**‘Costume in Literature: What do television adaptations of modern literature ‘write’ on the body via the clothing used as costume?’**

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***Abstract***

*This presentation/paper explores visible representations of the modern working class via television adaptations of modern literature. The focus here is how costume often communicates socially sanctioned class positions despite the possible intentions of the author.*

*The presentation/paper will foreground industry practices concerning the use of ordinary clothing as costume; discussing the compromises inherent in the practice. It will touch upon the complex relationship between notions of the ‘ordinary’ and the working class. It analyses the use of ‘ordinary’ items of clothing re contextualised as ‘costume’ in television drama using the work of Henri Lefebvre (1969, 2005). Particular aspects of Lefebvre’s work that are relevant to screen clothing in this context and its subsequent representation of the working class are; firstly the idea of paradox and tension, next the notion of information redundancy and lastly Lefebvre’s idea’s around ‘contestation’. This presentation/paper is a development of work that explores how these ideas can be applied directly to the articulation of the working class via small screen costume.*

*The broader aims are; to examine what if any influence costumed representations of the working class have upon existing notions of class identities and to consider what may or may not be the underlying political, cultural or social ideologies underpinning the representations discussed.*

*This project is informed by a research degree currently being undertaken at the University of the Arts, the outcome of which will add to the newly emerging literature around television costume (Warner, 2013). The research considers and integrates both theory and creative practice and positions the subject of costumed screen representations of the working class firmly within the field of cultural politics.*

**Keywords**

Costume, Representation, Class, Television, Contestation

**Paper**

This paper or presentation will discuss the costuming of a populist crime novel which was adapted for television viewing. The novel is by prolific and successful author Martina Cole and the particular work we are looking at is ‘The Take’ which was published in 2005 and adapted for Sky TV in 2009. The story centres on the criminal exploits and development of the Jackson family and is based in East London. What makes this work particularly interesting in this context, is the understanding that Martina Cole ‘Tells it like it is’. I think the screen adaptation does the same thing – although perhaps not in the way the publicists intended with the tag line.

My research centres on the use of ‘ordinary’ clothing which is formatted into a screen costume then naturalised as clothing again (Baert, 1994). These items are more often than not bought or hired and the purpose of them is to help create a visual identity for a screen character. In order to do that and for the result to be ‘accepted’ as a form of ‘realism’ by the eventual viewers the suggested ethos is that the designer would need information about a characters ‘identity’ in order to reflect that identity via the clothes worn on screen.

What I’m interested in looking at is the wider ideological structures that might actually govern this ethos and how these are made visible via the clothing choices and the representations they result in.

The modern working class is inextricably linked to notions of the ordinary (Bell, Hollows & Stewart, 2005) and both are linked to Bourdieu’s idea of a ‘negative essence’ (Bourdieu, 2003). The idea of a negative essence is relevant here via two aspects of how social class is understood and also how the idea of identity is often conceptualised. The first aspect of class where a ‘negative essence’ is present is in modern perceptions of class identity. Particularly how the modern working class (often relabelled as the underclass) are seen as lacking an appropriate or acceptable identity or the means with which to obtain one (Haylett, 2000, Reay, 2005, Skeggs, 2005). The access to such acceptable identities is managed through judgements of taste and behaviour. Those that are unable to access, articulate or understand the boundaries of acceptable taste and behaviour will display a lack of taste (Lawler, 2005) or where some level of understanding does exist, the negative feeling of shame (Sayer, 2005). The second aspect of social class to which this idea of a negative essence is relevant is class as a collective gathering or movement and the notion of class ambivalence (Payne & Grew, 2005 Reay, 2005 Skeggs, 2005). This can also be understood as the lack of a contemporary collective class identity or consciousness. Finally, as Stephanie Lawler has written, identity is often only considered when there is a lack evident, an identity crisis for example. As a result this sense of a lack is measured against what is considered normative or ordinary rendering both undertheorized (Lawler, 2014). For example, extreme examples of supposed class identities are represented as the expense of those considered more normative. In relation to the working class, documentaries such as *‘Benefits Street’ (2014-Present, dir’s Turner, Reid)* or drama’s such as *‘Shameless’* *(2004-13, Created by Paul Abbott)* are examples.

The representation of clothing worn by the working class 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). Within the everyday, style, choice and taste are consciously negotiated and managed for both men and women. 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.

So what are the acceptable frontiers of class specific 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. 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, organised criminality for example, we are inclined to rely too heavily on the representation presented to us. The use of incongruous stereotyped representations of the ‘ordinary’ as sameness, is still a stereotype and a powerful one that has political, cultural and social implications. The differences that exist within the ordinary have been managed in a negative way, especially via television representations. Equally the preference for replacing a nuanced idea of the ordinary with the extra ordinary is equally dangerous. The clothing these groups of people are seen to wear reinforce structures of judgement via the expression of taste – or a lack of taste. Here Freddie Jackson’s wardrobe is an example. There is little detail in the novel, what appears on screen however seems to be a conflation of stereotyped low level criminals, the use of fabrics, prints and accessories articulating an accepted notion of ‘poor taste’.

There seems to be a dichotomy that exists whereby on the one hand is the myth that is ‘commonality’; the everyday’s 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. On the other hand class on TV is often abstracted and the extra ordinary examples presented as ordinary; the working class here are seen 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.

Michael Carter states in ‘Stuff and Nonsense’ 2012 that; when dress is used as communication there is always surplus left over from the message. Whilst David Cannadine writing on class stated 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 or the surplus left over from the message. Here the gaps or spaces are omissions of any kind of sartorial diversity or understanding of conventions of ‘taste’.

Henri Lefebvre’s ‘*The Explosion: Marxism and the French Upheaval’* (1969) and The *‘Practice of Everyday Life’* (2005), first published in the early 1980’s provide an exploration of the everyday and between them posit several ideas that can be applied directly to the articulation of the ordinary or class identity via screen costume. In particular; the idea of paradox and tension, the notion of information redundancy and the idea of individual moments of contestation.

Lefebvre’s (2005) 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 (2005, p4). The point at which an individual decides on a course of action or resolves or adapts to a situation or for our purposes, 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 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. The question here is; are or can these micro decisions be represented on the small screen?

Lefebvre’s ordinary where such decisions take place is a site of ambiguity wherein a series of tensions and paradoxes are played out. Here the focus will be on the tensions between fragmentation and homogeneity, difference versus distinction and the abstract verses the concrete. This is alongside his idea of social voids or spaces which provide an environment for acts of contestation (1969)

To begin with, for Lefebvre ‘Distinction’ has very clear attributes, it is an abstract principle of classification that is founded on the ‘real’ of what has been accomplished or historical experience. It is a means of separation; a way of stating ‘I am not like you’. Distinctions are possible to detect via objects such as clothing and distinctions between the characters are visible through their dress. Distinction positions its subject within a linear hierarchy via a system of classification which assumes objectivity when in fact; ‘classifications intervene and modify objects’ (2005, p114). To analyse is to classify by using the signs by which people distinguish themselves from one another. This classification or ordering happens in relation to the one who is ordering;

‘thus 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’ (2005, p115)

Difference on the other hand is about connections rather than separations. Lefebvre states that differences derive from particularities which are biological realities, a ‘given’ such as sex, ethnicity, size and so on. Differences emerge as a result of the continued struggles when particularities confront each other. Differences are therefore created within the social world, or the social voids that exist for some. Difference does not exist in isolation but as part of a ‘whole’. Lefebvre discusses the idea of an uneven development across social experiences. This uneven development precipitated by the existing class structures and capitalist hierarchies create ‘differences’ between experiences and the formation of identities. These differences in turn create what he terms – lags, distortions, or disassociations (1969). Lawler also considers the connectivity of difference with regard to the formation of identity. Specifically she comments on the systems of inequality that exist and how they produce some identities that are more valued than others (Lawler, 2014).

For Lefebvre, a ‘Void’ is created as a result of the ‘lags’ he discusses. When lags that are latent become visible within these voids, contestation takes place as a reaction. The void is created by ideological and political power and is filled with contestations.Contestation is born from negation – it has a negative origin – it begins with a lack (1969). This idea of a lack can be applied in many ways here – a lack of class ‘taste’ for example**.** When individuals articulate the subtle nuance of identity via clothing choice this is where contestation is evident in the language of clothes. This idea of contestation is linked to the notion of spontaneity. Moments of contestation are unplanned, they are instinctive, and they often defy explanation. Spontaneity requires conditions and has meaning – here the conditions that precipitate spontaneous contestation are created within the lag between reality and representation (1969). This can be evidenced within clothing choice in the context of the everyday but is absent from clothing representations.

Clothing here is very deliberately used to distinguish Freddie and Jimmy from each other and both from ‘acceptable’ society. We know from very early on that Freddie will not be successful because of the clothing he wears, it displays a sense of hedonism and a lack of perceived taste or control in choice. Strong checks and prints, increasing amounts of jewellery, the use of particular fabrics such as leather are examples of this. Freddie might be ‘read’ as articulating a moment of contestation but the fact that he achieves this via the articulation of a lack of taste is significant. Both men therefore display how many believe the working class dress; badly, as either criminals or aspirational consumers.

Moving on, Lefebvre states that; ‘homogeneity no more abolishes fragmentation than aiming for coherence suppresses contradiction’ (2005,p146). He continues that we are all subject to certain homogenizing factors such as law and order, space management, clock time etc. He goes further to describe the media as a homogenizing factor, referring to the form (not content) as reflecting a uniform attitude of viewers who sit passively before the flow of information. If as Lefebvre states, the world of commodity (of which items of clothing are surely a part) is a system of equivalents, then the search for consistency, cohesion in behaviour and conditioned reflexes must be a determining factor. That said, then stereotyped representations are surely an inevitability? Tension arises between homogeneity and fragmentation or costume and clothes as;

‘..the tendency to appeal to knowledge bound up within the norms produced by the world of the commodity is reductive of lived experience’ (2005,P85).

Or perhaps costume cannot possibility hope to reproduce the ‘real’ of lived experience therefore it must be a reductive construction.

Most of us understand the lives represented here via a conflation of screen representations which refer to normalised masculine ideas and the long history of dangerous men and their perceived taste in clothing (Bruzzi, 1997). The irony here is that Freddie Jackson appeals to our established view of tasteless and ostentatious display of wealth and style, established through media representations. Whilst we still remain unable to divorce ourselves from our fascination with the perceived style of actual criminals. Yet another film about the Kray’s*, ‘Legend’* *(Director: Brian Helgeland*) which was released in 2015 and coincidentally also stars Tom Hardy precipitated another rash of exhibitions and discussion around the clothing the Kray twins wore. Both examples position the use of colour, print and check very specifically.

So for the final example of where Lefebvre’s work is relevant here. The idea of ‘the fictitious v the real or abstract v concrete’ and the resulting ambiguity. This section will also briefly touch upon Lefebvre’s notion of information redundancy.

The real here has changed for Lefebvre from the classical sense of something solid, being, independent of all subjectivity to a real that depends on a choice, a decision (2005p162). These choices and decisions move and transform the real into a ‘production’ whose function, form, structure and material have been predetermined. The produced object is then assigned a signification connected with a use, it then enters into multiple networks, passes through the market and whilst on the verge of being absorbed into language and signs crosses through into ‘abstraction’. As Lefebvre states; ‘The abstract is not the duplicate of something concrete, but the abstract and the concrete are inseparable, and their unity makes up the everyday’ (2005,p163).

How does this apply to costume? If the ‘real’ is a complex production, it’s representation on screen is a re- presentation of this complex production. This must surely raise the question ‘how real, can a costume hope to be?’

To explain further, we must briefly look at the concept of information redundancy (2005,p139). Here Lefebvre explains that if all signs (messages) are known and repeated then infinite redundancy is attained. If however information is maximal i.e. where signs (messages) are infinite and of equal probability (lived experience) then redundancy is minimal. This I feel is the root of the distinction between costume and ‘reality’.

Jackie Jackson is an example of this. Throughout the book despite her deterioration into alcoholism her clothing remains a site of stylistic expression. The action at the opening of the book sets the scene of Freddie Jackson’s homecoming party after a stretch in prison. His wife is described as looking elegant whilst wearing a long black skirt with a blue top. The costume worn in this scene differs significantly. Later in the book at her sister’s wedding Jackie is described as wearing a flattering powder blue Ozzie Clark trouser suit. In the adaption she wears a slinky peach silk sleeveless dress. Television production is a collaborative process and no doubt the script writer, director, costume designer and actress all had an input into what Jackie would be wearing in these scenes – changes like this occur all the time. But I think there is more going on here. I think Jackie is an example of Lefebvre’s infinite redundancy – her absorbed signification has crossed through into abstraction. If the drama had unfolded with Jackie retaining a stylistic integrity the audiences would have felt her deterioration less believable – such is the power of representations.

To conclude. The language of clothing is used by television in order to articulate a class position. This is more often than not a fabrication based on an understanding from a middle class perspective. What these clothing representations actually do is make visible the structures at play behind the representation of class.

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