Classy looks and classificatory gazes: The fashioning of class in reality television

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Abstract

Reality television has spawned a proliferation of programmes that feature 'ordinary' people.
Often this notion of ordinary not only means non-celebrity but is also a synonym for working-
class. Class, however, is typically unacknowledged and unspoken in the narratives that unfold
in the genre, while the programmes themselves construct class and perceptions of difference,
largely through fashion and appearance. Although there is an increased representation of
working-class subjects in the reality genre, this visibility is not matched by an access to
control of media platforms. Therefore, it is argued, what is often found in the representations
generated by these programmes is a kind of class tourism that involves Othering. A
substantial branch of reality TV that deals in narratives of transformation and foregrounds
fashion and the body as signifiers of classed taste is introduced, and it is posited that cultural
hegemony might be identified in the framing of middle-class taste as good taste in this
subgenre, not only for those surveyed on-screen but also for the audience watching at home.
Snog Marry Avoid? is analysed in relation to the performance of classed femininity it offers
within this context.

Keywords

cultural hegemony

embodied capital

habitus

hyperfemininity

panopticism

performativity

reality TV

working class

Introduction

A certain type of hyperfemininity is showcased to the viewing public in the 'world's first makeunder show' (BBC 2015) *Snog Marry Avoid?* (*SMA*) (2008–2013). This article will argue that this girlish glamour, which is painted as garish, excessive and undesirable, has class connotations and that the creation, by the programme, of a more understated feminine ideal tells us much about current attitudes to class and femininity. The motivation and willingness of women to choose to participate in such an adjustment of their fashioned identity is an additional element of interest that undergoes preliminary investigation here. It is proposed that such a choice can be linked to both the dynamics of cultural hegemony in the sense of an ideological 'leadership over allied and subordinate groups with the consent via coercion of those groups' (Forgacs 1999: 423), and the similarly coercive power of surveillance as described in Foucault's ([1975] 1991) rendering of the Panopticon. However, Bourdieu's (1984) notion of habitus, or social class transposed into an embodied state, provides the central means to unpick the representations of interest in this article.

Graeme Turner calls the increased representation of ordinary people in the reality television genre 'the demotic turn' (2010: 12). His use of the term demotic to mean of, or for,

the common people is perhaps a less optimistic identification than 'democratic'. He writes, 'the contemporary media consumer has become increasingly accustomed to following what happens to the "ordinary" person who has been plucked from obscurity to enjoy a highly circumscribed celebrity' (2010: 12). Ordinary is frequently a euphemism for working class, however (see Tyler and Bennett 2010). While Wood and Skeggs (2008) and Karl (2007) also identify a trend of increased representation of working-class subjects in the reality genre, they note that these representations are not matched by access to the means of representation. Thus, journalist Mick Hume joked about reality TV in general being a vehicle for 'Prole Porn' (see Tyler and Bennett 2010: 386). Examples within the genre such as *SMA* could also be described as a form of 'class pantomime' (Tyler and Bennett 2010: 376) or even slum tourism, and all of these representations have the capacity to generate defining discourses about their subjects. Following on from a well-established tradition that is also played out in Hollywood films (see Tasker 1998), they are based on the idea that the participants are in need of transformation or perhaps even redemption in some sense. Therefore, what emerges, alongside the male gaze (Mulvey 1974) maintained in programmes like *SMA*, is what might be termed a bourgeois gaze, which viewers learn to adopt, employ and submit to against the background of the cultural hegemony of the middle-class media. This gaze may be resisted of course, but it is hard to avoid.

Snog Marry Avoid?

In *SMA* (BBC Three) a female presenter (currently Ellie Taylor) works alongside POD, the Personal Overhaul Device, which is a 'Big Brother'-style booth with a camera, screen and computerized voice. This voice, with a mimicry of the anonymity of the digital age, is free to pass forthright and negative, yet comedic, judgments about the participants' personal images prior to their transformation, for the entertainment of the viewing public. Another gimmick of

the programme, and the origin of its name, is that vox populi interviews are conducted in the streets of the cities visited, in which men are asked to assess whether they would snog, marry or avoid the (almost overwhelmingly heterosexual) women in question, based on their appearance. Men have also been made-under in the series, but in most episodes these have been homosexual men, and thus it is typically men who pass judgement in this portion of the programme. Since series five, the show has been on tour around the United Kingdom, and often the cities visited are strongly associated with working-class heritage: Liverpool, Newcastle and Essex, for example.

Prior to being 'made-under', the participants generally have a high-maintenance look, involving fake tan, hair extensions, false lashes, dyed hair, lots of make-up and, often, very flamboyant, colourful and/or revealing outfits. The additional excess of pink and glittery accessories makes the overall effect hyperfeminine – at once childlike and X-rated. A lot of time, money and effort are put into the looks cultivated, and it might be assumed the women presented would like people to think better of them as a result; perhaps they want to feel beautiful, feminine, fun or simply noticed. Either way, the function of their interventions is arguably to raise status in some way, to acquire a form of feminine capital (Skeggs 1997) through exercising control over the body. However, Skeggs' observations regarding women who are seen to try too hard is apposite to this example: 'their attempts to "do femininity" are read as a class drag act, an unconvincing and inadvertently parodic attempt to pass' (Skeggs, in Tyler and Bennett 2010: 381). This is also what Bourdieu would see as 'the recognition of distinction that is affirmed in the effort to possess it' (1984: 251).

What the participants are actually attempting to 'pass' for, however, is a certain kind of celebrity ideal. It is what might be recognised as a California look of tanned skin, blondeness and cosmetic surgery, conveying conspicuous consumption and leisure and referencing LA's thriving pornography industry, as well as mainstream film industry (see

Church Gibson 2014). It is a look made all the more approachable when filtered through figures such as UK celebrities Katie Price and Jodie Marsh (who herself appeared on *SMA* in 2009), and others who have been labelled the 'Celebrity Chav' (see Tyler and Bennett 2010). Additionally, the visibility of such figures makes contemporary celebrity-hood seem like an avenue for equality of opportunity, but this actually masks mass inequality (Tyler and Bennett 2010). In one sense counter to Bourdieu's (1984) identification of a taste for necessity in the working class, the representations on *SMA* are of women using all their resources and agency to attain images that for them reference self-improvement, success and wealth. Their bodies are sites of rigorous control in this sense, whilst simultaneously declaring a kind of sexual abandon. Agency in the lives of these immodest women of modest means has its limits, however, which is why exercising will at the site of the body is already a fixation for the participants who are 'caught up in a power situation of which they themselves are the bearers' (Foucault [1977] 1991: 201). Consequently in Foucault's terms, the ways that these bodies are self-disciplined show individuals already subject to technologies of power, before dominant ideologies are more explicitly implemented through the transformations staged in the programme.

Figure 1: Laura from Liverpool listens to her 'public analysis' before make-under, *Snog Marry Avoid?* (Series 6, Episode 9, 2013).

Figure 2: Laura is deemed to be more "classy" after her make-under, *Snog Marry Avoid?* (Series 6, Episode 9, 2013).

Figure 3: Chloe Mafia from Wakefield explains her choice of outfit, *Snog Marry Avoid?* (Series 3, Episode 1, 2010).

Classed femininities

In being judged as in need of a make-under, the women in this programme are found guilty of not following the proper order of things by not aspiring to a more respectable ideal of femininity (see Skeggs 1997), one that conducts itself with more chastity and propriety – a middle-class archetype reinforced throughout the mainstream media. This ideal is bypassed by the women here, who serve to reinforce this archetype by opening themselves up to ridicule for attempting to emulate the famously rich when they have such limited resources (resulting in patchy fake tans and ratty hair extensions on occasion). All such judgements are shaped by a belief that appropriate behaviour might follow preferred appearance. This is neatly emphasized in the title. While 'snog' coyly stands in for something else, the programme-makers expect and find/script male respondents who would only 'snog' or avoid the women shown before make-under. Of course after their transformation into a more demure visual image (tans, hair extensions and fake lashes are removed, chests and legs covered up) many more of those interviewed claim that they might marry a girl like the one

shown to them since she now looks more like the marriageable type. That 'marry' should be more desirable than 'snog' is never questioned.

McRobbie notes, rather pertinently to this discussion of *SMA*, that

> If glamour is celebrated as a mark of aspiration and sexual identity, then this becomes a gendered marker of class and an attribute which properly middle-class women must eschew, since they will in contrast be in possession of 'effortless elegance' or 'simple chic'. (2009: 132)

Those showcased can learn how to modify their bodies by internalizing the correct, middle-class, patriarchal discipline and they are asked to police themselves according to these wider power relations. Foucault's ([1977] 1991) metaphor of the panopticon describes how such internalization leads to a docile body (see also Bartky 2010). It is via the mechanism of surveillance rather than force that behaviour is modified and in her feminist appropriation of Foucault's ideas, Bartky argues that although painful beauty treatments are undertaken by women, 'no one is marched off for electrolysis at gunpoint' (2010: 89). Individuals are more inclined to carry out the socially sanctioned forms of behaviour when they understand that they are being seen. It is this subtle, coercive mode of power that sees the women appearing on-screen, ready to be judged, when already routinely undertaking and submitting to intense, expensive, time-consuming, painful and skill-heavy regimes at their own initiation. Bartky explains this somewhat perplexing scenario by stating that 'the technologies for femininity are taken up and practiced by women against the background of a pervasive sense of bodily deficiency; this accounts for what is often their compulsive or even ritualistic character' (2010: 85). Most western women have learnt well – through the surveillance of femininity offered in women's magazines, for example – the consumption practices required in the

achievement of not only idealized femininity but of femininity itself. Although they are not bound to engage with these practices and their associated regimes, they generally willingly do so in exactly the way Foucault finds so characteristic of power in modernity:

> He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principal of his own subjection. (Foucault [1977] 1991 202–03)

And yet, the women are represented as getting their self-policing wrong. The ideologies of patriarchy and advanced capitalism are already successfully internalized, but the preferred taste culture is not. *SMA*, then, effectively activates several layers of surveillance, and in POD, offers its own panopticon where these competing femininities can be pitted against one another.

Surveillance and resistance

The first layer of surveillance involves POD's supervision (see Figure 1). The disembodied, digitized voice of POD is invisible and as such its gaze resembles that exercised from the watchtower of the Panopticon. The interviews conducted with the general public then multiply the impact and authority of POD's judgemental eye. Next, however, POD goes as far as to initiate a physical intervention to adjust the aspirations of the participant via the make-under. In this scenario, surveillance alone is deemed insufficient and women *are* in fact 'marched off' for beauty treatments, although it is still where the camera is pointed, and not the gun, that provokes their complicity. The camera is of course the unrepresented layer of

surveillance throughout, through which the participants know their image will be broadcast nationally, to potentially millions of viewers. Even in the opening sequence of the programme a region's citizens are described in relation to the way they contribute to the town or city's overall visual image. From this perspective of urban visibility the correct appearance is portrayed as a type of civic responsibility. The role of the presenter cushions the possible coolness and distance of all this mediated scrutiny in a similar way to women's magazines that offer 'advice' to their readers in a supportive, helpful and friendly tone. Women's magazines are a useful comparison to *SMA* of course, because they are a well-established venue for monitoring female bodies, and for the creation of discourses about appropriate femininity. The presenter's personal touch is complimented by the final layer of surveillance in the revealing of the woman's new look to her family and friends. It is unusual to find an instance where the made-under appearance is not preferred over the initial image in this final segment of the transformation, and so the message to the participant could not be made clearer.

There is resistance, however. Much of the entertainment in *SMA* revolves around disagreements with the participant and POD about whether their skin is brown (as the participant maintains) or orange (as POD gleefully declares) for example, or whether they look like a 'princess' or a 'plastic disaster'. Typically the subject of the make-under defends their choices, frequently with good humour, despite POD's barbed insults. But, as Foucault ([1977 1991) noted of resistance, it often merely reaffirms the power balance. By being written into the structure in such a successful and comedic way, resistance in any effective sense is annulled, while the individual, in choosing to participate, is already yielding to the many layers of judgement detailed above. If the women decide not to internalize the cultural ideals that are promoted by the end of the programme, the message that they should have is conveyed to the audience just as surely as a celebrity pilloried for not policing their cellulite

on the cover of 'Heat' magazine conveys the undesirability of cellulite. In this way, surveillance of these bodies in the Panopticon of POD disseminates hegemonic class and gender values to those watching. The programme seems to offer a type of humorous and harmless assistance, but it reaffirms the place within spheres of power for some, just as it marginalizes others. Class, enmeshed with taste, is most often the deciding factor.

Even when resisting the judgements proffered and retaining a pride in their fashioned identity, the participants, in having already decided to be made-under, seem to display an awareness of the classificatory repercussions of their taste choices. As Fowler observes,

…alongside the expansion of the market capacities for cheap luxuries in the sphere of the adornment of the body, there is an unprecedented inner loneliness, derived not least through the refusal of the destiny of 'vulgarity', associated with the stigmatized working class. In brief, for Bourdieu the game of culture which is at stake in relations to consumption, always has the working class as its negative classificatory foil. (2000: 11)

In this 'refusal of the destiny of "vulgarity"' it is possible that the individuals involved might see opportunities open up to them as a result of being more favourably packaged. However, the nature of class habitus as Bourdieu conceived of it (1984) means that this refusal is not so straightforward, since taste is an internalized symptom of stratification and cannot be easily left behind. Indeed, most participants, including Laura (see Figures1 and 2), return to their pre-made-under style. This refusal is reminiscent of Skeggs' interviews with working-class subjects, which found that the women had already invested too much in 'familial respectability', 'glamour' and 'caring' as forms of capital/status to be able to engage with a new ideal, in that case feminism (Fowler 2000: 43). In addition, Bartky sees the relinquishing

of the props of femininity as tantamount to a type of deskilling, which people ordinarily and understandably avoid (2010: 91). Not only is change brought merely at the level of appearance on *SMA*, it is also rendered as something simply subject to individual force of will. Socio-economic circumstances are never mentioned by POD or the presenter, and the programme is framed purely as a battle against fakery. Yet in displaying a certain type of urban identity – the immodest femininity of modest means, described above – understandings of class are created

Speaking directly to the 'refusal of the destiny of "vulgarity"' which Fowler posits (2000: 11), Chloe Mafia (Figure 3) confided that she did not want to be 'known as a "scrubber"' (2010) when asked why she had chosen to appear on the show. 'Scrubber', certainly in Yorkshire, is a derogatory term used to refer to someone of low social standing who is judged to be unclean and/or, sexually/morally lax. As a previous contestant on the *X Factor* (2004–), Mafia was possibly all too aware of the types of judgements that might be made by those outside of a person's immediate social group, and exhibited an understanding of the status assumptions that might be made from a reading of her sartorial taste. Interestingly, she explained her choice to wear Burberry check by stating that 'I think I've got a bit of chav at heart innit', which, while providing another term to stand in for working class, also conveys a value or attachment to her classed identity, even as it aims at self-depreciation. Vincent et al. (2008) note that working-class identity is a source of both shame and pride, and, while class may not be explicitly discussed on *SMA*, such ambivalences are regularly played out.

Habitus and taste

The term 'working class' as a description of status has been framed as outdated since the postmodern turn and the debatable, yet much 'vaunted death of Marxism' (Munt 2000: 7). But while a sufficiently thorough discussion of the validity of the term unfortunately lies outside the scope of this article, Bourdieu's (1984) designation of 'habitus' as a style of living informed by socio-economic status is precisely what is at issue in the representations on *SMA*. The concept of habitus arises from a consideration of class as culture embodied, as it gives rise to a series of bodily dispositions that impact on how future life experiences and opportunities are encountered. Charlesworth describes it usefully thus: 'Habitual comportment acquired through primary relationships that invest being-in-the-world in all its aspects, with a surplus of meaning; beyond whatever we are doing there is a discernable stylistic "hue", which is inescapable in all we are' (2000: 120). POD would joke that the 'stylistic hue' of the *SMA* participant is generally orange, but the point is that class in this rendering is 'inescapable' because habitus functions largely at an unconscious level. Consequently, the acquired disposition is a product of systems of inequality that might also work against class-consciousness. It is not clear whether the typical participant of *SMA* would identify as being working class, but a perception of firmly middle-class or upper-class identity by the viewing public would be unlikely. Bourdieu contends that

> Lifestyles are […] the systematic products of habitus, which, perceived in their mutual relations through the schemes of the habitus, become sign systems that are socially qualified (as 'distinguished', 'vulgar' etc.) The dialectic of conditions and habitus is the basis of an alchemy which transforms the distribution of capital, the balance-sheet of a power relation, into a system of perceived differences, distinctive properties, that is, a distribution of symbolic capital, legitimate capital, whose objective truth is misrecognized. (1984: 172)

So, in being in possession of the incorrect or 'vulgar' taste, the make-underee is found lacking in legitimate capital, which is in fact the currency of the middle classes. This, the outcome of stratification for Bourdieu, is presented on-screen as individual preference, and so actually results in those featured being seen as of poor aesthetic judgement or capacity. Bourdieu explains the translation of the social to the personal further by stating that 'necessities' become 'strategies', and 'constraints' become 'preferences', for particular groups (1984: 175). The internalization of classed culture, from the foods eaten to the physical rituals adopted, means that habitus is a 'phenomenon of the flesh' (Charlesworth 2000: 65) that comes from the internalization of hierarchies and structures and produces 'desires and aversions' (Charlesworth 2000: 65). Habitus is important because for Bourdieu 'Symbolic domination is not the outcome of the logic of conscious thought, but of the obscurity of practical schemes of habitus, in which relations of domination, often inaccessible to reflective consciousness and the will, are inscribed' (Bourdieu 1990 as translated by Lovel 2000: 28). Therefore, habits, beauty practices, speech and so on may all be physical manifestations of class position as it is unconsciously acquired via life experience in a local community. Bourdieu classifies fashion (along with furniture and cookery) as a 'personal' area of culture, as opposed to 'legitimate' areas like painting. His research showed that the 'personal' domains are linked more to individuals' social origin than the 'legitimate' ones, which held a closer relationship with educational capital (1984: 13). It is the somewhat intimate and informal nature of dress then that ties it so clearly to class habitus, while middle-class values are already conferred more widely for other areas of 'official' culture through the education system, but it is the somewhat public and performing nature of dress that sees the show's producers step in to this educational gap. In sum, taste, from this perspective, is profoundly political; it may go unacknowledged in *SMA*, but it is nonetheless at the root of the programme's narrative.

Where the analysis of *SMA* departs from Bourdieu's findings is in the nature of contemporary working-class taste as it is represented there. Bourdieu's feminine subject is one that engages with cosmetics and fashion the more she climbs up the social hierarchy. The *SMA* participant tallies more with those in the 'intermediate' position Bourdieu refers to, who are 'perceived as pretentious because of the manifest discrepancy between ambition and possibilities' (1984: 176). However, women's relationship with fashion and cosmetics in the cities of the United Kingdom today are markedly different from those in the rural France of the 1960s that Bourdieu wrote about. There is a vastly increased access to cheaper fashionable goods; a more developed media to promote consumption and offer models to emulate; as well as women accessing prestigious work in billowing urban populations, which place emphasis on the communication of identity by visual means. This acknowledgement of increased media access suggests a more democratic climate in some senses, and therefore also calls into question Bourdieu's wider assertions about the structure at play in habitus. However, every fashion magazine has its clearly stratified target market, while the media could not fully replace the 'transfers' (Bourdieu 1984: 173) of characteristics between real people in a community in any case. It is the illusion of choice that we might see in the fashion media that Bourdieu is consistently focused on dispelling. He states that 'The idea of taste' itself is 'typically bourgeois' in that it emphasizes agency, because 'many people find it hard to grasp the paradoxes of the taste of necessity' (1984: 177–78). Furthermore,

> The interest the different classes have in self-presentation, the attention they devote to it, their awareness of the profits it gives and the investments of time, effort, sacrifice and care which they actually put into it are proportionate to the chances of material or symbolic profit they can reasonably expect from it. (Bourdieu 1984: 202)

The garments and practices that are actually adopted make visible the conflicting fields of value in which classed femininities operate. The hyperfemininity displayed before make-under functions in the restricted markets and locations in which the *SMA* participants are shown to operate, be that their youth, region or the specific nightclub they are represented as regularly attending. In choosing to appear on the programme, however, an awareness of the wider field of power and how aesthetic language operates differently within it is hinted at. Physical alteration often results in obvious discomfort for the women 'deep-cleansed' in POD, firstly because the process sees their painstakingly acquired feminine capital, their armour bolstering self-assurance about the body, stripped away. Secondly because the participant's objectified capital (Bourdieu 1986) in the form of garments is transformed while embodied capital (Bourdieu 1986), in the form of cosmetic surgery, posture, dialect, etc, remains. This represents a disjuncture for the women, and herein, I would argue, lies an answer to why so few of them maintain their new look. Making such a radical change is far from easy, since 'Reality television participants…display class through access to or lack of the cultural and emotional resources required to move easily around the social spaces of unfamiliarity, offering instead people subject to forces beyond their control' (Wood and Skeggs 2008: 189).

As subtle as it is, Bourdieu's conception of habitus has been critiqued by scholars including Butler (1990, 1997) who read in it an overemphasis of the structural in his formation of identity, while he is taken to task specifically for not recognizing performative, transformative statements made by working-class women (Fowler 2000). It is, therefore, worth isolating the construction of gender by the participants in *SMA*. In offering up a type of femininity that is evidently such hard work, the pre-made-under guises shown on screen arguably subvert gender identity by revealing the performativity (Butler 1990) at play in

gender construction. Often what the audience sees is not just Skeggs' notion of 'class drag' but straightforward gender drag. The participants destabilize gender by being so obviously 'dressed as a girl' that their femininity seems to be something that they merely put on; at the same time it is repeatedly practised, rehearsed and produced through the routines and rituals of 'getting ready'.

Hyperfemininity and resistance

As Russo has noted 'putting on femininity with a vengeance suggests the power of taking it off' (1994: 70).Yet, evidence of any conscious subversion of gender in the hyperfeminity represented in the programme isn't immediately obvious. , Such a subversive challenge *was* evoked in the way that some women loosely associated with the Riot Grrrl Movement in the 1990s, reacted with cynical knowingness to the simultaneous and contradictory infantalization and sexualization of women in patriarchal culture, by donning the 'kinderwhore' look. This style was popularized by grunge musicians like Kat Bjelland and Courtney Love, for example. Performing live, Courtney Love used to smear the paint on her lips across her cheek with the back of her hand. This is an unusual act for a woman: to show how easily the femininity that has been constructed can be deconstructed, at the same time creating a kind of abject glamour that rejects feminine respectability. Feminine excess is compromised for hedonistic excess in this 'wasted' dishevelment.

Like Bjelland and Love, the *SMA* participant is also, it must be noted, in a performance context. They are shown both constructing their brand of gender identity in the sequences when they are filmed 'getting ready' as well as deconstructing it when POD instructs them to undertake a 'deep cleanse' (the moment they have to remove all the accoutrements of femininity and expose a 'natural' version of themselves to the camera). They have chosen to engage with this format – even though it is guaranteed to make them

wince with discomfort – possibly for the reasons they offer: wanting to attract the 'right' type of male attention, for example, or wanting to be taken seriously for a particular job, or to access the 'highly circumscribed celebrity' that Graeme Turner (2010) writes of. Whatever the motivations, the effect is to reveal the extent of the labour that has gone into constructing their gendered self. There is a similar rejection of respectability to Courtney Love's performance, in the way that women are often represented in a nightclub, having consumed alcohol, offering – to camera – a challenge to POD that 'you can't make a natural beauty out of me!' or suggesting that she has her 'work cut out!'. Therefore, perhaps these two examples are comparable: they respond to the same patriarchal context and create a corresponding performative reveal. Additionally, for one donning the kinderwhore look, 'knowingness' takes the form of a bricolage of feminine archetypes with ironic pastiche, yes, but also perhaps as homage.

This said, while the typical *SMA* participant and the self-styled kinderwhore may both acquire a form of feminine capital (Skeggs 1997), in a patriarchal context, musicians like Love and Bjelland, and the Riot Grrrl culture they bear an association with, have access to more clearly sanctioned cultural capital via feminist discourse that fosters a more critical and informed and therefore decided relation to femininity. They show an awareness of the import and power of representation, be that via a conscious avoidance of being framed by others or in having an investment in controlling their own public image. While it is not the intention to establish a class position for this comparison group here, according to Bourdieu's vision of how status also relates to a network of relational positions within a particular field (1993) as cultural producers of music, fanzines and so on, they at least occupy a privileged position in the field of cultural production. In Negrin's thorough analysis of the potential of maquillage to deconstruct femininity she states that

[…] the various defenses of femininity as masquerade, which have been offered

by theorists such as Doane and Constable, are problematic insofar as they efface

the desperation of many women who undergo constant transmutations of their

appearance. While some women may delight in the possibilities opened up by

parodic play with body image, for many others, the preoccupation with

appearance becomes a compulsive obsession. (2008: 71)

Compulsive obsession is certainly the way that many of the beauty regimes undertaken on

SMA are represented, and this is offered as another clue as to why anyone would choose to

appear to be featured on air.

Occasionally, those featured on *SMA* are subcultural in style and do not subscribe to

the aesthetic mentioned above, but still have a very high-maintenance look as a goth,

cybergoth, etc. These women perhaps offer a more direct comparison with the 'kinderwhore'

discussed above. After Hall and Jefferson (2006) first edited *Resistance through Rituals* in

1976, subcultural groups, such as skinheads, were more widely interpreted as representing a

symbolic refusal or expression of class position: as exercising creativity and agency in a

negotiation of structural limitations. In *SMA*, subcultural identities are simply outside of the

desirable, 'natural' feminine ideal of the middle class, however. This tallies with Lawler's

observation that escape (to the middle class) is seen as heroic, whereas escapism is failure

(Lawler 2000: 126). While these individuals are not ridiculed quite as much as the classic

SMA participant described above, and are sometimes rejected as candidates for a make-under,

as those in possession of subcultural capital (Thornton 1995), they are still encouraged to

trade this for the cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984) that would see them potentially more

centred in terms of power relations, and as less of a challenge to gender and class hierarchies.

So the alternatively styled participant might be expected to deconstruct ideals of femininity and class, and indeed they can do, but, when they are featured on *SMA* they are mostly still positioned by the make-under as subject to these structural categories. Therefore, the problem of whether working-class women suffer misrecognition of their agency in Bourdieuian conceptions of identity is returned to. There is something subversive about the visual identities presented, and I would contend that this is why the programme seeks to substitute them. They can still seem "inadvertently parodic" (Skeggs, in Tyler and Bennett 2010: 381) however, and the challenge can merely arise from a marginalised status that the women have not themselves actively chosen. Therefore Butler's approach might also be critiqued for offering insufficient consideration of how individuals' capacities to act might be contingent upon class position.

Whether the socially constructed nature of gender is tacitly acknowledged or not, it is certainly exposed by *SMA* participants. Consequently, the women shown might be seen as both refuting bourgeois, patriarchal power relations, and simultaneously being subject to them. Gender on one level is deconstructed, but gender difference remains simply more pronounced. The extreme self-presentation is a form of rebellion to mainstream notions of feminine propriety perhaps, but the taste culture projected sees the women marginalized even as it commodifies the body in the interests of consumer capitalism. The official narrative in the programme is clearly repeated as one of transformation from fakery to 'natural' beauty and this is a pronounced cultural preference that Deborah Ferreday (2008) has also examined. The 'natural' beauty presented, however, is still the product of considerable work, but the work is now, crucially, hidden. Make-up must conceal imperfections, not stand out: blend in the skin so the woman might blend in herself as truly and 'naturally' feminine. Bourdieu calls this a kind of 'aesthetic disavowal' (which) 'by a sort of essential hypocrisy (seen, for example, in the opposition between pornography and eroticism) masks the interest in function

by the primacy given to form, so that what people do, they do as if they were not doing it' (1984: 200). The active construction of femininity in this idealized form is thus denied. Women are not liberated from the time and money they spend on maintaining a definition of femininity that emphasizes the importance of appearance; they are just engaging in a less conspicuous process. Through the make-under, the threat of flamboyant, loud, artificial and consequently not-very-feminine hyperfemininity is diffused.

The way that power is exercised by individuals upon themselves in contemporary society, through the mechanism of media surveillance, seems to emphasize the role of agency and conceal structural inequalities. Thus the gaze, the authority, the order of things, is submitted to willingly in this one small corner of the overall hegemonic project. An understanding of class habitus, however, serves to highlight the socio-economic context of this difference and the limits of individual ability to act in the desired way. This desired way is naturalized as a universal ideal and it bolsters the position of those in power. When they declare they would 'snog' the woman shown to them, the men interviewed on the programme are not criticised on the grounds of promiscuity, but merely for eliciting this kind of male attention, the women are negatively judged. The desirability for females to appear respectable, appropriately classed and thus marriageable is not a given therefore, but actually a way of constraining women's freedom in a patriarchal context. In this respect, the consumption and construction of ideal femininity has become an effective route for both patriarchal and bourgeois ideology to be disseminated.

Conclusion

As a fun and frivolous bit of comedy programming it is sometimes difficult to *believe* any serious repercussions of *SMA*, but it represents only one of many offerings within the reality genre that deal with socio-economic phenomena masked as individualized problems. These

problems are portrayed as the sole responsibility of the self-improving person or family, who are thought to be bestowed with limitless agency regarding their circumstances, while structural divisions ensure precisely less choice for those with less capital. These representations have real repercussions and lead to what Bromley calls 'the pathologization of impoverishment as moral failure' (Bromley 2000: 54). As Wood and Skeggs elaborate 'once class has been removed as a structural category, individuals can be blamed for the inequalities and injustices they experience [...] The problems of a class society become identified as the problems of working class people' (2008: 179). Fashion and beauty practices are actually implicated in the interpretation of identity as freely constructed in a postmodern context. Dress and trends in fashioned bodies are aspects of consumer culture that are increasingly available and accessed by all, especially in the urban settings inhabited by most *SMA* participants. Yet as Bourdieu writes, 'the body is the most indisputable materialization of class taste, which it manifests in several ways. It does this first in the seemingly most natural features of the body' (1984: 190).

> to these are added all the deliberate modifications of appearance, especially by the use of the set of marks – cosmetic [...] or vestimentary- which, because they depend on the economic and cultural means that can be invested in them, function as social markers deriving their meaning and value from their position in the system of distinctive signs which they constitute and which is homologous with the system of social positions. (Bourdieu 1984: 192)

Those whose images are reproduced in *SMA* may be judged as either exhibiting 'congenital coarseness' (Bourdieu 1984: 178) or exercising their choices poorly, but it is seen that more status can be acquired through fashioned appearance, and the show purports to assist its

subjects in elevating their taste and thus their social position. This results in those featured being represented as solely responsible for, and in control of, the social identity that is manifested in their appearance. Furthermore, middle-class taste is convincingly universalized as 'good taste'.

Reality TV contributes to wider understandings of class and therefore has influence while subject positions are produced by such broadcasts (see Wood and Skeggs 2008: 180; Tyler 2008: 28). Jones records that *The Jeremy Kyle Show* (2007–2012) was criticized by the Joseph Rowntree foundation for being 'based on derision of the lower-working-class population'. By portraying them as 'undeserving' it undermined support for anti-poverty initiatives, the Foundation claimed (Jones 2011: 127). Developing this idea Munt offers that 'Whereas there has been a public debate for the last twenty years on positive images of women, people of colour, and gays and lesbians, there has been no such equivalent clamour for working-class representation' (2000: 8). In the representations within reality TV, fashioned taste is dealt with as classifying desirable or undesirable identities. Class position cannot be changed by appearance alone, but in opining that the visual manifestation of this classed femininity is to be avoided, the message is that working-class identities themselves have no value, and class is presented merely as that which is 'to be overcome' (Skeggs 2005: 54). It is to be overcome though by the individual agent, devoid of meaningful context, as a measure of their essential quality or lack thereof. Paradoxically, the individuals found lacking form a type, which can then be reclassified into a category marked simply 'Avoid'.

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