Slide 1

In March David Beckham made a guest appearance in an ‘Only Fools and Horses’ sketch commissioned for the BBC’s Sport Relief charity. The media interest was intense, but why so? What is it about the two men individually and collectively that was so intriguing? I’d like to use this presentation as a space to consider what was happening here via a look at the clothing both men are seen to wear or known to have worn.

David Beckham’s intense media exposure has shifted, what began as negative, patronising and critical; of his style choices, his conspicuous display of wealth and his attempts to dress outside the class/gender position allocated to him has recently traversed into the area of sartorial acceptance. Now openly applauded for his style in the sketch he wore a traditional navy wool pea coat. His persona has developed to such an extent that he can engage with the clothing of working men again but from an entirely different subject position.

‘Derek Trotter’ or ‘Del Boy’ is the central character from the class conscious, popular yet critically acclaimed situation comedy ‘Only Fools and Horses’ a regular on British TV since the early 1980’s. Del works as a vision of classed masculinity. A working class hero who actively resists the system and the position in society allocated to him.

Del’s clothing or costume or more specifically; clothes selected to work as a costume work as a visual comedic tool in much the same way that his French catchphrases work linguistically. The items he wears; his bespoke sheepskin coat, his cream YSL mac and his camel hair Crombie – on its own a consistent signifier of working class resistance via skinheads, mods and East end gangster chic - actively work to identify him as a failed class passer (Foster, 2005). I’d like to explore why and how? What are the recognised frontiers for acceptable classed clothing choices and how are those that cross the boundary without ‘permission’ judged?

Slide 2

David Beckham’s style or his idea of style or perhaps more accurately his choice of stylist and their idea of style has changed quite considerably over the past decade as you can see. He has moved from what was considered by many as tasteless forms of conspicuous display through to classic tailored elegance. This sartorial coming of age, something I’m sure we have all experienced (for me a corkscrew perm and a particularly nasty fringed suede jacket for starters) happened under the intense glare of media scrutiny. It is difficult to pinpoint when the mood shifted from ridicule to reverence or how pervasive the shift was as for some he is still an object of derision.

When thinking about Beckham in this context I think there are two key areas that need consideration. The first is the contested relationship between class and taste and the second is the idea of a prescribed judgement. In the first instance we need to look at theories around contemporary class structure. Before we move forward, just to note that we are discussing the idea of class within the UK. The traditional two or three tier system is no longer relevant (if indeed it ever was). David Cannadine’s ‘Class in Britain’ (1998) echo’s Perry Andersons writing in the 60’s which in turn was influenced by early Marxist writers when he comments that the British class system is determined by ‘ancestry, accent, education, deportment, mode of dress, housing and style of life’ (p8). That’s a lot to consider before actively categorizing someone. In fact the Office for National Statistics lists over twenty categorizations within the working class band alone suggesting that it would be very difficult to identify a definitive working class way of life today. If the parameters of classed identity have become so complex and unstable why has Beckham been pigeon holed so tightly? In fact when considering the criteria listed above should we even consider him working class? If so why? Does he dress in a working class way, or does he dress outside his ascribed class position? What is working class dress anyway? Can the dress of those that are members of the modern working class be grouped together at all?

My feeling is that the answer to these questions lie in the judgement prescribed for Beckham by the media which has been and is still very clear. I’m not sure if you would agree but my sense is that he is patronised as well as objectified. The media acknowledges how far he has come but will continue to judge him and his taste in terms of his original working classness.

Slide 3

Derek Trotter or ‘Del Boy’ is one of the UK’s most popular comic characterisations with ‘Only fools and Horses recording viewing figures of more than 20 million at the peak of its popularity. As Paul Dave comments in Visions of England 2006 ‘How class is represented depends on the kind of capitalism on show’ (p1). Del is a product and reflection of the social and cultural context at the time of his creation. The writer John Sullivan believed that the fly pitcher epitomised the Thatcher free market years whilst also reflecting the demoralised and frustrated social consciousness of the late 70’s and early 80’ typified in other forms of popular culture; the early Mad Max films or Gilliam’s Time Bandits, British TV’s Sapphire and Steel or Shelley, popular music from The Specials, Squeeze, The Beat, The Boomtown Rats etc etc and even via children’s literature such as ‘Hairs in the Palm of the Hand by’ by Jan Mark.

Dave again reflects that class is often expressed via gender on screen (Dave, 2006)) and Del works as a particular vision of classed masculinity. Casey et all (2002) identify a rather one dimensional vision of a screen representation of a working class male as ‘physical, simple, unsophisticated and parochial’ (Casey et all, 2002 P26). Whilst Del could be viewed in this context there is something much more nuanced at play here. For many he represented the idea of controlling one’s own destiny whist working outside the system. De Certeau discusses this idea at length in his ‘Practice of Everyday Life’ (1984) and describes such actions as the guerrilla tactics the ordinary use to traverse the everyday. Ultimately his appeal was that his situation was not only comedic but could also be considered as a form of utopia; not a utopia in the Marxist sense obviously as the central thread running through the series is his striving to become a millionaire as any ‘good’ capitalist system would want him to. No, the utopia of ‘Fools and Horses’ is about family, loyalty, friendship, shared experience and basic decency.

The creators of the character wanted it exactly that way. The writer John Sullivan, producer Ray Butt and actor David Jason were all from the same working class background. Sullivan wanted to ‘achieve keenly observed comic creations real enough to belong to the complex community of the audience, not clumsy caricatures’ (McCann, 2011 p44). The inspiration for Del and his wardrobe came from men such as Derek Hockly and Chickey Stocker, whom the actor and the writer respectively had encountered. The costume designer Phoebe de Gaye photographed examples of more ‘real’ men in the streets of Peckham for her research whilst his clothes eventually came from Austin Reed, Dickens and Jones, M&S, YSL, various bespoke shirt makers, Gabbici, and obviously Crombie.

It is important to mention here that a television programme is a construct produced within practical and ideological constraints and that situation comedy will have its own set of realist conventions (Casey et all 2002)

Slide 4

Unlike Becks, Del never achieves sartorial reverence or acceptance but why? Where does Beckham succeed and Del fail. Beckham is often used as a masculine role model; professional (not withstanding that petulant kick in 98) dedicated father (not withstanding his Inter interlude) and husband (not withstanding Rebecca Loos). On the other hand politicians such as Chris Woodhead in 1997 have actively voiced concern around Sullivan’s creations commenting that if Del and Rodney were our only role models we would be in trouble (Sunday Times news Review 26 July 1997 p2).

Many believe that in this era of post modernity the boundaries of taste are becoming blurred. However, to paraphrase Casey et all 2002; different habitas’ still struggle to achieve equal meaning and taste is still used as a tool of segregation. The media is very much a cultural tool wherein television production hides the dominant ideology it expresses within the mode of signification informing it, in this instance the representation of class and taste via clothing (Casey et all, 2002).

There is still an accepted idea of ‘good’ taste managed, prescribed and articulated at the expense of those judged as falling outside its parameters. The ‘canon’ may have changed but the hierarchy and means of control remain the same.

Slide 5

The representation of classed clothing on the small screen is where to paraphrase Marcuse; the pleasure of clothing choice is judged according to the structure of power and the judgement of taste applied accordingly (Marcuse, 1964). Obviously what’s important to acknowledge here is the unstable notion of meaning or the difference between taste v received meaning. Meaning as we know relies on context and evolves via a negotiation between producer and audience and the context of each engagement.

The Crombie absorbs different meanings in each of these contexts. What I find interesting is that the meaning of Del’s Crombie is often attributed to emulation or an attempt at class passing. I would challenge this reading. Men like Derek Hockly, the inspiration for Del’s clothing choices are not ‘uncommon’. Style, choice and taste are negotiated consciously for these men (and women) this is what happens to the ‘ordinary’. The positions they make their choices from may not be of their choosing but there are choices made according to an idea of taste and a notion of style not necessarily confined to or defined by a class position or financial considerations. The problem seems to be that the ‘ordinary’ has in some way become marginalised in favour of the extra ordinary where the cash poor are viewed as ‘the other’ or the underclass are mistaken for the traditional working class.

Slide 6

So what are the acceptable frontiers of classed dressing? We know that these frontiers do exist they rely on sufficiently consistent meanings that we all have access to and manifest themselves via stereotypes. I think we are at a stage now where we recognise most stereotypes when we encounter them and acknowledge them as either simplistic or more complex. Where I think caution is required is in the incongruous stereotyped representation of ‘ordinary’ as sameness, this is still a stereotype and a powerful one that has political, cultural and social implications. It reinforces structures of judgement via the expression of taste. De Fleur commented 50 years ago when looking at the representation of occupational roles on television that; ‘television may not be required to reflect reality faithfully but stereotypes, a-typicality and entertaining distortions may have subtle effects’ (De Fleur, 1964 p72). Has repetitive exposure to a banal ordinary informed our beliefs about what ordinary is? Who benefits from the power of sameness?

Slide 7

The tension around the idea of sameness and difference has been explored already by Henri Lefebvre in his third volume of ‘The Critique of Everyday Life’ 1981 amongst others. He states that difference is where meaning occurs. Sameness would therefore negate meaning.

That differences exists requires acceptance of superior and inferior ‘types’. Only inequality openly acknowledged will infer meaning on differences; ‘inequality is always experienced but illusorily rejected, must be accepted precisely as difference’ (p118).

Lefebvre’s overarching hypothesis of the everyday explores the notion of manipulation versus notions of choice that exist within the complex relationship between lived experience, daily life and reality. He describes the everyday as a site where micro decisions and adaptations take place within the macro thus resulting in a micro sociology or psychology (p4). The point at which an individual decides on a course of action or resolves or adapts to a situation or makes a clothing choice is influenced by the social, local and global or macro landscape of which they are a part. However the decision, action, resolution or conclusion often happens within arguably the most local or private space of the mind; the micro. The distilled result is then played out often in a very subtle way through bodily practice such as dress choice thus becoming part of the macro once more. Each result is invariably different. If these differences are ignored ‘we end up situating social groups exclusively by strata and layers, in a hierarchy acknowledged and sanctioned by ideology, taking little, if any account of the major vertical and horizontal division with which the society under consideration is shot through’ (p115)

Slide 8

The differences that exist within the ordinary have been managed in a negative way especially via television representations. This is where those that cross the boundaries of prescribed classed clothing exist and are judged. In the case of David Beckham and Derek Trotter their sartorial taste is judged with reference to their class position and always will be

The ordinary has become marginalised and could almost be viewed as a subculture. It exists as a site of resistance and this is what I believe can be read from Del Boy’s clothing. As Tseelon commented in 2001 we can only talk about what we know and what we know and what we see on TV are two very different things. When we view something we have no actual experience of we are inclined to rely too heavily on the representation presented to us. Class on TV is often viewed as another character, the working class as exotic low life much the same as the slum fiction writers viewed the people they wrote about at the turn of the last century. As Sidney Head found during his study; ‘Content Analysis of Television Drama Programmes’ in 1954, television is complicit in retaining a cultural status quo thereby creating cultural or a perceived sartorial inertia.

Clothes or the judgement prescribed by the ‘taste’ they express are still a means of exerting control. Representation is a regime of control although how powerful is open to debate. As already mentioned meaning as we know is unstable, audiences class pass as well. Class may well be performed on and off screen and style is a way of representing the in-between spaces that fall outside all-encompassing categorisations. The style of the ordinary may not be on TV (and I’m aware of the argument around why this is so) but is available to view when you step outside your door.

Slide 9

So to conclude, there seems to be a myth that is ‘commonality’. Its inherent diversity has been obscured in favour of a homogenised whole. Within the media or television representation more specifically it has become too easy to misrepresent or characterise the ordinary as something banal and bland. This is why I believe the ordinary man has/can identify more with Guy Richie than Ken Loach or Mike Leigh

Michael Carter states in ‘Stuff and Nonsense’ 2012 that; when dress is used as communication there is always surplus left over from the message and David Cannadine wrote almost 15 years earlier that; ‘the relationship between perception and structure is where class can be properly understood’ (1998 P23). Or rather what’s omitted rather than what’s included is where meaning occurs – the spaces in between.

To finish I’d like to show you what happens when we ignore those in-between spaces – apologies for those that have seen this a million times before!