
An ode to Common People

Confessions of a class migrant in the creative industries
Ben Cain, 2025 (published in Imperfect Index)



Essay Collage: Travel West Midlands, Sony Ericson Walkman, Jarvis Cocker, Mark Leckey, George Orwell, Corbin Shaw Flag, Titanic & CSM

0. Before we get into it

Taking the 30-year anniversary of Pulp's *Common People* as a point of departure, this text seeks to critically analyse the shifting class landscape within the UK's cultural sector and art schools. It's important to acknowledge that there are many other groups who experience being marginalised as well as under and misrepresented within this context. From race and ethnicity, to gender and sexuality. The intention isn't to diminish this fact, or to engage in class reductionism, but to keep a clear focus in alignment with the themes of the song and the author's lived experience.

1. Common People (Like You?)

Ever feel like a song is following you around?

2025 marks the 30th anniversary of Pulp's *Common People*. That makes it a whole year younger than me. I was hardly kicking about on its release date but nonetheless, the track has been inescapably present throughout my life and work. From Kerrang! radio on my bus to school (R.I.P 105.2FM + the Sony Ericsson Walkman with it's tinny earphones and infrequent radio connection), to the Platform bar at Central Saint Martins (CSM) on my undergraduate degree, to the pub round the corner after my final show, to the Artbar on my postgraduate degree, to the climactic last song of 90's night at the Rivoli Ballroom in South London and too many more occasions to count.

The song itself has been resonant in all of these moments. Not just because it talks about class struggle, but because of the specific journey of social mobility that Jarvis Cocker won through leaving Sheffield, studying at Saint Martins and successfully using his creative talent (and class position) to carve out an alternative life-path. In-effect exiting the doldrums¹ of ordinary working class existence and life back-home via art school.

Having come from a poor, 'working class' background in a post-industrial city myself, I've also won a bit of social mobility (although not nearly as much as Jarvis Cocker!) through attending Central² Saint Martins and pursuing a career in the arts. Or, more specifically for me, graphic design (albeit a slightly strange variety of graphic design). As a result of this perceived mirroring of experience, I often hear the faint ghostly lyrics of Common People in the back of my mind when I walk into the building (which is now my workplace), as if from outside a venue, forming some sonic background to a conversation in the smoking area. Or something like that anyway.

'She came from Greece, she had a thirst for knowledge
She studied sculpture at Saint Martin's College
That's where I
Caught her eye'
(Pulp, 1995)

It's a different building now and a different institution, with a more academic flavour, but the idea and the point of the song remains. A vivid picture of class inequality. Depicted through satirical storytelling, all painted through a flawed and parasitic romance in an art school setting. In short, the wealthy, bourgeois sculpture student is infatuated with the main protagonists 'authentic', 'working class' coded existence, or 'struggle'.

'I wanna live like common people
I wanna do whatever common people do
Wanna sleep with common people
I wanna sleep with common people like you.'
(Pulp, 1995)

At this point in 2025, we have no shortage of narratives like this. Slavoj Zizek's dark and vampiric take on the positive role of the Titanic's iceberg in *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology* comes to mind here:

'We should ask, what role does the iceberg hitting the ship play in the development of the love story?

¹ Not to diminish anyone's experience. I'm talking here about my own perceptions as an angsty teenager in Brum (Birmingham UK). One which I've heard Jarvis Cocker also reference in his own journey leaving Sheffield.

² The Central part was added in 1989, after the merger of the *Central School of Art and Design* and *Saint Martin's School of Art*. Jarvis Cocker attended a different school in a different building, which wasn't yet recognised as a university, however the institution still benefits from its storied history and alumni from various class backgrounds.

My claim is here, a slightly cynical one. This would have been the true catastrophe - we can imagine how maybe after two, three weeks of intense sex in New York the love affair would somehow fade away. It's really a new version of one of the old favourite imperialist myths. The idea being that when the upper-class people lose their vitality, they need a contact with the lower classes. Basically, ruthlessly exploiting them in a vampire-like way... As it were, sucking from them, their life-energy.

Revitalised they can rejoin their secluded upper class life. All this is just a trap, something to lower our attention threshold as it were, to open us up to be ready to accept the true conservative message of rich people having the right to revitalise themselves by ruthlessly appropriating the vitality of the poor people.'
(Žižek, 2012, 00:45:10)

Perhaps the power-balance in this relationship isn't too dissimilar to that of the relationship between the precarious cultural worker and their client, boss or stakeholder. When navigating work (and study) in the creative industries, you become aware of this power imbalance quickly. This is the stark contrast of the experience of different social classes, which Jarvis illustrates vividly in all but 53 words.

'I took her to a supermarket
I don't know why but I had to start it somewhere
So it started there
I said, "Pretend you got no money"
And she just laughed and said, "Oh, you're so funny"
I said, "Yeah...
Well, I can't see anyone else smiling in here"
Are you sure"'
(Pulp, 1995)

Much like the Titanic. Art school (and to a lesser extent the creative industries) are one of the few spaces where people from all walks of life both encounter and work closely alongside each other. And, as depicted in the song lyrics and analysis above, this isn't always a seamless, comfortable or positive experience for those on the lower rungs of the ladder of social mobility.

Unlike the Titanic's poor 'authentic', 'working class' protagonist Jack (prime Leonardo Dicaprio), these class tensions are alive and kicking in the UK. In fact, I'd argue that it's near impossible to escape these 'tensions'. Afterall, this is a country steeped in its tradition (and its class prejudice) and it has been for a long, long time. As George Orwell eloquently summarises in his 1941 essay *The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius*:

England is the most class-ridden country under the sun. It is a land of snobbery and privilege, ruled largely by the old and silly.
(Orwell, 1941)

Oh, how far we've come since 1941!

30 years on from the release of *Common People*, we find ourselves in an even less equal society. More working class people are attending university and yet, recent research shows that the majority of people working in the creative industries are middle or upper class (shock)³. Amidst the degradation of our welfare state and diminishing space for leisure and expression, why is it that so many fetishise and appropriate working class culture? I'm not sure I have the word count (or attention span) to fully answer this one here. But, coming back once again to *Common People*, we have a set of instructions on how to become more authentically working class (even if you are secretly rich and attending art school).

'Rent a flat above a shop
Cut your hair and get a job
And smoke some fags and play some pool
Pretend you never went to school'
(Pulp, 1995)

2. Class Migrants in Culture

Being a working class person in a middle class industry

Whilst middle class people often aspire to these 'authentic' aesthetics associated with coming from a working class background, many working class people in creative work and education are seeking the luxury of a more middle-class coded lifestyle. Think resources, think time, think money and think space for your own creative freedom, or perhaps the ability to turn down work and spend quality time on refining and positioning 'your' practice. Notice the quote marks for 'your'. Surely, the less capital you have, the less your practice can truly be 'yours'. After all, as workers 'our' labour (or 'practice') is the thing we are selling under capitalism. The more privileged you are, the more your practice can truly be 'yours'.

Despite all of this, contemporary art schools laud the more cultural work. Privileged practices like critical and speculative design⁴ are valorised and responsibility is piled on the individual to pursue an ethical practice, which many just can't afford. Students and cultural workers from working-class backgrounds are at a constant disadvantage when compared to their wealthy peers. And so, working (and studying) in the creative industries today feels like desperately cosplaying as middle class. A sentiment I've found echoed across various memes and social media posts, aptly summed up by Daniel Oduntan below:

'You're from a working class background and you work in the arts;
oftentimes you are taking a pay-cut to experience middle-class

³See findings from: *A Class Act, Social Mobility and the Creative Industries*, Sutton Trust 2024

⁴ These are fields within graphic design, product design and architecture. Both sit outside of the predominant service-based nature of these fields. Short definitions below:

Critical design is a design approach that uses objects, media, and other design outputs to provoke discussion and critical thinking about the social, cultural, and ethical implications of design and technology.

Speculative design is a design practice that explores potential future scenarios, often using hypothetical products, systems, or services to provoke thought and discussion about the impact of emerging technologies and societal changes.

culture but without the middle-class safety net, congrats.'
(Oduntan, 2024)

In writing this, I realise that I probably project too much onto the song. Class tensions have become an obsession for me. Navigating study and employment in the creative industries, running a design studio for 11 years and working primarily with clients and collaborators in the arts has been bittersweet.

In my mind, the song has become a resonant score and backdrop for this bittersweet experience of class migration⁵. As though creative education (and work thereafter) is some kind of film and this is a poppy, upbeat theme song that plays in one of the first scenes. It underscores my experience of becoming what Paul O'Kane calls a 'Class Migrant' - someone 'falling upwards' from working class to middle class. A sentiment echoed in an interview Mark Leckey for the Lives Less Ordinary exhibition at Two Temple Place in 2025.

'My work is like a portal to my background, which the further I progress in the art world, becomes lost to me.'
(Leckey, 2025, p. 53)

In my eyes, this feeling of loss is inevitable. Tied to the material realities of working class life is a slightly more hazy sense of identity. As you win social mobility and embark on this journey of class migration, you might find yourself feeling like you've 'lost' a part of your identity. A diluted accent, a different vocabulary with different reference points, the lack of common ground with those back home ETC... This begs the question at what point does a 'code switch' become permanent? Perhaps the words below can serve as a mantra for class migration...

'Don't forget; but don't let it define you'
(Shaw, 2025, p. 5)

In short, if you come from a poor background and you want to work in the creative industries, you essentially need to 'migrate' from working class to middle class. This journey can be both isolating and alienating. Part of the trouble with social mobility is that it is only afforded to 'atomised' individuals (and never to the wider community they come from).

In addition to this, you're likely to find yourself in a situation where the majority of your peers 'just don't get it'. It, being you, your background, troubles or struggle. And how can we expect them to? After all it's a feeling they haven't had to experience, and perhaps one which their

⁵ 'Class Migrant' is a term borrowed from Paul O'Kane's, 'Classanoia or Falling Up', A handbook for class migrants, 2025. The title alludes to a kind of pathology and disorientation encountered by those who feel they might be necessarily migrating from one class to another, without any signposts or satisfactory sense of arrival. Meanwhile, another newly coined concept aims to allow 'class migration' to share vocabulary and compare experiences with geographic migration.

safety net makes it near impossible for them to comprehend. Again, it's all there in the song.

But still you'll never get it right
'Cause when you're laid in bed at night
Watching roaches climb the wall
If you called your dad he could stop it all, yeah
(Pulp, 1995)

3. The class landscape of the creative sector today

What happened to all the Common People?

I'm clearly not alone in this bittersweet feeling. Since I graduated from my postgraduate degree in 2017, I've seen a real rise in class-consciousness (and discourse) in the creative industries. From an uncomfortable and avoided topic, to the subject of exhibitions like *Lives Less Ordinary and People in Pubs*, to the collective organising of *Working Class Creatives Database* and *Working Arts Club* ETC... to the many individual creative practitioners reflecting their background and experience in their output (see Corbin Shaw or Dion Kitson for instance).

This common experience of being barred from entering the creative industries has been widely researched and evidenced by reports like *Panic! Social Class, Taste and Inequalities in the Creative Industries (2018)* and more recently *Sutton Trust's A Class Act (2024)*.

Just as this collective conversation around class struggle in the creative industries amps up, wealth inequality worsens year on year. Meanwhile, the number of working class, low-income, or straight-up poor kids pursuing a career in arts and culture is decreasing⁶. What was once a viable and popular route to escape class confinement is becoming a playground exclusively for a wealthy minority. And yet, as curator Samantha May Manton points out in the exhibition catalogue for *Lives Less ordinary*:

'working class' people from 'low-income' backgrounds with little to no generational wealth are both under and misrepresented in arts and culture.

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'Despite a wealth of evidence showing that social class is the most significant barrier to people aspiring to careers in the cultural industries, there seems to be little widespread interest from arts organisations in mobilising around the issue' (Manton, 2025, p. 15).

It's a topic which has been exhaustively researched, backed up with evidence and largely ignored by the majority of the political class,

⁶ See findings from: Creative Further Education in the four UK nations, published by Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre

creative sector and universities⁷ alike. We find ourselves at a moment in time where wealth inequality is being continually exacerbated, whilst public libraries, community centres, cultural institutions (insert any support structure available to working class people here) are being underfunded out of existence.

As a working class person in this country, you will find a reminder of your place in society everywhere you look. From the current monarch on our fivers (five pound notes) and postage stamps, to our shitty royalist national anthem. To live in the UK is to be consistently reminded that this is the kind of country where some people are born better than others, and this is something to somehow be proud of and to hold onto for dear life.

So coming back to Common People, one last time. It's more than just the song or the lyrics. It's the evidence of class migration, an alternative route. A way to use creativity as an escape (even if you don't see yourself as an academic). And again, it's just one example of the power of working class creativity. Something which has been instrumental in the creative sector. Giving our visual and sonic culture life. Creative output which is relatable and resonant for the many, not the few.

But as we've already noted, this particular path is becoming harder and harder. The journey I made from Brum to London to study, seems near impossible today without substantial familial support. And as we all know, creative opportunities are far less prominent outside of London.

But is this really the kind of country we want? One where only a rich minority can afford to work in the creative industries?

4. Towards a future for common people in the creative sector

Being the iceberg

Whilst this issue is being spoken about more, we're still miles off an equitable or equal creative sector. That being said, working class people are nothing, if not resilient and although the landscape is looking bleak for the majority of cultural workers, we have no shortage of talented individuals who are carving their own niches.

So, if you manage to poke through, leave the door open, pay it forward and make space for others who need it most, where you can. But don't forget that you're the exception to the rule. For every person that gets through there's plenty more people that don't. That's why we need collective (not just individual action).

From where I'm standing, we shouldn't see class as an individual identity politic to commodify for individual profit. We should see it as a collective material reality that unites us - a class struggle which we share 'in common', and a struggle worth fighting for together. Especially in the spaces where we have been barred and misrepresented most (like culture).

⁷ It's important here to acknowledge the hard work of Outreach or Widening Participation programmes at Universities. These have not only helped me, but also enabled me to help others, but is this really enough in our current climate? Especially considering how unaffordable it is to live in London as well as the fact that creative opportunities are so concentrated in the capital.

At the end of the day, the creative industries need working class voices, ideas and labour, just like Elizabeth needs Jack in the Titanic. And more importantly, working class kids deserve a seat at the table (and a cabin on the ship).

But maybe the more important question for working class creatives to ask is - how do we reorient this relationship? To become at the least, a little bit more like the iceberg hitting the ship, rather than the poor bastards drowning and freezing to death?

Silly puns aside, if we really want a place for Common People in the arts, then it's something we need to continually push (and work) for. Afterall, culture would be pretty shit without *Common People*!

'Sing along with the common people
Sing along and it might just get you through
Laugh along with the common people
Laugh along, even though they're, they're laughing at you
And the stupid things that you do
Because you think that poor is cool'
(Pulp, 1995)

Working Class Creative Organisations and Resources:

This is not the conclusion (you already read that!)

If you enjoyed this text, consider getting involved in, or donating to one of the organisations below (or another one!), so that we can collectively work towards a more equitable creative culture, as opposed to one dominated by the wealthy (often cosplaying as poor).

- Working Class Creatives Database
- Working Class British Art Network
- Museum as Muck
- Working Arts Club
- Designers + Cultural Workers (United Voices of the World)
- Artists Union England (or equivalent wherever you are based)

If you enjoyed the text, found it problematic, have anything to share, or just want to chat email ben@benca.in

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