

Snog, Marry or Avoid?

Class, taste and the making of selfhood in makeover television

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Screenshot from *Snog Marry Avoid?*. Source: <http://demimondetherapy.blogspot.com.au/2012/06/snog-marry-or-avoid.html>

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in the Department of Gender & Cultural Studies, University of Sydney.

October 2012.

ABSTRACT

'Snog, Marry or Avoid?: Class, taste and the labour of selfhood in makeover television', is an exploration of the way social stratification is visited on individual and collective corporeality, externalised through the mechanics of taste and regulated within the makeover television genre. Research for this thesis has been primarily informed by the theory of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who, in the latter half of the twentieth century, aimed to expose the role of culture as implicated in the functioning of power within capitalist societies. Bourdieu's work reminds us that social stratification is inevitably inscribed on corporeality, through the structure of habitus and its relation to capital. This thesis demonstrates how class often informs the subtext of makeover television – as middle-class tastes are held as the key to affecting legitimate selfhood – yet social difference is subsumed in the ideology of individualism. These concepts are developed with reference to *Snog Marry Avoid?* (2008--), a British 'make-under' series that subtly works to equate middle-class taste with a 'natural', desirable state of being. Through examination of this text, questions are raised about the arbitrariness of 'good' taste, the durability of habitus and how these constructs inhibit social mobility and interpersonal success. Ultimately, this thesis figures as an indictment of the way (classed) bodies are devalued by discourses of self-legitimation.

Keywords: Bourdieu, taste, makeover television, *Snog Marry Avoid*.

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Introduction

In March 2009, conservative Australian commentator Miranda Devine took to the Fairfax opinion pages to lament what she termed “a girl-poisoning culture”, evidenced in her mind by a group of female reality television contestants who, after failing to progress to the final stages of competition, agreed to pose nearly-nude for ‘lads’ mag’ *Zoo Weekly*. The television series in question was *Aussie Ladette to Lady* (2009), an adaptation of a successful British format, in which a group of working-class ‘ladettes’, each deemed “loud, drunk and dangerous” (Devine, 2009) are sent to a ‘posh’ English finishing school in order to be transformed into polite, demure ‘ladies’.

Without television, trashy magazines and free access to alcohol the ladettes became happy. They learned how to restrain their emotions, behave with dignity, walk with poise, speak politely, cook souffles, dance with a prince, sew a ball gown and serve afternoon tea sweetly to a bunch of ghastly British dowagers. The point seemed not so much in the skills but in the exertion of the discipline and self-control required to acquire them (Devine, 2009).

Devine’s account fails to register the way the narratives of redemption that transpire throughout the series, and indeed participants’ learning of ‘discipline’ and ‘self-control’, are unapologetically formulated on the grounds of class distinction. The working-class contestants, pathologised as binge drinkers bereft of self-esteem, are offered personal salvation only through acquiescence to the customs of the leisure classes. Moreover, the locally-funded version of the show indulges a hideously anachronistic imagining of Australians as rowdy, indecorous convicts and the English as their civilised (and civilising) masters. Instead of questioning these deeply contentious foundations, Devine, whose response is fairly typical of mainstream media readings of reality television, bemoans the fall (back down) from grace of those featured in *Zoo*. What her article suggests is that audiences are able to disregard the overt denigration of working-class

dispositions when committed in the name of respectability and taste. The *Ladette to Lady* franchise is even unusual in its explicit referencing of class – for most shows of its kind, social division is the *unspoken* subtext – yet widespread reaction remains concentrated on the apparently unruly bodies of the ladettes and what must be done to save them. In attempting to bury class difference in individual agency, this type of commentary forms a problematic construction which this thesis attempts to both explain and refute.

The body and social distinction

In many ways, the human body is culture made manifest – it is a site onto which ideology is perpetually both projected and dissected and where impressions of appearance come to mirror conceptions of personhood. Even theories regarding the metaphysical constitution of the self are not easily separated from the phenomenological experience of corporeality. Furthermore, awareness of bodily comport as socially produced, rather than strictly biologically engineered, renders material the philosophical tension between structure and agency. Far from trivial, aesthetic judgements related to the body reveal how social stratification is both inscribed upon and reproduced by individuals and collectives. As power is refracted through the cogs of the capitalist machine, opportunities for ruptures within the hierarchical system of social distinction may also present themselves, with bodies reclaimed as sites of cultural rebellion. The well-worn feminist manifesto that the personal is political seems here an enduring one: the minute details, indeed the specific stylisations, of our bodies have a broad significance in the way they communicate senses of self and community.

Throughout consumer culture, but particularly within the spheres of advertising and lifestyle media, the body is conceived of as a vehicle for personal pleasure and self-expression, with taste in modes of bodily maintenance held to be outer realisations of inner essence (Featherstone, 1991). Adhering to the ascendant free market rhetoric of conscious utility maximisation, the notion of choice is held as sacrosanct, in that the ‘right’ choices are seen to afford social mobility and individual success. Put simply, the body is framed as a blank canvas, primed for modification and manipulation via consumption practices relating to appearance (dress, cosmetic use,

fitness regimes and so on). This logic is attenuated by the fact that choices regarding bodily presentation are not produced in a historical or cultural vacuum – that is, meanings that converge around, say, a choice of hair dye, make sense only within a pre-existing order of signification over which any one individual has little influence. Instances of ‘self-expression’ are mostly ancillary to the class system that attaches uneven value to tastes in the first place.

Although many critical approaches might be useful in discussing the ongoing relevance of this formation, this thesis will approach the meaningful body primarily with reference to French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who is probably best remembered for articulating the concept of cultural capital, a term frequently heard in non-academic parlance today. For Bourdieu, cultural capital names the central coalescence of culture and economy under a capitalist system and is most clearly manifested in the notion of taste. In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984), arguably his magnum opus, Bourdieu sets out to critique the Kantian model of good taste as accessed through a ‘pure’ gaze, showing this to be an ideal premised on class competition and a bourgeois denial of the social order. Where popular taste involves applying the ethos of everyday function to art, the Kantian disposition is removed from this, as it is dependent on a distance from necessity that is premised on privilege (Bourdieu, 1984, 5). Kant’s classical formulation of taste, Bourdieu emphasises, proves incompatible with working class concerns – a reality distorted to explain the ‘innate’ superiority of the leisure classes. The central thesis of *Distinction* is that taste is a socially produced phenomenon, not only in that certain preferences are largely derived from our place in the social order (particularly as they are imparted through family and education), but also that these preferences then work as markers of personal ‘distinction’: “Taste classifies, and it

classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make” (Bourdieu, 1984, 6). Distinction enables class difference to be (mis)construed as intrinsic, granting credence to the structure of capitalist inequality and ensuring its replication. Under this system, power may be levelled through the identification, possession and embodiment of what has been naturalised as ‘good’ taste, that is, the (largely arbitrary) preferences of the dominant class in a particular setting. This power can be summarised as cultural capital. This theory outlines the workings of cultural capital, taste and distinction as integral to a structuralist condition, in that if it is true of one cultural artefact, it must also be true of all others. However, it *does* allow for movement within the system: cultural capital can be consciously acquired (though this demands the investment of time and energy – resources not freely available to all) and its value fluctuates between given settings. As it is implicitly infinitely variable, it is a theory perhaps best understood in its application to particular objects and practices – an argument that has indeed informed the development of this thesis.

A sound understanding of Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital calls for examination of the separate yet related concepts of social, economic and symbolic capital. Social capital may be understood in terms of the networks created by individuals predicated on notions of trust and shared values and limited through institutionalised forms of power (Bourdieu, 1997, 51). Though distinct from cultural capital, the two mechanisms often enjoy a reciprocal relationship, that is, accrual of cultural capital can permit access to certain social networks, while association with a particular group can facilitate the acquisition of cultural capital. Indeed, social capital offers credentials for individuals, in that membership of a collective implies the general

approval of that collective. For most, the accumulation and maintenance of social capital requires labour in the form of invested time, yet those who possess inherited social capital, “symbolised by a great name, are able to transform all circumstantial relationships into lasting connections” (Bourdieu, 1997, 52). Hence, the (well-established) rich and famous are endowed with a level of social capital that is highly sought after. Economic capital is perhaps the most easily understood form of capital identified by Bourdieu, in that it is the access to money and ownership of other assets. This cannot necessarily be translated to social or cultural capital (though in many circumstances, these are the preserve of the wealthy). Wealth serves the power to obtain some goods and services immediately, though others are limited through the networks of social capital and the recognition of cultural capital. Economic capital is, for Bourdieu, at the root of the other forms of capital, but its transformation requires the investment of labour and time (Bourdieu, 1997, 54). Symbolic capital is a (non-material) mark of honour that acts as a guarantee of a person’s legitimate worth. A degree from a prestigious university is an oft-cited example of symbolic capital (!), as it represents an institutional affirmation of competence and capacity. The problem with symbolic capital is that it is easily misrepresented as something other than capital – that is, earned solely on the basis of individual merit and disinterested in economic value (Bourdieu, 1997, 49).

In order to demonstrate the way these forms of capital are inscribed on human subjectivity, Bourdieu introduced the ‘structuring structure’ of ‘habitus’, which represents the interplay between external stratification and individual action. For Bourdieu, the notion of the fully agential self is a bourgeois fabrication (Skeggs, 2004, 83) – instances of individual expression are seen not as the result of conscious will, but

of structure's lasting impression upon disposition. Defined as *habitus*, such "manners of being, seeing, acting and thinking" (Bourdieu, 2005, 27), dictate the likelihood of particular individual improvisations taking place within a given setting. Habitus is an acquired (as opposed to innate) character, which, as the very product of social conditions, is usually similar amongst people who experience the same social conditions – members of the same social class, possessing similar amounts of cultural and economic capital. Habitus accounts for the perpetuation of inequality through a resignation of individuals to its seeming inevitability – an inevitability legitimated through difference empirically inscribed on disposition. Class identity is therefore naturalised through the commonalities of habitus, frustrating challenges to the capitalist order. Habitus is "history turned into nature" (Bourdieu, 1977, 79) – our unconscious habits are largely determined by our position in the social order, yet we forget this simply because these habits *are* what we know and what we default to. Because it informs the likely or potential course of action of each agent habitus "must not be considered in isolation" (Bourdieu, 2005, 31), but rather, should be thought of in terms of the infinite 'fields', or social contexts, in which human interaction takes place and dispositions are engaged. A field is analogous to a game in which social bodies compete for legitimate power, calling upon the improvisations made available through habitus that are able to demonstrate mastery over or possession of different forms of capital. Each is governed by its own internal logic, and this is how the value of capital fluctuates – some fields only recognise cultural capital, while others are more explicitly economic.

Bourdieu (2005, 28) uses the theory of habitus as a challenge to the rational actor in the free market, arguing that disposition is more likely than the conscious

maximisation of utility to inform individual action. This calls attention to a thematic motif present throughout Bourdieu's work: the tension between the rigid prescriptions of structuralism and the existence of the discerning social agent (a figure advanced by capitalist ideology). Through emphasis on the word 'style', as in 'lifestyle', Bourdieu (2005, 29) conceives of habitus as explaining the loose systems through which individual and collective acts become common or habitual practice. The word 'loose' should here too be emphasised because, in being subject to history, habitus can be *changed* by history, that is, through experience and education. The theoretical challenge constituted by the concept of habitus is indeed a question of permanence and durability. Towards the end of his career, Bourdieu increasingly underlined its dynamic condition: "habitus change constantly in response to new experiences" (Bourdieu, 2000, cited in Hillier & Rooksby, 2005, 401). It must, however, be conceded that social positioning does discriminate between the likelihood of different experiences. Moreover, there is difficulty involved in adapting to drastic social change, especially for those who are well positioned in pre-existing 'states of the game' and therefore reluctant to embrace changes to the 'rules of play' (Hillier & Rooksby, 2005, 401). Though tending to reproduce themselves, dispositions are long-lasting, rather than permanent (Bourdieu, 2005, 29) – habitus constrains, rather than determines, thought and action. For most of us, habitus is best described as evolutionary, subject to ongoing modification that is observable with the passing of time.

Bourdieu's theories compel consideration of the importance of the body to capitalist inequality as a site through which class difference is made to seem natural. In situating taste and habit within a broad system of social difference, his work is especially useful in contradicting consumerist imaginings of the body as a canvas for

pure, unmitigated self-expression. Bourdieu's analysis of class preference and the way it sits uncomfortably with an ideology of individualisation (one often posited in consumer culture) indeed forms the basis of this thesis. For Bourdieu, the habitus is unquestionably a gendered structure, though this idea was not given his full attention until 1998 in *Masculine Domination*, a work developed in the late stages of his life, which examines the dehistoricisation of processes related to female subordination, ensuring its perpetuation. This thesis operates from the same assumption of gender difference as a social construct, but is more concerned with how representations of class taste come to inform the acceptable embodiment of gender, specifically femininity.

Economies of selfhood in reality television

Bourdieu's writing gives pause as to the constitution of (classed) bodies within contexts where class difference itself is assumed to have declined. In 'The Moral Economy of Person Production: the Class Relations of Self-Performance on "Reality" TV' (2009), Beverley Skeggs argues that reality television, which entertains through the dramatisation of the individualisation narrative, is one such setting. This is a popular narrative in which individualism is seen to have replaced the strictures of class in efficiently accounting for social difference. It is understood as a peculiarly post-industrial movement towards the performance of self-responsibility and self-management, where "the individual is now compelled to make her/himself the centre of her/his own life plan and conduct" (Skeggs, 2009, 628). In relating a thesis of individualism, Skeggs does not intend to "reproduce the liberal myth of the *self-determining* individual" (Redden, 2007, 159, emphasis added), which downplays important mechanisms of social reproduction such as inheritance and education. Rather, she calls upon this understanding to demonstrate that in modern societies of individuals, acts of self-legitimation are central to the important project of identity formation. Subjects vie to demonstrate personal worth through the embodiment and display of capital. Though uneven access to such capital remains a reality that is imprinted on corporeality, the compulsion to prove self-worth demands conscious and continued enterprise, experimentation and play with individual stores of value (Skeggs, 2009, 632). As such, Skeggs (2009, 632) puts forth a "labour theory of person-production [which, as] part of an economy of personhood", is predicated on the process of self-investment – the time and energy expended in the accrual and display of capital.

The key to this understanding is that, as anticipated by habitus, the 'right' choices demand more work for some than for others.

Reality television brings economies of personhood to life through its focus on 'ordinary' subjectivity and the everyday performance of self-legitimation. 'Ordinariness' is an epithet commonly employed in reality television discourse not only to describe the presence of non-professionals within that media sphere, but also to connote working-class status (Skeggs & Wood, 2012, 35). 'Ordinariness', though able to signify both authenticity and a denial of the trappings of privilege, is often used to imply a dearth of cultural capital which inhibits social mobility beyond commonplace or mundane experience. Rather than name class explicitly – though there are, as stipulated, exceptions to this rule – the genre indeed relies on the audience's ability to identify the values symbolically displayed on and in relation to the bodies of participants. These values subtly reference social division, with working-class habitus often signified through a spectacle of noisy excess, which highlights a failure to conform to middle-class standards of respectability (Skeggs, 2009, 637). The relationship invoked between middle-class taste and 'virtues' like restraint and modesty has enjoyed a long, compelling and relatively unchallenged history. This can be linked in some part back to Bourdieu's (1984, 6) appraisal of taste as informed by distance from necessity, where investment in the notion of quality over quantity is held to contrast with the utilitarian ethos of the working classes. The value of understatement represents a public denial of carnal enjoyment, instead emphasising "the superiority of those who can be satisfied with the sublimated, refined, disinterested, gratuitous, distinguished pleasures forever closed to the profane" (Bourdieu, 1984, 7). Reality television's presentation of subjects in pursuit of self-legitimation is ensnared in this moral management of taste, as

restraint is a technique made integral to the proper development of the superior reflexive self.

This thesis is particularly interested in the way reality television frames middle-class taste as not only 'good' or 'better', but also, increasingly, as 'normal'. Skeggs notes that these tastes have been dislodged from a classed history, coming to "define the Western social itself" (2009, 629). In settings dominated by a 'post-class' rhetoric, practices outside of the normative particular set of values are marked as sub-standard aberrations. The "growing 'stylization of life' [which] marks an apparent displacement of traditional class cultures with cultures of consumption" (Lewis, 2008, 8) foregrounds such tension. The notion that, via consumption, (rational, agentic) individuals are free to choose the way they would like to live overlooks the fact that these 'choices' are always limited by access to capital and as such serve to reproduce social distinction. Within reality television, middle-class competency is recoded as 'neutral' skill set to which everyone can and should aspire (Lewis, 2008, 8), an assumption that amounts to a denial of habitus.

Makeover television: transformations of taste

Makeover television, a popular subset of the reality genre, is an especially fascinating object of study due to its explicit intervention in processes of self-making. Though traversing a broad range of subject material, these programmes commonly hinge on the critical reading of (individual) habitus, usually undertaken by an ‘expert’ or team of such figures, which identifies apparent deficiency and thus establishes a problem to be corrected. Various pedagogical techniques, including humiliation and surveillance, are then employed to incite change in participants (Ouellette & Hay, 2008, 101). For example, in the British series *What Not to Wear* (2001-2007), participants are stripped to their underwear in front of cameras to have their bodies critically assessed by the show’s hostesses. This type of television rests on the premise that conscious amendment to corporeality (though this is not the only target of such series) grants coherence and stability, endowing subjects with personal agency and social mobility. The process relies on visible markers of status and taste (cultural and symbolic capital) as articulating the essence of selfhood and those overseeing the makeover become like a “master semiotician, altering the sign (self), by changing the relationship between signifier (appearance) and signified (perceived meaning)” (Weber, 2009, 17). As such, these programmes are designed to equip participants with knowledge sufficient in discriminating between certain styles and their symbolic worth.

This investment in free market rhetoric of the right ‘choices’ as affording individual claims on space, selfhood and success, serves to obscure the complexities of class that structure aesthetic judgments and enable certain subject positions to be coded as inherently deficient and requiring transformation. Within the makeover subgenre, narrative development is often covertly organised around class relations, in

that “one group’s standards are found lacking and in need of improvement, or conflict is generated around different standards” (Skeggs, 2009, 628). However, explicit reference to or questioning of structural inequality is largely avoided through the deliberate personalisation of the makeover story. The commonly contained framing of each participant’s experience and isolation of personal deficiency allows class identity to be subsumed in individual idiosyncrasy and pathology. However much class may be disavowed within these texts, instruction in the acquisition of cultural and symbolic capital, aimed at participants and audience members alike, amounts to the legitimisation of norms that are often intimately linked to those tastes represented as middle-class (Lewis, 2008, 81). Several scholars have indeed mounted the argument that these programmes offer the chance for working-class participants to be made to feel ‘normal’, through their adherence to the universalising practices of the middle class (Skeggs, 2009, 629; Weber, 2009, 12).

This reconstitution of normalcy is, for Skeggs (2009, 635-6), made apparent through the structuring of selfhood by a ‘depth model’, in which inner qualities are revealed via psychic excavation. The notion of an authentic, inner self is deeply enmeshed in middle-class concerns about uniqueness and individuality, yet makeover television engages in the “paradoxical production of *normative uniqueness*: as if the individual is unique, but actually corresponds to the middle-class particular-universal” (Skeggs, 2009, 636). This tells of a tension central to the makeover process: “to communicate an ‘authentic self’, one must overwrite and replace the ‘false’ signifiers” (Weber, 2009, 4) of the ‘before’ body through capitulation to specific requirements. Important here is the idea that the makeover reveals, rather than constructs, agency: the ‘before’ body (or home, wardrobe, car, et cetera) represents a self that is

salvageable, as long as time and energy are invested into its repair (Weber, 2009, 7). Of course, this repair, which usually involves the cultivation of specific “taste literacies” (Redden, 2007, 158), amounts to a form of labour on participants’ behalf, in that they are compelled to consciously assess and revise their own habitus against prescriptions that may appear counter-intuitive or even completely alien, fuelling dramatic tension. Such performance of labour undermines the simplistic rhetoric of reflexive consumer-citizenship, inadvertently drawing attention to the uneven distribution of capital as predicting, if not determining, individual success.

This is just one of the inherent tensions of a television genre riddled with inconsistencies. In dramatising Skegg’s proposed ‘economy of personhood’, reality television, and more specifically, makeover programming, is governed by a fundamental disconnect between emphasis on individual agency and explicit intervention into habitus. Ironically, participants are seen as empowered only after they submit to standards that are usually derived from pre-existing class structures. Makeover television functions by the reading of particular bodies, and tastes as hindering the proper development of a coherent self. Though class is unlikely to be explicitly named in such settings, it is made visible as individualised deficiency is corrected through amendment to particular consumption habits. Working-class participants are admonished for their failure to conform to the supposedly universal standards of middle-class practice, yet these are frequently standards they would have never had the capital to recognise in the first place. In short, “reality television repeatedly asks participants to perform an impossibility: the self-legitimation of themselves as invested in that to which they do not have access” (Skeggs, 2009, 639). Makeover television is formulated on a quick-fix philosophy usually ill-equipped to deal with the durable

strictures of habitus that it attempts to erase. Though the 'after' body is presented as the end point in a teleological process of improvement, questions linger about the longevity of change, especially when it is usually concentrated on one aspect of a participant's life.

Within makeover television, the imperative for improvement is emphasised through the commentary of lifestyle specialists (chefs, gardeners, stylists and so on), whose advice is consistently deferred to. These 'experts' are anointed as arbiters of taste, distinguishing, through advice and their own example, between positive models of conduct and consumption and those identified as inherently lacking. In many cases, the lifestyle expert functions as a counterpoint to the alleged incompetence of the makeover participant. The expert's knowledge serves to accentuate the participant's failings, with the clash of tastes made a source of humour or dramatic tension. Additionally, resistance to the advice of the expert may be pathologised as avoidant behaviour or the willful flouting of authority (Philips, 2005, 223). This power relationship demonstrates the legitimisation of one taste literacy over another, mandating submission to the makeover process. The revelation of the 'after' body (or other site of transformation) is a final affirmation of the expert's good judgment. Critically, there exists a parallel between these contemporary figures and Bourdieu's (1984, 325) "cultural intermediaries ... producers of cultural programmes on TV and radio or the critics of 'quality' newspapers and magazines", identified as petit-bourgeois peddlers of middlebrow culture. The importance of this similarity lies not only in Bourdieu's recognition of 'intermediaries' as attempting to legitimate particular class tastes, but also in his claim that these roles signify an "ethic of liberation" (Bourdieu, 1984, 371) – an ethic through which the social hierarchy is problematically obscured by the apparently boundless possibilities of consumer acumen. The makeover television

expert, a contemporary incarnation of the cultural intermediary, heralds a similar tension between class structure and individual agency.

While some experts offer pronouncements that are explicitly informed, even seen as justified, by their social standing – Trinny and Susannah, the decidedly ‘posh’ hosts of *What Not to Wear* are an oft-cited example – other more socially mobile figures stand for the democratisation of certain taste literacies. Within the televisual sphere, the successful embodiment and display of subject-specific cultural capital suffices for proficiency, allowing positions of apparent expertise to be assumed by laypeople. That these men and women may be without professional accreditation or special standing within their field of ‘expertise’ is rarely problematised. The mainstream success of series such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003-2007) signals not only a relaxing of the terms through which expertise may be qualified but also a diversification in the source and character of knowledge valued by television audiences. However, the extended validity of this claim is challenged by the way in which knowledge is likely co-opted for commercial appeal (Lewis, 2008, 81). Lifestyle makeover television is routinely debased as a ‘dumbed-down’ form of entertainment – this concern, though certainly testament to the genre’s broadly accessible register, is lent credence by the way specialised knowledges are decontextualised, as they are condensed in to gimmicky rules, tips and checklists.

These ‘tricks of the trade’ are broadcast to assure participants and viewers alike that a certain level of mastery is achievable, whether it be over their body, kitchen or wardrobe. In some instances, a show’s ‘expert’ is made to stand in for this purported achievability. Celebrity chef Jamie Oliver, whose initial popularity in the late 1990s was likely derived from his affable, ‘Essex boy’ public persona, is probably the most notable

example of this (Powell & Prasad, 2007, 64). Oliver's forays into television (which have not always been makeover themed, but have consistently coded him as an authority on food) have capitalised on a retooling of cooking as compatible with a normative heterosexual masculinity. Famously peppering his vocabulary with 'mockney' lingo, such as his signature exclamation "pukka!", Oliver trades in the currency of casual cool, disavowing the labour of cooking and instead emphasising its simple, sociable pleasures. In downplaying the years of rigorous formal training he has completed, this laid-back persona amounts to a form of misrepresentation common to the realm of reality television. "The personality designer 'knows' what is tasteful and stylish without apparently ever having learnt, their knowledge is presented as 'natural' and 'innate'" (Philips, 2005, 221). This apparent innateness shores up the expert's stock of cultural capital, as Bourdieu (1984, 330) explains: "in a whole host of markets...the important thing is to know without ever having learnt" in order to demonstrate one's 'intrinsic' superiority. In emphasising (perhaps to some extent affecting) a working-class habitus, Oliver embodies a tension between accessibility and impracticality that fuels the continued economic viability of the makeover genre. A sense of possibility is engaged, yet the cultural capital (background, formal education) necessary to actually yield expert authority looms just out of reach for most.

The television makeover presents itself as an "agent of care" (Weber, 2009, 15), without which participants would be doomed to continue living in the unfulfilled, ineffective 'before'. Crucially, in many instances, it is only through the eyes of the expert that a participant is actually made to feel inadequate, as they seem to be otherwise content with their taste and habits. That makeover television has the best interests of its participants at heart is tested by its often homogenising intent, which sits

uncomfortably with the ethics of individualism that is also uncritically activated.

Perhaps this (ill)logic makes the makeover susceptible to tears in its fabric of pretension, as attention is drawn to the arbitrary, unfair and downright unkind ways in which people are classed as lacking. “Participants do challenge their coding and loading through their self-performances” (Skeggs, 2009, 640). The impetus to abide by middle-class taste may in fact foster unexpected points of resistance.

Slap addicts and makeup mad minxes

Snog Marry Avoid? (2008--), touted as “the world’s first and only ‘make-under’ show”, is a British reality television series aired on BBC3 that crafts narratives of self-transformation implicitly dependent on the performance of class and its attendant expectations. The program’s premise is a simple one: each week, a handful of apparently outlandish young women (and occasionally men) deemed “in serious need of some style counsel” are stripped of fake tan, heavy make-up and hair extensions in order for their ‘natural beauty’ to be revealed. The show’s title is taken from a question posed to (male) members of the public regarding the appearance of the female participants, both before and after the make-under takes place. Initial responses are almost uniformly negative: if given the chance, those polled would likely ‘avoid’ the woman in question. Post make-under, public reception is consistently kinder, with most men asked admitting that they would be willing to ‘snog’ or even ‘marry’ the reformed “slap addict”. The process is overseen by POD (Personal Overhaul Device), a computer voiced by an uncredited actress that denigrates the appearance of participants before dictating the terms of their transformation. In exhibiting an explicitly interventionist logic, POD’s prescriptions replicate certain rigid cultural imperatives related to (female) standards of beauty and dress. Syndicated internationally, *Snog Marry Avoid?* speaks to the currency of these imperatives within a media sphere of increasingly global proportions.

The show’s modus operandi is patently formulated on intersecting understandings of ‘good’ taste, respectability and the embodiment of these values as anticipating success, specifically of the interpersonal kind. Class is predictably gestured to, rather than explicitly named, initially in scenes centred on participants’ everyday lives, that provide insight into habitus through documentation of occupations, friends,

partners, beauty regimes and leisure activities. Many of these sequences culminate in a 'night on the town' involving heavy drinking, provocative dancing, sexual encounters and other behaviour which, put to a soundtrack of thumping dance music, is unsubtly implied to be unruly and excessive. As the 'garish' appearance of these participants is held to be an extension of such everyday moral failing, this idea of excess is weaved throughout the series, with POD railing against what is deemed 'too much' makeup, fake tan and exposed skin. This rubric has clearly been inherited from a fabled distinction between middle-class polite civility and the supposedly coarse, indecorous nature of the working class. Restraint is central to achieving a POD-approved look – in applying Bourdieu's analysis of class taste, it can be deduced that this concern is informed by a distance from necessity that allows for a nuanced and subtle approach to personal presentation. On the other hand, the show's participants, many with limited means, have learnt to apply a utilitarian ethos to their body maintenance routine and hence embrace the undeniably immediate impact of 'fakery' and 'slap'. Whether or not Bourdieu's hypothesis here seems unsustainable, what can be empirically stated about *Snog Marry Avoid?* is that a significant majority of POD's projects are marked as working class through their employment, accent and locality. As such, the make-under process is designed to make inroads into working class habitus.

In *Snog Marry Avoid?*, the role of the expert is filled by POD, an animated computer with a disembodied voice that has a clearly feminine inflection. Despite ongoing speculation by viewers, the identity of the person that plays 'her' (as 'she' is referred to by the show's hostesses) has not been divulged to the general public. This calculated secrecy has a number of important ramifications for the way POD is able to interact with participants. Primarily, it gives her license to make scathing comments

about others' appearance – comments that could probably not be made by a public figure without warranting accusations of bullying and tarnishing a celebrity brand. Behind the facade of an electronic eye, POD is safe to hurl insults – “your skin looks like a leathery old suitcase”, “only a drunk person would think it’s nice to look like a hairy Satsuma [orange]” – without risking a counter-attack or reputational fall-out. She is a petty tyrant, who issues edicts (“the UK must consist only of natural beauties!”) with hyperbolic conviction. The hostesses seem to regard POD as a law unto herself, mostly shrugging off her behaviour. The power unevenly apportioned to POD is maintained by their lack of intervention, which serves as tacit endorsement of her assorted indictments. The message broadcast is that POD is harsh but fair and that her unkindness is ultimately justified by her possession of superior taste. Unlike Frost or Taylor, she is impervious to criticism about her appearance and questioning of her natural beauty credentials. To ask about a cartoon computer’s level of experience would indeed be absurd, yet because of this very absurdity, the person behind POD is able to take on the role of an esteemed expert without any qualifications attached or required.

Moreover, the dehumanisation of POD allows her to assume a stance of technical authority, as if her analyses are somehow grounded in well-established fact. *Snog Marry Avoid?*'s (obviously one hundred percent peer-reviewed) scientific method is demonstrated at various stages of the make-under. The vox pop interviews are phrased as “phase 1: public analysis”, while amendments made to each participant’s appearance are said to be informed by their unique “natural beauty data”, as if analogous to a strand of DNA. In being described as “only understand[ing] natural beauty”, POD advances the idea that there exists a fixed set of criteria (so stable it could be programmed into a computer) that can be used to define good taste in fashion and

cosmetics. The apparent innateness of taste central to the show's premise is hence replicated and reinforced through the figure of POD, whose sole motivation, "to rid the world of fakery," is made clear from the series' very beginning. Though viewers may well make certain assumptions about her identity, POD's sustained anonymity works to conceal the class character of her judgements, as neutrality is conferred on her assumptions. The character of POD represents a playful subversion of contemporary faith in technology – she is a gimmick, certainly, but with a camera lens for a face, she is able to affect omniscience in a way that a fallible mortal simply could not.

The participants, however, apparently revel in the very artifice of their own image. Consensus amongst them participants is that the way they look affords both enjoyment and confidence. What is particularly revealing about *Snog Marry Avoid?* is the huge discrepancy between this pleasure in appearance and the negative criticism received from both POD and those that would choose to 'avoid' the participants. This inconsistency speaks to a way in which knowledge of 'good' taste is disseminated throughout social fields, filtered, revised and distorted in response to uneven access to different forms of capital. The women of *Snog Marry Avoid?* largely exhibit a hyper-feminised, exaggerated appropriation of the markers of conventional beauty. In embodying a crude approximation of what has been normalised as archetypical female attractiveness in the social context presumed by the series (flowing hair, bronzed skin, large breasts and so on), the participants are presented as deluded objects of fun for an audience that 'knows better'. Moreover, the series' vox pop interviews, which are likely edited to remain consistent with the programme's narrative arc, employ the figure of the 'man on the street' as a stand-in for 'normal' and 'reasonable' judgement that marks the participants as ignorant aberrations. *Snog Marry Avoid?* operates on a jarring clash

of habitus, engineered through the splicing of social fields and the bringing together of actors (both onscreen and at home) that would otherwise be unlikely to ever meet. In order to validate the opinion of the armchair critic, the series decontextualises the lives of participants, working to discount the ways in which their appearance might actually be positively received in their own day-to-day encounters. While they may lack the cultural capital necessary to pass POD's test, many boast that the way they look lends them occupational advantages and sexual success. (A barmaid admits "I do love the attention [of male customers]", while another claims "when I go out, I never take any money with me because guys will come up to me and buy me drinks – why spend my money when I can spend someone else's?") However, these forms of status are implicitly denigrated by the series as they are shown not to translate to broader social spheres in which symbols of 'respectability' are more highly valued. Several participants (including aspiring lawyers, policewomen and flight attendants) agree to the make-under process in order to achieve an appearance that conforms to the expectations of their desired professional field. This not only demonstrates self-awareness of the specificity, that is, the contextual contingency, of their own appeal, but also the difficulty of negotiating a sense of identity in a world where this appeal and, by extension, personal disposition, is institutionally (though not universally) devalued. That some participants believe themselves to be incapable of fashioning a 'sophisticated', 'work appropriate' look without the help of POD demonstrates the way habitus shapes and, more importantly, impinges upon individual ambition, frustrating the persistent rhetoric of self-made success.

Throughout *Snog Marry Avoid?*, certain women are held as exemplars of that natural beauty to which the 'slap addicted' should aspire, with the make-under process

involving participants choosing a celebrity they would like their new look to be modelled after. On offer are mostly 'A-list' film stars the likes of Kate Winslet and Scarlett Johansson, who embody a significant amount of simultaneous cultural, symbolic and economic capitals recognised and valued within an international media sphere. Though the 'after' appearance of participants rarely bears any specific resemblance to the chosen celebrity – testament to the homogenising effects of the make-under process – these figures are important in demonstrating the way celebrated models of femininity can be intimately linked to outward displays of class taste. By contrast, celebrities often cited by participants as 'style icons', such as British glamour models Jodie Marsh and Katie Price, are predictably defamed throughout the series. The former, who, in the show's second season, agreed to a make-under herself (it didn't last long!), is identified as POD's arch-enemy, that is, an unadulterated embodiment of 'bad' taste unworthy of her own celebrity and financial success. POD's antipathy towards Marsh metonymically summarises the stigma of the 'page three girl', in that "economic capital is attainable, but the boundaries of respectable femininity remain unchallenged and the legitimate acquisition of social capital is denied" (Coy and Garner, 2010, 671). The distinct ways in which different celebrities are framed, even just in passing, lends credence to the observation that "it is not just volume and composition of capital but also how one accumulates capital that makes an important difference to its capacity to be converted" (Skeggs, 2009, 629, emphasis retained).

Also worthy of critical attention in this context is the series hostess, who is cast as the kindly foil to POD's aggressive tyrant, softening the blow of cruel judgement with a sympathetic ear. This was a role filled for the show's first four seasons (2008-11) by former member of girl band Atomic Kitten, Jenny Frost, before her replacement in 2012

by model-cum-comedian Ellie Taylor. Regularly complimented by POD, these women are shown to be compliant with 'tasteful' beauty ideals that seemingly explain their attractiveness and success. What is interesting about Manchester girl Frost and Essex-born Taylor is that each hail from locations that do not necessarily figure in an English popular imagination as 'respectable'. In particular, Taylor's birthplace has come to be seen as synonymous with nouveau riche excess drawn on and furthered by the 'gauche' docu-soap *The Only Way is Essex* (Blakely, 2010). Frost and Taylor, however, both pass as sufficiently respectable through their general acquiescence to POD's prescriptions, and as such stand for the way social mobility is seen to be afforded through simple adoption of the 'right' styles. In fact, Frost claims to have been fired from the series on account of her post-baby breast augmentation (Metro TV Reporter, 2012), which, if true, would demonstrate the highly conditional nature of her appearance as acceptable to the series' standards. The sympathetic yet ambiguous presence of the hostess invokes a tension between desire for status and the highly fraught challenge of reconditioning habitus.

In poking fun at regional identities, *Snog Marry Avoid?* creates an apparent connection between 'good' taste and social geography, which the hostesses are able to circumvent through submission to 'natural beauty'. For its fifth season, the show's format was modified to include a 'road show' dimension, in which POD and Taylor set up shop at a different location in Britain each week. This allows increased attention to be paid to regional variations in body maintenance, such as Liverpool's bold, powdered 'Scouse brow' and the more-is-more 'Geordie blow dry' from Newcastle. Taylor is made to sample these techniques for herself, usually to humorous effect, before being ordered by POD to return to her 'natural' look. She is often barely able to conceal her

embarrassment (and even distress) at local reactions to this experimentation. Of her so-called 'Essex facial' she remarks that "the worrying thing about this [dark spray-on] tan is that pretty much everyone I've asked has really liked it", while she is even less tactful about her Scouse brows: "You think it looks good? Are you kidding me?". In previous seasons, *Snog Marry Avoid?* had been characterised by an imprecise sense of (British) location – the changes wrought to the show's format instead foreground place as a crucial determinant of taste. The decision to take the programme 'on tour' seems to have been made solely for the purpose of indulging in these stereotypes, which enables the conflation of local identities and 'poor' taste. Under these circumstances, the make-under can be even more clearly conceived of as a vehicle for the flattening out of regional difference, which is framed as anomalous and aberrant, encouraging participants to adopt an appearance that can be nationally, if not internationally, read as tasteful. The imperative towards the erasure of geographic markings speaks to economies of increasing scale and homogenising standards, in which subjects are compelled to conform to the tastes of the "particular-universal" (Skeggs, 2009, 629) middle class in order to affect personal legitimacy and marketability.

It should be noted here that, while the overwhelming majority of POD's targets are female (whose experience indeed forms the basis of this discussion), *Snog Marry Avoid?* does occasionally perform make-unders on male subjects. That these participants have the apparent audacity to wear make-up (usually not even close to the extent of their female counterparts) is enough to outrage POD, who swiftly overhauls their appearance to reflect conventional imaginings of masculinity. This underscores a connection threaded throughout the series between good taste and socially sanctioned, or even celebrated, embodiments of gender. This connection is important to the

conception of class as impressed upon corporeality through taste, which is at the crux of this thesis. Like other shows of its 'reality' breed, *Snog Marry Avoid?* is premised on appraisal of and intervention into apparently sub-standard taste and the series focuses on subjects deemed unruly and excessive, two values often culturally coded onto working-class bodies. This is not coincidental – though class is never explicitly named, the rubric of taste continually drawn upon is consistent with middle class ideals of respectability and restraint, posited as universally 'good' or 'normal'.

Make-under mythology

Although the originality of the make-under formula is insisted upon throughout the series, *Snog Marry Avoid?* generally adheres to well-established conventions of makeover television, with techniques common to the genre, including humiliation and surveillance, incorporated throughout the series. The transformations undertaken in the programme are governed by a disciplinary regime, veiled by the discourse on ‘natural beauty’, which compels subjects to reflect upon and reform the representational attributes of their own state of being. At the beginning of the make-under, participants are made to justify the condition of their own appearance. “What in POD’s name *are you wearing?*”, they are usually asked. This calls upon self-reflexivity, working to establish the idea that people are individually, rather than structurally, accountable for their own taste. The rationalisations for their choices given by participants are invariably deemed to be inadequate by POD, who ‘fails to compute’ why anyone would want to look as apparently awful as they do. In this reiterated sequence, embodiment of bad taste is conflated with an assortment of personal failings – ignorance, immaturity, even, on occasion, a pathological need for attention. These traits are seen as signalling deficient performances of selfhood that obstruct career progression and limit chances for romantic or sexual success. The make-under is thus constructed as an intervention in these problems, guiding participants towards a state of purported corporeal authenticity, which, it is postulated, affords both a recognisable sense of agency and potential productivity.

Like other series of its kind, *Snog Marry Avoid?* uses consumption as a passage to transformation, highlighting the construction of ‘good’ taste as premised on culturally contingent grounds. Crucially, participants are not simply stripped of their ‘fakery’ and

sent on their merry way – rather, the “deep cleanse” is a stage that *precedes* the making of natural beauty. For all the emphasis placed on the make-under process, the audience is actually privy to very little of it, as the passage of time between the ‘cleansed’ body and the ‘after’ body is digitally condensed into an instant. This special effect masks the labour that has to be performed (presumably by a team of professional makeup artists, hairdressers and stylists) in order to remake participants, allowing POD to instead take credit for the modifications: “this is how I achieved your look”, she routinely boasts. Such assumption of authority allows POD to represent changes as informed by each participant’s unique “natural beauty data”, code for the consumption practices necessary to the maintenance of their new appearance. This ‘data’ is indeed constituted by instruction about ‘natural’ makeup and ‘flattering’ clothes – commodities presented as integrally important to the performance of good taste. The message that respectability can be achieved by amendment to consumption habits is clear and is only amplified by the second vox pop analysis. This is a problematic conclusion that assumes the broad financial viability of these practices and rests on an unscrutinised privileging of middle-class taste.

In order for the desire for change to be ignited in even the most chronic of slap addicts, *Snog Marry Avoid?* exploits the sway of public opinion to evince POD’s judgement. The central narrative arc of each episode hinges on the vox pop survey, a pedagogical technique quite unique to the series, which is clearly designed as an exercise in personal humiliation. The sequence, which invariably culminates in the participant being informed that most people asked would ‘avoid’ them, usually embarrasses even the most reluctant subject, resigning them to the necessity of the make-under process and brokering their compliance to its terms. The ‘snog, marry or

avoid' question is a pivotal one, serving to crudely legitimate the male gaze by its implication that women should aim to present themselves in ways that are most attractive to potential (male) suitors. More pressing to this discussion, however, are the distinct social classifications attached to the three hypothetical choices presented; that is, sexual attractiveness (snog), marriageability (marry) and distastefulness (avoid). The first two values, promised to participants in exchange for acquiescence to POD's rule, demonstrate what is seen to be at stake in the cultivation of 'proper' taste competency, that is, an embodiment of self that is not merely tolerated, but actively endorsed, by fellow citizens. What is particularly interesting is the way many participants emphasise marriage as the pinnacle of such endorsement, reacting especially positively to hypothetical proposals. Those that would choose to 'marry' the post-make-under participant tend to qualify their answer by describing the woman in question as appearing "nice", "sophisticated" and "down-to-earth", consistently linking notions of marriageability to those of respectability. Distasteful 'before' bodies hence present an inversion of this logic, marking participants not only as unfit for marriage, but also as incapable of even staging the respectability inherent to valuable forms of selfhood. The entire vox pop sequence is metonymically testament to Bourdieu's idea that "taste is what brings together things and people that go together" (1984, 241). Governed by the perpetual negotiation of social classification, human sympathies and antipathies are easily able to be aroused through the recognition and embodiment of distinctive forms of cultural capital.

Though *Snog Marry Avoid?* promises a vision of interpersonal and professional accomplishment, given the parameters of the show, this is only realised in the hypothetical realm of the vox pop questionnaire – the make-under marks participants

for *future* success (though not unproblematically, as it will later be argued).

Reclamation of 'genuine' selfhood tends to figure as the most immediate outcome of the make-under process. This is signalled not merely by POD's insistence that this is the case, but in the testimony of participants as well: "I think it's gonna give me a lot more confidence just to be 'me' 'cause I think you've proved to me that I can look good underneath everything". The idea that the make-under constitutes a revelation of a legitimate self by returning participants to a state of corporeal authenticity is directly informed by and helps produce a 'depth' model of selfhood (Skeggs, 2009). A depth model privileges inner qualities as transcending personal appearance, yet frames some appearances (like those of the *Snog Marry Avoid?* participants) as diverting and delaying recognition of these qualities. In stripping away fake tan, hair, nails and so on, the 'natural beauty' regime imposed by POD is shown to ameliorate access to this hidden dimension, as it confers upon participants the power of a 'normal' appearance. As one participant implores: "POD, I need to lose the fakery, so people can see the real Kelly...[and] take me more seriously. I want more people to think 'she looks professional' and not 'she looks tacky'."

The problem inherent in this situation is that certain tastes, developed over the course of a particular (class) history, are made interchangeable with a neutral disposition. This relegates some subjects to a sphere marked not only as socially anomalous, but also as strangely inauthentic. *Snog Marry Avoid?* offers relief to these devalued selves, but only through denial of the apparently 'false' strictures of their own habitus. As the series attempts to render the class origins of 'neutral', 'natural' taste invisible, the historical character of habitus is similarly obscured and is instead collapsed onto individual deficiency. This doubled decontextualisation amounts to a

number of questionable expectations: firstly, that 'normal' taste is immediately, intuitively and universally recognisable and secondly, that transformation is a simple process of returning to 'obvious', 'basic' codes. The idea of the make-under as revealing, rather than constructing, indeed discounts the labour that is actually involved in learning to emulate the nuanced, restrained approach to beauty advocated by POD as 'natural'. For those who have not been schooled since birth in the recognition and embodiment of 'good' taste, attempts at its mastery are frustrated by the fundamentally arbitrary and conditional character of that taste. As such, compliance with POD's prescriptions cannot simply be seen as having "natural beauty restored" – it often demands conscious revision of that which is usually unconscious, that is, the lasting imprints of habitus.

The confused logic of the make-under is magnified by a tension between homogeneity and individualism that is mounted throughout *Snog Marry Avoid?*. POD's mission, to transform the UK into a state populated by 'natural beauties', clearly reflects a homogenising intent, hyperbole aside. Participants do tend to emerge from the make-under appearing markedly similar, with many affecting a look that, according to one *Guardian* commentator, is reminiscent of "an English teacher who's been given [high street clothing store] Oasis vouchers for her 50th birthday" (Ravenhill, 2009). With POD presiding over a veritable production line of made-under women, each obliged to sport unembellished makeup and demure dress, one could be forgiven for thinking that the series fails to accommodate any other look. However, the rationale for the make-under is occasionally tested by adherents to particular subcultures (goth, steampunk, rockabilly and so on). While not embodying the fake tanned, fake haired look so abhorred by POD, they do affect an appearance that is incompatible with her 'natural

beauty' regime. POD's response to their tattoos, neon hair dye and costume-like dress is certainly disapproval, yet they are not always forced to undergo a make-under, as she admits that they seem too committed to their particular lifestyle for her to effect substantial change. This concession establishes a significant schism between the 'slap addicts', who are invariably sentenced to a complete overhaul, and the 'freak-ish', 'alternative' youths, whose eccentricities are implicitly tolerated. The former are marked as incapable of the proper recognition and display of taste (at least, without POD's instruction), while the latter are framed as self-determining individuals – POD may not approve of their style, but she resigns herself to the idea that she is in no position to change it. The subcultural devotees' apparently outlandish appearance is made legitimate through a lens of individual creativity – a privilege never extended to the other participants.

It is tempting here to posit that a working/middle-class divide in the origin of participants efficiently accounts for this disparity. Bourdieu (1979) might indeed argue that the middle-class participants are more freely able to invest time and energy into the conscious cultivation of preferences deviating from prescriptions of 'good' taste, because they are able to operate from the secure standing of inherited capital already embodied in habitus. This idea does have bearing on the way some participants are granted exemption from the make-under, but the limits of its application are tested by the (as far as can be extrapolated) diverse class status of the 'alternative' subjects. What is also effective in accounting for this dualism is the problematic rhetoric of individualism that is employed throughout the series to circumvent the naming of class taste. The logic that allows the personal pathologising of each 'makeup mad minx' (the show's bread and butter formula) is the same as that which decontextualises the tastes

of these other participants and thus elevates their 'different' appearance to a realisation of individual essence, rather than a more complex signifier of (sub)cultural structure. The latter group are marked as expressive and creative, if somewhat peculiar, because, as is clear to both POD and the audience, they have no interest in approximating (whether 'crudely', 'naturally', or otherwise) an idealised vision of beauty – this is conceived of as a conscious choice. The 'slap addicts' on the other hand are denied the creative capacity of legitimate selfhood by their appropriation (and distortion) of the markers of idealised femininity – in threatening the value of restraint intrinsic to this archetype they are framed as ignorant aberrations whose tastes must be amended. They 'do' beauty, but not in the 'right' way. The presence of the 'alternative' types is a gesture on behalf of *Snog Marry Avoid?* to deny its homogenising intent, but instead reveal the limits of the middle-class pre-occupation with individuality and its inconsistent application.

The invention of natural beauty

Central to the premise of *Snog Marry Avoid?*, the notion of 'natural beauty' is one that neatly dovetails with previously discussed understandings of class, taste and selfhood. If, as argued, the look promoted by the series is an explicit projection of (middle) class sensibilities, then emphasis placed on achieving a 'natural' appearance must also be bound by a logic that is both culturally and historically specific. *Snog Marry Avoid?* consistently invokes a particular, storied treatment of the natural, in which 'nature' is cast as culture's diametric opposite. This form of Cartesian dualism – itself an instance of *cultural* taxonomy – distorts the pre-human and therefore amoral existence of nature, allowing for notions of transcendence and universality to coalesce around the 'natural'. In additionally drawing on a Romantic tradition, which equates nature with 'Truth', representations of 'natural beauty' are often informed by problematic absolutes, especially those related to a kind of perennial womanhood or eternal feminine. Veneration of 'natural' beauty denies the labour often involved in achieving and maintaining such an appearance, and as such makes compulsory specific grooming practices. These practices are contextually contingent, highlighting the way in which the largely arbitrary preferences of dominant groups become, over time, *naturalised* as broader cultural expectations. Indeed, close examination of the idea of natural beauty reveals it to be an insidious conceit through which certain appraisals of appearance are unfairly granted moral leverage. These judgements are given particular credence in a context shaped by the global challenge of climate change and its attendant anxieties, where nature is something pure, to be protected from the polluting effects of human development.

Excepting perhaps a short period after birth, a pre-cultural body exists only in the abstract – the learning of specific ‘body techniques’ (ways of eating, walking, running and so on) is central to the process of human socialisation (Mauss, 1935; Falk, 1995). Though dictated by custom, these methods are largely adopted unconsciously and, as such, come to frame both personal and collective understandings of what constitutes the natural form. Bourdieu (1977, 78) elucidates this reality through the concept of habitus as “history turned into nature” – class tastes are inscribed on corporeality before we can even be made conscious of social stratification. The nature/culture dichotomy is clearly unstable, though often treated as a biological given. Indeed, the human body (and how we conceive of it) is far from impervious to historical change. The notion of nature as broadly preceding, and thus transcending, culture is, however, a persistent one, informing the ongoing currency of the natural beauty ideal. In terms of aesthetic critique, the floating signifier of ‘natural’ is usually harnessed in an attempt to assume a stance of seemingly unquestionable moral authority, where nature and truth are made synonymous. This stance is of course problematised by the reality that no singular vision of natural beauty can exist – as the boundaries of taste and (feminine) normality are constantly renegotiated, so too are expectations regarding issues like cosmetic use, body hair and plastic surgery.

Throughout *Snog Marry Avoid?*, the (nebulous) correlation between nature and authenticity is predictably exploited to ensure that aspersions cast on participants’ appearance are granted moral authority. Class discrimination inherent in these judgements is veiled by the discourse of natural beauty, a language readily geared towards the policing of unruly (working-class) bodies. The arbitrariness of POD’s standards is embodied by both Frost and Taylor, who are held as models of natural

beauty, although they always sport a full face of heavy make-up, with the former, clearly a bottle blonde, shown to routinely use fake tan. Cosmetic use is hence explicitly *naturalised* and framed as a practice innate to the proper embodiment of femininity. In exhibiting little regard for restraint however, POD's targets are shown to have transgressed the limits on this practice, upsetting a delicate balance between being made up and being *too* made up. The critical vacuity of the series' 'natural beauty' rhetoric is never questioned – the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable cosmetic use is not clearly drawn, but rather left to audience members to intuit via their own habitus. In this complex order of signification, appearances that fail to conform to POD's expectations are simply deemed unnatural and deserving of both revulsion and derision. As the camera lingers over exposed cleavage, bulging skin and streaky tans, the audience is invited to produce a knee-jerk response to participants' display. Bourdieu (1984, 56) explains: "tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes, disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance of the tastes of others ... which amounts to rejecting others as unnatural and therefore vicious". The series exploits an affront to the senses that is the result of social agents entering a field with which their habitus is incompatible, as their appearance subverts expectations of the natural. Middle-class distaste for participants' appearance is indulged by the option given to vox pop interviewees to 'avoid' undesirable subjects, where repulsion is framed as a reasonable, if not entirely obvious, response. In essence, of course, the 'slap addicts' of *Snog Marry Avoid?* are no more unnatural than the series' hostesses, but in failing to comply with particular standards of beauty declared to be natural within a certain taste regime, they are marked as undisciplined aberrations.

Crucially, the message broadcast by *Snog Marry Avoid?* is not that women should abandon their self-crafting through beauty regimes altogether, but that they should use clothes and makeup to enhance their ‘innate’ charms. This is a logic constantly exploited within consumer culture, as “artificiality is sold under the guise of an already present femininity” (Black, 2004, 23). The very idea that women should at all times strive to ‘flatter’ their shape, colour and face pre-supposes the existence of *particular* beauty standards to which not all bodies automatically conform. The work involved in adhering to POD’s standards of appearance indeed confuses the logic of the natural beauty ideal, further attesting to its arbitrary meaning. Beauty practices including facial make-up, body hair removal and hair styling and dyeing are clearly utilised within the make-under, and thus framed as necessary to the achievement of natural beauty, however, as these processes all take place off-screen, the labour they constitute is completely obscured. In being aligned with the ‘natural’, that is, the organic, the unfabricated, this is downplayed and devalued by the weight of cultural expectation. “For women, ‘looking good’ is interpreted as an immanent feminine characteristic, naturalised and unremarkable.” (Black, 2004, 53). The sense of obligation that this creates is covertly doubled in the experience of *Snog Marry Avoid?* participants, who are made to reassess and re-establish their own taste literacies against images of ‘natural beauty’ produced by POD. Emphasis on the ‘make-under’ process implies that participants are being relieved of the onerous task that is their excessive body maintenance – though this may be true to some extent, reality television’s quick-fix philosophy obscures the challenge of reforming habitus. The series hollowly insists that participants are returned to a state of corporeal authenticity – “natural beauty has been restored” – POD concludes after every make-under. With reference to dominant norms for feminine appearance as articulated by the series, participants are remodelled to

temporarily affect 'good' taste. But they are not given access to the cultural capital necessary to indeed reshape habitus.

At the heart of the this device, the hidden labour of the 'natural beauty' ideal demonstrates the way that calling attention to the production of personhood, specifically femininity, is coded as distasteful in its revelation of social construct. Achievement of the seamless appearance advocated by POD entails definite precision (which is itself a sign of time and energy able to be invested into the accrual of such skill) and is easily botched by unblended foundation, bleeding lip colour, smudged mascara. One wrong move and the 'natural beauty' jig is up! The audience of *Snog Marry Avoid?* is invited to laugh at participants who sport "a dress that doesn't flatter [them], an uneven streak of foundation, a dodgy hair dye job: signs of failure, mocked because they signal ineptness at mastering [their] image - the ultimate sin of womanhood" (McCombes, 2011). POD often compares (female) participants to men in drag, telling one 'slap addict' she looked like "a drag queen with a hangover" and hurling the pejorative term "tranny" at others. In their unsubtle dress and cosmetic application, they are judged by POD as imposters, whose clumsy attempts to emulate the proper embodiment of womanhood make them worthy targets of public scorn. These women in fact represent a hyper-realistic version of femininity that threatens the stability of binary gender difference: "when we start being too overt about the fabricated status of natural femininity, there's a lurking danger that we might start to question [its] absurdity, or realise that we can invent altogether new images in radical moulds" (McCombes, 2011).

It should be clear that the idea of natural beauty is a profoundly gendered one and this is echoed in the fact that, on *Snog Marry Avoid?*, the overwhelming majority of

POD's targets are female. Feminist theorists have long problematised a deep-rooted philosophical treatment of women as closer to nature than men, arguing that this conception stems from a simplistic overemphasis on the female reproductive capacity. In Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, the female body is described as having doomed women to the replication of life (never mind personal ambition), while men are free to pursue and enjoy the projects of culture. For de Beauvoir (1972, 95-96), "it is not in giving life, but in risking life that man is raised above the animal; that is why superiority has been accorded in humanity not to the sex that brings forth, but to that which kills". To classify a woman as essentially closer to nature than a man is to reduce her social worth to the fecundity of her womb, constraining the possibilities of her own individual agency. The idea of natural beauty is intimately linked to this enduring myth of the 'eternal feminine', in that, by assuming the normative functioning, or 'given-ness', of female desirability, it fetishises a vision of women as primarily, if not essentially, sexual, ignoring their productive capabilities in favour of their reproductive ones. The contemporary imaginings of natural beauty endorsed by *Snog Marry Avoid?* are not easily disentangled from this deeply problematic historical dimension.

Though *Snog Marry Avoid?*'s invocation of women as inherently sexualised is certainly coloured by this unfortunate legacy, it is important to recognise the ways in which a sense of agency is accounted for in its vision of natural beauty. Where de Beauvoir warns against ideas of 'the natural' relegating women to a sphere of immanence, *Snog Marry Avoid?* insists that natural beauty confers power and agency upon subjects. Natural beauty is indeed made *neutral* beauty, governed by an authenticity that is apparently impervious to the passing whims of fashion. More importantly, this neutrality is seen to precede social division: according to POD,

everyone *is* naturally beautiful, but they may not know how to show it. The make-under process makes viable this otherwise dormant potential, privileging a participant's 'after' body (moulded to affect middle-class taste) as a true realisation of self, unburdened by the false signifiers of past indecency. In many instances, the make-under serves mostly to eviscerate the external markers of working-class taste, markers that are seen as contaminating natural beauty and thus inhibiting the development of legitimate, reflexive selves. These ideas are all of course testament to *Snog Marry Avoid?*'s endorsement of middle-class taste as universal taste, which allows working-class habitus to be coded as unnatural and therefore morally questionable.

Conclusion: making over habitus

Throughout this thesis a tension has been established between the interventions attempted by makeover television and the lasting imprint of habitus. Though Bourdieu's analysis suggests that habitus is evolutionary and always amenable to gradual change, questions linger about the sustainability of the transformations made in programmes of this kind, especially as modifications are usually confined to a single aspect of personal disposition. The temporal parameters of many such shows further contribute to this problem, as the 'after' body (or house, car, wardrobe, et cetera) is presented as a fixed conclusion to a finite narrative of improvement. The sense of permanence that this narrative closure insists on is threatened by the inevitable return of participants to their 'normal' lives and, by extension, to the conditions that produced the 'problem' needing correction in the first place. One way that this issue is addressed is by incorporation of a 'follow-up' segment, a sequence designed to monitor the ongoing habits of past participants. In some instances, this practice takes the form of covert surveillance, as subjects are unwittingly filmed going about their everyday routine. What is striking about these scenes is that they often include scenarios deliberately manipulated in order to coerce the former participant into doing something they've been taught by the makeover is 'wrong', as if there is an expectation that they will return to their 'bad old ways'. In these follow-up segments, the durability of habitus is often made evident, though this is rarely presented as an indictment of the makeover process, but rather, is seen as a problem of individual commitment to change.

In *Snog Marry Avoid?*, the follow-up is filmed several weeks after a make-under has taken place and consists of a brief informal interview by the hostess in which the past participant discusses the effects of the make-under and whether they have decided

to heed any of POD's advice. In fact, the past participant's appearance usually immediately gives away the answer to this question and, significantly, the production never seeks to frame them in ways that would demonstrate the life-changing success of the make-under practice. The experience of participants varies significantly – some return to the show having retained a made-under image, while others admit to piling fake tan back on as soon as they escaped POD's supervision. Despite this diversity, responses do tend to be marked by ambivalence towards full compliance with POD's prescriptions, as most participants admit to modifying, rather than completely reforming, their style of dress and body maintenance, attesting to the evolutionary nature of habitus. As one participant who returned to the show clad in her former fakery admits "It's hard to change everything all at once. I think I have to put it all back on at once, which I've done, and then maybe just do it slowly". What can be made of this common reaction is that the make-under's quick-fix logic is able to attend to habitus, but mostly only so far as practices *add* to, rather than necessarily replace, a pre-existing arsenal of strategies able to be called upon in future social improvisations.

Whether participants are indeed imbued with the respectability promised by 'natural beauty' (that is, acquiescence to a homogenous, particularly middle-class manner) is a more complex question, that hints at the limits of the makeover subgenre. In the moments directly following the make-under, including the second vox pop segment, the participants are certainly marked for future success, however this marking is semiotically confused. A participant's appearance, as designed by POD, becomes a signifier of respectability – this is understood by the 'man on the street', whose commentary confers upon her the prospects of interpersonal accomplishment. However, his reading of her as respectable is confined to the embodiment of visual cues

deliberately manipulated by POD to speak of 'good' taste and restraint. Beyond the context of the show, the middle-class respectability signified by a newly regulated appearance may be betrayed by the revelation of accent, schooling and occupation. And it may fail to fit the lived circumstances of any amount of lives. Habitus is a function of social inequality and transitory affectation of 'good' taste does not override its state as fundamentally conditioned by access to capital.

The limits of change effected by *Snog Marry Avoid?* speak to a process of decontextualisation engaged with throughout makeover television. As previously canvassed in this thesis, adherence to the ideology of individualism allows for social distinction to present itself as personal deficiency. The *Snog Marry Avoid?* make-under is flawed in its reliance on this logic, attending to individual modes of appearance, rather than considering the broader circumstances in which taste is developed. The series produces a kind of social vacuum that makes middle-class taste the only taste, displacing habitus and compelling participants to abide by standards they may not otherwise encounter. Resumption of the participants' everyday lives constitutes abandonment of immediate stimuli that compels transformation. This is a rule perhaps best proved by exception: those 'successfully' made-under, that is, those who attempt to maintain the appearance granted to them by POD, had usually been influenced by pre-existing motivations such as employability anyway. For the others, the make-under often figures mostly as an unnecessary mitigation of pleasure taken from appearance. However, the (far) less than uniform success of the make-under is never accounted for (at least within the show's official commentary) by the arbitrariness of POD's severe instruction and its often-negligible value to the fields in which most participants operate.

The fact that POD's largely impracticable prescriptions are never scrutinised by the hostesses and have not, over the course of five seasons, been at all modified begs the question of whether participants are not in fact set up for failure. As the follow-up segment adds a final element of intrigue to the narrative arc, the seeming immovability of some dispositions certainly fuels entertainment. It can be speculated, perhaps rather cynically, that the audience, having been invited to laugh at the innumerable faux pas committed by participants, derive satisfaction from their continued inadequacy, as it allows a sense of distance and distinction to be maintained. The comforting notion of taste as innate is quietly cemented by the participants' failure. Despite consistently pointing to an idea of improvement, *Snog Marry Avoid?* does appear to have been produced mostly at the expense, rather than betterment, of its participants.

This thesis has, at several points, suggested that the arbitrary orders of the makeover television expert may provoke participants to resist their coding as deficient, defective citizens. When applied to *Snog Marry Avoid?* this idea seems mostly untenable – though participants occasionally bite back at POD's insults, engagement in such conflict is dismissed as evidence of unruly behaviour and swiftly stamped out. Not much more could be expected from a series that delights in sexism and, as demonstrated, is fully dependent on its audience's intolerance of social difference. The patently ridiculous premise of the series and the expectations it advances, however, might well compel viewers to question the wisdom of 'natural beauty' and the make-under narrative and recognise it as an arbitrary and culturally contingent ideal tipped in favour of privileged subjects.

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