that the 'English seaside in black and white can be a grim place' but here the black and white colour palette seems to suit the emotional texture of the image because it conveys a mood of dogged determination amongst the holiday makers. The absence of sun has not dampened their enjoyment, rather we have here 'blithe spirit – immune to the threat of foreign invasion, our island nation disports itself by the sea' (Morrison, 2008, p: 14).

For Ray-Jones, 'Photography can be a mirror that reflects life as it is' but at the same time 'it is possible to walk, like Alice, through the Looking Glass and find another kind of world with the camera' (cited in Jobey, 2004). This comment acknowledges that photography is aesthetically shaped, and aligns the aims of the photographer more closely with the aims of the artist. As Morrison points out, the idea of 'painting as purely fictive and photography as purely factual' does a disservice to both art forms' (2008, p: 13). When Ray-Jones showed his photographs in 1969 as part of a show at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) entitled 'The English Seen' photography was still considered '...naff. Most of the stuff at the ICA had been very esoteric, quite elitist, quite hard' (Davies cited in Jobey, 2004). The success of this show represented a triumph for photography as the underdog – an issue very close to Perry's heart.

*Unpopular Culture* blurs the distinctions between Modernism, traditional forms of painting (in terms of subject matter and treatment) and photography. The working-class artist William Roberts drew his subject matter from everyday life. His painting *The Seaside* (1966) (Perry, 2008, p: 36) depicts an outing to the seaside but it could not be more different from the Ray-Jones photograph. The structuring elements of this painting are influenced by both Cubism and Futurism but Roberts is described as an artist who developed a 'generic language all his own' (Spens, 2007). This language is

characterised by ‘full-blown figurative art, developing human forms that were well-rounded and upright’ (ibid.). *The Seaside* (1966) is an example of this unique visual idiom. The painting features ‘ten, busy, interwoven, semi-naked, hulking Leger-like figures, all with their backs to us’ (Morrison, 2008, p: 14). The Cubist influence is visible here in the flattened picture plane, the monumental quality of the crowded figures and the experiment with space and volume. There is no attempt to capture any sense of three-dimensional reality. At first glance, the figures and the colours in this painting reminded me of Picasso’s *Les Damoiselles d’Avignon* (1907) but Roberts takes a much more ‘affectionate approach’ towards his subject matter (Spen (2007). This attitude is evident in *The Seaside* (1966) which conveys that same ‘blithe spirit’ that Morrison identified in the Tony Ray-Jones photograph. Another factor that may have influenced Perry’s choice is that Roberts came from a working class background ‘which he never forsook’ and for this reason his works provide ‘genuine social documentation ... of his fellow Londoners and Eastenders’ (Spen, 2007).

Given Perry’s interest in traditional social rituals, it is not surprising to find that pubs also feature heavily in *Unpopular Culture*. A Bert Hardy photograph entitled *Pub scene in the Gorbals, 1948* (Perry, 2008, p: 46) and a painting by Alan Lowndes entitled *Telling the Tale, (1964)* (ibid. p: 44) share a similar emotional texture. The artists are using different media and their focus is different, but when viewed alongside each other these two images share a strong sense of companionship conveyed through body language and facial expressions. The title of Hardy’s silver bromide print *Pub scene in the Gorbals (1948)* reminds us that class is a ‘socio-spatial categorization’ that signifies ‘iniquities and differences’ (Savage, 2015, p: 264). This geographical location immediately identifies the subjects of Hardy’s photograph as inhabitants of Glasgow’s notorious slum tenements. Other class signifiers include the man’s faded and stained



cloth cap, his grubby-sleeved overcoat and the woman's toothless smile. Despite the high levels of deprivation, 'the Gorbals was also famed for its community spirit which could not be crushed – despite the often adverse circumstances its residents faced' (McCall, 2015). The photograph captures this atmosphere of 'community spirit' as the couple lean forwards to raise their glasses and share a toast. The closeness of the camera lens brings the viewer into the circle of shared intimacy between the couple. A woman is just visible in the far right of the picture but she is slightly out of focus. This detail effectively reinforces the impression of intimacy by creating the impression that the viewer is being invited to eavesdrop on the couple's conversation.

Alan Lowndes was a working class artist who specialised in paintings of the industrial North. His subject matter was ordinary people going about their daily lives. In *Telling the Tale* (1964) three men are seated together around a table: two men in the background are in conversation with a third man in the foreground. The sludgy colour palette gives the work a rather melancholy tone. Unlike the photograph, the medium of oil paint on canvas is the focus of this painting but the class signifiers are there in the content: the interior of the working-man's club or pub, the flat caps, the pint glasses, the tabloid newspaper and the model boat on the table. One man is smoking a pipe whilst another has a cigarette in his mouth. The figure in the foreground is pointing his finger to reinforce his point. These details coupled with this simple bodily gesture make the painting seem real and lifelike because they unite the group and create a similar sense of companionship. Perhaps something of the artist's own character is reflected in this painting. According to Berger, "His (Lowndes) essential spirit is as convivial as Lowry's is lonely" (Berger cited in Hartnoll, 1968).

Perry is concerned with depicting Britain in the aftermath of World War Two. A key feature of Welfare State Britain was the building of blocks of flats for council

tenants whose homes had been destroyed by German bombs or condemned as slums. David Hepher's large painting of 1970s social housing blocks entitled *Arrangement in Turquoise and Cream* (1979-1981) (Perry, 2008, p: 30) is an example of one of these '...bleakly monumental housing blocks that formed the estates of south London' (Glancy, 1997). The artist aspires to both Hyperrealism and Abstract Expressionism by producing works that have a photographic quality but his primary interest lies in experimenting with 'colour and the formal constraints of a Mondrian-like grid' (Morrison, 2008, p: 15). Glancy (1997) suggests that initially Hepher's series of tower-block paintings appear as '...hugely powerful abstracts; second sight reveals them to be minutely detailed portraits of some of the country's most superficially brutal housing.' The artist has used 'filigree brushwork depicting the individual patterns of net curtains in several hundred identical steel-framed windows' but this level of individualised detail should not be interpreted as 'a political statement of any kind' (Glancy, 1997). For Glancy, (1997) the clue is in the title: '*Arrangement in Turquoise and Cream* is an outward sign that there is no inward comment.'

For Hepher, the focus is on the formal possibilities offered by the housing block and the choice of medium rather than on social comment. Morrison regards Hepher's work as important in a social realist sense because 'This is what Britain looked like – and still looks like. This is where millions live' (2008, p: 15). My own response to this painting was to see it primarily in terms of its subject matter, not as an abstract painting but as a photographically detailed record of a place that looked familiar. This is what Morrison refers to as the 'representational impetus' of art, as he points out, these buildings are 'real places in real time' (ibid. p: 15). These brutal tower blocks have emotional resonance for me because they formed the backdrop to my own childhood. They are immediately recognizable as 'real places in real time', which makes it difficult

to view them with a 'pure' (disinterested) gaze (Bourdieu, 1986, p: 4): as abstract experiments in form and colour in which the choice of subject is incidental.

A painting that Morrison describes as having 'representational impetus' (2008, p: 15) is Jack Smith's *After the Meal* (1952) (Perry, 2008, p: 26). This work is central to *Unpopular Culture* because it sets the tone of the exhibition in terms of colour and emotional mood and it raises interesting questions about the connections between art and the real world. Jack Smith has been described as a Social Realist, part of a group of artists who were dubbed the 'Kitchen Sink School' by critics such as John Berger who viewed their work as 'helping the working classes to achieve their inheritance' (McNay, 2011). At first glance, this painting looks like an episode from daily life; the style in which it is painted seems to perfectly capture the dullness and greyness of post war conditions. A woman is standing by an open door as though she is about to leave. The opening reveals an outline of rooftops and a small moon. The expression on the face of the woman is inscrutable. A table in the foreground is set with empty plates and crockery. A sense of austerity is conveyed by the humble setting with bare floorboards and very little furniture. The painting has 'representational impetus' because the subject matter is recognisable but Morrison cautions that 'Even the Kitchen-Sink realism' of this painting 'is deceptive' (2008, p: 16). On closer inspection, the cutlery and crockery seem oddly out of place as though they belong to a different time-period and a higher social class. There is deliberate ambiguity in these details, which makes it difficult to construct a coherent narrative. Who is this woman? Does she want to leave the child? Why is the man holding the baby? Is he the father of the child?

Smith hated the term 'kitchen-sink school' and denied that there had been any such thing. He argued that his subjects were chosen largely as a matter of convenience; despite their everyday banality and grimness, his works were not intended as political

commentaries. When summing up his own work, Smith said ‘I wanted ... to make the ordinary seem miraculous’ (Independent, 2011). This statement indicates that Smith was not interested in producing ‘an art for the lucky proletariat’ (McNay, 2011). From the late 1950s the artist abandoned realism in favour of ‘a brightly coloured, jazz-inspired abstract style’ (Telegraph, 2011) influenced by Kandinsky and Mondrian. Commenting on his artistic vision, the artist said:

I think of my painting as diagrams of an experience or sensation.  
The subject is very important. The sound of the subject, its  
noise, its silence, its intervals and its activity ...

...the closer painting is to a diagram or graph, the nearer it is to  
my intention, I like every mark to establish a fact in the most  
precise, economical way (Arts Council, 2008).

Smith was doomed to remain ‘the one-time hero of the Kitchen Sink’ (Independent, 2011) but this is a reductive view of an artist whose work was never about ‘...making concessions to tastefulness or mere picture-making’ (Robinson cited in McNay 2011). The quality of light and colour in *After the Meal* effectively makes visible an emotion or mood. The overall impression is of bleakness and drabness, which is certainly how the nation is characterised in the popular imaginary in the immediate post war years. The intentionally ambiguous content raises the question of whether this painting can be social observation. Is the austere interior a reflection of some pre-existing reality, or does it serve an aesthetic purpose? The answers will depend not only on the artist’s intention but also on the knowledge of the viewer. This painting is central to the exhibition because it shows that it is possible to combine the seriousness of high art (experimental methods) with realism (class content) and this is Perry’s concern.

Perry cites Patrick Ward as another photographer who accurately sums up the privations and grittiness of urban life. Ward’s photograph *Untitled* (1974) (Perry, 2008,

p: 52) is a world away from the conspicuous consumption that came to define the Thatcher years. A girl aged around seven or eight years old is jumping through a large makeshift wooden hoop, nailed to a broken and ragged-edged picket fence. A group of figures including an adult with one child in a pushchair and another child close by are just visible on the patch of grassland separating the row of densely packed terraced houses from the fenced perimeter. There are no toys, no scooters and no bikes. This makeshift urban playground offers the child a freedom tinged with danger and it is a world away from the purpose-built, risk-averse playgrounds of today. The child plays alone amongst the menacing, uneven graffiti-marked shards of the fence which tower over her making her seem small and vulnerable. This contrast in scale really heightens the sense of anxiety and bleakness.

Makeshift urban playgrounds are also a theme in Tish Murtha's series of ethnographic photographs entitled '*Youth Unemployment in the West End of Newcastle*', (1980-81) (Perry, 2008, p: 54). *Untitled* (1980-81) shows a 1970s block of social housing in a state of ruin. The foreground is littered with broken bricks, bits of masonry and a pile of discarded mattresses. A group of children have gathered to watch as two teenage boys jump down from a second-story window onto the mattresses in a show of bravado. Three children peer out over the smashed wall of the next-door property. In the bottom left corner of the photograph, another youth watches the performance whilst clasping a ventriloquist's dummy. This detail has an oddly distancing effect, making the scene seem at once familiar and disturbingly strange. The devastation shown here echoes earlier photographs (also included in the exhibition) depicting bomb-damaged properties during World War II. But this state of affairs was the outcome of a very different type of war: class war. The break-up of Britain's heavy industries including

the mines, shipyards and steel works left many working class communities irrevocably blighted by long-term poverty and unemployment.

Again, there is ambiguity in the visual detail, which draws attention to the fact that photography is not merely recording but actually shaping and creating reality through aesthetic means. Another example is Martin Parr's photograph, *Jubilee Street Party, Elland 1977* (1977) (Perry, 2008, p: 38) described by Morrison as being 'every bit as imaginative (and aesthetically shaped) as a painting would be' (ibid. p: 13). Despite its title, there are no party-goers in this photograph but their presence is strongly suggested in the content and composition of the print. When looking at this print it is possible to hear and see the absent revellers, so they are, in a sense 'present'.

The British are often criticised for their obsession with the weather but anyone who has experienced the variability of the British climate soon comes to understand this particular preoccupation. As Parr's photograph shows, nothing conjures up British summertime more poignantly than the sight of a street party that has been rained-off. It is easy to think of the missing people huddling for shelter in the surrounding buildings, ready to emerge once the rain has stopped. Street parties are a leisure pursuit that is invariably associated with the working class. The class signifiers include three trestle tables set out between two factory or warehouse-type buildings. A row of terraced houses is just visible in the distance alongside a low building with a factory chimney. This is no garden party setting. The landscape is shaped around industry rather than leisure. There is a sense of vulnerability here too, without the protection of a marquee the picnic is waterlogged and probably inedible.

In our conversation, Perry described himself to me as 'a big fan of Martin Parr' and he acknowledged that the photographer had been accused of 'being a kind of middle

class person looking down on working class people' (Perry, 2016). He denied that there was a voyeuristic element to Parr's work:

I know him quite well and he's just interested in the world and he shows the world ... Working class culture is just something that has always fascinated him and still does ... the middle class audience that look at Martin Parr's work are bringing their preconceptions to it (Perry, 2016).

Perry is undoubtedly right about people bringing their own preconceptions to bear on a work. I am more doubtful about the claim that Parr is just recording what he sees, not least because his work is very influenced by Tony Ray-Jones. On seeing the latter's work for the first time in 1970, Parr said:

His pictures were about England. They had that contrast, that seedy eccentricity, but they showed it in a very subtle way. They have an ambiguity, a visual anarchy. They showed me what was possible (Parr cited in Jobey, 2004).

Here, Parr is acknowledging his interest in the experimental possibilities afforded by photography.

One might suggest that Perry's own full-length black and white photograph of Claire (which is directly inspired by Parr, Ward and Ray-Jones) on the front of the exhibition catalogue is also blurring the distinctions between art and photography and between fiction and social observation. Again, the clothing is an important class marker. The clothes Claire is wearing place her firmly in the late 50s or early 60s: a coat buttoned up to the neck, very pointed stiletto heeled shoes, leather gloves, and a handbag over the arm. Most poignantly, an elaborately coiffured lock of hair is just visible under her headscarf. Inside the catalogue, Perry's essay is accompanied by another photograph of a rather grim looking Claire, again sporting a headscarf. As these photographs testify, for Perry, the headscarf is synonymous with northern working class

women 'going to the salon and wanting to keep their nice hairdos in a good state for a Saturday night out' (Perry cited in Klein, 2013, p: 80). But its power as a social signifier lies in the fact that it is an equally potent symbol of the upper classes. Even more so today, when the Queen is spotted '...out tramping the heather in Balmoral' (Perry, 2008, p: 11). He acknowledges that multiculturalism has given the headscarf a set of political meanings, which have fuelled media debates about what constitutes Britishness but he does not engage directly with the issue of cultural difference in this exhibition.

Perry's own photographs reveal the constructed and aesthetic nature of photographic images. And they show how Perry is adept at using his cross-dressing to explore and perform class identity. These images carry extraordinary affect because they are portraying a particular northern working class female sensibility. Here, we are reminded of what Jones referred to as Perry's extraordinary ability to morph into different characters to match the clothes he is wearing (Jones and Perry, 2007, p: 3). The clothes that Claire is wearing, the expression on her face, her body language and her whole demeanour add up to an unerringly accurate portrayal of a working class woman who is anxiously concerned with preserving her appearance in preparation for a night out. These images appear realistic (as social observation in the form of documentary-style ethnographic images) not only because the material details are so meticulously observed but also because Perry can draw on the working class women he encountered during his childhood.

Perry said that in putting together *Unpopular Culture* he was looking for artists whose work was an 'honest reflection of British life and society' during the period 1940-1980 (De La Warr Pavilion, 2008). The picture of Britain that emerges from *Unpopular Culture* depicts a nation that 'looks a little grey, cold, wan, sludgy, down-at-



heel, not bursting with imperial self-confidence but adapting to its reduced circumstances' (Morrison, 2008, p: 14). The country is neither 'affluent' nor 'fashionable' says Morrison, 'but it is decent, public-spirited and doing the best it can' (ibid. p: 14). The very personal narrative that Perry put together in *Unpopular Culture* certainly resonated with the hundreds of visitors who flocked to see the show. However, it soon became clear that enthusiasm for this alternative art history was in short supply amongst the cognoscenti.

### **Critical Responses to Unpopular Culture**

There were some positive responses. Cathy Lomax writing in the Telegraph thought the 'genius' of the title lay in the fact that the exhibition focused on exactly 'the kind of low-key culture that the shiny re-branded Britain of the new millennium has been trying to forget' (Lomax, 2008). This 'downbeat vision' included 'lots of kitchen-sink painting and black and white photos unhealthy-looking people with bad teeth drinking pints of bitter' (ibid.). Lomax also noted that Perry's curatorial strategy gave these images 'a new poignancy' (even the ones that are very familiar such as the large modernist sculptures) (ibid.). Perry's 'tongue-in-cheek take on Britishness' is precisely the aspect of Britain's cultural life that 'has been ignored for too long by the art cognoscenti' (ibid.).

The response from Waldemar Januszczak (a spokesperson for the art cognoscenti) indicated that this situation was not about to change. For Januszczak, (2008) the 'genius' of Perry's exhibition lay in the fact that it was a promotional stunt on the part of Perry to make himself look good. 'Perry has plumped for the bleakest, dullest, greyest, least sexy things he could find: if it made you want to slit your wrists, it was in' (ibid.). These works provided the perfect foil for Perry's own exhibits, 'anyone

walking in here has little choice but to notice how awful the rest are and how brilliant Grayson is. Genius' (ibid.). *Unpopular Culture* set out to capture a particular mood in Britain between 1940-1980 before the advent of popular culture and the onslaught of mass media and marketing technologies. For the critic, Perry's 'curatorial austerity trip' resulted in a selection of works that were virtually without exception 'dire' (ibid.).

The show is spent chiefly in the gloomy 1950s, when taking a bath was something you did in a tin tub on Saturday nights and Capstan full-strengths were the ciggies of choice. The keynote painting is, according to its selector, *After the Meal*, by Jack Smith, from 1952. A family has just had dinner. Mum is leaving for the night shift. Dad holds baby in his arms. Painted almost exclusively in shades of grey, it's a fully representative example of the "kitchen-sink" school of painting, evoking, in turn, poverty, unhappiness, bad luck, bad food, bad housing, bad alienation (Januszczak, 2008).

Januszczak describes the period 1940-1980 as a '...made-up stretch of time...that did not coincide with any actual era in art or life' (ibid.). What he means is that Perry's choice of exhibits was not associated with any specific art historical period. The conventional assessments of post-war British art tend to pursue a linear art historical path with a strong scholarly focus. Januszczak thinks the nation would have been better represented by the art historical canon of excellence:

From Bacon to Moore, from pop art to Brit art, from Auerbach to Freud, from new sculpture to the video revolution, there has never before been an era when British art has been as globally pertinent as it has been in the postwar years (ibid.).

Whilst the sculptures resembled 'grim bonze turds' of 'lumpy hopelessness' Januszczak acknowledges the 'neglected genius of Thurston Hopkins' arguing that the photography '...supplies this display with almost all of its best sights' (ibid.). Januszczak may not agree with the curatorial selection but on the evidence of the artist's own work he is forced to acknowledge that Perry's '...taste is suspect, but not his drive'

(ibid.). Januszcak's comments illustrate the distance between the history of the nation narrated through its high culture and the everyday lives of the nation's citizens. As

Caroline Douglas points out, the ultimate success of *Unpopular Culture*:

...derived not only from Perry's sharp curatorial eye, but also from his ability to put his finger on the reigning zeitgeist, creating a narrative of Englishness that resonated precisely with a broad public' (Douglas cited in Perry, 2008, p: 5).

Chapter 3 discussed how art galleries function to make social and political power seem like a natural part of the social order. As Redfield points out, aesthetics:

...which developed as a separate philosophical category out of eighteenth and nineteenth century moral philosophy in Britain and Wolffian rationalism in Germany as an attempt to characterize a mode of knowledge inherent in sensory perception, was never just one philosophical category among others. Rather it provided a vocabulary for the secular self-production of the subject, of the state, and thus finally of modernity (2003, p: 75).

Perry is acutely aware of how the internal hierarchies of the arts establishment serve to reinforce and legitimate social divisions. The images brought to light in *Unpopular Culture* were instantly recognizable by vast swathes of the public, not least because Perry insisted on making class a central theme. Many of the works on show linked class as culture to class as objective material and economic conditions.

In an essay written to accompany the exhibition *Rank: Picturing the social order 1516-2009* Robinson points out that:

Walter Benjamin asked about works of art, "what sort of visibility should the presentation of history possess?" Benjamin's answer to his own question was that "What the [artwork] has to fix, perceptually, are the images deriving from the collective unconscious" (2009, p: 9).

Benjamin reminds us that art provides us with our working models of what the world is because artists make visible the ideas, myths, metaphors and beliefs that have shaped the social order. To what extent are these images giving representation to the nation as a whole? Who is being represented and who is being excluded? As 'a historian influenced by Marx', Benjamin rejects the idea that culture is an independent realm of values by arguing that 'the class struggle' is 'a fight for the crude and material things without which no refined and spiritual things could exist' (Benjamin, 1992, p: 246). Benjamin's aim was to link art to its material conditions of production and reception i.e., the capitalist conditions of life. We can see this same impetus at work in *Unpopular Culture*. In selecting images that revealed '...the bald economic determination of existence' (Benjamin, 1999, p: 43), Perry was refusing a history of the nation represented by the canon of modern art and, in so doing, he was rejecting the idea of art as acculturation. The latter is the logic underlying the argument put forward by Januszcak in which the aim is to produce a subject who is able to transcend class identity by identifying with 'culture' as 'the best that has been thought and known' (Arnold, 1993, p: 79). The working class subjects in *Unpopular Culture* did not necessarily (simply by virtue of their class position) lack sufficient imagination to identify with 'our best self' - had they wanted to do so, which is debateable - they lacked the material and economic resources which make such transcendence possible.

### **Concluding Comments**

According to Buck-Morss, 'Benjamin makes us aware that the transmission of culture (high and low) ... is a political act of the highest import' (1991, pp: x-xi). Perry highlights the obvious class symbolism inherent in the opposition between high art and mass art by viewing all of the art on display in *Unpopular Culture* as a form of social

comment. By instigating a series of dialogues between documentary photography and Modernism Perry aims to challenge the 'legitimizing ideological function' of the high art narrative by presenting us with a different version of history. He brings to light images that record the material, social, cultural and economic legacies of class during the period 1940-1980. The earlier photographs (covering the period 1946-1966) are replete with traditional working class signifiers: cloth caps, men in shirtsleeves, grimy pubs, dock workers fighting, street parties, country fairs and day trips to the seaside. Alongside these traditional leisure pursuits, the photographs reveal the material and social deprivation that resulted from poor housing, lack of educational and employment opportunities and lack of economic capital. The picture of working class lives that emerges from these early images is characterised by homogeneity. The images of these 'lost worlds' (Perry, 2008, p: 9) reveal communities tightly bonded together by shared leisure pursuits and by the need for shared protection against material hardships.

The ethnographic photographs covering the period 1970-1981 coincide with the period of deindustrialisation in Britain. The traditional imagery of class that was largely associated with the heavy manufacturing industries, has to a large extent, disappeared along with the docks, shipyards, warehouses and factories that had previously provided secure employment for the working classes. The material structures of these industries are long gone but they have left an enduring legacy. These later photographs reveal that high levels of social and material deprivation continued to blight the lives of many working class communities in Britain well into late 1970s and early 80s. It might be argued that, in selecting images, 'replete with traditional class signifiers' Perry is offering us a stereotyped view of class. One response to this criticism would be to point out that the artist is showing us the *realities* of everyday life for many working class communities. These images are evidence that not everyone benefited from the new

knowledge economy. Chapter Six will discuss the different ways in which class is lived today and, as we shall see, although we live in more relatively prosperous times, class continues to be a stubborn and intractable social division.

**Figure 11.** Grayson Perry *Queen's Bitter*, 2007



Glazed ceramic 57 x dia: 44 cms. Courtesy the Artist and Victoria Miro, London. © Grayson Perry.

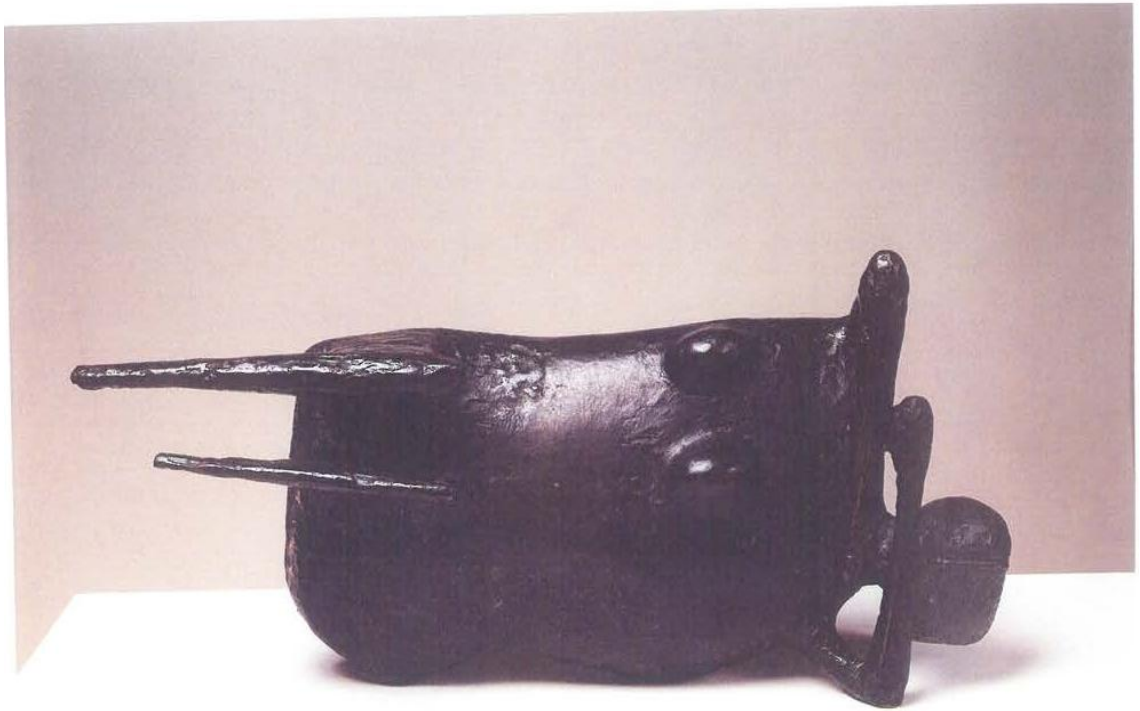
**Figure 12.** Perry, G. (2007-08) *'Head of a Fallen Giant'*



Bronze 40 x 50 x 35cms 15 ¾ x 19 ¾ x 13 ¾ inches. Courtesy the Artist and Victoria Miro, London (Photography Stephen White) © Grayson Perry.



**Figure 13.** Armitage, K. (1957) *Figure Lying on its Side (No 5)*



(*Unpopular Culture*, 2008, p: 18). Courtesy Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London.

**Figure 14.** Hopkins, T. (1947-56) *Untitled*



(*Unpopular Culture*, 2008, p: 19). Courtesy Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London.

**Figure 15.** Hopkins, T. (1955) *Harassed father left to cope with the family, Liverpool*



(*Unpopular Culture*, 2008, p: 41). Courtesy Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London.

**Figure 16.** Turnbull, W. (1955) *Head*



(*Unpopular Culture*, 2008, p: 40). Courtesy Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London.



**Figure 17.** Hardy, B. (1949) *A fight springs up between dockers waiting for work in the Pool of London*



(*Unpopular Culture*, 2008, p: 49). Courtesy Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London.

**Figure 18.** Ray-Jones, T. (1967) *Brighton Beach*



(*Unpopular Culture*, 2008, p: 34). Courtesy Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London.

**Figure 19.** Roberts, W. (1966) *The Seaside*



(*Unpopular Culture*, 2008, p: 36). Courtesy Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London.



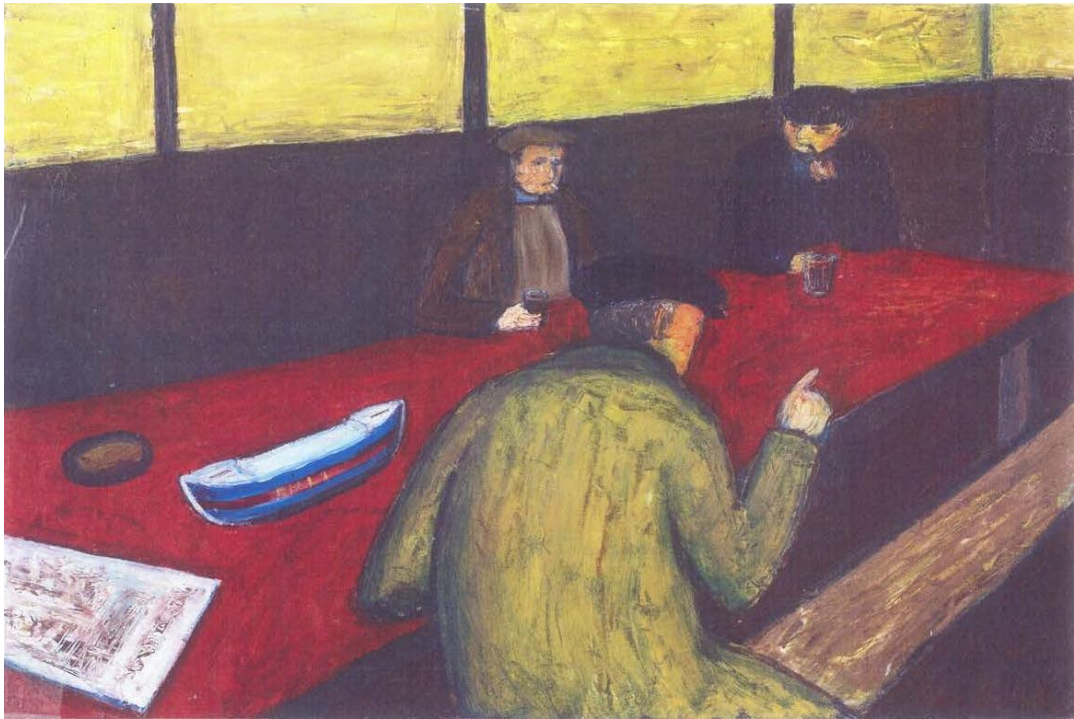
**Figure 20.** Hardy, B. (1948) *Pub scene in the Gorbals*



(*Unpopular Culture*, 2008, p: 46). Courtesy Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London.



**Figure 21.** Lowndes, A. (1964) *Telling the Tale*



(*Unpopular Culture*, 2008, p: 44). Courtesy Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London.

**Figure 22.** Hepher, D. (1979-81) *Arrangement in Turquoise and Cream*



(*Unpopular Culture*, 2008, p: 30). Courtesy Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London.

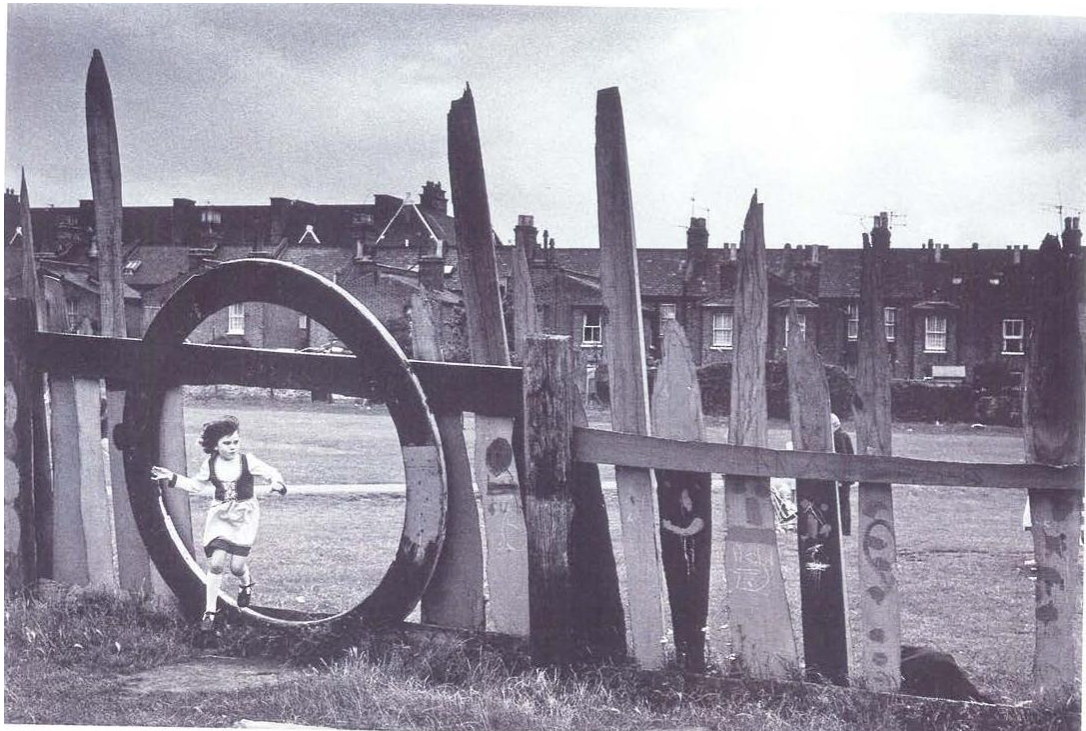
**Figure 23.** Smith, J. (1952) *After the Meal*



(*Unpopular Culture*, 2008, p: 26). Courtesy Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London.



**Figure 24.** Ward, P. (1974) *Untitled*



(*Unpopular Culture*, 2008, p: 52). Courtesy Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London.

**Figure 25.** Murtha, T. (1980-81) *Untitled*.



(*Unpopular Culture*, 2008, p: 54). Courtesy Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London.

**Figure 26.** Parr, M. (1977) *Jubilee Street Party, Elland 1977*



(*Unpopular Culture*, 2008, p: 38). Courtesy Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London.



**Figure 27.** Great-Rex, E. (2008) *Claire*



(*Unpopular Culture*, 2008, cover photograph). Courtesy Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London.

## Chapter 6

### The Vanity of Small Differences

In this thesis, I am arguing that Perry's work has particular significance when we understand it as aesthetic practice that is at the same time political. In his tapestry series *The Vanity of Small Differences* and via his anatomy of taste, the artist gives us the affective character of class, how class comes to constitute our sense of selves, organise our patterns of inter-relations and structure our pleasures. The conclusion we find in his work is that class gives us our sense of identity and place and yet, all of this is anchored by the material and the economic.

In the previous chapter, I discussed how, in *Unpopular Culture*, Perry gave us a visual imagery of class in which class emerged as a homogeneous category. The exhibition revealed a lost world of close-knit communities in which the visual markers of working class identity were largely associated with the heavy manufacturing industries that once provided a source of secure employment. One crucial factor differentiating the time period 1940-1980 reflected in *Unpopular Culture* from *The Vanity of Small Differences* is that, at the level of political and social theory, the idea of class as a homogeneous category in which class identity is linked to income, occupation and attitude has largely been lost. Consequently, class is less important as far as political theory and political change is concerned (Coole, 1996). We still live in a society in which production for profit remains the basic organising principle of economic life but now politics is less about production and more about consumption (see discussion in Chapter One). Another crucial difference is that *Unpopular Culture* was a window into an age before our experiences were mediated by sophisticated television, advertising and digital technology. Commodity producers who are intent on



making profits rely on what the consumer wants and their capacity to buy. The need to produce goods that people will want to buy is dependent on the ability to create a market by manipulating taste and opinion (Harvey, 1990). Our market-oriented and consumer-led politics is an appeal to the aspirations and desires of all the classes, including the working class.

Here we are reminded of the arguments put forward in Chapter One about the advertising and media images which now play a central role in shaping cultural practices and ensuring the growth of capitalism. Harvey contends that commodity producers have an ongoing ‘interest in feeding ‘imaginary appetites’ to the point where ideas about what constitutes social needs are replaced by fantasy, caprice and whim’ (1990, p: 102). Harvey continues ‘Advertising and commercialisation destroy all traces of production in their imagery, reinforcing the fetishism that arises automatically in the course of market exchange’ (ibid.). This development has in turn, led to the construction of a new system of signs and imagery through which we come to understand the world and our place in it. Celebrity culture, advertising, and social media technologies now infiltrate every area of existence with the result that watching others and being watched has become the norm. As Suzanne Moore points out ‘...we refuse a verbal discourse on class, except in our Marxist enclaves, but instead visually signal class difference, indeed class gradations to each other all the time’ (cited in Perry, 2013, p: 19). During his research for *The Vanity of Small Differences* Perry took social observation to a new level in order to reveal the structure of class relations in the twenty-first century.

The artist approached the subject matter of class by asking people what they liked and why. The answers to this apparently simple question revealed the social imaginaries of class that inform our lived experience of it and consequently the mechanism by which class is passed on as culture. Perry produces his ethnography of

class via an anatomy of taste. He would never describe himself as anything other than a visual artist, but in his television series he takes a pseudo-ethnographic approach to his subject matter. His aim is to provide us with an understanding of class as a cultural phenomenon, in terms of the aesthetic choices people make, and to provide us with an explanation of the ways in which objects acquire emotional salience, in the sense that they become the repositories of feeling within the specific social groups that he identifies. The strong emotions that accompany the subject of taste fascinate Perry and he is curious about the ways in which people use their possessions as ‘potent sign-systems’ (Perry cited in Klein, 2013, p: 276).

He observes that in each of the social groups he visits ‘taste seems to play a slightly different role’ (Perry, 2013, p: 13). Perry notes that working class people often talk about ‘a strong sense of community and taste decisions are often made to demonstrate loyalty to the clan’ (ibid.). This social group is marked by a sense of loss, a nostalgia for the industries (the material structures such as the mines and shipyards) which once bound them together and dictated the rhythm of their daily lives but have long since disappeared. Amongst his upper class subjects, he detects a similar sense of loss in the desire to preserve the past in the form of their crumbling old ancestral homes. Taste also ‘binds this tribe’ whilst for the middle classes, taste is a rather more anguished ‘tortured business’ (Perry, 2013, p: 14). On his journey through the social ranks of contemporary Britain Perry identifies a prevailing aesthetic or social imaginary in each of the groups he visits. This research provides the basis for the tapestries.

The tapestries work on a number of levels and crucially, they illustrate the links between taste and material and economic positioning by showing the different forms of capital available to the different classes. The reception of art works takes place within the limits established by certain social and cultural practices. Perry’s tapestries present

all of his subjects in a medium that is traditionally associated with high culture thereby unsettling the opposition between high and low culture and undermining the power relations at play in judgements of taste. Derrida's notion of 'working the frame' (Derrida, 1987, p: 12) in which attention is drawn to the boundary between the theory of aesthetics and the material objects that are constituted by this activity, seems relevant here. The tapestries challenge the idea that there is a hierarchy of taste and the higher classes are a source of authority on this topic. (See the discussion on Bourdieu in Chapter Three). Also undermined, is the idea that there is a link between taste, morality and social worth. This is a matter of great concern amongst the middle class as a whole. The educated middle classes are keen to be seen as 'upright moral citizens' as a way of marking a social distinction between themselves and the aspirant lower middle classes (Perry, 2013, p: 17). Perry refuses to judge taste in terms of an implicit aesthetic hierarchy presumed to correspond with a hierarchy of moral values.

Chapter Two discussed the way in which class identities have become divided and contradictory because people have been encouraged to believe that we live in a meritocratic society in which social mobility is both possible and desirable. But the desire for social mobility often comes at high cost. *The Vanity of Small Differences* can be read explicitly as an old-fashioned morality tale in which the artist alerts us to the dangers of indulging our desires for the latest consumer goods. Inspired by Hogarth's series of satirical paintings entitled *The Rake's Progress* (1733) Perry's hero Tim Rakewell embarks on a journey of social mobility which is marked by an attachment to the different items that act as class markers in each stratum of modern British society; but his journey ends in frustration and disappointment. The untimely death of Tim can also be interpreted as an implicit critique of market-oriented politics in which the distinctions between people are marked by consumption rather than production. As a

result, people are interacting with objects rather than with each other. Consumerism is the new religion and the tapestries reveal how problematic this notion is by examining the politics behind our aesthetic choices. Objects cannot satisfy all of human needs and both education and politics matter, not least because as Moore points out, ‘...the knowledge economy is not an aesthetically neutral environment – far from it’ (cited in Perry, 2013, p: 22). Moore explains, ‘Choice has now become oppressive ... the exercising of individuality is arduous’ (ibid. p: 20).

Perry is alert to the ways in which consumerism penetrates all areas of our lives and how it has contributed to the fracturing of class identity. This fragmentation seems to be represented in the collaged and heterogeneous nature of the tapestries. The tapestries are open to multiple readings because collage provides a way of incorporating different elements. The tapestries use citation so they are haunted by and reconfigure earlier works, specifically Hogarth’s *The Rake’s Progress* (1733) and early Renaissance religious works. Perry’s characteristic humour is never far from the surface and the high art forms referenced are destabilised by the knowing and often ironic use Perry makes of them. The association with religious iconography and its main themes of guilt, anxiety and temptation lends weight to his own highly caricatured ‘modern moral subject’ (ibid. p: 13). At the same time, it offers viewers an opportunity to test their own knowledge of Christian narratives. As Perry points out, ‘making knowing reference to older artworks is in itself a very middle class thing to do, as it flatters the educational and cultural capital of the audience’ (ibid. p: 13). The works are deconstructive in the sense that they ‘lead necessarily to a double reading: that of the text perceived in relation to its text of origin’ (Harvey, 1990, p: 51). I would argue that in their deliberate and multi-layered ambiguity, the tapestries have an inherent instability of meaning,

which in turn, opens up a space for ‘popular participation and democratic determination of cultural values’ (ibid.).

Another key issue here is that Perry gives us images that carry affect and as a consequence his work attracts a wide audience. In part, the clue to his popularity and accessibility lies in his acute awareness of the seduction of images and of our desire for beautiful objects. In their use of colour, design, and materials the tapestries are sensuously rich material artefacts. There is no overt political manifesto here but it is possible to see in these works, a subtle transformation of our ideas about taste and class differences. In *The Vanity of Small Differences* Perry shows us, quite literally, how the signs of social and economic difference are woven into the fabric of our everyday lives. My argument is that in so doing, Perry gives us an account of class as a subjective category (as lived experience) via an anatomy of taste which is anchored in class, understood as objective material conditions.

As a visual artist, Perry is acutely aware of the sign-systems, the visual environments people build around themselves. He claims that as a teenager he found himself wanting to ‘decode’ the aesthetic choices of the people around him (Perry, 2013, p: 9). According to Perry, people seemed to be ‘...curating their possessions to communicate consciously or more often unconsciously, where they want to fit into society’ (ibid.). He noticed that people were always happy to talk about and criticize what they saw as bad taste in others, for example, middle class people talked about their revulsion for taste choices they saw as ‘vulgar or working class’ (ibid.). It is notable that these two terms are used synonymously. During these conversations, Perry observed that ‘Their dislike, their desire to define themselves against what they regard as an awful ‘other’, is so embodied that they often express physical disgust’ (ibid.). These

strong feelings seem fuelled by the idea that there is a link between taste choices and a person's character.

Once the social distancing is established, the stakes are raised, as Perry points out 'Ask them to list things they regard as good taste, and people are much more reticent' (ibid.). People are less willing to venture an opinion about their own taste because this would immediately leave them vulnerable to criticism. Our choices of works of art, colour schemes, food and dress codes seem to matter as much as our manners and behaviour precisely because taste and criticism are two ideas that are closely linked. What fascinates Perry is precisely the strength of feeling that accompanies aesthetic choices which seems to be directly attributable to this fear of criticism or social approbation.

### **All in the Best Possible Taste**

Perry is an artist with an uncanny ability to tap into the reigning *zeitgeist*. In 2012 he made a Channel 4 documentary series entitled *All in the Best Possible Taste with Grayson Perry* (2012). Perry's aim was to spend a year watching us in order to discover the 'details of modern life' and the 'truths' those details reveal about us' (Perry, 2012). These three television programmes can be viewed as an extension of the ideas that he was beginning to explore in *Unpopular Culture* (2008). The photographs based on ethnographic studies were his key inspiration for the mood and tone of *Unpopular Culture*. This might explain why his approach in this documentary series is decidedly 'anthropological or pseudo-ethnographic' (Perry, 2013, p: 5). As previously noted, Perry believes that 'more than any other factor, more than age, race, religion or sexuality – one's social class determines one's taste (ibid. p: 9). In ways that parallel Bourdieu's discussion of the habitus, he is convinced that 'our culture of origin' (by

which he means our social class) is imbibed as we grow up. The effect of this acculturation process is that everyone has ‘a default setting’ on their taste which comes into play when we think we are not making a decision but simply doing what seems ‘natural’ and ‘normal’ to us (ibid. p: 12). Perry believes that it is ‘only’ when we move between social classes that these ‘unexamined’ taste choices come into focus (ibid.). As someone who has embarked on his own journey of social mobility Perry readily admits that he began his research ‘with a full set of prejudices about ‘the ‘inferior’ taste of the working class I had left behind’ (ibid. p: 17). During the making of this documentary series Perry entered wholeheartedly into the events, social rituals and dress codes he encountered in each of the different ‘taste tribes of Britain’ (Perry, 2012) in the belief that this would give him some answers to the question who do we think we are?

Here we might be reminded of Cannadine’s claim that ‘...class is rather like sex, and in the British case, takes place at least as much inside the head as outside’ (Cannadine, 1998, p: ix). Class is real in the sense that economic position influences our life chances including health, education, employment or lack of it and length of life. But class consciousness is always ideologically defined (it includes an imaginary or symbolic dimension). When Perry decided to explore class in three different regions of England at a precise moment in history, he used the triadic model of class. As discussed in Chapter Two, this model is not an ‘objective’ description of how society is organized but rather it provides a conceptual framework for simplifying a much messier reality. Savage offers a much more differentiated seven-tier model that aims to explain the interweaving of economic inequalities with social and cultural differences. However, he acknowledges that whilst the occupational gradations are more diffuse between the working and middle classes which makes the boundaries harder to draw, the ‘cultural legacy’ of the division persists (Savage, 2015, p: 392). Therefore, it still

makes sense to see three distinct classes marked by cultural and moral boundaries. Perry admits that he chose his locations because they were strongly identified both literally and symbolically with the different social classes: Sunderland, Tunbridge Wells and the Cotswolds. As the artist explained, 'Sunderland has a 'proud working class heritage from its heyday as a mining and shipbuilding town' (Perry, 2013, p: 13). The phrase 'Disgusted of Tunbridge Wells' – was invented by staff at the *Tunbridge Wells Advertiser* in the 1950s (ibid.). This fictional character with a fondness for writing complaint letters has made this town almost synonymous with conservative middle class values in the popular imaginary (ibid.). The scenic Cotswolds with its vista of gently sloping hills and its preponderance of 'mellow, limestone stately homes' has 'become associated with a deeply-rooted landed upper class' (ibid.). The photographs, observations and interviews Perry collected in the three different locations formed the basis for the sketches that were transformed into the suite of tapestries entitled *The Vanity of Small Differences* (2012).

### **Sunderland: working class taste**

Perry's first destination was Sunderland where he went to find out about contemporary working class taste. Club singer Sean Foster-Conley is a man with very definite ideas about what defines working-class taste. Foster-Conley identified 'the mines and shipyards' as the key symbols of working-class life (ibid. p: 13). Perry recognized that although these heavy industries 'that shaped the north of England' no longer existed they had 'shaped the emotional lives' (ibid.) of previous generations and continued to be a source of pride. The material structures such as 'the winding towers and cranes' can be demolished but 'the bonds formed through shared hardship working under them, live on' (ibid.). For Perry, these bonds are 'the embodied tradition of feeling, the emotional structures of a place' which 'take a lot longer to decay' (ibid.).



As argued in Part One of this thesis, it is this affective dimension of class which seems to be missing from both Marxist and poststructuralist accounts. Perry encountered these ‘embodied traditions of feeling’ when he witnessed a performance by Foster-Conley at Heppies the legendary working men’s club. Foster-Conley’s singing (its tone and content) might appear to the outsider as ‘slushy’ and ‘wallowing in sentiment’ but Perry found it profoundly moving in its very ‘real’ outpouring of emotion (Perry, 2012). The artist queried whether the same prejudicial judgements of value would be applied to an operatic performance. He wonders ‘Do you cry a more vintage kind of tears at Glyndebourne?’ (ibid.).

Today, these working class communities are no longer held together by the mine, mill or shipyards. The old industries have been replaced by call-centres, the Fitness 2000 gym, spray-tanners and beauty salons. Allegiance to place, family and friends is pledged through shared leisure activities rather than being forged through work-based bonds, especially for young people. Perry points out that leisure pursuits such as ‘football, soap operas, body-building, tattoos, hot cars, elaborate hairstyles and the ritual of dressing-up for a Friday night on the town’ (Perry, 2013, p: 14) can be seen as reflecting the shift from an age of industry to an age of consumption. The younger members of the group primarily focused on ‘the body, clothes, hair or cars – things to display in the social realm rather than the private home’ (ibid.). In conversation with the custom car enthusiasts, Perry discovered an appreciation of craft skills and an appreciation of aesthetics. The men talked about their cars as though they were ‘sculptures’ (Perry, 2012). The artist encountered this same sense of aesthetic appreciation in many of the shared activities. In the tattooist’s studio, the female tattooist Perry interviewed suggested that rather than investing in art objects to display in the private home the men were ‘painting their own canvases’ (ibid.). At the gym, the

hard work that once went on in the shipyards was being channelled into sculpting male bodies into the desired shape.

Amongst the older men, the artist found the remnants of more traditional leisure pursuits marked by a similar appreciation of aesthetics: a pigeon cove built to resemble a 'temple – like the one built by Maurice Surtees and his brother in the 1940s' (Perry, 2013, p: 31). Stumbling across a tumbledown shed, which he likened to an 'austere homestead', Perry suggested the 'shed aesthetic' was 'an aspect of the working-class sublime' (ibid. p: 32). The judgement of the sublime has its origins in our feelings towards nature, and in our intimation of our ultimate solitude and fragility in a world that is not of our own devising and remains resistant to our demands. The shed is a recurring motif that has both literal and metaphorical significance for Perry. In a typical gesture, he juxtaposes the poetic and the mundane by observing that it is both 'a male womb, oh, and somewhere to keep the tools' (ibid.).

In what must be one of the most memorable scenes in the series, Perry joined the women of Sunderland for a night on the town. As a transvestite, Perry is very familiar with and wholeheartedly enjoys elaborate dressing-up routines. Perry's initiation into the tribe necessitated his participation in the two-day ritual grooming session that took place beforehand. Clad in a 'folk costume' (Perry, 2012) comprising blue silk mini dress, sky-high platform heels, a full blond wig and false boobs Perry (almost seamlessly) blended in with the women. The artist observed that there was a 'base level of glamour' on show in Sunderland 'that would make an upper-class wedding in the Cotswolds look dowdy' (Perry, 2013, p: 29). The women had created what amounted to a glamorous, theatrical spectacle, which might have looked gaudy or overdone to the untutored eye. However, Perry makes the point that each stage of the grooming process involves a very calculated judgement about the appropriate degree of artifice. There are

aesthetic standards in place and people know what rules to apply. Moore describes this current aesthetic as the 'hyper feminine' (cited in Perry, 2013, p: 21). In conversation with celebrity hair stylist Neville Ramsey (credited with developing the Sunderland style) Perry discovered the desires and fantasies underlying the aesthetic choices of the women. Ramsey suggested that the end-result was a 'dream persona' (Ramsey, 2012) which might well be a welcome break from the monotony of the working week. Once the grooming session is completed, the evening out begins 'with a 'pre-lash' at home, then on to Jagerbombs in city-centre bars' (Perry, 2013, p: 29). As Perry emerged from a nightclub swaying on the arm of his female companion he suggested that this particular aesthetic demonstrated a capacity to live in the now and to take pride in a 'fantasy present' (Perry, 2012).

Away from the excitement and glare of the nightclubs, Perry rediscovered the environment he grew up in when he visited the private homes of older ladies in Sunderland. Here Perry found what he fondly referred to as 'granny's front room taste': rooms bursting with 'pattern and clutter', which to the Ikea generation looks like 'sentimental kitsch, unlikely to achieve 'vintage' status' (2013, p: 27). Amongst these cherished ornaments, Perry discovered 'a miner's lamp' a 'relic' from 'a harsher but even more communal industrial past' (ibid. p: 15). Perry is keen to examine his own prejudices about working class taste and he shows immense sensitivity when trying to understand the significance these objects hold for their owners. He is acutely aware that each piece of 'clutter' evokes a personal memory. Often these collections of ornaments are a reaction against earlier material deprivation. In the home of Susan, Perry spies the graduation photographs of her daughters ('the first in our family to go to university') that take pride of place (ibid. p: 27). Susan's life was defined by the circumstances of her birth: having been denied this opportunity she was determined to make the journey

of social mobility through education available to her own two children. This is a particularly poignant moment for Perry ‘a working-class, grammar school boy from the tail end of the ‘baby boomer’ generation’ who describes social mobility as a theme ‘close to my heart’ (ibid. p: 11). The stakes are raised because as Perry points out this ‘*drama of social mobility*’ is much less common today (ibid. my italics).

In Sunderland, the younger people focused on public display in the form of embodied capital: the making visible of a ‘dream persona’ rooted in a ‘fantasy present’ (Perry, 2012). The older generation were more concerned with private display. The front room often served as a repository for memorial objects relating to the family and to bygone industries. For both young and old, taste decisions were based on the principle of solidarity: the desire to ‘demonstrate loyalty’ rather than to assert individuality (Perry, 2013, p: 13). In this context, Susan’s photographs of her daughter’s graduation are a public display, but in all other respects, her home was an example of ‘granny’s front room taste’ (ibid. p: 27).

His experiences in Sunderland made Perry reflect on what he calls the ‘ancestral echoes’ of his own working class past and he observed that his night out on the town had allowed him to ‘slough off his inherited snobbery’ or rather ‘his Islington middle class pretensions’ (Perry, 2012). Perry also recognized the importance of the graduation photographs. These objects are potent symbols because education is still seen as the ticket to a better life. Education can mark the beginning of a journey of social mobility in which our awareness of aesthetic choices is heightened because our taste decisions signal who we are and who we used to be. This insight coupled with Perry’s own experiences provided the inspiration for the two tapestries that depict the working class.

### **Kings Hill: lower middle class taste and hyper-consumption**

Perry's next location was the Kings Hill housing estate near Tunbridge Wells in Kent. Here Perry found 'a modern commercialised utopia' characterised by its cleanliness: 'no litter, no mess' (Perry, 2012). The artist immediately sensed that he had strayed onto territory that was very different from that of his own Islington 'tribe' (Perry, 2012). Perry was invited to a typical King's Hill social ritual: a pink champagne and cup-cakes party. Keen to dress up for the occasion, Perry elicited the help of two women and encountered a set of unwritten rules for marking class distinctions. The rules governing visual markers were to alleviate anxiety and to signal membership of a particular taste tribe. 'Discreet branding' was frequently mentioned – 'Prada loafers with a little badge, a Paul Smith shirt with tell-tale eccentric buttons, a 'low-key Rolex'' (Perry, 2013, p: 16). All of these items suggested to Perry that 'ostentation' (however discreet) remained 'a difficult drug to resist' (ibid.). Dressed for the occasion in Prada loafers, smart dark denim jeans, a Paul Smith shirt and a suit jacket Perry confessed to feeling out of place and rather 'corporate' and he also admitted that he found brands 'troubling' (Perry, 2012). When Perry asked the men present how they would define middle class status, money was stated as the key indicator because it allowed a person to buy whatever goods they wanted rather than what they needed.

Perry attended another social ritual that he identified as the key to understanding the class journey of this particular social group. During a 'Jamie at Home' cookware party, Perry asked which object summed up middle class status. The *tagine* was identified as the ultimate middle class symbol, because it was the object least likely to be found in a working class home. Jamie Oliver's products were trusted because they created the appearance of having been thrown together by someone who has 'taste', when in fact, Oliver is the working class 'geezer with taste' (Perry, 2012). These people

had chosen to buy into a consumer paradise where ‘even eclecticism is prescribed’ (Perry, 2013, p: 34). The houses on Kings Hill were a ‘carefully contrived architectural variety’ ranging from ‘flinted cottages and oast-houses to Victorian Villas and Georgian terraces’ (ibid. p: 33). Inside the houses, ‘real kitsch’ (objects that are on display because they have emotional and therefore symbolic significance for the owner) such as those objects found in the homes of older working class residents in Sunderland was nowhere to be seen having been ‘hidden away in a cupboard’ (ibid. p: 34). Perry explained the Kings Hill aesthetic by suggesting that whilst ‘crude bling’ was no longer necessary to gain respect, these people ‘still needed the reassurance of an easily read code’ (ibid. p: 16).

For Perry, ‘the drama of taste really gets going when people betray their aspiration to a higher social class through their purchases’ (ibid. p: 16). When he met Jayne Norman, Perry had what he later described as his most haunting encounter and he discovered the real emotional charge underlying the aesthetic choices made by the residents of Kings Hill. Norman was so terrified by the responsibility of furnishing her new house that she had abdicated this role entirely by choosing to move into a show flat fully furnished and decorated by the developer. Norman admitted that her fear of ‘getting it wrong’ (ibid. p: 9) was so great that she had opted for a readymade version of the lifestyle to which she aspired. Perry described Norman’s flat as an ‘aesthetic duvet’ (Perry, 2012) with its neutral colour scheme, ‘unfussy sofas, bland knick-knacks’ (2013, p: 9). As someone who had spent a lifetime ‘enjoying control over his aesthetic choices’ Perry was obviously quite taken aback and fascinated by the level of this woman’s fear. Norman might have ‘God forbid...bad taste!’ (ibid. p: 9). Norman explained her decision to move into the show house by pointing out that many people did not know what they liked until they saw it. Perry asked ‘Are people buying their dreams?’

Norman paused for a moment before answering ‘No, people are being sold other dreams’ (Perry, 2012). This comment remained with Perry and he suggested that Jayne Norman’s dilemma could be a ‘symptom of modern capitalist hyper-consumption’ (ibid.).

A substantial proportion of the British public now identify themselves as middle class, largely because of mass home ownership, the council house sell-off, the influx of consumer goods and the disappearance of heavy manufacturing industries. The inhabitants of Kings Hill defined class by income and expanded consumer choice. These people have economic capital invested in the private home and in clothing, leisure pursuits and the cars on public display. Perry sees this group as caught in the dilemma between wanting to show off and not wanting to show off. The link between expressions of taste and the character of individuals underlies the desire to appear respectable (here respectability is defined as exercising restraint) by avoiding ‘crude bling’ and, in so doing, avoid any accusations of vulgarity which, in turn, would indicate that a person was in some sense morally reprehensible or, even worse - working class. There is a sense of social conservatism here, which may be factor in Perry’s choice of clothing when he attends the social rituals of this group. An expanded market economy appears to offer these people the possibility of social advancement and enhanced personal freedoms to buy whatever they wanted. Here we are reminded of Bourdieu, who argued that:

The effect of mode of acquisition is most marked in the ordinary choices of everyday existence such as furniture, clothing or cooking, which are particularly revealing of deep-rooted and long-standing dispositions because, lying outside of the educational system, they have to be confronted as it were by *naked taste*, without any explicit prescription or proscription, other than semi-legitimizing agencies ... (1986, p: 77, my italics).

Hence, the freedom of choice offered by consumerism becomes tyrannical because our taste decisions can be a form of oppression manifested in the minutiae of everyday life.

In conversation with the residents, Perry found ‘a genuine community spirit’ (Perry, 2013, p: 16). These people had all made the choice to move here, they socialised together and they shared the aspiration to maintain a particular standard of living. Perry notes, the ‘ambiance of the estate was maintained by contractual obligation (‘no caravans’) and communal taboos (no net curtains’)’ (ibid.). Underneath the immaculate exterior, this community shared a sense of unease. In part, this unease was generated by the need to prevent people deviating from the agreed norms of respectability, which in turn, necessitated an everyday policing of boundaries. These people were unsure of their place and to Perry, it seemed that despite the ‘convenience, security and luxury of their lifestyle, true middle class status, if they actually wanted it, was beyond an intangible exclusion barrier’ (ibid.). The artist discovers more about the barriers separating the different factions of the modern middle classes when he visits the inhabitants of Tunbridge Wells.

### **The liberal, educated middle class – the rule breakers**

Perry’s first stop in Tunbridge Wells was a vintage fair (an established social ritual) where he meets anthropologist Kate Fox. Here Perry discovered a world in which (according to Fox) money and occupation were not the main indicators of class but rather taste, speech and manners. In Tunbridge Wells, middle class status largely depended on the choices made about social activities, children’s names, style of clothing, leisure pursuits, speech patterns and whether or not you knew how to behave correctly. Perry was given a guided tour around the home of Su (without an e) and Norman Collings who have lived in the same Victorian villa in Tunbridge Wells for



fifty years. The house was an eclectic mix of art works and interior design styles. Works by recognisable artists (such as the Gauguin print: an inheritance from Su's father who obtained the print during his time at Trinity College Cambridge) were collected together with work by lesser-known artists. A wired and beaded torso and a faux Ben Nicholson painting were on display because they appealed to the couple, as did the William Morris vintage design wallpaper. A collection of pottery ducks (a gift from a friend) sat on the window ledge and 'two cheap knick-knacks from TK Maxx' were in place at either end of the mantelpiece (ibid. p: 36). Su and Norman claimed to be entirely at ease with their taste decisions (including how to behave and what to say in social situations). The artist noted that here it was not solidarity but rather individuality and self-confidence that were highly valued. This drive to appear different or unique is a major part of what it means to be middle class.

In the home of Amanda Vokes Perry encountered another expression of individuality in a confident combination of modern, vintage and retro styles which taken together exemplified 'the acute visual literacy of the Boho' (bourgeois bohemian)' (ibid. p: 37). In contrast to the residents of Kings Hill this group was not shopping for a recognizable visual style but rather curating their own sign system, albeit one with its own internal rules. Irony is important here: flouting the rules knowingly with everyone in on the act. Vintage clutter and 'the ability to mix and match with insouciance' are important because ownership of taste is understood as an ability to 'make things more beautiful by association' (ibid.). Perry links the taste choices of this group back to class position by noting that such uniqueness is only possible through the incorporation of a collective, classed understanding. Being brought up in a middle class family which places a high value on education and culture has given these consumers the self-confidence and power to 'define what they see as 'good taste'' (ibid. p: 12). Savage

made a similar point about this form of cultural capital when he identified amongst respondents, ‘a certain style of aesthetic appreciation, a certain detached, knowing orientation ... that demonstrates both an eclectic knowledge and a privileged understanding’ (2015, p: 11). One clear distinction between the residents of Kings Hill and the residents of Tunbridge Wells was that the former wanted clear rules governing their taste decisions whereas the latter had the confidence and the knowledge to play around with and flout the rules.

The ‘intangible exclusion barrier’ between the two groups is one Perry attributes to ‘culture and education’ (Perry, 2013, p: 16). In Tunbridge Wells cultural capital (the result of accumulated knowledge, education and social background) is on display. This group do not go in for obvious demonstrations of capital: they do not display embodied capital (tattoos, fake tans, heavy make-up) or economic capital (material acquisitions with obvious designer logos) rather they just ‘know’ when something is right (ibid. p: 12). Perry alerts us to the fact that the confidence on display in Tunbridge Wells does not happen by chance, it is an expensive commodity to attain. These are ‘the people basking in the sunlit uplands of the chattering classes’ and ‘have either passed through this miasmic barrier at university or were born beyond it’ (ibid. p: 16).

At a dinner party which Perry attends clad in a tasteful blue dress and low key make-up (having been advised to avoid looking as though he was selling himself) the artist attempts to discover what lies beneath the taste choices of this group: ‘angst’ came the somewhat surprising but immediate and unequivocal reply (Perry, 2012). These people seem outwardly confident about asserting their individuality through their aesthetic decisions, so there must be ‘another driver of taste’ involved here (Perry, 2013, p: 17). Perry discovers that in Tunbridge Wells, class identity has a civic dimension in which good citizenship is synonymous with being a responsible consumer. Their shared

sense of 'angst' derived from a strong desire to demonstrate morality through responsible citizenship (Perry, 2012). In the past, moral citizenship found its expression in regular church attendance or voluntary work. Today, it is much more individualistic and narrowly focused and is expressed in relation to consumerism and this appeared to be a source of anxiety (not least, one suspects, because mass consumerism has always been identified with the working classes). The image of the good citizen finds its expression through anxiety-laden decisions about what organic products they should buy, what to recycle, whether to drive an electric car and whether to deny the children television (Perry, 2012). These people know they are equally as consuming as their neighbours in Kings Hill and Perry believes that these activities are a form of expiation: 'the need to pay inconvenient penance to society' which stems 'partly from guilt' (Perry, 2013, p: 17). The educated, liberal middle classes have done well but they pay with hard labour on the allotment or by cycling to work ('green bling' was one memorable description of the ecological morality on display amongst this group) (Perry, 2012). I suggest that 'ecological morality' can also be understood as a modern day attempt to correspond with what Arnold termed the ideal of 'the best self' in which perfection can be understood as 'an inward condition of the mind and spirit' (Arnold, 1993, p: 63). Amongst the educated middle classes, a demonstration of ecological concerns signals an expression of the universal humanity, which marks the acculturated citizen thereby legitimating and strengthening social divisions.

As Perry discovers, the biggest divide seems to exist within these two sectors of the middle class itself rather than between the middle and working classes. It is here that the artist identifies 'a Berlin Wall of taste' separating the 'knowledge-driven' inhabitants of old Tunbridge Wells from their 'money-driven' counterparts in Kings Hill (Perry, 2012). This divide is largely the result of education and social background

but what the ‘aspirational purchasers’ of Kings Hill share in common with the ‘good burghers’ of Tunbridge Wells is a desire to demonstrate ‘I am a good person’ through the taste choices they make (ibid.). Perry concludes that it is within this class as a whole that small differences acquire huge symbolic importance. For both sectors of the middle classes, every object is freighted with underlying emotions because these aesthetic decisions reveal which side of the ‘Berlin Wall of taste’ a person is on: herein lies *The Vanity of Small Differences*. This insight forms the basis for the two tapestries that represent middle class taste.

### **Upper class taste**

Perry’s tour of the upper classes began with a polo match at Cirencester Park in the Cotswolds. Perry asked the Countess of Bathurst to define upper class taste and he was informed that it is characterized by ‘good quality’, and an ‘understated’ aesthetic without ‘too much bling’, above all, the final result should be ‘appropriate’ (Countess of Bathurst, 2012). In an attempt to find out what was behind this particular aesthetic Perry asked whether understatement was the key factor and the Countess replied ‘The posher the person, the less they have to prove’ (ibid.). Perry’s next engagement was a drinks party at Berkeley Castle. On the advice of the Countess, the artist attended this event clad in a pink striped blazer, shirt, tie, smart casual trousers, suede brogues and panama style hat. His aim was to embody the upper class aesthetic of ‘impeccable appropriateness’ (Perry, 2012). He asked various guests whether he had been successful and was politely told ‘You look like an Edwardian boating man’ and ‘You look very smart Grayson’ (Berkeley, 2012). Perry concluded that despite considerable expenditure on new clothes he had failed to disguise the fact that he was ‘an oik usurper’: a role he is very happy to play (Perry, 2012).

Perry's next stop was the stately homes of England. Ownership of these great ancestral houses is what really sets the landed upper classes apart from the rest of society. As 'a jumped-up prole' who nevertheless 'feels genetically drawn to crumbling, faded glory' (Perry, 2013, p: 14) sets out to discover why the English are so in thrall to the country house aesthetic. In conversation with Rollo and Janie Clifford, the owners of four stately homes in Gloucestershire, Perry suspected that the couple took pleasure in their 'crumbling stone staircase' and 'her fifty-year old car covered in stickers' (ibid. p: 14). When pressed, the couple denied any attachment to 'hard-won decay' and cited lack of money as the reason for their taste choices. Perry is suspicious and questions whether this attitude is due to genuine hardship or is it due to 'inbred taste'? (ibid.). Rollo Clifford admitted there was a 'certain inverted snobbery' (Clifford, 2012) in the fact that English gentlemen habitually wore their grandfather's old clothes: a tradition also maintained by the women. In the home of John Berkeley (the man who owns Berkeley Castle) Perry discovered a four-poster bed 'that has been identified as the piece of furniture in longest continuous use by the same family in the UK' (Perry, 2013, p: 41). Perry was not convinced that this 'elegantly arrested decomposition' was the result of economic necessity (Perry, 2012). Could it be that these people believed in their own mythology to such an extent that they were becoming parodies of themselves?

The same threadbare aesthetic was on show at Chavenage House, where tapestry-lined rooms have remained unchanged since Oliver Cromwell was a houseguest. Hunting is the predominant imagery of the upper classes: horses and hounds are the 'default motif of the aristocracy' usually alongside oil paintings of the ancestors (Perry, 2013, p: 42). This imagery is important because it serves to reinforce the idea that there is a link between blood and breeding. Hunting imagery is seen decorating various pottery knicks-knacks, which in another context, might well be

derided as kitsch. These homes are full of clutter but it dates back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century. These collected objects, along with stately homes, paintings, antique furniture and vintage wines acquire emotional salience and legitimacy because they provide a material link to the past. As Bourdieu points out, in the struggle over the different ways of acquiring culture, 'to possess things from the past ... by inheritance or through dispositions which, like the taste for old things, are likewise only acquired with time' is 'tacitly recognized as the supreme excellence' (1986, p: 71-72).

Away from the tapestry-hung rooms, in the private quarters at Chavenage Perry found a more Spartan lifestyle with rather a lot of formica and linoleum. In certain sections of the upper classes, it seemed the grand life was no longer affordable. Perry sensed an 'elegiac mood' (Perry, 2012) (particularly at Chavenage) fuelled by a desire to preserve the memory of the past in the somewhat scuffed, faded and shabby present. This determination and longing to preserve the heritage of the past has helped to shape the dominant aesthetic of the upper class, which Perry identifies as 'one of refined entropy' (2013, p: 14). The country house aesthetic is similarly reliant on the creation of a fixed visual sign system in the presentation of the right image. The 'accumulated, crystallized history' (Bourdieu, 1986, p: 71) or 'refined entropy' of the upper class aesthetic is intended to signal the message that the aristocracy are the rightful and legitimate bearers of culture and they are not going anywhere. The artist imagines this section of the upper classes in their crumbling mansions as an endangered tribe or a dying breed because they are renting out their homes to pay the bills and the barbarians are at the gates. The celebrities are moving in with their swimming pools and electric gates and, more importantly, with their 'new money' (Perry, 2013, p: 74).

### **The new ‘upper’ classes: the barbarians at the gates**

Perry’s next stop was Aynhoe Park in Oxfordshire. Since 2006, Aynhoe has been home to entrepreneur and art collector James Perkins who made his money in the music and events business. Perkins has painstakingly restored the house to its former glory including the restoration of an interior originally remodelled by Sir John Soane during the period 1799-1804. The house appears in advertising campaigns and fashion shoots but it is not open to the public. Perkins informs Perry that when he acquired the house his ambitions were to own a four-poster bed, stuffed animals and a huge Galapagos turtle. At Aynhoe Park, Perry discovered an impressive and eclectic collection including classical sculpture, contemporary design commissions, photography, large-scale taxidermy, a collection of children’s toys and many other curiosities.

Perkins freely admits to Perry that popular culture influences his aesthetic decisions. His stylistic references are James Bond, Batman and Thunderbird coupled with a passion and respect for 18<sup>th</sup> century architecture. Unlike the resigned and rather shabby aristocrats with their ‘appreciation of *patina*’ (ibid. p: 14) Perkins is not trying to preserve the house as a monument to the past: in 2012 he sold off everything at a sale hosted by Christie’s and began a new collection. Perry remarked on the stark contrast between the ‘refined entropy’ that defines the country house aesthetic in the prevailing popular imaginary and the ostentatious and flamboyant aesthetic of barbaric splendour on show at Aynhoe Park. The highly individual, eclectic and continually evolving taste decisions made by Perkins certainly seem to justify his characterization of this great house as ‘...a modern day stately home’ (Perkins, 2012).

## **The aristocracy: the origin of the link between taste and class**

Perry is curious about the link between taste and class and, like Bourdieu, he is keen to break ‘the spell that upper class aesthetic still exerts on us’ (Perry, 2012).

Anxiety about taste is fuelled by the belief that there is a hierarchy of taste and the upper classes are an authority on this topic. If this is the case, then how do we resolve the tension between these two competing versions of the stately home aesthetic? Does the answer to this question rely on whether one version is more ‘authentic’? Is Aynhoe Park closer to aristocratic taste than Berkeley Castle? Does good taste reside in the stuffed polar bears, centenary model edition of the Aston Martin DBR 1 (complete with engine) and cast bronze coffee tables of the new ‘upper’ classes? Or do we find a more authentic expression of good taste in the faded, old sofas and mouldering decor of the landed gentry? Do these objects signal ‘the supreme excellence’? (Bourdieu, 1986, p: 71).

Perry puts this question to historian Amanda Vickery during a tour of Blenheim Palace, built in the early 1700s for the First Duke of Marlborough. Vickery points out that by the 1800s all of the aristocratic families in England were finding new sources of money so they were the nouveau riche of their time: this was the richest aristocracy in Europe. These houses were direct statements of economic, cultural and social capital: built and furnished with trophies collected on the Grand Tour. They were temples to bling: full of shiny new objects, decorated with gold leaf and furnished with exotic rugs. The aim was to create a visual spectacle designed to dazzle the audience. Vickery argues that an 18th century aristocrat would be horrified at the dirty, faded glory that is on show at Blenheim Palace today. A nobleman built Blenheim Palace, which guaranteed its designation as good taste at the time; however, if a wealthy merchant had built and decorated the house, it would be vulgar. This resistance to the idea that money



can confer class status via taste is rooted in the idea of there being a natural social hierarchy and a corresponding aesthetic hierarchy: the belief that the aristocracy are the natural tastemakers in society.

Perry concluded that his journey around the taste tribes of Britain had revealed that the landed upper classes were not, in fact, an unimpeachable source of authority on the idea of 'English aesthetic goodness' (Perry, 2012). Yet, such is the power of this spell that we are sold a 'packaged' version of country house taste: an aesthetic of faded and 'shabby chic' (Perry, 2013, p: 34). There are paradoxes here because the intentional distressing sought out by the aspiring classes is far removed from the authentically acquired '*patina*' that characterizes the aesthetic of 'impeccable appropriateness' so beloved of the old aristocracy. Despite the popularity of 'shabby chic', (ibid.) whether it is acquired through accident or design, it is a look far removed from the aesthetic aims of the original stately home owners. At Aynhoe Park, James Perkins' love of flamboyance and ostentation may not be to everyone's taste nevertheless, it reveals a deep appreciation of the house and its history. According to Perry:

What Perkins is doing is no different from what the old aristocrats did back in the day when they had all the money and were the tastemakers in Britain...It's good that people will take on these monuments and put a bit of life back into them (Perry, 2012).

The upper classes are in a predicament. They want to hold onto their symbols of power, status and wealth but they lack the financial capital to do so, for this reason, Perry sees certain sections of the landed aristocracy as a dying breed. The upper classes are prey to the celebrities and entrepreneurs who have the money to save their properties from ruin and to acquire all the accoutrements of the mega-rich lifestyle that was once the

province of the old aristocrats. For many amongst the landed aristocracy, the belief that their ancestry does in fact, make them an innately superior class apart, means that the incomers will continue to be regarded as the barbarians at the gate and will never be accepted. These insights form the basis for the two tapestries depicting upper class taste.

### **The Vanity of Small Differences**

Perry chose the medium of tapestry precisely because of its historic and class associations. Tapestries are the traditional status symbols of the rich – they hang in vast baronial halls, saloons and bedchambers of ancestral piles. Much of the status value of tapestry is due to their huge cost and the enormous amount of skilled labour needed to produce them. Tapestries usually depict classical myths of military victories or religious narratives but in this case Perry could not resist subverting the genre by depicting ‘...a commonplace drama of social mobility in average Britain’ (Perry, 2012). The six tapestries were made by the Flanders Tapestries in Weilsbeke Flanders on a mechanized Jacquard loom dating back to 1804: the first prototype was invented by Joseph Marie Jacquard from Lyon in France. New computing technologies have given the loom ‘a new purpose ... the output of images either designed or manipulated in a virtual space’ (Lowe cited in Perry, 2013, p: 103). Lowe points out that the main task of the loom operator is to ‘keep everything standardised, repeatable and faultless’ (ibid. p: 109).

Perry had previously worked in this medium using a slightly different drawing technique<sup>11</sup>. All of the drawings for *The Vanity of Small Differences* were produced on a

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<sup>11</sup> *The Walthamstowe Tapestry* (2009) which Perry describes as a ‘take on the journey of life through shopping’ to show how marketing has invaded our heads (Klein, 2013, p: 267-268). This tapestry involved ‘hand drawings which were ‘manipulated and then ‘digitally coloured in Adobe Photoshop’ (Lowe, 2013, p: 103) with the aim of producing an effect ‘similar to quilting’ (Lowe, 2013, p: 106). See also *Map of Truths and Beliefs* (2011) first shown in Perry’s exhibition at the British Museum: *The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman* in 2012.

computer screen using ‘a Wacom Cintiq interactive pen display’ (ibid.). According to Lowe, this technological innovation:

...has created a new graphic language – every mark made in the knowledge that it will be transformed into tapestry. These drawings are to the final Jacquard weaving as Raphael’s cartons are to the tapestries made in Pieter van Aelst’s workshop in Brussels (or those woven later for Charles 1 in the workshops at Mortlake in the UK) (ibid. p: 110).

This digitised production process expands the range of possibilities for the artist, not least because the tapestries are woven at ‘dazzling speed’ (ibid. p: 11). Crucially, they are a highly portable form of public art, which makes them accessible to a wide audience. When we remind ourselves that Perry’s creative drive is fuelled by his need to balance two oppositional aspects of his personality (the hobbit who loves intricate historical detail and the punk who is an astute social commentator) it becomes clear why tapestry has become his ‘default setting’. According to Lowe, tapestry:

...is an intensely collaborative project; it is rooted in a powerful craft tradition that stretches all the way back to the Bayeux Tapestry (although this is technically embroidery), via a medieval artisanal tradition, and William Morris; it does not recognize the distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ art forms; and it enables Perry to continue an enduring tradition of telling highly moralised stories of who we are, whether we worship the gods of organized religion or Western consumerism (ibid.).

The language of tapestry seems to provide the perfect medium of translation for Perry’s ideas and his unique visual idiom. Examining one of the completed tapestries for the first time, the artist commented on the estranging effect of the production process by noting that it brought him face-to-face with ‘Grayson Perry-ness’ (Perry, 2012).

The series of tapestries takes its title *The Vanity of Small Differences* from a phrase ‘the narcissism of small differences’ used by *Freud in Civilization and its Discontents* (1929-30). Freud coined this phrase to allude to the fact that we are often

most strongly compelled to defend our uniqueness when differentiating ourselves from our near neighbours or from those who are very nearly the same as us. During his field work Perry was able to witness this phenomenon at close hand. The artistic inspiration for the project came from a diverse range of sources but the overall concept came from William Hogarth – an artist who Perry regards as ‘the lodestone of British art’ (2013, p: 13). Hogarth occupied a unique position as a painter and printmaker in the predominantly literary culture of early eighteenth century London. He was a storyteller in the tradition of social comedy who found his subject matter in real life and in the streets of London. Vilification by the art establishment on grounds of his low subject matter did nothing to lessen Hogarth’s popularity amongst his admirers and the targets of his satirical wit: aristocrats, merchants and professionals.

Hogarth has been credited with inventing a genre of painting ‘which may be termed the *moral comic*’ (Trusler, 2008, p: 18). His great skill lay in his ability to capture in paint ‘the manner and follies of an age, living as they rise...’ (ibid.). His series of moral paintings which began with *The Harlot’s Progress* (1732) have continued to appeal to audiences and have survived changes of taste from the eighteenth to the twenty-first century. *A Rake’s Progress* (1733) tells the story of Tom Rakewell, a young man who inherits a fortune from his miserly father, spends it all on fashionable pursuits and gambling, marries for money, gambles away a second fortune, goes to debtor’s prison and dies in a madhouse (Perry, 2013). According to David Bindman, *A Harlot’s Progress* (1732) and *A Rake’s Progress* (1733) are morality tales in which vice is clearly punished with ‘a seemingly irrepressible relish on the artist’s part for the rich contradictions of urban life’ (Bindman, 1997, p: 11). Hogarth dealt in universal often biblical themes such as virtue, vice and temptation but his work did not require a classical education in order for it to be meaningful. The figures of the harlot and the

rake would be immediately identifiable to a contemporary urban audience. Whilst these works can be read as morality tales which warn against living a less than virtuous life they are also comic portrayals of character indicating that Hogarth had some sympathy for his subjects. According to Hazlitt, in *A Rake's Progress* comedy versus tragedy is most fully exemplified and one finds '...silent despair, moody madness, enhanced by the tenderest sympathy, or aggravated by the frightful contrast of the most impenetrable and obdurate insensibility' (Hazlitt cited in Bindman, 1997, p: 22). Whilst their subject matter and their themes are universal, Hogarth's *Modern Morality Tales* are also an unnervingly accurate depiction of the Georgian social imaginary of taste and what lay beneath.

The historian Amanda Vickery, points out that 'Taste was a key word of Georgian cultural argument: a new way of seeing culture and society' (2009, p: 167). During the period 1690-1800 waves of anxiety about the 'moral, political, social and economic consequences of the new wealth' were sweeping through print (ibid.). The supposed link between expressions of taste and the character of individuals provided a source of endless fascination. Much of the literature produced by moralists, satirists and philosophers expressed concern about 'immoral profusion and meaningless glitter' (ibid.). In response to one of the main questions 'how could wealth be reconciled with virtue?' one frequently heard answer was 'through the operation of taste' (ibid.). Taste was undoubtedly of 'sovereign importance' and yet it remained a rather ambiguous notion which no one managed to define in ways that would alleviate the tyranny of taste choices for 'ordinary consumers' (ibid.). There was no shortage of literature but none that addressed the question, how does one decide 'between tasteful and tasteless teacups'? (ibid.). Here we are reminded of the Kings Hill residents with their fear of

‘naked taste’ and their dependence on Jamie Oliver as the semi-legitimizing authority (Bourdieu, 1986, p: 77).

Hogarth was acutely aware of the way in which material culture was used to express taste and to mark social status and superiority. He was able to bring to light these consumer anxieties through the actions and emotions of the characters in his paintings. The paintings are imaginative and aesthetically shaped but nevertheless they are a form of social observation because they convey something about Georgian society and character. According to Walpole:

It was reserved to Hogarth to write a scene of furniture. The rake’s levee room, the nobleman’s dining room, the apartments of the husband and wife in *Marriage a la Mode*, the alderman’s parlour, the poet’s bedchamber, and many others, are the history of the manners of the age (Walpole cited in Bindman, 1997, p: 24).

Hogarth’s satirical series rests on the assumption that society is made up of three separate and distinct orders: the aristocracy and landed gentry; the professional and commercial classes; and the poor. This tripartite scheme can be taken as the conventional representation, again it should be acknowledged that this model is an unrealistic and over-simplifying picture of eighteenth century society. During this time there was fluidity of social movement which was the result of growing economic prosperity. With growing prosperity comes increased consumer demand and increased anxiety about the links between wealth, taste and morality.

The vision of society presented by Hogarth is one in which individuals who seek to move out of their social class by any other means than hard work and conspicuous virtue come to a bad end. These paintings serve as a warning against the folly of ‘extravagance or profuseness’ (Trusler, 2008, p: 23) whilst at the same time, they are a

merciless satire of social aspiration and social pretensions. Hogarth lampoons the taste and entertainments of the aristocratic classes and those middle class individuals like Tom, who ape their habits and manners. In Hogarth's depictions of *The Harlot* (1732) and *The Rake* (1733) both of these characters reach nemesis at the point at which their social ambitions are about to be realized. The outlook is no less bleak for aristocrats whose pursuit of luxury has forced them to sell out to the middle classes – they too are damned. What these paintings reveal is that worry over the potentially corrupting influence of consumerism is nothing new nor is the idea that people with material aspirations are innately vulgar (lacking in taste) and by extension immoral.

At the time Hogarth was painting, upward social mobility was indeed possible for those with talent who were willing to work 'hard and virtuously'. In today's 'meritocratic' society the link between hard work and virtue has continued to exert a powerful hold on the popular imaginary, not least because politicians are constantly invoking the vision of a two-tier world in which virtuous 'hard working families' are contrasted with immoral 'benefit shirkers'. The reality is far more complex but the class connotations are obvious: it is inevitably the working class or those at the lowest levels of society (the 'Precariat') who are 'the brunt of negative characteristics' (Savage, 2015, p: 376). Perry's tapestries explore the conflicts, tensions and prejudices underlying our modern-day aspirations and, in so doing, they tell a very different story about social mobility in twenty-first century Britain.

## **The use of religious imagery**

Perry wanted to monumentalise the subjects of his own modern morality tales: to create an epic out of the banal everyday reality. The intention behind his decision to make religious imagery a consistent theme was to add dignity and authority to his topic. The tapestries explore biblical themes such as virtue and vice, temptation and penance, adoration and the messianic, but they can also be read as a critique of political authority that is based on market exchange and the production of commodities. According to Karl Marx, the worship of commodities is simply another form of alienation akin to that of organized religion. Following Feuerbach, Marx viewed religion as a form of self-alienation in which human 'essence' becomes detached from human existence because we look to the imaginary reality of heaven where (according to Marx) we find only the reflection of our own selves: 'The earthly family is discovered to be the secret of the holy family' (Marx, 1978, p: 144). In worshipping the false Gods of religion (a God created in man's own image) we are diverted from creating a truly human life through our practical social interactions with others (ibid. p: 145).

Similarly, the structures of commodity exchange in twenty-first century capitalist society create an extreme form of alienation. Rather than conceiving of ourselves as members of a vast co-operative, we go to work to earn money and then go shopping to spend it. During this process, we may barely give a thought to the question of how the objects we acquire come into existence. The social characteristics of labour take on the appearance of objects that appear to have no basis in social relations. In the absence of any consideration of the direct relationship between labour and production, Marx argues that the exchange of commodities invests them with supernatural powers



and an illusory autonomy: they become fetishes<sup>12</sup>. Consumers focus on the decision about consumption and on whatever the purchase will magically signal about them. The tapestries explore this fetishism of commodities and in so doing, they reveal the modern day oppressions of capitalism: the tyranny of taste choices that exacts a high price from consumers, both financially and emotionally.

### **Concluding Comments**

Perry is a latter-day Hogarth in the sense that he too is concerned with contemporary manifestations of taste, aspiration and social mobility. The overarching theme of *The Vanity of Small Differences* is how our feelings and prejudices about taste reflect our own individual journeys of social mobility. Perry is giving us the texture of class differences through an exploration of taste. Hence the title of the project: *The Vanity of Small Differences*. His tripartite schema of the English class system is closely modelled on the one used by Hogarth, in which society is seen as three separate and distinct orders: the aristocracy and landed gentry; the professional and commercial classes; and the poor. In the six tapestries, we follow Perry's central character Tim Rakewell as he leaves his humble working class background, rises up through society and meets a very public death. Crucially, the work is also semi-autobiographical because in certain aspects, it reflects Perry's own journey from working class origins into the very middle class environs of the contemporary art world. Chapter Seven will present a detailed discussion of the tapestries.

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<sup>12</sup> See Marx's economic analysis of capital in *Capital: Volume One*.

## Chapter Seven: The Tapestries

**Working Class Taste Tapestry 1: *The Adoration of the Cage Fighters*** (Perry, 2013, p: 67).

The first tapestry in the series entitled *The Adoration of the Cage Fighters* depicts the working class world into which Tim is born. The scene is set in the front room of Tim's great-grandmother. In the foreground left, Tim's mother is balancing the infant Tim on her knee. The baby is reaching for her 'smart phone – his rival for her attention' (Perry, 2013, p: 66). Tim's mother focuses on her phone and she is obviously dressed for 'a night on the lash: an evening spent drinking in the town. The religious theme of temptation is represented by the four female friends who have just arrived to collect Tim's mother. The women who have 'perhaps already been on the pre-lash' (ibid.) are dressed up in their 'hyper-feminine' (Moore cited in Perry, 2013, p: 21) weekend finery (big hair, heavy make-up, fake tans, prominent jewellery, high heels and short dresses). Two heavily tattooed cage fighters are kneeling at the feet of Tim's mother. In the background centre of the tapestry Tim's great grandmother sits in an upholstered recliner. The graduation photograph is on the wall behind Tim's mother. A small boy is just visible on the stairs in the background at the far right of the tapestry. Just above his head sits a picture of a man on a motorbike with a female companion. The tapestry is a riot of colour and detail and the signifiers of working class taste are unmistakable. They include two little mahogany tables with a plant, a vase of dried ferns, the TV remote, a lighter and cigarettes and a can of Red Bull. Every surface including carpets, upholstery and cushions is patterned and textured. The interior décor reveals a pottery horse on the mantelpiece, china ornaments, a series of prints on the walls and a dancing trophy. A small pugnacious-looking dog is on guard under one of the tables.

The title of this first tapestry *The Adoration of the Cage Fighters* echoes Andrea Mantegna's huge altarpiece *The Adoration of the Shepherds* (c. 1450) which depicts the Virgin Mary and the Christ child. The arrangement of figures in the tapestry references the arrangement of figures in the original painting but the shepherds who have come to pay homage are replaced by the cage fighters who are in a supplicant position at the feet of the Virgin Mary: Tim's mother. She is wearing a 'Madonna-blue dress': 'the outcome of an 'unconscious process of creativity' (ibid. p: 30). The cage fighters are presenting the infant Tim with the symbolic 'icons of tribal identity, a Sunderland A.F.C. football shirt and a miner's lamp' (ibid. p: 66). In Mantegna's painting the figure of Joseph sleeping is depicted in the bottom left of the canvas, unsurprisingly this father figure is absent from Perry's composition.

The subversive nature of Perry's own art lies partly in the way he shapes the genre to his own ends by retaining aspects of the original composition but replacing its formal conventions with highly satirised and caricatured forms. All of the tapestry figures appear within enclosed structures (in the case of Tim's mother the structure resembles a womb) that are linked together in an arterial formation. The great-grandmother is the central figure and the four larger female figures are on the far right. This woman is placed at the absolute centre of this tapestry to reflect the role she continues to occupy at the heart of the family. By contrast, the small boy observing the adult drama is not the focus of anyone's attention: a situation that mirrors Perry's own childhood experience. The reappearance of the child at a later stage of life is also a convention of early Christian painting. Linking the figures together may be Perry's way of making the emotional and family ties visible and it allows him to weave in textual narrative.

Any attempt to speak about the meaning of a work of art will necessarily involve the viewer in different levels of interpretation. Every single form (object, figure and

decorative element) in this tapestry belongs to a specific scheme of classification that is about 'more than meets the eye' (Bryson, 1972, p: 3). In conversation with the older ladies of Sunderland, Perry discovered that many of the ornaments and objects surrounding them were emotionally significant because they functioned as *memento mori*: reminders of a long dead industrial past that had once shaped the region and the lives of its inhabitants. The communal past is alive in these objects and in the rituals and emotional ties that now hold the communities together. As Bourdieu points out, this 'material inheritance' is also 'a cultural inheritance' in which material objects signify the 'continuity of the lineage' and they contribute to its 'spiritual reproduction...the values, virtues and competencies which are the basis of legitimate membership ...' (1986, p: 77).

Certain aspects of the figures facilitate identification with the people Perry met in Sunderland, despite the fact that they are highly caricatured. Some signifiers are more potent in terms of the overall narrative, for example, the graduation photograph that Perry spied in the home of Susan. Perry's own journey of social mobility is inherent in Tim's journey. Susan was denied this journey and this part of her story is woven around the figure of Tim's mother.

*Text (in the voice of Tim's mother):*

I could have gone to Uni, but I did the best I could, considering his father upped and left. He (Tim) was always a clever little boy he knows how to wind me up. My mother liked a drink, my father liked one too. Ex-miner, a real man, open with his love and his anger (Perry, 2013, p: 66).

The story told by Tim's mother is one of material, social and economic deprivation and lost opportunities: another form of inheritance that reaches down through the generations. Tim's father is absent and although Tim was 'a clever little boy' (ibid.) his

intelligence is seen as a source of irritation by his mother rather than as a talent that should be encouraged and supported as it would be in a middle class household. There are direct references to alcohol dependence and domestic violence. Outbursts of love and anger are the masculine norm: the sign of a 'real man' (ibid.)<sup>13</sup>. It is difficult not to draw parallels here with the childhood Perry documented in *Grayson Perry: Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl* (2007).

Another theme explored through this tapestry is the tension between belonging to the tribe and yet wanting to escape it. The cage fighters are offering Tim entry to the tribe in the form of symbolic icons: the miner's lamp and the Sunderland football shirt. Will Tim follow the same path as his mother or will he have the courage and the determination to embark on a different journey? The lure of guilty pleasures is another theme explored here. Tim's mother is clearly living for today: a night 'on the lash' during which Tim's great-grandmother will be holding the baby. The text woven around this matriarchal figure reads, 'My Nan though is salt of the earth, the boy loves her. She spent her whole life looking after others' (ibid.). The great-grandmother is a central figure because Perry discovered strong kinship and inter-generational family bonds amongst the individuals he met in Sunderland. Edith Ramsey, mother of celebrity hair stylist Neville Ramsey, was the inspiration here. The industries that bound these people together have long since disappeared but loyalty to the community and to the city of Sunderland are highly valued. After the loss of its main industries, financial insecurity, illness and mutual dependence has brought people together. Emotional and practical support is given to individuals within extended families and through close friendships.

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<sup>13</sup> Perry returned to the North of England (an area with the highest male suicide rates in the UK) for his latest Channel Four documentary series on masculinity *All Man*. The series was aired over three consecutive weeks from 5th May – 19<sup>th</sup> May, 2016 and in the first episode entitled *Hard Man* he revisited the world of the MMA cage fighters

The group of four women on the far right of tapestry are also clearly identifiable and they not only represent the lure of guilty pleasures but also solidarity and support. In case we are tempted to judge Tim's mother too harshly, the text woven around the group of four friends reads:

There are no jobs around here anymore, just the gym and the football. A normal family, a divorce or two, mental illness, addiction, domestic violence...the usual thing...My friends they keep me sane...take me out...listen...a night out of the weekend in town is a precious ritual (ibid.).

Again, Perry draws our attention to the material, social and economic deprivation that continues to shape the lives of many working class communities blighted by the process of de-industrialization. One of the emotions Perry identified beneath the elaborate dressing-up rituals of the women was the desire to create a 'dream persona' (Ramsey, 2012) as an escape from the banal realities of the working or non-working week. For Perry, this particular aesthetic, based on 'beauty you could measure with a ruler' revealed a capacity to live in the now and to take pride in a 'fantasy present' (Perry, 2012).

*The Annunciation of the Cage Fighters* introduces us to Tim's class of origin. Every object depicted in this tapestry is part of the network of classification within which Perry represents working class taste. He explores the way class is imagined and lived using a number of key themes: nostalgia and loss, love and loyalty, solidarity and community, belonging to the tribe and yet wanting to escape, the lure of guilty pleasures and the seduction of objects. His own journey took him from grammar school to art school but he is aware that this social trajectory from working class origins into the ranks of the middle classes through education is far less common today. Yet, the idea persists that education is the ticket to a better life. Perry also recognizes that the people

who are tempted to judge working class taste harshly are often the ones who were lucky enough to embark on this journey themselves. Tapestry Two marks the second stage on Tim's journey of social mobility.

**Working Class Taste Tapestry Two: *The Agony in the Car Park*** (Perry, 2013, p: 69).

The second tapestry depicting working class taste is entitled *The Agony in the Car Park*; the scene is a hill outside Sunderland. Tim's stepfather is the main figure and he is clearly modelled on club singer Shaun Foster Conley but we might also be reminded of Perry's step-father with his 'patina of glamour' (Jones and Perry, 2007, p: 12). The man is standing in front of a roughly drawn shipyard crane and Tim's mother is clasping his hand whilst kneeling in adoration at his feet. The facial features of the man are contorted with emotion as he raises his microphone in the air mid-song. Tim, wearing his grammar school uniform, is also kneeling at the feet of his stepfather. Unlike his mother, the boy is clearly embarrassed as he covers his ears in an attempt to block out the sound. His school bag has fallen open to reveal a computer magazine, a clue to the future direction of his interests. A basket of meat for the raffle is placed on the ground between the figures of Tim and his mother.

We are reminded that class is a socio-spatial categorization (Savage, 2015). The visual signifiers in this tapestry indicate that this is a working-class area. The river cuts a horizontal blue line across the width of the tapestry and just visible in the distance is the Stadium of Light (home to Sunderland AFC) built on the former site of the Monkwearmouth Colliery. The houses are back-to-back terraces including the 'Classy Lady' beauty salon (Perry, 2013, p: 68). Traditional working-class leisure activities are represented by the four men fishing on a small river whilst a horse grazes nearby. Over on the left, a young Tim is playing happily with his step-grandfather in front of his

pigeon cove on the allotments. In the bottom left foreground, a young woman wearing a hijab and a young man carrying a guitar case pass in front of a wall emblazoned with graffiti of Sunderland band *The Futureheads*; a small dog trails behind. In the lower right foreground, the young car enthusiasts gather to show off their customised cars in the car park of Heppies where a tattered England flag flutters above the club's signage. The same flag flies above one of the houses on the left. Mrs Thatcher and the manager of the call centre are standing in front of Heppies waiting to recruit a new member into the middle classes.

The title of this tapestry was inspired by Giovanni Bellini's painting *The Agony in the Garden* (c. 1465) which portrays Christ kneeling on the Mount of Olives in prayer. Christ is experiencing a conflict between the human desire to avoid imminent suffering and obedience to the divine will by which it is ordained (Hall, 1974). His disciples Peter, James and John are sleeping nearby. The Mount of Olives is a potent religious symbol which marks the place where Christ is betrayed by Judas before being crucified and it is also the sight of the resurrection and the ascension. Perry has said that the figure of Tim's stepfather 'hints' at Matthias Grunewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece* (1512-16) which was painted on the eve of the Reformation. In keeping with religious art commissioned by churches and monasteries, the *Isenheim Altarpiece* was not about 'self-expression' it had a social purpose: '...to teach religious stories to the illiterate poor – it was a book of the illiterate' (Jones 2007). Here we are reminded of the power of images in the popular imaginary. In the original panel depicting the crucifixion, the dying Christ is on a rough-timbered, ugly wooden cross and his body is slumped forwards. Jones makes the point that whilst the altarpiece was intended as didactic, 'there is a quality to it that is utterly personal' (ibid.) because it records Grunewald's intense meditation on images of the Christian faith. The painting does not seek to



reassure; there is no comfort to be found here but rather the artist has given us an account of a religious experience that amounts to a ‘long, dark night of the soul’ (ibid.).

We can view *The Agony in the Car Park* as Perry’s modern altarpiece. This second tapestry makes visible the emotional structures or ‘embodied traditions of feeling’ that inform working class taste. Again, Perry has shaped the genre to his own ends. A hill just outside Sunderland replaces The Mount of Olives portrayed in *The Agony in the Garden* (c. 1465). Tim’s step-father has replaced Grunewald’s figure of the dying Christ and a ‘naively-drawn shipyard crane’ replaces the roughly hewn crucifix (ibid. p: 68). The letters ‘NESL’ stand for North East Shipbuilders Limited, the final incarnation of the shipyards (Klein, 2013, p: 277). In a characteristic bringing together of the sacred and the profane, Tim’s mother - ‘once again in the throes of an earthly passion’ – has replaced the figure of the Virgin Mary (Perry, 2013, p: 68).

Unlike the previous tapestry, the visual similarities are not so immediately obvious here. In Bellini’s painting, Christ is kneeling in an agony of prayer to an invisible God. In *The Agony in the Car Park* shipbuilding has replaced religion as the tradition that binds the community together. These industries are long gone but they are memorialized in folk songs. The strength of feeling expressed by Shaun Foster Conley as he performed the same songs that his mother used to sing and the response from his audience inspired the central motif of this tapestry. Jones describes the *Isenheim Altarpiece* as a terrifying vision of religion in which faith is both ‘violent and extreme’ (2007). As Perry listened to the performance, his attention was caught by ‘a large fat tattooed man, naked to the waist, cavorting about the dance floor’ (2013, p: 32). Always alert to the potential for humour, he described this ‘extreme’ display of devotion as ‘at once both moving and comical and, it struck me as a demotic masterpiece’ (ibid.).

Perry admits that he found these songs very moving because the emotions on display were very 'real'; although to an outsider the performance and its reception might well be dismissed as 'slushy' and the emotions on display as wallowing in sentimentality (Perry, 2012). By immortalising the figure of Foster Conley in Tim's step-father, Perry is rejecting the view that there is nothing of value in working class folk culture. However, he depicts the singer as a figure crucified against a crane perhaps to acknowledge the hardships and dangers of working in heavy industry and to emphasize that there is both nostalgia and ambiguity here.

*The Agony in the Car Park* both recognizes and celebrates the shared rituals of working class lives and leisure pursuits whilst at the same time it shows how the loss of the heavy manufacturing industries has affected those left behind. The old industrial patterns of life have largely died out and the basis of working class solidarity has shifted. This second tapestry shows how tensions arise when working class identities begin to fragment as the old industries make way for the new. Solidarity is replaced by individualism and aspiration: the desire to escape and to create a better future. The text woven around the top of the allotments reads as follows: Text (*in the voice of Tim's stepfather*):

I started as a lad in the shipyards. I followed in my father's footsteps. Now Dad has his pigeons and he loves the boy. Shipbuilding bound the town together like a religion. When Thatcher closed the yards down it ripped the heart out of the community (Perry, 2013, p: 69).

Perry is recounting a story that is very characteristic of employment patterns amongst many working class industrial communities. The traditional expectation was that a son would enter the same occupation his father, especially when there was only one main industry. All aspects of life were patterned around industrial employment but

when those industries closed down there was nothing to replace them. Often there is consolation in shared hobbies. Pigeon racing is a popular hobby amongst older men and for Perry it harks back to an earlier industrial age. Enclosed within this text we have the image of a young Tim happily playing with his grandfather and blissfully unaware of the anguish that his future choices will bring. The high wall that surrounds the allotments is a visual indicator that this is a tight-knit way of life: secure and yet at the same time restricted.

Another visual clue lies on the other side of the wall, above the graffiti of Sunderland band *The Futureheads*, the text reads, 'I could have been in a rock band. I met the boy's mother at the club. I sing on a Saturday night between the bingo and the meat raffle' (ibid.). This text narrates a tale of thwarted ambition and compromise to illustrate the tension between who we are and who we would like to be. There is a poignant contrast between the life of a rock star and the life of a club singer forced to negotiate a time slot between the bingo and the meat raffle. There is a hint that the birth of Tim is implicated in this compromise. In a middle class environment, any evidence of musical talent would probably have been recognized and nurtured. The text woven around Heppies and the car park gives voice to the aspirations of Tim's step-father, 'Now I work in a call centre, the boss says I am management material. The money's good, I could buy my council house, sell it and get out. I voted Tory last time' (ibid.). Through the voice of Tim's stepfather Perry illustrates the way in which the basis of class solidarity shifts as politics becomes less about production and more about consumption. Tim's stepfather is anxious to leave behind local community life and he has a desire for social mobility based on acquisitiveness and increased economic prosperity, which have shifted his political allegiance.

This tapestry appears to contain several semi-autobiographical narrative threads. We are following Tim's journey but this particular tapestry takes his step-father as its focus. Here there appears to be an overlap with Perry's own background. Perry's stepfather was a powerful figure in Perry's early life, '...a storm on the horizon, which broke all the time' (Jones and Perry, 2007, p: 63). His mother was 'staunchly' working class whilst his step-father aspired to middle class status (he owned his own house and a number of small businesses) (ibid. p: 61). His mother voted Labour but his stepfather voted Conservative hence Perry's early view of a dichotomous oppositional world divided between us and them. Perry lived with his mother and stepfather for fifteen years but he felt alienated from both parents and this situation only added to his determination to make his escape on his own terms. In *The Agony in the Car Park* both Tim and his stepfather want to escape their class origins. Tim is anxious to distance himself from his class roots but unlike his stepfather, he is becoming self-consciousness about the subjective differences between the classes: an awareness that causes him an agony of embarrassment. He is just beginning to acquire the taste prejudices of a specific section of the middle class. In a mirroring of Perry's own experience, Tim is not the focus of attention for the adults and like Perry, his escape will be through education, hard work and sheer determination.

*The Agony in the Car Park* makes visible the embodied traditions of feeling that inform working class taste. Again, there is nostalgia and loss, loyalty and betrayal, solidarity versus individualism, and the tension between earthly pleasures and deferred gratification. The working class is generally portrayed as something to be *escaped* from rather than celebrated. Perry acknowledges his own desire for escape, yet at the same time, he does not subscribe to the view that nothing about working class life is valuable or admirable. In his determination to challenge the hierarchy of values implicit in

judgements of taste, the artist celebrates certain aspects of working class folk culture that are gradually dying out. In this tapestry, Perry examines what happens to working class communities when the industries that sustain them no longer exist. He acknowledges the rise in home ownership under Thatcher and new Labour has contributed to the breakdown of class identity. The journey of social mobility is one in which our taste choices mark who we are and who we used to be. As Tim begins his own journey of social mobility via education we see the difficulties and costs involved as he experiences a sense of estrangement from his family of origin. The difficulties and costs of social/class mobility are further explored in the first tapestry about middle class taste entitled *Expulsion from Number 8 Eden Close*.

**Middle Class Taste Tapestry 1: *Expulsion from Number 8 Eden Close*** (Perry, 2013, p: 71).

The first tapestry depicting middle class taste is entitled *Expulsion from Number 8 Eden Close* and this tapestry marks Tim's passage into the established middle class or rather the 'sunlit uplands of the chattering classes' (Perry, 2013, p: 16). The central figures are Tim who is now at university studying computer science and his 'nice' girlfriend from Tunbridge Wells (ibid. p: 70). Tim's mother and stepfather are shown on the left side of the tapestry enclosed by a rainbow. The couple are upwardly socially mobile and now live on a private housing estate and own a luxury car: a Range Rover of course. All the markers of lower middle class taste are here but Tim's mother is still wearing large hoop earrings and a tightly belted leopard print blouse, which betray her working class origins. As she kneels to Hoover the Astro Turf lawn in a bid to remove all traces of dust and dirt, she seems to be appealing to the back of Tim's retreating figure. Perry tells us there has been an argument.

Tim's stepfather clad in a discreetly logoed polo shirt is also looking towards Tim and waving a golf club. In the foreground, a vase balances in a bowl of pebbles, an exact replica of the vase Perry spied in Jayne Norman's show house. Left of the vase sits a plate of cup cakes and to the right a pottery duck. Hanging from the top of the rainbow is the small heart-shaped 'gilver' ornament that Perry spotted in the home of Kate Pinnel on the Kings Hill estate (ibid. p: 34). All of the objects shown here are a direct reference to the homes that Perry visited in the eclectically prescribed consumer paradise of the Kings Hill estate. The rainbow represents the 'intangible exclusion barrier' that Tim must pass through as he leaves his old life behind under the watchful eye of Jamie Oliver, 'the god of social mobility' (ibid. p: 70).

The religious reference for this tapestry is Masaccio's fresco *The Expulsion from the Garden of Eden* (c. 1425) which is a single scene depicting Adam and Eve being expelled from the Garden of Eden by an angel. The scene is taken from the book of Genesis after the Fall, when Adam and Eve succumbed to temptation by eating the forbidden fruit. As a punishment, God casts the couple into the world where they are 'forced to labour and suffer the consequences of their sin' (Italian Renaissance, 2016). Masaccio has painted a scene of intense emotion: Eve is crying out and Adam 'cannot bear to show his face' (Ibid.). Masaccio's fresco pushed the boundaries of the Renaissance tradition in its depiction of raw emotion as the couple 'grieve over the consequences of their sins' (Ibid.). In Perry's tapestry, Tim and girlfriend have also committed a sin because Tim is leaving behind his class of origin. In a humorous gesture, the facial features of Jamie Oliver (the 'God of social mobility') have replaced those of Masaccio's angel. In terms of their posture and their expressions of emotion, Tim and his girlfriend are modelled on Masaccio's Adam and Eve. Tim's anguish is

visible as he clutches his iphone and laptop and his girlfriend is glancing back anxiously.

There is no sense of connection between the figures on the left and the figures on the right of the tapestry. A university education has given Tim his ticket of exit to a brighter future and the couple make their hurried exit from the consumer paradise of King's Hill through the rainbow and onto the 'sunlit uplands' of the Tunbridge Wells drawing room (Perry, 2013, p: 70). A central bonding ritual of the middle classes, the dinner party, is just getting underway and his girlfriend's father raises a toast to welcome the couple. On this side of the 'Berlin Wall of taste' a very different scheme of visual classification is in place (Perry, 2012).

As with Hogarth every detail adds to the visual language of the tapestry. There is no mistaking the material culture of the established, educated middle classes on display here. In the foreground a table is set for dinner. Olive oil, red wine, wooden pepper grinder, salad and what looks like stuffed peppers or aubergines feature prominently. Four people sit around the candle lit table. The main figure in the group is a woman who bears a striking resemblance to Perry's own wife Philippa, with her characteristic huge-framed round spectacles and her brightly coloured, bobbed hair. The other couple bear a resemblance to Su and Norman Collings. The William Morris vintage patterned wallpaper and the pseudo Ben Nicholson painting complete with Perry's sneaky addition of a cafetiere (the 'chalice of the middle classes') (Perry, 2013, p: 38) are taken directly from the Collings's house. A floor to ceiling bookshelf is also visible next to an antique table piled with more books, an ipod on a docking station and two oriental-looking vases. The floors are stained and polished and the edge of a rug is just visible. A small dog leaps up to greet the couple. In the upper right corner, the sun shines down onto the scene.

The first sentences of the textual narrative woven into the Astro Turf on the Kings Hill side of the tapestry tell us about the argument between Tim and his parents.

Text (*in the voice of Tim's girlfriend*)

I met Tim at College, he was Such a Geek. He took me back to meet his mother and Stepfather. Their house was so clean and Tidy, not a speck of dust...or a book, apart from her God, Jamie. She Says I have turned Tim into a Snob (ibid. p: 70).

The text woven into the rug reads, 'His parents don't appreciate how bright he is' (ibid. p: 70). Tim's girlfriend is shocked at the pristine environment inhabited by Tim's parents. These people are adhering rigidly to the fixed visual language of the hyper-consumerist aesthetic in an attempt to present themselves as the epitome of respectability and upward social mobility. The house is clean and tidy, this couple do not have the knowledge and confidence to mix and match with insouciance. There are no kitsch objects and the lack of cultural capital is apparent in the absence of art works or books (Jamie Oliver is a hallowed exception). Tim's stepfather plays golf, a form of 'corporate entertainment' (R.G. 2011) and the couple drive a Range Rover, despite the fact that they live on a new housing estate. The only jarring note is the clothing worn by Tim's mother. Tim's parents do not place a high value on education and consequently they do not recognize Tim's intelligence: another echo of Perry's childhood. Being middle class is defined by purely financial considerations: money releases them from having to base their taste decisions on need and gives them access to expanded consumer choice.

This couple can buy into the middle class hyper-consumerist lifestyle but they do not have the educational background and the taste that would make them fully middle class. The rainbow is highly significant because it symbolises the 'miasmic barrier' (Perry, 2013, p: 16) that separates the money-driven middle class from their



knowledge-driven counterparts. Tim's education has allowed him to pass through this barrier but access onto to the 'sunlit uplands of the chattering classes' (ibid.) is not available to his parents who must remain firmly enclosed in their hyper-consumerist paradise. One of the main themes explored here is the difficulties and costs of class mobility. Tim's grief at his expulsion from his family of origin is the price he must pay as he progresses through the ranks of modern British society. The text woven into the sun reads, 'My father laughed at Tim's accent but welcomed him onto the sunlit uplands of the middle classes. I hope Tim loses his obsession with money' (ibid. p: 70). Another theme explored in connection with class mobility is the tension between who we are and who we used to be. Although Tim has gained his official ticket of entry (his university education) to the middle classes, his accent betrays his class origins, as does his obsession with money. His material aspirations leave him vulnerable to the dangers inherent in consumerism and the seduction of objects.

It is within the middle class as a whole that Perry finds the greatest levels of discomfort and anxiety about class distinctions. In *Expulsion from Number 8 Eden Close* Tim has 'sinned against the natural order of things, against his fixed position in the natural world' (O'Neill, 2012, p: 3). Perry reveals the power relations inherent in such judgements by linking the different forms of capital to economic positioning and the desire to mark social distinctions. What really divides the classes is education and culture (certain forms of knowledge) which are expensive commodities to attain. When the objective facts (income, housing, access to consumer goods) seem more on a parallel between the classes then there is a greater concern amongst the educated middle classes to exaggerate the subjective differences (speech patterns, choice of name, leisure pursuits, choice of décor and so on) hence the 'Berlin Wall of taste' (Perry, 2012).

These taste preferences function as forms of symbolic capital fuelled by the idea that certain tastes are legitimate and therefore aesthetically and morally superior to others.

The tyranny of taste choices arises because in Perry's view our aesthetic decisions communicate not only where we place ourselves in society but also where we have come from. He contends that taste is 'bred into us like a religious faith' and for this reason, we retain 'a primal desire for the gee-gaws of our culture of origin' (2013, p: 11). The tapestries show that all of the classes are susceptible to the seductions of consumerism in one guise or another and that to regard money and material goods as ends in themselves (the ultimate means of expression) is dangerous. Tim is a working class individual with ambitions to ascend the social hierarchy but his material aspirations will lead to his ultimate downfall.

**Middle Class Taste Tapestry 2: *The Annunciation of the Virgin Deal*** (Perry, 2013, p: 73).

The second tapestry depicting middle class taste is entitled *The Annunciation of the Virgin Deal* and it marks the point at which Tim becomes a multi-millionaire through the sale of his software business to Richard Branson. The scene is set in the kitchen of Tim's large, rural (second) home where he is relaxing with his family. The central figure is Tim's business partner who is here to inform him of the successful sale and his increased wealth. The woman is leaning against a heavily laden kitchen table. The numerous objects form a still life to demonstrate 'the cultural bounty of his affluent life style' (ibid. p: 72). Items with a religious symbolism such as the jug of lilies are included. In the upper left corner his parents-in-law sit and read whilst his elder child plays on a rug at their feet. A crowded bookshelf is visible. One shelf holds a lidded pot depicting the figure of Alan Measles, a photograph and a model of a rather haughty

looking dog. In the background centre of the tapestry Tim's wife is leaning against the Aga and sending tweet messages on her iphone. Over on the far right Tim is sitting on the sofa and playing with the baby on his knee; his pug dog is lying next to him (a direct reference to Hogarth's dog Trump) and his discarded shoes lie in the bottom right corner (a portent of what is to come). On the wall behind Tim, Steve Jobs and Bill Gates, two modern icons of the computer age look down on the family and a white dove is visible just left of the two men.

The tapestry is crowded with all of the material objects that have become the taste markers of the wealthy, educated, liberal-minded upper middle classes and every object is freighted with significance. The location is also very important. The windows reveal different views of the countryside complete with stone cottages, a church spire, chickens, five-bar gates and ploughed fields. Tim's yellow Citroen is parked under the window (a car sufficiently 'understated' to signal its owner had nothing to prove (Countess of Bathurst 2012). This car hints that Tim aspires to enter the upper classes. The home of Amanda Vokes provided the direct inspiration for this tapestry with its 'confident combination of mid-century, kitsch, classic and ethnic styles' (Perry, 2013, p: 37). Tim's kitchen is brimming with items that have achieved iconic status as the ultimate symbols of an affluent middle class lifestyle. The older child is playing on a hand-woven rug decorated somewhat incongruously with Kalashnikov rifles and a tank. Perhaps to remind us that governments are happy to invest billions of pounds in arms whilst cutting back public funding. Consumers are willing to invest heavily in highly desirable or fetishized goods but may be unaware of the conditions of production.

Amongst the many objects on display, the Aga has achieved the status of a modern day 'altar' (ibid. p: 38). The stove is a 'fuel-guzzling eco-hazard' but also a potent signifier of 'the authenticity of an un-renovated farmhouse' (ibid.). The Le

Creuset cast iron cookware and the Italian heat-on-the-hob espresso maker have also become fetish objects because they bear traces of European sophistication. A cafetière sits on the table next to a pile of organic vegetables, two Penguin mugs bearing literary references, a Cath Kidston bag, a jar of homemade jam and an iPad. These objects signify 'I am a good person' (Perry, 2012). Further evidence of Tim's ecological morality is on display in the re-usable nappies drying on the clothes hanger and the boxes of glass and plastic waiting to be recycled. The Guardian newspaper used to wrap the organic vegetables has a cover feature on Tim entitled 'A Geek's Progress' which provides a clue to his future celebrity status. In keeping with the genre of still life painting, Perry has included a sneaky *memento mori* in the small skull attached to Tim's car key as part of the still life on the kitchen table.

The title of this tapestry was inspired by three separate paintings of the *Annunciation* by Carlo Crivelli (the vegetables) Mathias Grunewald (the facial expression of his business partner) and Robert Campin (the jug of lilies) (Perry, 2013, p: 72). The *Annunciation* depicts the moment when the angel Gabriel makes his announcement to the Virgin Mary: 'You shall conceive and bear a son, and you shall give him the name Jesus' (Hall, 1974, p: 18). This announcement marks the Incarnation of Christ and the popularity of this theme in Christian art reflects its doctrinal importance. Depictions of the Annunciation have three essential elements: the angel, the Virgin and the dove of the Holy Spirit descending towards her' (ibid. p: 19). Crivelli's painting is entitled *The Annunciation with St. Emidius* (1486) and it depicts an ideal version of Ascoli in Italy where the painting was made. Saint Emidius the patron of the city is carrying a model of Ascoli Piceno in his hands. The foreground contains an apple symbolising original sin and a cucumber, symbolizing fertility and the Garden of Eden. The glow of the Holy Spirit illuminates Mary, as a ray of light pierces her

through the grilled window. According to Jonathan Jones, this ‘homespun’ painting allowed people to imagine a mystic event as though it was happening in their own towns and villages ‘among Crivelli’s potted herbs peacock and fruits’ (Jones, 2011). In Grunewald’s depiction of the *Annunciation* (one of nine images on the twelve panels of the *Isenheim Altarpiece*) Mary is clasping her hands together and her gaze is cast down as she receives the momentous news.

Robert Campin’s painting, *The Annunciation Triptych* (1427-32) has a centre panel focusing on the Virgin in prayer. This is the moment before the Annunciation and Mary has not yet noticed the archangel Gabriel. A small table in the centre contains a vase of lilies symbolizing the Virgin’s purity expressed through the divine birth of Christ. Perry also drew inspiration from one of the major panels of the Netherlandish Renaissance: Jan van Eyck’s *The Arnolfini Portrait* (1434). The painting is a formal portrait of a wealthy couple holding hands in the bedchamber of their Flemish home. The couple are lavishly dressed thereby displaying their wealth in clothes. In the background centre a convex mirror shows the backs of the couple and reflects two people entering their chamber, one of the figures is Jan van Eyck. Giovanni di Nicoloa Arnolfini raises his hand in greeting. In the bottom foreground left, a pair of pattens lies discarded. The ornate Latin signature above the mirror translates as ‘Jan van Eyck was here 1434’: an early graffiti indicating that van Eyck was not above injecting a sense of humour into his works.

We can view Perry’s *The Annunciation of the Virgin Deal* as an updated version of an apocryphal story in which consumerism takes the place of religion. Perry has shaped the genre to suit his own ends. This tapestry depicts the moment when Tim receives the momentous news that he has become a multi-millionaire after selling his software business for £270 million. Tim’s newly found wealth will allow him to buy

access into the upper classes. Tim's female business partner, who has acquired an ornate set of wings, replaces the archangel Gabriel. Her facial expression, the tilt of her head, the position of her figure and her clasped hands also appear to be referencing Mathias Grunewald's portrayal of the Virgin Mary in his *Annunciation* painting. The jug of lilies symbolising Mary's virginal status is taken directly from Robert Campin's painting in which the archangel appears and is about to announce to Mary that she will bear a son. In Perry's composition, the announcement concerns a business deal with Richard Branson's company, Virgin. Here the jug of lilies conveys the message that great wealth must be in balance with virtue. Tim has worked hard for his success and his taste choices demonstrate that he is also a virtuous consumer.

As in Crivelli's painting, the environment is highly idealized. Perry has depicted a scene that is crowded with objects of desire for those who aspire to an affluent middle class lifestyle. Perry's still life depicts a table containing a bundle of organic vegetables in place of Crivelli's 'potted herbs peacock and fruits' (Jones, 2011). Crivelli's paintings were hugely popular because they invited the viewer to imagine a mystic event in their hometown. Similarly, Perry is inviting us into the luxurious but 'homespun' environment of Tim's kitchen to imagine what it would be like to acquire wealth of unimaginable or 'mystic' proportion. Everything in this tapestry illustrates the wealth and status of Tim and his wife. Tim's cast-off shoes and the convex mirror are a direct reference to another wealthy couple in Jan van Eyck's *The Arnolfini Portrait* (1434). The back of Perry's business partner is visible in the convex mirror replacing the Arnolfinis in the original work and a tiny figure bearing a striking resemblance to Claire has replaced Jan van Eyck. In an acknowledgement of the fact that photography has largely replaced portrait painting, Claire is holding a tiny camera poised to take a shot of the celebrity couple. In reference to *The Arnolfini Portrait* Tim's business

partner seems to be acknowledging the presence of the photographer. Perry is really enjoying himself here, not least because part of his strategy is to ‘flatter the education and cultural capital of the audience’ by making ‘knowing reference to older artworks’ (2013, p: 13).

The inclusion of the *memento mori* is a significant detail. In the artistic genre of still life, it is *vanitas*, Latin for vanity. *Memento mori* (Latin ‘remember that you have to die’) is the Latin medieval way of describing the theory and practice of reflecting on death. *Memento mori* provided a means to consider the vanity of earthly life and the transient nature of all earthly goods. *Memento mori* formed an important part of ascetic discipline as a means of perfecting the character by cultivating detachment and other virtues, and turning the attention towards the immortality of the soul and the afterlife. In Perry’s tapestry, Tim is between the Dove of the Holy Spirit and the two business magnates: Steve Jobs and Bill Gates. In light of his newly acquired wealth, will Tim be able to balance virtue and vice or will he ‘revert to an embarrassing former self’ (ibid. p: 11) by continuing to lust after gee-gaws, money and social status?

Tim appears successful but appearances can be deceptive. The text woven into the tapestry tells us about the costs and difficulties of class mobility. Text woven around the window and the blackboard (*in the voice of Tim’s business partner*):

I have worked with Tim for a decade, a genius, yet so down to earth. Tim’s incredibly driven, he never feels successful. He’s calmer since his mother died. He’s had a lot of therapy. He wants to be good (ibid. p: 72).

In a fate prefigured by the hero of Hogarth’s tale Tom Rakewell, Tim is falling prey to his own obsessions. Perry alerts us to the fact that despite his very real talents and achievements Tim cannot enjoy the fruits of his labours. He has acquired the status

markers that code him as successful in the eyes others but his self-image is of a man who is not successful. We might see Tim as plagued by class anxiety, an innate sense of inferiority based on the idea that he will never be good enough. Perhaps he felt less conflicted about abandoning his class roots after his mother died. In his search for meaning, Tim consults a therapist because he wants to figure out how to be a 'good' person (ibid.). In this tapestry, his morality can only find narrow expression in expanded consumer choice within the values of a market exchange economy.

The text (*On copy of The Guardian used to wrap organic vegetables*) reads, 'A Geek's Progress, Tim Rakewell: risen without trace' and the text (On iPad) reads: Rakewell sells to Virgin for £270 million.' (ibid.). The sale of Tim's business has brought him instant and total success but the phrase used to describe his ascent might be a sly reference to the fact that Tim cannot lay claim to an ancestral lineage – he is new money. Without the benefits of inherited class privilege, there is the ever-present risk that Tim could sink 'without trace' (ibid.). Tim has established himself as a member of a supposedly more meritocratic middle class but he harbours aspirations to move even further up the social hierarchy. Perry's narrative of Tim's journey appears to be a story of successful class mobility, but the textual narrative warns us that not all is well.

One might say that Tim is living the twenty-first century dream by becoming a successful self-made entrepreneur but this so-called dream could rapidly turn into a nightmare. What is the Good Life? Can it be defined by the pursuit of money and social status and the freedom to accumulate material possessions? This tapestry can be read as a critique of political authority based on market exchange and the production of commodities. Through the figure of Tim, we see the high financial and emotional cost exacted by social mobility and the tyranny of taste choices. The balance between virtue and vice could tip in either direction as Tim's immense wealth has left him vulnerable.



Perry is not judgemental but rather he makes the point that class inequalities are internalized as a sense of innate inferiority. The symbolic stigma of working class origins can result in an increased vulnerability to commodity fetishism. Perry does reveal the ethics behind our taste choices but there is a more fundamental politics implicit here. This tapestry offers a critique of the idea that free market liberalism based on creative entrepreneurialism and possessive individualism can provide the conditions for human flourishing.

**Upper Class Taste Tapestry 1: *The Upper Class at Bay* (Perry, 2013, p: 75).**

*The Upper Class at Bay* marks Tim's entry into the upper classes. The scene is Tim's country estate in the Cotswolds. Tim and his wife are strolling through the grounds at sunset accompanied by a hound. The red, pink, blue and gold of the setting sun streak across the sky. The couple are underneath a gnarled, blackened tree heavy with orange-red Physalis: a perennial that has the appearance of a Chinese paper lantern. A black crow is perched on a branch directly above their heads. In the bottom foreground left, a dandelion and an allium have taken root at the base of the tree. The main figure in this tapestry is a large stag with a threadbare tweed hide and a human head topped by a massive pair of antlers. The stag is hunted and brought down by four red hounds and a fifth hound keeps up the chase. A small male figure holding a placard is perched between the antlers of the stag. Behind the couple, a huge country house is nestling into the rolling hills and fields. The entrance has a coat of arms topped by a St. Edwards crown: one of the oldest British Crown Jewels. A church is to the left. A group of Occupy-style protesters have erected a cluster of small tents in front of the house. One of the tents is flying a flag bearing skull and crossbones. Two more protesters stand in front of the encampment holding up a placard. A Morris Minor

winds its way up the private road through the protestors in the heavily waterlogged fields.

This tapestry is less crowded with material objects than the previous ones, partly because ‘much less personal expression seems to be involved’ in the taste decisions of the upper classes (Perry, 2013, p: 14). The focus is on houses, land and hunting: the factors that really set the upper classes apart from the rest of society. Perry sees these great ancestral houses as the ‘quintessential expression of upper-class taste’ (Perry, 2012). The balustrades and gently sloping entry staircase of the stately home in the centre left of this tapestry identify the property as Frampton Court, Frampton-on-Severn. Perry was quite affected by his stay at Frampton Court during the making of his television series, admitting that he was quite enthralled by the muted and faded ‘appropriateness’ of his surroundings (2013, p: 39). He described the house as ‘a mellow golden time capsule, hideously expensive to maintain, so now an exquisite B & B’ (ibid.). The head of the stag bears a striking resemblance to Frampton Court’s owner, Rollo Clifford. There are status distinctions within the upper class itself because the landed gentry are often self-made: they have wealth but lack a noble bloodline or peerage. By contrast, the Clifford family can trace their ancestral legacy back to Sir William Clifford: an 11<sup>th</sup> century Crusader: making Rollo Clifford the perfect choice of subject to represent aristocratic taste.

The art historical references for this tapestry are Thomas Gainsborough’s famous portrait of the self-made landed gentry: *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews* (c. 1750) and paintings of the vision of Saint Hubert. The influence of Hogarth’s tale *A Rake’s Progress* is evident in the abrupt change of mood in this tapestry: an indication that not all is well for Tim Rakewell. Gainsborough’s portrait of *Mr and Mrs Andrews* (c.1750) was painted a short time after the marriage of Robert Andrews of the Auberies and

Frances Carter of Ballingdon House, near Sudbury, in November 1748. The couple were not part of the peerage but marriage added property to the estate of Mr Andrews thereby guaranteeing future prosperity. Gainsborough's vision of the English countryside is still recognizable today.

Mr Andrews leans nonchalantly against a tree with a gun under his arm having exercised his right to hunt his fields. His wife sits next to him on an elaborately carved Rococo-style wooden bench. Mrs Andrews is also dressed in a matching jacket and skirt of brilliant blue silk and backless mules. The backless mules create the sense of informality and they signal that Mrs Andrews is not about to tramp across the surrounding fields. According to Jones, in this Gainsborough painting the landscape is not romanticised as a sublime presence but rather it is sublimated and depicted as property (Jones, 2001). The demarcation of lines between sitter and landscape are emphasized because the quality of 'their silks and stockings' is 'almost surreal' in an otherwise rural landscape. Mr and Mrs Andrews are 'absolutely set apart from nature. They are its rulers' (ibid.). The land is neatly and systematically cultivated but what matters to Mr Andrews is the wealth of his fields not their aesthetic or 'picturesque' qualities (ibid.). The facial expressions of the pair reflect their aloofness. There is a distance between us and them. 'They put us in our place ... This is a private England they are enjoying' (ibid.).

Perry took inspiration from paintings of the vision of Saint Hubert: the patron saint of hunters. St Hubert, was much given to the pursuit of 'worldly pleasures' until he was confronted by a vision of a stag (Hall, 1974, p: 158). A version of *The Vision of St. Hubert* (1615-30) was painted by Rubens and Jan Brueghel. Rubens painted the figure and Brueghel painted the landscape. One Good Friday whilst Hubert was pursuing a magnificent white stag through the forest, the animal stopped and turned in a

clearing and Hubert was astounded to see a crucifix between its antlers (ibid.). This vision prompted his conversion to Christianity.

*The Upper Class at Bay* depicts the battles between heredity, meritocracy and market forces. Perry views the aristocracy as a special group, which has been in gradual decline since the period between the two Great World Wars; but the stately home owners featured in Perry's televised taste safari expressed a deep sense of obligation towards their 'costly piles' and 'the roles that came with them' (2013, p: 14). Perry sensed 'an inherited sadness' (Moore, cited in Perry, 2013, p: 21) an underlying longing for a distant estate society with its unquestioned and supposedly immutable hierarchies of prestige, wealth and power. In *The Upper Class at Bay* the artist makes this elegiac mood visible by imagining the old aristocracy as an 'endangered tribe' trying to hold fast to a way of life that is rapidly disappearing (Perry, 2012). The aristocrats have sold out and are renting out their homes to pay the bills whilst the barbarians (the celebrities with their new money) and the anti-capitalists are baying at the gates.

As with the previous tapestries, Perry has shaped the art historical influences to suit his own purposes. The emotional tone of this tapestry is distinctly darker than the previous ones, partly due to the muted colour scheme, which reflects the aesthetic of 'refined entropy' Perry encountered amongst the upper classes. It also signals that his tale is following the narrative arc of *A Rakes' Progress* (1733). The sombre mood is reinforced by the objects and symbolism in this work. Perry has placed the figures of Tim and his wife under Gainsborough's oak tree in its present-day rather more 'gothic' incarnation as 'a gnarled and grumpy ruin (Jones, 2001). As in the original painting, the style of dress is informal and a slightly brighter colour scheme is introduced by the clothes worn by the couple. Tim is aiming at impeccable appropriateness by wearing popular shooting attire: casual purple trousers and a greenish (probably waxed) jacket.

He has a rifle under his arm, which signals his right to shoot on his own land. His wife is dressed in a red and gold patterned skirt, plain red top, patterned scarf and wellington boots, but her garments are not hunting attire. The hands of the woman clasp loosely in her lap to reflect the pose of Mrs Andrews in the original painting but here the visual similarities end.

Perry never leaves any visual detail to chance. He has portrayed Gainsborough's oak as the blackened ruin it would appear to the observer today but he has altered the landscape (which in reality continues to serve as an example of England's green and pleasant land). By contrast, the landscape around Tim is not a fertile paradise. This is a hostile environment, which has become a battleground of competing ownership claims. The fence behind the couple is broken down making the waterlogged land vulnerable to predators: human, animal and botanical. In place of new foliage, the tree is heavy with orange-red *Physalis*. These orange-red lantern-like pods are extremely invasive perennials, which can grow anywhere and are virtually impossible to eliminate. A black crow is perched in the centre of the *Physalis*. When it is associated with a person, a crow is an attribute of hope personified (Hall, 1974, p: 79). The dandelion is a well-known Christian symbol of grief, often used in early Flemish and German paintings of the crucifixion (ibid. p: 90). The allium is a plant grown for its 'showy flower heads' but it does not thrive in 'cold, exposed waterlogged conditions' (Royal Horticultural Society, 2016). The dandelion and the allium growing at the base of the ruined tree in the soggy landscape hint at the futility of Tim's hopes. The couple are 'new money; they can never become upper class in their lifetime' (Perry, 2013, p: 74).

*The Vision of Saint Hubert* provides the pictorial reference for the hunting scene. Hunting is the dominant motif of the upper classes. There is Hogarthian humour here too because the upper classes are 'being hoisted by their own petard': their love of

hunting (Perry, 2012). Under the setting sun, Tim and his wife watch as the great threadbare tweed-covered Rollo-headed stag (who symbolises 'the dying patriarch') is brought down by 'the dogs of tax, social change, upkeep and fuel bills' (Perry, 2013, p: 75). The text between the front hooves of the stag reads 'The Upper Class at Bay or An Endangered Species Brought Down' (ibid.). Perry has replaced the crucifix between the antlers of the stag in *The Vision of Saint Hubert* (1615-30) with the small figure of an Occupy-style protester. The protestor looks out at the viewer with a placard containing the words 'No War But Class War' (ibid.). Above one tent the placard reads 'Rich is Bad' whilst another placard reads 'Tax is good' and the final placard reads 'Pay up Tim' (ibid.).

In keeping with the previous tapestries, *The Upper Class at Bay* questions who we are and where we think we belong. Moore notes that 'battles, both individual and collective, around consumerism' are 'lived out as we reconfigure our relationship to how we live and what we buy' (ibid. p: 22). Here, these battles take place between the old aristocracy, Tim and his wife who are new money (the barbarians at the gate) and the Occupy-style protestors. Tim has now ascended the ladder of social mobility to its highest point: the upper classes but he has not lost his working class obsession with money and material possessions. He has committed the sin of tax avoidance: an act of possessive individualism and greed. I agree with Moore's claim that these tapestries are raising moral issues. Through the vulnerability of his working class hero Perry is showing us how and why a complicated relationship exists between ethics and aesthetics. But the political critique is equally important and it becomes more explicit in this tapestry.

*The Upper Class at Bay* combines the theme of religious conversion with hunting imagery to question the political values, attitudes and beliefs that we live by.

There is a continual battle for meaning because as Moore points out, ‘class is embedded in culture and culture is ever evolving’ (ibid.). The political slogans alert us to the fact that in a free-market economy based on competition and possessive individualism everyone comes under pressure to sell something in order to survive. In a consumer-based economy, we are encouraged to believe that obtaining economic advantage for the self is the morally right thing to do. As Wolff points out, “‘Value’ now almost always means ‘price’ or even bargain price” as ‘more and more is sold or exchanged for economic advantage’ (2002, p: 107). Perry questions this value system by depicting an inverse relationship between Tim’s wealth and his sense of civic responsibility. The Occupy-style protestor who appears before Tim is calling for a different world order in which concern for the collective good takes precedence over individual self-interest. Tim is faced with the possibility of conversion. Will he stop worshipping the false Gods of a consumerist society and place his faith in a different system of political values, attitudes and beliefs? The *vanitas* theme reappears in the *memento mori*: the flag bearing a skull and cross bones is a warning against the seduction of earthly goods and a reminder of their emptiness.

The slogan ‘No War But Class War’ alerts us to the fact that the class system is still alive and well. *The Upper Class at Bay* depicts a struggle founded on the ‘antagonism of classes’ but as Perry contends, ‘...the class system ... is a more hydra-headed form than in the days of flat caps, bowlers and toppers’ (2013, p: 11). The tapestries show how class mobility contributes to social fragmentation, which makes it difficult to establish any objective ground for common interest. One of the key political issues implicit in all the tapestries but made explicit in this one, is the extent to which each class identifies with and is therefore oppressed and exploited by consumerism. For the upper classes, Tim is a usurper because he is new money, which makes him by

definition, innately inferior. For the Occupy-style protestors Tim is the oppressor because he is an internet tycoon and he has committed the sin of tax avoidance. Is Tim oppressed and exploited or is he the oppressor and the exploiter? Are all the classes equally oppressed and exploited? Who or what is the source of barbarism here?

As Moore points out ‘if our identity is staked out through what we eat, how we dress, how we decorate our houses, we are all rather overwhelmed by choice’ (ibid. p: 20). In *The Upper Class at Bay* we see how class is both made and resisted through the rituals, symbols and material artefacts of culture: the means by which people identify themselves and are identified by others. The emotional or affective content of this tapestry is considerably darker than the previous ones and we are being called upon to give up, or at least to question the illusions we are being sold. In Hogarth’s tale, the rake reached nemesis at the point at which his social ambitions were about to be realized; an outcome that suggests there is an unconquerable opponent or rival here. In Perry’s view, the upper classes are no longer in power as the dominant group but a remark made by Rollo Clifford might suggest otherwise. On being confronted with the image of himself as the dying stag Clifford turned and said to Perry ‘But there are occasions when the hunted stag arises’ (Clifford, 2012). Perry replied, ‘And kicks the hounds over’ ‘Absolutely’ said Clifford. In the final tapestry, Perry confronts us with an existential question about the consumer politics we live by.

**Upper Class Taste Tapestry 2: #Lamentation** (Perry, 2013, p: 77).

The final tapestry entitled *#Lamentation* marks the end of Tim’s journey of social mobility. Tim has had a mid-life crisis and the scene depicts the first few moments after a fatal car accident at a junction close to a retail park. In the foreground, Tim is lying dead in the arms of a stranger whilst being attended by a paramedic.



Perry's hero is naked except for a pair of white underpants, a pair of trousers around his ankles and one pink and blue striped sock. On the far right, an ambulance parks in front of a kebab shop and the paramedics are wheeling out a trolley. A defibrillator is next to Tim and his bloodstained jacket is just visible in the bottom corner. Tim's glamorous but now bloodied and shocked younger second wife stands in the centre of the wrecked remains of the Ferrari. Over on the far left, the fire service and police are clearing the scene and recording the details. Tim's dog lies dead next to the car. In the distance is an advertising hoarding, emblazoned with well-known high street brands. The # tag symbol reminds us of the extent to which social media has infiltrated our lives. Spectators are taking photographs of the crash scene on their mobile phones ready to upload to the internet. In the bottom left foreground, the contents of his wife's expensive Louis Vuitton handbag are scattered across a copy of *Hello* magazine featuring the couple on its cover. The magazine is between Tim's discarded shoe and a coat of arms. The text on the cover reads 'Tim and Amber, exclusive photographs of software genius with his new wife' (Perry, 2013, p: 77).

The title of this tapestry was inspired by Rogier van der Weyden's *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (c. 1460). The original painting depicts the moments before the burial of Christ in the tomb of Arimathea. Mary is holding the body of her dead son in her arms and John the Evangelist is supporting the body with his right hand and with his left hand, he is comforting Mary. Mary Magdalene is also present, identified by her usual attribute, the jar of ointment. In the foreground, van der Weyden has painted a skull to remind us that we are at Golgotha – the Place of the Skull. In Perry's tapestry, the body of Tim is almost an exact replica of van der Weyden's painting of Christ: the placing of the body, the ribs visible through the torso, the limbs splayed in the manner of the crucifixion, the bloodied wounds and the white loin cloth. Again, Perry has

shaped the genre to his own ends by using the same arrangement of figures but in this composition, a stranger has replaced Mary: a passing nurse dressed in a Madonna blue dress. A paramedic, who is supporting Tim's body with one hand whilst comforting Mary with the other, has replaced John the Evangelist. A defibrillator has replaced the ointment and a smashed smartphone substitutes the skull. According to Perry, the smartphone is a direct reference back to the first tapestry in which Tim is trying to grab his mother's phone in a bid to gain her attention: herein lies the significance of Perry's title *#Lamentation*.

The choice of subject and the emotional power of van der Weyden's composition might owe its influence to the Modern Devotion: a movement in the late medieval church that tried to involve people in religion in a more personal way. By creating a mood of sympathy, believers were encouraged to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. A similar sense of pathos hangs over Perry's work, particularly in this final tapestry. The influence of Hogarth is very evident here in the treatment of the subject matter and the overall meaning. In the final painting of Hogarth's tale, *A Scene in Bedlam* (1733) a half-naked, chained and anguished Tom Rakewell meets an ignominious end in Bethlam Hospital (the famous Bedlam). In Hogarth's searing critique of the useless and often destructive character of Britain's ruling classes, his aristocratic hero became a victim of his own obsessions.

Hogarth's cast of tormented characters indicate the various causes of madness. Behind the figures of Tom and the spurned but ever-faithful Sarah, science has claimed two victims. In the left corner, a tormented soul is worshipping his cross whilst imprisoned in a cell. This scenario indicates that religion is a source of madness. To the right, a delusional man believes he is the Pope. A musician behind him plays madly on a violin and a lovelorn man on the steps carves the initials of his obsession ('Charming

Betty Careless', a famous prostitute) on the banister (Trusler, 2008, p: 58). Also included are a mad tailor and a naked delusional King. Perhaps the most disturbing element of Hogarth's painting is the two aristocratic women who have come to view the inmates of Bedlam for their own entertainment.

Inspired by Hogarth, in *#Lamentation* Perry has given us a morality tale and a sympathetic but humorous portrayal of Tim's character. There is an affective charge in scattered objects such as the cast-off shoe, the bloodstained pink striped blazer and the upturned designer handbag with its contents carelessly spilled across *Hello* magazine: the guide for celebrities and for those who aspire to a celebrity lifestyle. Tim's bare foot and the pink and blue striped sock, the white underpants and the crumpled trousers slipped down towards his ankles are to elicit sympathy and humour rather than condemnation. There is pathos but nothing heroic about this fallen figure. By worshipping the false Gods of consumerism and giving way to vice, Tim has become the victim of his own obsessions.

The text woven across the bottom of the tapestry states: Text (*in the voice of a female passer-by*)

We were walking home from a night out, these two cars, racing each other speed past. Middle aged men showing off, the red one lost control. The driver wasn't wearing a seat belt. He didn't stand a chance. The female passenger was okay but catatonic with shock. I'm a nurse. I tried to save the man but he died in my arms. It was only afterwards I found out that he was that famous computer guy, Rakewell. All he said to me was "Mother". All that money and he dies in the gutter (Perry, 2013, p: 76).

In this final tapestry, Perry points to the modern day causes of madness. All of the material culture on display here lets us know that Tim and his new wife are new money. Every object testifies to the fact that Tim has acquired economic and social status.

Status markers include his Ferrari, the Louis Vuitton handbag, the expensive shoes, the pink striped blazer, the multiple credit cards, the personalised coat of arms and the couple's appearance in Hello magazine. Despite his academic success, Tim has not escaped his class roots, which are evident in his taste preferences, his obsession with money and his mega-rich lifestyle. The landed aristocracy would immediately identify Tim as a barbarian at the gate; his showy aesthetic is far removed from the faded and shabby but nonetheless "impeccable appropriateness" that Perry encountered on his tour of the stately homes of England. Tim has achieved celebrity status rather than the upper class status he so fervently pursued. He and his second wife will not gain access to the aristocracy. Tim's last word to the woman leaning over him was 'Mother' (ibid.). The Madonna-blue dress is a recurring trope, which sets off a train of symbolic associations that might allude to Perry's own mother, to Tim's mother or to the Virgin Mary or indeed all three.

This final tapestry gives us a further understanding and critique of commodity fetishism by exploring the difficulties and costs of class mobility, the seduction of objects and the dangers therein. Tim has subscribed to the ideology of meritocracy, he has worked hard to escape his working class origins and tried to turn himself into someone else but he dies in pursuit of his entrepreneurial dreams. This tapestry is challenging our meritocratic value system and the class snobberies it spawns. Resistance to the idea that money can confer higher status via taste rests on the idea that the upper classes are innately superior through an accident of birth. Perry reveals that this is both a seductive and potentially destructive myth. In a curiously satisfying twist, he discovered that barbaric splendour was the prevailing aesthetic of the eighteenth century aristocrats. The commodified version of 'refined entropy' (ibid. p: 14) commonly known as shabby chic that defines the country house aesthetic in the popular

imaginary is far removed from the taste of the original owners. Yet it continues to be a powerfully seductive image. Today this threadbare and faded aesthetic is justified on grounds that the upper classes have less to prove. The truth seems to be that the landed aristocracy now have less money than the encroaching celebrities therefore it has become necessary for them to reinvent themselves in order to survive financially. Given the symbolic value of the cultural capital possessed by this class, their future prosperity seems fairly well guaranteed.

### **Concluding Comments**

Who do we think we are? Are we ‘all middle class now’ (Prescott, 2007) as John Prescott famously exhorted? *The Vanity of Small Differences* is an attempt to address the question of class mobility in the full knowledge that ‘the ability to accrue cultural capital ... to shift class’ is ‘being taken away’ (Moore cited in Perry, 2013, p: 22). Each tapestry provides a record of a specific class, place and time. The tapestries tell multiple stories and they can be interpreted in numerous ways. For Perry, the object is important and each tapestry can be appreciated in terms of its aesthetic qualities as a riot of colour and texture, shape and form and light. The works can be read art historically as Perry deliberately makes ‘knowing reference’ to various old master paintings, mainly early Renaissance religious works and to Hogarth’s series of paintings entitled *A Rake’s Progress* (1733). They also offer a political critique of consumer-based politics.

The artist used participant observation as his research method during the making of his Channel Four documentary series, *All in the Best Possible Taste*. His aim was to gain an insider’s perspective whilst simultaneously remaining a detached observer. There is much debate among anthropologists about whether this dual-edged perspective can ever be achieved (Fox 2004). In Perry’s case, the method seems to have been a

resounding success if the reaction of his audience is the empirical measure. When confronted with the tapestries, the accuracy of Perry's observations in the field provoked an immediate shock of recognition amongst his research subjects. Another reason for the accessibility of these works is that they are a simple morality tale, which follows the narrative arc of *A Rake's Progress* (1733).

As a nation, we are famously preoccupied with class, 'the belief in class, and the symbols of class in manners, dress and language' (Ringgenbom cited in Cannadine, 1998, p: xiv). In our attempts to acquire these markers of social distinction we experience a tension between who we think we are, who we used to be and who we aspire to be. The tapestries explore these conflicting and often unattainable images of class to reveal how our taste prejudices reflect our own journeys of social mobility. At the same time, Perry's ribald humour and sly wit warns us against taking our social preoccupations and pretensions too seriously. Fox points out, 'the 'guiding principles' of English humour are classless' (2004, p: 71). They include 'the taboo on earnestness and the rules of irony, understatement and self-deprecation' (ibid.). Another rule of English humour is 'The importance of Not Being Earnest' but there is a 'fine line between seriousness and solemnity' (ibid. p: 72). The tapestries respect this fine line by combining satire (in the highly caricatured slightly 'grotesque' figures reflecting the influence of Otto Dix) (Klein, 2013, p: 10) with a serious political critique of consumer culture which uncovers the myths about social mobility.

Following Bourdieu, Savage points out that 'Social classes are fundamentally associated with the stored historical baggage and the accumulation of advantage over time' (2015, p: 46). We live in a democracy in which 'individuals are supposed to have equal rights' but 'people's economic fortunes can be strikingly different' (ibid. p: 7). The increasing uncertainty around what it means to be working or middle class has

made class ‘a lightening conductor for the anxieties this discrepancy between economic realities and our beliefs provokes’ (ibid.). The idea that we live in a meritocratic society has provided the foundation for ‘a new kind of snobbery’ which:

...distinguishes between those who are skilled in exercising judgement, in a knowing and sophisticated way, against those, whoever they may be, who are deemed unable to choose effectively’ (ibid. p: 45).

I have argued that by using the three-tier model of class to examine our taste choices, Perry reveals the tensions between who we were, who we think we are and who we would like become. The tapestries challenge the idea that there is a link between taste, morality and social worth by attempting to demystify the ‘symbolic power of class’ (ibid. p: 46). And they expose the pleasures and anxieties attaching to class position as well as the attractions and dangers of differences anchored in consumption.

The tapestries work not only anthropologically and aesthetically, but also as conventional morality tales, and by implicitly and explicitly problematizing the processes of exclusion and privilege which ground this hierarchy of taste and lifestyle. They caution us against coveting money, possessions and status whilst at the same time Perry acknowledges the seduction of objects, our obsession with shopping and the ways in which our material possessions are increasingly functioning as a visual code to reinforce social divisions. The tapestries are haunted by prior working class identities based on communities of production rather than consumption; by the constraints of economic inequalities, by the insecurities and limitations of social mobility and by the dominance of the upper classes. The political critique is not explicit but woven into the fabric of the tapestries just as class inequalities are interwoven with everyday life. As these textual narratives make clear, class is not simply a matter of identity; these subjectivities are rooted in material and economic conditions and constrained by them.

One of the questions implicit in these tapestries is how do we form class affiliations?

As Tim ascends the ranks of society, we see how the basis of his class identity begins to fragment and divide as class loyalties and solidarities shift in response to aspiration and the pursuit of social mobility.

There is also a politics in Perry's adoption of an ethnographical approach. By using this approach to culture understood as a 'whole way of life' (Williams, 1958) he is refusing to endorse the hierarchies of taste that his tapestries record. In conversation with celebrity hair stylist Neville Ramsey during his televised taste safari Perry observed that unlike the hairdressing profession, there was no working class art world. As a result, he was forced to 'forge on' and become comfortable in an environment very different from the one he grew up in (Perry, 2012). This process of acquiring 'Islington middle class pretensions' (ibid.) has placed the artist at a distance from his working class origins. As he makes clear, we can adopt the rules, values and behaviours of a different class or taste tribe, but at the same time, we are shaped by the culture we grow up in. Therefore, any shift between cultures will be uncomfortable, not least because the ancestral echoes of our class of origin continue to haunt us. This relation between our past, present and future selves is always implicit in our taste choices. These conflicting images create the emotional charge around matters of taste that Perry identified and found so fascinating during his research and it provided the main inspiration for *The Vanity of Small Differences*.

There is an autobiographical element here too because all of Perry's work can be seen as reflecting aspects of the artist himself (Klein 2013). As we follow Tim's journey of social mobility we are also following Perry's journey from a working class childhood in Essex to the very middle class environment of the contemporary art world. With reference to his own aesthetic Perry told Ramsey that the art world provided an outlet



for what he termed his ‘tackier impulses’ because ‘all expression is ok’ (Perry, 2012). However, whilst all expression might be ok within the art world, Perry finds a similar ‘kind of class snobbery going on’ (Perry, 2014, p: 55). His own work refuses to endorse such snobbery, and thereby challenges the idea that a working class identity is of no value. Social mobility and aspiration have reinforced the idea that being working class is something to be *escaped from* rather than celebrated. Perry’s tapestries challenge inequality not only by presenting working class taste and upper taste as equally valuable but also by showing us how an illusion of class hierarchy is produced and maintained because some cultural forms are seen as more legitimate than others. Perry refuses to endorse a hierarchy of taste but shows how it marks difference, how taste intersects with class and the difficulties and costs involved. He also shows how this notion of a hierarchy of taste actually exploits the class with the least valuable forms of capital (economic, social, educational and cultural).

For Perry, our class of origin continues to constitute our sense of selves, organise our patterns of inter-relations and structure our pleasures. He gives us an anatomy of taste by describing class as ‘something bred into us like a religious faith. We drink in our aesthetic heritage with our mother’s milk, with our mates at the pub, or on the playing fields of Eton (Perry, 2013, p: 11). This statement contains a curious mixed metaphor in which the idea of ‘aesthetics’ (a category of visual perception) becomes something we drink or imbibe as a form of sustenance. Perry contends that ‘A childhood spent marinating in the culture of one’s class means taste is soaked right through you’ (ibid.). This mixed metaphor arises because on Perry’s account, taste is both constitutive of class and produced or imbibed by it via the inheritance of certain forms of material culture. As a result, ‘taste is inextricably woven into our system of social class’ (ibid. p: 9). Via this acculturation process everyone acquires a ‘default

setting' on their taste that comes into play when we think we are not making a decision but simply doing what seems 'natural' and 'normal' to us (ibid. p: 12). (In Bourdieu's terminology, this default setting is a habitus). Perry believes that only when we move between social classes do these 'unexamined' taste choices come into focus (ibid.).

According to Redfield 'Aesthetic judgement in advance of a rule or precept, is formed as naturally as a taste on the tongue' (2003, p: 11). This definition, however, generates 'the paradox that taste is simultaneously natural and educable' (ibid. p: 12).

Within the discourse of aesthetics:

...this paradox of taste becomes the paradox of culture: the idea that all humanity is represented in and by aesthetic culture, though this culture actually achieves representation in and as an acculturated minority (ibid.).

By insisting that taste is embodied and is shaped or formed by one's culture or class of origin, Perry is rejecting the idea that it is disinterested and universal. For Perry, taste is cultural in an anthropological sense and is not just a matter of economic positioning or position in relation to the means of production, although it is constrained by these factors. For Perry, this cultural anchorage is incorporated into our identity or sense of self so that even with social mobility our origins are not only important they are inescapable. He uses his own art to democratise taste by insisting that we have difference rather than a vertical aesthetic hierarchy in which one is intrinsically superior to the other. In his refusal to recognize and mark the distinction between high and low art forms Perry is challenging a traditional narrative in which high art 'acculturates' or civilises the lower classes.

Another of the key political issues raised by the tapestries is the extent to which each class identifies with, and is exploited by consumerism. Bourdieu's analysis

focuses on the way in which the different forms of capital accumulate within the different classes. The upper classes are keen to distance themselves from the obvious signs and symbols of rampant consumer culture whilst at the same time they are making huge profits from it. This privileged class already possesses forms of economic and cultural capital that are highly desirable: a factor that makes upper class taste both marketable and profitable. Bourdieu also reveals that the symbolic power of cultural capital arises from the fact that it transmits through seemingly invisible means. The opacity of cultural capital fuels the idea that there is an innate hierarchy of taste and that the upper classes are the ultimate authority on legitimate taste, referred to by Perry as 'English aesthetic goodness' (Perry, 2012).

For Bourdieu, the opacity of cultural capital becomes a form of 'symbolic violence' (1986, p: 77) because it naturalizes forms of domination. (This issue is discussed in detail in Chapter Three). Here we are reminded of Moore's claim that the 'knowledge economy is not aesthetically neutral' (cited in Perry, 2013, p: 22). Savage argues that today, cultural capital is a 'mutable phenomenon' rather than a 'fixed set of tastes' which 'now takes cosmopolitan and ironic forms which *appear* to be pluralist and anti-elitist' (2015, p: 51, my emphasis). As he acknowledges, far from being 'anti-elitist' cultural capital is demonstrated by the 'ease and grace' with which people play 'with classifications and typologies' (ibid.). Savage does not use the term 'aristocracy' in his seven-tier model because he believes 'the 'old upper class thing is a thing of the past' (ibid. p: 307). He argues 'The aristocratic formation knew that its innate superiority was no longer assertive or powerful enough to make a stand against the vulgarization of poshness' (ibid. p: 307). Perry also acknowledges the decline of the aristocracy in *The Upper Class at Bay* and the rise of the aspirant posh. I would argue that what the tapestries also reveal is how the upper classes *are* still fixing ideas on what

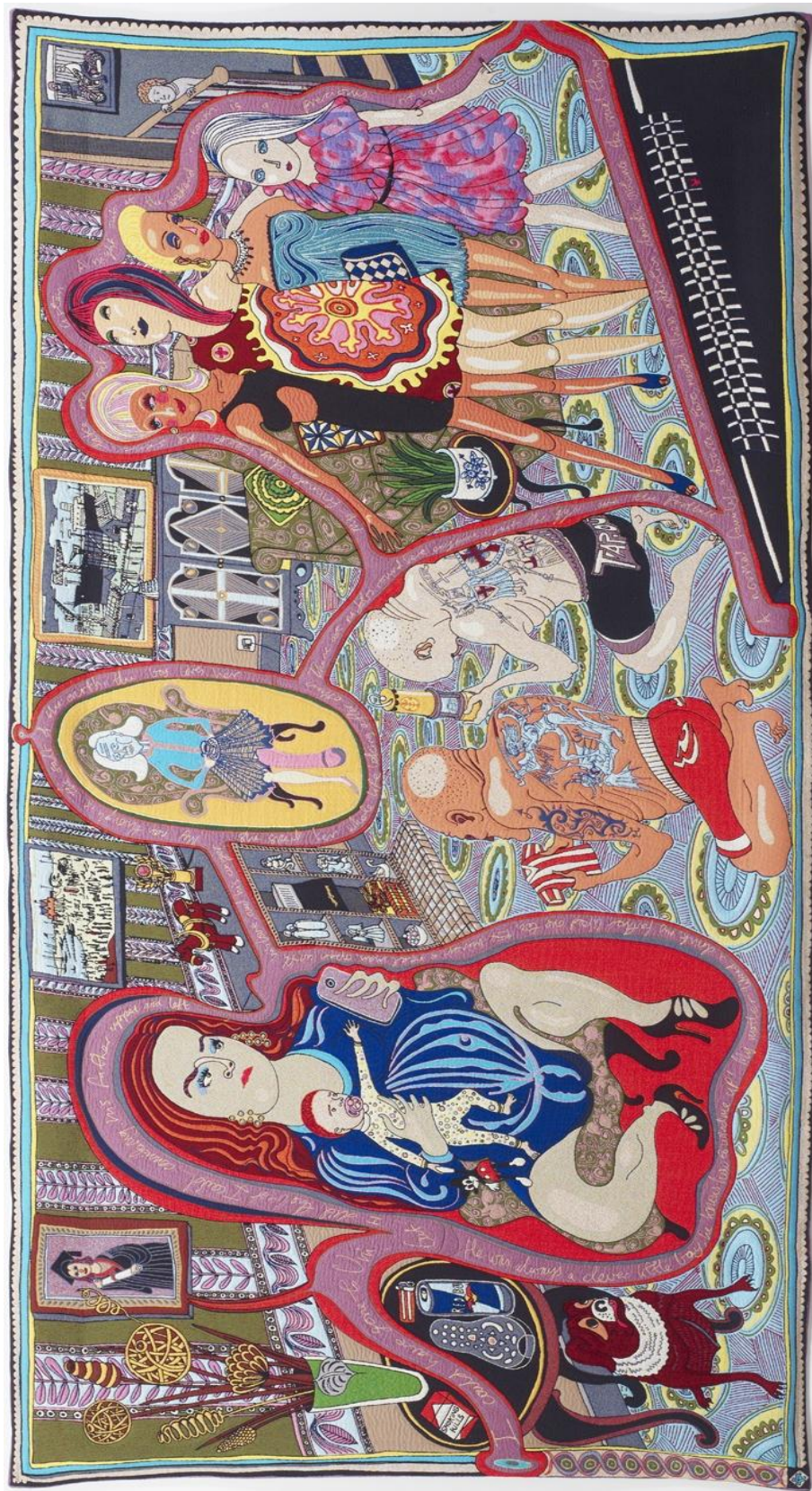
is acceptable or legitimate taste (my emphasis). The success of the re-packaged country house aesthetic requires the patina of age simulated through intentional distressing. This phenomenon is a testament to our enduring belief in the innate superiority of this class. Always willing to examine what underlies his own taste preferences, Perry admits that he is not immune to the seductions of ‘crumbling faded glory’ (2013, p: 14).

Savage contends that the transmission of cultural capital has remained opaque because as a society, we have subscribed to ideology of meritocracy. As a result, those who do not already possess the right forms of economic and cultural capital may be feeling that they have the most to prove and it is their own personal failure if they do not succeed. For Perry, this was most notably the aspiring working class and the lower middle class. These people have worked hard to achieve a better standard of living and their social mobility is an improved economic status and material acquisitions. Yet, consumerism does not necessarily offer a route to social advancement because what these people encounter is ‘the intangible exclusion barrier’ (ibid. p: 70) that separates the classes. This barrier is cultural capital (an education that gives access to certain forms of knowledge). This knowledge can provide a shield against the upstart lower classes with their bad taste who dare to get ideas above their station. Far from being a release from the tyranny of oppression, a market-based economy has given rise to new forms of snobbery and created new forms of oppression in which the upper class remain as the dominant force.

In the final tapestry, Perry confronted us with an existential question about the consumer politics we live by. On an individual level should we subscribe to a meritocratic ideology, which places individual advancement as the ultimate goal, or should we be committed to seeking a fair and equal society for all? Here we find echoes back to Marx. In the 1844 Manuscripts, Marx’s critique of money is a critique of

commodification: the fact that more and more of the things that we value are now being turned into commodities to be bought and sold in the marketplace. Guided by Hogarth, an artist he refers to as his 'lodestar' in *The Vanity of Small Differences* Perry has given us an unnervingly accurate depiction of what lies beneath the social imaginary of taste in twenty-first century Britain. Chapter Eight will discuss Perry's exhibition *Who Are You?* in which the artist moves on from class to focus on aspects of individual identity.

**Figure 28.** Grayson Perry *The Adoration of the Cage Fighters*, 2012



Courtesy the Artist and Victoria Miro, London © Grayson Perry







**Figure 30:** Grayson Perry Expulsion from No 8 Eden Close, 2012



Courtesy the Artist and Victoria Miro, London © Grayson Perry



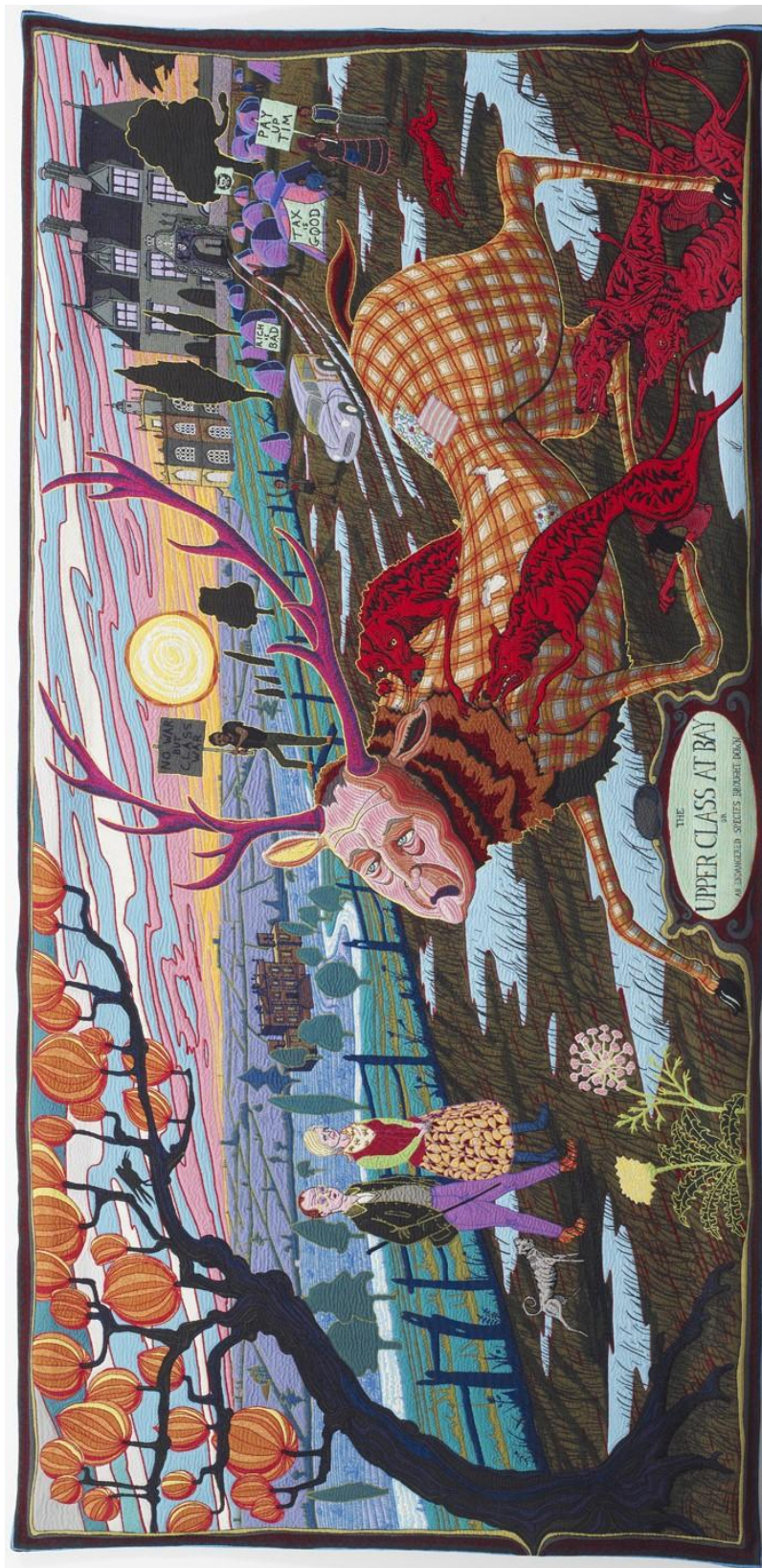
**Figure 31.** Grayson Perry *The Annunciation of the Virgin Deal*, 2012



Courtesy the Artist and Victoria Miro, London © Grayson Perry



**Figure 32:** Grayson Perry *The Upper Class at Bay*, 2012



Courtesy the Artist and Victoria Miro, London © Grayson Perry



**Figure 33:** Grayson Perry #Lamentation, 2012



Courtesy the Artist and Victoria Miro, London © Grayson Perry

## **Chapter Eight: *Who Are You?***

In the preceding chapters, I have made two claims so far. Firstly, I have argued that Perry is a socially and politically engaged artist-ethnographer who gives visibility to the marginalized. In addition, that he engages with these concerns without compromising his artistic practice. Secondly, I have argued that class concerns permeate all his work. In this chapter, I want to turn to Perry's later work in answer to a possible objection that he has become less concerned with class. *Who Are You?* opened at the National Portrait Gallery on 25 October 2014 and ran until 15 March 2015. The fourteen portraits in the exhibition focused on the theme of identity in modern Britain and they were created using a wide range of media including tapestries, sculptures, etchings and ceramics. The aim was to examine and represent the idea of 'modern British identity in all its complexity and diversity' (Brown, 2015). The works were the culmination of Perry's three-part TV series on Channel 4 entitled *Grayson Perry: Who Are You?*, which aired over three consecutive weeks.

The first program featured four individuals whose identities were shaped by fame, gender or religion. The second program looked at modern families and the third program examined the idea of community identities, including political communities and communities drawn together around what it means to be disabled. Perry chose each of his sitters because they represented something important about the nature of identity in twenty-first century Britain. The participants included disgraced politician Chris Huhne, a Muslim convert, two gay white men who adopted a child of mixed ethnicity, a man diagnosed with Alzheimer's and a group of Irish Loyalist marchers. Each of the individuals featured either had faced or was facing some kind of life crisis that, in most cases, had caused a re-evaluation of identity. The resulting fourteen portraits depict

individuals who are caught in potentially rival conceptualities of ‘race’, gender, religion, class, sexuality and disability (Jameson, 1999). Taken together they provide an alternative view of the nation: a ‘portrait of a modern Britain formerly dominated by white, middle-class, middle-aged males but now undergoing an identity crisis of its own’ (Rees, 2014).

Perry’s works were in the National Gallery’s 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century rooms so that visitors would encounter them en route to see other works. The permanent collections in these rooms feature notable figures from different walks of life including Queen Victoria, Charles Darwin, Alfred Tennyson, Henry James, Oswald Moseley, Winston Churchill, Amy Johnson and Walter Sickert, to name but a few. For the duration of Perry’s exhibition, one thing was certain – these galleries had ‘never been so busy’ (Brown 2015). The gallery estimates that around 250,000 people saw the Perry portraits and a further 850,000 saw at least one work by the artist (ibid.). *Who Are You?* was undoubtedly ‘the most viewed temporary display in the gallery’s history’ (ibid.). According to Paul Moorhouse, the gallery’s curator of 20<sup>th</sup> century portraits ‘There was a sense that we were getting a different kind of audience, which is really exciting for us – that is what we hoped. I think Grayson’s display has broadened the reach of the gallery’ (ibid.). As acting director of the gallery Pim Baxter pointed out, ‘It was clear from the number of visitors that thousands of people were enjoying his work on a daily basis, and that the display drew them to parts of the gallery that they might not otherwise have visited’ (ibid.). These comments would be welcome news to an artist who, by his own admission, was becoming:

...a bit obsessed about how to make things that are very accessible and welcoming to a broad audience and yet you can deal with the same sorts of issues as all the difficult art that you see in Biennales and whatever, which is very off-putting because of its aesthetic (Perry, 2016).

The TV series accompanying this exhibition has certainly been a major factor in its popularity, not least because Perry's approach to researching the lives of his sitters is quite fascinating to watch. Moorhouse informed Brown that Perry was:

...an astonishing observer. He listens and he looks and he has great empathy...he sees people very acutely and I think his real ability as an artist is being able to communicate that in terms which are readily comprehensible. He speaks to people in a language they understand, the language of their own experience (ibid.).

Traditionally, the National Portrait Gallery has housed portraits of individuals who are historically significant to the nation. In an article entitled 'Playing to the Gallery' (2015) Simon Schama discussed the history of the National Portrait Gallery. This article was an edited extract from Schama's book *The Face of Britain: The Nation Through Its Portraits* which was published in conjunction with a five-part TV series that began on 30 September, 2015 and an exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery: September 2015-4 January 2016. Schama tells us that when the Gallery first opened in 1856 'The impulse behind it was to tell the British who they were, via a procession of two-dimensional heroes' (2015, p: 2). Schama notes, 'What was wanted, then as now, was a gathering of individuals still alive enough in their painted incarnations for us to feel at home in their company' (ibid. p: 2).

The cast of familiar figures who traditionally occupy the National Portrait Gallery are people who have been commemorated for their achievements either as statesmen or as warriors, or in the arts, literature or science (ibid.). The question that interested Perry was what, if anything, could these 'icons of British solidity' tell us about modern British identity? (Perry, 2014). Perry's decision to select ordinary citizens as his sitters and to use their experience to tell us who we are, posed a twofold

question to the official narrative of the nation's history. Who are the great and the good? Who gets to decide what it means to be British today? As one reviewer observed, 'All Perry's subjects are real, and their presence at the heart of the NPG feels a little like an artistic storming of the Bastille' (Smart, 2014). Schama tells us, 'Portraits have always been made with an eye to posterity, to recreate a presence where there is, for whatever reason, absence' (2015, p: 2). As a self-described 'oik with a bit of a chip on his shoulder' Perry's stated intention was to enter the 'Holy Temple of British portraiture' and replace its 'polished heroes of British history' with a cast of individuals he described as 'a parade of the troubled and ordinary' (Perry, 2014). His aim was, quite literally, to 'recreate a presence where there is ... absence' (Schama, 2015, p: 2).

When we begin to think about the interplay of presence and absence in relation to the aims of portraiture and the nature of identity, then things become a little more complicated. As Schama points out, we expect portraits to 'offer a good likeness ... But this raises an enormous question: a likeness of what, exactly?' (ibid.). Schama is talking about traditional portraiture in terms of the face and the two-dimensional medium of paint on canvas. For the artist, the greatest danger is that the 'face may freeze into a mask and this may be what is transcribed on to the canvas' (ibid.). For Schama, '...the greatest of all portraitists – a Rembrandt or a Goya – caught their subjects as if temporarily halted between a before and after: an interruption of the flow of life rather than a becalmed pose' (ibid.). To capture this 'flow of life' the artist is obligated to see beneath the surface appearance 'and get at the essential character lying beneath the mask' in order to reveal 'the person, which is always more than an inventory of features' (ibid.). Schama continues:

But suppose there is no essence to unearth from beneath a variety of the appearances we assume as the day demands: the office face, the party face, the teaching face, the flirting face? Or

that one of those faces, shadowed with introspection, may be as much the authentic picture as its exuberant, outward-looking face opposite? (ibid.).

Schama is emphasizing that people may exhibit faces that are numerous but nonetheless ‘true’ in the sense that each face reveals a different aspect of the sitter’s character. As the historian points out, the stakes are raised even higher when the ‘history’ of the individual in question ‘is portrayed for the history of the world – or the country – *he* (my italics) inhabits and must somehow be both exemplary and individual’ (ibid.). When faced with this situation, ‘...the painter is now answering not just to the self-image of the sitter, and the creatively disruptive urges of his muse, but to a third party that must be satisfied: public expectation’ (ibid.). The historian suggests that what is on show in the permanent collections at the National Portrait Gallery is ‘...not a parade of the grand but the struggle to magic from the triangular collision of wills between the sitter, artist and public the palpable presence of a remarkable Briton’ (ibid.).

Schama’s use of the masculine pronoun is hardly surprising when we consider that the subjects traditionally chosen to represent ‘British solidity’ are usually white, middle-class, heterosexual (‘as far as we know’ quips Perry) males (Perry, 2014.). The historian acknowledges that the British have a ‘perennial suspicion of the self-preening of the great and the good’ but as his main focus is on the relationship between artist, sitter and public he does not question this categorisation (2015, p: 2). Schama’s article is interesting because it provides a foil for Perry’s approach to the subject of identity. As one critic pointed out, Schama does offer us ‘glimpses of something deeper and more complicated’ in relation to portraiture but he relies too heavily ‘on comforting myths of British national character’ (Gallagher 2015, p: 8). As a result, Schama’s chosen canvases simply retell ‘the same old story’ (ibid.). By way of contrast, Perry’s



exhibition rejects this kind of grand narrative approach, which presupposes that there is some special quality of Britishness embodied in certain high profile public figures. In place of one overarching story the artist gives us multiple stories which are intended to capture the often multiple and contradictory perceptions people have of themselves, of others and of the social worlds they inhabit. *Who Are You?* invites us into the company of Britons who might also be seen as remarkable but for very different reasons.

Perry's chosen sitters can be seen in Schama's terms as 'both exemplary and individual' (Schama, 2015, p: 2) because their portraits tell us a story about 'the extremes of modern life' and what can happen to individuals when they find themselves 'at a crossroads' (Perry, 2014). Perry's use of the crossroads metaphor is telling because he is acknowledging what Jameson refers to as the 'internally conflicted and reflexive' (1999, p: 47) nature of identity which cannot be represented simply in terms of simple stereotypes. However, as Jameson points out, whilst other relations of identity such as gender, race and ethnicity 'are not themselves the vehicle for the expression of class dynamics' nevertheless these dynamics 'are symbolically reinvested in class dynamics and express themselves through a class formation' (ibid.). For Jameson 'class consciousness' revolves 'first and foremost around the experience of inferiority' (ibid.).

This means that the 'lower classes' carry about within their heads unconscious convictions as to the superiority of hegemonic or ruling-class expressions and values, which they equally transgress and repudiate in ritualistic (and socially and politically ineffective) ways (ibid.).

In my conversation with the artist, Perry told me 'To a certain extent I shelved class, though of course it's there, hanging in everything' (Perry, 2016). Perry often draws attention to his working class background by labelling himself 'an oik usurper' or a

‘chippy prole’ as a way of highlighting that a working class identity is by definition subordinate. The fact that these labels are ‘self-ascriptions’ is an acknowledgement of Perry’s own cultural power. The artist has travelled a long way from his roots but these class dynamics certainly came to the surface in his encounter with ruling-class consciousness, in the form of disgraced Cabinet Minister Chris Huhne. For the most part, the politician himself seemed remarkably free of ‘any anxieties raised by the internalized presence of the underclass’ (Jameson, 1999, p: 47-48).

### **Perry on Identity**

The artist is no stranger to what one might call an identity crisis. During his early teens and twenties Perry struggled not only with ‘the emotional baggage of his childhood’ but also with ‘his emergent transvestism’ (Klein, 2013, p: 197). In addition, his acute awareness of class has always been a crucial factor in these identity struggles and, as Klein points out, ‘his earliest pieces often voiced a barely concealed rage, a nagging neurosis or a confusion about his place in the world’ (ibid.). By the end of his course of therapy in 2004, Perry had found not only a sense of enhanced creativity but also ‘Claire came out more confidently and assuredly’ (ibid. p: 199). As a transvestite, Perry is aware that his ability to reveal himself in multiple guises has made him into an instantly recognisable public figure. As the artist points out ‘I tick so many boxes. That’s why I get a lot of gigs – because I can do the lectures, I can do the television thing, and I dress up, and by the way, I’m an artist as well’ (Perry cited in Hattenstone, 2014, p: 20).

Claire is undoubtedly a major presence in Perry’s life but, as the above comment indicates, there is a distinction between his identity as an artist and his cross-dressing. During an interview with Sara Thornton, Perry stated that Claire was a manifestation of

his 'sexual obsessions rather than his artistic concerns' (Thornton, 2015, p: 306).

Thornton discovers that Perry's 'refusal to elevate Claire' to the status of an artwork is also 'a means of disassociating himself from performance art' (ibid.). Perry explained to Thornton that he 'wallowed' in performance art during his student days before concluding 'that it was 'painfully pious'' (ibid.). He tells Thornton, 'When it's entertaining, it becomes theatre; when it's not, it is earnest and boring' (ibid.). Claire is significant to Perry's identity as an artist in the sense that the 'emotional loading of cross-dressing is so powerful that other sorts of taboo-breaking don't faze me' (ibid.).

### **Identity as Imaginary**

During the course of our interview, Perry told me 'In the last fifteen years I've been trying to make work that is less autobiographical' (Perry, 2016). In a short YouTube video, the artist explained why he had chosen to focus on the issue of identity in *Who Are You?* According to Perry:

Identity is one of those words that get used a lot especially in political terms but it always seems like a slippery term to me. It's one of these things that is confronting us daily but we don't talk about it' (Gerry in Art, 2014).

Perry explained that as an artist his 'job' was 'to bring into awareness' these things 'so that we can talk about them. We can look at them and go is it working for us?' (ibid.). Perry continued 'the cliché is that we reduce portraiture to how people look – that's not what it's like. That's not what I'm about' (ibid.). In his refusal to consider identity within the limits of traditional portraiture the artist was influenced by the philosopher Julian Baggini. According to Perry, Baggini argues that, 'I is a verb masquerading as a noun ... You carry it along with you and it changes all the time' (ibid.). Perry believes that our identities are in a constant state of change. He argues, 'We're always moving,

we're never static, we've got this cast of identity characters coming forward like a troupe, like a repertory company, we need this person now and maybe we need support from this person now...' (ibid.). For Perry, identity is 'by its very nature a shifting, multi-layered thing' (ibid.). The series of portraits in *Who Are You?* are 'an accretion and that's exactly what identity is like. It's a poetic thing – it's a series of images, experiences and metaphors' (ibid.). Here, Perry is describing the imaginary of identity: the shape or form in which we experience the world and ourselves.

Perry describes his own self-portrait *A Map of Days* (2012-2013) as 'a metaphor for the complexity of identity' (ibid.): a visual expression of the imaginaries informing his sense of self. Perry's art is forged from the emotional extremes of his own experience, but it is never solipsistic, not least because he is an astute observer of contemporary culture and its effects on how we think and feel about ourselves. His rejection of traditional portraiture is a response to the way in which technology has revolutionized our lives. As he points out: 'if Michelangelo was around today, he wouldn't be painting ceilings. He'd be making CGI movies or developing 3D printing' (Perry, 2014, p: 103).

Perry gets to know his sitters by immersing himself in their lives for three or four days. Again he takes the approach of artist ethnographer as a way of finding out more about his subjects and the particular problems they are facing, not least how they perform the various and often contradictory roles they might be required to fulfil. Perry said that during this research he was 'talking to individuals, not to people as representatives of a class. It was more personal ... it was about their stories and complex issues' (Perry, 2016). He believes that the pressure to conform to stereotypical and often opposing categories of identity can become a particularly fraught process. In a leaflet published to accompany the exhibition, the artist suggests that when our

identity ‘does not feel right, or is under threat’ ... ‘then we are suddenly made aware of how central and important our identity is’ (National Portrait Gallery, 2014). Perry explains his relation to his subjects as a ‘hunt for clues’ about the ‘character of the identity journey they are facing’ (Perry, 2014). For Perry, as a contemporary portraitist, the challenge is to ‘distill’ these clues ‘into one image ... get it right and it will tell you more than a thousand selfies ever could’ (ibid.). As he points out, ‘What makes the series so moving is the truth of it. The most moving thing is when we are shown truths we didn’t know we knew’ (Gerry in Art, 2014).

### ***A Map of Days* 2013**

At its most basic level *A Map of Days* is precisely that – a map. Perry likes maps, not least because they provide a medium that is instantly recognisable and accessible. He cites 15<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup>-century maps from Holland and Italy which depict ‘fortifications and things like that’ as possible sources of inspiration for *A Map of Days* (Hopkinson, 2014). This inspiration is visible in the aesthetic qualities of the map: its aged appearance and its iconography. A closer inspection of the map reveals a surface covered by tiny, intricately drawn buildings including fairy-tale castles, fortresses, many-turreted towers, medieval gothic-looking houses, stately home-type structures, a timbered Tudor-style house and even a gypsy caravan<sup>14</sup>. A series of randomly ascribed words are written alongside these miniscule structures: these inscriptions include ‘Lingering doubt’, ‘Hubris’, ‘Mental health issues’, ‘An Imaginary Refuge’, ‘Disappearing up its own arse’, ‘Tired beliefs’, and ‘Accepting change’ to name but a few (Perry, 2013).

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<sup>14</sup> Here we are reminded that Perry cited Arthur Mee’s *Children’s Encyclopaedia* in which ‘...the print was miniscule, the pictures compact’ (Jones and Perry, 2007, p: 41) as a major influence on his aesthetic.

The viewer's eye focuses on the thickly drawn jagged shape in the centre, which encloses a cluster of buildings and shapes into an arrowhead on the far right. Inside this boundary is a central fortification criss-crossed by myriad streets with names such as 'Bullshit Detector', 'Reputation', 'Unearned Privilege', 'Paralysed by Indecision' and 'Nepotism' (ibid.). The words 'Paranoia', 'Rigidity' and 'Snobbery' are visible around the external edges (ibid.). Within the arrowhead the text reads 'Reactionary' and 'The parts of myself I cannot easily face up to' (ibid.). On the right is a small picture depicting a likeness of Perry's wife accompanied by the words 'The Inner You' (ibid.). A river labelled 'Imagination' and 'Inspiration' flows from the top left corner of the map around the city before snaking up into the right hand corner. At the outskirts of the map beyond the wall lie a series of small disc shaped islands inscribed with the words 'The Truth', 'Hubris', 'The Market', 'Who Am I?' and 'The Vast *Something*' and a small river is labelled 'Tragic Waste' (ibid.).

Klein suggests that although Perry describes himself as a 'Christian atheist' he loves the material culture of religion: 'its ritual, pomp and ceremony' and its 'kinkiness' (2013, p: 159). This might explain why the word 'CULT' is across the lower left corner of the map. The word HABITUS (which might be taken as a direct reference to Bourdieu) is inscribed in the top right corner of the map perhaps to signal Perry's belief that 'class is inhabited within you' (Perry, 2016). As a successful artist, Perry has accumulated cultural capital nevertheless 'There's certain structures in my thinking and feeling that are working class' (ibid.). At the very heart of the map there is a circular space containing a barely visible figure kicking a tiny can inscribed with the words 'A sense of self' (Perry, 2014). This densely layered and intricately rendered detail reinforces the idea of identity as accreted.

Maps provide the viewer with knowledge about a particular landscape but they are never totally objective. Every map is within a social, political and cultural context and it reflects the imaginary projections of its producer (V & A 2016). Aspects of this map are simultaneously familiar and fantastically strange because Perry has adapted traditional map iconography to give us 'A self-portrait as a fortified town' (ibid.). Perry explains this metaphor as follows '...the wall is perhaps my skin. Each day I worked on it I finished by marking the point with the date to highlight the passage of time in the production of art to reflect the forming and reforming of one's identity' (National Portrait Gallery, 2014). For Baggini, our identity is something 'that is in part a construction' which is given 'order and cohesion' by the 'biographical narratives that we tell ourselves' (2011, p: 86). The biographical aspect of this map is Perry's journey towards greater self-awareness and self-realization through his art-making practice. For Perry, identity is always constructed because it is 'co-created by other people as well as ourselves' (Hopkinson 2014). To illustrate this claim, the wall representing Perry's skin is 'permeable, I absorb the influences and ideas of the landscape I am in and then they form me' (National Portrait Gallery, 2014).

In his interview with Sarah Thornton, Perry identified 'self-awareness' as 'the first tool of intellectual growth' (2015, p: 304). This comment prompted Thornton to suggest that the notion of an 'interior quest' was one of Perry's 'artistic drivers' (ibid.). In *A Map of Days*, the map becomes a metaphor for a state of mind and this is an approach which gives the viewer intimate access to its contents. The artist has replaced all reference to outward appearance with a stream of consciousness or interior monologue. He uses this monologue to record the sensory impressions 'visual, auditory, physical, associative, and subliminal' that passed through his mind and formed part of his self-awareness along with his rational thoughts during the making of this

piece (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1988, p: 169). This free association of ideas, images and words seems to capture the impressionistic, fragmentary, subtle and poetic nature of identity. This technique also captures the flow of time to convey the idea that identity is not sameness: ‘one thing continuing to exist as exactly the same thing over time’ (Baggini, 2011, p: 135). As Baggini points out, we use the term ‘‘identity’ in relation to persons’, unclear as to whether we mean sameness (*idem*) or selfhood (*ipse*)’ (ibid.). Baggini argues ‘It is in the nature’ of our selves ‘to change, never exactly the same from one day to the next’ (ibid.). *A Map of Days* (2013) serves as a visual illustration of the philosopher’s claim that ‘...persons retain a sense of selfhood over time but this is not a precise sameness’ (ibid.).

Perry said that if he were to reproduce the map it would be ‘a lot more organised and easily interpretable’ but he prefers a more spontaneous approach to give his art a ‘random authenticity’ (Hopkinson, 2014). In *A Map of Days* (2013) Perry’s self-realization through art is a process that is given ‘authenticity’ by being uncensored (ibid.). For Perry, the ‘holy triumvirate of doors to our unconscious’ are ‘what we find funny, what we find sexy, what we dream about: these are the things we can’t fake’ (Harvey, 2014). Crucially, this piece is challenging the idea that there is an ‘authentic’ identity: the ‘false belief’ that something like a core identity forms ‘this immutable centre of who we are as individuals’ (National Portrait Gallery, 2014). This work is the most intimate self-portrait in the exhibition and yet the culmination of Perry’s identity journey takes him to the centre of the map where he finds only ‘...an open space: there is no pearl, no central core: our ‘selves’ are but shifting layers of experience. My ‘sense of self’ is a tiny man kicking a can down the road’ (ibid.)



## **The Huhne Interview**

Even when Perry is not using class as his primary category of analysis, he remains acutely aware of how class differences continue to shape and divide us in twenty-first century Britain. Nowhere was this division between the classes more starkly illustrated than in Perry's encounter with former Cabinet minister Chris Huhne. The series opened with this interview because for Perry, the politician represented 'Default Man' the identity Perry found 'hardest' and 'most elusive' to talk about (Perry, 2014, p: 25). According to Perry, 'Default Man feels he is the reference point from which all other values and cultures are judged. Default Man is the zero longitude of identity' (ibid. p: 27). For this reason, 'Chris Huhne (60, Westminster, PPE Magdalen, self-destructively heterosexual)' seemed to provide the ideal counter balance to the idea of putting other non-establishment into the National Portrait Gallery (ibid.). Also, there was the added frisson of interviewing a disgraced Cabinet minister (who was facing a possible custodial sentence for perverting the course of justice by getting his wife to accept responsibility for his speeding points) on the night before his trial. Under the circumstances, would it not be reasonable to think that Huhne might be facing a crisis of identity?

The interview took place in Huhne's flat in Clerkenwell, Islington, over a kitchen supper of tuna and lentils. According to Fox, 'supper' is a term used by 'the upper-middle or upper class' (2004, p: 309). Other class markers were immediately apparent when Huhne informed Perry that this was not the first time he had sat for a portrait. The artist saw before him a man whose 'identity remained unexamined' because he was 'rarely under existential threat' (Perry, 2014, p: 27). Was all that about to change? Perry told Huhne that he was interested in the 'phenomenon of the powerful man' and here was a member of the Establishment about to face a very public 'collapse

in power and status' (Perry, 2014). Perry has considerable empathy and skill as an interviewer but the politician remained resistant to the notion of a layered identity. 'People are not like Russian dolls' he argued (Huhne, 2014). 'They're exactly like Russian dolls' the artist responded (Perry, 2014). The artist contends that 'Lone Default Man' will never acknowledge 'the tribal advantages of his identity' (Perry, 2014, p: 27). True to form, Huhne denied that he was a 'typical stereotype' (Huhne, 2014) and accused Perry of being highly selective in choosing to define him only in terms of his white, middle-class elite status and not in terms of the other things he had done.

Keen to present himself as an individual, Huhne found the self-image (offered to him by his QC) of a modern-day Saint Sebastian 'subject to arrows coming in from all directions' far more compelling (ibid.) What fascinated Perry was whether the politician would (unlike Saint Sebastian) continue to remain magically impervious to these arrows. Thus far, the politician had seemed quite 'bullet-proof' Perry observed (Perry, 2014). Huhne had been pilloried by certain sections of the media and, for many people, the prospect of a custodial sentence 'would be a disaster' said Perry but Huhne's attitude seemed to be 'Oh well, move on to career number 4 (ibid.). As Huhne appeared unfazed by the possible consequences of the situation, Perry turned to his girlfriend Carina Trimingham to ask her whether she thought the experience had changed the politician. 'Not particularly, he's very philosophical' she replied (Trimingham, 2014).

Perry's attempts to get beneath Huhne's political facade had been unsuccessful and the artist admitted that his portrait of power was proving to be a struggle. The artist and the politician met up for the third time in a truck-stop cafe on the M4 just one hour after Huhne's release. He had served only eight weeks of an eight-month sentence. Perry wanted to find out whether a spell in prison had dented Huhne's self-confidence. Did Huhne identify with the prisoners he had left behind or with the powerful elite?

(Hattenstone, 2015). Huhne appeared imperturbable as he informed Perry that there were a lot of ‘ordinary folk’ in prison who were ‘sad and distressed’ and perhaps should not be there but his own views about prison had not changed. He added ‘I must be the only politician who comes out of prison without changing’ (Huhne, 2014). Perry answered ‘You’re already a politician then’ (ibid.) and Huhne responded by saying ‘unlike ordinary folk – like you Grayson’ (ibid.). Perry quipped back ‘I’m just a chippy working –class prole with a CBE’ before adding ‘Your crime is a sense of entitlement...you’re not contrite, you’re not demonstrably upset’ and ‘in P.R terms your attitude is a problem’ (ibid.). ‘I’m not getting a more vulnerable Chris Huhne’ (ibid.). ‘It’s my character’ said Huhne (ibid.) This response conveniently overlooks the other factors involved in shaping Huhne’s sunny outlook on his future, including his column in *The Guardian* and his management role in a Green Energy company: the accrued benefits of being a ‘Great White Male’ (Perry, 2014, p: 25).

The above exchange between Perry and Huhne can be seen as an example of what Schama referred to as ‘the triangular collision of wills between the sitter, artist and public’ (2015, p: 2). For Perry, the class aspect of the relationship was a particular source of tension as the artist made clear in the following comment:

I’m white, male, middle-aged myself, and if there’s one thing I feel alienated by, it’s the class thing. So, to see someone with that chutzpah and bullet-proof, Teflon confidence close up is fascinating. And sort of horrifying (cited in Hattenstone, 2014, p: 25).

As Schama pointed out, the artist charged with producing a public portrait must answer not only to ‘...the self-image of the sitter, and the creatively disruptive urges of his muse, but to a third party that must be satisfied: public expectation’ (2015, p: 2). The problem facing Perry was how to represent a man whose claim to a unique individuality

was based on his refusal to ‘turn off the politician’ and reveal the man beneath the mask (Perry, 2014). For the public at large, there is nothing exemplary (nothing that serves as a good role model) in the image of yet another disgraced politician who disappears from public view, only to re-appear a short time later having seemingly escaped any long-term damage to his status and career prospects. As Perry points out, ‘the more Huhne claimed his unique individuality, the more familiar the pattern seemed to be’ (ibid.) Perry was aware that his portrait had to do more than simply reflect what Schama terms ‘the self-preening of the great and the good’ (2015, p: 2). If the artist is expected to satisfy ‘public expectation’ then his portrait must be exemplary in the other sense of the term, which is to serve as a warning or a deterrent intended to break or discourage a destructive pattern of behaviour (ibid). For Perry, no artist is more closely associated with the theme of predictable repetition than Andy Warhol, whose work provided the inspiration for the *Huhne Vase*.

### ***The Huhne Vase (2014)***

In terms of their form, Perry’s pots are within other frames of historical reference. At first glance, this pot resembles the *Westfield Vase* 2009: an earlier work modelled on Chinese or Korean celadon vases (Klein 2013). The two pots are similar in terms of shape, colour and surface detail and in their use of an ancient Japanese repair technique called *kintsugi*. In Huhne, Perry encountered ‘The Great White Male’s combination of good education, manners, charm, confidence and sexual attractiveness’ (or “money”, as I like to call it)’ (2014, p: 25). These forms of cultural capital represented in the aesthetic properties of the vase, which Perry said ‘were intended to convey restraint, bourgeois values...good taste’ (Perry, 2016). The drawn imagery of the *Huhne Vase* illustrates the themes the artist wants to highlight and provides a stark and humorous contrast to its elegant beauty. A series of repeat patterns circle the pot

and the surface is criss-crossed by a delicate tracery of gold lines. One striking feature of this vase is that it has a very flat two-dimensional surface rather than a multi-layering of images and ideas. Often, this collage approach will create a vanishing point inside the pot to indicate an inner, psychological dimension. The flattened surface pattern of this pot results in a lack of depth perhaps to remind us that as a Default Man, the politician had rarely been called upon to direct his heterosexual, dominant 'male gaze' inwards (2014, p: 27). As Huhne's identity appeared not have been threatened he was particularly resistant to the idea of self-examination.

As with Perry's previous TV series, viewers were invited to watch the creative process at work. For this piece, Perry begins to create his unique visual idiom by identifying Huhne's personalized number plate H11 HNE as the 'boldest motif' because it seemed to 'encapsulate Huhne hubris' (Perry, 2014). This initial motif creates a repeating pattern around the circumference of the pot. With his characteristic wit, Perry explained that 'if we were to follow the story around the pot we would have a willy because that's what got him into trouble in the first place, putting it where it shouldn't be' (ibid.). The power of the phallus as a signifier is humorously undermined by its repetition and positioning and the vulgarity contrasts with the 'bourgeois restraint' of the pot. According to Perry, this motif implies the question 'Will they ever learn?' (ibid.). Perry has also included a repeating motif of Huhne's face and a mobile phone as a riposte to Default Man's cry that he is an 'individual' and that his achievements have nothing to do with his membership of an elite group.

Warhol's art encapsulates the idea that when images are repeated again and again through TV, print and media they become banal and disassociated, thus creating 'a role for affectless art' (Hughes, 1997, p: 539). Warhol's art provided the aesthetic inspiration for this pot but Perry's art is far from 'affectless' (ibid.). The artist claimed

that he wanted this pot to express his own ‘feelings about how Chris had been represented’ (ibid.) but he is, of course, acutely aware that whatever emerges from his ‘creatively disruptive urges’ must also fulfil the expectations of the public (Schama, 2015, p: 2). Thus the artist resolved that ‘Huhne hubris’ could not go unpunished (Perry, 2014). To this end, ‘Just glazing the pot wasn’t enough’ and there ‘was one more transformation’ he wanted to achieve (ibid.). He paused to ask ‘What symbolizes vulnerability better than a pot’ before taking a hammer and smashing it. ‘If Chris wouldn’t show any cracks in his personality then my pot certainly would’ claimed Perry (ibid.).

The broken parts of the pot were stuck back together using *kintsugi*. *Kintsugi* draws attention to the repair by adding powdered gold to the adhesive to strengthen the repair and turn it into an aesthetic feature of the pot. Perry had previously used this technique in the *Westfield Vase* (2004) where the repair lines represented ‘a kind of alternative map’ in which ‘they are almost desire lines, but desire lines of destruction’ (Klein, 2013, p: 266). In *The Huhne Vase* the repair lines are used to point to an alternative direction that a person’s behaviour might take. Perry said that he broke the vase to symbolise that a show of vulnerability might be asset in relationships for people like Huhne. Such a display might indicate to the public, strength of character, that there was more to Huhne than his arrogant, self-confident exterior and that his spell in prison had taught him a lesson in humility. My own reflections on the vase led me to thinking that in the context of Huhne’s ‘self-destructively heterosexual’ behaviour the repair lines to the *Huhne Vase* might also symbolise ‘desire lines of destruction’ (ibid.).

In the final meeting when Perry asked to see Huhne’s security tag, the political skills of the latter were very in evidence. In remarkable volte-face, he chided Perry for his apparent willingness to take part in ‘society’s ritual humiliation’ (Huhne, 2014). If

anyone was going to appear shamefaced in public, it was not going to be Huhne. Although he likes to believe otherwise, Huhne's disavowal of his elite status on the grounds that he 'never cared about ministerial cars or apartments' is less significant than his class status. His membership of this rich and privileged group facilitated his achievements, shaped his behaviour and protected him from the consequences of his actions (Hattenstone, 2015, p: 27). Unlike Humpty-Dumpty the character in the famous nursery rhyme, Huhne's fall from grace has not prevented him from putting his life and his career back together again. Perhaps that is why he did not appear to recognize his own story (or the alternative routes he might have chosen both in relation to his sexual behaviour and his lack of humility) in the image of the smashed and repaired pot (Rees, 2014). Huhne was pleased with his portrait. 'But he took a selfie anyway' (ibid.).

### **The Kayleigh Khosravi Interview**

For his next individual portrait Perry chose Kayleigh Khosravi; a twenty-seven years old, white woman 'whose identity was being radically transformed by religion' (Perry, 2014). As an unemployed single mother with four young children Kayleigh has automatic membership of one of the most pilloried, hated and stigmatized groups in British society: the white working-class single parent mother. One startling fact to emerge from the program was that in terms of her age and white ethnic background Kayleigh represents the most likely group to convert to Islam in the UK. For Perry, Kayleigh's story is exemplary because it is a very 'modern journey' of identity (ibid.). But in order for him to produce his portrait he must first discover why the Islamic faith seems to exert such a magnetic pull. Kayleigh tells Perry 'I was a racist, I didn't like Muslims, it started when I was around fifteen and I got into drinking' (Khosravi, 2014). Khosravi adds 'I was always taking the mick out of people, I was horrible ... I was a wild child' she concludes (ibid.). Kayleigh says she feels shame about what she did but

she also feels gratitude because in her efforts to overcome her past difficulties she believes she has become a better person. She adds ‘With Allah there’s a reason why he doesn’t want you to do certain things ...you can’t hide anything from Allah .... that’s what I tell my children’ (ibid.).

Kayleigh’s brother Ryan is the only other member of the family who appears in the program, apart from her children. Ryan feels ‘a little bit ashamed’ of Kayleigh’s conversion to Islam and wants to know ‘Why not Christianity?’ (Ryan, 2014). ‘The Bible has changed but the Qu’ran hasn’t changed’ she ventured by way of explanation (ibid.). Ryan argued ‘You’re not free, you can’t drink, smoke or eat pork ... you can’t do none of that ... and you’re living your life by a book’ (ibid.). Ryan is opposed to the limits Islam imposes on certain freedoms, which he sees in terms of the freedom to drink, smoke, eat certain foods and have children outside of marriage. Kayleigh responds by telling Ryan ‘I wouldn’t want to get pregnant by someone who was going to leave me’ (Khosravi, 2014.). She believes that religion will provide some protection against this eventuality. During a visit to a nearby playground, Perry feels that he is closer to finding out the source of Kayleigh’s identity conflict. Kayleigh tells Perry ‘My kids were always asking for things so they could be like their friends, new trainers ... they don’t need those things ... I used to be like that ... I had hundreds of pairs of shoes ... I feel much more peaceful now’ (ibid.). Kayleigh concludes ‘My kids are going to a much better place and they don’t need loads of stuff’ (ibid.). This was a light bulb moment for Perry: his portrait was going to be about ‘Islam versus shopping’ (Perry, 2014).



### ***The Ashford Hijab (2014)***

Perry decided that the obvious form for Kayleigh's portrait would be a silkscreen print hijab. Headscarves fascinate Perry; he sees them as an iconic symbol of womanhood, not least because of their historic associations with class. In Perry's mind, the headscarf is worn by both ends of the social spectrum: Northern working-class women and the Queen. However, in modern multi-faith Britain the headscarf has acquired another set of meanings, which have imbued it with a potent political significance. During his research, Perry noted that the Mosque was in a converted pub in close proximity to the Ashford Designer Outlet Centre and the shopping centre looked like a series of Bedouin tents. This irony got Perry thinking about what each building represented and what was available to young people in terms of the universal search for identity. Perry concludes that in both cases what was available was an 'off the shelf identity': an identity defined by consumerism or an identity defined by religion (Perry, 2014).

Perry's silkscreen portrait uses a predominantly red, black and cream colour scheme. The drawn imagery follows Kayleigh's journey of identity as she moves away from the Ashford Designer Outlet Centre towards Mecca: the birthplace of Islam. The figure of Kayleigh is the focal point and it divides the hijab into two halves representing the past and the future. Her children are depicted as four small figures following in her wake. Kayleigh's past is behind her on the left side of the screen print. In the top left corner, the tented roofs of the shopping centre display the names of well-known high street brands to symbolise Kayleigh's addiction to a consumerist lifestyle. Kayleigh is in a crouching position as she vomits into the gutter and she is followed by a couple enjoying a boozy night out.

The curling loop of the motorway creates a visual pathway to the newly transformed Kayleigh who is clad in traditional Arabic Islamic dress: the black abaya and hijab, which signal female modesty. Islam provides an escape from the ongoing and often sexual appraisal of women that is such an embedded feature of Western society. Under the protection of Islam Kayleigh has re-emerged here as a powerful and resplendent figure. She has one arm raised towards the future which is represented by a group of female figures in the top right corner: the supportive sisterhood of women Kayleigh finds at the mosque. The mosque at Mecca (which houses the Ka'bah, the holiest shrine in Islam) is in the bottom right corner, again this symbolises the direction of Kayleigh's future.

*The Ashford Hijab* is a symbolic illustration of Kayleigh's journey to 'selfhood' (Baggini, 2011, p. 135). The work explores the idea that both Western consumerism and religion can offer 'a refuge for a person whose identity is at sea' (Perry, 2014). For Kayleigh, Islam seems to provide a refuge from materialism and the constant pressures of consumerism and it offers a family, in the sisterhood of Muslim women. Islam also removes some of the challenges of everyday life, including decisions about the sort of person you want to be and how you want to present your self-image to the world. For Perry, these choices are an important part of how we choose to create our identities. My contention is that the ability to produce our identities through a creative act of will depends on whether we have the freedom of choice to act autonomously. Freedom of choice is within the range of options that are available to us which may be subject to material constraints. But as noted in the earlier chapters of this thesis, 'Class never appears in pure form', it is always criss-crossed by other axes of difference' (Aronowitz, 1992, p: 72). Material factors alone do not determine how people identify themselves. For Kayleigh religion provides an affective image with which she can

identify and Islam has certainly changed her lifestyle. Kayleigh's conversion to Islam has allowed her to exchange a highly stigmatized identity (white, working-class, single parent mother) for a highly conformist one but one in which traditionally (and perhaps for Kayleigh, this is a crucial factor) mothering is considered as a central and highly valued role for women.

During the interview it seemed that the only identity options available to Kayleigh were already predetermined by mass consumerism (which has always been closely associated with the working classes) or by the principles and practices of Islam. For me, *The Ashford Hijab* provides a visual illustration of the way in which a working class background can result in a 'deficit of objective life chances' (Coole, 1996, p: 18). However, these are my thoughts. Perry is not explicitly engaging with the issue of class. *The Ashford Hijab* tells a story of a journey from mass consumerism to religion and by its motifs and associations makes this story intelligible and gives us the affective contours of the situation. Despite the seriousness of the subject matter, Perry's humour is never very far from the surface. The scarf might symbolise a tongue-in-cheek reference to consumerism, in the sense that it is like a gift to Kayleigh, in the form of an item, she could (in principle) wear, which has attractive sensual qualities. At the same time, it is a wonderful and sensitive public tribute to a young woman who has triumphed over adversity and turned her life around. How did Perry's subject view her portrait? When Perry met up with Kayleigh at the National Portrait Gallery, she had married and had a fifth child: 'That's my life' she said delightedly (Khosravi, 2014).

### **The Jack and John Interview**

In the second episode, Perry met Jack and John, two white male partners who adopted Shea, a child of mixed British ethnicity, three years ago when the rules on

trans-racial adoption were relaxed. The couple live in a rural part of southern England. John is a commercials director whilst Jack stays at home full-time to look after Shea. Jack already has a biological daughter who lives with her two female parents in Brighton. For Perry, the family created by Jack, John and Shea represents a 'laboratory of identity' not least because it is positioned at the intersection of different conceptual categories including sexuality, 'race', gender, nationality and ethnicity (Perry, 2014). Jack and John see themselves as a modern family, which does not 'conform to the norm, even the norm for adoptive families. In many ways we represent what the world is becoming' (Jack and John, 2014). However, as Perry's interview with the couple progressed it became clear that negotiating these multiple identities was a complicated process. When Perry asked the couple how they defined their sexuality and whether they identified as 'gay' Jack was quick to respond 'No, I'm not gay, I'm queer, it's nothing to do with sexuality, it's just other' (ibid.) 'How would you define other?' asked Perry, 'It's complicated' came the response (ibid.). Perry asked 'Do you refer to Shea as mixed-race?' (Perry, 2014). This categorisation was equally difficult and the two men could not agree between themselves on what would be an appropriate term. John ventured that the couple tried to avoid using the word 'race' by using the term 'mixed' but he acknowledged that it was confusing, however 'mixed-black' didn't seem right either (ibid.). Jack observed that many young people were using the term 'mix:d' but there was no general consensus (ibid.).

One issue that seemed to unite Jack and John was the need to give Shea a positive sense of his own identity. The couple have joined MOSAIC a mixed-families support group with the aim of preventing Shea from acquiring what is already a highly stigmatized citizenship identity as a black British boy. Jack said that what he wanted for Shea was 'self-acceptance' (ibid.). Perry said he thought that the way they operated

at home as a gay couple and as a family was equally as important as MOSAIC. Perry observed that both parents were very aware of Shea's 'racial' identity and he queried whether they considered femaleness as important as blackness. Both men said that they did not regard femaleness as important and that 'nurture was more important than gender, men and women are not fundamentally different' (Jack and John, 2014). However, for Jack, 'in terms of how he presents as a black man, love is not enough, we need to do more' (ibid.). Perry accompanied the family on a visit to an African craft market because Jack and John really wanted Shea to learn about his African heritage as part of this process of self-acceptance. The choice of venue is significant because as Jack pointed out, there are few black faces in art, in literature or in TV programmes. Perry's search revealed only two black faces in the gallery: a portrait of Mary Seacole and a painting that included an un-named servant as part of a group. Perry wanted his portrait not only to address this absence but also to challenge the highly idealized images of traditional nuclear families that are currently on display.

### ***Modern Family (2014)***

Perry is always alert to the way in which other categories of identity are criss-crossed by class difference. Jack, John and Shea are certainly not a traditional nuclear family when viewed through the prism of sexuality, 'race', gender, nationality or ethnicity but they do conform to one norm when viewed through the prism of class. In their anxiety to get their parenting absolutely perfect, they are far from 'radical and pioneering' rather they are an example of 'all the middle class parents I know' declared Perry (ibid.). Perry points out that 'We are bombarded by images of happy looking-looking families that don't resemble our own' (ibid.). So it is hardly a surprise to find that Jack and John are extremely self-conscious about their parenting, especially when there is the added pressure of '...all social and cultural eyes ... upon them' (ibid.).

Perry said he wanted this pot to counter the idea that ‘somewhere else there’s this perfect family’ (ibid.). The pot is one of Perry’s classic invisible forms and the surface is a riot of bright colours and layered imagery. On one side of the pot, the eye focuses on a group of three figures: Jack, John and Shea. Shea is sitting on John’s lap clutching a small toy car and more toy cars are visible just below his feet. John is gazing down at Shea whilst Jack is pensively stroking his beard. This depiction may reflect the fact that during the interview Jack was the parent who appeared to be the most self-reflexive about the limits of language in terms of how the couple identified themselves. Here, Perry has placed Jack, John and Shea beyond the pressure of social scrutiny on a free-floating cloud above the trees and buildings below them. Around this central group, the pot is collaged with a jumble of idealised images showing a history of happy (apparently middle class) family get-togethers and wedding celebrations both European and non-European.

On closer inspection, the viewer might realize that John’s facial expression appears in countless representations of a mother and child. The symbolism is unmistakeable here. The most famous Holy Family is the Child Jesus, the Virgin Mary and Saint Joseph. This Holy Family has provided a venerable template since the 17th century, but Perry wants us to consider other modern family groupings as equally venerable. Jack and John might seem to be ‘trying a bit too hard’ observes Perry but perhaps this is no bad thing and maybe ‘all parents should have a moment of reflection before they embark on parenting so that they don’t visit their own problems on their children’ (ibid.). For Perry, the example of Jack and John serves as ‘...an important lesson: we should not take it for granted that we naturally know how to love and raise a child well, it needs thought and practice to get it right’ (ibid.). However, Perry is always alert to the dangers of too much self-reflexivity, not only because it can become

paralysing and can stultify creativity, but because such self-absorption is seen as a very middle class preoccupation (Klein 2013). He cautions against the idea that visiting an African craft market will ‘reinforce’ Shea’s sense of his ‘Africanness’ by giving him access to a range of pre-given cultural artefacts. Again, Perry is keen to emphasize that identity is not something that is ‘known’ but rather it is ‘felt’ as it gradually builds up like sediment on ‘the seabed of a prehistoric ocean’ (ibid.).

My own reflections on the pot led me to question why this modern-day obsession with parenting is so angst-ridden. I believe that this fear is partly a response to the idea at the heart of Cameron’s Conservative philosophy: ‘the idea that a person’s life chances are determined by behavioural factors rather than economic background’ (Jones, 2011, p: 77). From this ideological perspective, as Jones points out, ‘family stability’ explains everything and ‘if you are less well off, then it is your behaviour that has to be changed’ (ibid. p: 78). Despite a grudging acceptance that there is a link between ‘material poverty and poor life chances’, it is not ‘lack of jobs, or class divisions that are a major cause of poverty’, it is ‘family instability’ (ibid.). This concept is the key factor in Cameron’s ‘semi-apocalyptic vision of ‘Broken Britain’’ (ibid. p: 77). The opposite of the Holy family is, of course, the dysfunctional family. In the popular imaginary, this phenomenon is most frequently associated with ‘hordes of state-subsidized barbarians just outside the gates’ (ibid. p: 78). This is a highly stigmatized image, from which most families would strive to distance themselves.

Class is not the central concern for Perry. The significance of *Modern Family* lies in the fact that, as far as he is aware, it is the first image of a child of gay parents to make an appearance in the National Portrait Gallery. How did John, Jack and Shea respond to their historic portrait? Shea (unaware of gender sensitivities) immediately

pointed to a car ‘That’s a BMW’ he said happily (Shea, 2014). Perry said ‘Look you’re hovering on a cloud of love’ (Perry, 2014). The pot met with Jack’s approval:

‘It says something about being fragile but with a possibility of immortality, like all of our identities, no matter how constant they are. Even though our existence is impermanent, we leave something of our identity behind with our family and friends’ (Jack, 2014).

One might add, *Modern Family* also leaves something behind for posterity.

### **Interview with the Newtonards Road Loyalists in Northern Ireland**

In the third episode, Perry considers ‘21<sup>st</sup> century tribes’ (Perry, 2014). Despite the fact that we live in an era of individualism, the artist is convinced that our basic urge is to seek out those we deem people like us. The research for this portrait took Perry to the Newtonards Road, a working-class area at the heart of Protestant East Belfast where he planned to interview a group of Irish Loyalists. As the camera panned up and down the terraced streets to reveal a series of paramilitary murals of loyalist gunmen, the artist had his first encounter with an extremely powerful and highly visible expression of tribal identity. These murals were not only a manifestation of sectional interests, political, cultural and religious, but also a potent reminder of a not too distant and very violent past. Perry is keen to find out more about the group whose identity is defined in terms of an allegiance to Britain.

The first encounter took place in a tattoo parlour where Perry met grandmothers Roberta and Jean. This was his first opportunity to view his subjects when their identities were ‘on show’ (ibid.). Both women were in the process of having Union Jacks tattooed on their hands to mark their loyalty to mainland Britain. Perry observed that a tattoo was quite a ‘hard core way of expressing Britishness’ (ibid.). ‘It’s about



freedom of expression' Jean said. 'I don't have an identity crisis. I'm one hundred per cent sure' Jean responded before adding 'That's my official stamp Grayson' (Jean, 2014). 'She's British – no doubt about it' declared Roberta (Roberta, 2014). Perry was keen to understand more about the feelings behind this desire to have such a certain and forcible expression of identity indelibly stamped in art on bodies and walls.

Perry goes to meet Alec, for whom the Maze prison symbolised an allegiance to Protestantism and mainland Britain. Perry wanted to know what being British meant for Alec. 'If you were born a Catholic, Catholics would put themselves in the Republican camp' Alec said. 'I thought Catholics were a different colour. Also I couldn't read and write. I was illiterate' he adds (Alec, 2014). Perry gradually begins to understand that this is a tale of separated identities that were 'forged in isolation, fear and ignorance' (ibid.). Alec collects prison memorabilia in recognition of Loyalist prisoners held in the notorious Maze Prison H-Blocks. He shows Perry an example of the type of work made by the prisoners. The object appears to be a framed section of a banner inscribed with the words 'The Only Crime is Loyalty'. 'These were all working-class men ... people in poverty ... they loved being in prison because they had food and warmth which they didn't have outside' Alec explains. 'Do you think it was a tragedy for all sides?' Perry asks. 'I do' agrees Alec (ibid.). Perry is always aware of the material consequences of class inequalities but here class is entwined with nationalism and religion which makes being 'British' a highly potent symbolic force. Perry observes that:

If you grow up and haven't got many opportunities and you're presented with this rich culture, that's very involving and it's reinforced on a daily basis by people you meet and places that you go and can't go, this situation engenders in someone a cultural identity so passionate that they're willing to commit heinous crimes for it (ibid.).

Perry takes up the question of British identity with Johnny who is leading the marching band during the centenary celebrations to mark the founding of the Ulster Volunteer Force. The UVF was responsible for hundreds of murders during the Troubles but has since has renounced violence in favour of a non-military, civilianized role. Yet the murals remain as ‘very aggressive’ territorial markers which seem to say ‘keep out’ and Perry wonders whether this is ‘deliberate’ and whether it could be less ‘hostile’ (ibid.). Johnny informs Perry that some of the murals have already disappeared because there has been pressure to present a more historical and cultural focus (McAleese 2011). Whilst he recognizes the imagery as a very militaristic assertion of what it means to be British, Johnny tells Perry, ‘we need to keep some because it’s part of our past’ (ibid.). The artist is all too aware that the past is about war and not about peace and the future.

The parade to mark the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) offers Perry another opportunity to witness Loyalist culture. As the uniformed and massed ranks of the parade pass by, the artist admits that the spectacle is hard to ignore. ‘This is passion...it’s exotic...it’s like nothing else you will see in Britain’ enthuses Perry (Perry, 2014). However, the artist’s enthusiasm for this visual spectacle does not blind him to the fact that this patriotic nationalism is celebrating an identity formed in opposition and conflict. Loyalism is an excessive identity that is ‘More British than the British’ in its manifestations (ibid.). Always keenly aware of the sensibilities of his sitters, Perry also recognizes that in the Newtonards Road group he has witnessed ‘group identity in its rawest form’ (ibid.). The inheritance this group shares is based on ‘geography, ethnicity and blood’ however ‘in the Britain I’m loyal too, identity isn’t like that’ declares Perry (ibid.). The Loyalist version of what it means to be British is

very at odds with how identity is conceptualised in multi-cultural Britain in the twenty-first century. Perry asks himself whether his subjects could reinvent themselves if they were not so defined by their past.

### ***Britain is Best (2014)***

If the Loyalists wanted to maintain their allegiance to Britain today and to find a place in the peace process, then they needed to modernize their image. Perry's portrait seeks to help the Loyalists carry forward 'without opposition' their 'strong sense of communal identity and cultural tradition'. It must be 'a standalone celebration of who they are' declared Perry (Perry, 2014.). Perry decides on a cherished material artefact of Loyalist culture: a marching banner. In a reaction against the 'dour aesthetic' of the Loyalists, Perry opts for 'a glitzy, computerized embroidery banner, with maybe a few sequins' (ibid.). The predominant colour scheme is a background of bright pink and purple stripes, which radiate out like rays from the sun. Small yellow and red flowers are dotted randomly across the surface. A red border encloses a Union Jack positioned in the top left corner and a large turquoise horse with a red mane and a lolling tongue prances across the centre of the banner with the five Loyalists on its back. The horse is wearing a crown and one of the Loyalists is carrying a sceptre. The inscription across the bottom proudly proclaims '*Britain is Best*'.

*Britain is Best* is not a densely layered or complicated portrait but rather one that relies on caricature for its effect. The Loyalists defined their identities in terms of the colours and imagery that is traditionally associated with Loyalist culture. In an attempt to detoxify and subvert the Loyalist brand, Perry has exaggerated and parodied Loyalism's signs and symbols, thus emptying out their patriotic and oppositional connotations. The traditional orange, white, red and blue colours used extensively in

Protestant working class areas have given way to a far more exotic colour scheme. King Billy (William III of Orange) on horseback was a recurring image on Loyalist banners but Perry's horse is a comical creature that looks like an illustration from a child's book. 'My horse is sort of jolly, but also looking a bit knackered' Perry explains (ibid). The crown symbolises the British monarchy in Ireland but here it adorns the horse's head and the Union Jack, another symbol of British sovereignty, is looking rather battered and faded. The five Loyalists are recognizable as individuals but they are sharing the same apple-cheeked smile. This feature creates a slightly risqué seaside postcard effect which is reinforced by Alec giving the thumbs-up signal and Jean carrying a bright pink rifle. Johnny appears to be carrying a sceptre modelled on the *Sceptre of Light* from the World of Warcraft games, or perhaps that is just me being fanciful. Perry wanted the deceptively humorous surface of his portrait to convey a 'rather austere message' (ibid.) but did the Loyalists have any idea of how far they had to travel in order to be embraced by the Britain they were so loyal to?

Perry is visibly nervous as he awaits the arrival of Loyalists, aware that 'all of these groups have their issues' (ibid.). Three group members, Jason, Jean and Alec had made the journey to London to view their portrait. Jason immediately said 'It looks like a poster for a pantomime. Was I part of a pantomime, what does it all mean?' (Jason 2014). The portrait seemed to indicate to Jason that 'Loyalism has almost become a caricature in Britain' (ibid.). Jean, who had confidently asserted that she was 100 per cent British, appeared rather taken aback when she declared 'I just took it for granted that you would know what was going on' (Jean, 2014). Jason said 'We're this merry tribe with our tattered flag which makes us feel safe. You've flipped it on its head and made it bright not austere' (ibid). Visibly cheered, Jean added 'The future's bright' before adding, somewhat ambivalently, 'the future's orange' (ibid.).

## Concluding Comments

The fourteen portraits in *Who Are You?* are an attempt to understand what we mean by the term identity. The exhibition posed a question to the official narrative of the nation's history as told through its portraits of the great and the good. Who are these people? Who gets to decide what it means to be British today? Perry substitutes these icons of British history with a parade of troubled citizens with complex stories and complex issues to discuss. What emerges from these portraits is an idea of identity or rather selfhood that is not singular but is made up of multiple and often contradictory self-conceptions rather than anything solid and immutable. For Perry, each portrait is an attempt to represent through visual means the '...never ending negotiation between the identities we inhabit and those we choose' (Perry, 2014).

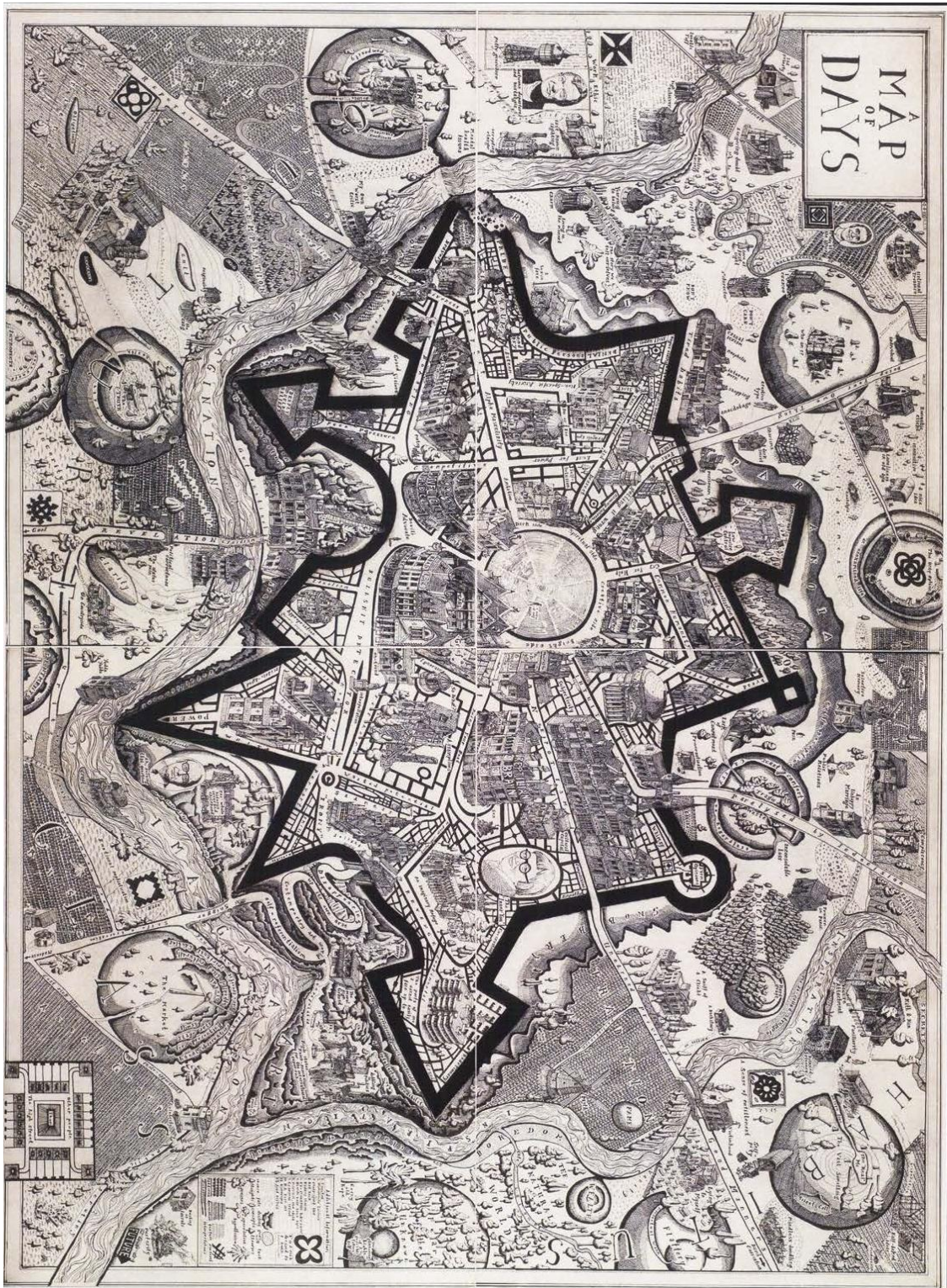
Perry's work is often criticised for being too self-referential, 'autobiography in glazed and fired clay' was the verdict of one critic (Frost, 2015). This criticism seems to imply that when viewed outside of his own personal narrative or viewpoint there is very little left to appreciate, ...'no magical transformation of the material' according to critic Jonathon Jones (Jones, 2015). Perry's own life experiences inform his work, his approach to his subject matter and his audience. One could argue that in *Who Are You?* the artist has moved beyond the autobiographical (with the exception of his own self-portrait) and chosen a topic that has a universal relevance.

I have situated my discussion of the art works within the context of the TV series partly because I think they offer a unique insight into Perry's creative process but also because I think that such narrative framings do not detract from an appreciation of the objects themselves. The personal stories they narrate simply provide another point

of access. This insistence on the democratization of art is important to Perry's politics of class. This is the hub of the matter. What really angers the critics about Perry is that he is determined to remove '...the mystery that should exist between artist and audience' and this is seen as a great 'loss to art' (West, 2015). In *Who Are You?* Perry has taken the lives of ordinary citizens and given their experiences meaning by transforming them into art. In other words, he *represents* ordinary citizens to themselves as 'participants in power' (Ross, 1989, p: 61).



**Figure 34.** Grayson Perry *A Map of Days*, 2013



Courtesy the Artist, Paragon Press and Victoria Miro, London © Grayson Perry



**Figure 35.** Grayson Perry, (2014) *The Huhne Vase*



(Courtesy the Artist, Paragon Press and Victoria Miro, London)







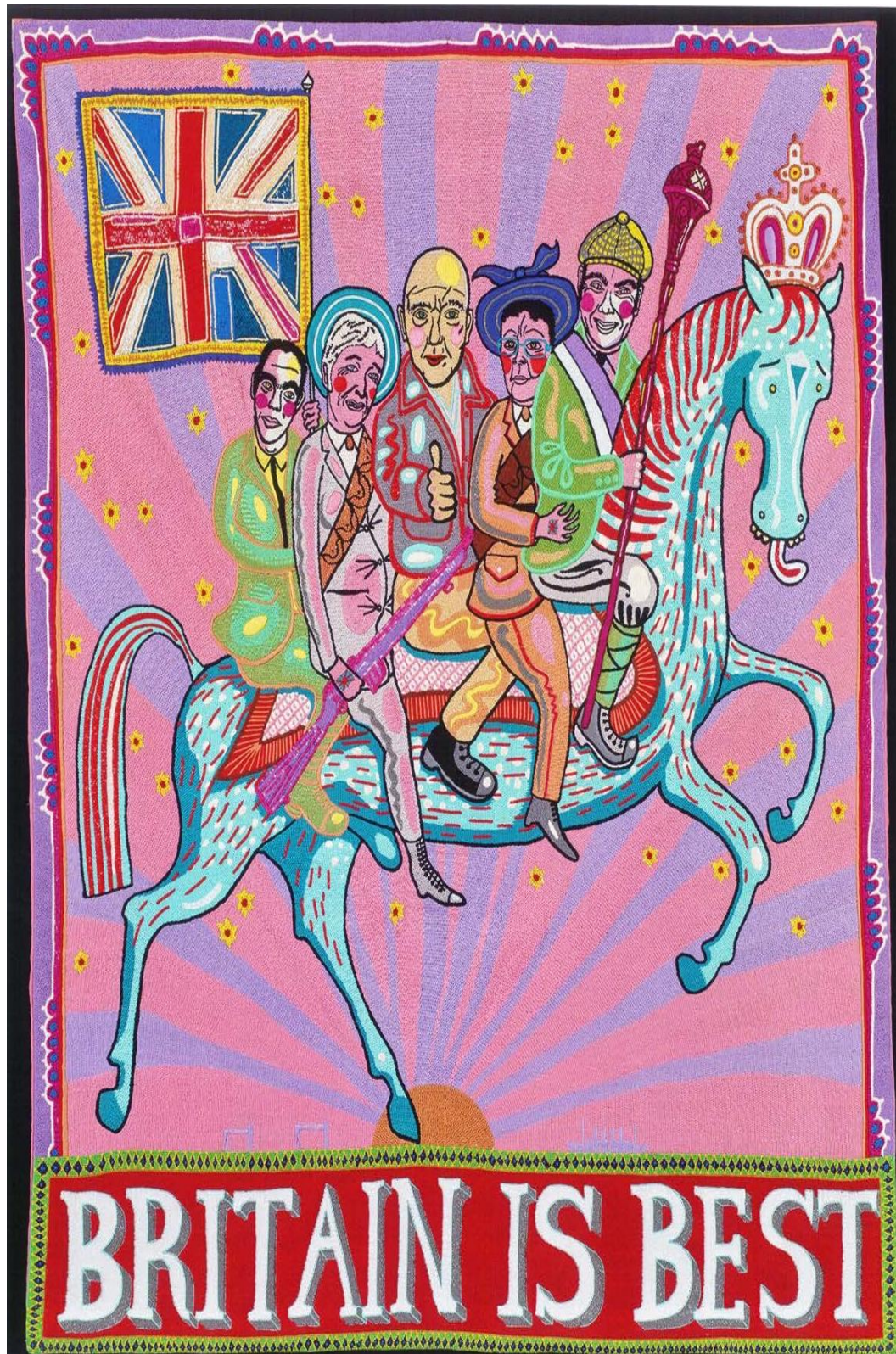
**Figure 37.** Grayson Perry, (2014). *Modern Family*



(Courtesy the Artist, Paragon Press and Victoria Miro, London)



**Figure 38.** Grayson Perry, 2014. *Britain is Best*



(Courtesy the Artist, Paragon Press and Victoria Miro, London)

## Conclusion

This thesis has explored Grayson Perry's treatment of class and it has shown how his concern with class differences permeates all aspects of his work. I have argued that his work reflects the eye of an ethnographer in charting the differences between the classes, the nature of social mobility and the changes from class relations based on occupation and production to those based on power and consumption. Perry gives us a conception of class in which class is understood as a set of objective material structures and as an aspect of lived subjectivity and identity with affective content. I have shown that in his later work he explores other aspects of identity but always shows them as interwoven with class. I have also upheld the claim that a radical politics is contained in Perry's work, namely, his determination to democratize art by making work that is accessible to a broad audience. Another aspect that gives Perry's work its radical and political edge is his determination not to objectify the working classes but to make them the subjects of history by bringing them into the centre of the art world. His work is an *intervention* in the sense that it challenges the purportedly 'objective' canons of aesthetic taste by engaging with popular culture and by reflecting everyday life and everyday concerns. However, this determination to make work that intervenes in the social does not detract from the making of beautiful objects, which remains a central feature of his art making practice.

Part One (Chapters 1 - 3) discussed the different conceptions of class that are used in contemporary theorising to provide a background to my discussion of the role of class in the work of Grayson Perry. Part Two (Chapters 4 - 8) focused on Perry's work. In Chapter One the aim was to explain how the predominance of poststructuralist

theorizing had led to ‘the discursive eclipse of class’ (Coole, 1996, p: 21). Coole’s central argument was that the shift towards a ‘more cultural focus’ had encouraged the view that class was simply a matter of lifestyle and identity diversities rather than an objectively verifiable ‘structured economic inequality’ (1996, p: 17). This is a claim I have accepted in this thesis. I have argued that Perry’s work allows us to see how culture and class are interwoven as an objective category and how class is lived subjectively.

Chapter One also discussed Stuart Hall’s revised account of Marxist ideology which is of particular relevance here because it draws attention to the importance of images. Hall’s central argument is that material (economic) interests are not the determining factor in shaping the beliefs and behaviours informing an individual’s sense of self-identity. If we want to understand the ‘apparent contradiction between what people say and how they actually vote’ (1987, p: 31) then we need to acknowledge the importance of *images* in shaping how people feel about class. Not just images understood in a visual sense but the shapes or forms, which ‘capture people’s imaginations’ (ibid.). For this reason, ‘images are *not* trivial things’ because ‘Electoral politics – in fact, every kind of politics – depends on political identities and identifications’ (ibid. p: 33). This is a claim I have supported in this thesis. Crucially Hall recognizes that images shape our behaviours, beliefs and sense of identity because they carry *affect*. I have argued that Perry offers us a conception of class as both a structured/economic position and as an aspect of lived subjectivity laden with affect.

Chapter Two discussed the evolution of our ideas about class and the models of class that have informed how British society has been understood over the last three hundred years: class as hierarchy, class as an adversarial dichotomy and class as a triadic model with upper, middle and lower groups (Cannadine, 1998, p: 19-20). These

models, which may or may not be explicitly articulated, provide the ‘collective social categories’ through which we understand our social identities and they govern how we respond to the social order (ibid. p: 169). As the historian points out, class is not just a matter of language, perception and psychology, class is *real* in the sense that our economic position affects every area of our lives and determines our life chances. This is a claim I have supported in this thesis.

Chapter Two also discusses the seven-tier model proposed by Savage based on the results of the Great British Class Survey (2013) which represents the latest attempt to map the social order and to look at how our famous obsession with class has evolved during the twentieth century. The seven-tier model places individuals on a hierarchical scale according to their accumulated economic, social and cultural capital. Having produced this model, Savage admits that people ‘do not easily place themselves on a simple ladder’ (ibid. p: 64.). The model shows how structured economic inequalities are a central feature of class but, as Savage acknowledges, they are not enough to define it. Here Bourdieu’s argument reminds us that class is not just an objective position but is:

.... progressively inscribed in people’s minds’ through ‘cultural products’ including systems of education, language, judgements, values, methods of classification and the activities of everyday life’ (1986, p: 471).

What this sociological model fails to show is the symbolic dimension of class: the complex, internally divided and contradictory identifications and dis-identifications, which determine class antagonisms and class affiliations. In 2016, economic inequalities have worsened and the visible markers of class difference are an integral part of our everyday lives. As Savage points out, our high streets are replete with ‘the social-class coding of different kinds of shops’ (Savage, 2015, p: 403). Whether we



shop at ‘Waitrose, Aldi, corner shops, delicatessens – all carry with them a social as well as a practical meaning’ (ibid.). These classifications not only point to the increasing uncertainty over how to determine class boundaries they are also a manifestation of ‘the kind of snobbery which proliferates in a market-based consumer society such as ours, where our display of taste is both paramount and mundane’ (ibid. p: 45). I have argued that by focusing on taste, the ‘narcissism of small differences’ (Perry, 2013, p: 12) Perry’s work brings to light these shared imaginaries of class and reveals the emotional structures underlying this new classificatory politics identified by Savage. Perry’s work is political because he refuses to endorse an aesthetic hierarchy of taste (which is also a class hierarchy and a moral hierarchy). By challenging the idea that taste, morality and social worth are connected, Perry’s work brings into clearer focus, ‘those groups whose privileges may be called into question’ (Savage, 2015, p: 403).

Against the charge that Perry’s work stereotypes the classes by relying on the two and three-tier models, I have argued that, as Cannadine (1998) points out, these models have exerted an enduring hold on the popular imaginary for the last three hundred years. Although Savage has produced a much more differentiated model of class he admits that the ‘cultural legacy’ of the divisions between middle and working class still persists (2015, p: 392). My claim is that Perry’s decision to use the three tier-model of class in the *Vanity of Small Differences* can be justified on grounds that the three chosen locations (Sunderland, Tunbridge Wells and the Cotswolds) are strongly associated with the three different classes both *literally* and symbolically. The tapestries reveal how these ‘cultural’ legacies of class intertwine with the economic and social legacies of class, by weaving these differences into the very fabric of the tapestries using both text and imagery.

The rise of meritocratic politics and its effects on how people perceive class and social mobility is another issue discussed in Chapter Two. Politicians of all parties have encouraged the belief that birth does not determine destiny and that social mobility (an improvement in economic and social status) is possible through sheer hard work and determination fuelled by *aspiration*. I have argued that social mobility and aspiration operate as a form of ‘symbolic violence’ because they provide a smokescreen, which obscures the fact that class (understood as both a structural position and a subject position) remains a determining feature in people’s lives. And I have argued that this is the position we can find in Perry, most notably in *The Vanity of Small Differences* (where he engages directly with the difficulties and costs of class mobility) but also in *Unpopular Culture* and in some of his pots.

Chapter Three focused on class and taste with specific reference to Bourdieu’s work *Distinction: A Social Critique of the judgement of taste* (1986). Bourdieu uses the concept of *habitus* to explain the relationship between class and taste. I have argued that we can find a parallel with Bourdieu in Perry’s claim that ‘...one’s social class determines one’s taste’ (2013, p: 9). Bourdieu’s thesis draws attention to the way in which the exercise of taste (both in art and in the realm of everyday life) functions to reinforce and legitimate existing social divisions. Economic capital is passed on directly, but cultural capital is passed on indirectly; herein lies the root of what Bourdieu calls its symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1986). Perry recognizes the symbolic power of cultural capital (usually inherited through class privilege and educational qualifications) and he is keen to break the hold it exerts over us. I have argued that it is precisely this struggle over the definition of legitimate culture that is manifest in *The Vanity of Small Differences*. Like Bourdieu, Perry recognizes the seductions of what we might call high art whilst at the same he is aware of the cultural power vested in the



institutions of visual art. I have argued that in *Unpopular Culture* and in his *Reith Lectures*, Perry reveals how art functions as acculturation.

Chapter Four provided biographical details of Perry's early life and it explained how his childhood experiences have provided a constant source of inspiration for his work. This chapter also included a section on his cross-dressing and a discussion of his pots. Klein has suggested that Perry's experiences have allowed him to remain outside the confines of class and made him 'semi-classless'. I have agreed with this claim in the sense that Perry has undoubtedly travelled a long way from his class of origin. His own journey of social mobility has equipped him with the cultural capital to move comfortably between the classes but I have argued that his class origins have stayed with him and continue to inform his work. Klein also suggests that in the art world 'the typical signifiers of class 'money, wealth and property ownership' are less significant than 'the currency of ideas and personal expression' but I have argued that traditional class divisions are important in the art world. Perry's success as an artist has placed him beyond the material constraints of class but his art reveals how the emotional memories and habits of working class thought linger on. The class disputes at home alerted the young Perry to a two-tier world divided in terms of 'them' and 'us' (Klein, 2013, p: 65). I have suggested that these internalized oppositional dynamics of class are evident in his pots, particularly his triptych entitled '*them and us*' (2001) but also in *taste and democracy* (2004), '*good and bad taste*' (2007), '*barbaric splendour*' (2003), and '*the tragedy of ordinary life*' (1996).

The creative impetus behind Perry's art derives from his determination to make his own class background the primary source of inspiration. He is always alert to the material differences between the classes but he does not fall into the trap of romanticising or reifying working class identities. '*them and us*' (2001) rejects 'the idea

that the working classes are somehow more authentic because they live in ‘the ‘real’ world’ whereas ‘rich people live in a kind of fantasy’ (Perry in Klein, 2013, p: 72). These pots depict three very different social worlds to illustrate his claim, ‘No they don’t – they just live in a much nicer real world’ (2013, p: 72). These issues are explored in *The Vanity of Small Differences*.

Nostalgia is a recurring theme that runs through many of the works discussed in this thesis. Perry is aware that his childhood ‘memories’ are in fact a series of idealizations based on ‘a pseudo-1950s dream world’ (Jones and Perry, 2007, p: 39). He does not fall into the trap of romanticizing his past and the theme of nostalgia versus modernity becomes an important one. This distinction is crucial because in Perry’s mind it marked the difference between two worlds and two important male figures. His real father whom he associates with a vision of ‘quaint old fifties England, pre-consumerism, pre mass ownership of cars’ (ibid. p: 42) and his step-father whom he associates with ‘bleak flats and the tinny modernity of that time’ (ibid. p: 42-43).

Perry explores the tension between nostalgia and modernity in relation to national identity in *Unpopular Culture*. These biographical details provide insight into Perry’s main sources of inspiration but my aim is show how his works engage with and illuminate wider social and political concerns. The distinction between nostalgia and modernity is also significant because it marks a shift in attitudes towards class identity. By the late 1960s class was no longer about who you were (an identity rooted in industrial occupation and community) but about who you wanted to be. Harvey (1990) has drawn attention to the role played by advertising images and media technologies, which promoted the desire for aspiration and the self-fashioning of an individualized identity expressed through consumer purchases. But, as Perry makes clear in *Unpopular Culture*, not everyone was part of the pop cultural revolution that was the

‘swinging Sixties’ (Perry, 2008, p: 9). His pot ‘*what things say about us*’ (2002) is a somewhat ironic comment on materialism and the desire for individuality expressed through mass consumer goods. I have shown how this anti-consumerist strand is also an aspect of *The Vanity of Small Differences*.

Chapter Four includes a discussion of Perry’s cross-dressing. For Klein, Perry’s cross-dressing is ‘unnervingly authentic’ because he is ‘compelled’ to act out these fantasies in public. Perry is clear that his cross-dressing is about his sexual obsessions rather than his art. I have argued that his transvestism also provides him with a means to explore issues around identity. Claire appears in different guises, which offer us class identity as well as gender identity as a matter of performance. This is an identity reproduced by our everyday making of ourselves in terms of our imagined or desired identity. I have suggested that this performative aspect plays a key role in Perry’s cross-dressing because, as Jones pointed out, the artist has an uncanny ability to *morph* into the clothes he is wearing (2007, p: 3). I have argued that authenticity here does not only mean satisfying some inner psychological need. Claire’s character is ‘unnervingly authentic’ not only because the visual details are so accurate but also because of Perry’s insight into the emotional contours of the situation. Perry is clear that the wearing of certain clothes can produce a particular emotional response in himself and his putative audience. The clothes she is wearing place Claire objectively in terms of class position but it is Perry’s ability to morph or *inhabit* the costumes he is wearing that gives us an insight into the class sensibility that is being portrayed here: a sense of knowing one’s place.

Chapter Five discussed *Unpopular Culture*, which Perry described as a show about ‘the intangible visual language of Englishness’ (Perry cited in Klein, p: 169). I have suggested that the influence of Walter Benjamin’s thought is important here.

Benjamin reminds us that art provides us with our working models of what the world is because artists make visible the ideas, myths, metaphors and beliefs that have shaped the social order. Benjamin also draws our attention to the question of just who or what is being represented here? Are these images giving representation to the nation as a whole? Who is represented and who is excluded? Benjamin rejected the idea of culture as a separate realm of values and his aim was to link art to the capitalist conditions of its production and reception (Benjamin, 1999). I have argued that we can find this same impetus at work in Perry's approach to curating *Unpopular Culture*.

In relation to some of the images on show in *Unpopular Culture*, Perry expressed concern over whether his continuing fascination with working class lives was 'tempered by a feeling of voyeurism' (2008, p: 9). The question of whether or not an image is voyeuristic draws attention to the asymmetrical relations of power that might be in play during the production and reception of works of art. *Unpopular Culture* addressed this issue by reminding us that historically, the working classes were viewed as anthropological curiosities to be scrutinized and classified. Perry draws our attention to the obvious class symbolism inherent in the opposition between high art and mass art by viewing all of the art on display in *Unpopular Culture* as a form of social comment. I have suggested that by pairing documentary photographic images with Modernist works of art Perry is challenging the idea of art as acculturation and presenting us with a different version of historical truth.

When Grayson Perry won the Turner Prize in 2003, 'the judge's verdict was anything but a foregone conclusion: it took hours longer than usual to reach a decision' but when they did 'the medium for the message was Grayson Perry's troublingly beautiful pots' (Kennedy, 2003). The comments on the visitor's wall in the gallery confirmed Perry's popularity "great, great, great pots" said one (Kennedy 2003).

Perry's skill as a ceramicist combined with an 'uncompromising engagement with personal and social concerns' (Kennedy 2003) won the day. Since winning the Turner Prize Perry's 'social and personal concerns' have taken him into the world of television and to date there have been three Channel Four TV series. Perry's television appearances have certainly broadened his audience reach, but does widespread appeal necessarily result in poor quality art, a dumbing down? Jonathan Jones (who seems to be Perry's most virulent critic) appears to think so. 'Real art has mystery and otherness. It cannot be put into words' (Jones, 2015). Perry 'makes slogans. He can and does explain everything he is doing. It is all a "statement"' (Jones, 2015).

According to Jones Perry produces 'art for those who need to be told what they are looking at' (Jones, 2015). Having established his own position as a member of the 'acculturated minority' (Redfield, 2003, p: 12) but anxious to avoid any accusations of elitism Jones adds quickly 'No that's not fair. People are so busy these days. Art is not a big part of peoples' lives' (Jones, 2015). Perry's work is not didactic and his aim is not to tell people what they are looking at but rather to encourage them to look for themselves. He is unapologetic about his intention to make work that is accessible to a wide audience and not 'off-putting because of its aesthetic' (Perry, 2016). His real skill lies in his ability to transmute the experience of his sitters into a unique visual idiom that 'they understand' and is 'readily comprehensible' (Moorhouse cited in Brown, 2015).

In Chapters Seven and Eight I chose to frame my discussions of Perry's work within the context of the accompanying television programmes. I think the works can stand alone, but I have also argued that the context of their production and reception is important. My view is that the programmes were an opportunity to watch Perry's creative process at work. This narrative framing does not detract from the objects

(which can be appreciated for their aesthetic qualities as ‘troublingly beautiful’) but simply provides another point of access. It is precisely this democratization of art through an insistence on accessibility, which is central to Perry’s politics of class. Perry’s own journey of social mobility has taken him away from his class roots into a world that is much nicer but no less real or less authentic than the one he left behind. Nevertheless, I have argued that his sensitivity to the nuances of class differences and his awareness of how class inequalities shape and constrain the lives of his subjects is constantly informing his work. During the research for his three television programmes, he took on the role of artist-ethnographer, not out of prurient curiosity, but as a way of getting to know and understand the lives and concerns of his sitters. His overriding aim is not to objectify his subjects but to make work that is accountable to their lived experience.

Chapter Seven presented a detailed discussion of the tapestries. In their use of satire and caricature, the tapestries are aesthetically shaped and playful but at the same time, they are a form of social observation. Perry is not just making a selective interpretation of his subject matter but rather the tapestries are accountable to an external reality. One empirical test of their ‘authenticity’ or truthfulness is the extent to which these works provoked a shock of familiarity in their subjects. Here we are reminded of Hogarth ‘the lodestone of British art’ (Perry, 2013, p: 13) in whose work, ‘nothing was without meaning, but all either conspires to the great end or forms an addition to the lively drama of human manners’ (Trusler, 2008, p: 19). The visual detail in Perry’s work is unnervingly accurate. Following Hogarth, every object acquires added significance precisely because of the supposed link between taste, social character and morality. In depicting the ‘commonplace drama of social mobility’ which is ‘not as common as it should be’ (Perry, 2103, p: 11) the artist is telling us what class

means today: what class looks like, how people perform class and how class is subjectively experienced. Here we might see a parallel with Perry's hero Hogarth, who was able to capture in paint 'the manner and follies of an age, living as they rise' (Trusler, 2008, p: 18).

In support of Perry's contention that 'the class system still thrives' (ibid. p: 13) the concept of class that emerges here is not based on a fixed homogeneous category but one constantly in a state of flux, internally divided and conflicted. The tapestries show us how class as culture is continually being made and unmade in the cultural struggle over meaning (Moore 2013). Class emerges as site of anxiety, especially acute in the middle classes and as a site of pleasure. Whilst expanded consumer choice brings with it the increased tyranny of taste decisions, people also derive a sense of pride and satisfaction from their class position.

On Perry's account, class is not a fixed category nor is it simply an endless play of difference (a cultural struggle over meaning) in the poststructuralist or linguistic sense. Social mobility (it would be more accurate to say, the desire for social mobility) continually disrupts the basis of class allegiances, which in turn, has resulted in a complexity and fragmentation of the collective subject. Economic exploitation remains a key objective feature of class, but it has been masked by the ideology of meritocracy. Perry links class as culture with class as an objective economic category by revealing how the aesthetic functions as a form of class power. A hierarchy of taste (the power to impose strictures on how to behave and how to react) is intricately interwoven with mass consumerism and the relations of economic power and exploitation which that process carries. Here, Gilbert's claim reminds us that aesthetic conflicts are also political conflicts which ultimately determine who has 'the power to impose the dominant definition of reality' (2010, p: 146-147).

Chapter Eight discussed Perry's exhibition *Who Are You?* In this instance, class was not the focus of attention but my aim was to show how class remained intertwined with other aspects of identity. The class tensions surfaced in the exchanges between Perry and disgraced politician Chris Huhne. Perry used the *Huhne Vase* (2014) to highlight how Huhne's membership of an elite class had shaped his behaviour and protected him from the consequences of his actions. *The Ashford Hijab* (2014) focused on the way religion shapes identity, but here the subject was a white, working class, single parent mother who had swapped a highly stigmatized identity for a highly conformist one. In *Modern Family* (2014) the focus was on the intertwining of gender and 'race' but the idea of 'family' that was informing how Jack and John saw themselves was highly idealized and very stereotypically middle class. My claim was that *Modern Family* (2014) highlighted the Conservative ideology behind our modern day obsession with parenting: 'the idea that a person's life chances are determined by behavioural factors rather than economic background' (Jones, 2011, p: 77). In the popular imaginary, the respectable, middle class family finds its opposite in the dysfunctional family, most frequently characterized as 'hordes of state-subsidized barbarians just outside the gates' (ibid. p: 78). In *Britain is Best* (2014) the artist recognized that class identity and class deprivation were entwined with nationalism and religion in this potent expression of identity that was 'More British than the British' (Perry 2014).

Perry is unapologetic about his desire to attract a wide audience by making his work accessible. Here, Ross's comments remind us of the connection between culture and power. I have argued that in *Who Are You?* Perry has taken the lives of ordinary citizens and given their experiences meaning by transforming them into art. In other words, he has *represented* ordinary citizens to themselves as 'participants in power'



(Ross, 1989, p: 61). Suzanne Moore contends that Perry's work raises the question: 'Is there a place where taste is about hope and morality and life itself, somehow not just a mirroring of market values?' (Moore in Perry, 2013, p: 22). In this thesis, I have argued that Perry's work itself provides an answer to this question. The ability to begin a public dialogue about class and to make class a central topic of your art making practice is no mean feat for a contemporary artist. In a recent article for an edition of the New Statesman that he guest-edited, Perry claimed that his working class background gave him 'cultural distance from the towers of power' adding that 'I have space to turn around and get a fairly good look at the edifice' (Perry, 2014, p: 25). As the tapestries demonstrate, there is a playful quality to Perry's work but this does not detract from its seriousness or its political accountability. In a world where everyone is trying to distinguish themselves, one of the most crucial issues for an artist is whether their work is judged as 'serious' because seriousness is 'the most valued currency in the art world' (Perry, 2014, p: 31). When Perry won the Turner Prize he was asked 'Grayson, are you a lovable character or are you a serious artist?' Perry replied with the question 'Can't I be both?' (Perry, 2014, p: 31). By way of contrast to the coolly intellectual and abstract nature of much contemporary art, Perry's art does not aim at unreadability but rather 'It sneaks up on people and seduces them' (*Reith Lectures 2013: Playing to the Gallery*).

Perry acknowledges that today it is very difficult for an artist to be shocking or rebellious because capitalism has this amazing power to absorb everything and to create new markets. The artist notes that 'one of the big dominant, squatting toad-like things over the whole art world is commercialism' (*Reith Lectures 2013: Nice Rebellion: Welcome In*). Perry contends that there is no longer a role for the artist as 'the creative rebel' because creativity and invention simply play into the hands of capitalism: 'the lifeblood of capitalism is new ideas' and 'they need new stuff to sell' (ibid.). Perry

quotes Marx's comment about the 'need for progress' underlying 'The restless nature of capitalism' (2014, p: 87) which means that 'contemporary art is like an R & D department for capitalism' (ibid.). Art previously considered subversive or outrageous has now become a merchandizing opportunity. This situation becomes a problem for artists because 'outrage has become domesticated' with the result that artists have entered a state that New York performance artist Keith Haring referred to as 'subversive compliance' (ibid. p: 92). Perry observes that the art world has become virtually shock-proof so that 'detached irony – this is a sad moment – has become the default mode of our time in the art world' (ibid.). He suggests that adopting an ironic mode can be 'problematic' for an artist. The following quotation from singer Tracey Thorn of Everything but the Girl fame sums up the situation for Perry. Thorn observes:

It's really difficult for people in the arts to be entirely sincere about things without looking like they have not thought about it properly. The problem with irony is that it assumes the position of being the end result, from having looked at the problem from both sides and having a very sophisticated take on everything. If you eschew irony you do look as though you've not thought hard enough about things and that you're being simplistic. It's a double bind you get yourself in when you know everything is ironic... (Thorn in Perry, 2014, p: 94).

Along with Bourdieu, Perry is aware that 'Culture is a game which, like all social stakes, simultaneously presupposes and demands that one takes part in the game and be taken in by it' (Bourdieu, 1986, p: 250). Perry is adept at playing the game but he is not taken in by it. He knows that 'the value of culture, the supreme fetish' derives not from some 'absolute value' but rather is an illusion that is produced and maintained by the oppositional relations of the game – the distinction between high culture and low culture, 'the authentic' and 'the imitation', the barbarous and the civilised and so forth (ibid.). Indeed, the very nature of Perry's art and aesthetic lies in his ability to play

around with these oppositional distinctions in his work and the tensions or ‘double bind’ they create serves to fuel his creativity.

Perry is also aware of the pernicious effects of ironic detachment on his creativity and he acknowledges that the art world ‘atmosphere’ can be ‘corrosive’ (Perry, 2014, p: 129). Unable to resist a jokey aside he adds that ‘Perhaps the most shocking thing left to artists these days is sincerity. And the shocks in the work are not formal but political or social’ (ibid. p: 94). Making work that is ‘political’ lends the work an air of seriousness because politics deals with ‘real’ issues (ibid.). Perry contends that ‘this idea of being real – of having integrity, sincerity, authenticity – these are the qualities that all artists need to make their work; and they should protect them’ (2014, p: 96). He also acknowledges that ‘these qualities are also very valuable in the marketplace’ (ibid.) but art has to be about more than making a profit. Perry refuses to succumb to the ‘Midas touch’, the dangerous temptation to ‘churn’ out work because it is worth ‘whatever-anybody-will-pay-for-it’ (ibid. p: 126). Art might well be a ‘serious business’ (2014, p: 129) but the creativity on which it relies has a much deeper value. He adds:

I protect my ball of creative energy. I protect it with a shield made of jaded irony, a helmet of mischief and a breast plate of facetiousness. And I wield my carefully crafted blade of cynicism’ (Perry, 2014, p: 129).

Perry remains connected to the physical realities of making his work, claiming: ‘It’s a very noble thing to be an artist. You’re a pilgrim on the road to meaning’ (*Reith Lectures 2013: Nice Rebellion: Welcome In*). By choosing to work alone and by refusing to bow to market trends and mass produce his art, Perry can retain the qualities of ‘being sincere, real, having integrity and authenticity’ in his work. I have argued that this is what his engagement with class seems to display. I have also argued that there is

an authenticity to Perry's work because he does not deny his working class roots but acknowledges, without pretence or shame, how his class background is constantly informing the present.

Moore concludes that for the time being at least, 'the democracy of taste' that is depicted in *The Vanity of Small Differences* 'remains a thought experiment' and that classlessness remains a dream (2013, p: 22). However, what the tapestries really reveal is not that 'classlessness remains a dream' but rather that the term classlessness has been redefined to mean everyone should become middle class or at least should share that aspiration. Savage suggests that, within 'this new politics of class' the success of political parties, rests on 'how they offer strategies for accumulating different sorts of capital' (2015, p: 396). But in the absence of any real meritocracy, the current intersection of cultural capital with 'other kinds of advantages' produces 'a world of virtuous and vicious circles – though distinguishing whether these are virtuous or vicious depends on where you stand. This is the stuff out of which classes are built' (ibid. p: 166). Perry is very clear about where he stands. To return to Moore's question about whether there is a space that is not '...just mirroring market values' (2013, p: 22). I would argue that Perry's art provides one such space.

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## **Afterword**

A conversation I had with a fellow student back in 2001 keeps coming into my mind. We were discussing the how we might approach choosing a topic for our forthcoming dissertations. ‘Well, whatever you choose you will end up writing about your own experience’ she said. As I had always gone to great lengths to separate my academic work from my life experience I was sceptical, but with the benefit of hindsight I can see that she was right. When I think about the course my academic career has taken it makes little sense to see it in terms of a journey of class mobility so I prefer to think of it as an intellectual journey which began with an ACCESS course in 1991-1992. Although I did not recognize its significance at the time, the whole issue of access was going to become a central theme in my academic work. The term access has two meanings: as a noun it refers to ‘the means or opportunity to approach or enter a place’ (Dictionary.com, 2016). In its literary sense, it is ‘an attack or outburst of emotion’ (ibid.).

The aptly named ACCESS courses were a means to higher education for people who had left school without A Levels. They opened up opportunities to those individuals (including myself) who in all probability would not otherwise have considered going to a university, not least because such places were remote and not for the likes of us. Having obtained this initial passport to entry, in 1997 I applied for an undergraduate degree in Art History Studies. I can remember vividly what it felt like to enter the art school for the first time: it felt like coming home. I can remember vividly what it felt like to stand before a class of students and deliver a paper: it felt like a revelation. So this is what I can do! This is what I am good at! I was already thirty-seven years old at that time. Another factor that made those undergraduate years special

was that the culture within the art school allowed for differences. There were other women like me, who were also single parents and who came from similar backgrounds. I think we shared a sense of awe over the fact that we could spend all day looking at and writing about art – what joy!

1997 was an exciting time to be studying art history. The election of New Labour marked an end to eighteen years of Tory rule: the “Cool Britannia” phenomenon (McGuire, 2009) was underway. Britain had lost her empire but the economic boom that was fuelling the worlds of finance, fashion, art and design, music and theatre was turning London into the ‘coolest city on the planet’ (McGuire, 2009). The general mood was one of optimism. As McGuire points out with reference to Tony Blair:

The electorate, especially perhaps those middle Englanders who voted Labour for the first time, saw him as their skywalker, the man who would lead post-imperial Britain, post-Thatcher Britain, into the uncharted twenty-first century. It was, all in all, a good time (McGuire, 2009).

I could not believe my luck. I had finally escaped from Hull, I had taken the first steps on a career path, I was in a city that already felt like home, I was studying a subject that I loved and I could visit art galleries whenever I chose. My own mood was in keeping with this new spirit of optimism, this was definitely ‘a good time’. ‘New Labour, New Britain, as the Labour party slogan said. Onward and upward’ (McGuire, 2009). As part of this new inclusive politics, the Government decided to make access to museums and galleries free and this move played a key role in the popularization of contemporary art. This phenomenon has to date, shown little sign of slowing down. In this heady climate, it was hardly surprising that I chose the topic of public accessibility to contemporary art museums for my undergraduate dissertation. The project was primarily concerned with the cultural, social and political issues within which the popular experience of the arts

was framed (particularly the high/low distinction) and which were focused by the term 'access'.

This was Tony Blair's Britain and the idea of 'class warfare' was a distant memory having been 'replaced by talk of "community", which sounded good, even if no-one could figure out what it meant' (McGuire, 2009). The question of class differences was not uppermost in my mind at that time, not least because I did feel part of one big "community". The people I encountered in art school were from backgrounds that were similar to my own, so I was quite at ease socially and I was doing well academically. During my undergraduate years I was not encountering anything which might be labelled a class barrier, so the question of class differences was perhaps less acute than it might otherwise have been. That was about to change.

I graduated with a First Class degree in 2000, which provided me with another means of access. To celebrate my achievement I attended the opening of Tate Modern in London. The issue of public accessibility to museums and galleries was the topic of debate and the future still seemed to hold out possibilities. In 2001 I was fortunate enough to secure AHRC funding for an MA in Cultural Studies at a Russell Group University. As far as university rankings are concerned, this institution represented quite a step up the social mobility ladder although this was not the reason behind my decision. The rationale for my choice was the fact that a course in Cultural Studies would enable me to follow up many of the issues I had found so fascinating in my undergraduate studies. Another factor was location. I had returned very reluctantly to Hull after finishing my undergraduate degree, as I had nowhere to live, and no means of support financial or otherwise, in my university town. My son was only seven years old at the time so I had to choose an institution within commuting distance. Geographically and financially, I was back where I started, which partly explains my reluctance to

describe my journey as one of social/class mobility in terms of a trajectory from there to here.

Having secured my ticket of entry to a higher ranked institution, I was immediately aware that I had entered a social and academic environment that was very different from the previous one. This was the first time I had encountered students who had been privately educated and who exuded the kind of self-confidence that comes with class privilege and the sense that one has nothing to prove. I got on well with the other students but whenever there were discussions about our social backgrounds, it was very evident that they were pretty much without exception middle-class. Within this social context, I would rather have died than mention the fact that I grew up on a council estate. Over the years, I have become adept at disguising my Hull accent (only lapsing into the distinctive flattened vowel sounds from choice or inadvertently when under extreme stress!). I should acknowledge that there was never any hint of snobbery from my fellow students but I could not rid myself of the suspicion that I was the token single parent from a council estate in Hull: thereby attributing to myself three stigmatized identities in one.

As the above description of my internalized class shame reveals, the barriers to access are both physical and psychological. Despite having obtained an AHRC grant, I was in agonies of self-doubt about whether I would be able to live up to the expected academic standard. I now recognize these insecurities as 'the wall in my head' (Hanley, 2016, p: x). Hanley uses this phrase to explain how her past experiences of growing up on a council estate 'as a child and adolescent' have remained with her 'partly in the form of a strange kind of vertigo when presented with opportunities I'd grown up assuming were far beyond my reach' (2016, p: x). The other factors in play had more to do with educational capital and less to do with self-image. None of the students on this

course had come from an art school background. Three of the students had completed their undergraduate degrees in this institution and then taken the decision to stay on for the MA. They were obviously culturally *at home* in this environment. During the ensuing seminar discussions and in my exchanges with the course tutors I realized that the other students were in possession of certain forms of ‘legitimate’ knowledge that I did not possess at that time. I used Bourdieu in my undergraduate dissertation but was soon to discover that sociological theories had no place here as they carried the vulgar taint of empiricism. This was my introduction to High Theory. The reading list included Ferdinand de Saussure, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, Roland Barthes, Jean Francois Lyotard, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari amongst others. I had encountered many postmodern theories during my undergraduate degree but the higher reaches of poststructuralist abstraction were uncharted territory.

I enjoyed reading these texts. I was interested in the topic of identity politics and questions of representation, added to which these theories had a patina of glamour: the allure of European sophistication. I can’t deny that I found them exciting, not least because the subject matter was purportedly ‘a *language* for the disillusioned’ (Arshi, 1996, p: 39). This language of liberation included terms such as ‘Desire, the metaphysics of difference, hybridity, and Otherness’ (ibid.). These signifiers represent the alternative subject positions of those marginalized by so-called hegemonic or dominant discourses. However as I was carried aloft on tidal wave of utopian abstraction I experienced another kind of vertigo: a dizzying sense of dis-location. After a few months, I began to realize that none of these theories seemed to include the idea of the economy as a ‘mode of production’ (ibid. p: 40). As critics have pointed out, these theories were primarily concerned with the production of language, notably with ‘escaping the prison house of language’ (ibid. p: 37). Attention had seemingly shifted

away from ‘escaping the prison house’ of low paid/exploitative labour, which in effect, meant that economic inequalities were not represented.

For me, the idea of class is linked with economic inequalities. Whilst my own experiences were constantly reaffirming my deeply held (but hidden at the risk of being judged naive) conviction that class was an objectively existing social and political reality, I could not find the linguistic resources to express these concerns. Also, coming from a background in art history this highly abstract vocabulary simply failed to capture my imagination. These concepts are (perhaps intentionally) so abstract that they are impossible to visualize. There was another reason for my sense of unease. These thinkers are motivated by the desire for a radically egalitarian politics, yet at the same time, their theoretical insights are functioning as languages of exclusion. As a result, this ‘*language for the disillusioned*’ (ibid. p: 39) is impossible to share except amongst those who have acquired the linguistic competence to understand it. This point brings me to another factor that is crucial in terms of my own intellectual development. As Arshi points out, what really characterizes this approach to cultural theory is ‘the Derridean interdict against the possibility of retrieving original sources’ (ibid. p: 40). Having written an MA thesis on Derrida’s reading of Marx, the question of how to overcome this ‘interdict’ in order to resolve this tension between the theoretical and the empirical in a way that reflected my own experiences was one that was going to shape my academic work for a number of years.

Despite my own growing sense of disillusion, I graduated in 2003 with the means to access a higher-level qualification. After taking a couple of years out to care for my son and my mother and to research sources of funding, in 2005 I enrolled for PhD at the University of Hull. As the time span makes clear, this PhD has had rather a lengthy gestation period. In part, this is due to my other caring responsibilities (and I



have always worked part-time) but it is also due to the fact that, having acquired these languages of exclusion, I found myself effectively silenced. As I mentioned earlier, in its literary definition the term access means ‘an outburst of emotion’ (Dictionary.com, 2016). I knew I wanted to write about class but the subject has always seemed so integral to my own personal struggles that I have never been able to write anything without being overcome by ‘an access of rage’ (ibid.). Not quite the air of critical detachment one is supposed to adopt in a PhD thesis. I found myself erupting in a kind of apoplectic fury every time some politician or other spouted some meaningless statement about how social mobility had turned Britain into a classless society. My personal nadir was when Hull’s own John Prescott famously announced “We’re all middle class now”. In view of the fact that Hull has always had high levels of poverty, unemployment and social deprivation this statement could only mean the politician had lost touch with a level of objectively defined ‘reality’.

Another problem with the highly abstract vocabulary of poststructuralism is that it is not a language of feeling, which means that the affective dimension of identity is neglected or just simply ignored. I realized that not only did I need to find a way of filtering my fury constructively but also that I needed to find a language that would enable me write from the basis of my own experience of class, rather than from a position of shame and denial. My lightbulb moment came when I saw Grayson Perry’s documentary series for Channel Four *All in the Best Possible Taste*. These programmes marked the starting point for this PhD.