

Sublime Dissension: A Working-Class Anti-Pygmalion Aesthetics of the Female Grotesque

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Abstract

This thesis reclaims and refigures negative stereotypical images of working-class femininity, proposing an “Anti-Pygmalion” aesthetics (referencing Shaw’s *Pygmalion*) in which pressure to conform to bourgeois notions of respectability is refused in favour of holding onto aspects of working-class female identity which have been treated as faulty and shameful. It examines a previously under-theorised dimension of the “female grotesque”: its formation under a process of *classed* construction.

Contesting the disavowal of class identity in much art writing, I explore how it shapes art reception, showing how images of the Anti-Pygmalion female grotesque can provoke sublime experiences in viewers who share an empathetic connection with the work’s presentation of class difference. Against Enlightenment aesthetic theories which associate the sublime with the lofty, this thesis conceptualises it from the perspective of working-class women, connecting it with an excitement and awe that comes from below and bursts up and out.

My approach is auto-ethnographic, drawing on my experiences as a woman from a working-class background to deepen my readings and address gaps in the field. To counter the erasure of working-class artists, I focus on work by working-class British artists and filmmakers from the 1980s – 2000s. Exploring the problematic experiences of working-class artists and writers in the institutional spaces of education and the art world, I highlight the resulting internalisation of stigmatised subjectivities. This frames my analysis of three case studies, each addressing aspects of working-class femininity: Jo Spence’s *Class-Shame* series, the photographs collected in Richard Billingham’s *Ray’s a Laugh*, and Carol Morley’s film *The Alcohol Years*. My analysis builds up a dialogue around Anti-Pygmalion aesthetics which forces a reconsideration of the categories of the sublime and the grotesque in the light of working-class identities and creativities, dispelling stereotypes which have hampered existing criticism, and reframing working-class stories and lives as significant and valuable.

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Dedication

Dedicated in gratitude, love and respect to my mother Maggie Fricker, without whose unfailing strength, encouragement and support this thesis would not have been possible.

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Introduction

This thesis' reclamation of negative stereotypical images of working-class femininity, described as grotesque, ugly and shameful, hinges on an argument that aesthetic as well as gender categories are classed constructs. Designations of "ugliness" are not neutral. Ela Przybylo writes in "The Politics of Ugliness" (2010) that, 'ugliness is political in at least two ways: (1) it denotes and bookmarks inequalities and hierarchies, serving as a repository for all that is "other" in our culture and (2) ugliness is a necessarily contingent and relational, it is never an individual concern but rather exists because bodies are compared to one another, and because they are evaluated in accordance to the "norm"'. (Przybylo 2010, p3). I argue that for Western women, the acceptable "feminine" norm is middle-class, which is why the figure of the Pygmalion is examined and subverted in discussions of my three case studies. This figure of class-passing interconnects the themes of beauty and femininity with middle and upper-classness, and casts out working-class women as their grotesque opposite.

The Pygmalion

George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion* (1914), was inspired by Ovid's story of Pygmalion – a sculptor who after carving a female figure out of marble, falls in love with his own creation. In the play, as well as the arguably more well-known film *My Fair Lady* (1964, itself an adaptation of the 1956 Broadway musical), a working-class flower-girl called Eliza Doolittle is "turned" into a lady by the application of elocution lessons, and the "correction" of her grammar, manners and bodily comportment by phonetics expert Mr Higgins. The reason for the transformation is a bet: he wagers that he can pass off a 'common' 'guttersnipe' (Bernard Shaw 2003, p29) as 'a duchess at an ambassador's party' (p18). Through much painful and relentless training, Eliza learns to speak and perform *like* a lady, and fools the wealthy party guests.

Although the "humour" of the play stems from sending up the hypocrisies of the British class-system of the time, the joke is mostly directed at Eliza herself. During her re-education, she is humiliated, dehumanised and only treated decently when she has transformed into a "lady". In this story, language *is* power: how it is used shapes identities, and the way Eliza is spoken of is key to how she is seen and treated in all adaptations. Higgins says of her: 'A woman who utters such depressing and disgusting sounds has no right to be anywhere – no right to live', 'You squashed cabbage leaf', 'this baggage', 'She's incapable of understanding anything', 'She's so deliciously low – so horribly dirty', 'shall we throw her out of the window', 'put her in the dustbin', 'Well, when I'm done with her, we can throw her back into the gutter; and then it will be her own business

again; so that's all right.' Mrs Pearce, the housekeeper, says, 'I want to change you from a frowzy slut to a clean respectable girl fit to sit with the gentlemen in the study.' (pp18, 24, 26, 32, 34, 36)

The story is a fable about how the amount of respect and worth granted to a person correlates with their expression of the *right sort* of language and speech, although a constructed and learnable artifice. In Ovid's tale, an inanimate stone is transformed into a love-object by the sculptor's touch; but it is a class transformation that makes Eliza loveable. By the end of the film, Higgins realises he is in love with his creation. The message is clear: to speak in a working-class accent makes a person less than human, but to speak like a lady is to be worthy of love.

This thesis uses my own lived experiences of class difference to enrich my dialogue with my case studies, all of which are by artists from working-class backgrounds. This is so that the working-class can be represented by themselves, rather than, as so often has been the case, being spoken for by others from more privileged backgrounds/positions - as in the "Pygmalion Paradox" (1998) described by Mark Wallinger:

The paradox being that down the years Eliza has been played by the kind of well-bred gals from RADA who have had every advantage in life and have struggled temporarily to dumb down their diction to the requisite cockney before resuming with their more natural elocution. This immediately places the work within patrician parentheses – what should empower the poor condescends to the street. (p1-4).

Each of my case studies incorporates aspects of autobiography, or more precisely is auto-ethnographic, with the artists taking their own experiences and backgrounds as starting points for their work. They challenge the class-based ideals of "good taste" and aspirational femininity to explore alternative ways of being, learning and creating.

There is scant academic, theoretical and historical writing about the role of working-class artists in creating visions of their own lives, or representing their/our own history, culture and creativity. A rare book that looks exclusively at work made by working-class artists in the UK, is Emmanuel Cooper's *People's Art: Working-Class Art from 1750 to Present Day* (1994). Although Cooper provides a survey of work and styles and the conditions in which they were made, he does little to conceptualise the experiences of working-class artists and the impact of their work on art audiences, particularly other working-class people. This thesis contributes new knowledge in this neglected area, by not only exploring work made by working-class artists but also conceptualising a new framework for understanding work against and away from middle and upper-class value judgements.

Emory Elliot's introduction to the collected volume *Aesthetics in a Multicultural Age* (2002) articulates

the point, that aesthetic judgements are not natural nor neutral, but reflect their formation within political realms which are often classist, racist and sexist:

When the person making such a judgement is in a dominant position politically, legally, or economically over the other and renders aesthetic judgements that demean and subordinate the other by pronouncing the person his or her cultural production to be inferior, beneath consideration, or objectionable, the aesthetic may operate as a tool of divisiveness, enmity, and oppression [...] Those who do not recognize themselves or their works of art in the features of the putative universal ideal will either feel diminished and inferior or systematically excluded and marginalized. Thus, the aesthetic is always in danger of being exploited in the service of individual prejudice or of nationalism, racism, sexism and classism. (p3)

This makes clear how important it is to resist aspiring to the dominant trends of aesthetic worth, and instead produce art work and writing from your own culture, class, politics, and gendered experience and concerns. Work that presents identities and backgrounds that do not fit with ideas of *where* excellence can be found and produced (i.e. spaces marked white, western, educated, intellectual, male etc.) will almost always be seen as sub-standard: “ethnic art”, “folk art”, “women’s art” “queer art”. These are not just categories of art, but subcategories *below* “art”, just as a white male author is a “writer” proper, a white woman is a “woman writer”, a black man is a “black male writer” etc. - all deviations from an assumed standard. Therefore, the “new aesthetics” of the female grotesque that I propose does not aspire to be considered within existing notions, but to challenge the basis of such judgements of value and taste.

There is an established body of literature coming from British cultural studies and sociology departments that explores the negative treatment and representations of working-class women’s appearances, behaviours and lives. This thesis draws on models for left-wing feminist research developed within these fields, which explicitly incorporate personal testimony into knowledge building, but extends their class discourse beyond cultural studies and sociology and into the area of art writing. I have drawn on Bev Skeggs’ work on working-class women and respectability (1997), on Imogen Tyler’s writing on the shaming of working-class mothers (2009), the figure of the female “chav” (2010), and social abjection (2013), and on Carole Anne Tyler’s book on femininity, class-passing and masquerades (2003). However, these discussions have not been taken up within the fields of visual culture and feminist art theory. Additionally, while feminist work within cultural studies and sociology departments has examined the causes and effects of classism on women, it has not put forward methods for dissent. It is vitally important to discuss the how and why of women’s oppression, but this thesis goes beyond this to consider strategies for rebellion.

Murray (2006) argues that even between the disciplines of art history and visual culture there exist tensions. She writes that art historians have been criticised for being ‘Eurocentric in their emphasis, elitist, ethnically and racially essentialist, politically conservative’ (p23), while visual culture has been seen as: ‘too hybrid [...] too theoretically scatter-brained to be intellectually effective’ (p23). Her argument makes the link between opposite ideologies and class positions - the interest visual culture takes in the consumption of low culture, versus the art historical appreciation of “high art”: ‘this separation also draws a line in the sand between minority and normative practitioners, their histories and criticalities.’ (p25). She argues that it is the interdisciplinary approach of visual culture, and its interest in the politics of identity, that would expand art history in vital ways. This thesis aims to connect these disciplines, to expand these writers’ insights into visual culture and art together.

There are large gaps in the current literature around all three of my case studies. Class was cited by Jo Spence as a major concern in her work, yet is massively under-theorised by her critics. My chapter on Spence looks at a series of works under the banner “Class-Shame”, which have never been discussed in full. My chapter on Richard Billingham’s images of his mother Liz from his series *Ray’s A Laugh* (1996) provides an original reading of these images that counters the overwhelmingly classist and sexist critical reception they have received.¹ There is, so far, no other published academic research and minimal critical writing on my third case study, Carol Morley’s film *The Alcohol Years* (2000).²

Historiography

The contextual time line of this thesis follows British politics from Thatcher’s coming to power in 1979, which initiated a period of heightened systematic disempowerment, stigmatisation and shaming of the working-class. Robert Walker (2014) argues that shame is intrinsically linked to poverty. In relation to the benefits system he writes, ‘Shame [...] when used by government to deter illicit applications or to distinguish deserving from undeserving claims, can very easily become generalised as stigma applied in an undifferentiated way to all people in poverty and especially to those receiving welfare benefits.’ (p53). A combined ideological onslaught from political policy, and the press affected in a very real sense the shaping of an image of a grotesque undeserving poor, a lazy, willfully unambitious lumpen working-class subject, a drain on British

¹ My plan was to interview Billingham. We arranged to meet November 2016 in Swansea but he did not make it and was subsequently too busy making a film to reschedule.

² An exception being Brunow (2015), which focusses on Morley’s work in reference to feminist film, politics and narrative.

society. As I argue, it has been working-class women that have borne the brunt of such treatment.³ Following Thatcher, John Major's 1990-1997 government continued and developed a "back to basics" moralistic Conservatism.

From 1997, the dominant political representation of the working-class shifted subtly in appearance, if not in political practice and policy, under Tony Blair's neoliberal New Labour. Although as predominantly middle-class and privately educated as the Conservatives, New Labour performed an appropriation of working-class culture to recast their party as more "in-touch" with "the people" than the previous government.⁴ Their appropriation of stereotypical working-class signifiers filtered down to middle-class actors, musicians, artists and people in the media, who performed an artificial downward mobility in the form of mimicry of working-class youth speech, colloquial accents and dress, most evidently seen in the use of Brit-Pop as marker of a new "Cool Britannia" that relied on exploiting the spectre of poverty to connote "down-to-earthness".

My case studies are all white British photographers and filmmakers from the North, South and Midlands, and span the 1980s to the 2000s. I have chosen not to explore working-class women of colour. Although there may be commonalities of shared class / gender related experiences, it would be a mistake to claim to be inhabiting the same structural oppressions.⁵ While there is a danger of being appropriative in my claim to sharing subject positions with my case studies, I endeavour to demarcate my differences to them as well as exploring the places where there are shared experiences, where I feel a spark of recognition.

Having been brought up by a politically active socialist feminist mother gives me a strong sense of familiarity with the left-wing politics and class-consciousness of Spence's work. Like Morley and Billingham, I grew up on council estates, and like them was highly independent from an early age – not (as in Billingham's account) due to parental neglect, but because of my mother's view that she "couldn't give her kids everything, but she could give us independence". Like Billingham, I took pictures of my family and teenage friends, recording our lives for art projects; and like Morley I was rebellious and sexually promiscuous as a teenager, and spent my time regularly going to clubs while still underage.

³ See Foster (2016), a recent feminist text that shows how current and historical formations of conservative political policy have disproportionately negatively affected women, through work, home and life.

⁴ For example, Blair's ingratiating claim in a 1997 speech that "being of the rock and roll generation, The Beatles, colour TV, all the rest of it, that's where I come from".

⁵ See Crenshaw (1995), for an examination of the complexities of intersecting oppressions.

My parents met in the 1970s and were members of the Militant socialist party. As a child sat in meetings, marching on demos, or at home around comrades of my mother's, I heard working-class people speak with articulate passion about working-class history and political struggle. I also realised that the pride and intelligence I saw in these people was not visible in the representations of working-class people I saw on British television, in films or on the news in the late 80s and 90s. Nor was it reflected in the attitudes of my peers at school, to whom being poor was just shameful. In women's groups, my mother and her friends would talk about feminism and the ways in which sexism holds women back in their lives. I was brought up to believe that being a girl should not impede me; and yet what I knew at as a child, without being able to articulate it, was that what marked me out at school and made me feel *less*, was not that I was female but that I came from a poor, single-parent family. Although I heard comrades talk of the class-struggle, I didn't hear anyone in this group discussing the internalisation of class oppression in the same way that I heard women talk about the subjective experiences of sexism.⁶

Therefore, there are three layers to my historiography; the history of British politics. My personal history as a working-class girl/woman growing up within this period, aware of class difference and the shift in working-class representations. And lastly, the history of changing artistic responses to these situations tracked by my three case studies.

Phenomenology and Subject Position

My critical methodology foregrounds the subjective experience, both physical and emotional, of looking at works of art. My starting point is the phenomenological approach proposed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception* (first published in 1945), in which he argues that: "we shall need to reawaken our experience of the world as it appears to us in so far as we are in the world through our body, and in so far as we perceive the world with our body" (Merleau-Ponty 2002, p239). However, my approach ties together a theory of embodied art reception with the recognition that such bodily experience is always conditioned through gender and class.

Iris Marion Young's *Throwing Like a Girl* (1990) details the ways in which the "correct" femininity taught to women from a young age entails performing a restrictive bodily comportment:

The young girl acquires many subtle habits of feminine body comportment - walking like a girl, tilting her head like a girl, standing like a girl, and so on. The

⁶ Bev Skeggs comments of the way that, 'For a time I felt more comfortable with Marxism than with feminism.' (Skeggs 1997b, p131). This I believe comes from the lack of articulation of class difference within feminist groups at that time, for a working-class woman this failure to address class within feminism is felt as isolating.

girl learns actively to hamper her movements. She is told that she must be careful not to get hurt, not to get dirty, not to tear her clothes, that the things she desires to do are dangerous for her. Thus, she develops a body timidity that increases with age. (p154)

Women are taught to survey their bodies fearfully, and keep them in check, so that they do not risk being criticised and shamed for being not like a girl, unfeminine and faulty. Building on Marion Young, I argue further that this timid, respectable femininity is a construct of class as well as gender.

Certain generalities in subjective art reception can be charted on the basis of gender alone: women and men may react differently to a work because of the effects of gendered socialisation on their lived experiences *as* women or men. Yet these differences break down further if you unfix “women” as a stable category, taking into account differences of age, race or sexuality. In this thesis, I foreground differences in spectatorial position between working-class and middle-and-upper-class women, arguing that marked variations in embodied reception exist between “women”.

In addition to differences of bodily comportment, there are also differences of subjective identification, and enjoyment. Nicos Hadjinicolaou argues that ‘pleasure or displeasure (to take only the two extreme poles of reaction) are always closely linked to the viewer’s recognition or non-recognition of himself in the visual ideology of each work’ (Hadjinicolaou 1978, p180). I am especially concerned with the pleasure of recognition as an aesthetic response, as this is often what motivates me to take issue with the dominant (middle-class) readings of my case studies.

The works in my case studies have often been received negatively, and characterised as presenting the unattractive and disgusting. Critical responses to these works have often divided into two camps: those who look exclusively at their formal and technical aspects, and those who instead focus on their “meanings”, reading them as political and/or feminist gestures. There is a discrepancy between *looking* and *thinking* in these approaches, and often a total absence of consideration of how one *feels* about the work. In contrast, my thesis offers a dialectical assessment of the difficult pleasures offered by these artists, which puts phenomenological analyses of embodied perception to work alongside analyses of social and cultural context. I identify a sublime feeling of complex visual pleasure in encountering images that are both difficult and nonconformist, yet also stimulating and politically radical.

I pursue an embodied and emotional analysis of my case studies in the hope of exposing a gulf between how we are taught to apply *taste* in thinking about “ugly” or socially undesirable realities,

and how we may feel/experience them.⁷ For example, Billingham's photographs in *Ray's a Laugh* are almost exclusively viewed by critics through a middle-class lens; these critics receive the *habitus* captured by Billingham's camera, in its difference from their own classed *habitus*, as “disturbing”, “unpleasant” or “alienating”.⁸ This analysis is problematized by the response of many of us from similar class-backgrounds to Billingham's, who look at these images with familiarity or fondness - sharing a similar background or family dynamic and therefore reading the photographs differently, even warmly.

For example, Gitte Ørskou's “The Psychology of the Home” (2003) uses Freud's ideas on the *Unheimlich* (literally, “the unhomely”) to argue that certain spaces are uncanny in their alienating difference to the expected “norm”. Concerning the family home life depicted in Billingham's photographs, Ørskou writes, ‘Not only is the situation unseemly and somewhat repulsive, as the mother hardly conforms to the pattern according to which she has been arranged; it is rather *unheimlich* – as it moves on the borderline of a familiar scenario which at the same time is suspended.’ (p32). For Ørskou, as well as many other writers on Billingham's work, what he captures with his camera is not *their* “norm”. A fat working-class woman is *unheimlich* to this writer, but not to anyone who grew up with working-class women, who may also have been fat, or had a similar sense of style or dress or taste in décor. Just because this woman, as a mother, is unfamiliar to this writer does not in fact make Liz *uncanny*. To counter this dehumanising treatment and give a more nuanced reading, what is needed is the input of voices from different class-backgrounds.

Billingham's images of the fleshy, tattooed body of his mother are often read as superficially transgressive, in that they “shock” the viewer. I'm interested in why they are shocking, and why it is posed as problematic to display the fat and working-class body in this way. All photographs of human subjects carry an element of exploitation or voyeurism: to view images of situations in which the viewer were not present or invited, grants a level of access that requires no permission,

⁷ An example of this approach can be found in Alison Rowley's (2001) discussion of her embodied encounter with Jenny Saville's large scale painting *Plan*. She writes, ‘At this distance from the canvas I'm lost in the memory of the tactile pleasures of paint application. And literally lost in the space of the canvas with nothing to locate myself.’ (p395). This description combines physical disorientation with haptic and sensual pleasure.

⁸ I use Pierre Bourdieu's (2010) term “*habitus*” throughout as an all-encompassing description of the homes, décor, clothing and spaces of the lives represented in the images discussed.

putting the viewer in a privileged position. Yet in the reception of Billingham's work it becomes clear that witnessing these scenes is somehow thought *more* voyeuristic.⁹

Martha Rosler (2004) uses Billingham's work from *Ray's a Laugh* as an example of a trend in documentary photography in which 'Voyeurism as a naked motive for photography is increasingly expressed and rewarded, in art and mass culture, even in polite society. The art world is not immune from the rhetoric of demonization of immigrants and the poor, and galleries and museums are revoking their former discreet avoidance of sensationalistic and tendentious images of poor people.' (p229) Voyeurism may not have been the motive for Billingham in producing these images, yet their appeal to galleries may have been *their* taste for voyeurism. In holding Billingham up as '[illustrating] the collapse of the tattered but still widely upheld art world stance of generalized humanism and noblesse oblige.' (pp229-230), Rosler shifts responsibility for the galleries' intentions onto Billingham himself. There is a split between intention and reception here, as Billingham has argued many times the work was not sensational or shocking to him. I argue that these images are more difficult to *look at* because they depict lives that lack the "good taste" that comes with inherited cultural capital, and disturb the social norms that enforce a classed conformity. This debate draws attention to the problematic relationship between working-class artists depicting their own lives and the powerful galleries that show the work to predominately middle and upper-class audiences.

Auto-Ethnographic Approaches

In this thesis I employ an auto-ethnographic methodology which allows me to factor in my own experiences, both to examine how these are mirrored by the case studies' depiction of working-class identity and lives, and to acknowledge any bias I may have as well as my identifications. As Sue Jones explains in "Depth Interviewing" (1985), a position of acknowledged subjective bias can be a positive attribute for a researcher:

The answer has to do with the way in which we understand and use the concept of bias, *not as something to be avoided at all costs but as something to be used creatively, contingently and self-consciously*. We use our "bias" as human beings creatively and contingently to develop particular relationships with particular people *so that they can tell us about their worlds and we can hear them*. In doing this *we use ourselves as research instruments to try and empathise with other human beings*. No other research

⁹ Azoulay (2012) gives another account of the power relations between photographer and subject, 'These uses of photography are part of the way in which citizens actualise their duty towards other citizens as photographed persons who have been struck by disaster. The exercise of photography in such situations is actually the exercise of citizenship.' (p104). Rather than voyeurism, it is interesting to think of Billingham's work as expressing a kind of citizenship, such as Azoulay references, towards his family and his place amongst the lives depicted in the photographs.

instrument can do this. (My italics. p48).

Liz Stanley's *The Auto-Biographical I* (1992) discusses 'the "speaking" aspect of photographs of auto/biographic subjects' (p20) in these terms:

A "voice" that speaks through representation in photographs is gendered as well as raced, classed; and "seers" of these representations are also gendered, raced and classed persons. Photographs of auto/biographic subjects and our readings of them are importantly involved in constructing characters and biographies, lives-with-meaning. For those of us who are or who have been sighted, the auto/biographical I is a *seeing* I, a seeing eye.' (Original italics. p21).

In order to be able to hear and see what is being said and shown in photographs, it helps to have a shared vocabulary. As Stanley continues, 'Photographs do not speak for themselves: they require interpretation and this interpretation may be mediated by words which surround, literally, particular photographs or from "texts" which readers of photographs import from *their general knowledge*.' (My italics. Stanley 1992, p25). The key point here is that what is "general" to whom, is also class and gender specific. In order to connect to what you are looking at, and communicate its meanings, you have to draw on *shared* experience – but not everybody shares the same experiences.¹⁰

A Conception of Class as a Political "Structure of Feeling"

This thesis is less concerned with class as a political (Lukacs 1975) and economic category (Marx 2013) than it is with how class is *experienced* by people: what it *feels* like to be working-class and the way classed-subjectivities shape our identities and aesthetic and political standpoints. In the process of this research I have developed a theoretical understanding of some of the ways working-class experience is lived and understood via memoir writing, personal testimonies, and theoretical texts by feminists which discuss coming from working-class backgrounds, examining experiences of home, education and self-image as shaped by their class positions.

I explore the ways in which class can be felt as a *difference*, as deviation from the normative construction of middle-class experience as universal. Rather than seeing class solely as an objective socio-economic category.¹¹ I argue for a conceptualisation following and expanding upon

¹⁰ Like many of the artists and writers from working-class backgrounds whose work I discuss in this thesis, I use the pronoun "you" as a form of intimate address to the reader: if "you" the reader identify with the experiences I am discussing, then it is "you" that I am addressing. By retaining these working-class speech patterns in my writing, I am also consciously reversing the tacit assumption of middle-class academic writing that it is addressed to an anonymous "we" which is actually assumed to be middle-class.

¹¹ Such as in Savage (2015) a survey of social class in the 21st century.

Raymond Williams' (2001) concept of a political "structure of feeling".¹² I explore through my case studies the ways that working-class women's identities have been constructed via schooling and cultural socialisation as something to disavow, something shameful. I also look at the failure to discuss class difference within most art writing, in order to theorise the systematic erasure of positive creative working-class identity in visual culture and the art world, as this affects the production and reception of the case studies in this thesis.

Throughout, this thesis navigates the question of how these structures are actively felt and understood by the people held within them. So much of working-class identity is complex and difficult to articulate, shifting and changing with political circumstances, but also subject to political agendas that disavow it entirely. For example, New Labour's rhetoric claiming that "we're all middle-class now" pushed the culture and experiences of working-class people to the margins, so that if you were working-class you were left without voice to articulate yourself, in a climate where you had been told that you did not exist.¹³ In looking at personal testimonies and autobiographical writings of working-class people, I draw together evidential accounts of the ways *being* working-class has been *felt*. If "the personal is political", then stories of the way class difference have shaped people's lives also reveal, not isolated individualistic subjectivities, but structures of political feeling that run across classed lives held in common.

The Case Studies

Instead of performing a complete survey of my chosen artists' work, my case studies focus on specific works from each that can be drawn into a dialogue around my theory of the Anti-Pygmalion. I have chosen works that are notable for challenging stereotypes and so helping us to think about and experience representations of working-class women's lives in new ways. Spence's class-shame series dispels narrow assumptions of who an artist can be, by exposing a body and subjectivity which has rarely been represented. The representations of classed reality in Billingham's photographs collected and published as *Ray's a Laugh* both conform to stereotypes of working-class destitution, and yet convey beauty, pleasure and creativity. Morley's film *The Alcohol*

¹² 'In some respects, the structure of feeling corresponds to the social character, but it is also an expression of the interaction described. Again however, the structure of feeling is not uniform throughout the society; it is primarily evident in the dominant productive group. At this level, however, it is different from any of the distinguishable social characters, for it has to deal not only with the public ideals but with their omissions and consequences, as lived.' (p80)

¹³ This phrase and sentiment, although coming into regular usage under New Labour, is documented in Jackson (1968) as appearing as early as the 1950s, and often bandied about since to suggest the end of a coherent working-class; but, as Jackson argues, the working-class remain.

Years presents a narrative that surprises: exploring supposed teenage indiscretion without pity, it is nevertheless funny and warm, and refuses shame. Each case study addresses aspects of working-class femininity which are often problematized or described as grotesque; each negotiates class-shame, disgust, and moral and aesthetic judgement in its making visible of socially disavowed realities. Shame is a unifying theme, which shapes the way the female grotesque is constructed in each case: it is through shame that the grotesque and sublime are connected as object and relation. As each work deals differently with shame, so each offers a different kind of sublime encounter. Another unifying theme, threading through both the works and their biographical context, is the difficult experience of class-mobility and class-passing: aspects of working-class identity are always held onto, and the “Pygmalion” transition through education and into cultural spaces is never seamless.

Jo Spence

My first case study (chapter three, “Jo Spence’s Spectres of Class-Shame”) looks at the work of self-described “cultural worker” and photographer, Jo Spence. In the early 1980s, Spence and the therapist and photographer Rosy Martin developed their version of “phototherapy”, a creative and cathartic process of exploring identities and emotions by performing aspects and histories of the self to camera. I show that class identity, a major concern in her work, has been critically undertheorized by largely middle-class art writers, and focus on the much-neglected themes in Spence’s work of class-conflict, “split-subjectivity” and feelings of “class-shame”. I explore the series “class-shame” (1987), charting the ways Spence’s visualisation of anger and revolt against middle-class judgement can provoke feelings of empathy from those of us who share similar class-based experiences, mixed with awe and excitement that someone is making these feelings public. I argue that this combination of empathy and awe associates this experience with the sublime.

Richard Billingham

The mid-1990s saw a resurgence of intrigue around and appropriation of working-class culture: in certain quarters of the art world and media, being working-class became something “edgy” and seemed to possess an aura of “realness” or “grit” apparently missing from the lives of the middle-classes.¹⁴ My second case study (chapter four, “Richard Billingham’s Common (Dis)Taste: The Politics of Class, Photography and Female Flesh”) examines the photographic series *Ray's a Laugh* (1990-96) produced by Billingham while he was still an art student. A selection of these photographs were purchased by Charles Saatchi and exhibited at the now infamous *Sensation* (1997)

¹⁴ See “Everybody Hates a Tourist” in Cashell (2009).

exhibition – a pivotal moment in the fascination and appropriation of working-class lives as “hot commodities” amongst the bourgeois art world, and wider British culture of the time.¹⁵

As well as looking at critical receptions of Billingham’s work, I’m also interested in the world that it presents, especially in the photographs of Billingham’s mother Liz who, with few exceptions, has been perceived and described as grotesque and excessive because she is fat, smokes, has tattoos and dresses in brightly coloured patterned clothing. I re-examine and reclaim the beauty and creativity in the images of Liz and the world that she creates within her council flat; her passion for ornamentation, her decoration of her body with tattoos, clothes and jewellery, and of the surrounding environment of her flat. This enables me to explore the meanings and functions of classed taste and value judgements about working-class female bodies and environments that do not fit within the norms of bourgeois notions of “good taste” evident in the attitudes of reviewers.

Carol Morley

My third case study (chapter five, “Shameless Girls, Class, Sexuality and Carol Morley’s *The Alcohol Years*”) discusses Carol Morley’s auto-ethnographic documentary film *The Alcohol Years* (2000, which explores Morley’s teenage years and experimentation with sex, drinking and participation in the music scene in Manchester of the late 1980s. I examine representations of the working-class female grotesque from a different angle from the other case studies. What is different here is that the image of the female grotesque is one that is never *seen*: the representation comes solely from the oral recollections of friends and acquaintances of Morley’s who knew her during her teenage years in Manchester. These recollections create a portrait of a young Anti-Pygmalion women who rejected the modest, lady-like, respectable behaviour coded “feminine” in favour of the excessive and uncontrollable. As an adult seeking to confront a time in her life that she barely remembered, Morley put a call out in the local papers in Manchester for people who knew her at that time to get into contact with her. As their stories begin to fill the gaps in her history, her interviewees also pass judgement on her, create versions of her, and edit her into a character; and whether wittingly or not they construct her as a female grotesque. This chapter’s focus is on the ways in which non-conformist sexually active female behaviour is read as grotesque, linked to a working-class femininity which is historically already deemed sexually deviant. It also takes account of the experiences of growing up a working-class girl, of rebellion in the form of music, clothing and sexuality as an outlet for expression and self-determination, and their potential for sublime

¹⁵ For a detailed discussion of the commodification and politics of contemporary art, see Stallabrass (2006).

encounters.

Chapter One: Methodologies, Concepts and Frameworks

Women, Class, The Grotesque and The Sublime

The canon of theoretical, philosophical and art historical texts on the grotesque and the sublime is vast, spanning nearly two thousand years. The first theorisation of the sublime, “Peri Hupsous/Hypsous” or *On the Sublime*, dates from the first century CE, and is most commonly attributed to the Ancient Greek critic Longinus. Philip Shaw (2006) writes that this text’s focus on the sublime ‘is primarily rhetorical; basically it sets out to teach oratorical devices that enable a speaker to move or persuade an audience.’ (p12). Although the sublime is acknowledged as something unrepresentable and “beyond definition”, Longinus expresses a metaphysical power that ‘tears everything up like a whirlwind’, imbuing words with high emotion and ‘a kind of madness and divine spirit.’ (Longinus, 1965 p9). This theorisation of the sublime in speech links emotion with power and also force, as Shaw writes: ‘the sublime is a discourse of domination; it seeks to ravish and intoxicate the audience so that a grand conception may be instilled in the mind without any bothersome appeal to reason or justice.’ (Shaw 2006, p14)

Later theorisations of the sublime in the Eighteenth Century, for example Immanuel Kant’s *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764), and Edmund Burke’s *Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1795), also feature an experience of violence and ravishing. But rather than using the sublime to dominate an audience, the sublime becomes something that the male Enlightenment writers could test their strength against, and *overcome*. The sublime was thus framed in terms of magnitude and greatness, an issue of size and strength that put it in contrast with beauty. This dichotomy of beauty and sublime was read through supposedly biological gender difference, and it is this work that feminist scholars (shortly to be discussed) would take up and challenge in new theoretical work on the gendered nature of the sublime.

This thesis is not concerned with producing a historical survey of these concepts: firstly, there is not the space, and secondly, *my* purpose is in applying them as tools in order to think about the constructions of aesthetic and moral judgements on working-class women’s bodies and identities. In order not to get side-tracked amongst the labyrinths of texts on these subjects, I focussed on those which also discuss the sublime and the grotesque in relation to feminist theory, women, women’s bodies and class. The space my research takes up stems from gaps within the existing literature: my starting point is the connections which are not made by the previous texts. Uniquely, this thesis takes these concepts as *interconnected*, arguing that the grotesque is gendered as well as classed and that feelings of the sublime can emerge from images written off as grotesque.

The Grotesque

For the purposes of this research, the first important text on the grotesque, in particular on the grotesque body, is Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*, first translated into English in 1968. Julia Kristeva was one of the key theorists who introduced Bakhtin's work to a wider audience in France in the late 1960s. Her work was influenced by Bakhtin's ideas of the "carnavalesque", "dialogism" and "intertextuality", concepts which would later contribute to post-structuralist debates (Moi in Kristeva 1986, p36). But it is the influence on Bakhtin's work of Rabelais, the carnivalesque and the grotesque body that was significant in the development of Kristeva's theory of the abject, which would go on to inspire feminist writers of interest in this thesis. Bakhtin discusses the grotesque as a positive and subversive bodily reality connected to the "carnavalesque" enjoyment of the epicurean and sensual pleasures of food, drink and sex. In the carnivalesque, social, sexual, moral and bodily boundaries are breached in an impulsive rejection of restrictive cultural and behavioural norms. Bakhtin's enthusiasm for the grotesque is primarily focussed on the functions and fluids of the female body; for him, the female grotesque is a display of affirming earthliness: 'to degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy and birth.' (Bakhtin 1984, p21). This embrace of the body in flux is utopian in highlighting of the reality of (some) women's bodies, against the idealisation of the female form as something discrete, neat and *fixed*. For Bakhtin, images of the grotesque represent a 'realism', something truer to the workings and desires of the human condition:

In grotesque realism, therefore, the bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a private egotistical form, severed from the outer spheres of life, but as something universal, representing all the people. As such is it opposed to severance from the material and bodily roots of the world [...] The material bodily principle is contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed. This is why all that is bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable [...] This exaggeration has a positive, assertive character. (p19)

Bakhtin's proposition is to treat as positive that which Western culture has historically treated as shameful, fearful and disgusting. Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* (1984), names the same matter - bodily fluids, viscera and waste - as the 'abject', and explores its ability to arouse contradictory emotions of fear *and* fascination. As Kristeva writes, 'it is not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.' (p4). Perhaps the most revealing aspect of Kristeva's theories on abjection is that it describes the oppression of women through the disavowal of the very fact and function of their bodies. It is the very assumption of the fecundity

of the female body that is treated as horrifyingly abject: menstrual blood, breast milk, the moistness of the vagina and the dark unknown of the womb (Hatherley 2015). However, as Imogen Tyler argues in “Against Abjection” (2009), despite Bakhtin’s attempt at a positive reclamation of female abjection, to reduce a woman’s bodily reality to solely that of its reproductive functions is clearly problematic.

Tyler is concerned that feminist theoretical texts such as, for example Barbara Creed’s *The Monstrous Feminine* (1993) and Mary Russo’s *The Female Grotesque* (1994) effectively reinforce negative descriptions and treatment of women, and that attempts to reclaim the abject body through positive attribution can be harmful for real women, since ‘abjection is not just a psychic process but a social experience’. (p87). In particular, ‘research suggests that 30% of women experience their first physical assault by a male partner when they become pregnant for the first time and that when intimate partner violence already exists in a relationship the ferocity of violence intensifies’ (p88). The experience of being reduced to the abject, and subject to male violence rooted in fear and disgust, strips women of dignity and agency. Tyler therefore cautions against ‘the repetition of the maternal (as) abject within theoretical writing’, arguing instead for ‘a critical shift from the current feminist preoccupations with the “transgressive potentiality” of “encounters with the abject”, to a consideration of the consequences of *being abject* within specific locations.’ (Original italics. pp77-78).

In this thesis, I also attempt to reclaim and refigure the grotesque. But my intention is not to hold up as positive the image of women broken down and dehumanised by violence, nor to say that a woman *is* her bodily processes, but to embrace that which has been used against us in order to subvert its power to shame. It is important not to define women by their physicality or their (sometime) ability to give birth; but also not to shy away from discussions of the abject that do try to undermine the violence and control patriarchy enacts over women's bodies by shaming their bodily functions.

Against the tendency in feminist theory to reduce the female grotesque and the abject to aspects of the female *reproductive* body, I discuss “the body” in terms of its social rather than biological manifestations, theorising the political and sociological effects of ‘abjecting’ women whose class identity is treated as if it were undesirable waste. This puts my project’s application of terms like the abject and grotesque more in line with Tyler’s book *Revolted Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain* (2013), in which she discusses how government policy and media position populations such as gypsies, the disabled, immigrants and working-class black teenagers as social refuse, the unwanted viscera of social life. In order not to dehumanise the women whose images I am discussing in reference to the grotesque, I am deliberately not judging from afar. Rather, *I am*

included in this conceptualisation of an Anti-Pygmalion female grotesque: it is my own lived-experience which has helped me choose my case studies and I am providing myself as an example. Taking up Bakhtin's theories of the grotesque and the carnivalesque Allan White and Peter Stallybrass's influential *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (1986) makes important points about the grotesque and class, expanding the grotesque as a concept linked with the reinforcement of class difference within society:

The "poetics" of transgression reveals the disgust, fear and desire which inform the dramatic self-representation of that culture through the "scene of its low Other". This poetics reveals quite clearly the contradictory political construction of bourgeois democracy. For bourgeois democracy emerged with a class which, whilst indeed progressive in its best political aspirations, had encoded in its manners, morals and imaginative writings, in its body, bearing and taste, a subliminal elitism which was constitutive of its historical being. (p202)

Not only is the grotesque body and the carnivalesque called upon in order to let go temporarily of socially sanctioned acceptable behaviours, but this is a process that divides and maintains divisions and differences of social-class and gender, almost enacted as a play on what a civilised body or body-politic should not be. The carnivalesque is a process of rejection and then reinforcement:

Often it is a powerful ritual or symbolic practice whereby the dominant squanders its symbolic capital so as to get in touch with the fields of desire which it denied itself the price paid for its political power [...] the carnivalesque was marked out as an intensely powerful semiotic realm precisely because bourgeois culture constructed its self-identity by rejecting it. (pp201-202)

Therefore, the carnivalesque is part of a temporary transgression for the bourgeoisie, in which those with power shuck off their privilege in order to symbolically slum it. Challenging Kristeva in *Desire in Language* (1980), Stallybrass and White argue with her notion of the subversive nature of the carnivalesque; yet they take no account of the pleasures the working-class themselves may take in carnivalesque practices. In their framework, the working-class only exist as ciphers, personae to be put on and played with as a temporary reprieve from the demands of bourgeois civility. To working-class readers the notion that we may take self-aware pleasure in the carnivalesque, or even be aware of its existence, is totally overlooked in this text. The working-class are often more aware of the moralistic condescension of the middle-classes towards the so-called low pleasures of the poor than the middle-class, who are themselves often unaware that they are doing it.¹⁶

¹⁶ See for example the testimony of the research subjects of Skeggs (1997).

While Stallybrass and White suggest that the ‘act of rediscovery...in which the middle-classes excitedly discover their own pleasures and desires under the sign of the Other [...] is constitutive of the very formation of middle-class identity’(p201), their account overlooks how much these same judgements affect the identities of the working-classes, who may take pleasure in throwing back these stereotypes of classed depictions of the grotesque to the middle-classes with irony. Today the hostile treatment of the poor in Britain is so explicit, that visions of the “undeserving”, “base”, and “contaminating” underclass are expressed almost daily on television, newspapers and political sanctions that actively demonise the poor (Jones 2011). My thesis situates the experience of having an identity constructed as grotesque as a source of defiant pleasure from the point of view of the working-class.

The Female Grotesque

The key text on the female grotesque is Mary Russo’s *The Female Grotesque, Risk Excess and Modernity* (1994). Russo theorises new figurations of the female grotesque, away from abjection, fertility and the reproductive body; she also introduces a relationship to the sublime: ‘I invert the usual vertical scheme which associates the grotesque with the “low” to revisit the “high” registers of modernism, the sublime, and discourses of liberation’. (pviii). Russo employs case studies from diverse areas in literature, film and real life: Angela Carter’s “Fevvers”, a circus aerialist who may or may not have real wings, from *Nights at the Circus* (1984); the stunts performed by real-life aviatrix Amelia Earhart (born 1897- disappeared 1937), and cross-dressing and transgender femininities in Ulrike Ottinger’s film *Freak Orlando* (1981). These case studies allow Russo to test out the key themes of her conception of the female grotesque: risk, aerialism, transcendence and spectacle.

Russo is concerned with “defaulting” femininities; her case studies are interested in ‘the practice of risk’ of ‘possibility’ over ‘sustained progress’ (p13). Therefore, her book is ‘filled with images of female performers who are, one way or another, in error. Each of these agents is marked by specificities of age, body shape, class, ethnicity, and sexuality; each performs with irony and courage in the face of danger, ridicule, disbelief, injury, or even death’. (p13). In suggesting that ‘there may be affirmative models of risk and deviance in the high registers of modernism, and ways in which the image of freedom as limitless space, transcendence, individualism, and the upward mobility of various kinds may be embodied and diverted, giving way to a model of feminist practice’. (p26). Russo’s text is firmly declaring itself to have transcended the mucky, low realm of previous writing on the grotesque, jumping over the Cartesian mind/body split to make connections with the cleaner, more cerebral realms of modernism. This can be seen in her use of the sublime:

The sublime in this study is highly qualified by “aerial” - a term I use to designate a zone which is at once historical and imaginary. As historical, it belongs to the late-nineteenth and twentieth century preoccupation with modernity and the specific technical contents of those Futurist aspirations for progress, associated with spectacle. As imaginative, “the aerial sublime” posits a realm of freedom within the everyday. For latecomers to the scene of political identity, freedom as expressed in boundless flight is still an almost irresistible image. (p11)

One major difference between Russo’s concept of the female grotesque and mine is that my argument is not interested in the *fantastical*, of flight from the body through aerialism and the spectacles of modernity, but in a freedom of expression in and from the body, starting from the grounded reality of *lived* experience. I am not interested in transcendence; I do not want to encourage my case studies to *transcend* their imposed identities - which is the crux of *why* they are Anti-Pygmalion: they remain *within* their ‘faulty identities’ in order to challenge them from below.¹⁷ Russo does not mention how the class of women affects their status as grotesques: she seemingly wants to move the female grotesque into a higher realm. The “sublime” in my research does not refer to lofty heights, but to the subversive transgression of displaying bodies that matter, both in weight and in classed-political consequence.

Other feminist writers have discussed the concept of the grotesque in varying figurations. Margaret Miles’ “Carnal Abominations: The Female Body as Grotesque” from *Carnal Knowing* (1989, reprinted 1997) connects Christian notions of sin onto female bodies constructed by men as dangerous and corrupting, that *they* must protect themselves against. She writes: ‘In the patriarchal societies of the Christian West, “woman” was mysterious and ultimately grotesque because women did not represent themselves; lacking conditions for the self-presentation – collective voice and access to the public sphere – women were represented by men’s anxieties, fears and fantasies’ (Miles 1997, p112).

The most common trope of the female grotesque, the reproductive body is discussed in texts such as Julie Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror* (1984), Barbara’s Creed *The Monstrous Feminine* (1993), Maggi Philips’ “Madame Koto: Grotesque Creatrix or the Paradox of Psychic Heath?” (1999), Jane M. Ussher’s *Managing the Monstrous Feminine, Regulating the Reproductive Body* (2006).

¹⁷ This thesis shares with Hill (1991) the aim of producing a “history from below”. While Hill explored historic working-class groups, such as the Levellers, Diggers, and early Quakers, who were interested in refiguring new worlds by rejecting authority and oppressive social norms, my history comes from the lives of working-class women writers, artists and academics. It is due to their challenge to established norms that the women I’m discussing have been described as grotesque; therefore, it is from their perspective that I approach the concept of the Anti-Pygmalion.

The female grotesque is linked to the cyborg in the text by Sara Cohen Shabot's *Grotesque Bodies: A Response to Disembodied Cyborgs* (2008), the strong, large body in Dawn Heinecken's *The Warrior Woman of Television: A Feminist Cultural Analysis of the Female Body in Popular Media* (2003), Lara Glenum & Arielle Greenberg's *Gurlesque: the new grrly grotesque, burlesque, poetics* (2010). Tara Chittenden's "Body-Building: A Female Student's Use of the Transitional Spaces of a Painting Degree Course to Explore her Sexual Desirability and Aesthetics as a 'Grotesque' Female Body" (2013).

A useful discussion of the ways drinking and supposedly debauched behaviour have been read as signs the female grotesque is Terri Waddell's "Revelling in Dis-Play: Grotesque in *Absolutely Fabulous*" (1999). Waddell discusses Patsy and Edina, the main characters of the British comedy series *Absolutely Fabulous*, who are middle-aged alcoholics working in the fashion industry. She observes that these two women: 'share a sense of the spectacular that stems from a desire to "do as they will"- a credo which suggests contempt for order and containment.' (p207). Yet she makes no mention of the key aspect of the humour of this spectacle, which is its strong relation with their middle-classness. It is this that shapes the excessive desire to be seen as fashionable and important that leads these women to go too far, and it is their wealth that allows them to "get away with it" and enjoy to the extreme such debaucheries of champagne-drinking, taxi rides and pretending to work (or, often, not bothering to turn up to work at all).

Elaine Ashton's "Making a spectacle out of herself: Bobby Baker's take a peek!" (2004) similarly associates the female grotesque with middle-class identity. Writing on the work of performance artist Bobby Baker. Ashton writes, "To make visible the oppressive and damaging constraints of the feminine and the maternal on women's lives, Baker works with her own, real, late middle-aged body: makes a "spectacle" out of herself. As an ageing body it is more at risk of becoming a spectacle'. (p279). Although pertinent, Baker's work primarily draws on her position of being a middle-class woman, thus is outside the purview of this thesis.

Jeffrey A Brown's "Class and Feminine Excess: The Strange Case of Anna Nicole Smith" (2005) based on an American case study, is a rare text that discusses the female grotesque and the working-class. However, from my survey of research it is clear that there is a gap in the literature on art, the female grotesque and working-class identity from a British context.

A Feminist Sublime

Arguably the most cited text on the sublime is Edmund Burke's *Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, first published in 1795. Burke distinguishes the sublime from the beautiful in highly gendered terms, based on his view that men and women are without question

essentially different creatures: physically, emotionally and intellectually. Consider his explanation of how scale and proportion differ in the sublime and the beautiful: 'sublime objects are vast in their dimensions, beautiful ones comparatively small: beauty should be smooth and polished...beauty should not be obscure; the great ought to be dark and gloomy: beauty should be light and delicate; the great ought to be solid, and even massive.' (Burke 1990, p58). If we replace in this passage the words 'sublime' and 'great' with the word 'male', and the words 'beautiful' and 'beauty' with 'female' and 'woman', then Burke's view of society and aesthetics can be clearly understood.

If this passage did not already make clear the way Burke personifies his aesthetic theory in terms of gendered stereotypes (associating 'beauty' with women, smallness, unobtrusive smoothness and passivity), he goes on to make these connections explicit:

Observe that part of a beautiful woman where she is perhaps the most beautiful, about the neck and breasts; the smoothness; the softness; the easy and insensible swell; the variety of the surface, which is never for the smallest space the same; the deceitful maze, through which the unsteady eye slides giddily, without knowing where to fix or whither it is carried. (p105).

This strange and excessive passage reveals Burke's unfamiliarity and distance from the object of his swooning appreciation, both physically and intellectually. This is an account of a fetishisation of perhaps the most commonly seen part of the female body that is visibly available to him: the flash of flesh displayed by dresses of the period, the exposed décolletage. It does not speak of intimate knowledge of a real woman, but of the idea of a "woman" from a distance. Burke is swept up or 'carried away' by his idealisation of feminine beauty; the 'deceitful maze' is his own flimsy construction, an ideal that forever escapes him because it does not exist.¹⁸

By constructing an idealisation of soft, smooth, dainty femininity to worship, Burke transforms women into something elusive; and through the patriarchal enforcement of codes of behaviour and appearance, and the total disavowal of active sexuality, women become something *Other*, something that is unknowable and beyond representation. Seen in these terms, then, female sexuality is the dark, lurking sublime that lies under the fabricated veneer of the female-as-beautiful - beauty to Burke being of less value than the true magnificence of the sublime that he equates with masculinity.

Wendy Steiner's *The Trouble with Beauty* (2001) interrogates beauty from a feminist perspective,

¹⁸ See Brownmiller (1984) for a detailed historical analysis of the construction of "femininity" from a feminist perspective.

criticising the way women have been judged by their appearance. Steiner notes how ‘an interpretation of Darwin buttresses male fears by picturing women as unalterably Other. In early modernism, the thrill and danger of this exotic figure played directly into the Kantian sublime, causing artists to recast female subjects in frightening and dehumanised ways.’ (p30). The female character types that emerged as subjects in early modernist art, such as the vamp and the femme fatale, presented beauty as something untrustworthy and deceitful that seduced the male almost against his will.

The beautiful and deadly woman is a common trope in art - for example, the vampire in the work of Edvard Munch or the figure of *Salome* painted by Gustav Klimt and by Aubrey Beardsley. Such images of women as sexually dangerous conform to Margaret Miles’ theorisation of the female grotesque discussed earlier: by constructing this sexually excessive figure, men could relinquish responsibility for succumbing to the unprogressive, unenlightened baseness of sexual desire by placing the blame with evil temptresses.¹⁹

Joanna Zylińska in *On Spiders, Cyborgs and being Scared: The Feminine and the Sublime* (2001) elaborates on the ways that women are disempowered in writings on the sublime that equate women with the beautiful, while simultaneously painting femaleness as inherently grotesque:

This fear of eruption and “overflow” poses a threat not only to the newly emergent subjectivity but also, it seems, to the selfhood of the predominantly male theorists of the sublime. This is probably the reason why the discourse on the sublime relies on the idea of “woman” as its cornerstone and reference point. “Woman” is usually disempowered in this discourse (i.e. reduced to the images of weakness, submission and beauty), a manoeuvre which allows its practitioners to reassert their masculinity. (p29)

Male artists have historically dealt with female sexuality in a very similar manner to that in which male theorists have dealt with the sublime: as something that one approaches with desire, but which must be conquered and overcome in order to shore-up the patriarchal male ego against that which threatens it.

As well as enable ego-bolstering against the threat of women, the experience of the Romantic sublime of Burke and Immanuel Kant’s *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764),

¹⁹ Further analysis of the misogyny inherent in the art historical themes of evil temptresses and wicked women, see Dijkstra (1986 and 1996), and Bronfen (1992).

can be likened to an intellectualised thrill-seeking game of *fort/da* (Freud 2003), in which one comes close to danger but the threat is always evaded: the danger is *here* then *gone*, conquered by the mastery of man's reason. Kant describes this process of man's assertion of a superior autonomy over the dangers of sublime nature:

The sight of them is the more attractive, the more fearful it is, provided only that we are in security; and we readily call these objects sublime, because they raise the energies of the soul above their accustomed height, and discover in us a faculty of resistance of quite a different kind, which gives us the courage to measure ourselves against the apparent almightiness of nature. (Kant 2005, p75)

In direct opposition to the masculinist ego-projection of the Romantic sublime of Burke and Kant, there is what I will call a "feminist" sublime, as theorised by writers such as Patricia Yaeger in *Towards A Female Sublime* (1989), Barbara Claire Freeman in *The Feminine Sublime: Gender, Excess in Woman's Fiction* (1995) and Joanna Zylińska (2001). These writers are interested in exploring the excessive, in shattering essentialist gender concepts and dissolving the boundaries and limits that separate the self from the *other*. As Freeman comments, 'Unlike the masculinist sublime that seeks to master, appropriate, or colonise the other, I propose that the politics of the feminine sublime involves a taking up a position of respect in response to an incalculable otherness.' (p11). In short, Freeman's feminine sublime represents the very things that the masculinist sublime reaffirms and protects itself against.

For Yeager (1989), reformulating a sublime from the female point of view can enable women writers to push back against masculinist traditions and hegemony:

The burden of French feminist writing is that women must create a new architectonics of empowerment – not through the old-fashioned sublime of domination, the vertical sublime which insists on aggrandising the masculine self over others, but instead through a horizontal sublime that moves towards sovereignty or expenditure, that refuses an oedipal, phallic fight to the death with the father, but expands towards others, spreads itself out into multiplicity. (p191)

Yaeger's idea of a female sublime being a "horizontal sublime" is relevant for this thesis, as the sublime responses I am encountering in my case studies are about the recognition amongst women of shared experiences, in a way that is not hierarchical, nor about reinforcing ego. Yeager's female sublime also shares Russo's calls to embrace risk as an essential process of subversion and creativity: 'In refusing to adapt to the codes of a dominant culture that demands female propriety, [the woman writer] represents woman bursting out of bounds, lifting the burden of the past (however painfully) and experiencing an influx of power' (p210). This female sublime is an active, transgressive figure, in the process of making and dismantling.

Barbara Claire Freeman's (1995) theorisation of a feminine sublime is close to Yeager's in its desire to present an unfixed, destabilised version of what is thought of as the feminine, Freeman comments that:

At stake in the notion of the feminine sublime is the refusal to define the feminine as a specific set of qualities or attributes that we might call irreducible and unchanging. I employ the term "feminine" as that which contests binaries, including a rigid notion of sexual difference that would insist upon separate male and female selves. The appeal to a "feminine sublime" is not specifically feminine subjectivity or mode of expression, but rather to that which calls such categories into question. (p9)

If calling into question the stability of categories is a theme of the feminist "feminine sublime", this is due to the risky nature of exploring gendered identities that are treated as incorrect in their deviation from idealised acceptable femininity. If there are varying ways in which being a woman can be experienced, then there can also be said to be varying ways the sublime can be experienced. As Freeman comments, 'The discourse of the sublime, then, is integrally bound up with the subject's response to what possesses it, to the nature and effects of such a merger, and to the ways in which various forms of identification may be understood.' (p17). This idea is also taken up by Bettina Reiber's "The Sublime and the Possibility of Meaning" from *The Sublime Now* (2009), in which she makes the important point that the sublime is so often subjective, 'In the statement "This is sublime" I say something about myself, about me as subject' (p87). In this thesis, I am interested in what my sublime experiences can say about me as a *working-class female* subject – and how this might inform our understanding of the sublime.

If the sublime can be present differently depending on the person, it can also be experienced differently spatially, as in Elizabeth Wilson's *The Sphinx in the City* (1991). Wilson argues for a rethinking of the city as a place that can empower women, providing discovery and independence, and links the experience of the city with the sublime since the dangers and pleasures it offers are intertwined. This is especially relevant to my discussion of young working-class women's adventures in cities and council estates, as in my discussion of Morley in chapter five. Wilson writes that:

Women's experience of urban life is even more ambiguous than that of men, and safety is a crucial issue. Yet it is necessary also to emphasise the other side of city life and to insist in women's right to the carnival, intensity and even the risks of the city. Surely it is possible to be both pro-cities and pro-women, to hold in balance an awareness of both the pleasures and the dangers that the city offers women, and to judge that in the end, urban life, however fraught with difficulty, has emancipated women more than rural life or suburban domesticity. (p10)

The freedom of the city for women, in its association with danger *and* pleasure, brings women near to the complex, entwined feeling of the sublime; at the same time, a woman in the city is outside her traditional “place” - the domestic sphere - and thus may be framed as aberrant, as a grotesque.

Zylinska’s theorisation of the feminine sublime also carries an active association with risk and danger:

The feminine sublime, which remains open to the experience or unexpected arrival and eruption, inheres the possibility of bastardy, disaster and death [...] Instead of protecting itself against the unknown, the self extends an invite to the always already monstrous (in the sense of “showing itself as something that is not yet shown”) Other. (p138)

This extreme openness is meant to allow for new knowledge, and to push against the surety and arrogance of the masculinist writers on the sublime; and like Yaeger’s it is a horizontal sublime. Zylinska’s sublime is highly transgressive, there is an element of masochistic pleasure in putting yourself in an extremely vulnerable position, to be open to some pay-off of newness or discovery: ‘As well as depicting the emergence of new, multiple, but also fragmented, identities, the sublime represents the waning of knowledge about what is going to happen: it is a sign of opening oneself to the future [...] and thus unpredictable and perhaps also scary.’ (p2). Yet it is ambiguous whether the primary focus is *jouissance* or understanding – the former makes the encounter function as if only for the fulfilment of egocentric desires. When Zylinska says, ‘the self needs to risk and reveal its vulnerability for the sake of experiencing the infinite *jouissance*, a feeling which results from a direct contact with otherness.’ (p40), the question is: what about when you yourself are the societal *other*? Who is vulnerable for whom, and what might it cost?

Unlike Zylinska, Freeman and Yaeger, I am not trying to link a non-conformist, non-binary femininity directly with the sublime – rather, I’m interested in arguing that the Anti-Pygmalion female grotesque can herself provoke a sublime reception. The reception of my case studies transgressive images of grotesque femininities, when shown in the art gallery, in the cinema and within the media, provoke strong *sensations* - of shock or embarrassment, but also, for many, of excitement.²⁰ This feeling, I argue is a response that is too powerful to be merely the titillation of

²⁰ Morley speaks of women coming up to her in the loos after screenings to share their experiences of sexuality and grief: the film broke taboos that lead to silence and shame. From a Q&A recording with Morley, ICA London 1st September 2015. *Onwards and Outwards* women filmmaker’s festival screening of *The Alcohol Years*. [Accessed 6th May 2016]. Available from URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=biINod-aSCw&t=551s>.

viewing the outrageous; nor is it merely an intellectual, aesthetic or ideological excitement in the appreciation of bodies/identities often unseen. This often potent emotional and physical reaction has strong affinities with the experience of the sublime. In paying attention to my own experience of the works, and putting phenomenological analysis to work alongside the analysis of social and cultural significations, I account for the visual pleasures experienced when encountering images that are both difficult and (socially inscribed as) grotesque, yet also alluringly stimulating and politically radical.

Jennifer Wawrzinek's *Ambiguous Subjects: Dissolution and Metamorphosis in the Postmodern Sublime* (2008) offers a critique of the "feminine sublime". Her book begins with a detailed discussion of the history of the sublime from Longinus, through the Romantic sublime of Burke and Kant, to the postmodern sublime of writers such as Lyotard and the feminist appropriations of Freeman and Yaeger. She discusses the way the sublime factored into bolstering national identity in Nazi Germany (p21) and an American Nuclear sublime in its bombing of Japan (p21). Her case studies are three novels - Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Nicole Bossard's *Le Desert mauve*, and Morgan Yasbincek's *Liv* - and performances from an Australian community arts group, The Women's Circus. Of these she writes, "The authors and performers I have examined here in various ways, resisted the notion of a politics grounded on action and visibility. They have refused representational structures that engender the construction of a subject who is solely individual and autonomous, and which found a notion of agency, power and legitimacy upon the idea of such a subject." (p141). Wawrzinek is therefore unconvinced by the project of assembling a theory of a "feminine sublime". She argues:

Critics who rework the sublime in the service of the feminine often aim to contest binaries and a rigid notion of sexual difference that reinforces distinct gender positions. Nevertheless, their dependence on an opposition between a "feminine" mode of the sublime (horizontal or maternal) and a "masculine" mode (vertical and hierarchal) reinscribes the dialectical oppositions and gender categories underwriting the sublime they are criticising. (p53)

What she proposes instead is a "passive sublime" arguing that, 'Inhabiting the sublime from a position of radical passivity means that the other, who remains radically other, elsewhere and unknowable, must be approached as other – that is, outside identity.' (p53). Her project's intentions are at odds with the arguments of this thesis. By remaining *other* and unknowable, the Anti-Pygmalion identities I am discussing become meaningless: their ability to challenge sexist and classist constructions of women collapses if they remain *othered* and cannot challenge the *othering* and stigmatisation that place them in this position. To open up my project to such an approach would dehumanise my subjects and lead to a dissolution of any position from which they could

critique structures of oppression. Instead, this thesis refigures sublime encounters as reactivating the experiences of working-class women, enabling an acknowledgement of shared humanity.

Chapter Two: Working-Class Stories Matter

Theories of Class

The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) was a research centre founded at the University of Birmingham in 1964 by Richard Hoggart and Stuart Hall, with Hoggart as its first director. Aligned with the politics of the New Left in Britain in the 1960s, and following Marxist approaches to theory, writing and culture, the research produced by the CCCS centred around analysis of popular culture, the media and subcultures. It employed an interdisciplinary approach applying critical-race theory, feminism and post-structuralism to theorising culture and understanding its production.

A key influence on the CCCS were the writings of Antonio Gramsci (1982) on hegemony, which were used to understand the methods by which the dominant class maintains its ideological power through culture as well as politics. As John Clarke and Stuart Hall explained in “Subcultures, Cultures and Class: A Theoretical Overview” (1976):

Dominant and subordinate classes will each have distinct cultures. But when one culture gains ascendancy over the other, and when the subordinate culture experiences itself in terms prescribed by the dominant culture, then the dominant culture has also become the basis of a dominant ideology. (p12)

A starting premise of my thesis is that working-class cultural production is under-valued and erased by the middle and upper-class hegemony within the art and culture industries. The CCCS produced work that aimed to counter this hegemony, by publishing texts on working-class culture, subcultures and histories.²¹

A challenge to this approach was raised by feminists on the left, who felt that Marxist analyses centred on class had a gendered blind-spot, tending to see class oppression as primarily affecting working-class *men*. Heidi I. Hartmann’s influential essay “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a more Progressive Union” (1979) tackled this problem, arguing that ‘early Marxists failed to focus on the *differences* between men’s and women’s experiences under capitalism. They did not focus on the feminist questions – how and why women are oppressed as women. They did not therefore, recognize the vested interest men had in women’s continued

²¹ For example, Thompson (1963), Hall and Jefferson (1976), Clarke (1979) and McRobbie and Garber Jenny (1976) which influenced McRobbie (2000).

subordination.’ (Hartmann 1979, p3). Although I am simplifying the debate between Marxism and feminism, this failure to factor in gendered oppression contributed to a discursive turn away from Marxist class analysis for many feminists.

The Turn Away from Class

In the 1980s the theories of French poststructuralists such as Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida were becoming increasingly influential in the UK, along with those of French feminist philosophers and psychoanalytic theorists.

Newly translated editions of texts such as Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror* (1984) and Luce Irigaray’s *Speculum of the other Woman* (1985) became available, prompting feminist writers to focus on negotiations of psychoanalysis, structuralism and sexuality.

Ellen Meiksins Wood’s *The Retreat from Class: A New ‘True Socialism’* (1998) analyses the tendency of even those on the left to drop class from political and theoretical discussions, considering factors such as ‘the lure of intellectual fashion, as “discourse” becomes the style of the eighties; or perhaps even a certain fastidious middle-class distaste for – not to say fear of – the working-class, and an arrogant and indignant refusal of the discomforts occasioned by the withdrawal of service.’ (pp10-11). In the absence of a class politics centred on the working class, ‘the search for revolutionary surrogates has been the hallmark of contemporary socialism.’ (p14), while ‘the decisive detachment of politics from class was achieved by making ideology and “discourse” – themselves conceived as autonomous from class – the principal historical determinants’ (p47). This “retreat from class” leads to the erasure of serious and thorough theoretical consideration of how class features in political and social life. This perhaps goes some way towards explaining why even in texts that discuss feminism, race, gender and queer studies, consideration of class is so often absent.²²

Identity Politics

As the 1970s moved into the 1980s and 1990s, what took the place of class was an increasing focus

²² The opposite of this trend can be seen in Delphy (2016), a collection of the 1970s texts of French feminist writer Christine Delphy which was first published in English in 1984. Delphy treats women as a separate class from men, in their oppression via men directly and patriarchy structurally. The problem with this argument is that Delphy ends up arguing that there is no class difference between women (p135), which is simply not the case. The oppressions faced by middle-class women are different from those experienced by working-class women and women of colour, and affect women’s lives in different degrees and aspects, for example access to education, childcare and job opportunities.

on the politics of identity.²³ The emergence of identity politics was met with hostility by many on the Left. As Holly Lewis writes: ‘Within Marxist and various third-wave feminist camps, the term “identity politics” is more of a slur than genuine political critique. For Marxists, the slur refers to politics that substitute systematic historical and economic analyses with inquiries into intrapersonal aggression. Marxist political activity does not require proletarian identity politics because Marxist analysis involved impersonal macropolitical investigations.’ (Lewis 2016, p18). Although intended to bring to bear key discussions of how other identities such as gender, sexuality and race impact the oppressions and stresses one will be subject to, identity politics ignored class as a determiner of oppression.²⁴ An example of the impact of class position: a black trans woman from a middle-class background with a high-earning career will not face the same oppressions as another black trans woman who is poor; particularly in the USA, the latter’s access to healthcare, safe places to live and work will be dramatically impaired. Class makes a crucial difference here to the material conditions of these two women.

However, as Lewis points out above, Marxism is also disinterested in ‘proletarian identity politics’. What is needed is a combination of approaches: to research and understand the position of working-class women, we must pay attention to their personal testimonies of lived experience central to their / our conception of class-identity, to subject positions as well as political positions.

Categories of Working-Class Meaning

What it means to be working-class depends on so many factors and often conflicting indicators that it can seem impossible to pin down precisely. For purposes of this thesis, when I describe the “working-class” I am talking about a group of people who are or have grown-up experiencing and living in poverty as the norm. By this I mean not just temporary but structural poverty. “Temporary” poverty is “being broke” *sometimes*, or lacking funds due to a change of circumstances - for example, running out of cash as a student, having to save up for a holiday or a car, or otherwise living on a budget in ways many of the middle-class have also experienced. “Structural” poverty, *although feeling personal*, is an ongoing state of not having enough money to make ends meet: not having enough money for food, rent, bills or bus fares. I am talking about a poverty that is ingrained, a confinement of economic opportunity, and its resulting practical and psychological effects.

²³ See Fuss (1990) for a discussion of the origins of identity politics, its positive aims and ultimate limitations.

²⁴ See Crenshaw (1995) for a more successful and inclusive politics of taking into account the interconnections of oppression on identities.

Exceptions to this understanding of working-class experience through the lens of poverty are the “respectable” or “traditional” working-class in stereotypically male jobs, who earn enough to live without deprivation in traditionally-understood working-class jobs.²⁵ Another example of groups within the working-class who may not necessarily be poor are migrants who may have held higher status-positions in their country of origin but post-migration are earning less in lower status jobs and may now be living in working-class areas and identifying as working-class.²⁶ My own experience of *working-classness* is of being poor, as it was for my three case studies, none of whom conform to the respectable working-class narrative of relative stability and respect, but articulate the struggle and shame that comes with being poor in the long term.

One of the main problems of researching working-class subjectivities that are articulated in written testimony of lived experience is that those who publish such testimony have often already moved or begun to move from one class position to another. Those I have looked at have all, to varying degrees, been “educated out” of their original class backgrounds, and are now working within academia or as artists and writers. Carrying out quantitative research by interviewing people who are still living traditionally-understood working-class lives is outside of the reach of this thesis. However, according to Didier Eribon (2016), himself an academic from a working-class background, being once removed from one’s original class-position can be beneficial:

An analysis has to be written at some distance from the way ‘social actors’ see their own lives. Take, for example, the way the school system functions: working-class children think that they leave education early out of choice, because they don’t like it. You need to distance yourself from their point of view to see, through an analysis of the whole system, that the very purpose – or, at least, the real result – of the school system is to exclude them. The people who are destined to be eliminated are blind to all this because it seems to them that they voluntarily and actively choose what was, in fact, predestined for them, from birth. (p130)

I’ve chosen to focus on the work and testimony of working-class people who have entered more middle-class spaces, and are equipped to reflect in this way on their experiences.

Subjective Experiences of Having a Working-Class Identity

In this section I review a range of testimonies by working-class writers concerning their experiences of class and education. One of the most common themes in this body of writing is

²⁵ Historically: factory worker, miner, steel worker, Docker etc.

²⁶ See Reynolds (1997 and 2000) for discussion of the position of black women from immigrant families who may have come from middle-class families but currently live in working-class areas, and the racist assumption that black Britons will have lower-class origins.

the experience of pain and anguish at being made aware of your class as shameful and problematic in relation to middle-class people and institutions. This is crucial to explore, as it relates to the experiences and consequently the work of my case studies as they move through education into careers in the arts; it also mirrors my own experience. These writers' testimony is thus put through a three-way check, corroborated by other writers, the artists in my case studies, and myself, the researcher.

Sheila Rowbotham's *Threads Through Time* (1999) describes her childhood and education, from school through to university in Oxford, and her participation in the left wing and feminist politics of the 1960 and 70s. Through the process of learning the standards set by middle-class institutions, Rowbotham realised that she had been subjected to a power of normalisation. She says, 'my own realisation of the depth and extent of my colonisation came with the force of an electric shock. It jolted me into perceiving all my glimpses of myself in a different light.' (p70). A conflict arises when (as a working-class person) you leave the people and places of your class and start to mix with others by whom your background and way of being are treated negatively, as "common" and revealing a wrongness. On moving to a more middle-class area as a child, Rowbotham found that:

Roundhay was different. I was somehow not right. Being tough got me nowhere. The kids wouldn't even fight. They just bawled. As little girls returned covered in dust and mud, a parental boycott developed. I was "common", they said. "What's common?" I asked my mother. "It's when you scream and play rough games and get dirty". I tried not to shout so loud [...] This "common" lodged inside me – the lost good times. Cut adrift from nearly everything I'd known before seven, I turned inward and invented story games to play alone. (pp41-42)

This is a testament to the way working-class girls are taught class-shame at the behaviours, speech, manner and dress associated with being working-class. If class is "read" through speech and accent, it becomes very difficult to be active in spaces demarcated as middle-class:

The embarrassment about dialect, the divorce between home talking and educational language, the otherness of "culture" - their culture - is intense and painful. The struggle is happening now every time a worker on strike has to justify his position in the alien structures of the television studio before interrogatory camera of the dominant class, or every time a working-class child encounters a middle-class teacher. (p69)

As Lorna Sage writes, if you are working-class it is safer and often less painful to remain within the limited expectations people have of you due to your class position. Writing about the people from Hanmer, the Welsh village she grew up in, Sage argues 'they didn't just "know their place", it was as though the place occupied them, so that they all knew what they were going to be from the beginning.' (Sage 2007, p4). These two accounts reveal the pressure to remain within your class

background and the dangers of mobility that exposes you painfully to judgements that find you lacking.

The effect of not feeling “good enough” is lingering. For Sage getting into grammar school was a source of pride but also anxiety: ‘I was mystified when I passed the “scholarship” at ten, and felt sure it was a mistake and someone was going to find me out...They didn’t and still haven’t, I suppose.’ (p29-30). Mark Fisher’s article “Good For Nothing” similarly discusses his personal anxiety around class position, but argues that it is formed by structural inequalities:

When I eventually got a job as lecturer in a Further Education college, I was for a while elated – yet by its very nature this elation showed that I had not shaken off the feelings of worthlessness that would soon lead to further periods of depression. I lacked the calm confidence of one born to the role. At some not very submerged level, I evidently still didn’t believe that I was the kind of person who could do a job like teaching. But where did this belief come from? [...] The most likely cause of such feelings of inferiority: social power. (Fisher, March 19th, 2014)

The experience of feeling yourself to be an intruder is common to all the writers I discuss here, as is the precariousness of straddling a working-class identity and background while pursuing academic advancement. As Sage illustrates, ‘I worked very hard to stay up there. It was a pleasure, but it was also a matter of survival, for exam results were my alibi. This was understood between my parents and me: my academic performance was taking place on a kind of high wire; so long as I could keep it up my lack of moral balance didn’t count, but if I slipped and fell I’d be revealed in my true colours.’ (p157). As Fisher confirms, this fear of slipping, of failing at being considered educated or intelligent, is especially problematic for autodidacts: ‘In England working class escape is always haunted by the possibility that you will be found out, that your roots are showing. You won’t know some crucial rule of etiquette that you should. You will pronounce something wrong – mispronunciation is a constant source of anxiety for the autodidact, because books don’t necessarily teach you how to *say* words.’ (Original italics. Fisher 2014, p37). Learning middle-class values and manners and even being a high achiever doesn’t allow one to transcend a classed identity, it is clear that class background is formative in ways that are hard to move away from.

In *Estates* (2007), her first book about life on a British council estate, Lynsey Hanley wrote much about how the subjective feelings of being poor shapes your outlook on life and your sense of self. In her second book *Respectable* (2016), she returned again to the theme of her upbringing. For many working-class people who have made similar transitions, this is a subject they keep returning to, and trying to make sense of, again and again. In a preface to the second edition of *Estates* (2012), Hanley talks about the letters and responses she received after the book’s publication:

‘Many describe their own experience of the “wall in the head”, which they’d never quite escaped, despite most having experienced upward social mobility, including moves from council to private housing, from flats to houses, and from the struggling North to the genteel South, in adulthood.’ (Hanley 2012, xiii). Hanley uses this phrase “walls in the head” to describe the ways that class shapes our geographies, psychologies and realities, limiting our outlook and stamping a working-class model onto our ways of being: ‘social factors effecting my experience of life – the area I lived in, the schools I went to, my family’s income and status – filtered inwards and expressed themselves psychologically.’ (Hanley 2016, xi).

Like Hoggart (1958) before her, Hanley expresses the culture-shock of being working-class at university, and questions the value of social mobility as a universal good:

Changing class is like emigrating from one side of the world to another, where you have to rescind your passport, learn a new language and make gargantuan efforts if you are not to lose touch completely with the people and habits of your old life, even if they are among the relationships and things that are dearest to your heart. The effect of this is psychologically disruptive, sometimes extremely so; yet it’s rarely discussed alongside the received wisdom about social mobility, which is that it is unequivocally a Good Thing for individuals and for society as a whole. (Hanley 2016, px)

It is not just that moving through different class contexts is difficult, but that one class is posed as the ideal, and the other as shameful. It is a painful experience to learn that the class you came from is seen this way, and leads to mixed feelings of shame but also longing - as Hanley points, out there are people and things that you will miss when you have been educated out of your class and taught the “proper” way to be.

Hanley recalls Margaret Thatcher’s attitude that poverty was the result of individual failure, and that consequently ‘all the people who live on estates are failures, and failure is not only contagious but morally repugnant.’ (p15). If the working-class are categorised by those from outside, as stupid, poor, lazy etc. this is internalised by many working-class people, particularly those who live on estates; yet alongside shame, there is also pride and humour. The very word “estate” gathers together these contradictions: ‘It’s a bruise in the form of a word: it hits the nerves that register shame, disgust, fear and very occasionally fierce pride... In many ways, what defines the state of being working-class is veering between sentimentality and bitterness like a drunk trying to walk down the aisle of a moving bus.’ (p20). The experience of knowing that others look down on you, but also knowing that there are things worth being proud of, leads to a split-subjectivity. Balancing the desire to push against romanticising your poverty, to stay angry at the structural inequalities that shaped it, with pride that you are surviving and trying to live a decent life despite it, is a wobbly

and unstable path, an identity that exists in defiance.

In Carolyn Steedman's (1986) memoir detailing her relationship with her mother, class is felt as a wound of bitterness and wrongness. Her mother's class-disaffection, rather than class-pride, separates and excludes both mother and daughter from the community, from the respectable stoicism of "making do". The pain of being denied the things one can't have, the things which would make one feel worth something - even if this is just enough fabric for the New Look skirt longed for by Steedman's mother - is felt sharply and bitterly:

My mother's longing shaped my own childhood. From a Lancashire mill town and a working-class twenties childhood. She came away wanting: fine clothes, glamour, money; to be what she wasn't. However, that longing was produced in her distant childhood, what she actually wanted was real things, real entities, things she material lacked, things that a culture and a social system withheld from her. (p6)

Steedman herself feels the bitterness of knowing one's illegitimacy in society, and of being the reason for her mother's loss of freedom. Her mother's story does not line up with common narratives of class solidarity, for her right-wing attitudes meant that she could gain no comfort from solidarity with a class she painfully resented being a part of.

Giving this account of class as a wound, 'changes the tradition of cultural criticism in this country, which has celebrated a kind of psychological simplicity in the lives lived out in Hoggart's endless streets of little houses.' (p7). Steedman's book expresses the pain and anger of what deprivation and shame feel like, countering the romanticising stereotypes of traditional respectable working-class life, and the patronising assumption that the working-class themselves did not wish for more than "their lot" in life:

Superficially, it might be said that historians, failing to find evidence of most people's emotional or psycho-sexual existence, have simply assumed that there can't have been much there to find [...] Lacking such possessions of culture, working-class people have come to be seen, within the field of cultural criticism, as bearing the elemental simplicity of class-consciousness and little more. (pp12-13)

By drawing on her own experiences and feelings about growing up working-class, Steedman offers a counter to stereotypes that reduce the subjectivities of working-class people that write about the working-class as a mass, an abstract category. She also gives a perspective on the least theorised aspect of working-class people's lives, which is the perception of working-class women of their own class position.²⁷ What comes across in this is the way that class oppression and sexism are

²⁷ See Hoggart (1958), Thompson (1963) and Rose (2010). In these key texts about working-class lives, the emphasis is predominantly on the experiences of men.

conjoined, as working-class women strive to distinguish themselves from others less capable of passing as respectable.

Steedman relates how her mother sought to distinguish herself by keeping her body within the expectations of social control and acceptability: ‘My mother did what the powerless, particularly powerless women have done before, and do still: she worked on her body, the only bargaining power she ended up with, given the economic times and the culture in which she grew.’ (p141). For working-class women without cultural capital, the female body and its appearance becomes the only source of status. Referencing the attitudes that link poverty with fat, and thinness with the middle and upper-classes, Steedman writes of her mother, ‘She looked so much better than the fat, spreading, South London mothers around us, that I thought we had to be middle class’ (p37). A level of respectability is granted to women who express aspirations to conform to middle-class bodily “good taste”.

Yet, for working-class women being “respectable” is not a fixed accomplishment, but something that can be lost or taken from you by any social faux-pas or wrong move. As Hanley writes, thirty years after Steedman: ‘It’s about being *sensible*, and not being caught out. You can’t let yourself go...except when you do the plug of repression pops out with the force of a champagne cork. The confusion is endless and self-defeating, and comes from having grown up “respectable” in an area perceived, from outside and to an extent from within, as “rough”.’ (Original italics. Hanley 2016, p7). This illustrates how precarious the situation is emotionally for many working-class women who move away from their working-class roots: at any moment you will be found out, as Sage fears, be revealed to be the intruder you are, be thought of as stupid and not good enough. If you “let yourself go”, your body will betray you with its lack of middle-class refinement.

All of the writers of these important texts describe the pain of having their identities, formed through the experience of growing up with class-based feelings of shame and inadequacy, clash against the norms of middle-class-dominated space. This knowledge does not go away; when Carol Morley explained to me that “you cannot transcend your class”, this rang true for me also (Morley: 25/08/2016). For Steedman, too, it is always present: ‘I read a woman’s book, meet such a woman at a party (a woman now, like me) and I think quite deliberately as we talk: we are divided: a hundred years ago, I’d have been cleaning your shoes. I know this, but you don’t.’ (p2). This is why these memoirs are so important: they tell what *we* know, and bring this knowledge into academic and

cultural spaces that otherwise would reinforce a middle-class hegemony.²⁸

Working-Class Women in Sociology and Cultural Studies

Most academic writing on and by working-class women comes from the fields of cultural studies (where since Hoggart the study of class has been permitted as a legitimate area of study) and sociology. Two key edited collections from these fields, are the books *Class Matters: "Working-Class" Women's Perspectives on Social Class* (1997) and *Cultural Studies and the Working Class: Subject to Change* (2000). What is important about these collected volumes is the authors themselves are from working-class backgrounds, and use their knowledge to reflect on the roles and representations of the working-class in culture and society. Introducing *Class Matters* (1997), the editors Pat Mahony and Christine Zmroczek give their reasons for assembling the collection:

as two women from working-class backgrounds, the experience of going through university as students and then working in the academy as teachers and researchers left us confused about our own class positioning. Though both of us were told repeatedly that by virtue of our education and our 'position in the labour market' we were not working-class, we did not *feel* middle-class nor believe that we had necessarily "gone up in the world". (p1)

They also state their belief that not enough texts on working-class come from feminist perspectives, and that feminist writing is assumed to be middle-class and unconcerned with the differences between women's experiences (Mahony, Zmroczek 1997, p2). The essays in this volume discuss subjects such as class, race and gender (Tracey Reynolds 1997, p8), success and failure of working-class academics (Diane Reay 1997, p18), the relationship between working-class lives and escape via middle-class culture (Clancy 1997, p45), the devaluation and disavowal of working-class women's intelligence (Morley 1997, p109), interpretation, autobiographies and social change (Walsh 1997, p155), and finding your academic voice coming from a working-class background (Holloway 1997, p191). Especially important to my work is Bev Skeggs's "Classifying Practices: Representations, Capitals and Recognitions", which outlines the effects of middle-class value judgements on the confidence of working-class students, and the way that feelings of inadequacy

²⁸ Cherry (1996) gives an account of the struggles of working-class women to write, drawing a connection to the reason why many working-class women from the Victorian period onwards wrote autobiographically. She writes, 'working-class women wrote autobiographies as a record of a way of life, as something that was of historical interest, because it was the only way they could justify writing about themselves' (p91). This has a connection to why many of the texts I cite come from sociology departments, as these are academic spaces where you can legitimately write about your own background.

may persist throughout their professional careers. Skeggs says of her time at university:

All the prior cultural knowledge (capital) in which I had taken pride lost its value and I entered a world where I knew little and felt I could communicate even less. I was delegitimated. The noisy, bolshy, outspoken me was silenced. I became afraid to speak in case I gave “myself” (that is my classed self) away. I did not want to be judged and found wanting. Being the object of the judgements of others, whose values are legitimated, is a very uncomfortable position to occupy [...] It was this cultural devaluation that was the most obvious and devastating assignment of class for me [...] You have to force yourself to enter spaces in which you never feel as if you belong or will “fit”. (Skeggs 1997b pp130-131)

These texts voice the struggle to assert your reality and identity in an institutional setting in which your presence is contradictory to middle-class understandings of who belongs and “fits” in the academy. Alongside pain, embarrassment and shame, there is also the pleasure of escaping poverty, whether economic or cultural, and of exploring knowledge in an environment which prioritises learning and knowledge. These testimonies find a double-edge to class-mobility.

The essays in *Cultural Studies and the Working Class* (2000) don't exclusively discuss working-class experiences; when they do, many of the same experiences are described but with a focus on culture. For example, Steph Lawler's “Escape and Escapism: Representing Working-Class Women” (Lawler 2000, p113) discusses the representation of women in theatre. Chris Haylett's analysis of “Personal and Popular Discourses of ‘Underclass’” looks at what happens when you cannot escape your class, describing from personal experience ‘A politics of pride and anger, of personal and collective memory, a defence against division and against attack. I regard the contemporary moment of “underclass” politics as such a moment of attack.’ (p70). Tracey Reynolds discusses the intersections of class and racial oppression via the lived experiences of middle-class black mothers, on the racism that leads their children's white teachers to assume that they occupy low-class positions (p82). Andy Medhurst writes on the ‘emotional business’ of class, arguing that ‘Class privilege and class prejudice are not reducible to dispassionate debate or the algebras of abstraction. *Class is felt, class wounds*, class hurts, and those of us on a cusp between classes bruise particularly easily.’ (Original Italics. p21).

In “Discursive Mothers and Academic Fandom: Class, Generation and the Production of Theory”, Joanne Lacey describes how feminist academics from working-class backgrounds can become role models/mother figures for working-class female students displaced from their own mothers by the shift in class position: ‘I called home for security, but my mother saw me (because she needed to) as the clever class warrior; I could not talk to her about my feelings or fraudulence, my vulnerability. I could share those feelings, and gain an understanding of them from reading the

work of theorists such as Steedman and Walkerdine.’ (p38). Although these texts are extremely useful sources of knowledge and shared experience, none of them come from artists and none deal with art. Art is made by people, and in Britain people are divided by class, yet there is a lack of research on the subject of art and social class. This thesis bridges this gap in its three case studies.

Bringing the Discussion of Class into Art Writing

It may seem that the most suitable approach to tackling issues of class in art history would be Marxism. Yet the Marxist focus on the structures and material conditions of labour, capital and power gives little help in understanding the *effects* of class in shaping identities and subjectivities; and women are often left altogether out of discussions of working-class history and culture, which have centred on the figure of the male “worker”. Although women have also been workers in factories, their working patterns have also included domestic labour, child-rearing, and part-time / low-paid work, all of which have often been side-lined from these discussions.²⁹ It appears that if theorists and historians have not considered women to be fully “workers”, then they have also assumed them to be exempt from the shaping power of class formation. The reason I have not adopted a Marxist framework for my analysis of working-class artists and the representation of working-class women in art and visual culture, is that I am interested in the lived experience of what it *feels* like to be classed, what it does to identity - not just what the material conditions are, but what it is like to live inside those structures.

However, I have made a survey of Marxist writing on art and aesthetics, in order to understand its shortcomings in accounting for the experiences and work made by working-class artists. Much of this writing sees “art” broadly as literature, poetry and plays, and gives much less consideration to the visual arts. For example, the texts in Maynard Solomon’s collected volume *Marxism and Art: Essays Classic and Contemporary* (1979), deal with the political ideologies and material conditions under which art works are made, but say very little about the class position of its makers – and even less about the working-class as producers of art. Among them, Leon Trotsky’s early texts “Creativity and Class” and “Art and Class” (both published 1924) describe the influence of ‘a bourgeois milieu’ on art-production:

Art is created on the basis of a continual everyday, cultural, ideological inter-relationship between a class and its artists. Between the aristocracy or the bourgeoisie and their artists there was no split in daily life. The artists lived, and

²⁹ See Federici (2004) on Marxism’s theoretical deficit with respect to women as (re)productive workers.

still live, in a bourgeois milieu, breathing the air of bourgeois salons, they receive and are receiving hypodermic inspiration from their class. This nourishes the sub-conscious processes of their creativity. (Trotsky in Soloman 1979, p195)

However, Trotsky assumes that the working-class live in a cultureless environment: ‘Does the proletariat of today offer such a cultural-ideological milieu [...] No, the working masses are culturally extremely backward; the illiteracy or low level of literacy of the majority of the workers present in itself a very great obstacle to this.’ (p195). This statement does not take into account all the art made before and since the period Trotsky is living and writing in.³⁰ To see only bourgeois-designated-valid-art *as* art dismisses all the work that has been made by people without high levels of education. In assuming that the masses do not have any culture of their own, Trotsky falls into the trap of recognising only bourgeois art and culture as legitimate.

The New Art History, edited by Frances Borzello and A.L. Rees (1986), seeks to theorise a ‘new art history’ that can break away from and reinvigorate traditional art history and its methods; the editors claim that this new approach is ‘signalled by a different set of words – ideology, patriarchy, class, methodologies, and other terms which betray their origins in social science.’ (Borzello, Rees 1986, p4). Yet, in this collected volume, class is only mentioned alongside other “theories” or categories, most often as part of a list, such as ‘gender, class, race’ or ‘ideology, patriarchy, class’ (p.4). Although there are chapters looking specifically at gender and feminism, there are none that address class directly. When it is discussed, it is as an economic category, or in Marxist terms concerned with power, economics, labour relations and status. What is still missing is any discussion of how class affects the *people* positioned within these categories, how it works as a lived reality and identity as well as an economic position. Since the “new art history” was proclaimed in 1986, there has been little writing about working-class artists and the way the working-class are presented in art.

Hemingway (1996) examines the development of the New Art History, and the role of Marxist theories of art and their implications on the discipline of art history. He argues that Marxist approaches to art have been marginalised due to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the shift to the right in the west from the 1970s. He also details differing approaches to thinking about the role class plays in subject formations and art and the state. For example, he looks at Bourdieu’s approach to theories of social capital in economic, cultural, educational forms but finds it lacking ‘an adequate theory of how social identities are produced.’ (p22). Also problematized is a materialist analysis that focuses on historical evidence of the class formations, both social and

³⁰ Such work can be seen in Cooper (1994).

economic, from within which an art work was produced, e.g. in the writing of T. J. Clark (1973/1994). He concludes that more than Marxist approaches are needed to account for: ‘the contradictions of culture, acknowledging that the aesthetic is simultaneously a realm of ideology and cognition, of social power plays and utopian possibility.’ (p26). This is why paying close attention to the subjective experiences of class is important, as auto-ethnographic writings and art works can shed much light on the way that class is present in art, shaping the lives of artists and the positioning of their works within art history.

Clayson (1995) expands upon the difficulties faced by Materialist approaches, writing of the way materialist art historians had made the connection between an ‘ideological alliance between the author and her class formation’ (p367) a central concern, a position that was challenged by authorship debates prompted by Barthes (1977) and Foucault (1979). She also argues that the influence of feminist thought and psychoanalysis has rightly complicated the struggle for materialist art historians to argue for an understanding of subjectivities shaped by class ideologies.

Pollock (2014) also finds issue with the New Art History, which she sees as based on a desire for novelty in categorisation, leading her to question whether there is ‘anything *new*, about it.’ (p9). Pollock’s problem with the “New” Art History is that it poses itself as doing things that Art History has never done before - like paying new attention to marginalised voices - whereas for her, this has already been the project for many feminist art historians. Instead of creating new commodities of art categorisation, she argues for ways of experiencing and thinking about art which lead to a practice of ‘reading to learn difference rather than succumbing to globalising massification managed through reductive categorisation.’ (p21). Employing the work of the art historian and cultural theorist Aby Warburg (1866-1929) to work through this approach, she writes:

For Warburg, the image was a complex form, not a content alone. It was a figuration of memory of what has once been originally performed by the body and was then formalized and iconically remembered, its gestures and hence its affects transmissible via the iconization, becoming available for travel across cultures [...] Warburg understands the symbolic as the culturally fashioned space whose iconic remembering might hysterically revive and let loose affects. It might equally, however, transform them into resolutions that temper such affective intensities into thoughts. (Pollock, 2014, p11)

Pollock, via Warburg, is suggesting that encounters with art can transmit and transport intensities of feeling, and that we can read art in ways that acknowledge and explore its affects and effects, using it as a ‘thinking resource’ (p16) for ‘thinking otherness, thinking the world, thinking sexual difference’, which in turn ‘means encountering the challenge of that which already includes us and from which we cannot abstract ourselves as “thinkers about”’ (p15). This shares commonalities

with this thesis's call to pay attention to embodied encounters with art that has been negatively classified because it represents stigmatised identities.

Texts on Art and Class

I will now summarise the small field of texts that do directly address class in relation to art history, and show how these omit to consider class as the lived experience of the working-class as artists themselves. In *Art History and Class Struggle* (1978), Nicos Hadjinicolaou's method for analysing "class struggle" in works of art, their "visual ideologies" is to ask questions of the work: what and whom does it represent, who commissioned it, what style is it in, and what does this style say about the class ideology of the painter or sitter? Hadjinicolaou's case studies come solely from the fifteenth century; he comments towards the end of the book that he 'regrets' this, but that "This historical limitation is due not only to my own training, but also to the fact that very little basic research has been carried out into historical periods which correspond to the societies that existed prior to the primitive accumulation of capital.' (Hadjinicolaou 1978, p149). Hadjinicolaou does not discuss artists who are anything other than middle or upper-class; nor does he discuss representations of the working-class, or of "class struggle" from a working-class perspective.

Both Ben Watson's *Art, Class and Cleavage: Quantulumcunque Concerning Materialist Esthetix* (1998) and Ben Davis's *9.5 Theses on Art and Class* (2013) mention art and class in their titles, but fail to address the positions, work or experiences of working-class artists. Watson uses "class" as a synonym for "politics". Using theories by Marx, Freud and Trotsky alongside figures from popular culture such as the writer Philip K Dick and musician Frank Zappa, Watson mounts a performative challenge to established ideas on the connections and divisions between politics and aesthetics: "The intent is to cleave the "public" in twain; to jolt learned privilege from its pedestal; to offer spirited curiosity a briar-patch for play' (Watson 1998). But his book does not contribute to the field of writing on art and (social) class, and says nothing about how classed subjectivities feature in art production, are represented in art works, or shape the experiences of artists.

Davis's book is concerned with the art market: the world of commerce, capitalism and art fairs. His analysis of "class" is Marxist, and focused on the power and economic dynamics of the art world. Only middle-class agency in this world is discussed: 'Visual art still holds the allure of being basically a middle-class field, where personal agency and professional ambition overlap.' (Davis 2013, p25). Indeed, it is visual art's preservation of 'middle-class values of independence and creative economy' that 'holds out hope for constructing an alternative culture in our capitalist world.' (p4). These are valid points but again, this book does not touch the areas taken up by this thesis.

Meredith Tromble's "Notes on Class" (1999) also gives an account of the middle-class dominance of art institutions, discussing how, during a city housing workshop, class categories were analysed and she was identified as having a low income. Tromble was shocked by this, as she also believed being part of the art world meant she held high *cultural* capital: 'Courtesy of the art world escalator, I was tripping between floors of our class system. If, at the housing seminar, it dumped me in the basement with a lurch, there were also times, when I rode to the penthouse. In the art world, people of differing economic class, status and power mingle to an unusual degree'. (p12). She reflects: 'Like many artists, my own class position is complex. Finances are only one aspect of class; as some writers have pointed out the confidence to risk an artist's lifestyle is in itself *an emotional characteristic of the middle class*.' (My italics. p12). What Tromble makes clear is that while middle-class artists may experience temporary poverty, due to precariously irregular earnings, that doesn't necessarily make them working-class. Furthermore, although "poor" artists and rich collectors all share a level of status anxiety, one group has considerably more power and wealth than the other: they are *not* in the same boat.

In her discussion in *Vision and Difference* (2003) of how class figures in the institutions of art education, Griselda Pollock argues that the idealisation of "the artist", is a classed and gendered construct, central to teaching that promotes an ideology of male greatness and 'how to appreciate the greatness of the artist and the quality of art objects'. The Great Male Artist is 'presented as an ineffable ideal which complements the bourgeois myths of a universal, classless Man (sic).' (p29). Arguing that to understand an art work, we must take into account social relations of gender and class in both its production and consumption (p5), Pollock discusses the assumption of: 'how *genius will always overcome obstacles*' encourages the myth that 'art is an inexplicable, almost magical sphere to be venerated but not analysed.' (my italics. p29). If the "ideal" is male and middle/upper-class, then all work that doesn't express the ideology of greatness, quality and value associated with this category will always fall short; and if working-class artists are not successful, it's assumed to be because their work isn't good enough, rather than because they're structurally disadvantaged. The same applies to anyone who isn't white, Western, middle-class and male: all others are judged against this standard "universal" artist subject. Pollock argues that this needs to change so that art made by women, working-class people, people of colour etc., is not automatically considered as sub-standard.

Gen Doy's *Seeing and Consciousness: Women, Class and Representation* (1995) also brings gender and class to bear on visual arts analysis, discussing the representation of women in "visual images" of art from the 1700s to the mid-nineties. Her examples come from France, in particular from the French Revolution, the Paris Commune of 1871, Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany. Doy's analysis

follows a Marxist framework: she is interested in the economic position, power and status of women during this period, as artists and as subjects in visual representations, paintings and photography. Class *identity* is not discussed. Throughout the book middle and upper-class women dominate: working-class women feature only in discussions of poverty and the rise of prostitution in France via photographs by middle and upper-class men of working-class women involved in the Paris Commune (p.85-90). Doy does not offer an analysis of working-class women as producers of their own representation.

Towards the end of the chapter “The Postmodern, Gender and Race”, Doy briefly discusses works by two black British artists and photographers, Roshini Kempadoo and Samena Rana, which explore race, identity and disability – yet for most of this chapter, Doy chooses Cindy Sherman as her case study. There is a real missed opportunity here, as although Sherman’s work may be rich in postmodern interpretations, her work does not explore class explicitly. Strangely, Doy does briefly mention Jo Spence, but does not seem to be sure of Spence’s gender: ‘Perhaps Jo Spence was one of the few practitioners of photographic work to combine an accessible integration of theory and practice in his/her work without diluting important theoretical problems or patronising her/his audience. Unfortunately, I have not the space here to further develop comments of Spence’s contribution to photographic practice and theory. However, I feel there is a particular interesting investigation to be made of Sherman as a Postmodernist who is really not interested in theory.’ (p170). This is really astonishing, to side-line the *one* example in her whole book of a working-class female photographer who was the producer and subject of work that dealt with *women, class and representation* – the subtitle of her book!

Joanna Kadi’s *Thinking Class: Sketches from a Cultural Worker* (1996) is a rare book in the field of writing on art and class that is also written by a self-identified working-class artist. Like Spence, Kadi describes herself as “cultural worker”: ‘a working-class Arab halfbreed queer girl, I am impacted by class, race, imperialism, gender, and sexuality.’ (p6). Discussing the ways in which art made by anyone not white, western and middle or upper-class is assigned a separate, sub-category such as ethnic, native and folk art, Kadi writes:

But the idea that valid, life-enhancing cultural expressions come from working-class people, whether “ethnic” or “American,” still falls outside most people’s conceptual framework [...] Class membership doesn’t ensure awful or good art. Class membership does ensure whose art, whose cultural expression, is valued and appreciated. Any talk about class and art necessarily entails talk about critics and criticism. Not surprisingly, the white, upper-middle-class sensibilities that have traditionally dominated the critics’ worlds are unimpressed by and even hostile to working-class art and artists. (pp19-21)

In the chapter “Stupidity ‘Deconstructed’”, Kadi writes of how the working-class are framed as being less intelligent than middle and upper-class people, and how these structures maintain capitalist hierarchies.³¹ Destabilising these categories and negative stereotypes is risky for working-class artists and academics, as Kadi’s fellow American Ed Check writes in “Unbecoming Working Class? Living Across the Lines”: “The more I self-label working class roots, the less comfortable middle and upper class people are around me – possibly because they will have to admit benefiting from an unjust and stacked system.’ (Check 2005, pp45-68). Check goes on to discuss his discomfort in academic institutions and the way he monitors his speech, behaviour and dress in order not to reveal his working-class roots (p.68). He also offers strategies for a praxis that may allow his work to be accessible to the working-classes, ‘I want to talk about class in my writing and art. This paper is one example of me beginning that public discourse. Creating a poster series and postcards that can be handed out to people for free. This is another way for me to do outreach to working class allies and others. Many working class and working poor families are strapped for cash and cannot buy art.’ (pp45-68). By making art available to all, art becomes truly democratic; but this also threatens the status and wealth created by rareness and exclusivity.

Buchloh (2012) poses another strategy to prevent the erasure of class from discussions of art, and the labour of working-class artist:

First, we must query artistic practices with respect to their implicit or explicit reflection on the actual existing conditions of social representation and ideological affirmation. And we would demand of any artistic production that it specifically consider, in each of its instantiations, to whom it is addressed and with whom, if at all, it would intend to communicate. Inevitably, under such critical pressures, these practices would come to discover and recognise that under current conditions they have assumed as one of their primary tasks the effacement of any reflection on social class. And then we must further pressure artistic practices to reflect on this disavowal, one of the guarantors of an artist’s economic success in the present. After all, the enduring and comprehensive amnesia of class is a foundational condition for the culture of the neoliberal petit bourgeoisie. (pp253-261)

A concern here is that the application of such “critical pressures” might not be conducive to experimentation and allowing undealt with memories and feelings to surface. I worry that if Billingham, Morley and Spence were put through such a process they might have backed out of revealing as much, not for fear of erasing the issue of social class, but in directing the work to a known audience. However, reflection on the market would force a crucial acknowledgement of

³¹ This mirrors many of the working-class writers’ accounts I’ve included, such as Stanley (1995) on the trope of the “Working-Class Thicker” and how these classed assumptions become interiorised.

the work's intended audience, which shapes what work gets made, funded, exhibited and bought, all of which are issues of class positions: whoever holds the money holds the power.

As I was writing up this thesis, three articles 'exploring art, class and precarity' appeared in *Frieze* magazine (Nov/Dec 2016). This anomalous event – an exception that proves the rule - can be read as a reaction to increasing austerity in Britain, with rising levels of precarity that have come to affect even middle-class artists. In the first article, "Keeping Up Appearances", international artists and writers share their thoughts on the situation. Adrian Piper writes of the way class is understood in America, arguing that, 'Social class has nothing to do with money.' (Piper 2016, p121) and more to do with social distinction. Magali Arriola identifies class and race as 'the elephant in the room' in Mexico's art scene (Arriola 2016, p121), while Verena Dengler points out the domination of Vienna's Academy of Fine Arts by students from privileged backgrounds (Dengler 2016, pp122-123). Lynsey Hanley writes of increasing stratification in the arts: 'disadvantage is being compounded by a steep and growing financial penalty.' (Hanley 2016b, p125).

The most interesting response, combining personal experience and political discontent, is from Nathaniel Mellors, who uses mockery and regional dialect to critique the classed art world:

Ay-up, duck. I thought I could write something about class but now I'm not too sure. It's too big and too personal. My art checklist reads: absurdism, the grotesque, language, technologies and – even more nebulous and oppressive – 'power'. Power: the fat-jellied air that binds us. I never foregrounded class because of its tendency to exert power – to brand, in both senses of the word. You must be formatted, compartmentalized, legible, consumable. But now I've been asked to reflect on class, I'm coming apart, mate. I've worked hard not to be properly explained. (Mellors 2016, p126)

Mellors shares with the other writers the experience of feeling out of place in the art world, and fearing that your class background will be fetishised and used against you. He ends his piece by writing, 'Everything I cared about has been eaten by the cannibal bourgeoisie. Their doughnut-shaped universe, a super-massive black hole. The flux between the custodians and the custodial class: symbiosis. Confessions of a crap artist: there is no trickle-down, apart from liquid shit.' (p127). For working-class artists, working within a culture industry that does not value or support those not raised with privilege carries risks, both financial and psychological. The recurring problem is how to work within such a space without being exploited or consumed, how to remain an agent.

The second *Frieze* article, Paul Clinton's "What A Shame: Paul Clinton Interviews Didier Eribon About Class and Queer Politics", discusses Eribon's *Retour à Reims* (2009), which 'details his

estrangement from, and attempts to hide, his working-class background as he entered the world of culture' (Clinton 2016, p128) in his book *Retour à Reims* (2009). The book came from a personal crisis, after the death of Eribon's father, which led him to return to his roots - where 'you are confronted by the contradictory coexistence in yourself of your past and present. The split between the life you've chosen and where you come from suddenly becomes more insistent: the forgotten wound re-opens and sends you into disarray.' (Eribon 2016, p128). This experience is close to that described by Spence and Rosy Martin, which I discuss in chapter three.

Clinton and Eribon also discuss the way rhetorics around "precarity" and "the 99 per cent" (coined by the Occupy movement in New York) smudge structural inequalities within that group. As Clinton writes, 'Precarity has become a fashionable concept in the art world. To my mind, it has afforded non-working-class artists access to the radicalism of marginalization – as if we're all precarious now. That's not to downplay economic hardship, but to say that this term ignores the cultural aspects of class, such as whether or not you're able to articulate your discontent.' (Clinton 2016, p129). The issue here is not that working-class people are "inarticulate", but that economic precariousness makes a career in the art world increasingly unattainable for working-class people, who therefore lack a *platform* to articulate this discontent. It is telling that these arguments about precarity, something that has predominantly affected the working-class, are being taken up in print now that middle-class artists are also starting to be affected.

In "Know Your Place: The Complications of Class in the Art World", Dan Fox discusses the barriers to working within the arts faced by working-class writers and artists. Besides needing the confidence to enter such spaces in the first place, the financial obstacles of expensive travel, and being expected to work periods in unpaid internships before securing jobs, may make the arts an impossible career option. Fox writes, 'I frequently travel but it's always on the magazine's tab and I flat-share in order to afford New York. I find art profoundly interesting but, despite 18 years in the business, I feel alienated by the games of hierarchy that play out around me, because they involve forms of classism that few will admit to.' (Fox 2016, p135). This classism also extends to what will be discussed, written about and published: 'discussions of identity politics in the art world – which rightly tackle race, gender, sexuality and geography – appear to find class a harder issue to confront, even despite its crucial intersection with issues such as education, immigration, voting rights or police discrimination.' (p134). It is clear the barriers faced by working-class artists and writers are not only structural and economic, but also ideological.

Where is the British Working-Class Art?

My research has uncovered only three significant sources of thorough writing on British working-

class art: a series of books published by *Working Press: books by and about working-class artists* (1986-1996), two special issues of *Feminist Art News* (1990) and (1992), and Emmanuel Cooper's *People's Art* (1994).

The Working Press

At a late stage in writing up this thesis I was doing some unconnected reading on a class-critique of William Morris, Stefan Szczelkun's *The Conspiracy of Good Taste: William Morris, Cecil Sharp, Clough Williams and the Repression of Working Class Culture in the C20th* (Szczelkun 2016, first published in 1993). Szczelkun argues that Morris and others shared an ideology of middle-class cultural values, which led them to frame an idealised medieval English pastoral fantasy heritage as a Socialist utopia: "These unreal myths were cleverly woven into a tapestry, which denied the value and potential of urban working-class culture. Through his wealth, energy and humanitarian charisma he became an icon as the cultural "Champion of the People"". (p8). I saw that the publisher was called "Working Press", and was curious about the connection to this book having been written by a working-class artist. Working Press was set up by Szczelkun and Graham Harwood in 1985, and ran from 1986-1996 with the tag line "books by and about working-class artists". Some years after it ceased trading, Szczelkun donated the archive materials and published works to the University of the Creative Arts in Farnham, where they are now housed.

Szczelkun, together with archivist Rebekah Taylor and the publisher and curator Emmanuelle Waeckerle, had joined in a project to gather this work together, resulting in the publication of *Rise with Your Class Not from It* (2016) a collected volume detailing the history of the imprint. The texts, books, zines and posters published by Working Press looked at art, architecture, poetry, football culture, comics, race, disability and literature. Although *Writing on The Line: 20th Century Working-Class Women Writers* (1996), includes an invaluable annotated list of international working-class women writers, I narrowed the texts down to those specifically on art and class: Szczelkun (1987, 1990 and 1993), Atkinson (1991) and Harwood (1987).

The State of the Art and the Art of the State: The Production of Culture and Its Mediation Through the Hegemony of the State (Atkinson 1991) is an edited version of a Power Lecture given by Conrad Atkinson at the Power Institute, University of Sydney, Australia, October 1983, in which he discusses his thoughts on the contemporary art world and political culture of the 1970s and 1980s. Although he does discuss his working-class background in the North, the text itself isn't about class in art but about trends and attitudes in the art being produced at that time.

John and Other Stories (Harwood 1987) uses art to narrate the story of "John", and his role in a

repressive classed society, representing the themes of education, tradition, the oppression of waged labour under capitalism, police brutality, the 1985 riots, and struggles in South Africa, in fifty-four images. In the introduction, Harwood writes:

This book is produced to try and create a context for my work. Faced by the problems of an art world having no convenient place for me, I am being forced to try and create one. This struggle is made all the more difficult by what I see as one of society's chief weapons, which is inferiority. Inferiority helps keep us under the thumb of this rigid and degrading culture in which, women are encouraged to feel inferior to men; black to white; working-class to middle-class and people with handicaps to those without. I was taught that being working-class meant being without professions, property, power or education etc. All in all without a culture, while only just out of reach and if you do well, you can join the people who have the power and culture. Taught never to look to myself or my family, my friends or my personal history or culture, I felt and still sometimes feel inferior. (p1)

This echoes the intentions of Working Press itself, to make space for work with a working-class aesthetic identity, made by artists without cultural capital or financial privilege who were side-lined by the art and publishing industries. The ethos espoused in the title of the collection, "Rise with Your Class Not from It", is Anti-Pygmalion in spirit, as the intention of these books is to express *active dissent* from the hegemony of middle-class values in art and writing. Many of the writers discuss the repression of their work, how hard it was to be included in exhibitions or have their writing and works seen. Harwood continues, 'We are though, the majority in this society, yet we still find ourselves subservient to a culture that does not serve our interests. I believe we must understand the suffocating methods by which we are culturally dominated and made to feel inferior.' (p1). Often the starting point of these texts is to understand the ways in which working-class people personally have been oppressed, in order to find alternative ways of asserting a working-class culture and creativity.

Throughout his three books, Szczelkun writes of his own class background and experiences, in order to expose the classism in British education, culture and art worlds. Szczelkun's father was Polish and his mother English, and in *Class Myths and Culture* (Szczelkun 1990) he discusses how his father Anglicised himself to fit in, so that Polish was rarely heard in his house except during Sunday dinner with Polish friends. At the same time his mother, a working-class woman from Nottinghamshire, was also modifying her speech 'for a posher London voice'. (p4). Like so many of the other writers I have discussed, Szczelkun found his own working-class identity treated negatively at school: 'we were again forcefully reminded of the correct language in which to communicate. And exclusion of those who did not speak and write it was manifest by the divisions into separate institutions at the age of 11. In addition, it must be noted that in my 13 years of

schooling there was never the slighted acknowledgment of my Polish background.’ (p13). Not only is speech classed, it is also nationalised: the standard that maintains middle-class English supremacy in the classroom suppresses or ignores the identities of many children of migrants.

Szczelkun went on to study architecture at Portsmouth Polytechnic, but this highly middle-class space also exposed him to cultural class injustices: ‘underlying architectural education was a subtext of learning how to behave in a professional manner. This meant giving off an air of superior knowledge and distancing oneself from the other workers in the building industry.’ (p5). Growing awareness of how one practice was given a higher status than another led Szczelkun to examine the class formations of culture itself. He writes:

So when history puts you on a path of intellectual enquiry, as it did with me, then you feel the oppression all the more acutely. The offered solution was to adopt a middle-class identity. But for those of us with an acute sense of social justice this option seemed like turning on our own communities and denying who we were – a sort of affirmation of the oppressive myths. (Szczelkun 2016b, p44)

These “oppressive class myths” are a major feature in his writing and led him, in an echo of Spence and Martin’s experiences, to seek ‘involvement with Re-evaluation co-counselling from 1978 that allowed me to explore the emotional dimensions of class oppression with other people who had similar inner turmoil. I came to be confident that all working-class people could be intellectuals and artists in spite of how we had been made to feel, and in the face of an often poor education which had held out low expectations of intellectual achievement.’ (2016b, p45).

Szczelkun details how the working-class have been constructed culturally ‘to appear innately worthless and worthless, stupid, dirty, smelly, brutish, deficient, untrustworthy, evil, ill mannered, uncultured, unsophisticated, uncouth, badly spoken and lacking most characteristics that distinguish humans from animals.’ (1990, p6). This examination of class wounds was for a purpose: ‘I’d like to catalogue all the ways in which oppression works on us. To make working drawings of its construction so that we can begin to dismantle it.’ (1990, p14). Through growing knowledge of how the dominant ideology silenced working-class culture, making it invisible, Szczelkun identified ‘the central and murderous denial of our intellectual capacity’ as ‘at the heartless core of class oppression’, while ‘the dominant culture’s values and traditions are seen as embodying an excellence, rationality and taste that is beyond reproach’ (2016, p5).

The working-class artist working within such conditions must also work against them. As Szczelkun argues, ‘The same WASP male standards also exclude artists of colour, working-class artists and other oppressed groups. The idea that standards of art are absolute or universal... is deeply embedded classist myth.’ (1990, p25). These hierarchies are not only ideological, but

material: 'The definition of art and artists are overwhelmed by upper middle-class monopolies of the centres of power. The commercial and private galleries tend to lead trends and define what is shown in public galleries and what is shown as English art abroad... This in turn influences the policies of art education and publishing' (1990, p26). This is why Szczelkun decided it was necessary to form alternative ways of working and exhibiting outside of oppressive classed-hierarchies: 'to counter the oppression head on I needed to assert myself as a "working-class artist" and persuade others to do that with me.' (2016b, p45).

Szczelkun took up a two-pronged approach, setting up Working Press to give a platform to marginalised voices, while also finding new ways of working. This latter aspect is detailed in his first book for Working Press, *Collaborations* (Szczelkun 1987), which gives accounts of his many collaborative projects with other artists, in the form of exhibitions, theatrical performances, and networks such as BIGOS artists of Polish origin, and I.P.A.N the International Postal Art Network, which were a way to get artists to send their work to each other. One of the exhibitions discussed, "Roadworks" at Brixton Art Gallery (July 1985), shows how important it was to break free of the ideologies of the "white cube"-style gallery and to go out into the streets of Brixton to perform and interact with real life. Szczelkun's notes of intent, written before the exhibition, include:

The presence of the artist for feedback and questioning. The personal and general context from which the work is created becomes visible. Being in the world and present makes the artist more responsive and accountable (without being slavish). People's reactions and what they understand are important if we are interested in a broad based, rather than the present elitist, art culture. The artist becomes a part of everyday life.

Techniques are demystified rather than being USED to create awe-full mystery. Techniques may be shared and learnt. The mystique of the artist may be seen as a real person like everyone, screwed up, lost, wanting to be loved and accepted, afraid. Not to be deified, rarefied or made out as the seer she may not be.

The gallery is not just a neutral space, the Gallery is itself an image, a frame, a cultural viewpoint. It is locked into a set of culture ideas which most people will unconsciously take on board as soon as they enter therein. (Szczelkun 1987, pp20-21)

Especially useful in these notes are the ideas for practical ways of showing work in defiance of the structures that maintain the high status and rarefied positions of individual artists. The aesthetics of the book itself extend this practice of dispelling rareness and specialness by placing photocopies of art works and performances in montage alongside the text. This book shows that it is possible to work in ways that dissent from the capitalist schema, that are more fulfilling and

creative for artists and the public. Such practices undo the structures that make art one of the most profitable industries – if you do as Szczelkun suggests and bring in artists to discuss their work and dispel the idea of the artist as more special than the rest of us, then it is harder to claim rareness and exclusivity and expect the work to sell for thousands if not millions of pounds. In this dynamic of ordinary people, the art world's vast wealth becomes ludicrous.

Although Working Press was briefly mentioned by Terry Dennett, discussing a book project with Spence, I had not seen any of their projects or books mentioned in *any* other published texts on art and class. If I hadn't come across them, this thesis would also have been unknowingly complicit in the erasure of a part of the history of working-class artists creating their own platforms of art and writing. This discovery also hints at how much still might still be left uncovered. Despite only having a run of 10 years, Working Press contributed to giving voice to the fact of working-class intelligence, creativity and culture, as well as offering Anti-Pygmalion strategies of dissent that destabilised the middle-class monopoly on cultural value. However, alongside the typical problems of small presses distributing their texts, writing on class fell out of favour, as Szczelkun reports: 'Unfortunately Working Press did not coincide with radical change in the general intellect. We still had to put up with Tony Blair repeating the confusing adage that "we are all middle-class now". Still, it was a concerted attempt to both explore what working-class artists did and to underline and publicise their work to a wide audience. This must have had some effects however they are submerged by the reactionary trends that followed.' (2016, p51)

Working-Class Women Artists in *Feminist Art News* (FAN)

The back pages of *Rise With Your Class* include a list of resources on working-class arts and relevant texts, through which I found a special issue of FAN called "Working-Class Women Working It Out". I tracked down a copy, and another from two years later, at the Women's Art Library at Goldsmiths College. After searching for so long to find texts discussing working-class women artists, this was a major find! The editorial of the first special issue states:

WE ARE HERE. We have always been here, we are here to stay. Yet this issue of FAN represents the first space in which Class has been addressed and confronted, collectively by Working-Class Women, as visual practitioners... In the exclusion from our own visible representation of our culture, and our struggle to reclaim it, we are often viewed as threatening. Ultimately our presence is only acceptable if the middle-classes can maintain their overview and access in controlling our perspectives. As Working-Class Women we move beyond middle-class ideologies, continually having to sidestep at great cost, reiterating our (constantly unrecognised) stance over and over again. (Humphreys-Power, Kumari-Burman & Marchant: 1990, inside cover)

Two years later, “Working-Class Women: Issue 2, Enough is enough” (1992) addressed the same issues: the lives and working conditions of working-class women artists had not improved. This issue came out just after the death of Jo Spence, and is dedicated to her along with photographer and teacher Samena Rana who died September 1992.

A major contribution of these two issues is they make clear how varied working-class identity is, and how immigration makes up a body of working-class British identities. Both issues are full of the writing and poetry of British Asian artists such as Chila Kumari Burman, “Harinder”, Nilofar Akmut and Shanti Thomas, who all express the split-subjectivity of maintaining cultural identity in the face of assumed value systems, diaspora and racism. As Jahanara A. Malique says of her work:

Writing is an affirmation of my individual and creative worth, and it is also proving to the racist and elitist sections of society that an ASIAN, WORKING-CLASS FEMALE has something to say, and refuses to remain mute any longer, that the educational process had not robbed me of my cultural identity and stifled my creativity, that I was capable of using the “native” English to subvert their stereotypes. (Malique 1992, p15)

Margherita Sprio, writes on her work being based around themes of Italian / English identity and culture, patriarchal family structures, and the experience of Italian girls going to university and being educated out of traditional expectations. Her work aims, “To find a visual-language for these experiences.” (Sprio 1990, p5). Michelle D Baharier’s “Finishing school for nice young ladies” discusses work exploring Jewish-British identity and gendered expectations, while Gabrielle Humphreys-Power talks about the effect of British imperialism on Irish culture, identity and material conditions. Although not always directly discussing class, these texts show that the British working-class is not a homogeneous “white working-class”, but is made up of many joint nationalities and religions.

Most of these texts discuss painful experiences of growing up working-class and moving through educational and art spaces. Their narratives are nearly identical in structure and content to the testimonies from working-class memoirs already discussed. For example, Tracy Davidson in “Grin and bear it” writes:

For many years I have carried around feelings of guilt and shame which I find very difficult to explain. I feel that this is a direct result of being part of a working-class family where the attitudes towards emotional and physical struggles is “grin and bear it”. The pressures of poverty leave no time for self-indulgence, the only time available is for survival [...] In my final year at Goldsmiths’ College I came to the conclusion that the only way forward was to deal with these negative thoughts in a very positive way, by making work about my life and experiences. This certainly proved to be problematic and I often felt

unable to continue, but the results were worth the pain. I began to feel unburdened, free, not completely but more than I had in years. (Davidson 1992, p9)

Not all the writers and artists writing in FAN share the same politics or values, but what they have in common is they've all been pushed up against the same ideology that casts working-class identity as inferior and shameful, and in different ways have framed their art practice as a response to that experience.

Many of the writers discuss the financial obstacles to being an artist without being subsidised by family money. Barbara Bennett's "Q. When is an artist not an artist? A. When she is earning a living" is written in response to a friend's boyfriend who told her she's "only half an artist" (Bennett. 1992, p11) because she spends much of her time working other jobs:

Those of us from black or working-class backgrounds, with ambitions to avoid further exploitation, will not willingly opt for a future of starving in garrets, patronage from the privileged and cadging hand-outs from equally down and out (and therefore unsympathetic) kith and kin – so how could I be anything other than half an artist? (p12)

Because art is seen as a lifestyle or an identity rather than a job, if you cannot afford not to be financially compensated for your labour, you are seen somehow less of an artist, and are taken less seriously.

Other texts in these volumes tackle the intersection of working-class identity with race, nationality and sexuality. Chila Kumari-Burman's "Ask how I feel" describes her parents coming from India to Liverpool in the 1950s, and the pressure she faced to combine housework and school work while meeting their expectation that an Asian girl would marry and remain within the domestic sphere. Despite there being no books at home, and no art history taught at school, she decided to go to art school:

The History of Art classes at the poly were dead boring anyway, the language most staff used was inaccessible, far too academic and unnecessary, so I always fell asleep, but the practical side was fine. I loved drawing and making things. Although of course with the Eurocentric and Imperialist ways of teaching they sometimes couldn't handle what I was doing, especially when I was doing body-prints. (Kumari-Burman. 1990, p17)

Kumari-Burman writes that her tutors and fellow students didn't know how to deal with who she was or where she was coming from, and so fell back onto stereotypes of Asian female subservience. Not only was her presence on the course treated as problematic, but the work she made was also treated as unwelcome:

There were no other Asian Art students male or female, this was the late

seventies after all and no such thing as Black Art. Neither was there when I went to the Slade in the 1980s. The Slade couldn't handle me sometimes, what with a scouse accent and being Asian. Having an accent to some middle-class people equals thick. When I spoke Punjabi to my friend in the printmaking department they nearly dropped dead. They couldn't handle the prints I woz doing of the Uprising in 1981, Black women under apartheid. Asian women active in Britain and making links with women in India, Police Brutality and self-defence is no offence. The photographic dept. at university college London refused to print my photos of the police in various forms, they sent me a note saying: "The dept. cannot deal with private work of this sort". (p17)

Despite all of this, Kumari-Burman stuck it out and finished the course, becoming an artist and exhibiting her work. She sums up, 'I think people under estimate the hard struggle that Asian working-class women artists have to go through in order to assert themselves, gain respect, and survive in this mad world. To challenge the strict patriarchal culture with double standards and traditions which encourage suppression and control, demands courage and strength.' (p17). Many of the other writers also speak of the courage and strength needed to keep producing work that challenges the middle-class hegemony.

In "Words Apart", Mandy McCartin writes that, 'If a working-class painter assimilates into the art world, producing "classless" work, involving themselves with painterly techniques, obscure references and blurred meanings open to a vast range of (mis)interpretations; then they might have had an easier passage than I have.' (McCartin 1990, p6). Instead, McCartin made work that was related to her own current life experiences and background: 'I paint strong, raw, upfront pictures that take away their opportunity for bullshit and appear to make them feel uncomfortable.' (p6). She argues that perhaps due to the critics, selectors and people who run the galleries having no common ground with what is depicted in her work, they cannot see the value in it:

The recent work I have done about being a working-class lesbian has shown me that the galleries with a radical reputation are often as prejudiced against working-class art as the commercial ones. One gallery felt that they could not show my work as it "might be open to misrepresentation". On closer questioning, it turned out they were censoring it for not fitting into an acceptable middle-class-lesbian-feminist-subtle-symbolic way of representing sex. (p6)

It is interesting that even in a radical political space of lesbian artists, class as an identity position was treated as unwelcome. This goes some way to back up my argument that class was a taboo topic within 90s identity politics.

The editorial for the second issue dedicated to working-class women artists states that their funding from the Arts Council of Great Britain had been cut, and although they planned to work in other formats, this last issue of FAN was to be their last. This resulted in a further narrowing of the

spaces for working-class women artists to publish and discuss their work, leading to the continued devaluation and erasure of that work from intellectual and arts discourse. Platforms created in the 1970s and 1980s for politically-engaged art writing, discussing subjects such as racism and classism, increasingly disappeared from view in the 1990s, removing these topics from mainstream consciousness.

The People's Art

The only book I found which exclusively surveyed art made by the working-class in Britain, was Emmanuel Cooper's *People's Art: Working-Class Art from 1750 to Present Day* (1994).³² Against the othering and devaluation implicit in the categories of "folk" or "traditional" art, Cooper comes up with the title "people's art" to describes work that 'reflects the working and living conditions of an industrial, often urban, society...was made in or around the home or the workplace and is discussed within the context in which it was made.' (p9). He continues:

In identifying and describing visual art by men and women, who include skilled workers, artisans, housewives, semi-skilled operatives, unskilled workers and labourers, the book illuminates a currently unstudied and little acknowledged element of our cultural heritage. It discusses the importance of visual art as a communicative process of working-class life; it also questions the accepted definition of "art" and puts forward arguments for extending it. (p9)

Rather than just abstractly theorising about why work made by the working-class should be worthy of consideration, Cooper provides many examples to let the work speak for itself, demonstrating its own variety and creativity. As he explains, 'For many years there has been a generally accepted theory that the working-class has produced little or no art, for it has not been made in the refined mode of classical art; nor does it appear to measure up to formal comparisons with the fine arts of painting, drawing, sculpture or fine art crafts. Such a view, however ignores the diversity of creative energy which can take many forms.' (p9). In making space for this work to be judged on its own terms rather than those of "fine art", Cooper demonstrates that "The "aesthetics" of people's art is largely determined by the people who make it rather than outside bodies.' (p11). Aesthetic judgements based on the standards of wealth and privilege will miss the creativity of this work, which exhibits canny improvisation and resourcefulness in its choice of materials, reflecting the lives and conditions of its producers.

Discussing photography and class, Cooper notes that in the second half of the nineteenth century

³² Spence's phrase "cultural worker" could be applied to Cooper: as well as being a writer, teacher and artist himself, Cooper was politically active, campaigning for gay rights. In the early 1970s he helped to form Gay Left Collective, and later (1977-82) became the art critic at the *Morning Star*.

the working-class gained access to the ability to have their likeness and memories recorded via portraits, something previously only enjoyed by the middle and upper-class: 'enabling them for the first time to acquire a visual history.' (p217). Cooper points out that this aspect of photography has been given little attention: 'as a means by which working-class men and women could document their own lives or use the medium as a form of artistic expression. Studies of photography usually concentrate on the work of famous photographers, on technical processes, on photographic movements or subject matter, with little or no attention given to the social context or background of the photographer.' (p217). Lacking the distinction of using expensive cameras, lenses and film etc., working-class photography was dismissed as without merit or evidence of self-expression. Cooper also points out that, 'The working-class themselves were popular subjects for nineteenth-century (and twentieth-century) photographers, and distinctions have to be made between photographs taken *of* the working-class and those taken *by* them.' (p218). For working-class photographers, documenting their own lives has been a way to counter the narratives and representations of the ruling-class; for example: 'During the Miners' Strike of 1984-85, the workers, with time if little money, on their hands, recorded the strike.' (pp224-226). This became an important means of countering media misrepresentation of events during the strike, which aimed to paint the miners and their supporters in a bad light - for example as instigators of violence against the police rather than as acting in self-defence.

Cooper's discussion of decoration brings out a point which is central to my reading of Billingham's photographs of his mother Liz, where I argue the decorating of her interior spaces and own body is itself a form of artistic expression. Decoration, writes Cooper, 'is a central issue of people's art. Despite the fact that materials and leisure time were limited, people still found the resources, energy and drive to enhance the appearance of objects made for their own pleasure and use.' (p19). Cooper terms such decoration 'house art', (p234), in which: 'the decoration and care of the home becomes not only the focus *for individual and artistic expression but also an important statement of identity.*' (My italics. p234). Billingham's photographs of the interior of Liz's flat exhibit a *habitus* in which creativity is also a source of comfort, reflecting Cooper's observation that 'Today "private worlds" seem more significant and important than ever before. When high-rise flats and anonymous estates provide little sense of community or of belonging, the need to create a "nest" becomes even stronger.' (p148).

Cooper concludes with a plea for art historians to revisit and re-theorise working-class art:

Conventionally art history has largely ignored such work or else relegated it to a tiny and insignificant part of its concerns. This will no longer suffice. Ironically, working-class art can only be acknowledged: it cannot be formally taught, ordered or directed. It is a visual expression which comes out of a deep-

felt need for communication and identity. It has to be recognised and cherished for what it is, and if this presents a radical challenge to the usual view of art, it is one which has to be met. (p235)

Over twenty years later, this call for greater critical attention has not been answered. This thesis takes up the overdue challenge to recognise the art of working-class artists - art that has been dismissed, disavowed and under-theorised for far too long.

Chapter Three: Jo Spence's Spectres of Class Shame

Introduction

For some working-class women, the experience of class stigma – of being treated and perceived as negative, faulty, unfeminine, common, stupid and ugly - has had such an extreme and exaggerated impact on their sense of self that their “bad” working-class identity can be positioned within the realms of the grotesque.³³ In this chapter, I tackle the part that shame and social exclusion play in the construction of a working-class female grotesque formed by shame. I begin by unpicking the social and political processes which have formed this figure, and go on to look at how working-class viewers might respond to images of the female grotesque in ways that incorporate our own lived experience of class difference, so that we can formulate alternative readings that reshape the supposedly negative categories of the ugly and grotesque to allow for pleasure, awe, and sublime encounters.

The photographic practice of self-described “cultural worker” and “cultural sniper” Jo Spence worked through her personal experiences of a class-shame that associated working-class female identity with ugliness and failure. By deciphering the class discourse in her work, to explore the process of production of portraits in the “photo therapy” she and Rosy Martin devised in Britain from the early 1980s as feminist activists and community photographers. I pay particular attention to her collaborations with David Roberts and Valerie Walkerdine on the explorations of “class-shame”. This work revolted against sexist and classist media representations, and in its place created emotionally and political powerful works that in their depiction of identities constructed as grotesque evoked the sublime rather than the beautiful. I propose that this work provides new insights into the ways certain types of bodies and classed identities are marginalised in visual culture, in institutional spaces of education and the art world. I posit ways we might learn to appreciate and value images of non-conformist femininities: those that do not fit the ideals of middle-class “good taste” or patriarchal beauty norms, that disturb the boundaries that dictate where women can or deserve to be seen and exist.

Jo Spence was born in 1934 in Essex, and later brought up in Kingsbury London. After leaving school at 13 and taking a two-year secretarial course from 1951, Spence worked as a shorthand typist and secretary to a commercial photographer.³⁴ In 1967 she set up her own photography

³³ From a case in the media, see the discussion of class-based demonisation of Jade Goody in Jones (2011, p127).

³⁴ Biographical details gathered from Spence's writing in *Ten 8* (Spence, Spring 1991) and Spence (1995).

studio on the high street in Hampstead, taking the space over cheaply from a friend who was moving, where she specialised in wedding pictures, family portraits and head shots for actors. In 1974 Spence met Terry Dennett, and together they founded the *Photography Workshop Ltd*, working with *Half Moon Gallery* to form *Half Moon Photography Workshop* and *Camerawork* magazine. Ten years after the formation of *Photography Workshop Ltd*, Spence and Dennett wrote of the extensive projects they undertook, which integrated photography with politics, the personal and educational:

The 'Photography Workshop Limited' is an independent educational, research, publishing and resource project. Founded in 1974, it carried out an extensive programme until 1979 of workshops on photography - lecturing, research, exhibition, production and publishing [it] has helped many groups in the community, labour and women's movement, and adult education, towards a better understanding of progressive potential for making and using photography...It currently includes work on visual representations of labour, race, gender and sexuality in the popular mass media [...] We have been instrumental in helping to set up a number of other projects: these include the setting up of the *Half Moon Photography Workshop* and magazine *Camerawork* [...] initiating and working with the *Hackney Flashers Women's Photography Collective*; Publishing the first serious collection of essays on photography, history and politics in this country (*Photography/Politics: One*); publishing the broadsheet *The Worker Photographer*. (Dennett and Spence 1986a, pp14-15)

This makes clear their commitment to photography as a tool for socially and politically active and responsible cultural work and production. As socialists, their desire to work together within their communities, as well as giving talks to reach many other people and groups, informed their praxis of photography as a means to political and social change through education. Throughout her life, Spence continued to work collaboratively, co-establishing the *Hackney Flashers* (1974 – 1980), and after becoming a mature student in 1979 on a course run by Victor Burgin at the Polytechnic of Central London (now University of Westminster) setting up the group *Polysnappers* (1980-82) with fellow female students. In 1979 Spence submitted 'Beyond the Family Album' for inclusion in the 'Three Perspectives on Photography' exhibition at the *Hayward Gallery* alongside the *Hackney Flashers*.³⁵

Working within the culture industry was (and still is) an unusual career trajectory for a working-class woman, and this left Spence sharply aware of her class positions both current and past.³⁶ She comments: 'I had a very uncommercial attitude to photography in the beginning, remembering

³⁵ For a full biography and list of exhibitions and photography projects, see Spence (1995).

³⁶ 'I felt very much like the woman in the film *Educating Rita* who says she feels like an intellectual "half caste". I've had neither a good education nor a thorough education, nor have I had no education. I have crossed boundaries and I am in limbo land'. (Spence 1995, pp208-9)

that I started life as a shorthand-typist in a “general practitioner” studio it was an amazing leap for me to become a photographer. Anybody from my class who became a photographer was amazing. It took me a long time to give myself permission to do that.’ (Spence 1984, p7). This outsider status would shape her approach to her position as *producer*, for the rest of her career, driving her to challenge the rules of the establishment from within. Of her photography praxis in *Beyond the Family Album* project, Spence comments, “This would take the form of a radicalized type of “amateurism”; what would amount to a total questioning and overthrow of the Kodak regime which dominates world markets and fills our memories with visual banalities.’ (Spence 1983, p28). As working-class photographers within the predominantly middle-class occupied spaces of photography clubs and left wing politics, Spence and Dennett’s practice was quite introspective. As Dennett describes it:

In fact, much of our work has been about history, both of the individual subject – “who am I?”, “How do I know that?”, “How did I get to be that way?”, “How will new knowledge of the past effect my future activity?”; as well as being interested in the broader political perspectives of belonging to a class (however fragmented or ill defined), or understanding how our race, age and gender shape our conscious and unconscious desire. We have been interested too, in the relationship between these questions and the institutionalised bases of photographic practices. (Dennett and Spence 1986a, p13)

Their awareness of not quite fitting-in led to a constant questioning and challenging of their positions, of how representations of the working-class form a visual language that can shape social realities, and how to dismantle these structures in their own work.

In 1984 Spence met Rosy Martin, also a photographer from a working-class background. Both were facing a time of personal crisis - Spence was coping with her first cancer diagnosis and Martin, ‘struggling [through] a period of loss...took a co-counselling course and among my fellow students was Jo Spence.’ (Martin 1991, p36). From this encounter, they developed their practice of photo therapy which enabled them to work through their experiences of oppression, their left-wing politics and their encounters with therapy and counselling.³⁷ It was important that this practice

³⁷ At the same time, Judy Weiser in Canada was working unbeknownst on her own version of photo therapy. She is the ‘Founder and Director of the PhotoTherapy centre in Vancouver. In a “personal and political memoir” of Spence (2005), she records that having simultaneously been working on practices of, in Spence’s case “photo therapy” and Weiser’s “PhotoTherapy”, they ended up hearing of each other and wrote to each other at the same time. Weiser, a trained psychologist, states that she, ‘began using PhotoTherapy techniques in 1971, and my first article about it was published in 1975.’ They met in 1991 when Spence came to stay with Weiser, where both spoke at a panel at the Emily Carr Collage of Art and did, ‘several live sessions at the PhotoTherapy Centre’. (pp240-248).

would not reproduce unhelpful existing power structures. This meant that photo therapy would not be hierarchical, that the usual power binaries of photographer and sitter were disrupted to give creative and supportive agency to both parties. According to Martin, ‘The work produced in photo therapy is always jointly-authored, to acknowledge the contribution that both sitter/director and photo therapists make to the process.’ (Martin 1991, p36.). As Spence and Martin explain:

The process of phototherapy is essentially collaborative; it is not something which is either done to you, or for you. Our introduction to therapy was through co-counselling in which when working in pairs we give each other complete attention and an equal amount of non-judgemental listening time. This has been carried through into phototherapy. The easiest way to understand it as a form of phototheatre of the self; it is basically about the making visible of psychic reality. It is not documentary photography because everything is stage-managed and deliberately placed in images, though it could be called “self-documentation” (Martin and Spence 1995, p165)

This emphasis on collaboration differs from the traditions of the photographer/artists being treated with elevated importance as sole author. In this way, they connected their politics with their practice, and showed that photography need not exploit those captured by the lens.

Working with an ally in this way enabled both women to feel safe enough to expose and explore parts of their class identities that had been stigmatised as grotesque, shameful and in need of hiding. As Walker (2014) points out, ‘Shame is the fear of exposing oneself to others and may therefore occur more commonly in company.’ (p33). This is reduced by working with those from a similar class background. The weight of these feelings of shame and “spoiled identity” cannot be underestimated: they are formed early, and reinforced throughout our lives.³⁸ Through photo therapy these unhappy memories, along with aspects of personality cast as undesirable, unbecoming, “common” and “unrespectable”, could be performed, examined, talked through and written about.³⁹ Although often overlooked as part of their creative practice, this process of working-through means that *all* stages of the photo therapy sessions are important: Spence and Martin’s written reflections are as important as the images produced. They belong to the “making sense” part of the process, where the inarticulate but instinctive aspect of the sitter’s performance can be given a voice. As Martin explains, ‘In photo therapy we have synthesised theories on the construction of a fragmented subjectivity with techniques for exploring, and making visible our multi-faceted identities, moving through transformations to acknowledge a myriad of selves.’ (Martin 1991, p49). Spence continues, ‘It’s like parts of you that have been locked away, suddenly come out of a little locked space and you say yes, I can look at that, it wasn’t as painful as I thought.’

³⁸ See Goffman (1990) on passing and “spoiled identities”, for discussion of the psychological effects of living with an identity that must be disavowed. Also, see accounts in chapter one on the lasting effects of the socialised stigma of growing up working-class.

³⁹ Spence describes the most available depictions of the working-class: ‘It goes without saying that I picked up from the cinema and media that I was either “common” or “stupid” or funny.’ (Spence, 1991, p10)

(Spence in dir. Potts 1987). The performance, the production of the images and the writing about them are all key aspects of their praxis.

Through this work, Spence and Martin could acknowledge that their feelings were not just individual and personal, but also collective and political, formed through oppressive power structures: 'Through this work-in-progress we are interested to better understand how, through visual and other forms of representation, our psychological or subjective view of selves, and others, are constructed and held across institutions of media and within the hierarchical relationships in which we are constantly encountering the various facets of capital and the state.' (Spence 1980: pp8,10). Doing this work and exhibiting it makes public the social, political and personal effects of inequality, classism and sexism.

Like Spence's photography projects with Dennett, photo therapy was meant as an amateur practice, a strongly class-conscious practice. It was meant to enable people to take ownership of the means of their own creative self-expression - in this case photography - and use it to reconstruct their own images of themselves and their histories, countering the often negative and limited representations of women and the working-class in the media and the art world. Spence's classed experience as a secretary shaped both the way she saw herself, and her desire to express herself on her own terms:

For me the main pain of my class experiences as a young person was just continually being put down, criticised, ignored and talked about as if I wasn't there. I have worked as a secretary most of my life (and still do when I need to). The secretary is the invisible observer. She is the like the oil that holds the whole working world together. As such she is totally taken for granted. As a secretary I have no opinion of my own, no apparently different class opinion from the person who employs me. I continually hear "myself" talked about through the discussions of others, in a way that is upsetting and painful. The secretary is not in a position to do anything about it, stuck in the middle as a hand-maiden, stuck in the colluding "service" position. (1991, p11)

Much of Spence's work as a cultural worker was an attempt to escape this experience of being silenced and stripped of an identity. By making her presence known and by communicating her own opinions in her work, she was trying to undo the harm that being "stuck in the middle" did to her sense of integrity and agency. Thus, her work acted as an *antidote* to the erasure of working-class women's lives, exploring the complex realities of women's experiences of their bodies, sexualities, class struggles and the problems of women's precarious place in the world.

Women looking to find themselves represented within Western visual culture were, and are, unlikely to find images that tell the stories of their own lives: as Spence states, 'We urgently need to know how it was that we came to (mis)recognise ourselves as being present in the representations offered to us.' (1980, pp8-10). Photo therapy provided Martin and Spence the

space to work through problems and conflicts within themselves by creating and testing out multiple conflicting images, in order to explore, work through and become familiar and comfortable with facets of themselves rarely depicted in Western visual culture.

However, the figure of the secretary cannot simply be opposed to that of the artist/cultural worker – the change in occupation did not enable Spence to *escape* the oppressive class confines of waged labour. Even in the cultural sector and the art world, class and gender inequalities still exist, and Spence still had to fight to make herself and her work heard, seen and understood. Basically, she was still at the mercies of the bosses, albeit in the form of gallery owners, arts programmers, curators, funding and grants bodies.

Class and Institutionalised Stigma

My theory that working-class identities have been constructed as grotesque incongruities in the middle-class dominated spaces of the art world and academia is influenced by Nirmal Puwar's concept of racial and ethnic minorities as "space invaders" within those same institutions. In *Spaæ Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place* (2004), Puwar shows how middle-class, white men have been positioned as the universal standard, the natural occupiers of high-status positions of power and prestige. She describes the ways in which, when racialised minorities take up these professional positions, they are received negatively: 'For those for whom the whiteness of these spaces provides a comforting familiarity, the arrival of racialised members can represent the monstrous.' (p50). The idea that the presence of people who deviate from the expected norm could provoke such strong emotions, framing outsiders so exaggeratedly as "monstrous", informs my conception of the grotesque as a heightened, excessive portrayal of those who do not conform to the set standard. My "working-class female grotesque" expands on Puwar's writing on race by extending her racialised "space invader" to include the situation of (in this case white) working-class women. This is a subtle expansion: racial difference is obviously more "visible" in white-dominated spaces, but class is also signified through visual markers of difference such as choice of clothing and dress style, speech and accent, "manners" and behaviour, and these are recognised both explicitly and tacitly.

In a section that echoes Mary Douglas's writing on dirt and the ways we guard against pollution in *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966), Puwar describes the ways in which bodies that "intrude" are received as actively threatening:

Demarcations of masculine and feminine bodies and the concomitant public and private domain point to how women in the privileged spaces of the political realm are matter out of place. These boundaries are complicated further by

looking at “race” and colonialism have been central to the formations of (imperial) public masculinity and femininity. Gendered constructions of national boundaries and differences between women have contributed to how Europe's constitutive outside has figured in the making of political and private / public realms. (p11)

The construction of women and racialised minorities as “matter out of place” leads to them being feared as *abject* subjects.⁴⁰ As Puwar continues: “The fragility of the masculine claim to public space and most importantly the body politic is disturbed by the arrival of the abject [...] the presence of the feminine as a bodily entity disrupts the partition between the private and the public even if it does not render it altogether invalid.” (p14). Similarly, Imogen Tyler argues (2013) that the working-class are treated as if they were waste, “abjected” undesirable bodies that don’t matter. Such unwelcome identities, stripped of personhood to become bodies out of place, are marginalised and demonised within a neoliberal Britain that targets the vulnerable through political policy and punitive benefits sanctions.⁴¹ Although this is a side of British class politics that has worsened in contemporary Britain as the divide between the rich and poor has widened during the LibDem/Conservative coalition (2010-2015) and Conservative governments (2015-), it is also consistent with the rhetoric promoted by Thatcher from her election victory in 1979 until she left office in 1990 - almost the whole period of Spence’s photography career.

In both Puwar and Tyler’s approaches to bodies and identities that manifest economic, racial or class differences to the “universal” subject of middle-class white maleness, these identities are cast as an extreme “other”, the personification of all that is unwelcome. This otherness is then projected through an aesthetic category of dirt and abjection. My “working-class female grotesque” can be placed alongside Puwar’s “monstrous space invader” and Tyler’s “revolting, abject subject”. Yet I want to move beyond *negative* description and towards a reclamation of this figure: to posit an “Anti-Pygmalion” female grotesque who does not aspire to dress/act/perform in ways that would enable her to “pass” within high-status institutions, but rather presents herself as a radical alternative.

One of the reasons Spence and Martin described feeling shame at their class positions when they were growing up was being placed in situations where to be working-class was to be in the inferior, subordinate group. Spence was evacuated during the Second World War and placed with middle-class families, while Martin’s mother sent her to a primary school where she was one of the only

⁴⁰ See Kristeva (1984) for a theory of the “abject”.

⁴¹ On how this affects women in particular, see Foster (9th September 2016).

kids from a poor background. As they moved from school to work, this feeling of being intruders did not abate. As Spence wrote, part of her job as a secretary was to be *unseen*, just as her mother hid her paid labour in favour of the more “respectable” unpaid labour of the bourgeois housewife.⁴² Working-class women who leave the domestic sphere of family-centred life, the areas they’ve grown up in, the jobs they are expected to take up, who instead go on to higher education and pursue the paths of the predominantly male and middle-class in the arena of the art world, represent a double intrusion: they deviate from the norm both by being women and by being working-class.

A constantly recurring theme throughout Spence’s work, as well as her photo therapy projects with Martin, was that of working-class identity framed as *faulty*, class difference being felt as a wound that refused to heal. Class shaped Spence and Martin’s sense of self and marked their feelings of belonging in the world, or rather their understanding of the ways in which, as women coming from working-class backgrounds, they did *not* in fact fit in. For Spence, the struggle of moving through the social and institutional spheres of professional photography, higher education and the art world did not allow her to simply transcend her class origins, but made her sharply aware of them: ‘I found in my therapeutic exploring that, in spite of all my parents had done for me, when I had become socially mobile I had become a monstrous daughter, looking upon *them* with shame. I had forgotten the history of my subjectivity because it was too painful to remember.’ (1995, p165). Ascending academically did not free Spence of lower status, but reinforced her place as neither here nor there: she found herself becoming *other* to her family, associating them with the shame she attached to being working-class, while at the same time remaining marked as an intruder within middle-class spheres.

Learning the Standard

To understand why being working-class is such a site of recurring conflict, we need to go back to our early formations, where we learn classed and gendered norms which go on to inform our judgement of what constitutes correct behaviour. From the moment we enter institutionalised education as children, we begin a process of correction which has as much to do with socialised performance as it has to do with acquiring knowledge.⁴³ As Dennett argues, ‘The inculcation of

⁴² A woman who does not need to work transmits status to the male who provides for his wife.

⁴³ It is clear from the accounts of school life in the writings by Sage, Rowbotham, Spence and Martin discussed in the previous chapter, that this formation was not just in the curriculum they learned, but in the fact that their ways of speaking, acting and dressing were being assessed and found wanting.

such values relies on the use of sexist, racist and culturally biased Standard English in the teaching of literacy, linked to the stereotyped imagery which claims to present a “universal” view of the world.’ (Dennett, Spence 2001a, p18). The language we are taught as “Standard Written English” is neither neutral nor the language of all attendees of British schools: it is a *standardised* version, a language we must master in order to write and speak “correctly”. It is a language that is not spoken by all its writers. To deviate from this standard means failure, being marked as *Other*: for example, middle-class British southern speakers often consider themselves “without accent”, assuming that their way of speaking is the neutral norm from which others “with accents” - whether “regional” or working-class or both - have deviated. The standard is set by those who exercise power and dominance.

As students, we are taught to learn mimicry, to repress our own dialects, and to appropriate the language of people to whose discourse community we do not belong.⁴⁴ Citing capitalism, patriarchy and imperialism as the main systems of oppression, Dennett and Spence state that, ‘the fundamental oppression still remains a matter of one’s class.’ (Dennett, Spence 2001a, p19). No matter where you are from, or what colour your skin may be, in the British school system “correct” (i.e. middle-class) speech, accent and writing are always required as the norm.⁴⁵ Martin recalls starting at school, ‘I could not talk at all, only stammer out my inarticulate, gauche faux-pas. I was literally silenced, as were my class experiences, as part of learning to “pass”, the solution I was offered was elocution lessons.’ (Martin 1986, p40). The key feature of Martin’s anecdote is quite how entwined language and identity are: not performing middle-class identity means being assumed to be not worth hearing, and thus losing the confidence to present and articulate yourself in public.

It is worth quoting in full the accounts of institutionalised regulation that Spence and Martin experienced, as although they grew up in different areas and went to different schools their accounts are very similar. It is useful to look for correspondences between personal testimonies as a way of building up a picture of the lived-reality of class difference, rather than just attempting to theorise class as an economic or occupational category, because the ‘structure of feeling’ I’m describing isn’t captured by those categories. Here Martin describes how she felt about going to a middle-class school and how her mother was complicit in reinforcing her disavowal of working-class background:

⁴⁴ Foster Wallace (2007) makes the case that the debates about “descriptive” and “prescriptive grammar” are strongly connected to power and class.

⁴⁵ For a perspective on this that intersects class and racial difference, see Dash (2002).

I was cut off from my roots too young. Forced to give up my “familiar” background, since my mother knew that power lay elsewhere. But that included disavowing and denying the power within my class – resilience, endurance and being in touch with feelings. For me, an awareness of class consciousness came young, before I could analyse it: “Don’t play outside, with the kids on the street.” “You’ve got a place at the ‘good’ school”. “Don’t say your favourite food is fish and chips.” “Don’t speak common, speak proper.” No photographs bear witness to these building blocks of my identity formation. (Martin 1991a, p216)

Spence’s account describes ongoing processes of regulation, and the repression of signifiers of working-class identity as secret and shameful:

In relation to the innermost sanctum of my secrets, the most painful of all is to do with class codes of conduct, of which I became aware by the age of six when, as an evacuee, I moved rapidly between people of different class fractions and was continually extorted to behave and speak in a variety of ways. This continued into my formal schooling. There is no acknowledgement of the painful self-censorship or secrecy involved in such acts of domination and subordination when I look at the pictures of this period, nor is it ever openly talked about. By my teens I was caught up in a complex range of class and sexual masquerades which now extended beyond language and behaviour and began to take the form of “personal style”. (Spence 1995b, p91)

The judgements enforced at school are reflected within the wider culture, as Spence and Dennett point out: ‘Where the experience of working-class life is shown it is usually a negatively stereotyped view which only reinforces existing social divisions. The dominant class views itself, via its art forms, as the purveyors of good taste.’ (Dennett, Spence 2001a, p19). The British education system is not just teaching standardised language, but marking and entrenching class-based evaluations. Feminist academic Jo Stanley similarly observes that ‘Language is used to signify and to reinforce class oppression; formal educational institutions are just examples of the places where systematic shaming and undermining, positioned on notions of superiority, are reinforced. That eroding phrase “working-class thicko” no longer needs to be spoken, so well is it internalised.’ (Stanley 1995, p169). Stanley is one of the few critics who makes the connection between class-shame and education in Spence and Martin’s work; it is no coincidence that she herself also comes from a working-class background, and is thus able to see the connections, as she herself had *lived through* them.

Stanley writes of her own experiences in a project she calls “feeling like a working-class thicko at academic conferences” (1992), which explores the ways that exclusion and stigmatisation of working-class students assumed to be stupid produces the anxieties of internalised class shame in academic settings. She recalls:

My own knowledge and the self-destructive ideas about the exclusion had three

sources: I am a woman; I am working-class in a society that oppresses such people; and failing the 11-plus examination and being sent to a despised secondary modern school, despite being top of my class, compounded the idea that I was fundamentally not good enough for the Real Arbiters who could see through all the “pretence at cleverness”. So I do readily experience a dreadful shuddering in some competitive privileged situations. However, the problem is not only the internalised oppression, the feeling like, but also the actual objectivity – existing practice: being treated as a working-class thicko. (Stanley 1995, p169)

Stanley’s account corroborates Spence, Dennett and Martin’s in making explicit how awareness of class difference is imposed on working-class children from an early age at school. This awareness is often unarticulated and sublimated into shame or anxiety in institutionalised or official settings: fear of being treated as a “thicko” for presenting a classed identity not in-keeping with the institutionalised preference for middle-classness. Being present in a space dominated by one group leads to learning the way that groups views others, as Martin found: ‘By being there in the company of middle-class people, I had heard how much they despised and felt contempt for the working-class.’ (1991a, p216). Such experiences provoke feelings of shame that are internalised, and which Spence, Dennett and Martin were only later able to unpack and challenge as adults who began to learn that their experiences were not personal failures but enactments of the structural oppressions of classism.

If we take the stance that language and identity are closely bonded, then acceptance of the discriminatory idea that language usage that does not adhere to the middle-class SWE is *incorrect* can lead to a shattering of one’s sense of identity; thus, accents, behaviour and speech signifying working-class identity are stigmatised. The linguist James Milroy comments, ‘in an age when discrimination in terms of race, colour, religion, or gender is not publicly acceptable, the last bastion of overt social discrimination will continue to be a person’s language.’ (Milroy 1998, pp64-65). What is not being said here is that *class* is ‘the last bastion of overt social discrimination’. As Walker (2014) argues, the stigma of being discriminated against also produces shame. While stigma most commonly comes from the outside, and shame is internalised, according to Walker they are interconnected:

In the same way that feeling ashamed is partly a product of being shamed, so felt stigma is a response to the social stigma conveyed by others. Social stigma is a process entailing attitudes, thoughts, and actions on the part of the majority group, and the perceptions and responses to these by the people stigmatised, which both frame their felt stigma and may also serve to fuel further stigmatising. (pp55-56).

The point is that while class shame - the shame you feel at having a stigmatised class identity - is internal, it is also something that is *done* to you.

In *Stigma, Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1990), Erving Goffman comments on the way the body of a person seen to have some malformation or disability comes to mark that person out as somehow *ruined*: their presence is revolting, due to not fitting the standard. This also works in more subtle ways with people who are not the universalised white, male middle-class subject. When one identity is selected as being the correct model, all *others* feel the pressure to aspire to emulate it. Goffman suggests that ‘Because of the great rewards in being considered normal, almost all persons who are in a position to pass will do so on some occasion by intent.’ (p95). But passing carries its own risks: the fear of being found out, discovered not to be what one is mimicking, is a constant worry, alongside the pain of the displacement from your original class *habitus*. As Goffman continues, ‘The phenomenon of passing has always raised issues regarding the psychic state of the passer. First, it is assumed that he must necessarily pay a great psychological price, a very high level of anxiety, in living a life that can be collapsed at any moment.’ (pp108-109).

A key text discussing the anxieties of class passing, is Richard Hoggart’s description in *The Uses of Literacy* (1958) of the extreme discomfort of the “scholarship boy”, drawn from his own experience of grammar school and university. (Throughout Hoggart’s discussion of the plight of the “scholarship boy” no “scholarship girls” are ever mentioned).⁴⁶ Hoggart writes: ‘He is often not at ease about his own physical appearance which speaks too clearly of his birth; he feels uncertain or angry inside when he realizes that, and a hundred habits of speech and manners, can “give him away” daily.’ (p301). Four decades later, Lynsey Hanley (2012) writes about how when starting university, she believed that she would only be intellectually accepted by other students if she was perceived to be middle-class:

I wanted to know about everything, but I felt a barrier stronger than I was capable of breaking down alone, a barrier that seemed to exist only in my mind but was no less solid for it...If I was to fit in and make the friends I longed for, I had to learn how to become middle-class. (p157)

Between Hoggart and Hanley there is a shared feeling of intrusion, of breaching unspoken rules which dictate who is clever and who belongs in university, leaving a sense that if you are working-class at university, you have somehow fluked your way in. This has also been my experience. I would tell people who were surprised by my “doing well” at university that it was down to being *bolshy*, rather than admitting that I must, also, be *clever*. The aspect of precariousness in the pleasures

⁴⁶ This thesis prioritises the experiences of working-class women, thus filling in the missing accounts of Hoggart’s invisible scholarship girl.

and perils of passing is detailed by Spence in this account of her experience of going to university in the early 1980s as a mature student:

Going into higher education was the most amazing thing that ever happened to me, but it was also one of the most painful because it couldn't deal with the conflict that I wanted to theorise, which was class. It gave me some amazing tools, though, which I'll always have, but I felt very much like the woman in the film *Educating Rita* who says she feels like an intellectual "half caste". I've had neither a good education nor a thorough education, nor have I had no education. I have crossed boundaries and I am in limbo land. I'm sorry to talk in parables but I think the story of the ugly duckling is very important because it ties up the story of Cinderella. If I was going to do the Cinderella work again I would concentrate on the ugly sisters. The point about the ugly duckling story is that you have to know who you can relate to, who are your group. In class terms, crossing social barriers, my greatest pleasure in life would be to understand what group I belong to. But at least now I understand that I never assimilated, I only masqueraded. (1995, pp208-9)

Annette Kuhn comments that Spence's above passage 'suggests how, for upwardly socially mobile women of working-class origin, our class formation remains deeply inscribed in our inner worlds, and continues to shape our opportunities and inform our outward lives'. (Kuhn 1995, p22). The image of Cinderella is an aspirational classed subject which links success with a beauty that permits class mobility. Those who *can't* transcend their stigmatised class beginnings are tainted, undesirable and may even, like the ugly sisters, present femininities experienced exaggeratedly as grotesque. Tellingly, when Spence contributed some of her research on the Cinderella story from a class perspective in a BBC *Arena* documentary, 'they came and interviewed me quite extensively because I had a Cinderella archive. I was very, very angry when I saw the programme because what they edited out was all my work on class, since it didn't fit into their theories of sexuality.' (1991, p14).

Despite being a space for opportunities to learn, university was not a safe place for Spence to explore her class conflicts, as doing so would be received antagonistically within an institution in which class is (still) taboo.⁴⁷ Even a higher education course that engaged with racial and sexual difference still seemed to be a space that was ill-equipped to discuss class: 'Very often on such courses a major component (and crucial factor) in the lives of those of us from working-class backgrounds is rendered absent; namely a theorisation or discussion of class and power differentials.' (Spence 1990, p29). Being unable to explore her own working-class history within academia disrupted Spence's coherent sense of self, as that sense of self had to be adjusted to fit

⁴⁷ From my own experience (and that of other working-class students I have talked to) of discussing class in universities, it feels like mentioning class difference arouses a lot of hostility, from both middle-class students and lecturers.

an academic standardisation that disavowed the experiences of “others” who did not come from the histories being taught. This gave rise to feelings of inadequacy, of experiencing oneself as wrong: the “ugly duckling” syndrome of a woman in the wrong place. This is why Spence, had to work on her ideas of class “split subjectivities” outside of academia, creating her own spaces such as the photography workshops and the photo therapy sessions.

Locating Gaps: The Invisibility of Class in Existing Literature on Spence

Given my belief that class is a dominant feature in our lives, that is where I choose to put the bulk of my work – Jo Spence (Spence 1991, p21)

As a case study in a thesis that explores representations of working-class women by artists from working-class backgrounds, Spence is a vital example: she wrote extensively on her own work, her life and her methods, and this writing *was* part of her praxis. Unlike more taciturn artists, whose works and intentions we must (supposedly), rely on critics, writers and historians to interpret, Spence spoke for herself in extensive writings in such magazines and journals as *Spare Rib*, *Ten 8*, *Variant*, *Camerawork*, *Incite*; in the books she co-edited, *Photography/Politics: Vol 1* (1979), *Photography/Politics: Two* (1987), *Family Snaps: The Meanings of Domestic Photography* (1991), *What Can a Woman Do with a Camera?: Photography for Women* (1995); in her solo authored books *Putting Myself in the Picture* (1988) and *Cultural Sniping* (1995), as well as many chapters in books spanning from the 1970s up until her death in 1992; and in projects she worked on that were published after her death. In this writing, she clearly and boldly states her claims and intentions. One of *my* intentions for this thesis is to make space for the artists I explore to speak for themselves, to give agency to them, so that my own arguments can form a dialogue with theirs, producing a narrative that differs from and challenges existing “knowledge” about their work.

One of the most revealing aspects of the class bias I have found in researching existing work on Spence is the erasure of class discourse and analysis. It may seem to some that class-background or class-identification is an unnecessary focus for analysis, or is irrelevant – the work itself produced by the artist is what matters - but what if this work is informed by its producer’s class position, background and politics and explicitly takes these as its subject? A complex and inclusive reading of any art work must always take into account the material and social conditions in which that work was produced. In the case of Spence’s work this approach is key, as her history and the complex conditions of her life were so much a part of the art she made: it was not from a neutral place that the work sprang, nor can it be for any art.

Yet, what I have found most striking in the literature on Spence's career, in reviews, articles, thesis's, book chapters etc. is that the strong concerns she articulates in her writing have not been recognised as part of the *narrative* of her work. From her very earliest writing, class is stated to be one of their central concerns that shapes all the projects she and Dennett worked on. Even Spence's work on illness and her treatment by the medical establishment, which she experienced as alienating and dehumanising, is discussed in terms of class disempowerment by Dennett and Spence; but in critical writings *on* Spence by others, class is a taboo subject repeatedly avoided.

Critical writing on Spence can be categorised according to its main emphasis broadly into three somewhat overlapping groups. Firstly, there are writings discussing Spence's work as an example of feminist art (Wells 1987, Cullis 1994, Meskimmon 1996, Isaak 2002, Battista 2012, Stacey 2013, Wilson 2015), autobiographical self and/or self-portrait photography (Atkinson 1985, Watney 1985, Podpadec 1986, Hopkinson 1987, Scott 2003, Hagiwara 2005, Pedri 2007, Vasey 2013) and from a historical framework (Hirsch 2012, Tinkler 2013, Sheehan 2015) that discuss Spence in reference to other British photographers from the 1970s/1980s (Mulholland 1998, Walker 2001, Ribalta 2007, Battista 2012, Wilson 2015). Secondly, there are those feminist writers who write on Spence's use of her own body (Ross 1997, Jacobs 1999, Battista 2012), on photography and representation (Kuppers 2003, Garland-Thompson 2009), and/or symbolic codes from Freudian frameworks (Meskimmon 1996, Wilson 1996, Isaak 2002, Wilson 2015). Thirdly, there is an extensive body of texts that may discuss the above subjects, but take illness and death as their focus (Hevey 1992, Dykstra 1995, Pryer 1997, Ross 1997, Elliott 1998, Van Meenen 2001, Isaak 2002, Takemoto 2002, Kuppers 2003, Florescu 2007, Pedri 2007, Tembeck 2008, Garland-Thompson 2009, Jacobs 2013, Epps 2013). There are a few exceptions that *do* mention class, but these are often simplistic, simply listing class as subject category, or stereotypical and quite problematic. The two major exceptions to this tendency I have found are a PhD thesis by Paula Georgina Farrance (2011) that discusses *Transgenerational dialogues with Jo Spence about class and gender in the mother-daughter sphere*, and Roberts (1993, 1998 and 2014) on politics and photography – Roberts is one of the rare writers who discusses class, in a sensitive manner, in terms of the political formation of class-shaped subjectivities.

The majority of writing on Spence's work focussed on her projects on illness, and was published after her death. After surviving her battle with breast cancer Spence subsequently got leukaemia, of which tragically she died in 1992. Although she tackled her illness in her work, making it a major topic of creative and therapeutic projects, it affected only the latter part of her life, whereas it is clear that class conflict was a *life-long* concern.

From the 1990s Spence's work was written about more widely by feminist scholars, who mainly focussed on her use of her own female body in photography, and on the politics of representation, aligning her with the canon of feminist artists of the 1980s. Many of these feminist scholars focussed on psychoanalytic readings of Spence's "split-subjectivity" crisis and the personal traumas her work sought to work through, discounting class as a topic worthy of examination in any serious depth – a striking exclusion.

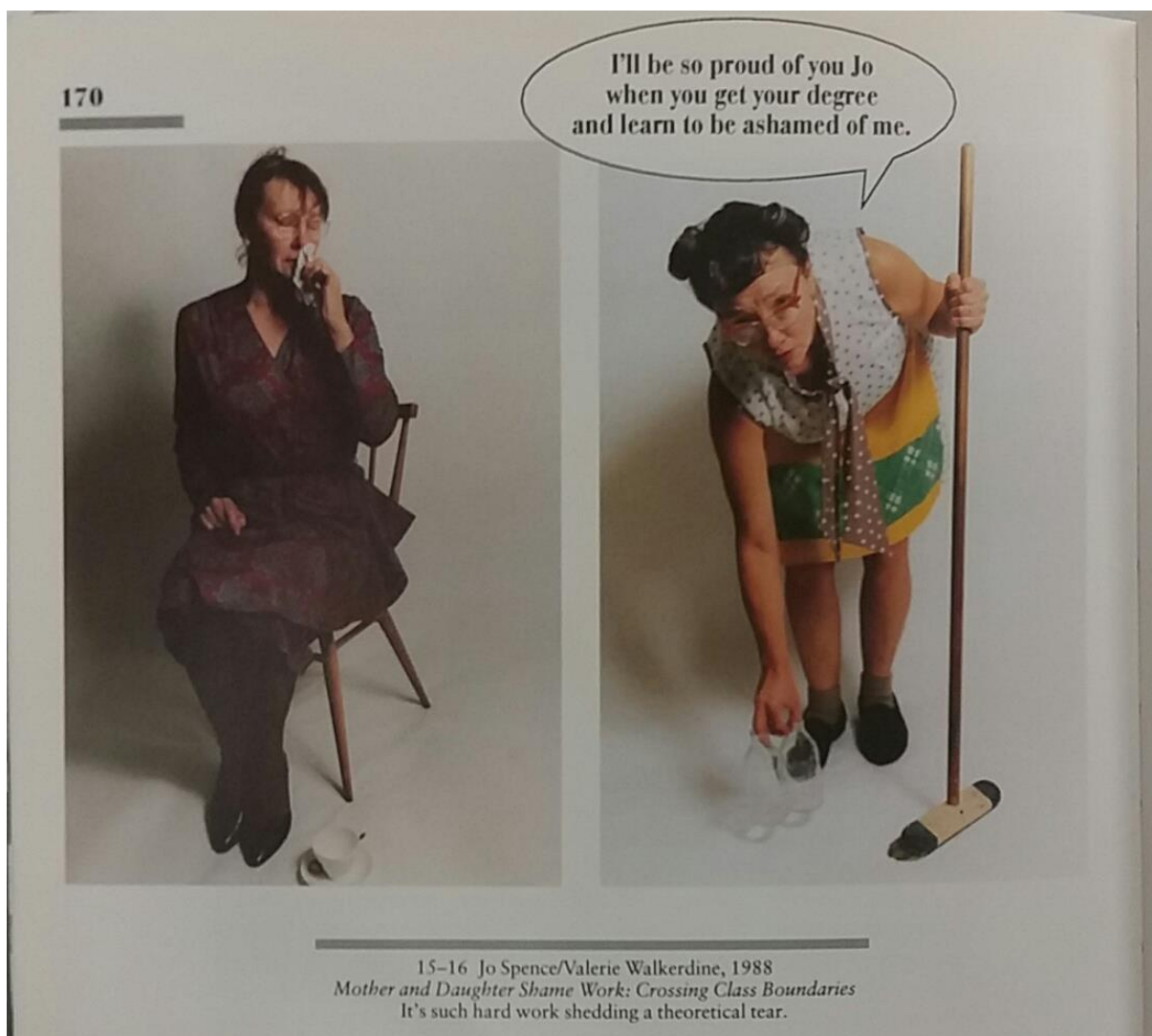
An example of this is Marsha Meskimmon's *The Art of Reflection: Women Artists' Self-Portraiture in the Twentieth Century* (1996). This book looks at gender identity and autobiographical models: Spence's political background is mentioned but only in relation to gender politics and not her work on the lack of positive representation of working-class women. Writing about photo therapy, Meskimmon says, 'In her phototherapy works from the 1980s, which explicitly concerned highly personal details of her own biography, Spence attempted to use photography as a therapeutic tool to help ease the emotional traumas brought on by her experience of breast cancer and the medical profession's treatment of her as a "patient".' (p87). However, the issue of cancer and illness is only *one* aspect in the therapeutic work: the traumas of class shame experienced throughout her life from school onwards are some of the strongest and most recurrent concerns in the photo therapy work, and are not mentioned here at all.

Statements such as Meskimmon's, listing cancer and illness (but *not* class) as Spence's focus in photo therapy, are common; also common are discussions of the work that *list* class as a concern, but neglect to discuss how it figures in her work and focus instead on cancer and illness. A notable exception is John Roberts's contribution to a catalogue for an exhibition on class and photography.⁴⁸ Roberts discusses this exhibition with a focus particularly on working-class experience and subjectivity, pointing out that 'Individuals do not experience class as an abstract category; on the contrary, class experience is related through, and in conflict with, a person's identity as a man or women, heterosexual or gay, black or white, disabled or able-bodied. There can be no class experience without a self-recognition of the body as positioned across these divisions.' (Roberts 1993, p4). It is precisely this refusal to situate themselves within a class position, and experience that make so many writers on Spence turn away from acknowledging how key class difference is to understanding her life and her work.

Spence seems to have understood these limitations herself, when she writes, 'Critical academics have found it difficult to comprehend an endeavour to find a "subjective language" when they are

⁴⁸ The exhibition, *Renegotiations: Class Modernity and Photography* at Norwich Gallery, Norfolk Institute of Art and Design (1993).

so highly trained as professional managers of knowledge, deeply implicated in concealing their feelings and class histories.’ (1995b, p94). For the middle-classes, though, their classed identity is systematically set up by individuating itself from that of the working-class, as Steph Lawler argues, ‘By contrast, middle-class identities pass as normal [...] middle-class identities can be seen to be constructed on the basis of a difference from working-classness.’ (Lawler 2008, p125). Because their class position is treated as if neutral and standard, this identity need not be acknowledged as coming from a particular set of positions that may impact on their judgements, opportunities and lives. It is clear why negotiating Spence’s working-class background seems an inconvenient and undesirable task for many critics, as to explore another’s class position, attention is drawn to the ways this position differs from your own.



Jo Spence with Valerie Walkerdine, *Mother and Daughter Shame Work: Crossing Class Boundaries* (1988). Reproduced in *Cultural Sniping: The Art of Transgression* (1995).

Mother and Daughter Shame Work: Crossing Boundaries

In 1988, Spence teamed up with academic and writer Valerie Walkerdine, also from a working-class background, and through a photo therapy session they produced the work *Mother and Daughter Shame Work: Crossing Class Boundaries*. Meskimmon's account of this piece again displays a marked aversion to discussing class, which is mentioned very cursorily as an abstract category, in favour of a psychoanalytic reading of the gendered relationships of mothers and daughters:

Spence takes up the position of both mother and daughter in these images. One of the areas of greatest concern to women artists dealing with the psychic elements of mother-child relationship over the last few decades has been the separation of the child from the mother. In the case of female children, this separation is often more troubled and has fewer representational modes with which to figure it. (p148)

The problem is not that this analysis is wrong per se, but that it misses or ignores the real subject of the work, which is even in the title: "shame work". In "crossing class boundaries", away from your family, you lose the place where you once fit; and in the change of position, the shame of being working-class is transferred to those you have partially left behind. In the photograph on the right, Spence (as her mother) is positioned as subservient, low in status and physicality – she is *beneath* her educated daughter, who now holds a higher status than herself. The educated Spence is dressed smartly, dabbing a tear with a tissue, but it is the image of the mother that most strongly expresses physical pain: her awkward lowering of herself looks a strain, Spence's face is lined by the effort. Through this performance, Spence is able to get close to the pain of her mother's sacrifice of own life for the betterment of her family, something Spence used to resent. She is now positioned as experiencing it, perhaps masochistically but also in order to *understand* her mother's position, and recognise that the pain of crossing boundaries was felt by both women.⁴⁹

Spence wrote regularly (Spence 1980, 1984, 1988, 1990, 1991a, 1995, 2001b) about how she learnt in school, from television and films that being working-class was something to be ashamed of, and this in turn meant that when she began to be more educated she became painfully aware of her parents' class position, in particular her mother's "shameful" factory work. In the BBC documentary *Putting Ourselves in the Picture* (1987), Spence described her mother as an "invisible

⁴⁹ This practice has much in common with the vulnerability and risk of the feminine sublime that Freeman writes of, while the 'central moment' of the masculine sublime 'marks the self's newly enhanced sense of identity', the feminine sublime 'does not attempt to master its objects of rapture.' (Freeman, 1995, p3). Spence is open to the pain evoked during the enactment of her work, but instead of mastery over its object (her mother) she seeks an empathic understanding of the pain felt by the other women.

worker” who after coming back from work would clean herself up and remove the evidence of her labour as a “factory worker” as if her work clothes were grotesque signs of a breach in femininity. Spence’s mother would “change into” the more acceptable clothing and role of “wife and mother” (Spence in dir. Potts, 1987). When playing her mother in the photo therapy works, Spence could start to work through this shame her mother felt at having to work, which is really shame about being poor.

By using props and costumes to represent her mother's dual occupations as housewife and factory worker, Spence could begin to feel and express solidarity with her mother. Through later analysis of the session’s performances, Spence began to understand the larger political structures that frame women’s labour as something shameful, so that having to work makes women less feminine while at the same time that work is devalued and made invisible: ‘This visual representation of women as not having to work, as the glamorous property of men, harks back to the tradition of bourgeois painting. It effectively displaces the idea that women do work, and so inhibits their sense of themselves as workers.’ (Spence 2001b, p131).⁵⁰ It’s clear that this piece, as well as being about the painful class divide between Spence and her mother, is also about the larger subject of the way working-class women are constructed aesthetically as grotesque in presenting signs of their labour. It is also, finally, about class solidarity between women as workers whose labours, like their lives, are made invisible.

Aesthetic constructions of working-class women as grotesque are figured through dress, speech, behaviours, bodies and sexuality. As Skeggs finds from her research talking to working-class women in *Formations of Class & Gender: Becoming Respectable* (1997), these definitions dictate what status and position women receive socially and economically. Economic position becomes manifest through aesthetic and moral evaluations, the middle-classes becoming the benchmark of normality; as “Susan”, one of the working-class women Skeggs interviewed puts it, “To them you never fit, never up to their standards’ (p3). This is the effect of historical endeavours to keep women under control by setting difficult-to-impossible standards to aspire to live up to, as Skeggs explains:

The femininity produced [in the eighteenth century] had an affinity with the *habitus* of the upper-classes, of ease, restraint, calm and luxurious decoration. It was produced as a sign of difference from other women [...] Femininity was seen to be the property of the middle-class women who could prove themselves to be respectable through their appearance. Because femininity developed as a

⁵⁰ For a detailed discussion of photographic representations and self-portraits of women at work, see Stanley (1991).

classed sign it became imbued with different amounts of power. (p99)

Skeggs discusses ways in which working-class women and women of colour have historically, in Western culture, been categorised as dangerous, pathological, overly sexual and generally deviant (p1). This positioning constructs middle and upper-class women as separate and distinguished from other, “lower” women. Working-class women of all races, then, act as a yard-stick to caution middle-class women, as an example of how not to be.

Skeggs makes the connection between being seen as “respectable” and being seen as middle-class: ‘respectability is one of the most ubiquitous signifiers of class’ and ‘one of the key mechanisms by which some groups were “othered” and pathologised.’ (p1). Appearing “respectable” was one of the keenest wishes of the working-class women Skeggs interviewed. If women’s value, public visibility and access to services hinge on meeting bourgeois standards, then those women who cannot live up to these norms – or refuse to do so - are seen as dissenting, ugly, trashy or rough, in opposition to the discreet refinement of “classy, feminine women”. As Carole-Anne Tyler comments in *Female Impersonation* (2003), ‘a real woman is a real lady; otherwise, she is a female impersonator.’ (p61). As Tyler argues, these aesthetic standards define the parameters of gender to the extent that those who do not master the performance of femininity - as defined by those with the power to set the bar – are framed as not being women at all but “impersonators”.

Applying Joan Riviere’s concept of “womanliness as masquerade” (1929), Tyler argues that women learn femininity as a defensive strategy, the performance of which is a masquerade that facilitates women’s acceptance socially and professionally. She comments, ‘A woman passes for the real thing when she masquerades as a middle-class man, an imposture always seen through because of the feminine difference: the suit with a skirt. A woman passes for “passing” for the real thing, miming it, when she masquerades as a working-class woman, an imposture always seen as such because of her “unnaturally” bad taste: the skirt with the sequins and slit up to the navel.’ (p61). What Tyler makes clear is that working-class women will so often fail to pull off the masquerade of femininity successfully, as they do not come from the class that possesses (i.e. has learnt) the “good taste” that would make the performance seem real.

For Spence, an awareness of socially-sanctioned, correct female presentation is evident in all her writing. For example, the classed dimensions of beauty are explored in her “Cinderella” project, where she gathered an archive of images from fairy tales, fashion magazines, newspapers, toys and ephemera from popular culture. When I describe Spence’s visual representation of herself as figuring the female grotesque, that is not to say that I find *her* grotesque or ugly - far from it - but that she is *presenting* a femininity that plays with classed stereotypes and also her everyday reality as

a working-class woman. This presentation is defiantly anti-bourgeois: she is expressing a desire *not* to pass as middle-class. This figuration in her work of an antagonistic class identity begins to tally with my concept of a radical Anti-Pygmalion working-class woman – a woman who refuses to be “made over”, to be refashioned as middle-class and therefore visually and morally acceptable.

Psychoanalysis and the Turn Away from Class in Practice

There has recently been a resurgence of interest in feminism, activism and art in the Britain of the 1970s and 1980s.⁵¹ Siona Wilson’s *Art Labor, Sex Politics: Feminist Effects in 1970s British Art and Performance* (2015) is an example of this tendency. This text also expresses the ongoing propensity of ignoring class in feminist art writing (discussed in chapter two) of the 1980s and 90s. Wilson’s chapter “Revolting Photographs: Proletarian Amateurism in Jo Spence and Terry Dennett’s Photography Workshop” suggests that the feminist dictum, “the personal is political” should again be taken up in discussing class politics and personal experience in the work of Spence. However, when it comes to class Wilson in fact treats “the personal” and “the political” as separate spheres. She does mention class in Spence and Dennett’s work, but only in relation to strategies of visual disruption in worker photography that Dennett had a specialist knowledge of (p152). However, when she turns to the “personal” angle, she seemingly forgets about class conflicts, and focuses exclusively on a Freudian psychoanalytic reading of the personal trauma of cancer (p197).

Class is treated by Wilson merely a set of stereotypical visual signifiers that relate to a supposedly stable social category; in this case clothes, which she reads as encoding the classed and gendered stereotypes of working-class housewife or working-class *male* worker. Wilson does not comment on how class in Spence’s work is expressed as a reality of lived-experience and as a set of identifications. She therefore diagnoses “class” solely as a socio-economic category, missing the ways in which the treatment of class in Spence’s work is both deeply personal, speaking of one women’s own experience of difference, *and also* concerned with the larger struggles of many women within systematic political structures of oppression.

When discussing photo therapy, Wilson identifies cancer as the motivation for Spence’s turn to therapeutic practices (p193); but as I have shown, class identity was also a major factor in the

⁵¹ Example of this resurgence in such events and exhibitions: *Hackney Flashers Exposed* event at Chats Palace, London 12th October 2014, *Radical Thinkers: the art, sex and politics of feminism* at Tate Modern, London 9 February 2015, and *History Is Now*, at Hayward Gallery 10 February – 26 April 2015.

unresolved psychic distress that was worked through in Spence's photo therapy sessions. Using the language of "semiotic signs", the Freudian concept of *fort/da*, and Lacanian theories of encounters with *the real* (p195), Wilson argues for a psychoanalytic understanding of the works that ends up squeezing them to fit within these frameworks of behaviours, disorders and terminologies. The 'psychic wounds' of class described by Spence are ignored by Wilson, perhaps buried a layer deeper than Freudian and Lacanian analysis is capable of reaching – or, perhaps, class is too close to the surface for interpretation using these methods, a wound that is "hiding in plain sight" and therefore overlooked when meaning is mined from an unconscious already mapped by assumed class-neutral disorders.

Wilson states, 'In using photography to try to master the trauma of the doctor's marking of the body, Spence must repeat the trauma over and over again [...] This scene evokes an encounter with the real...she is confronted by her own subjective annihilation.' (pp196-197). The trauma of encountering one's mortality is perhaps easier to identify as a motivation for recording and fixing an image against the threat of annihilation, yet a more sensitive look at Spence's work (and her extensive writing about it) exposes another type of threat. This came in the form of a loss of Spence's class-identity and known position in the world: the trauma of split-class subjectivity. These are themes that run throughout Spence's work and are not discussed by Wilson, who sees the fear of death as a straightforward Freudian formation to account for Spence's compulsive return to recording her own image. This ongoing approach of psychoanalysis stripped of any class-analysis, ends up erasing the class discourse and meaning intended by Spence.

Photo Therapy and the "Class-Shame" Series

Spence wrote often of her own discomfort at bringing up class in spaces in which the subject was taboo. Speaking of class conflicts, and giving an account of personal experience that differs from that of the middle-class group you are situated in, is a precarious activity that requires confidence and courage. In my experience of speaking in such spaces, I have regularly encountered people wanting to challenge my concept of class, or diminish my experience of class stigmatisation and the pain of class difference. This may be down to the common situation of these spaces often being, or assumed to be, homogeneously middle-class. But I also believe there is an element of "middle-class guilt" at play here, where people do not want to acknowledge that their own paths have not been simply driven by their own volition - who want to believe that talent alone, rather than privilege, have got them where they are today. Hearing stories of people who have not had their privilege, and have struggled to access and remain in these spaces, makes many people uncomfortable, disrupting a class-biased or class-blind view of academic success being a

meritocracy rather than a structurally uneven playing field. This is some 30 years after Spence's work, which disproves the accusation that this feature of class discourse in Spence's work is irrelevant and outdated.⁵² It is therefore no wonder that after Spence's mixed experience of university she sought the company of like-minded working-class people in which to feel safe and understood enough to make such difficult and challenging work.

Spence also wrote of her ambivalent feelings about being part of the women's movement; this was not because she wasn't a feminist, as her tireless collaboration with other women testifies, but because she found the women's movement to be a classed space that focussed on the rights and lives of middle-class women.⁵³ She explains, 'My experience in the women's movement is that I haven't felt very safe most of the time because the movement has been dominated by middle-class women, whether people like to admit it or not. Working with people like Rosy Martin has allowed an amazing amount of joy for me because she comes from the same background as I so, as do Terry Dennett and my husband David.' (1991, pp14-15).

Within the photo therapy sessions many topics were explored. For Martin, her sexuality, memories of adolescence, anger and problematic relationship with her mother were significant areas of exploration. For Spence, her battles with illness were a regular topic, as were the connected themes of beauty/ugliness, ageing/sexuality, all seen through the shaping prism of class-consciousness. The practice of photo therapy aided Spence in uncovering where the repressed feeling of shame associated with class difference, a recurring motif in her work, first took shape:

I began to discover that one of my major defensive strategies was to hide overwhelming feelings of shame. Shame at my "ugliness", at my deformed and injured body, at my inability to carry on being "successful", shame at my inability to perform whilst I was ill, shame at my poverty (I got behind on the rent, had the phone cut off, sold my car), shame at inability to form the perfect relationship, shame at not being the daughter my parents had hoped for, shame

⁵² Such as Walsh (2012): 'While other changes in British society, such as the disenfranchisement of the working-class by means of the substitution of work by celebrity culture, make Spence's early works, at least, seem like fossils from another era.' (p30).

⁵³ This feeling of being "unsafe" amongst the middle-class women of the women's movement, was also experienced in other groups, for example working with psychotherapists before meeting Rosy Martin, 'When the verbal power relationship between them and myself echoed painful areas of my life which involved class oppression, or felt patronising or voyeuristic, I became silenced all over again. Eventually, by working with people from my own fractured class background, I was able to move beyond deconstructing my family in to making visible to myself the power relationships with the discourses of state education and medicine and understand how they too had shaped my life.' (Spence, 1991a, p228)

at not being the intellectual my tutors had expected. “*Could do better...*” As the year progressed I began to be in touch with a buried structure of shame in relation to my class background. (1990, p28)

Through photo therapy and its feature of talking and writing about issues as they are uncovered, Spence began to be able to distance herself from internalising shame, to understand that this feeling was put *onto* her by the political and social stigmatisation of working-class women. Tapping into anger at the way she had been treated allowed Spence to project outwards these negative feelings, to disown them and direct them away from herself. This process is at work in the *Class Shame Series*, one of Spence’s last projects before her death, compiled from photo therapy sessions in collaboration with her husband David Roberts. This project is rarely discussed, yet as one of Spence’s last projects it presents some of her lifelong concerns of classed history, identification and rebellion from bourgeois standards. If Spence had survived her cancer, she planned to extend the project; there were plans for a book on the subject of class shame to be published by Working Press.⁵⁴ Due to her death, her hopes for this project to go out into the world and be seen critically did not materialise. Spence was very aware of the way her work could be co-opted by different parties for varying agendas: it is clear from her writing that Spence wanted to talk publicly about class, and I hope that this thesis will help to undo the silencing of class discourse in her work.

Spence produced some of the works that came under the *Class Shame* heading in the late 1980s, but it was just before her death in early 1990-1992 that she was planning to bring them all together into a single series. My analysis is the first time that this series and its history has been discussed in full. Producing images for Spence was part of a process that included talking about memories, performing and writing, so photographs were often reworked and placed next to other works and retitled (for example, the *Mother Daughter Shame Work* has been exhibited as separate images). This removes any preciousness about the works as art objects, and instead frees them up to work as aids to communication, tools to reconfigure meanings to destabilise one version of self. Thus, Spence planned to group together a couple of the images under the title *Not Our Class* (1989), as well as two others *Middle class values make me sick* (1986-88) and *If I don’t need to please...* (1986-88), under the banner of the “*Class Shame*” series.⁵⁵

This series is the least discussed of all Spence’s works by critics, with the exception of John Roberts (2014). Other than in Roberts, if this project is mentioned, it is only cursorily listed rather than

⁵⁴ ‘Jo Spence was an enthusiastic supporter and was preparing a Working Press book when she tragically died of cancer’ (Szczelkun, 2016, p47).

⁵⁵ Information gleaned from archival paperwork at the Jo Spence Memorial Library Archive, London.

analysed in any detail. Dennett is quoted in Roberts's book discussing the last two images *Middle class values make me sick* (1986-88) and *If I don't need to please...* (1986-88), telling the story of the series and Spence's plans for it:

These two short works were among a group of projects that Jo had chosen for inclusion in a book commissioned by *Working Press*, (Jo Spence/Terry Dennett *Class Shame: healing ourselves with a camera* – in preparation). Always the optimist, Jo took the view that if she survived her struggle with leukaemia, her work in 1990-1992 would constitute "The retirement project"; if she did die it would become part of her "Retrospective project." Questions of class and power relations, social subordination and shame, have been a central theme running through much of Jo Spence's work since the 1970s. Her confrontation with the Cancer Industry and the NHS in the early 1980s served to underline further that fact that Shame plays a key role in the function of all institutions in contemporary society. (Terry Dennett 1992, in Roberts 1993, p27)

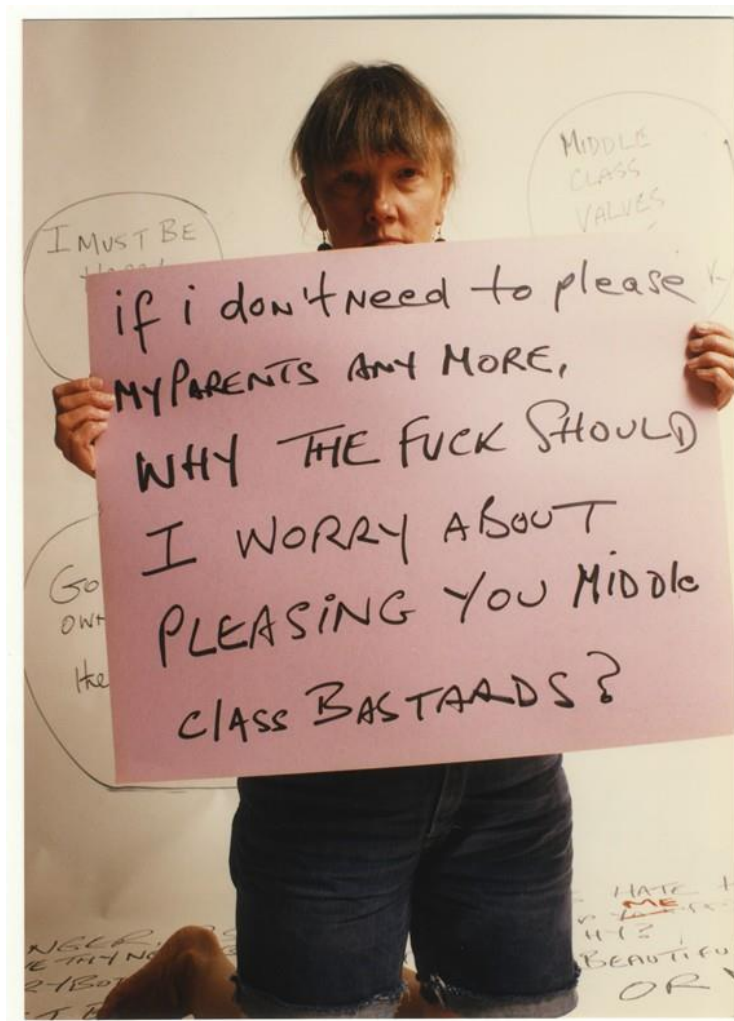
Tragically Spence died before this book materialised, meaning that her last published project was *The Final Project* (published 2014), on coming to terms with death. It is extremely sad that Spence's extensive output as a cultural worker came to be predominantly associated with illness and death, rather than her public challenging of the devaluation of the work and lives of working-class women. It does not do Spence justice, either as a person or as a cultural worker, to frame her work as being about personal illness and tragedy, rather than a passionate political commitment to interrogate inequality across the public institutions of education, media and the art world.



Jo Spence with David Roberts, *Class-Shame Series* (1986-1988) from the Richard Saltoun Gallery Archives London

The photographs from this session in the *Class-Shame Series* enact a rebelliously grotesque class spectacle. Writing aggressive phrases - “I refuse” “I must not” “middle-class values make me sick”, “hate”, “liars” “If I don’t have to worry about pleasing my parents anymore, why the fuck should I care about pleasing you middle-class bastards?” (the latter, not in the above collage but part of the same series) - expresses the violent eruption during this session of emotions normally suppressed out of fear and shame.

Across the series as a whole, the desire to speak tangles with the impulse to think better of it, to repress and hide. From left to right, the twenty-first photograph captures the beginning of a statement in a speech bubble being painted over; the next three photographs show more and more strokes of red paint, with the writing completely disappearing by photograph twenty-four. The angry red paint that Spence uses to emphasize certain powerful words is also used to write certain phrases literally on her own body, marking her as the subject of revolt that owns and identifies with these statements. In photographs twenty-seven and twenty-eight she is using her inhaler, a pause to catch her breath during a performance that is clearly exhaustingly aggressive and emotionally draining.



Jo Spence with David Roberts, *If I don't need to please...* (1986-1988) from the Richard Saltoun Gallery Archives London

This is a spectacle of all that is associated with *not* being respectable and feminine. Ripping up paper, throwing it around, painting on herself, crossing out writing scrawled on the walls, she is making a mess of herself, and also making her messy feelings public. She is refusing here to pass

as an educated, respectable bourgeois woman. This series expresses moments of carnivalesque pleasure in letting go of correct, socially sanctioned gendered and classed behaviours, and shows her instead revelling in the revolt of being grotesque and without shame.

As in much of Spence's work, words are central to communication, visualising the voicing of feelings which are difficult to express. Spence was criticised for her use of panels of text in her work with the *Hackney Flashers*, as well as in her solo and collaborative work, as some felt this made experiencing the work in a gallery setting too difficult or inappropriate.⁵⁶ Like political banners at demonstrations, Spence's use of written text in her art speaks of her desire to tell the personal in the public setting, as well as her allegiance to grass roots activism. The use of placards bearing deeply personal statements blends together the public and political with the private catharsis of the confessional. Reviewers of Spence's photo therapy work who have suggested that these works are harder to relate to because they are "too personal" have missed out on these intertwining modes: what Spence is writing here are like slogans that many of us could also hold up in protest.⁵⁷

Discussing two images from this series, Roberts suggests Spence was directing her shame towards an internal target: 'The visual and verbal violence of these images sees Spence take revenge on her own mistaken assumptions that being an "artist" one might pass for middle-class. Essentially this work is about unpacking the construction of class identity through looking at the role the family plays in determining subjectivity.' (Roberts 1993, p16). However, I think Spence here is projecting her shame *outwards*, implicating and taking revenge on her family for its complicity in reinforcing classed assumptions about what a working-class woman could do with her life. Another target of Spence's protest is those in the art world who make assumptions about who can be understood to be an artist, and the way class is made invisible within the culture of artistic production.

Spence tells an anecdote about such assumptions: 'A woman challenged me recently – she said "You can't be working-class, you're too intelligent".' (1991, p11). This is not an uncommon challenge: I have received similar comments from both friends and work colleagues, when mentioning my class background or that I grew up on council estates – comments such as "oh, how did you end up doing this then?", as if working within culture, art and academia was not for "people like you". For Spence, often at the receiving end of class prejudices, it was as if one must disavow one's class background in order to be successfully assimilated into a bourgeois culture and

⁵⁶ As discussed by a member of the Hackney Flashers group at the *Hackney Flashers Exposed* event at Chats Palace, London 12th October 2014, talking about the problems with viewing the work as art rather than agitprop.

⁵⁷ For example, see Gogarty (2012, p129).

be recognisable as a correct holder of the title “artist”. Roberts sums up the myth of class mobility, ‘if it was possible for the members of the working-class to exit collectively from their class, then the exploitative relations of capitalism could no longer be said to exist. And this plainly, at present, is not the case.’ (Roberts 1993, p6). Even when members of the working-class achieve success in these spheres, they/we are there precariously, unprotected by the financial support and assistance, the networks and “family connections”, that help maintain the stability of the middle-classes.

The *class shame* work is quite complex, as what is being performed are behaviours that have been negatively associated with the working-class: “speaking out of turn”, being “loud and mouthy” “aggressive” or “disordered”. The risk here is that what is being presented conforms to the stereotypes of the working-class female grotesque. As Spence says, ‘I work with what is seen as “negative” imagery. And in coming to terms with the negative, the so-called negative, all of those images become part of my dialectical way of thinking about myself. That which is hidden away, the shadow, is out in the open.’ (Spence in Hevey 1992, p128). There is real subversive potential in *conforming* to all those negative classed stereotypes, in throwing them back in defiance to nullify their power to shame, silence and keep women’s rebellious behaviour in check.

Yet because the message of the placard in *If I don’t need to please...* is both personal, rebellious, *and public* Spence’s message comes across as vulnerable. Her eyes are tired and puffy as if perhaps she has been crying, her mouth and lower face are partially covered by the placard in a protective gesture, she is also on her knees as if in appeal. This reveals that the people addressed by the placard’s message (her parents and the “middle-class bastards” of the institutions of education and art world), have hurt her *and* have the power to do so again. The act of rebellion is real and carries risks: the freedom to say such things is conditional on being behind a lens, rather than directly in front of those she accuses. Those whose judgement she fears cannot answer back, as they are set at one remove from this space in which she is safe.

Discussing the differences between the *Hackney Flashers* photos and Spence’s photo therapy sessions, Lorne Abse Gogarty (2012) comments:

Conceived as a therapeutic process, this project is inevitably much more introspective and fails to communicate in the same way as *Space*. The works of the *Hackney Flashers* never appear calcified as period pieces, despite showing a Hackney infused with socialist feminist politics and alternative childcare rather than luxury flats and hipster yuppies. But in contrast, the work at *Studio Voltaire* is difficult to read beyond the personal; Spence's use of photography as a tool to work through her own trauma perhaps overtaking the communicative, social quality of her earlier work. (p129)

This reading crystallises the issue I have been highlighting here: this critic fails to see that Spence's work depicts a woman negotiating the ways her class identities and conflicts are *tied* to wider social and political structures. Maria Walsh (2012) also falls into this pattern, conceding that 'Spence's conviction in the use of photography in helping her/us come to terms somewhat with old age, illness and death is inspiring.' (p30). The "her/us" here is assumed to be middle-class, as Walsh's previous description of Spence's works on class as "fossils from another time" (p30) indicates. Spence's labour of "coming to terms" with subjective class conflicts is erased: such conflicts lie beyond the writer's experience and capacity for empathy, and so are treated as an irrelevance.

What Gogarty finds "difficult to read" in the photo therapy work is an unfamiliar class discourse. In the 1987 BBC documentary directed by Ian Potts, *Arena: Putting Ourselves in the Picture*, Martin says that many women have approached her, shared their own stories and told her how her work with Spence resonated with their lives (Martin in dir. Potts 1987). To tell the personal can be a political gesture: one woman's story can speak to many others. When writers dismiss this work as merely "personal" they devalue its importance to women other than themselves, underestimate the great cost to Spence and Martin of publicly exhibiting their personal distress, and ignore the lives of the many women whose stories are echoed by Spence and Martin and who take comfort in seeing aspects of their experiences reflected back to them.

When I look at this image now, I feel conflicting emotions. I am both excited and nervous when I read what's written on the placard, and feel a surge of recognition and joy that Spence is putting into words the desire I have of wanting to work and exist without having to seek validation from those "above" us in class terms: those who have the power to reject us, to notice our intruder status and deny us access to the spaces they enjoy. But I am also worried for her: the move of speaking out against those that hold the keys to these spaces is a risky one, and despite the image coming safely from the past I experience that risk as if it were in the present. As I have shown throughout this chapter, discussion of class was often received with hostility during the time Spence was working; and I would add, it is scarcely more popular today. This gesture is a revolt and a protest against having to tell your story apologetically in case it offends those with more privilege, against having to talk about class in covert terms for fear of "rocking the boat" by asserting your own reality that is treated as taboo. The violence and urgency of this image comes from the fact that it took Spence until her mid-40s to find her voice and feel safe enough to articulate herself (Spence 1990). Although I do not share Spence's acute trauma, it rubs up against painful experiences I have had - I identify with her and empathise with her anger. While I experience her exhilaration in "making a spectacle of herself" - key to Mary Russo's conception of the female grotesque (1994) - I am also frightened for her, and worry what the consequences of

this outburst could be - might her work have been exhibited more widely during her lifetime if she had worked on subjects less taboo? It is clear that when Spence makes her working-class identity explicit, many critics feel alienated and fail to connect with her work – this is a risk such work will always face.

That is why, for me, this image, along with the whole session to which it belongs, evokes the sublime: these photographs possess powers of terror and joy, risk and excess. They are not easy images for me to look at - none of Spence's work is "easy" to take in - but that is the point: the work is difficult as it deals with painful and complex issues.⁵⁸ Going by the accounts of Spence and Martin, it was also difficult to *make*, as Martin explains, 'If the work that Jo and I have done is influencing the way people are using and thinking about photography, that's brilliant – that's why we went public with the work, that's why we took the personal risks of laying ourselves and our psyches bare, being publicly vulnerable.' (1991, p349). For Martin and Spence, the vulnerability of self-exposure to an often-hostile public was worthwhile, if it encouraged people to use photography to take back the power of representation, to create images of identities that had been made invisible, replaced with negative stereotypes.⁵⁹ However, the success of the work was always going to be held back by the limits of public reception: the aims of Spence and Martin could not be fully realised in institutions hostile to class discussion. Although the work is not addressed *exclusively* to other working-class and minority women, it is with us that its central themes will resonate most strongly; it could not achieve universal acclaim when so many viewers and critics do not take class difference into account when experiencing and thinking about it.

Marxism and Representing the Working-Class

When Spence entered higher education at the Polytechnic of Central London, she encountered Marxist theories of art while studying a photography course led by Victor Burgin. Burgin's

⁵⁸ There is an element of feeling overwhelmed by the work, but not unpleasantly, which fits Freeman's description: 'The discourse of the sublime, then, is integrally bound up with the subject's response to what possesses it, to the nature and effects of such a merger, and to the ways in which various forms of identification may be understood. At stake is the question of how to theorise ravishment.' (Freeman 1995, p17). Spence's work, by producing emotionally stirring images, evokes a sublime experience that enraptures sympathetic audiences - it moves me on both a political and a personal level.

⁵⁹ This has much in common with Zylinska's feminist sublime, 'The self needs to risk and reveal its vulnerability for the sake of experiencing the infinite *jouissance*, a feeling which results from a direct contact with otherness.' (p40). In a sense, the otherness in Spence and Martin's work is internalised class stigma: they open themselves out to exploring what they have learnt to keep hidden.

influence on Spence's work (and, later, Dennett's) extended beyond her time at polytechnic, as Siona Wilson records:

Burgin served on the arts council panel that decided on the *Half Moon Photography Workshop's* award and was the principal figure in securing the grant for them. But it came with a proviso. Burgin was given the role of advisor and informal overseer of the project, and Spence became liaison with him for the group. In the mid-1970s Burgin thus served as an informal mentor, and Spence recounts feeling particularly intimidated at the prospect of these meetings, since along with Dennett she was familiar with his considerable reputation as both a conceptual artist and a theorist. (p152)

This relationship was clearly beneficial for Spence and Dennett but it evokes some uncomfortable power dynamics: the more established person held the power and the influence, and controlled access to financial backing.

Wilson suggests that Spence and Dennett's desire to disrupt notions of middle-class "good taste" took the form of a 'self-staging as subaltern soldiers within the ranks of the art world' which 'reinforces the extent of their proletarian investment in the cultural politics of the period. To the extent of the military metaphor they use, their commanding officer would have to have been Burgin.' (Wilson 2015, pp174-175). Again, the implied power dynamic is troubling; but also, Wilson ends up giving all the intellectual credit to the middle-class presenting man, as if Spence and Dennett were unable to formulate these theories on their own. As Dennett points out, during Spence's time as secretary at the BFI she came across lots of influential political and theoretical texts that would have informed their practice:

Jo's day job was as a secretary in the education department at the British Film Institute. It was through Jo that we got to see many rare films and read translations of theoretical texts not yet available in English. Jo would be typing newly translated texts during the day and bringing home copies for us to study in the evening. (Dennett in Takemoto 2009: pp13-18)

This undermines Wilson's assumption that these two autodidact working-class photographers *must* have relied heavily on Burgin *because* of the fact of his superior class position.

Not to dismiss Burgin's positive influence, but in fact he barely figures when Spence writes of her influences - unlike Augusto Boal and Brecht who are cited more frequently (Dennett, Spence 1982, p34). Regarding Marxism, Spence states:

My politics are informed by Marxism but I am finding it increasingly difficult to know how to talk about class in relation to images of women. Which is why in using myself as subject matter, and going back historically, at last I have been able to draw upon what I know rather than being stuck with the agendas of higher education which endlessly deconstruct images that are not about class, in the sense that they are a displacement of class. (Spence in Roberts 2001,

It is clear that for Spence, this group of middle-class male Marxists were unable to get their heads around the problem of how to represent working-class existence, let alone the separate struggles of working-class women, without exploiting or speaking for their subjects. This is why her use of her own body is important: she does not risk exploiting the bodies of other women, or falling into the trap of using stereotypical images of the working-class at work, as labourers. By presenting her own body and all its complications, without meaning to stand in for *all* working-class women, Spence instead expressed the complex multiplicity of class identity. By contrast, Roberts (1993) writes of Burgin's own attempts to represent class and make visible the lives and conditions of working-class people:

Victor Burgin [...] sought to open out images of class beyond the documentary legacy and a heroicized Avant-gardism... Yet these images of the working-class, for instance in Burgin's UK76 were still very much grounded in representations of the objective conditions of alienation. In one image Burgin shows an Indian woman factory worker at her bench. The experience of class, how people come to *negotiate* its alienations, how they embrace it and disavowal it, was absent. The representation of the class subject as class-type was still in place. Burgin of course was to drop this approach soon after, strengthening his commitment to the categories of psychoanalysis in recognition of this dilemma. But this was to a great extent at the expense of class. (Original italics. p12)

Arguably, Spence and Dennett actually surpassed Burgin, and managed to achieve what he could not. In their photo theatre projects and photo therapy work with Martin, varied and complex aspects of working-class life and experience are presented, and together these images tell in fragments the narratives of people who aren't just examples of a "class-type". They refused stereotyping, avoiding the common tropes of associating the working-class exclusively with work and the labour movement (Roberts 1998, pp209-210), in order to show an interiority of complex feelings, memories, lives and experiences.

At the same time, in moving beyond the clichés of conventional Marxist photography, Dennett and Spence were also interested in *playing with* and *subverting* stereotypes:

Above all we wanted to get away from the dry didacticism which pervades so much worthy work on photographic theory and to provide instead a kind of revolt from within the ranks. Indeed, one photo critic recently labelled our work "revolting to behold [...] (where) forms and techniques, cherished dreams, lie in ruins" [...] In a funny sort of way this is a return to our own class roots, where adversity and oppression is dealt with not only through comradely struggles, or learned expositions, but is often lived out through individual or group rituals, which include sarcasm or irony (what is commonly termed "taking the piss"). We wanted to produce something which was perhaps not quite in such "good taste" as is usually expected – something which tried also to break down some

of the sacred cows of photography and bourgeois aesthetics. (Dennett, Spence 1982, p34)

In using the *negative* stereotypes of working-class identity to express that which is treated as a sign of vulgarity or lack of “respectable” femininity, they provide humour and subversion in their work. Without experience of these classed-constructions of grotesque identity, Marxist photographers often fell into repeating clichés of working-class people purely as victims of state oppression. In works such as “Middle-class values make me sick!”, Spence was able to show strategies of revolt that recast working-class people as aware of the structures that oppress them, not as victims but as rebellious and angry. Collaborative work that was capable of “taking the piss” out of bourgeois culture rather than showing workers as passive cogs of capitalist power, or in need of enlightenment and education by well-meaning but unequipped Marxists (Spence in Roberts 2001, p256).

Social Geographies of Women and Class out of Place

The painful experiences of stigmatisation described by Spence and Martin cannot be described in the terms of “survivor” narratives, which would insist that such class wounds can simply be “overcome” by acquiring a university degree, a good job and financial stability. The class-based status divisions established during school years are reproduced with full force in the areas of professional occupations. Spence moved on from working in the gender-and-class-suitable position of secretary to working as a photographer and joining photography groups and clubs. Pierre Bourdieu (1996) says of the organisation of the camera club, “The members of a camera club have in common not only their valorisation of the photographic act, but more particularly, their desire to take photographs in a different way.” (p104). But again, the spectre of the class interloper loomed large, as differences in background seemingly shaped the agenda of the group’s members: this shared commonality did not extend to the concerns of a working-class woman.

The members of these groups in the 1970s were, like Spence, interested in politics and social justice, yet Spence’s supposedly more “domestic” political activism that included women, children, minority groups and the working-class was treated as a hindrance to the grander aims of these groups, as John Walker (2001) points out: ‘Unfortunately, in 1976, Spence was locked out of the *Half Moon Photography Workshop* after ideological disagreements – she had been stressing the issue of social class.’ (p244). The *Half Moon* group later became *Camerawork*, a magazine with an interest in critically-focussed writing on photography, practice and theory, yet it could not deal with the clearly still taboo issues of class. Dennett explains what happened:

We believe that different strategies are needed at different times, and so our

work has often been interventionist, as with our decision to join up with Half Moon Gallery in order to gain a wider platform for our views through the journal *Camerawork*. But because we were adamantly stuck to our views for the period we were there, by challenging the dominant view of documentary photography and the sexism and racism inherent in all existing photography, and because we tried to introduce notions of ideology and technological determinants into the work we produced and published, and because we always insisted that we bear in mind that we live, work, have pleasure and are ripped off in a class society, we were eventually expelled from the Half Moon Photography Workshop, and Jo was fired from *Camerawork*. (Dennett and Spence 1986a, p23)

This hostile environment should have been a welcoming space, yet the treatment of Spence here shows quite how unwelcome class was as a topic for serious interrogation. Common aims are not enough to smooth over structural inequalities, as Bourdieu notes: ‘Photographers from the working-classes often attempt to improve their status without great hopes of success. They are more aware than photographers of the middle-class origin of the importance of inequalities in social origin, and feel them more strongly, not only because they are more strongly subjected to their constraints, but also because they are subordinated to the prestigious models provided by photographers of higher social origins.’ (p169). For working-class photographers like Spence, Martin and Dennett, these artistic spaces promised a solidarity that the politics of the group could not provide.

It is important for people who have been marginalised and misrepresented to be able to take control over the means of artistic production for themselves. Projects like *The Photography Workshop* and the practice of photo therapy aimed to work within working-class communities, to enable people to tell their own stories and depict themselves in ways that showed what had often been suppressed in visual culture and the media. One of the central projects of Spence’s work was to destabilise the rules governing where women’s bodies could be seen, and on whose terms:

Much of my previous work has been described as in “bad taste”, “unsuitable for galleries”, “revolting”, “ugly”, “narcissistic” and “obsessive”: pejorative and dismissive words, presumably spoken because thwarted expectations of the viewer/critic who might prefer to continue to consume the female body, or to dwell only in fantasies of idealisation of self and others, rather than be encouraged to ask critical questions. (1995, p198)

The female body has traditionally been represented in the art world in very limited ways, as the social geographer Doreen Massey illustrates in *Space, Place and Gender* (1994) with this anecdote about visiting an art gallery while on holiday with some male friends:

And this Temple of High Culture, which was one of The Places to Be Visited, was full of paintings, a high proportion of which were of naked women. They were pictures of naked women painted by men, and thus of women seen

through the eyes of men. So I stood there with these two young friends, and they looked at these pictures of naked women seen through the eyes of men. And I felt objectified. This was a “space” that clearly let me know something, and something ignominious, about what High Culture thought was my place in Society. The effect on me of being on that space/place was quite different from the effect it had on my male friends. (p186)

For feminists, being in the space of the gallery often entails a problematic split allegiance, identifying either with the objectified female nudes or with the male spectators. Massey became uncomfortably aware that her attendance as a *female* art viewer was an intrusion on the assumed audience of (heterosexual) male culture-consumer.⁶⁰ Spence understood the great need for new spaces to be opened up, where the lives of women weren't confined to being represented only as images of ideal femininity and where real lives could be articulated within the art world.

Inspired by Boal's ideas in *Theatre of the Oppressed* (2008) of the “social actor”, Spence and Dennett came up with a conception of photography as a form of community activism or “photo theatre”. Suggesting that in order to represent oppression truthfully artists must seek out and work with the people who are most directly affected by it, Boal argued that, ‘the popular artist must abandon the downtown stages and go to the neighbourhoods, because only there will he find people who are truly interested in changing society: in the neighbourhoods he should show his images of social life to workers who are interested in changing that social life, since they are its victims.’ (p86). This method of public engagement gives agency of expression to those commonly stigmatised and excluded from artistic spaces.

Spence saw the political implications and value of this method: ‘Our work [...] has indicated that photography is valuable and could be called one of the healing arts. Photographic technology is so highly evolved and relatively cheap that we now have a potentially revolutionary means of production in our hands.’ (1995, p165). Greater access to artistic creation via cheaper photographic materials means that those without the opportunity to study in art schools, and be trained in the expensive and rarefied modes of fine art, can still create work, and are thus given a voice. Artistic production, outside of the permission of the elite, gives working-class women the freedom to express portrayals of stigmatised selves previously silenced, to produce images that revolt against oppressive depictions and instead show their lives and experiences to be worthy of recognition and value.

⁶⁰ For a further exploration of the theory that social spaces have been “reserved” for certain bodies within a racialized dimension see Ahmed (2012).

Exhibiting Bodies “Unsuitable for Galleries”

The critical reception of Spence’s use of her own body in her work demonstrates that if class is an unwelcome subject in photography, the female working-class body is doubly so. Spence herself noted (see quote above) that critics had reacted to her publicly exposed body as ‘revolting’, ‘ugly’ and ‘unsuitable for galleries’, expanding upon Massey’s point about the segregation of gendered bodies in art galleries. Not only must a woman be nude to appear in a gallery, she may only appear nude if she is also conventionally attractive.

Christine Ross (1997) also calls Spence’s work ‘ugly’, in a book on “abject art” associating it with illness and the ‘failing’ or ‘out of control; body (p.152); yet she does not explain what is it about the female body presented by Spence that is being “abjected”, or describe why it connotes the abject. There’s no attempt to understand the abject except in terms of a breach of bodily conformity, no mention of class or the politics of why some female bodies are “abjected” in society more than others. Without taking the politics of aesthetics into account it is impossible to account for why the female body in Spence’s work has been received so negatively.

It is revealing that besides negative aesthetic terms such as “ugly” and “revolting”, Spence’s self-representation has also been described as “narcissistic” and “self-obsessed”. In representing a bodily reality outside that of the commonly young, slim and classless “classically-beautiful” nude, Spence’s body *intrudes*. It is as if she had *no right* to present her body publicly, and can only be doing so out of an elevated and misguided self-regard. Spence comments, ‘I’ve had a lot of flak for my work on the mistaken assumption that it is some kind of narcissism rather than politically motivated investigation. (1995b, p94)’. Yet this focus on the self was not selfish. Spence’s work, almost always made as part of a dialogue and collaboration with others, was not based on an individualistic obsession with the self, but on a commitment to communicating other ways of being for all women.

Amelia Jones (1998) suggests there is subversive power in appropriating the terms used to reprimand women for expressing an interest in exploring their own bodies, subjectivities and experiences, with her notion of “radical narcissism”. This concept encourages a revolt against anxious self-surveillance in favour of a focus on the self as a gesture of knowledge gathering and communication. Jones suggests that, ‘narcissism – the exploration of and fixation on the self – inexorably leads to an exploration of and implication in the other: the self turns inside out, as if were, projecting its internal structures of identification and desire outwards. Thus, narcissism interconnects the internal and external self as well as the self and the other.’ (p46). This concept

offers a useful way of describing what was taking place in photo therapy sessions, as Spence describes:

There was also safety to explore their own narcissistic auto-eroticism without fear, shame or guilt. In this sense, then, such sessions are “enabling” processes to open up their own potential for exploring sexuality in all its polymorphous “perversity” and “roundedness”. (1995, p153)

Photo therapy could be described as a practice that encourages “radical narcissism” as a politically motivated investigation of ourselves. Such investigation can “enable” an Anti-Pygmalion reclamation of “grotesque” aspects of the self, encouraging women to reject middle-class defined respectable feminine behaviours - to rebel rather than conform to the way their identities have been constructed for them.

Conclusion

The oppression of working-class women has a direct effect on the spaces they will go on to inhabit in their lives: the social categories of class and gender are etched into our physical, aesthetic and psychological identities. As our sense of self is formed during our progress through educational and institutional spaces, people who fail to live up to the bourgeois standards set by those with power and privilege bear the marks of class and gender stigmatisation. Narratives of overcoming and assimilation as a positive aspiration don’t acknowledge the way many of us from working-class backgrounds carry our class wounds with us through all the spaces of our lives - as long as these spaces have privileged reservations, we will continue to feel like intruders. This is the situation in which Spence’s work intervenes, and in this chapter I have pushed the questions of class and gender stigma back to the forefront of discussion of Spence’s work.

It is important to push against privileged reservations and, like Spence and Martin, to enter spaces where you aren’t at first welcome and produce radical work as social activism. Such work can make safe spaces for marginalised women to come together in solidarity to explore their subjectivities, and make sense of how they have been affected by inequalities of political power. The hope behind it is that in educating the community they may better their situation – whether on a personal or political level, but ideally both. Spence’s practice was one which enabled working-class women to confront and reclaim the negative stereotypes that figure us as grotesque, to deflect internalised shame at working-class identity and defiantly present images that do not attempt to “pass”. Her work models an Anti-Pygmalion identity that is proud of not being that which is deemed acceptable, but instead recasts working-class women as worthy of respect and admiration. In doing so, it can even evoke sublime experiences.

By reintroducing class discourse back into the field of critical writing on Spence's work, I have sought to give attention and recognition back to Spence's central aims and concerns. In order to negotiate realities and experiences that are not easily representable, to describe a shifting and emotionally complex class reality, I have argued that we should move away from the unhelpful idea of fixing ourselves into one stable presentation. We cannot and should not attempt to definitively say what it "is" to be a "working-class women" - but we can tell our own stories, rather than allow working-class life to be caricatured with one-sided hostility in visual culture and the media. This means that we need to be the producers of our own images in art and visual culture. The great project of photo therapy, and one of its most powerful tools, was to develop a practice of exploring the self in a way that connected individual personal concerns with history, culture and politics, and through them with the collective political struggles of other women.

As I have shown, this work was not always received positively and was often misunderstood; yet I do not believe this to be a failing of Spence's, but due to a systematic bias of the world in which she was working. Her works still stand up as attempts to keep communicating, despite unending hostility towards any discussion working-class experiences and identities. As Spence says:

The best I'll ever be able to manage will be a montage of fragments of reconstructed histories in which I gain new knowledge and wisdom and perhaps begin to share it. Not merely a history of victimisation and injury, nor a shift into a utopian world of "positive images", but one which represents the continuous struggle to speak, to redefine, to name, of coming into being. Where I became the subject of my own enquiry rather than the object of someone else's, where I act rather than being acted upon. (1995, p163)

The images made in photo therapy function more like reactivated snippets of memory, experience or performed feelings, than definitive portraits of a class-type: they are never finished, but ongoing attempts to keep trying to tell the story, to live through it and keep visible the lives of working class women as subjects of value, as gestures of revolt.

Chapter Four: Richard Billingham's Common (Dis)Taste: The Politics of Class, Photography and Female Flesh

Introduction

This chapter discusses the role played by class in the critical reception of the photographs collected in Richard Billingham's *Ray's a Laugh* (1996). These colour photographs, taken with cheap cameras and out of date film rolls, chronicle the lives of Billingham's family - his mother Liz, father Ray and his brother Jason - in their Midlands council flat, where they spend their time together eating, smoking drinking, arguing, embracing, vomiting, feeding pets, watching TV, and looking out of windows. Most of the material written about *Ray's a Laugh* focuses on the Ray's alcoholism and the squalor of the family's living conditions, speculating about whether it is exploitative for a photographer to depict his parents in desperate and embarrassing situations.

My particular focus is on Billingham's photographs of his mother Liz. For me, these photographs depict a woman who has *chosen* and created the way her body looks, shaping the way she dresses and the environment she inhabits (i.e. her *habitus*) in ways that she finds beautiful. What is revealing in the critical reception of these images is that this aspect is, with only a couple of exceptions, totally overlooked in favour of negative, classist stereotypes of fat working-class femininity that reproduce narratives of grotesque excessiveness and lack of "good taste" and control.⁶¹

Because my reception of these works is informed by my experience and knowledge of working-class identities, I am able to offer counter-readings that run against the dominant trend. Even if the writers, critics and reviewers of the work are not *all* middle-class, the majority are producing *middle-class art history*, in the sense that they take middle-class identities to be the normal standard, and middle-class taste to be "good" taste, so that the lives, *habitus* and art of the working-classes are treated as automatically inferior. Their prejudiced assumptions about what it *must* feel like to inhabit Liz's world get in the way of a more embodied, empathetic reaction. My prior life experiences also shape and inform the way I respond emotionally and intellectually to work, giving me tools to read "against the grain" and challenge dominant readings: because I am not a middle-class writer I have a different *set* of assumptions.

⁶¹ The few writers who have written positively and sensitively on Billingham's work include Remes (2005, 2007) and Williams (1996)

I analyse the way critics read Liz's fat body in terms of her classed identity as a working-class woman, in order to highlight the ways in which fat is a class as well as a feminist issue. I argue that the way Liz decorates her body and her domestic space is an example of an Anti-Pygmalion grotesque aesthetic. I'm using the word "grotesque" here as a *reclamation* of a term used to demonise working-class femininities by focusing on all the ways in which they designate difference from the constructions of "good" middle and upper-class femininities.

This chapter is divided into three sections, beginning with a biographical sketch of Billingham based on his own comments about his early family life, his early interest in art, his education and getting into art college, and what led him to make his first painted portraits of his father Ray. Billingham is often read as some kind of savant, an accidental artist who fluked the success of his photographs, rather than someone who was actually immersed in art history from a young age and was familiar with composition and style.⁶² The classist assumption behind this reading is that a working-class kid must lack the middle-class cultural-capital to know anything about art. Billingham's own biography shows that this is false.

The next section discusses Billingham's critical reception in the context of 1990s class politics. The 1990s were a decade in which working-class signifiers were used as markers of "cool" by musicians and celebrities such as the band Blur, a group of middle-class young men speaking with working-class accents and wearing sportswear labels associated with working-class youth. In politics, New Labour's nostalgic refiguring of British culture as "Cool Britannia" similarly appropriated working-class British culture in order to position politicians as "down to earth", rather than privately educated members of the elite. New Labour's leadership recast themselves as belonging to the same social milieu as working-class pop stars Oasis, members of whom they invited to Downing Street for a party. Robert Hewison's *Cultural Capital, The Rise and Fall of Creative Britain* (2014) discusses "Cool Britannia" as an appropriative rebranding exercise:

Like other aspects of New Labour, Cool Britannia was a carry-over from the Conservatives...The Nineties Britpop bands such Oasis and Blur were hailed as a return to the glory days of the Beatles, and the same ironic use was made of the Union Jack as a pop icon...Gallagher's endorsement of Blair, following his evocation of the Beatles and the Kinks in a speech at the 1996 Brit Awards ceremony, was one of the auguries that encouraged New Labour to appropriate the patriotic colours of Cool Britannia. (p35)

⁶² For example: 'Maybe it's an accident, and maybe it isn't, but the similarities between Billingham's formal photographic technique and his moral relationship with his sitters is striking: he does well by doing badly.' (Lewis 1997, p67).

At the same time, the rhetoric that Britain was now a meritocracy, and that we were “all middle-class now”.⁶³ This papered over the cracks of structural injustices of education, employment and opportunity, in favour of seeing success and failure in terms of personal responsibility.⁶⁴ The working-class who remained poor were painted as having done so due to their own failings, falling into the “underclass” through not trying hard enough – the promise was that if people had talent, they would succeed (Turner 2010, p271).

The success of Billingham’s work during this period seemingly supports this notion of Britain as a meritocracy, yet he is the exception that proves the rule: the fact that he *stood out* as a working-class photographer during this period shows that success of this kind is rare. It would have been impossible for Billingham to rise out of poverty and become an art world success story if he had not been given the seal of approval by the establishment and championed by some important players in that world.

I next focus on the value judgements made by critics about Billingham’s mother Liz, examining the aesthetics and politics of fat, and the ways in which disgust is a major component in the construction of the working-class female grotesque. One of the most unpleasant aspects of reviews of Billingham’s work from the *Ray’s a Laugh* period is the way Liz is dismissed as “monstrous”, “grotesque”, “abject”, and “massive”, described in ways that expose the sexism, classism and snobbery of mainstream British art writing. I apply Bourdieu’s theories of class and taste in the formation of *habitus*, to explain how the *habitus* of the poor and working-class is framed as unacceptable or undesirable. In particular, I use Bourdieu’s discussion of how thinness in women is associated with the ideal femininity of a correctly discreet body that doesn’t take up too much space.

Liz is written off as valueless, having neither a body that connotes sufficient cultural capital, nor the kind of conventional beauty that would invite the visual pleasure (Mulvey 1975) of the art spectator. Because of this, Billingham’s images of her are not read carefully or seen thoughtfully - the beauty in these photographs is ignored because her body, her dress and her home do not fit bourgeois notions of “good taste” and traditional aesthetic appeal. The aesthetic judgements of

⁶³ “We are all middle class now,” was the often-quoted phrase used by John Prescott before the 1997 general election, becoming a tagline for the philosophy of New Labour.

⁶⁴ Alwyn W. Turner (2010) writes of post-Thatcher Britain as ‘a Britain in which a whole stratum of society was effectively written off [...] Wealth inequality had increased substantially, with a fall in the income of the poorest 10 per cent of society, and there were 60 per cent more people dependant on the state for their income than in 1979.’ (pp373-374)

critics end up becoming moral judgements about who deserves to be seen, where they should and shouldn't been seen, and what subjects are and aren't acceptable for art. My interest here is to draw out the connections between the politics of classism and the aesthetics of the grotesque.

By introducing concepts of creativity and the sublime stemming from working-class lived experience, I propose an alternative reading of these images of Liz as an Anti-Pygmalion. Billingham has often been accused of exhibiting his photographs of his parents exploitatively for shock value, to titillate middle and upper-class audiences.⁶⁵ But if we look at these images in a more sympathetic, less objectifying and moralistic way, we can learn about how people without art educations or middle-class cultural capital are still capable of having taste of their own, and using it to find and create beauty. Their beauty and taste are quite independent of the bourgeois notions and prevailing narratives of taste makers and art connoisseurs, but nonetheless valuable and valid.

The idea that an uneducated woman could be capable of creating beauty in her *habitus* is one that destabilises the way we are taught to think about artists and creative people, as usually highly educated, academically talented and credentialed, and almost never working-class. According to the narrative of meritocracy, being working-class and talented is a contradiction in terms: *if* you have talent you will succeed, social mobility will enable you to brush off your working-class identity, and you will thus *become* middle-class. Many people in my life have tried to argue that an artist couldn't be working-class, as if the title "artist" erased the economic and cultural position of that person – after all, even while being exhibited in major London art galleries and appearing on the cover of international art magazine *Art Forum*, Richard Billingham was still living in Cradley Heath and working in Kwik Save.⁶⁶

I argue that not only can working-class people *be* - rather than *become*, via sanctioned institutional routes - artists, creative people and cultural workers, but that we can also hold onto our identities while doing so. The case studies for this thesis have produced work that shows new sides to working-class life, showing that it contains culture and beauty that, although it doesn't conform to middle-class "good taste", still has its own value and appeal. Many innovations can be made when you are poor and can't afford expensive art materials: in Billingham's photography, the cheapness of the film adds a lush, vivid colour and texture that makes the work much more expressive than if he'd used expensive equipment.

⁶⁵ 'He claims his work is a form of personal exploration, but it has more than a whiff of constructed self-exploitation for the titillation of middle-class gallery-goers.' (Cameron 2001, p9)

⁶⁶ Reprinted in an interview with Billingham in Burn (2009).

This is an important point, as historically when work has been made by working-class people with cheap materials, it has been dismissed as “folk art” of a lesser standard (Cooper 1994). This dismissal is again not purely aesthetic, but moral and political: a rejection of art that doesn’t express unattainable distinction, rareness and exclusivity. Work that is “special” in these ways maintains the status quo, which is why many people find galleries unapproachable: the physical and psychological walls that are constructed around the art world makes it feel to many working-class people like it is predominantly by and for the elite – which, when it comes down to the art market, it is.⁶⁷

In the concluding section I argue that Billingham is not simply exposing for shock value what families in general are encouraged to hide, but that there is a class politics to this exposure. Both Spence and Billingham expose class wounds and family backgrounds which working-class kids who have entered middle-class dominated work and education are meant to disavow, move away from and forget. As discussed in the previous chapter, many people from working-class backgrounds experience deep shame and anxiety about those backgrounds when they achieve upward-mobility in the form of education and jobs: to expose their identities in the very settings that provoke such negative feelings is a brave and dissenting act, and one that I argue generates feelings of the sublime.

As well as contributing new knowledge on the literature on Billingham’s series *Ray’s a Laugh*, by providing new readings of the photographs, I reconceptualise the work by framing it along class lines in a tradition of working-class artists and their experiences of education and the art world. Thinking and writing about the experiences of working-class artists is important for understanding the role of class in the art world in general, and can help us think about why and how so many working-class kids choose not to enter into the arts, why those that do so often fail, and how these spaces are structured both tacitly and explicitly to keep them out.

First Encounters: An Auto-Ethnographic Account of Opening the Book

At sixteen I left school after finishing my GCSEs, and went to college outside my home city of Southampton to study for A-Levels. The class balance at this college tipped more towards middle-class kids than I had experienced at my secondary school. Although no one treated me differently, I felt separate somehow in this new space. In one of my first A-level Art History lessons, the lecturer, a woman in her 60s who ordinarily was lovely (resembling Marianne Faithful, with grey mullet and cough mixture addiction anecdotes), was trying to help the class imagine the historical

⁶⁷ See Davis (2013) for a detailed discussion of the intuitional elitism of the art world.

tradition of the elective poverty of many middle-class artists, who after leaving home and rejecting financial assistance would live in poor areas and experience life away from the bourgeois family nest. She asked us to imagine that we all left home and “moved to Saint Mary’s, or Northam Estate say” - and the second of these “poor rough areas” was where me and my family lived. Looking back, I regret that I did not point this out to the lecturer, who standardly (and wrongly) assumed that all of her Art History A-level class were middle-class; but at the time I was embarrassed by this slight, and ashamed - ashamed of being poor, and not even in a glamorous-struggling-artist way.

I spent a lot of time at college alone in the library. On one occasion, looking through the photography section I came upon *Ray’s a Laugh*. Flicking through this intimate photobook full of extremely personal images, I felt suddenly exposed, jolted by the shock that someone had taken the hidden, secret poverty of many of us from working-class backgrounds and put it outside our space and into this *other* space, the space of culture, art and “posh” people. Then I felt excited, excited that his representations of his life had been accepted by these elite art people. It was amusing and validating all at once. But at the time I carried with me too much embarrassment about my poor background to share this revelation with anyone on my course. I repeatedly renewed the book and looked at it in private. In time, I managed to write about Billingham’s work for my Photography A-Level, which was inspired by his use of his own life. Seeing that he could do it inspired me, giving me confidence to expose the parts of my life that I was ashamed of.

I don’t feel embarrassed about my background now, but traces of class-shame still linger. I still take comfort in looking at these images now, not just because a working-class artist has “made it” but because of the photographs themselves. As well as misery, addiction and boredom, they also convey the warmth and pleasures of home, of sharing food, having a laugh, of *being together*. Yet when I reviewed the extensive body of critical writing on this work, responses like mine were nowhere in sight.

I am not the only working-class art student to have taken comfort in these images of banal yet familiar domesticity, and marvelled with joy at Liz’s flair for decoration, her creative construction of her own space. The picture below depicts a situation that many people who grew up poor can recognise, in the resourceful use of breadsticks instead of fresh bread for soldiers with a boiled egg. There is beauty in this photograph for those of us who have received the gift of improvised food, with the same type of joy seen on Ray’s face. Many of us also look towards the women in our lives who have “scraped by” to provide for us with pride and love, despite society viewing these women as grotesque because they are poor or fat or wear clothing that marks them out as

lacking distinction. My reading of Liz in this chapter is informed by this perspective, which acts as a defence against the vitriol levelled against her appearance in reviews.



Richard Billingham, *Untitled* (1996) from the book *Ray's a Laugh* (1996)

My contribution to expand the thinking about this series is also an attempt to tell a different story about how art is accessed. It is not only just in galleries surrounded in the main by middle-class white people, that art can be encountered but from looking at art in books, for free in libraries. The received knowledge about this body of work has a blatant class-bias. This chapter provides a counter narrative. We working-class autodidacts have always formed our own spaces, and our stories and receptions of the work are quite different from what is published.⁶⁸

Childhood, Art and Family: The Eternal Return

Richard Billingham was born in 1970 in Birmingham, to mother Liz and father Ray. Ray and his

⁶⁸ Writing on the band *Japan* (1974-1991), Fisher (2014) describes how music was a route for working-class young people to access, explore and create culture. He writes, 'Art pop was a finishing school for working class autodidacts, where, by following up the clues left behind by earlier pioneers – the allusions secreted in lyrics, in track titles or in interview references – you could learn about things that weren't on the formal curriculum for working class youth: fine art, European cinema, avant-garde literature' (p36). See also Rose (2010). It is also worth pointing out that even if you subsequently get a further education, the autodidacticism of your beginnings is a tradition that is often continued and valued.

family were from the Midlands and Liz's family were Polish, 'Her parents came over here I think after the war. Dad's 20 years older than her. He'd already had a family and he got divorced and then he met my mum when she was 20' (Billingham in Moroney 2000, p16). The story of the Billingham family is one that is all too common following Thatcher's attack on organised labour, the unions and the power commanded by the working-class:⁶⁹ the disappearance of jobs took the family from making ends meet to falling into destitution.⁷⁰ As Billingham describes it:

Dad was a machinist – he earned quite good money in the 1970s – £5 an hour, that was a lot of money then, but then Thatcher got in and closed down lots of little industries, and he got made redundant in 1980. He was always a heavy drinker, but that's when he started drinking in good earnest. He said to his workmates, "when I finish up, I just want to lay back and be done". (Billingham in Moroney 2000, p16).

For many of Britain's working-class, dealing with authorities is a difficult process of navigating bureaucratic language, filling in forms and jumping through hoops. Many people fear that the organisations supposed to help them are judging them and trying to catch them out (as has often in fact been the case); as Lisa McKenzie (2015) notes, 'this often gave rise to feelings of fear, hostility and anger towards those they believe "looked down on them", but also towards themselves through their powerlessness in trying to change the situations that hurt them.' (p51). Billingham recalls that after Ray lost his job, 'suddenly we were very poor. He didn't sign on because he didn't know how to fill the forms in. We were broke, starving almost.' (Teeman 2006, p15). The disenfranchisement of the working-class was felt personally as well as understood politically: people felt hopeless, bereft. I am not surprised that many unemployed men turned to drink.⁷¹ This contributed to the formation of the stereotype of an "underclass", the "undeserving poor" who

⁶⁹ For further discussion on this, see Jones (8th April 2013, Verso Blog).

⁷⁰ Stuart Hall (1988) explores the effect on the working-class of Thatcherism's construction of what Hall terms an "authoritarian populism" that took apart traditional ideologies, reshaping notions of "common sense" and further destabilising notions of solidarity or coherent working-class politics or identity. Hall argues, 'As an organized ideological force "Thatcherism" has played – long before its actual succession to power – a formative role, articulating the field of popular ideologies sharply to the right. Some of the keys to this success lie in its wide appeal and "common touch"; its inclusive range of references (for example, its ability to condense moral, philosophical and social themes, not normally thought of as "political", within its political discourse); its proven capacity to penetrate the traditional ideological formations of sections of the working-class and petty bourgeoisie.' (p141)

⁷¹ In the documentary film, *Still the Enemy Within* (2014), many former striking miners talk about the lasting emotional and psychological damage caused by their disempowerment and loss of pride.

failed to “get on their bikes” and find work, instead remaining on long-term dole.⁷² Thatcher’s infamous “no such thing as society” remark was made in support of a claim that the long-term unemployed were failing to exercise their personal responsibility to take care of themselves: ‘no government can do anything except through people, and people must look to themselves first. It’s our duty to look after ourselves and then, also to look after our neighbour. People have got the entitlements too much in mind, without the obligations. There’s no such thing as entitlement, unless someone has first met an obligation’ (Thatcher in *Women’s Own* magazine, October 31, 1987).

Art and the Autodidact

Billingham’s path to recognition as an artist has often been treated as a fluke by critics, yet what is clear from comments Billingham has made in interviews is that he sought art out very early in his life:

I learned to read quite late, maybe seven or eight years old. Not because I was thick. But because my parents didn’t bother pushing me. *When I did learn I wanted to read everything and a big world opened up to me.* I would read art books in the local library. I probably read most of them – there weren’t that many but I got to know who Picasso was. Constable was the artist who influenced me the most. (My italics. Billingham in MacDonald 2007, p20).

Some working-class parents living through poverty do not believe it is worth trying to better yourself: nothing will come of pushing your children. This is not an excuse for the childhood neglect experienced by Billingham, but a partial explanation: if life has gone your way and your hard work has paid off then you assume that’s how life works, but for many working-class parents working hard hasn’t prevented redundancy and poverty.

From an early age, Billingham was an autodidact, seeking out books and knowledge by himself, for himself. His first introduction to art, alone in a library, is echoed by my later discovery of *Ray’s a Laugh* in my college library. There is a counter-history of working-class, autodidact cultural transmission, separate from that of the art world’s main distribution channels. Only those with the income to travel to art festivals and to cities with galleries and shows can see the work first-hand. For those who do not live within reach of exhibitions, who are not kept informed of what new artists are showing work, access to art comes from books in local libraries and the art departments of polytechnics, colleges and universities.

Far from being a *naiif* who lucked his way into an art career, Billingham found in art-making a form

⁷² Conservative MP Secretary of State and Employment 1981-1983 Norman Tebbit’s speech about unemployment in Blackpool 1981 ‘I grew up in the 30s with an unemployed father. He didn’t riot; he got on his bike and looked for work and he kept looking ‘til he found it’

of escape and self-esteem throughout his childhood, as he discusses in an interview with Jane Richards:

“No one ever told me to go to bed or anything like that. It made me independent”. It also made him introspective, something he channelled into an aptitude for drawing. “I didn’t get attention by breaking into cars,” he says. “I did it by drawing. I always used to be the best drawer in school. I wasn’t good at writing, and I’m not much of a talker, but I knew I could draw”. Ambition came from somewhere. “I must have been born that way, because I never got any encouragement at home. They just thought art was a waste of time” (Billingham in Richards 1998, p10).

In an interview, nearly ten years later Bingham returns to the topic of his parents’ thoughts on him taking up art, ‘They were indifferent to it. They probably liked it because if I was drawing, I was occupied and didn’t need looking after.’ (Billingham in MacDonald 2007, p20). In these interviews, Bingham makes clear that art was a form of nourishment and an escape, something he was good at: it gave him a focus, kept him out of trouble, and was something he pursued out of his own self-propelled motivations. Despite this, many interviewers do not really listen to what they are being told, and repeatedly question how and where he got his talent or ambition. MacDonald comments ‘Ambition came from somewhere’, Moroney and Lewis are similarly bemused: ‘*Wherever* he got it, Richard always had the artistic bug, a determination which sustained him better than his five brothers who, he says, are all on the dole’ (My italics. Moroney 2000, p16), and ‘*Wherever* Bingham *came* from, he’s very smart and very audacious, and he has a truly astonishing eye.’ (My italics. Lewis 1997, p67).

These interviewers are not *hearing* what Bingham is saying, which is that he was interested in art from a young age, and his practice of drawing and painting sustained him during years of neglect. Their refusal to acknowledge what they are being told I believe comes from an inability to imagine that talent and imagination could reside in someone from a council estate. Look again at these quotes ‘Ambition came from *somewhere*’ and ‘*Wherever* he got it’ – place and situatedness are at the forefront of these statements, as if the only legitimate *place* to become ambitious is *from* growing up *in* a middle-class milieu. No one questions why a middle-class child becomes a lawyer, but a working-class child having an interest and talent in art is treated as incongruous.

Recently, during a walk around Tate Modern with a friend, a group of teenagers looking at the same exhibition were talking loudly; my friend turned to me and said, “why don’t they just go back to Croydon?!” I asked her what she meant by that (although I had some inkling), and she explained that “these kids from council estates have no business being here”. When I let her know that *I came from council estates*, she replied in shock “So how did you get *here*?”. What she meant was, how does

such a contradiction exist? How can someone from a working-class background come to be studying art at PhD level, and end up spending her midweek afternoon strolling around an art gallery undetected by her middle-class friend? Art critics' readings of Billingham's biography display the same distrust and disbelief.

Educated Out

Coming from a working-class background makes the decision to go to university or art college a perilous one: there's the risk that you won't fit in, that *that sort of thing isn't for someone like you*, and the financial and emotional costs of failure are high. Billingham did his art foundation at Bournville College before being accepted via the clearing system to study art at Sunderland. Without parental guidance about how to apply to universities, many kids from working-class backgrounds struggle to articulate the required information and make properly informed choices. As Julie Bettie (2003) argues, teachers in the USA often make classist assumptions about the abilities of their working-class students, and narrow the future options of these students by discouraging them from an academic route.⁷³ I would say from my experience, as well as reading extensive memoirs and autobiographies of working-class students in Britain, that these assumptions are also prevalent here.

Without guidance on how to proceed, many working-class students will fall at the first hurdle, applying for universities and not being offered places. Billingham says of his experience applying to art schools: 'I was very unlucky. I got rejected from 16 places and I got into Sunderland in the clearing system' (Billingham in Richards 1998, p10). I would say rather than *unlucky*, Billingham was in a position of structural disadvantage. He continues, "Not that I was thick or anything...The reason I didn't get into the other 16 art schools I applied to was because when it came to A-levels I wanted to do sciences. So I did chemistry, physics, biology and art. I'm sure it worked against me, because I looked like I didn't know what I was doing...But I did". (Billingham in Jackson 2001, p7). There is a knack to applications: without middle-class cultural capital to help inform you of the "right way" to do things, working-class students can end up making mistakes, not

⁷³ Bettie (2003) details how the class background of the students she interviews has shaped their teachers' assumptions about their abilities and guidance over their academic pathways, 'The social roles linked to a group membership include curriculum choices (whether a student is on the college-prep or vocational track) and extracurricular activities (whether student was involved in what are considered either college-prep or non-prep activities). These course and activities combine to shape class futures, leading some girls to four-year colleges, others to vocational programs at community colleges, and still others directly to low-wage jobs directly out of high school.' (p49)

because they lack intelligence but because they lack knowledge of how the systems work. This is one invisible barrier that keeps the working-classes out of institutions that function with a set of unwritten rules.

Asked in an interview, ‘Was he desperate to leave home?’, Billingham replies, ‘Of course. Every Wednesday I would check out the housing section of the local paper and think: “God, I’m never going to be able to afford twenty grand for a house.” I wanted to go to university but had no idea what it was. All I knew about was crime and shit like that.’ (Teeman 2006, p15). Moroney suggests that ‘As soon as he could, he got out, and did a degree in painting at Sunderland University, after 16 colleges rejected him.’ (Moroney 2000, p16). Although Billingham no doubt dreamt of escaping poverty and being in an environment that would nurture creativity, the narrative of escape posited by Moroney and Teeman does not tell the whole truth about the experience of being educated out of your class, of being displaced, both geographically and emotionally. Billingham expresses his discontent at moving to Sunderland: ‘I wasn’t happy there, ‘cos the area was the heaviest little shit hole [...] It made me realise how good the Midlands were.’ (Billingham in Moroney 2000, p16).

There is an aspect of moving between worlds: now seen as a “student”, and therefore middle-class, Billingham faced class hostility of a different kind: ‘The worst thing was the kids – they just threw bricks at you in the street because they could see you were a student or you looked different. I always wanted to move away but when I saw what Sunderland was like I couldn’t wait to get back to the Midlands.’ (Billingham in Grimley 2000, p13). Narratives of class-mobility, of transcending your background, do not consider the fact that there may be plenty to miss about the people and places you leave behind.⁷⁴ These sorts of assumptions situate middle-class occupations and lives as worthwhile, and working-class lives as wholly undesirable. An aspect of Billingham’s work that first appealed to me as a sixteen or seventeen-year-old studying photography, was that it seemed to be saying to me that *working-class lives did count* and were worthy of regard.

The classed common-sense of middle-class reviewers would assume that having “escaped” his working-class background in the Midlands, Billingham would move South and work in London, as Grimley articulates: ‘Contrary to what everyone assumes, 29-year-old Billingham has not moved to some newly-fashionable part of London’s East End but only as far from the family home as his own house in Cradley Heath. “Why should everyone have to move to London?” he asks. “This is where I grew up. Even if wanted to move to London, I couldn’t afford to. I feel comfortable here. It’s familiar and I do feel some affinity with the history of the area. I feel at a bit of a loss when I

⁷⁴ This aspect of loss through class-mobility is discussed by Hanley (2012 and 2016) and Rowbotham (1999).

see an old terraced house being knocked down.” (Billingham in Grimley 2000, p13). This longing for return challenges the notion that class-mobility only possesses positive qualities, that once you have left your lowly beginnings you go off to richer pastures and never look back. Once Billingham had earned enough from his art he bought a house back in nearby Stourbridge.

Echoing Spence’s discussion of the split-subjectivity brought about by class mobility (Spence 1995, p208-9), Moroney comments that ‘Billingham himself is now a creature of two very different worlds, and somehow, of neither’. Billingham himself says that ‘When I came back to the Midlands, I spent a couple of months going into local pubs, talking to people and trying to be like a local person, but I wasn’t the same, I wasn’t innocent anymore [...] *There’s nobody where I live I can really talk to. I’m not lonely, but I’m alienated.*’ (My italics. Billingham in Moroney 2000, p16). Having moved out of his class-background by becoming a famous artist and being exposed to new and different places, people and culture, Billingham like Spence found himself split between worlds.

Ray’s a Laugh

While at art college Billingham would periodically return home, where he began taking pictures of his family, his flat and the surrounding area of Cradley Heath. In particular Billingham took pictures of his father Ray that were meant as studies for paintings. Liz had left Ray, and when Billingham would return he never knew what state his father would be in. Being used to his father’s alcoholism meant that seeing Ray in destitute states was not shocking to Billingham, as he tells Tim Teeman:

Each time I came back from college he would be lying on his bed. For all I knew he might have been dead. I was trying to make the best photograph in order to make the best painting. I was neglected – he was a subject to me. To be angry would have been a waste of emotion at least I was making something worthwhile. If I’d been born in Ethiopia it would have been a lot worse. I had enough to eat and a roof over my head. (Billingham in Teeman 2006, p15)

This dissociation could be seen as a coping strategy, a way of dealing with the unbearable reality of his father’s situation. What made Billingham famous was not his paintings of his father, but the photographs. As Billingham tells it:

There was this visiting lecturer at Sunderland, and he saw some of the photographs lying on my studio floor...and was picking them up, saying ‘These are great photographs.’ I did have a fantasy early on about exhibiting some of these photographs large, in galleries, but honestly, where I come from I had no idea what the art world was, I had no idea what an artist was, and I didn’t know you could exhibit big photographs in a gallery. I thought I’d have to exhibit them alongside paintings in order to justify them as art...Then the book was published and the phone never stopped ringing. I thought ‘What’s the big deal?’

you know? (Billingham in Jackson 2001, p7)

Billingham did get to exhibit some of his pictures that would later become the images in *Ray's a Laugh* in the Barbican photography exhibition *Who's Looking at The Family Now?* from 1994, as he recalls:

I printed the three out-of-focus photographs life size, brushing on the developer so you could see brush marks in the final images. I wanted a painterly, hand-made sort of look. I went down to the opening of the show, and it was a bit of a realisation to see so many large, pin-sharp images, professionally framed behind glass. My blurry pictures, mounted on board and with a badly written statement, must have seemed a bit *out of place*. But I'm happy to have had work in the exhibition, and I regard myself lucky to have taken part in it at all. (My italics. Bingham 2013, p96)

Both Bingham and his critics tend to describe his work and success as if everything has been a matter of luck; bad luck at being rejected by 16 colleges, good luck at being accepted in the Barbican show. In 1998, Richards asked Bingham about the question of luck – a question that I doubt would have been directed at a middle-class photographer who had done well relatively quickly, since in that case success would have been ascribed to the artist's own talent and agency. In response to Richards's question, 'Does he put his success down to luck, then?', Bingham responded 'Well it did seem like luck at first. But now, when I look back at the work, I can see that it's good, and when I look at other people's work, I think it's no worse than anybody else's. So I think there must have been a bit of talent there' (p10).

In an interview with MacDonald (2007), Bingham explains that he was initially concerned about publishing his photographs as the collection *Ray's a Laugh* because 'I didn't want to be classed as a photographer – I didn't want to be pigeonholed. I wanted to be an artist. I talked to a friend from Sunderland, and he said, "You might as well do the book. Francis Bacon was a furniture designer before he became an artist...if you do the book of photographs, well, photography is closer to painting than furniture design". So that swung it but I was reluctant at first.' (p21). During this interview, MacDonald challenges Bingham on his reasons for exhibiting his family:

GM I suppose part of that reluctance was that these were very personal?

RB That never bothered me really. Why should it?

GM I would think twice about displaying my family.

RB Maybe you had closeties with them? I don't owe them anything and I didn't think they would be shown in a gallery at that stage anyway. I thought they would be in a book and it would have a specialist market and not really a wide audience.

GM So the attention came as a bit of a shock?

RB Yes it did. (Billingham and MacDonald 2007, p21)

During an earlier interview with Tim Teeman, Billingham is similarly asked about the “exposure” of his family: “Well, I was neglected,” he says, exasperated at my questioning of his detachment’ (Billingham in Teeman 2006, p15). Considering Billingham’s childhood, in which he had to be very responsible for himself and become very self-motivated and independent of his family, it is not surprising that he feels both detachment towards them and a closeness and affection - after all, he was still a member of the family.

Billingham has stressed that he was thinking about composition, colours, patterns and textures rather than the subject matter. He acknowledges that this was both a way of distancing himself, and a way of making sense creatively out of what he was experiencing and witnessing:

Ray was 59 and seemed to be mulling over his life, what it could have been/what it had become. Ray’s room began to take on an outward expression of his inner life, and I had a strong urge to make paintings about the situation...I took photographs that often looked for various spatial arrangements of him and objects within the room, making little narratives about his condition. Although thinking about potential paintings, I was probably, in my own way, also trying to objectify or make sense of a surreal situation. (Billingham 2013, p96)

To photograph the scene, to take a step back and photograph a common but still traumatic situation, can become a way to mediate its effect on you. As Billingham says:

The photographs were intended to provide a starting point for tragic and moving paintings but I later discovered a different reason for continuing, I found that by digging the prints out of the cupboard and studying them I could uncover different things about my family. I could start to objectify my relationship to them; it became a form of distancing. (Billingham in Rodriguez 1996, p10)

I was very pleased to see the connection to Spence’s therapeutic art praxis made by Julian Rodriguez (1996), ‘Billingham had stumbled on the therapeutic and cathartic possibilities of the alternative family album, something the late Jo Spence discovered.’ (p10). Yet Billingham’s production of an alternative family album is the aspect of his work that has garnered the most criticism, which shows how culturally and socially invested we are in the idealisation of family life, insisting that it must be seen as good (or at least that its problems should remain hidden).

Accusations of exploitation position Billingham as if he were separate from the scene, when in fact he is intimately present within it, familiar as well as distanced: ‘Billingham denies that the pictures are exploitative of his parents. His dad was surprised that the critics found the pictures so shocking. “Have they never seen a dog licking the floor?” he’d say to his son. As for fame and

notoriety and the London art scene, Billingham reflects, again with a mordant chuckle: “It’s great. Well, it’s better than working in Kwik Save.” (Teeman 2006, p15). There is no attempt to understand the choices available to Billingham here. The scenes he was exposing, which were received so dramatically by the art world and public, were to him very banal, everyday occurrences. A couple of years after the publication of *Ray’s a Laugh* (1996) and the publicity of the 1997 *Sensation* show, Billingham discussed his relationship with his family: ‘I get on well with them...Probably a bit more than I used to because I’m not a teenager any more. They’re happy that I’m successful but they don’t really have an opinion on the work. They say that’s something that Richard does.’ (Billingham in Grimley 2000, p13). In many ways Ray and Liz have had the last laugh: it is middle-class ideas of respectability that are so outraged by Billingham’s pictures. His parents were simply living their lives – and, from their son’s account of their response to their public exposure, doing so without shame. Their son’s images of them made him a success and enabled him to achieve things in his life that they missed out on: it’s no wonder they are happy for him.

The pictures Billingham took worked in similar ways to Spence and Martin’s photo therapy practice, in that they recorded aspects of their lives and examined them to learn how to come to terms with them. As Richards points out, ‘It’s tempting to see Billingham’s compulsion to view his family through a lens as a form of therapy, a way of distancing himself from his situation. “I’m sure it has helped me in some way,” he agrees. “I used to spend hours looking at the photos when I got them back from the chemist.”’ (Billingham in Richards 1998, p10). The process for Billingham clearly enabled an acknowledgement and a letting go of repressed shameful feelings:

When I was a primary school kid I didn’t want any of the other kids to see where we lived because we were poor and the place was not cared for. We didn’t have any heating or hot water, the carpets were dirty, there was dogshit everywhere and there was no paper on the walls. I don’t know when the turning point was but at some point – perhaps when I first started photographing Ray in this room – I decided never to think about hiding my background or upbringing again. It was easier and less stressful to not bother about it. Why should I hide my poor background anyway? (Billingham in MacDonald 2007, p25)

In this way, Billingham like his mum, Liz, is an Anti-Pygmalion: he has decided to reject shame, and instead expose that was meant to be hidden out of fear of negative judgements: to represent a working-class identity.

Culture, Class, Politics: Critical Receptions & Classed Readings of the

1990s

Blair, Saatchi and the Market

1990s Britain was seemingly a boom time for cultural and artistic production. The YBAs (Young British Artists), a group of young artists mainly from Goldsmiths Art College, gathered around exhibitions organised by the artists themselves, with Damien Hirst as ringleader, in the late 1980s.⁷⁵ Work by these artists was cherry-picked by the businessman, art dealer and gallery owner Charles Saatchi in the 1990s and brought to mainstream attention, meaning that the UK had a *distinct*, recognisable group of young artists who were being written about, discussed and exhibited globally. “British art” became identifiable and, more crucially, *marketable*. During the late 1990s, Saatchi’s agenda synchronized with that of New Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair, as Robert Hewison (2014) describes:

The *Sensation* show at the Royal Academy in September 1997 was a fitting accompaniment to Blair's first months in power. The highly popular and self-consciously controversial exhibition was the culmination of a miraculous decade for a group of youthful artists that had come together in 1988, under the entrepreneurial curatorship of a canny working-class lad from Leeds, Damien Hirst, to exhibit in converted offices belonging to the London Docklands Development Corporation. Artists of all persuasions had learned to duck and dive if they wanted to prosper in the Thatcher years; now there was an opportunity to cash in [...] with a clear eye on the market, (the YBAs) invaded the temples of high art. (p37)

The concepts of “creativity” and “culture” were recast under New Labour, their “use value” focussed around how Britain’s symbolic and economic power could expand globally. Hewison notes the New Labour buzz-phrases: “creative workers”, “creative Britain”, “creative economy”, “creative industries” and even “creative class”. He writes:

Culture would be the means to achieve the transformation of Britain: liberated from old bureaucratic procedures, lifestyle would govern a new politics of “choice” that changed the individual's relationship to the state and stimulated permanent innovation. Hence New Labour's rhetoric of “creativity”, and the innovation of “Creative Britain”. (p4)

Yet culture and creativity are often at odds with the status quo, and cannot be made useful to capital without a compromise; hence the paradox of New Labour’s superficial focus on “creative Britain”, “investing” in arts and culture to obtain marketable, exportable commodities that helped

⁷⁵ See Stallabrass (2006), Cashell (2009), and Burn (2010) for further reading on the YBAs and the cult of personality centred around Hirst.

reinforce the New Labour brand of “Cool Britannia” with its political rhetoric of meritocracy and aspiration.

The extent to which Blair really believed in the arts as socially transformative is debatable. As Hewison points out, despite Blair suggesting that ‘the ten years since he had come into office would be looked back on as ‘a “golden age” for the arts’ he did so during a speech ‘reflecting on the cultural achievements of his government’ that was in fact ‘his *only* speech on the subject during the ten years he was in power.’ (My italics. p1). It was the *idea* of creative Britain that was useful, supporting ‘the Thatcherite idea of an “enterprise culture” that used the arts and heritage as a catalyst for urban regeneration by stimulating domestic and international tourism.’ (p34).

For the ex-advertising man Saatchi, who produced political election campaign posters for the Tories, this “enterprise culture” was a ripe terrain for investment. Julian Stallabrass (2006) describes his opportunism:

The switch from buying work by established artists to buying work by those relatively unknown gave Saatchi a huge amount of leverage over those whose work he chose to purchase [...] Naturally in this situation, the power was all on one side: Saatchi’s usual practice was to buy very cheap and pay very late. Few of the artists he favoured in the 1990s were in any position to refuse his offers. (p205)

This one-sided power relationship is important to remember amongst discussions of Billingham’s so called “exploitation” of his family: to a poor working-class artist working in a supermarket to make ends meet, it may seem foolish to decline an offer from a millionaire art dealer, whatever his motives.

It is useful to compare Billingham’s ambitions for the reception of his work to Saatchi’s. Billingham said of *Ray’s a Laugh* that ‘I wanted the book to be very intimate. It would have been much better as a small novel, with no pictures on the dust jacket, so that when you open it, it’s like a play, a visual play inside.’ (Billingham in Pinsent 1998, p19). This was *my* first encounter with the book, alone in a library, looking at these imitate photographs privately, almost confidentially. Yet Saatchi was uninterested in such intimacy, favouring the supposed shock value of the subject matter: poverty, drunkenness, and domestic mess. Billingham perhaps sending up Saatchi, teases, “‘He saw the book and he didn’t really like it, but when he saw the pictures on the wall he liked them a lot more, I suppose because they were big.’” (Billingham in Pinsent 1998, p19). With an ad-man’s eye for provocation, Saatchi chose to display the work “big” in order to maximise its impact.

As Vanessa Corby (2008) argues, ‘Billingham’s rapid entry into the public domain was matched only by the equally rapid disapproval of his chief subject matter; his parents Ray and Liz’. (p1).

Surely this was part of the draw for Saatchi, as ‘propelled by the market’s ever greater desire for novelty the art world can only ever exploit the subjects that Billingham presents; an argument cemented by Saatchi’s possession and parading of his latest goods.’ (p4-5). Billingham making auto-ethnographic work that exposed his family to the eyes and judgments of the art-viewing public was substantially less “exploitative” than Saatchi’s choice of his work for its potential to become infamous and garner him publicity and economic rewards.

Those with power have always exploited those without. As discussed previously, the 1990s saw a high level of appropriation and exploitation of working-class culture,⁷⁶ coinciding with the weakening of the social and economic position of the working-class themselves following the great defeats of the organised labour movement. Signifiers of working-class culture were used in revolt against middle-class moralism: a “roughness” in attitude, closely bound up with working-class “edge”, and rebellious performances of cheeky laddish working-class directness, masked staunch careerism and brash individualism.⁷⁷ Less politics and more patronising populism. Like many other writers on this period, Kerstin Mey (2007) links New Labour’s self-mythologising of “creative Britain” with the YBAs’ shameless self-promotion and appropriation of working-class culture. She suggests:

However, at the time the images were published, the yBas (young British artists) had come to dominate the UK art scene and were in the process of confirming their international reputation (supported and instrumentalised for its own political goals by the Labour Party when they entered government in 1997). The yBas had cultivated a materialist, loutish and often-shallow engagement with selected aspects of working-class culture – in all its constructedness and its projections across the social spectrum of the UK – ranging from the macabre jokes by Damien Hirst and the Chapman brothers to the outright provocations of Tracey Emin, and the decidedly laddish attitude of Sarah Lucas. (p104)

⁷⁶ The work of the artist collective Common Culture sought to challenge this trend. They: ‘came together to make work as a response to the rampant promotion of art branded as Young British Art and its ludicrous “Dick Van Dyke” characterisation of British working-class culture by the London art establishment. For us the YBA phenomenon just didn’t ring true, certainly it didn’t chime with our experience of living in the North West of England.’ (Common Culture: 11 July 2016). Their work produced ‘[an] examination of how the culture industry routinely commodifies human labour and experience as entertainment.’ (Common Culture 2006 p35). Common Culture are a counter-example of the way working-class lives and culture can be explored in art without appropriation or conforming to middle-class standards and assumptions.

⁷⁷ Seen in the 1990s phenomena of the “lad and ladette”, the supposed rise of football hooliganism. TV Depictions included Channel Four’s *The Word* (1990-1995), featuring a section where people would show how much they wanted to be on TV by performing gross or embarrassing acts without shame.

Although on one hand seen to conform to the tropes of the *Sensation* exhibition, of provocative “in your face” work, Billingham’s photography was *not* self-consciously produced to shock art audiences. Although Hirst, Lucas and Emin did come from working-class backgrounds, and sometimes performed and played with working-class stereotypes, Billingham doesn’t quite fit Mey’s description of a “materialist, loutish and often-shallow engagement” with such stereotypes. The poverty in his work wasn’t a pose, it was his reality; this differentiates him from accusations of class-tourism in the YBAs.⁷⁸ He was part of the YBA scene but also separate, as is so often the case for working-class academics, artists and cultural workers.

Just as New Labour promised to make “everyone middle-class”, so Saatchi performed the role of the wealthy saviour who would pull the aspiring talented up out of the unaspiring underclass. Despite the art world *still* being predominantly white and middle and upper-class, reviews of Billingham’s work still display the assumption that the working-class can be liberated from poverty simply by being sufficiently talented. Penny Huntsman’s (2015) reading of the process from poverty to acclaim is typical:

Candour is a commodity, or so it seems, in recent times and, unsurprisingly, Billingham’s photographic confessions caught the attention of that most famous backer of the class-conscious, maverick and patron of the arts Charles Saatchi. Billingham’s commercial success arguably demonstrates meritocracy in operation and a distinct vogue, even celebrity prestige, in having climbed out of the Hogarthian gutter. (pp184-185)

Firstly, Saatchi is not *himself* class-conscious, in the sense that he cares about working-class artists getting fair representation and access to the arts: his interest is in converting their novelty value into economic value to him as dealer. As ad-man for a Conservative government which systemically attacked the working-class, he is not an ally of the poor. Secondly, Billingham was *chosen* by Saatchi for his show because he knew Billingham’s photographs would cause controversy, which they did.⁷⁹ Billingham’s success was not solely down to his merit, but to fact that his work would help provoke the hype that would increase Saatchi’s financial gains. It isn’t talent that wins out here: the success of working-class artists still comes at the whim of rich patrons.

⁷⁸ Many of these art students lived in working-class areas as they were cheaper to live in. For example, Gillian Wearing going to Peckham, a predominantly working-class and afro-Caribbean area of South London, to photograph and film the “locals” (*Dancing in Peckham*, Gillian Wearing, 1994).

⁷⁹ Dunne notes that ‘there has consistently been a great deal of debate about the nature and ethos of what Billingham was and is doing.’ (Dunne 2002, p12)

Huntsman's reading continues by contrasting Billingham's photographs with subsequent developments in the media:

Since the 1990s the media has been saturated by voyeuristic glimpses of abject and dysfunctional families, private lives unfold in TV programs such as *Celebrity Big Brother* and *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding*. Yet, however unnerving Billingham's "fly-on-the-wall" portraits are for the viewer, their authenticity makes them deeply poignant and brimming with social and class narrative; even if Billingham's example supports the idea that it is possible to move beyond a working-class background. There is certainly an irony in the fact that many of these "working-class artists" enjoy levels of wealth that match or exceed that of their patrons. (p185)

The comparison is telling. *Big Brother* aired in the year 2000 and *My Big Fat Gypsy Wedding* aired ten years later in 2010; both exemplify the exploitative depiction of working-class lives, in which "abject and dysfunctional families" are humiliatingly exposed and held up as examples of bad behaviour. When you are poor you are desperate in ways most middle-class people will never experience, and it is this, apparently, that makes good television: the many ways in which working-class lives can be full of dignity, creativity, humour and intelligence are not represented. When critics look back at Billingham's work, they so often compare it (and sometimes equate it) with the only other examples of working-class life they have seen.⁸⁰

Against Huntsman's reading, you cannot "move beyond a working-class background": it is your background, where you *started* from, and remains so even if it is in the past: as my case studies show, and as I know from my own experience, it cannot be wiped away through acquiring cultural or economic capital. The speech marks around "working-class artists" are also very revealing, as if Huntsman cannot quite believe that such people exist, as if a working-class background and the wealth and status of a successful artist must be mutually exclusive. To say that artists such as Billingham could reach 'levels of wealth that match or exceed that of their patrons' is absurd and expresses a paranoia of class-displacement, the worry that these *plebs* will start to enjoy some of the wealth and privilege enjoyed by those in established class positions. It is fair to say that some of the YBAs became rich (particularly Hirst and Emin),⁸¹ but it was Saatchi who had, and still has,

⁸⁰ For more on criticism of classism in television from feminist writers see Tyler (2008), Tyler and Bennet (2010), and Wood and Skeggs (2011).

⁸¹ 'In 1999 Colin Gleadhill described the development of a three-tiered price level for recent British art: Hirst and Whiteread, whose major works can sell for six-figure sums, formed the highest category; the middle rank was made up of those selling work for sums between £15,000 and £50,000 and included Lucas, Rae, Hume, Quinn and Ofili; finally, the third rack, selling in the £5,000 to £15,000 range, included Billingham, Glenn Brown, Coventry, Marcus Harvey, Nick Hoberman and others.' (Stallabrass 2006, p192)

the wealth and power to make or break the careers of working-class artists.

Clichés of the Critics, Tropes and Gaps

The most common critical positions on the *Ray's a Laugh* series are those that accuse Billingham of producing “artless” work or complain of its grotesque subject matter, those that accuse Billingham of exploiting and/or fetishizing his family, and those that worry about class tourism and poverty porn. This overwhelmingly negative middle-class art writing is so hegemonic that alternative counter-readings are needed to address its failure to acknowledge that Billingham’s photographs might actually contain beauty, or that there might be other viewers of his work besides the middle-classes. I will now discuss how each of the common critical positions subjects Billingham to a process of distrustful *othering*, before presenting my own reading of the works in the last section.

Firstly, critics consistently attempt to strip the photographs of their status as art. Kevin Jackson (2001) writes:

Richard Billingham has gained fame, or notoriety, or both, with his intimate studies of his mother and father at home – a subject that might sound uncontentious enough, until you realise that is parents are... well, let’s just say that if these giant, *apparently artless* snapshots were not blown up and displayed on a gallery wall, you might easily assume that they were the aide-memoires of a particularly harassed social worker, or the research materials of a film designer in search of the authentic tang of contemporary domestic squalor. (My italics p12)

In this review, it is as though the photographs’ subjects - Billingham’s parents - are unmentionable: Jackson cannot name them as such, they are beyond description and beyond representation, and they certainly can’t be art.

This view that the work can’t *really* be art (or even documentary) is reinforced by Mey (2007) in a chapter on “Obscenity and the Documentary Tradition” that discusses Billingham’s work in terms of ‘the relationship between documentary tradition and notions of obscenity that derive from the obscene, that is *from placing into public view what should have remained hidden from it.*’ (My italics. p97). The implication is that classed-identities that are seen as shameful or grotesque “should have remained hidden” from view, that their exposure before a (presumably) middle-class art viewer is obscene by definition: there is a classed assumption here about who the “public” is, and what it will find aberrant or transgressive.

If Billingham’s photographs of his family are not being described as obscene, they are being

accused of pandering to fetishistic enjoyment: ‘Richard Billingham’s candid photographs of his obese and drunken parents [...] do not “expose the harsh realities of his family’s life”, they merely fetishize it for a privileged audience.’ (Mulholland 1997, p887). The assumption here is that Billingham produced these images of his family *for* the middle-class art world, rather than for *himself*: the middle-class egotism of assuming that art is always *for you*. These receptions are polarised between insisting that the abjection depicted in Billingham’s photographs is unbearable and should be hidden, and complaining about the prurient enjoyment it provokes, functioning as the “class or poverty porn” of the “class tourist”.⁸² A review of Jackson’s (2001) *combines* these two positions:

But much of the attention was fixated on the content, which, if you find that sort of thing sordid, was sordid: slimy stains on the walls; copiously overflowing ashtrays and other signs of a relaxed attitude to the niceties of housekeeping; Mrs B’s more-than-Rubenesque proportions and lively forearm tattoos; and any other details likely to provoke concern in the social worker, titillation in the social voyeur and queasy misgivings in those who cherish ideals of family privacy. (p7)

No more varied or nuanced understanding of the work is made available: the choice is disavowal or fetishisation.

Alongside some stereotypical assumptions about Billingham, Jan Estep (1999) makes some interesting points: ‘But Billingham put his work out there, displaying his poverty and family troubles, before he was a rich and famous artist. How was he able to override these social inhibitions and prohibitions, and more importantly, *why does he do so in his art?*’ (My italics. p29). Firstly, it is lazy to assume that, having become an artist, Billingham must now be rich. Secondly, there is a telling confusion about why he would make art about his background: this writer cannot see why anyone would want to represent a life like *that*. Despite these apparent biases, Estep gets deeper into what is going on in the production and reception of these images when she comments, ‘After all of the analysis I am left with an ambivalence that revolves at its core around two poles: *shame* and *pride*. The overwhelming emotional responses I have to Billingham’s images is not compassion, not love, not ridicule, no indifference, not laughter but *shame*. It is a difficult feeling to experience, and not one I tend to seek out, but I recognise the power of its universality.’ (My italics. pp30-31). While the particularity of class shame is not a universal experience, many viewers can relate to the shame of exposure, of being revealed to judgement. I think Estep gets close to

⁸² Class “tourism” appears in Rickson (2005, p86), Jackson (2001, p12), Cashell (2009, p19); class or poverty “porn” in Stallabrass (2006, p263), Corbetta (1999, p45), Phoca (2002, p218) and Rickson (2005, p86).

my feelings about the mixture of shame and pride in Billingham's work, and the struggle of overcoming class shame in general, when she writes, 'However, akin to this feeling of shame I also imagine an odd pride behind Billingham's images, as if to say, "Who cares if these are my parents and they're poor and screwed up. I'm no less a person for it. I am who I am, they are who they are. Deal with it"'. There is an intrepid self-confidence that flaunts itself regardless of such socially inculcated shame.' (p31). This "odd pride" is visible in the work of Spence and Morley as well.

Kieran Cashell (2009) discusses Billingham's work in a section titled "Disinterestedness and Cultural Tourism", using Laura Mulvey's (1975) concept of the binary relations of visual pleasure in cinematic gendered/powerful looks to frame the middle-class viewer of working-class existence as a "tourist":

The desire of the social tourist to inhabit another world with distanced impunity is less important to media-reinforced middle-class fantasies of the working-class than the longing to escape from their social *habitus*, to be liberated from the straitjacket of liberal morality, if only for a fugitive hour of imaginative abandon. And this is the key to these genres, for it determines – more than any strategic, commercially successful narrative structures – the pleasure the genre deliver. This is the fantasy indulged by the media-fabricated image of the working-class, repackaged as a lifestyle choice for the consumption of the middle-class media tourists. From the security of their modular Semi-D, the tourist-viewer is enabled at once to experience vicariously, temporarily, and via hallucinogenic vehicle of television, the visceral amorality of the urban under classes [...] Viewing the images of *Ray's a Laugh* does raise legitimate concerns that they encourage the adoption of the voyeuristic perspective we have associated with the tourist.' (pp21-22)

Again, this reading assumes the audience to be exclusively middle-class. No attempt is made to understand the power relations in play when the working-class view these images. Are we also tourists? In a sense, all people looking at photographs of people they do not know, in places they have never been, having experiences we have not yet had, are "tourists". However, it's problematic to assume that photographs of working-class lives are in some way *more* troublesome. When middle-class lives are taken to be the standard, and art is treated as their rightful property, then the appearance within this sphere of images of *other* lives seems to send reviewers into discomfort. Such work cannot quite be allowed to exist, hence these two strands of argument that disavow the work as art: reviewers shame the artist for exposing his family's reality, or they shame viewers who are not too ashamed to look by calling them class-tourists. But when I enter the space of these photographs, I do *not* feel like a tourist: the roles are reversed, and for once it is the dominant occupiers of art spaces who find themselves *not at home*.

The other "common knowledge" about the Billingham's work is that it 'does not possess any

conventional aesthetic qualities. In fact, such possible aesthetic defences are rendered doubly implausible because Billingham's work actively undermines precisely these aesthetic conventions. It is not possible to experience such formally fucked-up work aesthetically, primarily because it is impossible to adopt an attitude of disinterested contemplation in the face of – to remain emotionally distanced from – the content of the work.' (p25). Why is it thought necessary to be emotionally neutral in order to appreciate the aesthetic properties of art? As my own critical practice in this thesis shows, emotional responses can be brought together with other aspects of the work in forming an interpretation. Cashell continues, 'What is artistically compelling about Billingham's work is the way in which the artist has exploited these codes and semiotic conventions to critique the very voyeuristic tourist structure on which these codes and conventions are founded. We are invited to become tourists by Billingham's work, invited to take a temporary tour around an unfamiliar yet media-familiar social stratum.' (p26). Again, unfamiliar to whom? While poverty, violence and alcohol/drug addiction are often subject to stereotyped representation in the media, they are also realities of working-class existence, not simply escapist fantasies of the middle-class imagination.

What is missing amongst all this angst about exploitation, fetishisation and class-tourism is the possibility of finding beauty in places that have only been represented negatively in the media. Billingham says of his work, 'It's not despairing [...] People don't see the beauty and the emotion in it. They see the stains on the wall or my mum's tattoos or my dad falling over, they see the surface.' (Billingham in Grimley 2000, p13). The vast majority of critics writing on the series do not seem to see beyond their immediate shock reaction to any of the other experiences these images might bring them – of beauty or warmth. Billingham expands on this in an interview with Jackson:

I'm sure a lot of people were looking at them for the wrong reasons...I don't think this happens in the art world because people can look properly. But they caught the general public's eye because they were looking at the subject matter...I soon clocked on to this, after a couple of months. See, I thought everybody could read photographs, but they can't [...] I was shocked when I realised it, that people can't read photographs. It was 'oh, look at those stains on the wall, look at his mum's tattoos...' and I never saw any of that, honestly, that just happened to be there. People weren't seeing any beauty underneath, none of the composition, none of the pattern. (p7)

Jackson adds, parenthetically, 'for what it's worth, I find myself entirely convinced by this guileless account of his motives' (p7). This is incredibly patronising: what Billingham was capturing with his camera was his life, his family, his upbringing; of course he found it strange that others were shocked by a lived experience that was normal for him. For Jackson to call this "guileless" (with

an implication of naivety) exposes his own lack of understanding that people have different life experiences to him.

The Othering of Billingham, Distrust and Scepticism

A strong tendency in critical writing on Billingham's work is scepticism and distrust of his motives in photographing his family and exhibiting the images. As I've shown, many critics have found it hard to understand why Billingham would choose to make public a family life thought of as shameful. Billingham is described by his interviewers as distrustful and uncomfortable with interviews; given the amount of criticism of his work and motives, this is hardly surprising. In an interview with Jackson, who prefaces the interview with, 'I should probably admit from the outset that he doesn't seem all that trusting of my motives, either' (p7), Billingham is described as follows:

Down from his home in Stourbridge briefly for a meeting for this year's Turner Prize nominees at Tate Britain, Richard Billingham is looking and sounding mildly perplexed, still not quite sure that he *belongs* in the same category as the other candidates, maybe more than a shade of suspicious of the big city's fickle, predatory art world and of all the nasty surprises it might have in store for him...when asked how he felt when he heard about the nomination, Billingham says that it made him feel anxious: "I was thinking whether to accept or not, because, you know, it's a lot of stress" [...] At first, I suspect that he must simply be play-acting the role of diffident provincial innocent here, exaggerating the degree to which all this media attention is a worry-inducing novelty. You don't get swept up by the Turner Prize mechanism from nowhere, and Billingham is already pretty well known in artistic circles; it's only a couple of months since his photographs filled a large wall at the Saatchi Gallery for the *I Am a Camera* show. Before long, though, it becomes apparent that he is either a) a brilliantly deadpan performer or b) genuinely the character he presents himself as being – idealistically committed to the art of picture-making, socially guileless, and wary in the extreme of being misrepresented and misunderstood. (Jackson 2001, p7)

Jackson seems unfamiliar with the feeling of being an intruder in classed spaces, and makes no attempt to understand the anxieties of class-mobility, personal exposure and facing hostile judgement to which Billingham would have been subject. Despite commenting on Billingham's being "wary in the extreme", Jackson makes it clear that he himself distrusts Billingham, a transference revealing an inherent suspicion of Billingham as an interloper.

Consider the following descriptions of Billingham's demeanour, from various commentators (italics mine throughout):

Like Billingham himself, who is *watchful*, quiet and *self-contained*, and has the knack of throwing you off balance with his *wry* sense of humour... (Dunne 2002, p12)

Billingham has a *feral* hunger for the unregarded moment. (Searle 2000, p2)

There's a *strange cannibalistic* warmth to the pictures. (Moroney 2000, p16)

Richard Billingham is boyish and *unnervingly self-contained*. He sometimes just ignores questions, not rudely, just because he seems to orbit around – what? – Planet Billingham possibly. The Observer's Lynn Barber once wrote that she had “never felt so completely unhinged by an interviewee”. (Teeman 2006, p15)

Billingham has an *unworldly*, almost vulnerable air, but in matters artistically he is *ruthlessly* decisive. A shelf stacker he may have been, but when he saw the book he wanted it withdrawn immediately because white borders, introduced without his permission, had softened his pictures unacceptably. Happily, he was dissuaded from this and the book made him an overnight success. (Pile 2000, p7)

In these descriptions of Billingham as “feral”, “watchful”, “strange”, “cannibalistic”, “unworldly” there is a blatant othering of him, an attempt to mark him out as different - not just his art, but him *personally*. This also extends to the types of jobs he's had: “a shelf stacker he may have been”, as if it is incompatible for artists to take on work to make ends meet, or to have had jobs before becoming artists, with the phrasing “may have been” separating the working-class past from the “artist” present. During my reading through endless reviews that find Billingham strange, I wonder how many working-class and poor people these writers have come across during their lives.

Mic Moroney (2000) begins in a similar vein: ‘One of the *oddest* of the Britart/Sensation crop, Richard Billingham is a slim, fit-looking 29-year-old, with straight eyes when they actually settle on you. Fresh into the gallery and surrounded by crates of his work, he was at first reserved, even shy, like he just wanted to be left alone. But when we got talking over a couple of pints and sandwiches, he emerged as a friendly, level-headed bloke, from underclass Birmingham originally, and with his very own take on the world.’ (p16). At least Moroney manages place Billingham's supposed “oddness” in a context, understanding that perhaps he is shy and guarded because he is *dealing* with press/writers, and noting that after a while, with the normality of pints and sandwiches, Billingham relaxed and Moroney saw another side to him. Many reviewers are happier to represent a one-dimensional portrait of an artist who doesn't fit, an outsider.

Even reviews that look as if they are heaping praise on Billingham often fall into the same tropes of *othering* and classism. An odd 1997 review by American critic Jim Lewis, “No place like home: the photographs of Richard Billingham”, is a good example of this. Lewis straight away mis-classes Billingham, exposing the difference in classifying structures between the US and UK: “The book is a collection of photographs of the apartment in a *lower-middle-class* British housing project where his parents live.’ (p62). The *otherness* that Lewis finds in Billingham's depictions of home life by

turns horrifies and amuses him,

Billingham's home seems, at first glance, to be an almost comically horrible place to be, with its airless rooms stuffed full of broken down furniture, its violence and abjection, and hopelessness, and mess. It's the kind of place that usually exists in domestic semidarkness, not because it's private, but because it's too tawdry to photograph: until Bingham, I would have thought such things literally would not show up on film, as if Kodak's chemicals would refuse to capture them [...] Gruesome things: still, there's a certain wild humour to it all [...] the reality of Bingham's surroundings is fascinating, but it's the artifice he brings to bear on it that makes it worth a second look. (p62)

Lewis's expression of surprise that such "comically horrible" scenes exist and could actually be captured by film is dehumanising. Not only is he shocked by what he sees but he actively denies any potential for creativity in the desire to record such a *habitus*, as if the representation is so offensive ("too tawdry to photograph") that even photographic developer would be averse to capturing the images. Lewis goes on in a contradictory passage to argue that Bingham's pictures are bad yet emotionally powerful:

Billingham's may well be the worst photographs I've ever seen professionally published, and never mind for now that they're also some of the best. Almost every rule of photography is badly broken: pictures are out of focus, over-exposed, printed with a grain so visible that the image beneath is almost completely obscured. Half of them are absurdly framed...in many cases it looks like he was none too sober himself when he pressed the shutter button...But almost no one has missed its power, because everything that's wrong with the pictures is right with the work, every failure of the image is a success for the art. Such is the aesthetic of our times: there is a desire in effect, almost a policy of fucking up so completely, yet with such confidence and control that one's medium expands [...] Bingham is better at fucking up than any photographer I've seen in a long while, and as if to prove that it was deliberate, after the fact if not before. (pp65-67)

This passage is full of back-handed compliments, or rather *concessions* to the fact that the pictures are aesthetically "good" and formally pleasing, coupled with insinuations that this must be a fluke: 'Maybe it's an accident, and maybe it isn't, but the similarities between Bingham's formal photographic technique and his moral relationship with his sitters is striking: he does well by doing badly.' (p67). Lewis is unable to think that the aesthetic effects of Bingham's photographs were knowingly and deliberately chosen: refusing to see Bingham as *active* in the work, he casts him as a naïve Pygmalion artist.

When asked in an interview if he could see the difference between the pictures he took before and after access to professional photography books, Bingham responded, "There is a very obvious difference to me. I prefer the more innocent ones I did before I'd seen the photo books, even though they're probably harder work for the viewer. However, in the later works I still didn't want

a polished aesthetic...I thought that the technical mistakes I made could initiate better ideas for paintings and I wanted to continue that. Many of those “accidents” were allowed to happen: they look like accidents but most of them aren’t.’ (Billingham in MacDonald 2007, p21). Thus, the assumption that Billingham fluked the successful images is disproven, in his own words.

If the arts were structurally inclusive and democratic, it would not be so controversial to show work representing the lives of people in the midst of poverty, and critics might have looked past their immediate revulsion towards the subject matter and explored the photographs more richly. Ian Rickson’s (2005) reception shows how it is possible to do just this: ‘As I looked at Richard Billingham’s photographs for the first time, I was troubled. They were hanging in an opulent gallery, amid work of style, viewed by the middle classes. Was there a whiff of tourism going on, a kind of “class porn”? But his characters were never objectified, and when I realised they were the artist’s own family, snapped on the kind of camera you can buy in Argos, I lost my disorientation and began to be drawn in.’ (p86). If the art world wasn’t so elitist, if Art really was “for everyone”, then pictures of working-classes lives would not sit so uncomfortably on the walls of galleries.

Aesthetics, Politics and Alternative Readings: Liz as Anti-Pygmalion

Value Judgements: Class and the Body

In unpicking the reception of Billingham’s photographs of his mother Liz in specialised art magazines, mainstream newspapers, books and journals, a picture of misogynistic classism emerges. Just as, when Ray is mentioned it usually as “Richard’s alcoholic father Ray”, mentions of Liz are most often qualified in terms of her physical appearance – specifically the fact of her being fat (rather than white, or middle-aged). What Ray *does*, i.e. drink, equals *who* he is seen to *be*; likewise, Liz is not a “working-class white middle-aged women who likes floral dresses, decoration, home-making, animals, cooking, and who loves her family” – all aspects of her personality visible in the pictures – but rather simply “overweight”. Invalidating language is used to demonise both her and Ray, to dismiss them as unworthy, often with vitriolic, barely disguised contempt.

Liz is variously introduced as: an ‘overweight mother’ (Jury 2001, p3), ‘A behemoth mother’ (Lewis 1997, p62), ‘his overweight, down-to-earth, tattooed mother’ (McLaren 2000, p4), ‘Richard’s mother, an obese housewife, (Smith 1997, p127), ‘Obese and tattooed, Liz is usually surrounded by a menagerie of animals.’ (Daly 2000, p32), ‘Elizabeth, his enormous, tattooed mother’ (Hornby 1997, p32), ‘the mother an overweight, tattooed ogress’ (Gibbs 1998, p21) ‘Liz applying make-up to a fat, greasy face’ (Richards 1998, p10), ‘Liz in a hideous floral dress.’ (Searle 2000, p2) ‘his obese

mother Liz, who surrounds herself with masks, pets, and elaborate tattoos.’ (Turner 1997, p113), ‘Her huge, flabby face takes up most of the picture’ (Ørskou 2003, p32). What these phrases expose is an ingrained disgust towards the fat working-class female body.

My chapter in *Fat Sex: New Approaches to Theory and Activism* (2015) contributed to the field of fat studies by expanding the discussion to the ways in which class-identity shapes our attitudes to fat and women. In 1978, Susie Orbach wrote that “fat is a feminist issue”, yet it is apparent from reviews of Billingham’s images of his mother Liz, from the 1990s onwards, that it is also a strongly-marked issue of class. On television, in papers and films, in everyday conversation, the working-class body has become a site of disgust, with right-wing politicians using society’s fear of the fleshy, corpulent body as a moralising stick to beat the poor. Fatness is used as visual shorthand to signify the working-classes’ supposed bad spending, bad eating habits, and – in short – “bad taste”. The image of the working-class in the British popular imagination has morphed from one of hard-working respectability to a body that is hated, despised and ridiculed: a body on which is written a brash, distasteful, lazy ignorance, a body seen as physically and socially “unfit”. Nowhere is this more true than in the case of the fat female working-class body. Fat women’s visible rejection of the discipline of bodily regulation is taken as evidence of a scandalous irresponsibility, a loss of control over the self and its physical boundaries (Hatherley 2015, pp67-68). This argument is pertinent to the reception of Billingham’s images of Liz: her body is classed as well as gendered, and certain bodies are treated as if their size and shape stands as evidence for the moral deficiencies of the people possessing them.

In *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (first translated into English 1984), Pierre Bourdieu argues that culture and society is shaped, defined and segregated along class lines via differences in discernment, taste and “cultural capital”:

Taste, a class culture turned into nature, that is, embodied, helps to shape the class body [...] It follows that the body is the most indisputable materialisation of class taste...which express in countless ways a whole relation to the body, i.e., a way of treating it, caring for it, feeding it, maintaining it, which reveals the deepest disposition of the *habitus*. (Bourdieu 2010, p188)

As I have argued previously, Bourdieu illuminates the fact that ‘judgements that “distinguish” those that possess “good taste” discriminate against those that do not.’ (Hatherley 2015, p70). Billingham’s images of Liz reveal that her body’s size and shape, her dress and her environment (i.e. her *habitus*), are strongly marked down in the judgement of the middle and upper-classes: critics receive her as possessing a *lack*.



Richard Billingham, *Untitled* (1994) from the book *Ray's a Laugh* (1996)

When I first saw this photograph (*Untitled*, 1994) in college, I was struck by the colours and patterns, all vying for attention: they seemed so stimulating but also overwhelming. The image was unnervingly, *excessively* marked for me by working-class identity, in its accumulation of negative stereotypes: a fat woman in a “garish” dress; a messy living room with clothes piled up in the background; a cheap brand of cigarettes in overflowing ashtray; colourful tattoos; kitsch décor; greyish velveteen sofas of a kind that I only ever saw around working-class friends’ houses. I felt embarrassment but also wonder and excitement, the mixed pleasure and discomfort of the sublime. I had never seen a contemporary representation of a working-class woman in photography before: what I had learned to be ashamed of, was recorded in an art book I held in my hands. I felt excitement at that. I felt validation that *my* life might also not be beyond representation.

To me today, this image is a powerful example of an Anti-Pygmalion working-class aesthetic. The picture is not an easy one to look at: it is not shy but proudly direct, making no attempt to hide or disguise its class identity. Liz’s dress does not connote style or wealth for contemporary audiences: many critics describe it as shapeless, drab, tacky and hideous, failing to see that it might also be beautiful. Its positive attributes - it is in lush bright colours, with bold and lively floral designs; it is button down and looks comfortable - are not taken into account because it *reads* as poor.

Alongside class as a determiner of supposed “bad taste”, feminist design historian Penny Sparke (1995) suggests that taste is also defined along politically gendered lines. She argues that the historical division of the genders into separate “spheres”, in which women were confined to the domestic sphere and men the public, led to the prevalence within homes during the Victorian era of an aesthetics of domesticity, comfort and beauty, defined as “feminine taste”. This taste was subsequently derided by the masculine ideals of the Modernists, for whom “design” was superior to “decoration”, and “utility” was of higher value than “comfort” (p11):

The objects of feminine taste have, in this century, frequently been deemed inferior to those of high culture. The material culture of feminine domesticity – expressed by such reputedly “vulgar” items as coal-effect fires, chintzy fabrics and potted plants – has frequently been singled out of condemnation or, at best, sarcasm, termed “bad taste” or “kitsch”. (pp11-12).

The aversion and derision expressed towards the *habitus* created by Liz in Billingham’s photographs therefore falls doubly on masculinist and modernist distaste of working-class femininity.

In “The Suit and the Photograph” (2009), John Berger discusses how the clothing, grooming and styling of the body identify the person within a classed group. Berger compares the dressed bodies of working and middle-class men in three photographs; one of peasants dressed up in their ‘Sunday best’ on route to church, one of village musicians holding classical instruments, and one showing a group of ‘Protestant missionaries’. All three photographs are black and white posed portraits of men wearing suits. In the first two, Berger describes the ways in which the suits, ‘deform’ the wearer, giving them ‘the impression of being uncoordinated, bandy-legged, barrel-chested, low-arsed, twisted or scalene...None of their abnormalities is extreme. They do not provoke pity. They are just sufficient to undermine physical dignity. We look at bodies which appear coarse, clumsy, brute-like. And incorrigibly so.’ (p35). Speaking of the workers’ body that has been shaped from hard labour, he says:

Most peasants, if not suffering from malnutrition, are physically strong and well-developed because of the very varied hard physical work they do. It would be too simple to make a list of physical characteristics – broad hands through working with them from a very early age, broad shoulders relative to the body through the habit of carrying [...] One can, however, speak of a characteristic physical rhythm which most peasants, both women and men acquire. This rhythm is directly related to the energy demanded by the amount of work which has to be done in and day, and is reflected in typical physical movements and stance. (p37)

By contrast, for the middle-classes the suit is a garment designed as ‘a costume to idealise purely sedentary power. The power of the administrator and conference table. Essentially the suit was made for the gestures of talking and calculating abstractly [...] It was the English gentleman, who

launched the suit. It was a costume which inhabited vigorous action, and which action ruffled, uncreased and spoilt.’ (p38). Today’s poor are not all labourers with bodies shaped by physically demanding work; often unemployed, they may have bodies shaped by lack of physical movement, and by a poor diet of cheap food filled with fats, sugar and salt. The stereotypical working-class body is now associated with fatness, while middle and upper-class bodies are stereotyped as thin, signalling access to more expensive and nutritious food, to gym membership and healthy leisure activities.

The idealised middle and upper-class woman’s body is constructed as being all the things which the working-class body is not. As Skeggs (1997) argues, historically the designation of “femininity” was a class-construction (p99). If the working-class body cannot express visually a sufficient degree of feminine respectability, that body then forfeits status and is degraded. As we can see in the critics’ responses to Billingham’s photos of Liz, her failure to present a slim, discreet body, seems to give writers free rein to demean her. Bourdieu (2010) makes the connections between bodily performance of gender with moral judgements:

The legitimate use of the body is spontaneously perceived as an index of moral uprightness, so that its opposite, a ‘natural’ body, is seen as an index of *laissez-aller* (‘letting one’s self go’), a culpable surrender to facility [...] Thus one can begin to map out a universe of class bodies, which (biological accidents apart) tends to reproduce in its specific logic the universe of the social structure...bodies would have every likelihood of receiving a value strictly corresponding to the positions of their owners. (p191)

This means that women face the double pressure of the sexism that controls and monitors their bodies, alongside the threat of a loss of class status, stigmatised as moral and physical failure: ‘The disappearance of economic constraints is accompanied by a strengthening of the social censorships which forbid coarseness and fatness, in favour of slimness and distinction.’ (p183). As I argued previously (2015), the extreme cultural distaste towards fat bodies in British society is not fundamentally about healthy eating, or the supposed obesity epidemic, but about policing pleasures that do not conform to bourgeois standards of refinement. We are encouraged to conform by performing the only proper way of being feminine, respectable and worthy of status. The corpulent body breaches the boundaries of “good taste,” refusing the social disciplines of state power: as I wrote (with a tip of the hat to Beth Ditto), ‘this body stands in the way of control.’ (p70).⁸³ The fat working-class body is fundamentally anti-aspirational, as Skeggs puts it:

⁸³ Beth Ditto is the lead singer of the band *The Gossip* whose song *Standing in the Way of Control* (2006) deals with the themes of queer sexuality being repressed. She is also well known for being fat positive.

The working-class body which is signalled through fat is one that has given up the hope of ever ‘improving,’ of becoming middle-class. It is the body which is recognised for what it is: a working-class body that is beyond the regulation and disciplines required to be part of social and cultural exchanges. (p82).

In *Cruel Optimism* (2011) Lauren Berlant makes a political case for drawing out the connections between the fat body and social and political control over working-class bodies and lives, ‘The obesity epidemic is also a way of talking about the destruction of life, bodies, imaginaries, and environments by and under regimes of capital [...] It also involves the more normative and informal (but not unpredictable) modes of social capital that have so much to do with the shaping of managed and imagined health.’ (p104). This vision of the normative underpins more direct power relations: ‘In short, every day more and more advice circulates from more locations about how better to get the fat (the substance and the people) under control’. (p103). Shame is a key tactic in maintaining such control: to be overweight is to be treated as *morally* deviant. If the attainable, relatively cheap pleasures of eating become stigmatised, it is then possible to encourage trends of gaining pleasure only in the aspirational economic commodified spheres, in buying the symbolic “good tastes” of the middle and upper-classes.

Silvia Federici (2004), discussing the hypocritical shaming of the pleasures of eating by those who never do without, observes that it is ‘revealing concerning the nature of class relations at the time of the witch-hunt, that dreams of roasted mutton and ale could be frowned upon by a well-fed, beef-eating bourgeoisie as signs of diabolical connivance!’ (p196). For those who have very little, the rare times of abundance in celebration and feasting are important: for those that have the money to dine out on finer, less fattening foods, the urgency of the feast doesn’t exist, as money can be spent elsewhere, on the arts, on fine wine and expensive cuisines, on holidays and travel.

Disgust at the fat body and the working-class body are intimately linked. Tyler (2013) theorises this disgust as part of a process of “social abjection”: ‘When we approach disgust as symptomatic of wider social relations of power, can we begin to ascertain why disgust might be attributed to particular bodies. Disgust is political.’ (p24). Disgust is also *ambivalent*, as Bourdieu notes:

Disgust is the ambivalent experience of the horrible seduction of the disgusting and of enjoyment, which performs a sort of reduction to animality, corporeality, the belly and sex, that is, to what is common and therefore vulgar, removing any difference between those who resist with all their might and those who wallow in pleasure, who enjoy enjoyment. (p491).

The “disgusting scenes” captured in Billingham’s photography capture the pleasures of the carnivalesque, of the breakdown of moral and social order and of “indulgence” in eating, drinking, fighting and wallowing in mess. They *do* represent pleasure, but not a cultured pleasure that

expresses middle-class good taste; and so middle-class critics react with ambivalence, with disgust, because it is the wrong *kind* of pleasure. Turner's (1997) review in *Flash Art* displays this ambivalence: 'Even while wincing at the greasy chicken flesh stuck in Liz's teeth as she talks to the cat at her plate, one can't help but wonder about the lovingly detailed tattoo on her arm that incorporates her sons' names with a rose and bluebird.' (p113). The excessive pleasures of Bakhtin's female "grotesque body" are abundantly present in Liz's fatness, her multi-coloured dresses, her pleasure in eating, her way of taking up space. Rather than turning away from Liz's pleasure, we might instead take some time to bask in it; rather than focus on her role as mother, a more fruitful analysis might want to take in and think about her pleasure, and what it says about British culture and society that we look away in distaste from women eating with relish and having bodies that take up space without shame.

Habitus, Creativity and a Working-Class Sublime

Billingham is right to stress that people should look at the pictures as they appear – as formal compositions - rather than focussing exclusively on the content. It is not that the content is unimportant, but in asking reviewers who have repeatedly shown a class-bias in responding to his work to look *beyond* the content, he is asking them to see the beauty that is blocked when his images are read solely as depictions of "life in a council flat".

After moving out of the family's shared home and into another flat, Liz began to decorate and make her new environment a reflection of *her* tastes. As Billingham tells it:

The first time I went back to the flat, after I'd left to go to university, I found my dad wasn't living there anymore. The flat was empty and he was living in the new flat with my Mum in another tower block. The way the flat was decorated was different from the flat I grew up in. It was more opulent and there were more cats and dogs and small animals in cages everywhere – it was raucous (Billingham in MacDonald 2007, p20)

Although Ray later ended up joining her in the new place, what is key for me here is the way Liz, once on her own, could make her own space as she saw fit, in ways that expressed her desires for animals, life, colour and decoration.



Richard Billingham, *Untitled* (1996) from the book *Ray's a Laugh* (1996)

Writing on “The Psychology of the Home” in *Home Sweet Home* (2003), Gitte Ørskou uses Freud’s term “Das Unheimliche” – the uncanny, or literally the “unhomely” - to argue that certain spaces are uncanny, taking as an example the home life depicted in Billingham’s photographs. In a passage that reveals a multi-dimensional distaste for Liz and her *habitus*, Ørskou analyses the photograph above:

In one of the pictures, we see a close-up of Liz. Her huge, flabby face takes up most of the picture, to the accompaniment of a large number of small carnival mask decorating the real wall. She has demurely turned her eyes down for the split second during which the picture was taken. Her maidenish pose is in sharp contrast to her actual appearance. Not only is the situation unseemly and somewhat repulsive, as the mother hardly conforms to the pattern according to which she has been arranged, it is rather *unheimlich* – as it moves on the borderline of a familiar scenario which at the same time is suspended. (p32)

Look again at the above photograph, and then at the words Ørskou has chosen to use: “flabby”, “unseemly”, “repulsive” - this feels *nasty*. As I’ve already shown, such dehumanising treatment is the “common-sense” of middle-class critics, when presented with working-class bodies and signifiers of working-class (lack of) taste. A fat working-class woman is “unseemly” to this writer - but not to anyone who grew up with working-class women who may also have been fat or had a similar sense of style, dress or taste in décor.

The pose Liz has been captured in was chosen by her son, and the photograph is an image of love for his mother. That Ørskou finds it repulsive because it does not confirm to her notion of correct, feminine motherhood, suggests that for her only one type of mother can exist as true or worthy. It is cruel as well as classist and sexist to say that Billingham’s posing of Liz as beautiful is a *mistake*.

There is a difference between expressing unfamiliarity and discomfort with the subjects and spaces depicted in a photograph, and designating the subjects represented as *unheimlich*: these scenes may not make her feel at home, but they are actually *someone's* home. The love and beauty in this image is denied by Ørskou's reading.

Yet Ørskou goes on to make pertinent points about the meanings of home and *habitus*, saying that 'the home is first and foremost a mental place.' (p16). If so, then why is it so impossible to imagine home as residing with an overweight mother in a council flat? For Ørskou, 'the home is the same place where we are happy to open our doors and invite the world inside once the worst dust has been removed from the corners, allowing us again to show an immaculate and shiny picture of our ideal reality.' (p10). Although many working-class people share the bourgeois respectability ethic of maintaining domestic space "for show", to represent oneself well to the outside world, for many others home is about personal comfort: a safe place where you can be yourself and disregard what others may think of you, your tastes and décor. The combination of extreme mess and immense care in Billingham's images of Liz's flat expresses her dedication to beautiful objects, fabrics and patterns, whilst not really being fussed about cleanliness – this is a *habitus* to actually inhabit, to live in rather than to showcase one's taste and cultural and economic capital.

As a teenager, I would visit friends' houses and the majority of the middle-class family's houses had plates, chairs and even rooms that were not used but were meant "for guests"/ "for best" but ended up just for show. This was not a feature in the homes of my working-class friends, which were often spaces where I was asked to make myself at home, and fed endless rounds of toast and tea and biscuits, while cat and dogs jumped up all over the furniture. It is not my intention to claim this is the case for all homes, but my experience is useful here to provide a contrast to negative readings of the home captured by Billingham as irredeemably horrible – from my experience the messier the house, the more comfortable the inhabitants were to be around; the tidier the house, the trickier the parents.⁸⁴

The above picture of Liz does not repulse me like it does Ørskou. It soothes me, but also sparks something I long for: it is a representation of a woman that feels true to me. Liz looks tired, her eyes are cast downwards as if she is taking a moment in repose, or just to herself. The remnants

⁸⁴ When discussing this work with my oldest brother Owen, who didn't feel comfortable with these images, what became clear was that due to having exclusively middle-class friends at school, he had not encountered other working-class homes in the same way I had. Despite coming from the same family, we had different degrees of exposure to other working-class lives. The point being not all working-class people will view these images in the same way.

of a shimmery eye shadow are on her eyelids, and a blue eyeliner can be made out from beneath her bottom lashes; this make-up is faded as if it's the end of the day, so I think that maybe this is why she is tired. There is no suggestion of glamorising her tiredness in some fetish of the pressures of poverty: this photograph just conveys that she looks weary, yet she also looks dignified. This aspect makes me feel tenderness towards her; the delicacy of the remaining make-up speaks of fragility. The skin on her face is lined and marked by her life - to be poor, to struggle and worry, does tell on the body and it also wears on the mind. Liz has the beginnings of a moustache at the sides of her mouth, and at first seeing this I feel a shock: protectively I want to cover it up, not let people see it, as I know people will judge her harshly for this failure at performing feminine grooming. And yet in the next moment I notice her full red lips are upturned in a half smile; this makes me take courage for her, and think “*so what* if she has a moustache, does it really matter?” Her face expresses contentment: this is her face and she is not ashamed of it, she is tired, but she is comfortable with herself.

To see a photograph of a woman who is not young, not conventionally beautiful, not perfectly made-up, is rare in art and visual culture.⁸⁵ It is not rare to see a photograph of a working-class woman publicly exposing her “flaws” in the media, but in these cases the purpose is to shame the woman for “letting herself go”.⁸⁶ The way that Billingham has framed this photograph with Liz in the middle of the shot and her ornate masks behind her - decorating and framing her face, mirroring back the blue of her eyes and the red of her lips, along with the colours of her dress - makes her presence feel grand and celebrated: she is the focus of the picture. Although it is Billingham who set up and captured this composition, the *mise-en-scène* of this image is created by Liz: the decorations, rich colours and patterns are of her design, and formed through her creativity.

Although it could be said that this is an image of worship as well as love, it is not falsely idealising Liz's double-chin is emphasised by the picture's angle, and her moustache and facial blemishes are highlighted. This Anti-Pygmalion representation reveals that women who do not conform to hegemonic notions of “good taste” can nevertheless evoke beauty, love and tenderness. Liz is not presenting her “best side” here, but she is presented by her son as clearly in her element. Just by

⁸⁵ As illustrated by the viral online trend of women posting pictures of themselves without make-up to social media sites: if it was commonplace to have women un-made up within the media and culture, then this trend would not have been commented upon. See Lewis (25th March 2014)

⁸⁶ *The Daily Mail*, *The Sun* are regularly shaming women on their pages, as well as the online “Femail” site of *The Daily Mail*. Magazines for women such as *Closer*, *Heat* and *Grazia* have often expressed shaming attitudes to women's bodies, clothing and gender performance.

being herself, in her *habitus*, without aspiration to be otherwise, she is worthy of his love, and she provokes aesthetic pleasure from me: enjoyment of the rich colours she has chosen for her world, along with phenomenological responses of fear and joy - fear for her exposure to judgement and joy in her presentation of alternative ways of being beautiful and succeeding.

Gilda Williams (1996) is one of the few critics to have focused on Liz rather than Ray, and also one of the few who acknowledges the way Liz has created her own environment as one of the most interesting aspects of the work. She describes Liz's "rampant sense of decoration":

colliding patterns of wallpaper, fabrics, lace and trinkets effectively provide a lush background for either despair or the ordinariness depicted. These suffocating interiors are not accidental result of indifference or accumulation but, far more disturbingly, have been created on purpose, with some care even – a metaphor, somehow, for the politics in this country, wherein the "accident" of poverty is soon unmasked as part of the plan. (p31)

I agree with her point that poverty in Britain is not an accident but part of the deliberate structural organisation of wealth, but I'm not sure about why she would read the Liz's creativity in designing her own space as "disturbing" because it is intentional. What it speaks of to me is that one does not need to be money-rich to be rich in creativity and resourcefulness.

Conclusion: Anti-Pygmalion Photography

In this chapter, I've exposed the backlash of classism faced by working-class artists, when the aesthetic merit and artistic skill of their work is devalued because writers and reviewers can't quite believe that working-class artists can exist, or might have become artists through their own talent and agency rather than just blind luck. Despite overcoming the structural hurdles and emotional struggles that make it extremely difficult for people from poor backgrounds to become artists, those that do succeed are continually confronted with hostile, disbelieving receptions. Against such critical hostility, I provided counter-readings of Billingham's work that bring back into view the dimensions that these critics have missed or ignored.

I have examined the classing of bodies, and the gendering of class, in order to account for the oppressive stereotyping of fat working-class femininity which gives rise to the assumption among critics that Billingham's mother will universally be seen as ugly and unworthy of respect and value. When asked by Teeman (2006) how he felt 'to be remembered for the grotesque, shocking family pictures', Billingham replied 'very plainly' that "they weren't shocking and grotesque to me" (p15). The critical "common sense" that insists that they must be, is in fact a *position* informed by the class background, education and gender of reviewers – it is grounded in their subject positions. When they take their perspectives as facts in their reading of the work, they take it for granted that

Liz's *habitus* is *unheimlich*, and discount it as a site of aesthetic appreciation.

This thesis unpicks negative stereotypes of working-class women as “grotesque”, to expose that designation as formed by classist and sexist oppressions as a tool of subjugation, a punishment for social and physical deviation from middle-class norms. The concept of the Anti-Pygmalion is a form of resistance to these norms. In this chapter, I have enriched and expanded this concept by showing that Billingham himself, by producing work that resists and refuses aspiration (despite his precarious acceptance by and ascension into the art world), is an Anti-Pygmalion artist. ‘He says he has never taken any self-portrait photographs but that “everything about me is there anyway when you look at the pictures.”’ (Dunne 2002, p12). In representing his family, he also exposes himself publicly to the risk of moralising criticism, stigmatisation and shaming. To produce such work, and have the courage to show it, takes strength and resilience: it is an act of sublime dissension.

Chapter Five: Shameless Girls, Class, Sexuality and Carol Morley's *The Alcohol Years* (2000)

Introduction

This chapter takes up a different aspect of the formation of the working-class female grotesque. Moving on from discussions of identities formed from class-shame and split-subjectivities in Spence's work, and the fat working-class female body and *habitus* in Billingham's work, this chapter shifts focus to "behaviours" defined as shameless and unfeminine. I look at the ways in which working-class girls' sexuality is written about as if it is out of control, in breach of femininity. Teenage girls' experimentation and participation in drinking and casual sex are often described as if they make these girls "post-feminists" and complicit in their own "degradation". Critical writing on girls' sex and drinking often takes a conservative tone, revealing *distaste* for behaviours deemed unfeminist, and an unconscious association between feminist political integrity and *feminine* respectability, i.e. middle-class respectable discreetness.⁸⁷

This chapter is structured into three main sections, the first of which discusses *The Alcohol Years* as an example of a *non-visual portrait* of the working-class female grotesque. The second explores the subcultures and acts of rebellion that allow girls spaces to reject conformist and conservative gendered behaviours, performance and appearance, as a counterpoint to the ways critical writing on working-class girls' sexuality often constructs it as a form of *deviant* femininity. In the third, I argue for an understanding of teenage "rebellion" as a form of carnivalesque interlude which needs to be rethought. I conclude by considering whether Morley's film, and the girls whose lives it narrates, present an example of a positive Anti-Pygmalion aesthetic and politics.

This chapter does not argue that girls' casual sex and excessive drinking is subversive in itself, but attempts to understand the ways in which some working-class girls make space within a limited *habitus* to explore their own limits, define their own sexualities, and negotiate the constructions of femininity which have been socially and culturally imposed on them. So-called bad behaviours can be empowering ways to rebel against gender training and reclaim sexual agency, and offer a path to experiences which fall into this thesis's understanding of the carnivalesque. There is more to this behaviour than is currently theorised. Looking at behaviours deemed "shameless" reveals the

⁸⁷ See, Levy (2006) for an example of the ways feminist writers blame girls themselves for playing out patriarchal stereotypes of sexual availability, describing them as ignorant dupes who are in a sense impairing feminist progress.

narrow realms of existence girls are permitted to live within, and also makes clear the contradictorily double-standard treatment of girls' and boys' sexualities and behaviours. This chapter examines the classed-experience of working-class girls, and the effects on their lives of encounters with subcultures, music and sexuality, to explore what is going on when girls are "shameless".

Bad Girls in Art

The art world is full of supposedly bad boys, male artists who court controversy.⁸⁸ There are also many representations in art, film and visual culture of men and boys who behave badly. Men are given permission socially and culturally to be shameless: often we share their point of view, and their behaviours are understood to be the result of external forces that shape their lives.⁸⁹ We see such men as are doing the best they can in bad situations; but when women are depicted enacting the same behaviours it is because *they* are bad, and they are pathologised for it. Critical writing about the trope of the "bad girl" has discussed this sexist double standard, and also looked at the roles played by race and sexuality in the construction of this figure (Bettie 2003). There has been much writing by sociologists on the topic of girls and class,⁹⁰ yet in art writing the dimension of class in constructions of the bad girl has largely been ignored.

Two popular texts that deal with girls (as well as reclaiming the word "girl" from its patronising application to women) as subjects of contemporary art are the books *Bad Girls* by Marcia Tucker and Marcia Tanner (1994) and more recently Catherine Grant's *Girls! Girls! Girls! In Contemporary Art* (2012). Although the focus of both books is on girls and girlhood, and on nascent adolescent female sexuality, neither looks closely at the experiences of *real* girls' material and social conditions. The experiences of school, of lived environment, *habitus* and class in the formations of girls' gender identity are left unanalysed. The experience of *becoming* women, or more crucially the

⁸⁸ Much of the career of British artist Damien Hirst, often described as the bad boy of the art world, has involved work that has caused sensation and spectacle. For example, 'The Physical *Impossibility of Death* in the Mind of *Someone Living*' (1989) and 'For the Love of God' (2007).

⁸⁹ British filmmaker Mike Leigh's *Naked* (1993) begins with the main character Jonny raping a woman and then fleeing from Manchester to London. Although he behaves badly throughout the film, he is portrayed sympathetically.

⁹⁰ Among the main texts are Walkerdine (2001), Tyler (2008), Skeggs (1997) and Lawler (2008).

process of learning correct femininity and gender presentation, is different for different girls: as I've argued, this process has classed and racialised dimensions.

Although *Bad Girls* takes a broad look at what it means socially and culturally to be seen as a “bad girl”, looking at beauty, transgression, age, sexuality and the grotesque, it is largely focussed on women rather than girls as such. The premise of the 1994 New York exhibition of which the book is the catalogue was to look at work made by female artists who ‘are defying conventions and properties of traditional femininity to define themselves according to their own terms.’ (Tucker 1994, p5). The “girls” in the title is an appropriation of the patronising practice of infantilising adult women by calling them girls, making the label “bad girl” a badge of honour as a celebration of revolt, rebellion and mischief. Despite the absence of real teenage girls in the book, *Bad Girls* is still of interest for this thesis as it explores avenues of women’s pleasure in transgression, proposing a reclamation of what women have been taught to be ashamed of and repress.

In *Bad Girls* Tucker and Tanner write of the importance of language:

Language is more than just what is spoken and written; virtually all communication, social structures and systems rely in some ways on language for their form. Whoever controls language – who speaks, who is listened to or heard has everything to say about how people think and feel about themselves. Language is power. (p16).

Speaking of woman artists “finding a voice” Tucker lists important subjects for discussion – ‘ageing, racism, reproductive rights, motherhood, physical and sexual abuse, standards of beauty and control over language itself’ (p18) - yet misses out “class” altogether as a subject that women need to articulate. For working-class women, finding the confidence to speak amongst the middle-classes whose voices predominate in cultural, artistic and political spheres is a real issue: not all women have the same ability or opportunity to “find a voice”.

Tanner notes that some behaviours mark out “good” girls from “bad”, so that in order not to be seen as bad, girls must learn a set of rules:

Good girls, we learn, don't rock the boat. They don't break the rules or radically question absurdities in the social, economic, political or cultural status quo. They don't behave excessively, don't call attention to themselves, never do anything embarrassing. They learn ingenious strategies for displaying and yet concealing their bodies. They act feminine, modestly, quietly, in ways unthreatening to men. They put others' needs and wants first. They may wield power or be aggressive but covertly, through passive manipulation. (p51)

Tanner makes the crucial point that to transgress codes of acceptable behaviour carries a high cost. The girl who does not conform to correct behaviour becomes the “bad girl”, and by extension her body becomes the physical manifestation of *badness* and is perceived as grotesque:

‘The grotesque body is frightening to most people. It stands in opposition to the ideal of serene, closed, symmetrical and centred classical forms sanctioned by high or official culture (particularly the fashion magazine).’ (p32). The grotesque body of the bad girl is doubly transgressive:

This transgressive figure contradicts commonly-held values and norms of all kinds. It is old, pregnant, horny, loud, fat, sloppy and drunk, and it’s telling the authorities to get fucked. No wonder it’s scary. And no wonder the ideal female form in which all grotesque aspects are hidden from view (at least in mainstream Western culture), the one bad girls don’t buy, is the one which is under the complete control of its owner and of its leasing corporation, The Fashion Industry. (pp32-33)

Although not discussing how class plays into constructions of good and bad behaviour, *Bad Girls* shares theoretical threads with this thesis: ‘*Bad Girls* puts the lie to stereotypical images of the female body by showing it unidealised and unselfconscious, a challenge to the inevitable accusation of inherent female narcissism; it makes clear that what’s normal depends on who’s doing the defining, and from what position.’ (p33). Through thinking about gender *and* class, a more complex picture of the oppressive and hypocritical treatment of girls becomes apparent.

Carol Morley Biography

Carol Morley was born 14th January 1966 in Stockport, seven miles outside of Manchester.⁹¹ Morley’s father committed suicide when she was eleven years old; a year later she started drinking. At thirteen she formed her first band, The Playground, and later the band TOT with her friend Debby. At sixteen Morley left school, and continued to spend her time at Manchester’s famous club *The Hacienda*, drinking and getting up to mischief. Around twenty, Morley left for London, not returning to her home town for twelve years; when she did return, it was to make *The Alcohol Years*.⁹²

As the story goes, many years later in London Morley was having dinner with fellow filmmaker Clio Barnard, when Barnard’s partner revealed that he had met Morley back in Manchester, and began to remind her of occasions and events, as well as her “reputation” at the time. Morley found that she had no recollection of these events, and this episode forced her to confront a period in her life that she barely remembered. This motivated an investigative practice that Morley would make her trademark, a method of examining lives and playing the detective as director.⁹³ Morley

⁹¹ Hence the title, *Seven Miles Out* Morley’s autobiographical novel (2015).

⁹² Biographical details gathered via articles and my interview with Morley (25/8/2016).

⁹³ Morley’s film *Dreams of a Life* (2011), about the real-life case of Joyce Vincent who lay dead in her flat undiscovered for three years, uses the same method of sending out a call to those people

decided to put a call out in Manchester's local papers, asking for people who knew her at that time to get into contact with her. It is these meetings and stories that begin to fill the gaps in her history, yet they do more than relay events: these speakers also pass judgement on her, create versions of her, and edit her into a character and myth. Whether wittingly or not they construct her as a female grotesque.



Film still of one of Morley's adverts in *The Alcohol Years* (2000).

The Alcohol Years: An Unseen Portrait of a Female Grotesque

Within the first few seconds of *The Alcohol Years*, interviewees are seen talking harshly about how they remember Morley - we see a woman speaking of "this Carol Morley creation".⁹⁴ This is followed by one of the film's rare shots of Morley herself, walking along a red brick terraced street, seen from the neck up behind a camera: one eye closed, looking at us through her camera lens, with black thick framed glasses and a dyed orangey/pink cropped bob haircut, and mouth in a grin. While this shot plays, a male voice starts saying "I think everybody hated you Carol, to a certain degree, at that time, you were incredibly manipulative." (Later in the film a woman interviewee says she thought everyone was in *love* with Morley). There is a clash here between these dramatic spoken statements, and what appears to be a cheery woman returning to the streets of

who knew Vincent; the film is then assembled from interviews of those who knew her, in order to construct a portrait from the fragments of memories other people have of her.

⁹⁴ Manchester music writer and manager Liz Naylor.

Manchester with a camera. This sets up a constant pull of contradictions within the film, between contrasting accounts and unreliable narrators

The words of the film's title appear one by one as we hear the ring of a door bell; non-diegetic music starts up, sounds of strummed guitar and keyboards, the tone hopeful and slightly sad-edged. We see a shot of Manchester from above, the city just about to get dark; the car headlights and turning-out building lights are sped up as the scene becomes one of night-time.⁹⁵ In the next shot, the first interviewee fills the screen: a man sitting, looking down, clearly uncomfortable despite being in a comfortable-looking room in front of a bookcase. "We've not seen each other properly in ages, you came to my wedding a month and a half ago though, but that's the first time I've seen you in god knows how long". He then looks up at the camera, "I mean, to some extent, you are a stranger to me again. And now here I am in front of a camera". The old friend is clearly hurt, looking now at the camera for a response, but none is given. The film cuts to another outdoor shot of Manchester, this time from ground level as young women dressed up for a night out, with bare arms and legs exposed to the elements, rush down streets in the rain towards clubs to begin their night out and take shelter from the weather. Shots of wet Manchester streets linger over the neon lights of the pubs and clubs, and the comparative tattiness of neighbouring buildings; a white stretch limousine glides conspicuously down working-class streets. The scene is being set of Manchester as a place of contradictions.

Over the top of these images, two male voices are heard saying "Carol Morley", then the next shot takes us to two men in front of a bright pink wall, as they continue "...I think she was a figment of our imagination, wasn't she?". The next shot pans along a road, again at night: there are lines of people standing on the street as the camera glides by in a car, while another voice is heard: "Early 80s Manchester, there were no loft apartments in the city centre, there were no places to buy a fucking cappuccino, there was fuck all". The camera glides on, showing women in party dresses and casual jumpers, hoods up against the rain. A woman's voice starts speaking, it's Liz Naylor: "It was like Moors murders, kinda 1960s yeah, it was dead '60s Manchester". We see groups of men striding down the streets and crossing busy roads; the camera remains inside the car, looking out of its windows: not part of these scenes, but observing them.

⁹⁵ cf Wilson (1991), on the city as place of sublime encounters for women: "The sublime" is, therefore, not just an abstract theory, but an idea that has seeped into the collective consciousness to become one of the ways in which the experience of urbanism is understood, re-evaluated and transformed.' (p23). Morley as filmmaker shows us the city in an exciting light, she makes it dynamic. We see the city through her eyes, as an adventurer.

A new, male voice is heard: “It seemed to me that Manchester had lost its soul from the Manchester I knew from my childhood, which was always a warm, cosy, but busy place”.⁹⁶ We drive past a chip shop, the warm lights glowing against the dark rainy outside. Passing the outside of a church we see a couple of girls in tight, bright red, short party dresses, one of them holding her dark jacket above her head against the rain, exposing her body, as the voice continues, “I always remember you as someone who has a passionate interest in Roman Catholicism”. The next shot is of Alan Wise, a middle-aged man in glasses and flat cap, with a bright colourful tie and round belly under his suit, continuing, “and as always going on about the nuns, and how you wanted one day to become a nun and live in a nunnery”. We then see groups of couples standing outside of clubs on the street, kissing as taxis line the pavements. The film is full of both spoken and visual contradictions such as these: churches and red dresses, a notoriously promiscuous girl who wanted to be a nun.

The next voice, soft and female, begins “I think you were more desperate, it was like, you were definitely more desperate to kind of go home with somebody”. The camera now focuses on the warm-coloured living room of a woman, speaking in daytime: “you had to, you couldn’t go back to your flat, it was like I have to go home with some fella, or some woman, or whoever’s gonna have me basically” - she laughs at that, and looks back at the camera.⁹⁷ The next shot returns to the street at night, a close-up of young smiling people; a girl sticks her tongue out at the camera, and the group’s laughter can be heard over non-diegetic music. These are the first couple of minutes of the film, and they contain so much of its character: clashing opinions, feelings about place, descriptions of Morley as a character rather than a real person, and the combined tone of cosiness, with dark humour and bawdiness.

The film is full of comments about Morley’s unreality, alongside accusations that everything was all about her, that she was manipulative and self-absorbed. A man says, “you thought all about yourself, a Morley creation”; a woman says, “nothing was real about you, you were in a film of your life”. The most hostile interviewee is a man with dark short hair and small thick dark glasses (Gary, who was the chef at The Hacienda): his comments are bitter and revolve around his conception of Morley as self-absorbed, he seems angry that he is in front of a camera speaking about her. This seems odd, as surely didn’t have to be in the film, and knew full well that its subject was Morley herself - he chose to be there, which adds a layer of bitterness that he would voluntarily

⁹⁶ Alan Wise (1953- 2016), a manager and promoter in the Manchester music scene.

⁹⁷ This is Debby, Carol’s best friend during that period.

take part but begrudge the experience.⁹⁸ Gary says, “it’s all about you, why are you making a film about yourself, you may as well be in front of the camera... When you told me you got the money to do the film, I told you not to bother making this film but spend it on therapy”.

Although Morley herself is only briefly seen in the film, some of the stories are illustrated with filmed stand-ins for her. One of the female interviewees is in a blond wig; she smears bright red lipstick across her mouth and says, “Carol circa 1984”, and the next shot is a child’s toy duck on a stick being walked along a night-time city street. Interviewees tell of their shock and perplexity at Morley’s habit of taking toys with her to The Hacienda, walking the duck on a stick and playing with a train set under the table of the pub – the incongruities of an underage girl who instead of dressing up to appear older was actually dressing like a child. Many interviewees describe this as attention-seeking behaviour. Another stand-in for Morley is a blond girl passed-out on the floor outside a nightclub in an animal print fur coat, with her head resting on the plastic duck. This is typical of a particular sort of (especially Northern) working-class gallows humour, a way of making light of something so as not to let it break you.⁹⁹ We see a close-up of Morley’s shiny red-lipsticked mouth as a male interviewee reports on everyone loving and being fascinated / freaked out by her tongue “which was extra-large”: the lips part and extra squelchy sound effects are added as a very large and long pinkish wet tongue comes poking out in a point and wiggling at the end. A fun break in the film’s action for a visceral bodily encounter.

There are also snippets of archive footage of Morley and Pete Shelley’s (singer of the post-punk band *The Buzzcocks*) trip to Paris. Several interviewees back up the narrative that many people fell in love with Morley by telling the story of how Shelley, habitually in the club with Sailors, was wooed by Morley’s coming up to him and telling him she was going to marry him. They began a brief relationship, planning to get married and even booking the registry office. During an archival snippet, we see the briefest of flashes of a very conventionally attractive young woman seen in oversaturated light, a flicker of beauty. Sat in a café, blond hair, blue dress, looking away from the camera. In the next shot a young Morley is caught face-on looking sad. The frame freezes before dissolving. Shelley tells of her “becoming very withdrawn” during the Paris trip. As soon as the

⁹⁸ This reading is complicated by my interview with Morley, she tells me that Gary really didn’t want to be in the film, but that she pleaded with him to be in it as his opinion of her provides a reality check somehow. (25/8/2016)

⁹⁹ McKenzie (2015) writes of the survival strategy of finding humour within bleakness, ‘I have many examples of serious situations that I have recounted to those to those who do not live on the estate, or who have not lived on council estates, who wince at these stories, which I sometimes think are funny.’ (p56)

film returns to Manchester the music picks up in mood, more sturdy and secure, more familiar if not happier. This gives the impression that this brief romance in Paris with a famous man did not hold the key to happiness and satisfaction for Morley - it wasn't really what she wanted, and she left Shelley before the wedding. In the film, we see Shelley holding a bottle of beer, discussing the end of their relationship without bitterness; after all, he says, his band were due to tour America.

The most prominent narratives of Morley in the film revolve around her sexual promiscuity, which is treated as aberrant, excessive and pathological. Although many of these stories would not seem that unusual if they were attributed to a man, for this "pretty blonde" her behaviour is seen as expressing a grotesque nature. One interviewee terms her "a role model for promiscuity", another says that when people talked about her they were "not talking about your artistic aspirations I'm afraid, but how many things had been up your vagina" – there is a strong aspect of othering and dehumanising in the way Morley is spoken about. One of the interviewees recalls a story of her sleeping with the gas man who had come to her flat, an act he diagnoses as "sexually ill" and "sad" because "I thought you were more valuable". There is a contrary character to many of the male interviewees' accounts - many describe their distaste and disapproval of her behaviour, yet continued themselves to sleep with her. So many of the men say *other* men used her, and should have taken care of her, yet none takes responsibility. There were lots of stories, lots of men spreading information about her, so when these men also slept with her, knowing all about her "reputation", they then blamed her afterwards for her behaviour. People would talk about evenings out improving because "great I can sleep with Carol", or, "great, this person's gonna come in and you should see some shit hit the fan at some point". The men here are complicit in the construction of her reputation, but she alone is framed as guilty.

The construction of the film gives a differing account of the feelings connected to these stories. Instead of a sombre, tragic *mise-en-scène*, and soundtrack that reveals shame at these damning accounts of her behaviour, the film makes light of them. In one scene, a female interviewee asks, "how many men have you slept with?", and the shot moves into an outdoor scene of lots of different windows lit-up with glowing lights, some Christmas fairy lights making the interiors of the windows glow warmly in contrast with the dark blue of the night outside. Music plays, and layered on top are the sexual sounds of huffing and puffing. This represents all the interior scenes of her *promiscuity*, yet there is a cosy, upbeat feel about the music and visuals: not the tragic feel of degradation, but homely and fun looking. In this way, the film counters the dominant narratives formed by the male interviewees and refuses shame.

Critical Writing on the Film

Much of the critical writing about the film is limited to exploring a few thematically linked subjects, either establishing that the film is “about” Morley’s time drinking heavily and sleeping around, puzzling over the way that Morley is discussed but not shown in the film, or focussing on lost selves and constructed identities, the subjective nature of memory and identity. Of course, the film is edited, and what is seen and heard has been chosen by an authorial/auteur director, but the film does not push for one obvious or clear narrative about the events it revisits, or about how we should understand Morley herself: what it presents are varying and contradictory accounts of people and events, unreliable testimonies¹⁰⁰. It shows that not only is memory subjective, but also the way memories are evaluated and judgement is formed.

The interplay of spectral positions with authorial agency, and the power dynamic created by Morley’s not speaking for herself, works to reveal and contest attitudes to women’s unconventional and socially stigmatised behaviour. By not replying to accusations and angry or negative comments, Morley literally refuses to defend herself, apologise, or explain: she refuses the position of the shamed woman who must plead with her accusers. The figure of the Anti-Pygmalion is formed through such a refusal of shame - instead of Morley presenting her defence, we the spectators are left to weigh up what the interviewees have said, and decide for ourselves between contradictory and unreliable narratives.

In her chapter “Feminist Filmmaking Practice as Intervention (Carol Morley’s *The Alcohol Years*)”, Dagmar Brunow (2015) places this approach in context:

Morley’s film is an original intervention into recent trends within autobiographical filmmaking; it is a confession video without a confessor and a first-person film without the “I”. In fact, Morley’s film is an act of confession, but this act is not exerted by herself, but others [...] The film undermines the modes of conventional documentary film-making by abstaining from a coherent voice-over which would evoke the impression of an “authentic” I-narrator. (p85)

This choice allows the viewers to come up with their own conclusion rather than follow one ego-authorial voice leading the film, presenting differing versions, agendas and attitudes of the same events to come through to tell a more complex and dialectical story. As Brunow says, ‘*The Alcohol Years* challenges the use of talking heads as a means of authentication. As such *The Alcohol Years* can be inscribed into a tradition of self-reflexive documentaries exploring the use of talking heads

¹⁰⁰ Daniels (2013): ‘Carol Morley’s *The Alcohol Years* (2000) also combines performativity with realism to explore her own contested identity [...] Through these strategies *The Alcohol Years* creates a rich and reflexive exploration of the unreliability of subjective memory in the representation of identity.’ (pp30-31)

and witness accounts, such as, Trinh T. Minh-Ha's *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* (1989) or Errol Morris' *The Thin Blue Line* (1988). Like these films *The Alcohol Years* questions the truth claims of the witness accounts.' (p88-89). It is useful to understand the film in reference to these other filmmakers as what is being aimed at is an investigation of contested territory and not a neat summation of a period or person. It is also a counter to accusations of narcissism as what is sought by Morley as director is not ego supply or validation.

It is not only the interviewees that have conflicting memories and feelings: the often upbeat, fun and sometimes dreamy atmosphere created by the non-diegetic music and montages of clips of interiors, gives the impression that not all that is being remembered was bad. In a review of the film's broadcast on Channel 4, Daniel Stour mirrors Brunow's comments:

Spoken clips are mixed with a collection of images – mostly from the present, occasionally the past – illustrating the stories being told; a dream sequence of bedsits, streets, faces, tower blocks, dressing tables, wallpaper, books, dolls, nightclubs and countless other details flow past [...] While fragments of her self are scattered across the film, her presence, reflected in the abrasive words of others and the elegiac visual style, saturates every frame [...] The result loosens the notions of documentary, memory and autobiography by drawing attention to conflicts and unreliabilities, rather than concealing them. Questions are left unanswered, stories unfinished; the director does not verify or discount anything said about her by her interviewees. The pattern suits the hazy visual collages, which evoke the years of intoxicated wandering; the edges between past and present are blurred. (Stour 2002)

Because this is a time Morley barely remembers, these “hazy visual collages” represent visually the fragmentary aspects of partial memory - it is more honest for her to allow the film to be ambiguous. It is also a way of refusing to paint her as a victim: by constructing the mood as dreamy, Morley is placing herself within a situation that may have felt unreal, but crucially was also a valid experience.

It also reveals the ways in which the construction of information and descriptions of people are not necessarily about “truth” but about the subjectivities of the people who are forming judgements. As Brunow continues:

By constructing herself as an absence, the film's protagonist becomes the film's “slippery signifier” exposing the patriarchal discourses which run through the recollections and in which Morley's sexual activity is pathologised while she is described as a “freak” [...] The seriality of the witness accounts does not represent a polyphony of narratives, but foregrounds how *the versions echo each other through their constant repetition of patriarchal views on female sexuality*. (My italics p89)

The argument that the subjective accounts of the interviewees is shaped by patriarchy is key for

my reading of the film, as Brunow terms it a ‘construction of cultural memory by revealing which discursive spaces are opened and which are closed in the process of remembrance.’ (p76). The possibility of Morley being remembered as a part of Manchester’s music scene, rather than for her sexual exploits, is closed off: as a female in these spaces her role was limited, and the way she is remembered reinforces an understanding of her imbued with sexism. As Brunow comments, ‘the film’s feminist perspective foregrounds the construction of hegemonic cultural memory with its inherent male homosociality, its stereotypical representation of women as wives, girlfriends or groupies, and its heteronormative stance.’ (p89). By withholding images of Morley from this time, the visual pleasure and titillation evoked by presenting an attractive young woman is denied: some of the interviewees may be discussing Morley in sexually objectifying ways, but the film does not, which further supports Brunow’s description of the film as feminist in its strategic denial of the “male gaze”.

Another recurring reading of the film is one in which Manchester itself is seen to be the portrait / subject of the film. In Dwight Vick and Elizabeth Rhoades book *Drugs and Alcohol in The 21st Century: Theory, Behaviour, And Policy* (2010) the film is described as painting a picture of a cultural time and place, rather than a person:

A poetic retrieval of the years the filmmaker Carol Morley spent in Manchester, where in the early 1980s, her life was lost in an alcoholic blur. In Morley’s search for her lost self, conflicting memories and viewpoints weave in and out, revealing a portrait of the city, its pop culture, and the people who lived it. (p361)

Although the film is set in a historically and culturally fascinating time, to focus on the place rather than the person is to treat Morley as of less importance than the musicians, music and places of Manchester. Similarly, Jason Wood and Ian Haydn Smith (2015) write that ‘although the film initially recounts the film-maker’s teenage years, mostly spent partying in Manchester at a time when the Hacienda was at the peak of its popularity, the film ultimately becomes a fascinating portrayal of the era and the many people Morley encountered.’ (p215). It is interesting the way that critics either foreground the teenager Morley or Manchester in their assessment of what they believe the film to really be about. It seems to me that this is an obfuscation of the difficult subject matter of teenage sexuality and active female sexuality.

Emma Slawinski’s review of the film tries to balance the topics and subjects of the film and deal with some of its paradoxes and contradictions:

Morley has put together an engrossing and entertaining film of the legends and personalities of a vital era in British pop culture that will have you wincing in parts, while wishing you’d been there to witness this world of anarchic

opportunity [...] As a homage to Manchester, it's warmer and softer than *24 Hour Party People*, sentimentalising its grit and seediness [...] Even the bleak tower blocks of Hume are caught in limpid Northern sunlight, breaking through the clouds, making the estates look like places of hopeful promise. (Slawinski 2005)

Slawinski makes the point that despite the 'contempt directed towards Morley, or at least towards the mythical, grotesque caricature of Carol that the interviewees conjure up in the space left by her purposeful silence' the film *is* pleasurable and aesthetically pleasing to watch: 'pity and distaste' are 'balanced by warmth and laughter at the memories that she evokes' (Slawinski 2005). This is observed by paying attention to the feelings evoked by the film: the warmth, the humour, the cosiness of glimpses into the interviewees', hint at an everyday life that feels familiar, even if it is contrasted with harsh words. It feels like a real and true place because, like one's home town, both comforting and suffocating, it contains that which we may long for while at the same time wishing to escape.

Mad, Bad and Sad: The *Othering* of Morley

Peppered throughout the film are comments about Morley's mental health, her personality and *who* and *what* she is according to the interviewees. These descriptions conform to the dehumanising treatment of women who do not know their place socially: when women behave in ways that do not adhere to sanctioned femininity they are labelled as out of control and hysterical, as "mad, bad, and sad" in Lisa Appignanesi's (2009) phrase. Morley is described as "crazy", "excessive", "sexually ill", "broken", "damaged", "there was something bothered about you"; it is asserted that if she had behaved that way in the middle-ages she'd have been "burned as a witch", and that, "in the 1930s you'd be put in a mental asylum for that". Although Morley avoided these fates, she did not escape judgement and condemnation for her unfeminine behaviours, which were treated as an expression of grotesque femininity.

These comments from interviewees are echoed by reviewers, who also view Morley's decision to return to this time in her past as narcissistic and self-obsessed. A woman focussing on her own stories, and putting aspects of herself that are difficult, controversial and confrontational out into the public realm, is so often meet with scorn.¹⁰¹ Whatever her intentions might be, there is a sense that these negative reactions are due to her making a spectacle out of her self, a trait of the female grotesque according to Mary Russo.¹⁰² No amount of theorising or intellectualising this process

¹⁰¹ cf the reviews of Spence's work that described her producing auto-ethnographic work as narcissism, from chapter three.

¹⁰² 'Making a spectacle out of oneself seemed a specifically feminine danger. The danger was

can redeem the project in the eyes of those that believe women should not reveal too much, or (to borrow a phrase used against Spence and Martin's phototherapy work) wash their dirty linen in public.¹⁰³ Male writers and filmmakers constantly explore their past selves in art, books and film, yet the accusation of narcissism is reserved for women solely, a punishment for thinking and caring about themselves and their lives.

The imputation of narcissism is common. As a review in *Time Out* states:

Imagine if Proust had sat down, pen in hand, and found he really had lost the past, blotted out in a haze of booze, drugs and embarrassment. If he'd had Carol Morley's chutzpah, he'd have advertised in the local press for anyone with a clearer remembrance and interviewed them on camera. In Carol's case, this is a really brave move, as her interviewees remind her that between 1982 and 1987 she was the most promiscuous party animal Manchester has ever known, a universal groupie who slept with anything that moved. It may be unadulterated narcissism, but Morley stays offscreen, and most of her interviewees are less than complimentary. Cleverly melding home movie footage from the '80s with new material, the result is funny, revealing, and (something Morley has never been accused of before) a bit of a tease. (TCH 2000)

This review mentions that what people say about Morley isn't complementary - for most people it would be extremely difficult to hear those things said about you - but to actively investigate such negativity is surely at odds with the narcissism the reviewer floats as a possible explanation. The reference to Proust is interesting, as someone who wrote an enormous novel formed of seven books about himself (as narrator) is surely the narcissist *par excellence*: the idea that *Morley* might be the narcissist in this picture is quite funny, in its huge discrepancy of scale. Morley may be making a film about her life, but it is the opinions of *others* that form the portrait of her the film presents. Kate Stables (2005), reviewing the DVD release of the film for *Sight and Sound*, is similarly ambivalent: 'Carol Morley's insistently self-mythologising memoir is *either* an exercise in needy narcissism, *or* a brave stab at reconstructing her later teenage years, lost to drink, posing, and promiscuity in 1980s Manchester.' (My italics. p86). She seems to miss that most of the mythologising comes from the interviewees - in many ways the film is as much about them as it is about Morley.

exposure [...] It was my impression that these women had done something wrong, had stepped, as it were, into the limelight out of turn – too young or too old, too early or too late – and yet anyone, any woman, could make a spectacle out of herself if she was not careful.' (Russo 1994, p53)

¹⁰³ McGrath writes a counter to the review that attacks Spence and Martin for 'washing dirty linen in public'. (1986)

Morley and her brother are interviewed together by Julia Stuart in *The Independent* in 2000, in a piece entitled: "A Family Affair", with the description, 'The taboo of a father's suicide Paul and Carol Morley's father Leslie, committed suicide 23 years ago. They are both still coming to terms with his death. Paul, 43, is a writer and lives in London with his fiancée. Carol, 34, a film-maker, lives with her girlfriend, also in London' (12th July 2000). What is interesting here is that the brother and sister have both simultaneously made work about their pasts, having taken a similar amount of time to be able to make public their experiences of this era. Paul is nine years older than Morley, so when their father died both were at very different stages in their development. Paul says that after their father's suicide he 'moved away from Stockport very quickly afterwards. One of the terrible things was that Carol looked to me as possibly a father replacement, and I, in a way, disappeared also. I would hear rumours about her drinking, drugging and sexing. But I felt somehow in her own madness she would be safe' (Paul Morley in Stuart 2000). Without wanting to psychoanalyse Carol's actions, it is clear that she had a different set of strategies for dealing with grief. Instead of moving away, she says, 'Within a couple of years I just went off the rails until I was about 20. I was drinking a lot, going out a lot and being very promiscuous, like sleeping with the gas man who knocked on the door. There were hundreds. It was like trying to get intimacy very quickly' (Carol Morley in Stuart 2000). Filling up her time with going out, drinking and casual sex could be said to have filled a gap left by her father's death, or at least acted as a distraction from the trauma.

For Paul, writing his memoir *Nothing* (2000) allowed him to return to that time and begin to deal with what had happened: 'I never cried about him. I've just written a book about it all, maybe now the normal sort of mourning will begin' (Paul Morley in Stuart 2000). Carol's film exploring the time in her life after her father's death came out the in same year. Both brother and sister felt the need to go back and make sense of their lives, yet it is only Carol's motivations that are perceived as narcissistic in nature; this is evidence of a deep-rooted sexism that casts women as superficial and vain. It's also notable that Paul heard about his sister's behaviour and did not intervene – a further example of the ways in which men in her life observed and judged her actions, perhaps worried about her, but offered neither help nor support.

Becoming Respectable?

There is a tendency for reviews of Morley's films to take pains to distinguish Morley the filmmaker from the character presented in *The Alcohol Years*, to make it clear that Morley is now a more

respectable person.¹⁰⁴ In an interview with Louise Carpenter for *The Telegraph* before the release of *The Falling*, Morley is described as ‘ruminating on the art of piecing damaged lives back together – including her own’ (Carpenter, 11/4/2015). Carpenter lists several household items, describing clothes, books and décor in order to express Morley’s new cultural capital, a cultural capital assumed to be separate and distant from what Morley would have possessed as a working-class teenager. Notice here the way in which past and present are contrasted, and the former discredited in favour of the later:

Carol Morley is pouring tea from a china teapot in the study of her terraced house in east London, where for the past two decades she has tenaciously researched, written and then directed her beautiful but low-budget, non-commercial films. There is a plate on the tray carrying delicate artisan biscuits. Scholarly books (Jung, for example) are piled high [...] Today, Morley still looks a tiny bit like the wild child she was in *The Alcohol Years*. Her hair is bleached blond and cut into a sharp bob and her lips are painted red, but it is a muted, vaguely European intellectual look these days (not the fur coat with nothing underneath of the past). She is wearing an expensive-looking jumper and good, tailored grey trousers finished off with silk socks and black leather shoes, laced with ribbon. Morley’s risk-taking – her fearlessness of old – has never left her, but as she says, it is channelled now. (Carpenter 11/4/2015)

So many details of this description are deliberately revealing: artisan biscuits (not cheap rich tea, then), a terraced house in fashionable and expensive East London as opposed to a flat Up-North somewhere. The mention of the books situates Morley as an intellectual, not someone who *fucks*, but someone who *thinks* - and reading Jung for emphasis! When her physical appearance is appraised, Carpenter is careful to let the reader know that the bleached hair and red lipstick are not those of a trashy stereotype, a tarty woman without taste, but express ‘a muted, vaguely European intellectual look’, expressly distinguished from ‘the fur coat with nothing underneath of the past’. If we were in any doubt that Morley is firmly a new woman, we are told that her jumper looks expensive, and her clothes are “good, tailored” leather and silk: quality and worth. These aesthetic observations are value judgements which express the ways in which Morley is now *acceptable* to the conservative *Telegraph*.

Carpenter continues, ‘It is hard to square the scholarly, well read and artistic Morley of today with the badly educated Morley of her youth, a damaged individual whom she dissected and dispassionately presented to the viewer 15 years ago in her Bafta-nominated first major documentary film, *The Alcohol Years*.’ (Carpenter 11/4/2015). As I have discussed with reference

¹⁰⁴ cf Morrow (2000): ‘Morley’s wonderfully frank and intimate film study of the person she once was’.

to the autodidacticism of Spence and Billingham, there is an assumption that when you come from the working-classes you have no intellectual or artistic interests, yet as a child Billingham was reading art books in his local library and Spence was reading French theory as a secretary. In *The Alcohol Years* an old friend of Morley's - a man who claimed to be one of her only male friends not to have slept with her - says that instead they spent their time talking about literature (especially Samuel Beckett and F. Scott Fitzgerald) and her artistic aspirations. In a brief shot in the film, while her band "T.O.T." with Debby is being discussed, a flash of a page of poetry is seen - if you catch the reference you glean that the band was named after Sylvia Plath's poem *Temper of Times*. Any information that disproves stereotypes about the lack of working-class intellectualism is being ignored - all the information about Morley being well-read, creative and artistic *is* present in the film. Yet, as it does not fit with the idea the writer perhaps has of a promiscuous, badly-educated working-class girl - in Jo Stanley's terms a "working-class thicko" - it is discarded in favour of a narrative of transformation (Stanley 1995, p169). For me, it is not 'hard to square the scholarly, well read and artistic Morley of today with the badly educated Morley of her youth': the film shows us her attempts as a teenager to make and create different spaces for herself. Perhaps she is not wholly successful, but not many of us *are* in our teens. Most of us get it wrong, try and fail until we get lucky and /or are in positions in which our artistic and creative desires are supported.

Carpenter's use of signifiers for poverty and middle-classness constructs a class-split in Morley's biography, seeing two versions of Morley in polarised class terms, rather than younger and older versions of the same person. The narrative of calming down and finding comfort in routine and stability is common to many of us as we get older. Carpenter writes:

Morley admits now that back then she was probably even more messed up than the film lets on, but that the emotional damage of that time has fed into her love of stability and hard work today (she has lived in a same-sex relationship with her producer, Cairo Cannon, for almost 20 years). She is single-minded about her mission, "My films are like my babies." Finding filmmaking at the age of 23 saved her life - if not, by then, literally, but emotionally because a career gave her a structure and a stability she never had as a child. (Carpenter 11/4/2015)

Although Morley's work-ethic and drive may well come from years of insecurity and poverty, she is described here as having a life that is split between a present that's respectable and worthy of acknowledgement, making films of note, and a past that is shameful. This treatment mirrors that in critical writing on Billingham, which so often situates the artist or filmmaker in terms of their current assumed class position as separate and severed from their past class background, rather than seeing the young person's creativity and the adult's artistic practice as belonging to a continuum of interests.

Gender, Class, Space and Subculture

Sociological Approaches

As discussed in chapter two, sociologists have written widely about the way class constructions, positions and subjectivities shape the lives and experiences of working-class women and girls. This section explores the ways that working-class girls who deviate from mainstream gendered and class expectations, exhibiting unconventional behaviours and inhabiting alternative identities and subcultures, receive negative judgements. Researchers from the US and UK have examined the ways that girls' self-esteem, confidence and ability to articulate their ideas and feelings, as well as express their bodies freely, dramatically reduce once they enter adolescence and nascent womanhood.¹⁰⁵ This is articulated in Lauraine Leblanc's *Pretty in Punk: Girls' Gender Resistance in a Boys Subculture* (2000), which employs field research as well as auto-ethnographic approaches to describe the way involvement in subcultures helps girls push back against this process of narrowing:

As girls enter adolescence, they lose self-esteem in their attempt to conform to the constraints and demands of the female gender role [...] Thus, in the attempt to mold themselves to the impossible ideal of femininity, girls are asked to suppress valued attributes such as assertiveness, spontaneity, and self-possession in favour of attractiveness, docility, and passivity. (p11)

These are not only gender attributes, but also class constructs that shape the way correct femininity is perceived. According to Leblanc, girls who join punk and alternative music subcultures are able to inhabit identities constructed as in direct opposition to mainstream conservative and sexist gender norms, which allow them to consciously and critically dismantle their previous and ongoing oppressive treatment. Yet, as she continues, 'Girls' and women's participation in such groups is not without cost, and their forms of resistance are tempered by the accommodations they make to masculinity and male domination of their chosen surroundings' (p226). This thesis argues that women who reject gender norms are also rejecting the classed construction of these norms, as femininity and higher class-status are irrevocably tied.

Angela McRobbie's *Feminism and Youth Culture* (2000) also examines girls' involvement in

¹⁰⁵ See Leblanc (2000) and Lavin (2010), which notes that 'women's aggression still tends to be aimed primarily inward, making women prone to depression and eating disorders.' (Lavin 2010, p14), echoing Rowbotham's memoir of being silenced due to class identity and turning inward. Tellingly, Lavin also observes that 'historically, in US. Culture, women's aggression has been repressed, frowned upon as inappropriate behaviour, or branded low class.' (p3).

subcultures, based on surveys and research McRobbie undertook in Birmingham between 1974 and 1984 speaking to young working-class women and girls. A key point I take from her research is that participation in musical subcultures enabled alternative modes of autodidactic learning, granting access to education, art and politics to women without university educations. McRobbie also argues that working-class girls' lives are restricted in ways that working-class boys' lives are not, or at least not in the same ways: 'Young pre-teen girls have access to less freedom than their brothers. Because they are deemed to be more at risk on the streets from attacks, assaults, or even abduction, parents tend to be more protective of their daughters than they are of their sons.' (p23). Although this knowledge can protect girls from real threats, it is also a way of barring them from the freedom of movement enjoyed by men and boys, and forms an alibi for the gendered restriction of freedom, with the result that girls 'are firmly rooted in the home and local environment, and lack the social knowledge and expertise which derives from being able to visit and explore different parts of the city by themselves in the way boys can' (p46).

McRobbie argues that girls' gender and class positions inhibit the range of social and cultural spaces they believe they belong in, and form standards that dictate much of their lives, from where they will live to how they dress:

The working-class girl is encouraged to dress with stylish conventionality; she is taught to consider boyfriends more important than girlfriends and to abandon the youth club or the disco for the honour of spending her evenings watching television in her boyfriend's house, saving money for an engagement ring. Most significantly, she is forced to relinquish youth for the premature middle-age induced by childbirth and housework. It is not so much that girls do too much too young; rather they have the opportunity of doing too little too late. (p42)

In McRobbie's findings, working-class females go from girlhood to womanhood almost directly, denied the forms of adolescent experimentation and exploration of place and self that boys are permitted. Subcultures of art and music offer alternative spaces during this period for girls:

The young working-class women I came across [...] were a handful of girls whose overwhelming desire to escape the constraints of their class background marked them out as highly deviant. It so happened that the vehicle which offered this escape route was that of the music subcultures of punk and reggae. (pp2-3)

The realm of music translates into access to new geographical and intellectual spaces to explore. In McRobbie's paraphrase of the account of one of her interviewees, association with these music scenes 'was the single fact of punk which provided a real pathway from school and housing estate into, only a couple of miles away, the shabby bohemianism of Moseley, into the pubs, where there were gigs, drink and drugs, and different kinds of people.' (p6).

The counter-cultural politics and aesthetics of the music in these scenes prompted many girls to follow up these threads themselves. In 1999, 14 years after McRobbie's original study, one of her interviewees "Michelle" reflects on the question "why was punk important?":

For me it was like instead of university, I got all my education there, I had just come from this school in Maypole and didn't know anything much, but it was reading and talking and being in a band myself and what we learnt at that time (p9).

Being part of a subculture that was interested in subversive critique of the socio-political status quo meant that new horizons of art, politics and history became part of your understanding of music and culture. Reflecting on spending time with one group of girls she had interviewed in her survey that had subsequently formed a band, McRobbie describes how:

Julie who had left school with no GCSEs would be sprawled across a sofa reading Andre Breton's *What is Surrealism?* Or else Jean Cocteau. Sitara would be engrossed in the autobiography of Malcolm X and Michelle would be arguing about the sleeve design for the band's next single. The house seemed to reflect the same desire for excess and extremity as the young women themselves (p7)

In departing from gender and class expectations and norms, these working-class girls rejected standards which confined them to the domestic sphere, and entered spaces in which they were marked out as deviant. They also gained access to knowledge and forms of self-expression that allowed for "excess and extremity": rather than shrinking as they moved from girlhood through adolescence to womanhood, their worlds clearly expanded to encompass opinions, feelings and tastes that would have been unacceptable outside of their subcultural spheres.

This is not quite the whole story of Morley's participation in Manchester's music scene. Like most subcultures, this was a scene dominated by men, and Morley's acceptance into it was conditional on being accepted by the male gatekeepers of its spaces. For many girls, access to such spaces was mediated through being girlfriends or groupies to males who were active within them. Although Morley and Debby had their own band, this is barely mentioned by the film's interviewees, and even less in critical writing and reviews of the film. Debby and Carol are described as groupies of New Order even though the reason they followed New Order to London was to blag free studio time to record their *own* drum beats while New Order were there recording an album.¹⁰⁶

No cultural spaces under patriarchy will be free of limitations: although involvement in subcultures

¹⁰⁶ See for example Slawinski (2015): 'hitchhiking to London with her mate Debby to be New Order groupies.'

allowed girls space for *some* non-normative gendered behaviours, they were still held accountable by gendered power relations within these groups. The main point of conflict, within these groups as well as outside of them, was the problematics of girls expressing an active female sexuality. This sexuality, when public rather private (discreetly regulated by marriage or monogamous relationships) is deemed *shameless*, excessive and *grotesque*.

Constructions of Working-Class Girls' Sexuality as Deviant Femininity

As discussed in chapter two, our understandings of femininity and respectability are shaped by class, with one class designated as the purveyors of correct feminine performance, presentation, behaviour, taste and morals. As Skeggs (1997) writes that the 'working-classes (Black and White)' have 'consistently been classified as dangerous, polluting, threatening, revolutionary, pathological and without respect' (p1), this has a bearing on the ways in which working-class women's sexuality is seen as excessive and threatening. While bourgeois women are characterised as possessing taste and refinement in body and mind, working-class women have long been defined by their bodies, as workers and labourers since long before bourgeois women left the home for jobs. Although there is not the space here for a discussion of the history of women's sexuality, child rearing and work, it is worth recalling that working-class women have historically been elided with their bodies and sexualities to a much greater degree than middle and upper-class women.¹⁰⁷

Although it was not used in this way during the period discussed in Morley's film, the word "chav" - currently used to refer to working-class people as rough, criminal, stupid, shameless or generally unrespectable - represents a shorthand for an attitude towards the working-class that was in effect from the 1980s onwards. Rhian E. Jones's *Clampdown: Pop-Cultural Wars on Class and Gender* (2013) usefully teases out classism from the sexism faced by young working-class women stigmatised as "chavs":

The female "chav" fits into narratives of slut-shaming and taste-policing, implying unladylike promiscuity, lack of restraint, and vulgarity in dress, speech and behaviour. All heavily classed presentations, these are held to be especially objectionable when observed in women, with sexual excess seen as a central signifier of "disrespectable" femininity. (p21)

When girls are "excessively" sexually active - described as "promiscuous" - it is thought to lower them, degrade them to the point of being "without class". When sociologists write anxiously about "raunch culture", they don't always understand the class significations involved in contrasting the excessive sexuality pathologised in the working-class with the supposedly normal, discreet feminine

¹⁰⁷ For a more detailed account of this, see Skeggs (1997).

sexuality associated with the universalised good behaviours of the middle and upper-classes. This framing ends up situating feminist activity with middle-class women's notions of good taste, casting working-class women whose sexuality does not fall into notions of "classy" femininity as shameless, out of control, as bad feminism or "post-feminism".

For example, Amy Shields Dobson's (2013) "Laddishness Online; The possible significations and significance of 'performative shamelessness' for young women in the post-feminist context" looks at the displays of drinking culture and "unfeminine" behaviours in public profiles on social network sites of young women between 18 and 21 years old in Australia and the UK. Shields Dobson worries:

Does this kind of "laddish" performativity by young women function less as a rebellion against femininity and more as a kind of "giving in" to a certain model of masculinity; as a "phallic" form of girlhood now licensed by the patriarchy; or even an indication of "feminine melancholia", predicated on the broader cultural rejection of critical feminist voices? (Original italics. p142)

The focus is on feminine versus masculine, feminist versus phallic-patriarchal, rather than on classed constructions of feminine behaviour. Understanding this difference allows for a more complex understanding of what these working-class girls are rebelling against.

If we think about *classed* distinctions of behaviour and taste in the following passage, rather than supposedly universal gender norms, then the "drunken performativity" discussed looks quite different:

young women are making silly or caricatured "unfeminine" faces by posing with open mouths and protruding tongues, depicting drunkenness and raucousness and posing in positions which would typically signify a more "masculine" body (e.g. legs wide apart, limbs akimbo and occupying space, miming "rear-entry penetration", squatting and so on). These bodies are open and active, engaged in poses depicting rowdiness, physical playfulness and hedonistic overindulgence...[young] women often describe and depict themselves as rowdy, wild, sometimes crass or vulgar and uninhibited – *shameless* – in their pursuit of pleasure and leisure. The "ladette" persona, as it has been called in Australia [...] and the UK, appears to be an important aspect of these public self-construction, and this often involves displays in young women's photo galleries of drunkenness or, at least, drunken performativity. (p143)

For a feminist, it is curious why Shields Dobson thinks it is "silly" for girls to "make faces", to let their faces lose feminine composure - surely it is a good thing for young women to want to be physically "open and active" and want to be "occupying space". These performances contrast strongly with the theories of Marion Young and Leblanc that girls' confidence in their bodies expressivity shrinks as they become adolescent and learn to conform to "grown-up" limitations on feminine bodily comportment. Shields Dobson aligns the girls' actions with masculine

behaviour: as a learned gendered posture, this is more acceptable body language for men in Western culture. But such comportment is learned and socialised, not naturally “male” or “female”; it is a shame that girls are not taken seriously for confidently enjoying the performativity of taking up space and enjoying their bodies in space.

Taking up a theme from McRobbie (2009), Shields Dobson suggests that ‘performative shamelessness may be one of the few options available to young women in the face of intense social and cultural scrutinizing, and often sexually objectifying gazes.’ (p144). Perhaps we should include in our critique the gazes of middle-class female academics who judge these women to be patriarchal dupes for taking their enjoyment where they find it, and for not attempting to pass as middle-class. In a passage that seems to be critiquing the critique of the “ladette” figure - predominantly a working-class female who enjoys the activities stereotypically understood as low (unsaid: working-class) male pleasures - Dobson connects class and culture with gender:

we can see the ways in which commercial media representations of the young women as “wild” and “laddish” may function to mask the repudiation or even “undoing” of feminism in popular culture by foregrounding feminism’s links to current girl culture...“Laddish” performativity is associated with the working-class in the UK and increasingly in Australia too [...] In Australia and the UK “ladettes” [...] are represented and discursively produced in commercial media discourse in terms of shame, self-degradation and sometimes violent, abhorrent behaviours by young women...The “ladette” figure has emerged as a kind of contemporary folk-devil, framed as the cause of a number of social problems. (p145)

This “repudiation” of feminism is connected with what McRobbie “posits” as ‘a kind of nascent political anger at the state of current competitive-individualistic culture and neo-liberalism, and at the loss of any readily accessible collective feminist discourse.’ (Shields Dobson 2013, p146). From my own experience, many young women, particularly young women from working-class backgrounds *do* have an understanding of politics, since the working-class are often most sharply affected by policies and laws that may directly push their families into further poverty. Also, I believe that young women are very aware of the way they are viewed: there is an abundance of negative representations of working-class women and girls by societal and media depictions.

Under a section titled “Could ‘grotesque’ be considered ‘feminist?’”, Shields Dobson suggests that ‘Bakhtin’s theorisation of the grotesque body provides a useful framework for analysing these images of “debauchery”, vulgarity, drunkenness and transgression by young women on MySpace.’ (p148). In Bakhtin’s formulation, it is bodies themselves that are physically grotesque, but Shields Dobson extends this notion (as I do, in this thesis) to the symbolic, performative and behavioural realms, describing the girls in the images she is discussing as presenting ‘bodies that do not close

or confine themselves. Rather, they take up space, consume and protrude into the external realm, and in this case, literally into a global public sphere via cyberspace.’ (p151). The grotesque appears wherever feminine codes of conduct are breached.

In this section, I’ve drawn attention to the ways that working-class girls who default from aspirational middle-class-inscribed femininity, who reject “classy” behaviours at the risk of being thought of as “low”, “crude” and “vulgar”, are subject to normalising judgements and treated as if failing to behave correctly. Instead of understanding the “ladette” in terms of the *class*-based judgements working-class girls grow-up under, Shields Dobson reads them as aping male behaviours, “degrading themselves”, and failing to live up to a feminist standard. The implicit judgement is that being working-class is itself degrading. But working-class girls are already stereotypically aligned with their bodies and sexuality, and in fact these girls, understanding fully how they will be perceived outside of their social group, are being blatant about exposing this back at each other, expressing delight in shocking and disturbing those who will be offended and concerned by their behaviour.

Shields Dobson sees the pride – ‘they show a pride in and celebration of overindulgence even as they draw attention to the negative, sometimes “humiliating” aspects of it’ (p158) – but is uncertain about the agency: ‘Through performative shamelessness these young women are *perhaps* attempting to intercept a masculinized, patriarchal, sexualizing gaze [...] in an individualistic, post-feminist social-cultural context...In other words, shamelessness may signify an agentic urge.’ (p159). Women rejecting shame over their bodily functions and sexuality is surely a feminist gesture, but because of the connotations of *degradation* associated with working-class identity, this aspect of positive-refusal is not recognised in the predominantly middle-class space of academic feminism. In my reading, Shields Dobson’s “shameless” young women are not “post-feminist” but Anti-Pygmalion: theirs is a *class-conscious* feminist presentation, actively rejecting aspirational femininity.

At the end of the article Shields Dobson makes the connections between femininity and class explicit:

By subverting the performative codes of feminine demureness and heterosexiness, as well as displaying a kind of hedonistic, Dionysian behaviour that is more traditionally “masculine” or “laddish” in its carefree and shameless pursuit of pleasure and self-abandonment, these young women, do, in some ways “symbolically invert” traditional notions of upper-class femininity and some stereotypes of feminine performativity. (p160)

I do not think that what is being performed is an *inversion* - this sounds a lot like the way that lesbians were described as “sexual inverts” in the late 19th and early 20th century, suggesting that a normal standard has been deviated from. It is perhaps more useful to think about stereotypes of

femininity being *cast off*, in favour of enjoying behaviours and ways of being that have been prohibited for girls - an expanding of experience, and a broadening of the terms of what it means to be a “girl”. The rejection of femininity is as much against *other* women as it is against men, as it is often our mothers that teach us normative gender presentation; and for working-class girls as for middle-class girls, this gender presentation is a classed production.

In a passage that is worth quoting in full, Shields Dobson misdiagnoses the direction of power in the pressures these girls experience. As she supposes:

In the face of such social pressures towards “laddishness” and, also, towards self-pathologization *for* “laddish” behaviour, young women who identify publicly in their own self-presentation as “shameless” - that is, as *subjects of pleasure rather than damaged subjects* - may be navigating such contradictory pressures in one the few ways possible. It must also be acknowledged that this constitutes a rather defensive measure, a pre-emptive strike against the gaze, rather than a purely celebratory, self-pleasing display. The question arises of whether “self-defence” and “agency” are the same thing. (Original italics. p159)

Although there may be pressure to conform to laddish behaviour within the small social stratum in which these girls reside, the much larger social, cultural and political pressures that will affect them are pressures against laddishness in favour of class-defined standardised femininity. If you grow up poor, or have an accent thought of as rough, you are under pressure to disavow your faulty identity in favour of the correct one, to learn refinement: instead of “bad taste”, there is “good”; instead of being cheap, you could be classy etc. The idea that defending yourself from the pressures of aspirational and normative gender identity is not *also* expressing agency, reveals an unfamiliarity with the strong self-possession needed to face the high cost of rejecting normative femininity. It may be an identity that is read as problematic and distasteful for many feminists, but, that should not mean these are not valid acts of feminist rebellion: to say that these young women are not in the process of critiquing sexist and classist expectations for women, amounts to saying that all feminism must look alike, be done alike by those who are alike; which amounts to saying *feminist rebellion must behave middle-class or it will not be at all.*

Sexuality in Morley’s Film

Although Morley’s film is called *The Alcohol Years*, in many ways it is far more about sex than alcohol, exposing a young working-class girl’s sexuality as seen and understood by the people and times she was living in. This is framed by the film’s interviewees who base most of their recollections, opinions and stories of Morley on her sexual activities. Most the interviewees have negative attitudes to Morley’s sexual behaviour; as mentioned earlier, they define her sexuality as sick, excessive, pathological and manipulative. The myth of Morley they created between them was

primarily focussed on her sexual appetites and adventures. Some of the most derisive and distasteful comments come from interviewees who say that Morley didn't seem to mind what gender the person she went home with was. In an interview with Morley, Fiona Morrow writes, 'It had been a time of excess, of drinking, of sex. Lots of sex. Morley was the girl who always left with someone; she was up for anything and everybody knew it', and quotes Morley: 'Manchester was a real boys' town and I would freak people out because I'd fuck anybody, men or women. And of course, I had this huge reputation.' (Morley and Morrow 2000). Bisexuality is never named as such; Morley's sexual inclusivity is not discussed in terms of attraction to all genders, but rather used as an example of her shameless indifference: she didn't *care* what gender someone was, which is somehow far more deviant than being genuinely interested in both men and women. As McRobbie points out, 'for working-class girls especially, the road to "straight" sexuality still permits few deviations.' (p36). If your sexuality is already situated as "dangerous and polluting" (Skeggs 1997, p1) via its connection to a "low" class background, there is more pressure not to breach sexual respectability and conformity.

Daniel Stour's review of the film exemplifies the tendency to uphold dehumanising ideas about working-class girls' sexuality, in its claim that "The film is an effective portrayal of a "predatory female" asserting her sexuality in a way which at that time was commonly thought to be restricted to men' (Stour 2002). What is so often left out of analysis is the ways in which this understanding of Morley as "a predatory female" comes from the construction of her by others: it is the assessment of Morley's interviewees, yet it is opinion treated as fact by reviewers, who read the film through a moral lens. This is not to contradict the statement that Morley had lots of sexual partners - that can be agreed on - but what I am interested to query is the dominant understanding of her representation in the film. Reviewers tend to agree with the interviewees in their analysis and classification of Morley's behaviour and personhood as predatory or excessive, upholding and reproducing the same sexist and restrictive norms as them. As Stour narrates it:

The film portrays an apparently compulsive sexual career, for which alcohol was the lubricant. Most of the stories, therefore, are about sex, in one way or another: the dimensions of her tongue are legendary among male acquaintances (here the director provides a close-up demonstration – her longest time on screen in the entire film); one day she opens the door to the gasman and fucks him on the cooker; while visiting London, she and a friend offer a male stranger some dubious service for money. The soundtrack voice ironically sings, "... just a girl who can't say no". Lost in depression, on the verge of prostitution, her life is heading for the wrong sort of climax. (Stour 2002)

This assessment reproduces the cliché that active female sexuality is dangerous and ultimately tragic. Other reason for Morley's depression and poverty are not given, and neither structural nor

political insights are offered for why a young working-class girl's life may be "heading for the wrong sort of climax": what about poverty, or the lack of educational or job opportunities? This way of framing the story of too much sexual activity leading to destitution, compounds misogynistic narratives that "promiscuous" women will either be *punished for* or *damaged by* their breach of correct feminine performance. Rather than seeing her promiscuity as a reaction to things going wrong for her, Stour and many others instead blame her actions for her situation, recapitulating classist narratives that frame the victims of structural inequality as responsible for their own poverty.

The sensational and inaccurate title of Fiona Morrow's article for *The Guardian* perpetuates negative stereotypes of working-class sexual deviancy: "Going Back to The Bottle: At 13, Carol Morley had a reputation for sleeping with anyone and drinking men under the table. Now she has put her past on film. Fiona Morrow finds out why". Although Morley did start drinking at this age, the events of the film take place later, from sixteen to twenty-one (an age at which young women are still referred to as 'girls'). Despite the sensationalist heading (which may not have been written by Morrow but by the paper's sub-editors), the article does take on the task of unpicking the portrait of Morley constructed in the film, echoing my desire for a deconstruction of representation:

Morley may have had the reputation, but here *she is unpeeling its construction*. For this is a film about attitude and myth: in presenting their perceptions of Morley as they remember here, the men and women on screen become part of a study of both the power of memory and the endurance of received morality. (Morrow 2000)

It is crucial for this "unpeeling" to delegitimise the authority and dominance of the sexism that inscribes the portrait of Morley. Instead of taking the interviewees' attitudes as the only possible way of seeing Morley, Morrow describes the way the film dispels stereotypes:

The Alcohol Years is a challenge to those who would write off a promiscuous woman as "just another slag" and tut disapprovingly at those who refuse to hide their sexuality under a sensible skirt. But because Morley took everything to extremes, the film pushes even the most liberated among us to confront our own boundaries of what is, and is not, acceptable behaviour. (Morrow 2000)

The notion of a confrontation with boundaries is key here. It is a very ordinary thing for a teenager to experiment with boundaries, both their own and other people's; it is a way to learn and grow. But because Morley is female, there are certain male-sanctioned forms of acceptable experimentation and wildness that are denied to her: for a girl to behave this way is aberrant, and she becomes a grotesque.

Carnavalesque Interludes

In this sections that follows, I want to consider what happens when we frame Morley's teenage deviancy via an understanding of adolescence as a time of "carnavalesque interludes", a period between childhood and adulthood that is reserved for play, trying out identities and roles, being excessive and pushing extremes. These interludes open a breach in the social contract, in which you can push your limits and "make an exhibition of yourself", not only testing your own boundaries but also, crucially, disturbing the boundaries set by others. Although "experimentation" is expected during one's teenage years, there isn't a safe space for young women to fully test their limits. For many working-class girls, the restrictions against "low class" behaviours are already high and the repercussions of transgression can be substantial. Despite these risks and restrictions, which are firmly in place during adolescence, "interludes" of carnivalesque excess can be a way to grow and learn, as well as to recognise and challenge sexist limits placed upon girls' mobility, performance and existence, even at the risk of personal safety and comfort. One of the reasons that Morley is now described as stable and comfortable with herself, may very well be that the transgressions of her teenage years, taking things to extremes to test her limits, have left her with a strong and stable sense of where those limits are.¹⁰⁸ Not against the odds, but because of them.

Transgressive Teenage Female Friendships

One of the most important and moving aspects of *The Alcohol Years* for me was its depiction of the relationship between Morley and her best friend and partner in crime Debby. It is clear that they egged each other on, and were very active and self-aware in their search for experiences and adventures. Without the money to go on trips and to new places, working-class girls are left with the only capital they think they possess, which is their/our bodies. Although many working-class girls have talents that would be "better" (or more respectably) employed elsewhere, without access to education, culture and training, the experiences you can have without testing the boundaries of your body and sexuality are limited. As the song *Common People* (1995) by Pulp attests, sometimes working-class people "dance and drink and screw, because there's nothing else to do". During this time, Carol and Debby were not in education, working towards getting their A-Levels or getting into university - in a sense they were adrift.

Debby talks about them rolling around on the floor of The Hacienda together, playing games of "who could cop off with the ugliest bloke", "getting your drinks bought by blokes, enjoying the conversation flowing" and "going home with whoever you happened to be standing next to at the

¹⁰⁸ For example, Carpenter (11/04/2015) refers to Morley's 'love of stability and hard work today'.

end of the night”. She mentions the hypocrisy of men who did what they did sexually, but without the judgement. Debby also says that maybe they “were desperate for love due to her being adopted and Carol losing her dad”; or maybe because they “were so young”. She then laughs and counters “well maybe it was just an excuse, we just kind of talked ourselves into it”, then after another laugh, “look we’re delinquents, we’re allowed to act like this, and this is what we’re gonna do”. Debby says they did start to be too risky. While she is speaking, we see old family photographs and collected old letters of their shared history, then we see footage of Carol and Debby embracing, smiling in reunion.

The camera focuses on stickers and posters, merchandise of Morley and Debby’s band TOT. We see the male friend (the one who previously said that he and Morley were friends who exchanged books and ideas) with a TOT t-shirt. A book is shown open, with the Sylvia Plath poem *Temper of Time* visible. We hear a guitar band’s female vocals, it is Debby’s recording of reworked TOT (it sounds really great!) The friend is then seen again, he says TOT were “the great undiscovered gems of Manchester”. Debby says the band was “a way of getting known” “a taste of a high life”, a way of “having enough money to buy drinks”. They were 19. They had seen so many working-class Manchester kids make it and “end up on Top of The Pops”, yet this dream of success didn’t come to fruition as they were *girls* in a band and the Manchester bands championed for mainstream success were boys.

When I was a teenager, like Morley I read philosophy and poetry and *also* sought out the experiences offered by drinking cultures and casual sex. My best mate Stef, who like Debby and Carol made me feel safe enough and supported enough to explore and experiment without being shamed into behaving myself. Launching yourself into the unknown was exciting, there was something of the sublime in the risks of drinking and going on late-night adventures. A way of learning and understanding was being opened up to me. I couldn’t at that time go to art galleries every week, or visit new countries, or even eat out at nice restaurants, but I could learn about my body and sexuality and those of other people, I could take things to extremes, like Morley and Debby did, as a way of finding out *something new*. This is a form of knowledge-gathering, but a method that is not recognised as valid. Girls who express active sexuality without shame, are seen as degrading them/ourselves even in the eyes of supposedly sympathetic feminists.¹⁰⁹

A recent essay, “Have Your Cake and Eat It”, in the film zine *Girls Gotta Eat* (2016) published by the feminist film programming collective *The Bechdel Test Fest*, showed that I wasn’t alone in my identification with the friendship of Carol and Debby. In this piece, Sophie Brown discusses female

¹⁰⁹ See my earlier discussion of Shields Dobson (2013).

friendship on film, and her relationship with her best friend and their activities during the summer after finishing their GCSEs. Speaking of the joys of having a “partner in crime” (p28), the strength of female appetite and the satisfaction of misbehaviour, Brown brings up a short discussion of *The Alcohol Years* by comparing the stories of Carol and Debby with the female leads in Chantal Akerman’s film *J’ai Faim, J’ai Froid* (1984), who spend much of the film eating, looking at food or being hungry, and with the insatiable and carnivalesque girls of Věra Chytilová’s film *Daisies* (1966). Brown introduces *The Alcohol Years* for comparison:

Their insatiable desires echo in Carol Morley’s *The Alcohol Years*. With their unruly urges and couldn’t-care-less-attitude, Carol and Debbie are a match made in teenage delinquent heaven. They egg each other on, the angelic blonde duo giving leery men a run for their money... Like the two friends in *J’ai Faim, J’ai Froid*, Carol and Debbie have a dinner bought for them by a man, but in Morley’s film the sex is explicitly currency for their dinner. Whether they had their heart set on a Chinese meal, or whether they just did it because it tickled their penchant for inappropriate behaviour, the truth is hazy in their vague recollections and salacious whispers. (p31)

This episode of being brought Chinese take-away by Alan Wise in exchange for sex is referred to by many of the interviewees, who all give differing accounts of what they think had happened. The way that Debby tells her story is that they thought it was “just a laugh, that was until everyone else found out”. So, for them, their actions only became problematic when they became public knowledge and were judged as shameful according to sexist attitudes on the correct behaviour of girls. If the genders were exchanged, and two lads had slept with an older woman they both knew and hung around with, and then got taken out for a Chinese meal afterwards, then attitudes would most probably be along the lines of “fair play”, “lucky buggers” etc. - it would be treated as if they “scored”, getting away with something cheeky and fun: they got *sex and* food! But for Carol and Debby, something degrading happened *to* them. In the gendered power dynamics of sex under patriarchy, girls can only be passive, meaning they are being *done to*, rather than being agents. I am not arguing that it was “good” or empowering for the girls to exchange sex for food: my point is that girls’ and boys’ behaviours aren’t treated equally, there’s a double-standard at play. The girls’ sexuality is treated paradoxically: simultaneously framed as objectified sexual “victims” and as “predatory females”, their sexual agency is disavowed through the stereotypical “virgin/whore” dichotomy.

During Morrow’s discussion with Morley, she asks ‘so is it a cautionary tale?’, to which Morley replies:

I think there are consequences to actions, but I also think that attempts to control promiscuous women are often expressed as concern for their wellbeing

You get pushed aside by fear and made to disappear. Going to the edge of doing anything is an adventure, and I don't regret it. (Morley in *Morrow* 2000)¹¹⁰

The same behaviours thought of as a healthy and natural part of growing up and learning sexual expression for men and boys, are pathologised for women and girls. Like Morley, I do not regret my teenage experimentations, nor do I feel ashamed of them. I was with good friends whom I trusted, we looked out for each other, we took things to the extreme, enjoyed the excess and had a really interesting and fun time doing it. This counter narrative isn't very popular, because there was no violence, pregnancy or STIs to punish me and force me to repent of my misbehaviour or learn from my "mistakes" – my carnivalesque interlude just ran its course. Like many stages in life, there is a time limit to the desire for experimentation: if you try out and experience enough, then this enables an understanding of what you don't like, what you won't put up with and how you navigate certain spaces in the world.

Escaping the Boys Club / Writing your Own Narrative

The portrait of Morley constructed by her interviewees is situated in a specific time and place, within which she is understood. At the end of the film, it is clear that many of her friends and acquaintances from that time didn't understand why she left Manchester when she did, and having not seen her since, were left without answers as to what had happened and thus constructed their own narratives about what had happened to her.

In a section of the film that deals with her departure, there is a real feeling of mounting pressure and things coming to a head. Debby discusses the way that suddenly Carol wasn't around anymore. But, she says there was relief as looking back she was glad that Carol had got out before the drug scene took over in Manchester. Debby talks about letters Carol had written her, quoting one which said that she was "floundering, I always flounder". The *mise-en-scène* shows a bedroom scene of old fashioned plastic dolls, their blond bobbed haircuts mirroring the images we've previously seen of Morley. There is something bereft in this room, an uneasy mixing of childhood and approaching maturity, the word "suicide" is seen written in red blood like dripping ink on a piece of card perhaps a record. This links together childhood and violence, Morley's past and her father's suicide.

¹¹⁰ Part of Zylinska's (2001) formulation of a feminist sublime is that taking on danger, allowing oneself to be vulnerable, is a path to discovery. She writes, 'Instead of projecting one's fears into some external territories and cherishing fantasies about the possibility of taming the excessive and the frightening, the ethics of respect towards irreducible difference calls for the recognition of the strange as part of the everyday.' (p161). This resembles what Morley is saying here, which I believe has a strong gendered element as girls are taught fear from an early age. To really live in the world, much of this fear must be met.

We then hear from more interviewees who say they knew things were taking a bad turn for her, yet at the time they couldn't be there for her: they didn't know how to be, or they were struggling in their own lives to keep their heads above water.



Film still from *The Alcohol Years* showing an old photograph of Morley (2000).

Her male friend (the one she talked about books with) talks about a 1986 festival gig celebrating 10 years since punk, put on by Factory Records at G Mex - something happened to Carol there, he thinks. Some thought she'd been thrown out of the gig; "something happened", they also say. We see ominously a car's lights on a dark road. Tony Wilson appears saying there "was a three to six-month period where people were wondering, will she go over the edge", that "your exuberance and whatever else was spiralling", that he feared "would your head explode?". Another voice: "I thought you might end up dead in a gutter or something"; then a cacophony of all the interviewee voices saying bad things about her overlap.

We then see earth and leaves on the ground as if lit by a torch, a female voice, breathing heavily. The dark car drives away. A dark moon. Grass at night. A signpost that states "to the edge" the

chorus of voices berating her continue.¹¹¹ A voice stands out: “it became dark and evil, beyond all possible redemption, is that what happened to you Carol?”. We hear wheezing breath and see the unsteady camera approach a phone box at night in the middle of nowhere. The next shot is daylight at a train station, snow globes of London scenes. Voices say they didn’t know why she left.

This dramatic departure is not explained. Morrow discusses it in her interview with Morley:

Morley left Manchester abruptly: in the narrative of the film, her departure is precipitated by an impressionistic sequence of what could be interpreted as a rape scene. She left it ambiguous because she didn’t feel the need to be explicit: ‘It wasn’t a rape scene, but that happened somewhere else, by someone I knew. That night was more to do with losing control, drinking too much and starting to become really paranoid.’ (Morley in Morrow 2000)

The scene has a feeling of foreboding and threat, but it feels to me that the voices in the film are what she is being stalked by, as represented by the car at night and the unsteady walk “to the edge”.

One of the most interesting pieces of critical writing on the film unsurprisingly comes from someone from the music scene in Manchester of the time, who has insight into what it was like. In the blog “Mancky”, the writer posts on the film in a piece titled “The Wild Child’s Revenge: Concerning *The Alcohol Years* – a film by Carol Morley (2000)”. He has a different take on why Morley left when she did:

Carol Morley has every right to feel angry and disappointed about the way things worked out in Manchester. She was a determined, intelligent girl on a mission to be a pop star. She managed to get a band together, TOT; they wrote a couple of songs and they were signed to Factory Records, who failed to promote them. She was doing all the right things... and she knew all the right people. (Mancky 2011)

In a final twist, the 1986 GMEX concert, from which TOT were dropped at the last-minute causing Carol to leave Manchester, was co-presented by her brother, flogging the dead horse of punk once again, much to our great boredom. A home-grown girl-band or a history lecture – which should Tony Wilson have championed? (Mancky 2011/Postscript 2015)

What Mancky brings into focus here is the way in which those with power in that scene in Manchester - for example Tony Wilson, who was the manager of record label Factory Records - dictated what was worthy. Unlike most of the people in bands in Manchester, Tony Wilson wasn’t working-class: he was a Cambridge-educated middle-class television presenter who became so

¹¹¹ Which not coincidentally is the name of her next (full length) film, *Edge* (2010) about the mystery of a woman falling to her death from a beachy cliff and the impact it had on her friend (played by Maxine Peake) who, although witnessing the event, cannot remember what happened, instead haunted by fragments of her friend *going over the edge*.

interested in Manchester's music scene that he created a record label in order to champion the music being made there. Morley recalls a great point made by Liz Naylor, that Tony Wilson was like the traditional factory owner, and all the young people in Manchester were like his workers – there was always a classed-power dimension to the relationship.¹¹² What is clear from Mancky's account is that there was also gendered value judgements involved: Wilson side-lined a new female group, but championed men - in this case Morley's brother Paul, there to discuss musical history. The double-standard again at play, continues Manky:

Carol Morley could give the Mondays and Oasis a run for their money in the bad behaviour department. She was perfect Manchester pop star material, but there was one huge problem: she was a girl. Did she not realise? Did no-one explain to her? You can only be a pop star in Manchester if you're a man. Nothing else will do. That's the way it's always been here, as long as anyone can remember. Maybe the penny dropped and that's why Carol went to London. (Mancky 2011)

This is an important point of view in the possible reasons for Morley's departure, one that foregrounds Manchester's music scenes structural failure to support women in music, rather than Morley's personal failure to make a go of it there. Mancky also gives his explanation of the attention seeking behaviour being an attempt to be seen and recognised by the men of that scene:

The interviewees describe a striking teenager who liked attention; they recall her good looks, her unusual clothes and the "toys" she carried around with her – the duck on wheels and the train set. She was acting out a role... playing at being childlike... purposefully provoking the interest of others, especially older men who worked in the music industry, which was no co-incidence. If there were any justice in this world, one of those men would have written songs for her, mentored her successful music career, photographed her, promoted her or made a film about her... but very disappointingly for Carol, none of the above occurred. In the end, she had to go out and make the damn film herself. (Mancky 2011)

The film's interviewees don't connect Morley's behaviour to wanting recognition and an "in" to the scene, but dismiss it as vanity and self-absorption. Lack of recognition for her efforts, and the music scene's devaluation of women in music, meant that staying in Manchester wasn't a tenable way for Morley to fulfil her ambitions.¹¹³

After leaving, Morley spent six months working in Devon before moving to London, where she worked odd jobs for a few years before starting an A-level course in art and photography. During

¹¹² Quoted from the recording of a Q&A with Carol Morley at the ICA London 1st September 2015 for the *Onwards and Outwards* women filmmakers festival screening of *The Alcohol Years*.

¹¹³ Morley says in interview with me that Stella Grundy (of band *Interstellar*, interviewed in the film), was told her music was good but the only problem was she wasn't a man.

this time, she met an inspiring teacher who encouraged her to continue with art, and applied to the Fine Art and Video course at Central Saint Martins. In an interview with Jason Wood and Ian Haydn Smith, Morley explains the beginnings of the idea to revisit her past and to give her own narrative to her experiences of life:

At art college I'd been encouraged to tell stories about the world I inhabited. More than that, it was about how you told the stories, the form that you found for them. With *The Alcohol Years*, it started with trying to trace memories of events that had been lost in my memory to booze, but the film soon became about the possibilities of looking at myth-making and the possibilities of creating a portrait of other people in a city known for its pop culture [...] I've always been fascinated by other people, and how we all construct our identities. In asking the people that feature in *The Alcohol Years* about myself, I think their guard was down about themselves, and you could see interesting ideas and feelings emerge that may not have come about if they thought they were talking about themselves. (Morley in Wood, Smith, p216)

This account rebuts the accusation, brought by both the film's interviewees and its reviewers, that *The Alcohol Years* is "unadulterated narcissism" (TCH 2000). It is revealing about attitudes to female artists who produce autobiographical or auto-ethnographic work that there is a backlash against the value women place on constructing their own narratives. It is risky for women to make public the emotions, attitudes, and sexual or political feelings that come from their personal experience, which often contradict the supposed universality of male-centred narratives. Calling such narrations narcissistic is one way to silence them.

There is a feeling of "justice done" about the film: despite people's low opinions of Morley, she didn't die in a gutter, but instead made it out and became a filmmaker. Her life and her ideas meant something, and were of value after all; as Manky says, '*The Alcohol Years* is a piece of alchemy through which an embarrassing failure is transformed into a successful work of art.' (Manky 2011). He takes this idea of justice to the next level: 'The film is a perfect piece of revenge... against the city which didn't appreciate Carol... which didn't make her a star, even though she was doing all the right things... all the things you're supposed to do if you're a young woman who wants to be famous.' (Original italics. Manky 2011). When I interviewed Morley, she said that it wasn't revenge that motivated making the film, but a desire to understand and make sense of that time in her life (Morley, 25/8/2016). Yet it can still evoke in some of its viewers the guilty pleasure of sweet revenge, of showing the people who thought you would amount to nothing that you have achieved something. Morley describes her feelings about it:

There was a real sense of accomplishment when I completed *The Alcohol Years*, that I had made something of that messy part of my life. I guess when you revisit a place in your life and you write about it or make a film about it and you

make something coherent or structured, you can find it suddenly has value. If you take a disruptive part of your life and refuse to shrink from it, you find you can control it. That's powerful. (Morley in Wood, Smith 2015, p217)

There *is* something very powerful about using your own life, the hard bits, the aspects that others perceive as shameful, and putting them out there publicly with your work. In confronting the risk of negative, shaming judgements directed at Morley (as both working-class *and* a woman), and bringing the elation of accomplishment out of that confrontation, the film produces a kind of sublime power, a power felt by its viewers as well as by Morley herself. As in Zylinska's formulation of the feminist sublime, there is excitement in confronting danger, making yourself vulnerable, yet getting through it - and making the film. For the viewer, the experience of the sublime is vicarious, as it is in many of the encounters with the sublime we find in art history such as Romantic paintings of dramatic nature. The film is the outcome of a process of coming to terms with difficult parts of its maker's personal history: not a clean and tidy narrative of "overcoming", but a defiant rewriting of the dominant narrative which exposes its portrait of a female grotesque as a *construction* rather than an objective truth.

Conclusion: Morley as Anti-Pygmalion

This chapter has used the case study of the art/documentary film *The Alcohol Years* to explore the film's portrayal of the construction of a working-class female grotesque, a grotesque that is never directly physically depicted but presented through narrative accounts of actions and behaviours that remain unseen. On examining the public attitudes reflected in the film's interviews and in critical reactions to the film itself, both of which react judgementally to girls' experimentation with sexuality and drinking, a picture of moralising distaste emerges. Such attitudes and judgements expose the double-standard which pathologizes and problematizes in girls what is permitted and even treated as normative for boys. My intention here is to make this double-standard explicit, and to unpick the way that some feminist writers end up perpetuating this by judging working-class girl's behaviours against a middle-class standard of correct feminine presentation and performance.

The *shameless* femininity described in the film is of a type that rejects the "good behaviour" of respectability. It is engaged in active sexuality and the carnivalesque pleasures of drinking, sex and adventure. It pushes back against the normalising powers that squash girls into withdrawing into themselves, teaching them/us to take up less space publicly, and instead attempts to infiltrate the cultural spaces of music and art. The rebellion described in the film *isn't* "post-feminist": yes, it is

transgressive and full of risk, but it is *not* complicit in reaffirming patriarchy, because it works to destabilise ideas of what “good girls” should be and do, what social spaces they should inhabit.

By making the film and putting her story out into the public spaces of art and culture, which are dominated by the middle and upper-classes, Morley challenges the ways we as women are taught not to give ourselves away, not to “make a spectacle” of ourselves, but to be ashamed of our transgressions and keep quiet. She also risks being judged as conforming to the stereotypes those people have of working-class women being “without class”, behaving like “slags” etc. This is a risk Morley is willing to take, and in her refusal of shame she forces us to confront our attitudes about what is and isn’t shameful. In the film itself we don’t see Morley desperately trying to justify herself to the interviewees and the audience. She is unrepentant – and by extension, I argue, she is Anti-Pygmalion.

The subject of self-revelation and vulnerability comes up in Morley’s interview with Morrow:

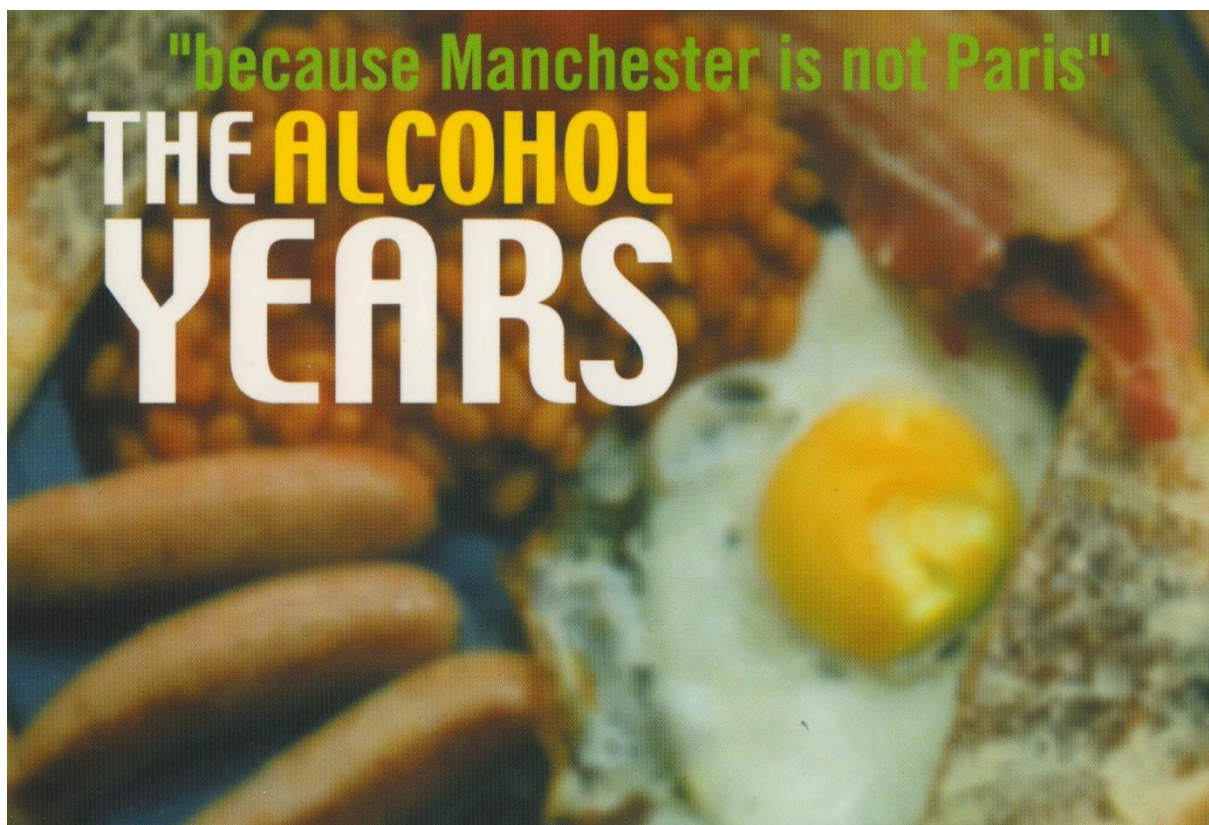
Many might see it as either brave or completely crazy, though to be so open about it. “I don’t think it was brave because I wouldn’t have gone back without the camera. It was always there, mediating for me and protecting me. And I didn’t even ever think about it being seen as self-publicising, which ironic because at that time, all I wanted was to be noticed. When you’re a teenager, you only define yourself through other people’s eyes.” (Morrow 2000)

The mediation of difficult experiences that Morley is speaking of comes from the artistic process: the techniques and technologies of film-making produce a distancing effect. The use of artistic process as a *defensive* gesture is common to all my case studies: Spence and Martin, like Billingham, use cameras to place reality at a distance, to add a layer of separation between themselves and their subjects. This makes it possible to look back at times, people and situations from a safe distance, in order to begin to explore and interpret them.

The film’s presentation of antagonistic girlhood, of rebellion against class and gender norms, of Anti-Pygmalion femininities that express neither shame nor desire to explain or repent, is quite radical. Yet Morley says, ‘I don’t consider myself a subversive person trying to speak of subversive things, but I do feel I have encountered a subconscious antagonism towards the films I’m interested in making. It’s then that I am reminded that telling stories, and the form you want to use to tell them, is ideological. Making films is political.’ (Morley in Wood, Smith 2015, p220). It is not simply the content of *The Alcohol Years* that is subversive, but *whose* story is being told and *how*. In the male and middle-class dominated space of the arts, working-class women telling their own stories, without deference to middle-class norms, is a radical act.

There are of course films that deal with working-class life, but relatively few about working-class

people as agents, fewer still are about working-class women, and even fewer are written and directed by working-class women themselves. *The Alcohol Years* has a clear female authorial presence, but it also displays a distinct working-class aesthetic, which is rarely seen in cinema without the symbolic signs of working-class life being utilised to convey the *tragic awfulness* of poverty. This alternative working-class aesthetics often has a warm and homely atmosphere and tone; what it chooses to show comes *from* the working-classes, its places and people: Manchester's streets, shabby door fronts, door bells with chipped paint, parks and green spaces filmed as though by a person walking amongst the life of the park; the warm comfort of launderettes, bedrooms, messy sheets, clothes all over the floor, plates and crockery piled up. Shots of the lure of Manchester at night, seen outside a window. Close-ups of juicy hot fry-ups in cafes. Washing lines, garden fences, bridges and underpasses - all the small details of a place remembered. This is not done out of self-conscious style choice,¹¹⁴ but as an assemblage of working-class life experience that carries a working-class identity quite strongly.



Poster film still from *The Alcohol Years*, with quote from Tony Wilson (2000).

¹¹⁴ Morley was at pains in my interview with her to explain her dislike of self-conscious “style” in film. (Morley 25/8/2016)

As I have argued throughout this thesis, it is important for working-class people to represent our own lives, to tell stories that are not public, to reveal the differing ways different classes experience culture and possess our own cultures. Working-class academic Lisa McKenzie (2015) notes that ‘Narratives, and storytelling, are important in working-class lives. It is how we explain ourselves, how we understand the world around us, and how we situate ourselves in a wider context.’ (p6). As Morley comments:

Someone might look at a story and think it’s very dark, but I think my role has is to find the light in there. Finding the poignant and meaningful in everyday life – the struggles we face in life – is what fascinates me. I can’t stand poverty porn films, or something that focusses solely on the abject elements of someone’s existence. (Morley in Wood, Smith 2015, p221)

By making public aspects of stigmatised lives in a way that conveys warmth, humour and integrity as well as the complexity of identities, Morley contributes to building alternative representations of working-class women: not as two-dimensional but as complex, contradictory but very human, and crucially refusing shame and taking pleasure in their working-class identity. Morley and her film contribute to my concept of the Anti-Pygmalion in their refusal to be silenced: to openly discuss shamed behaviours and experiences is to recast women’s integrity as being brave enough to tell the truth about yourself. The honour of the Anti-Pygmalion lies not in the presentation of purity and respectable femininity, but in avowing the supposedly “grotesque”: in taking up space and making noise.

Conclusion to Thesis

In this interdisciplinary thesis, I have undertaken an original synthesis of personal investigation and art historical exploration into how and why working-class women are predominantly represented negatively, and structured a theoretical inquiry around these stereotypes of classed femininity. Unpicking the ways in which constructions of normative femininity are shaped by both classism and sexism, I have argued that “positive” feminine attributes have a classed-character and refer to a middle and upper-class ideal. I have reclaimed aspects of working-class womanhood that fall outside of the aspirational ideology that enforces normative gendered presentation.

In addition to working across the disciplines of art history, British political history, sociology and cultural studies, I have applied phenomenological and auto-ethnographic methodologies to bring my own background into the analysis of my case studies, using my life experience as a research tool to contest bias and stereotyping in the existing critical literature and demonstrate the possibility of alternative readings. My argument reframes the aesthetic concept of the grotesque in terms of a classed process of construction, through the imposition and interiorization of class shame, and uses this to bring into focus an experience of the sublime centred on a class-conscious aesthetic agency which repudiates stigma: *The Anti-Pygmalion*. This framing and methodology have enabled me to produce unique new interpretations of the experiences and creativities of working-class artists, and to propose new answers to the questions of who can be found beautiful, and what can be experienced with recognition and emerging excitement.

By focusing on class discourse, subjectivity and lived experience, and applying this focus to the area of art history, I located a gap between aesthetic concepts and theories, and the work of feminist sociologists which discusses working-class women’s lives. In bridging this gap, my thesis expands the body of knowledge of research in the visual arts, offering an original approach to thinking about the reception and refiguration of stereotypically ugly or grotesque images. I have developed the concept of the *Anti-Pygmalion* as a way of crystallising this approach, and motivating future research.

I have challenged the classist assumption that working-class artists don’t exist, or that becoming an artist erases one’s “former” working-class identity, by offering a counter-narrative about how working-class people access art and knowledge. I show how classed backgrounds inform our attitudes to knowledge, culture and politics, and our work in research, photography and film.

In the introduction, I discussed the gendered construction of the aesthetic categories of the grotesque and the sublime, with reference to the key texts in both areas. However, I do not make constant use of these texts in my discussion of my case studies, because – as I establish in the

introduction – these categories have seldom been articulated in a way that takes account of class. As I argue, women’s bodies are far more often described as “grotesque” than male bodies, and working-class female bodies are far more often aligned with the grotesque than bodies which comport themselves according to “respectable”, i.e. middle-class, femininity. Although the sublime is predominantly theorised from the point of view of bourgeois men, feminist writers such as Yaeger and Zylinska have offered reconceptualisations of the sublime to account for feminist perspectives of gender difference within aesthetic experience, including notions of risk and danger from the point of view of women. I extend these reconceptualisations to include the risks and pleasures of working-class self-representation.

My theorisation of both the grotesque and the sublime is limited to using these concepts to *name* two recurring features of my case studies: on the one hand, the systematic degradation of working-class women’s bodies, their treatment as grotesque; on the other, the way in which the exhilaration of Anti-Pygmalion self-representation cannot be understood as mere aesthetic appreciation of something beautiful, but approaches a sublime intensity of mixed emotions. In other words, this thesis is not primarily *about* the grotesque or the sublime, but uses these terms as place-holders for a kind of experience that is not fully addressed by the existing theorisation of these concepts. I repurpose the terms in order to use them descriptively, to understand situations and experiences in a new light and elevate them into an aesthetic understanding. This enables me to provide readings of my case studies which draw out the ways they are capable of inciting complex, interesting and rare experiences in viewers, against a critical reception in which this experience has been under-theorised and these works have often been read within narrow and stereotypical frames of reference.

As I made explicit from the outset, this is an auto-ethnographic project: my starting point has been my own embodied encounters with the works in my case studies. The highly personal and subjective nature of this project is both a weakness and a strength. Comparison with other working-class art viewers’ experiences of the sublime in art reception may have provided some useful data, but would have required a very different methodological framework. Race is also largely untheorized in this project, and further research projects are needed to take account how race features in the construction of bodies and identities considered grotesque, and how it might also inform a different experience of the sublime. However, the personal nature of *this* project has meant that new stories *have* been told, that have countered the class bias at play in the literature on the sublime and grotesque.

Theories of Class and Art

This thesis theorises class from the point of view of working-class people, based on the subjective experience of lived realities. I foreground the importance of feelings and emotions in this analysis; this is risky, as it leaves this project open to accusations of lack of objective theory, but the purpose is to *form* a theory from accounts of experience. I pull this theory together from memoirs, personal testimonies and interviews which provide evidence that proves people who have grown up working-class share commonalities of experience. What at first appears individual and subjective turns out to be shared in common with others, in a pattern of recurring feelings and attitudes which I call (borrowing from Raymond Williams) a “structure of feeling”.

This isn't to say that all working-class people feel the same way about class, but this approach provides a line of enquiry into classed-identities formed of shame and insecurity. Not *all* working-class people will experience this, yet the extensive examples act as evidence to establish that it *is* a common experience, especially for those working-class people who inhabit and move through predominantly middle-class spaces of education, arts and culture. Bringing together these accounts offers new ways of thinking about the effects of class difference, and how this feeds into the work made by working-class artists and writers. Instead of simply transcending working-class backgrounds once they are working in supposedly middle-class occupations, many working-class people then look back and produce work that reconstructs their class history: partly to make sense of it, but also I believe to hold onto that which they/ we have lost. Against the assumption that class-mobility is a purely positive process, this thesis shows that it is often accompanied by a feeling of loss, and a desire to look back and understand what has changed - and what has not.

Taking my own biography as a starting point, I assembled personal narratives that chimed with my own experiences of education, class-mobility and class-shame, stories that rang true and hit a nerve with my own experiences. It is risky to demonstrate a structural status-quo by using personal stories, but I believe that by reviewing so many examples, in academic texts from cultural studies, sociological departments and in written memories and comments made in interviews by artists and writers, I have found evidence that builds up a strong picture of commonalities that cannot be disregarded.

The limitations of this approach again are in the subjective nature of argument – there is a danger of confirmation bias, because the accounts I discuss have been chosen by me and speak to an experience of mine that I am trying to explicate. But because I make space for many voices besides my own, I hope that these accounts build upon my own narrative in various ways, allowing the reader to build a picture of what it can feel like to be working-class. It is also fitting, in a thesis

discussing working-class artists who risked stigmatisation and judgement in exposing their identities and histories, that I do the same. The Anti-Pygmalion is a figure, after all, conceived out of my desire to dissent from aspirational middle-class femininity, and so cannot be articulated as separate from my will for its existence.

Although drawing on sociological literature, this project chose to pursue the subject of representations of working-class women in the discipline of art and visual culture, in which it has been relatively neglected. There are already sociological texts that discuss how working-class women and girls have been treated negatively: I have shown that the arguments established in these texts can be transferred to the arts, to enrich a field in which discussions of class are scarce and often shallowly informed. Further research could expand the scope of investigation to examine how working-class women are represented in television and media as grotesques, and what this says about British news media and entertainment.

The Case Studies

By foregrounding class in my discussions of my case studies, I am able to provide original readings of them, as class is the least theorised aspect in the critical literature. As well as treating working-class experience and subjectivity as central *topics* of these works, I also theorise the ways in which working-class lived realities shape the works themselves. By doing this, I make the case for the works to be understood within a tradition of autodidact working-class artists, producing work that comes from and speaks to a working-class aesthetics. By interrogating the existing literature on Spence, Billingham and Morley, I prove that their work has most often been judged according to middle and upper-class standards of artistic value, against which it can only fail. I show that all three case studies must be seen and evaluated on their own terms, rather than judged to be lacking against work made by more finally privileged artists and institutions.

This is evident in the critical revulsion shown towards the working-class subjects of all three artists' work, since all three feature and present working-class people as their main focus. These negative readings stem from the negative attitudes aimed at working-class people and their / our lives. My readings differ strongly to the hegemonic middle-class critical literature, as I share a point of view with my case studies, artists and with the women represented in their works. My analysis counters these dominant readings, and demonstrates original and insightful ways that these works can be received.

One problem inherent in sharing an empathetic relation to the works discussed is a desire to defend the material, and by extension its producers. Although I have tried to be reflexive in my readings, it has been difficult to avoid a level of defensiveness in my analysis. However, given the

overwhelmingly negative critical judgements on these works miss so much of value, there *is* a very real need to articulate a defence of what is valuable within them. The works I discuss have been written off or pigeon-holed in so many ways. In the case of Billingham, the critical focus has been almost exclusively on critics' own anxieties around questions exploitation, shock value and transgression. Spence's large body of work has been overwhelmingly categorised as being "about" illness, to the detriment of serious consideration of her extensive body of writing discussing her lifelong struggles with class difference, present in the phototherapy works that worked through class shame and pain of class mobility. In the case of Morley, the least critically written about of all my case studies, *The Alcohol Years* is read through the lens of a Manchester nostalgia that foregrounds the time and place rather than the girl in the centre of the story; or else critics simply fret and moralise over her sexuality. What is least discussed is her ambition, and the reasons for her experimentation: little attempt is made to understand the experiences of a young working-class women who isn't in education or employment, who like her male counterparts is trying to make it in the Manchester music scene of the 1980s but is side-lined and cast aside due to being female. My contribution to the literature on all three case studies counteracts the limited, stereotypical ways that each have been understood, to restore complexity, richness and value to our understanding of these works as existing within a working-class culture.

One of this thesis's major contributions is exposing the substantial deficit of research on class in the visual arts. The more I searched for materials discussing class in this field, the more this gap became apparent. This also extended to class discourse on my case studies: in spite of all three coming from working-class backgrounds, depicting working-class subjects and overtly dealing with class issues, class was still the least theorised aspect of the work. My suspicion at the start of this research that class was being systematically ignored in this area was proven to be correct. Nowhere was this more vividly apparent than in the critical literature on *Mother Daughter Shame Work*, from Spence and Martin's photo therapy sessions. Spence repeatedly says in her own own writing that during her photo therapy sessions she explored the shame she felt at her class background, and the distance her class-mobility provoked between her and her mother. Yet in the critical writing on this work, class and the experience of splitting-class-identities of these two women is ignored – even though the clue is in the title of the work. I framed the absence, identifying class as a blind spot that writers cannot or choose not to see, even if it is explicitly presented in the work. Repeating this "absence testing" in the chapters on Billingham and Morley, I found that there is a systematic failure to take into consideration how class features in these works, to understand how class works as an identity, a situation, background, and subjectivity. On the occasions when class is mentioned in the literature on my case studies, it is usually included as a list of labels, like

“British” or “woman” etc.: class is used as a stamp rather than as something that shapes, describes or reveals.

Another aspect of this critical blind-spot around class analysis can be seen in the assumption that all artists must be middle-class. As if, they may *once* have “come from” a working-class background, but with education and culture they transcend neatly into the middle-classes. I have shown through the personal accounts of all three case studies, as well as the other memoirs and personal testimony, that this is not how most working-class people experience it. Classed subjectivities remain and are carried with us throughout new classed spaces, adding to and blending into our sense of what class we belong to. As Jo Spence termed it, we experience a “split-classed subjectivity”, a feeling of no longer really belonging in either class category.

Exposing this narrative is an important contribution to research on the visual arts, not only because class is absent from so much critical discussion of these images, but also because the producers of those images carry with them a discomfort due to being in spaces dominated by the middle and upper-classes. Although many artists from working-class backgrounds are able to pass in such institutions, it is important that their/our identities are not disavowed, but are taken into account as factors in the shaping of the work, in its production and consumption.

This thesis tells my own story of coming to art, of encountering work by Billingham as a young A-level photography student and gaining the confidence to make work about my own classed background and identity rather than be shamed into assimilation into the middle-class milieu at my art college. I draw out the important narrative of working-class autodidactic traditions of using local libraries, alternative music scenes and involvement in political activism as avenues to learn and explore knowledge and culture. This account produces a counter-history and culture of learning for working-class people, against the more recognised and valued routes of higher education and university. I argue that these alternative avenues are crucial in shaping a working-class culture of shared learning.

The Class-Struggle in Art Continues

This thesis reveals an untapped working-class creativity and intellectualism within the arts: it shows working-class people using their/our lives as a rich source of inspiration, against shame and exclusion. This creativity uses our histories to challenge the classism that permeates oppressive representations of women, and create our own images that reject aspiration as the only means of being taken seriously or being given respect. It embraces that which we have been taught to disidentify with, to show our class, our pride as well as our wounds.

In the spirit of the working-class women in FAN in the 1990s saying “Enough is enough” and Emmanuel Cooper’s plea for further work to be done on the area of working-class art, which he terms the “People’s Art”, I hope this thesis sparks further research into work by working-class artists. We need to know more about the ways working-class people can create images of their own, that challenge the ongoing demonisation of the working-class in Britain today. The challenge can come from work by community photographers, from art workshops for children and teenagers that deal with representation and home, from DIY zines and performance art that deals with the poverty and shame of being an artist and being unable to pay your rent, or from personal work that takes in gender and race alongside class in art. For example, *Free Lunch with The Stenchwench*, performance artist Catherine Hoffman’s piece on residual class-shame and growing up poor in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s,¹¹⁵ which continues the lineage of Spence’s work in discussing the themes of shame, stigma and the personal and political struggles to exist as an artist in austerity Britain. It would be a much-needed acknowledgement of the classed realities of many marginalised artists if further research was directed towards this work. For there to be diversity in the arts, the work of working-class artists and writers needs to be appreciated and our labour paid for.

Arguments, Findings and Answers

In each case study, I described how a representation of working-class womanhood was received and/or constructed in terms of the grotesque. In the case of Spence, it is the internalisation of class inferiority, the feeling described by Spence that one’s classed identity is aberrant, ugly and faulty, which figures the grotesque as a classed-subjectivity of exaggerated wrongness and out-of-place-ness. In Billingham’s photographs of Liz, the female grotesque is constructed from outside the context of the work and projected onto it by reviewers and critics whose attitudes are shaped by cultural distaste towards the signifiers of poverty, and a disgust of female flesh. In Morley’s case, the female grotesque is composed from the judgements of her interviewees, which form a portrait of a young woman seen as a sexually deviant female grotesque in her rejection of feminine bounds of behaviour.

Having made the argument that these representations aligned with my conception of a working-class female grotesque, I then proposed that they could simultaneously be seen as Anti-Pygmalion i.e. as defiantly positive images of a femininity that rejects aspirational gender presentation. The Anti-Pygmalion figure refuses the norms that make class-passing a condition of social or aesthetic

¹¹⁵ Catherine Hoffman, *Free Lunch with The Stenchwench*, performed 14th June 2016 at Toynbee Studios London.

acceptability, and instead holds on to and emphasises supposedly faulty or “bad taste” aspects of working-class identity. Given this reframing, I was then in a position to analyse my embodied responses to these works, and see whether they evoked a sublime experience or not.

The question I wanted to answer was whether these supposedly ugly, shameful, transgressive, unfeminine, narcissistic representations of women could be received with pleasure, fondness and recognition. My aim was to demonstrate that these works are open to a wider range of intellectual and emotional responses than has so far been acknowledged or theorised. Middle-class critics missed the possibility of learning something positive from Billingham’s representations of Liz, because they were coming to these works with biases and stereotypes that prevented them from experiencing joyful or interesting embodied receptions. By exploring my alternative responses to these works, which draw on my own lived experience as a working-class woman, I was able to generate new knowledge and contest existing stagnant classist readings.

There is no single, universal type of sublime experience, all three case studies provoked different responses in me. Confronted with Spence’s class-shame series, especially the *Middle-Class Values Make Me Sick* image, I experienced a strong feeling of anxiety at Spence’s articulation of such a risky point of view: it is dangerous to articulate an unhappiness with middle-class values and hence middle-class people, because it risks offending the very people who might employ and commission you. Such a revolt is brave, and puts one in a precarious position. Yet alongside these feelings of sympathetic unease, I also felt uplifted, amused and excited by the image and its bold statement. In this mingling of pleasure and fear, I felt strongly the unanchored feeling of the sublime. I also considered the image to be a strong embodiment of an Anti-Pygmalion working-class aesthetic.

In the case of the images of Liz captured and composed by Billingham, my response contained a much more visceral mixture of emotions and sensations. Reading through the extensive literature on Billingham’s early series *Ray’s a Laugh*, I found it quite overwhelming and upsetting how negative, harsh and blatantly cruel reviewers were in the way they described Billingham’s family, especially the level of vitriol directed at Liz. Their disgust at her body, her clothes, her supposedly self-evident “bad taste”, is hatefully expressed, as if they were angry at her. I found this part of the research process extremely difficult to take, as one review after another laid into Liz, criticising her, demonising her, making a monster of her.

I grew up with an overweight mother and aunties. As a child, I was aware that being fat carried stigma, but I also loved these women, especially my mother who remains an important and respected person in my life. My mother’s body was a site of comfort, of safety and warmth. Despite knowing that my mother had tried many times to lose weight, and wasn’t always

comfortable about her body, to me she was and is beautiful. I found it hard to read dozens and dozens of writers ripping Liz to pieces simply for being fat. Very few attempted to think about other ways of reading these images; all seemed oblivious to what was obvious to me, which was that this woman represented, however ambivalently for Billingham, a maternal figure of comfort and love.

I had previously made the connection in my writing between fat and class (2015) and it seemed that Liz represented to these writers the very worst crimes a woman could commit: being fat, being poor, taking up too much space and being *shameless*. When I look at Billingham's images of Liz, in particular those in which she is feeding milk to a kitten, and the image in which is haloed by the china masks, I feel again overwhelmed. But this time, it isn't a feeling of being suffocated by classist misogyny, but of being overwhelmed by how *exposed* Liz is: all the things she clearly loves are present, in overabundance. This is an image of a woman who possesses love and desire. Just because someone loves kitsch ornaments, feeding rescue animals, working on jigsaws, smoking endless fags and wearing loud floral dresses – all of which is read so harshly by reviewers – does this make her possession of love and interest less valid? I felt protective of Liz, and fond of her. I recognised her. Or at least, I recognised her love of decoration, her joy in making her space her own. I empathised with her nesting, her defence against poverty and deprivation with decorating, smoking, drinking and eating. How unjust to attack Liz for making the best of things.

For me, clearly, the images are emotionally resonant. In this situation, the bias this introduces into my reading is also a strength, as it allows me to give an original reading of the work, to offer a new perspective based on how people who are marginalised in academia and the art world can read the work and experience it positively. My analysis can speak to other working-class women. For example, I show that the way Billingham has composed the “halo” image of Liz speaks of love and value, but not idealisation. Her moustache is visible, as is her blotchy skin. We do not love our mothers for conforming to an ideal of perfect, beautiful motherhood, but because of the people they are to us. This is why these images of Liz should be important to all women, because they show truth, and reject standards that are impossible for many women to achieve. These images express that you are lovable *as* you are.

The explicitly visible markers of shameful poverty, the sight of a woman who has gained weight and “let herself go”, incite disgust and distaste in the reviewers of these images, who construct them as grotesque. But for me they are shocking, and brave, which is why they are also sublime. Like Spence's self-portraits, they evoke exhilarating, perilous sensations at the exposure of that which we are taught to hide, causing unease but also pleasure and joy.

For my last case study, I found that my feeling of the sublime worked in a different way, and perhaps came from a different place. I felt sympathy with the way in which Morley put herself up for judgement, not defending herself but allowing others to create a portrait of her as grotesque: this made me want her to step in and give her side of things. But allowing this portrait to emerge revealed the way in which all women who breach the social contract of acceptable normative behaviours, sexualities, occupations, politics and identities risk being described and treated as excessively wrong - a wrongness that is found so unpalatable as to be grotesque.

Although I found the film to be exhilarating and nerve wracking, the embodied experience of the sublime doesn't quite describe *my* reaction to the film. It does however resonate around what is being described by Debby's accounts of her and Carol's antics, which evoke sublime feelings of danger and risk, the excitement of willingly pushing their limits for fun and adventure, simply because they had nothing else to do. When I interviewed Morley, she talked about how at that time of year (Summer) it seemed that everyone was waiting to hear about their kids' A-Level results, but at that age she wasn't studying and perhaps this was why she sought out other avenues of experience (Morley: 25/8/2016). What this also suggests is that Debby and Carol felt they had nothing to lose. For young working-class women in the 1980s, their futures were not mapped out with artistic opportunities but with marriage, kids, low paid work, and of getting by. For Carol and Debby, the freedom of the streets, the nights, their bodies and risky sexual (mis)adventures was itself a form of sublime embodiment - not always pleasant, but a way in which they felt that they were living.

Although it works differently in all my case studies, the concept of the sublime has provided a useful way of theorising and taking into account an experience that isn't easily articulated. The sublime speaks of strong sensations, of emotional and visceral experiences; it moves beyond moral judgements of good and bad, and often conservative and sexist notions of the beautiful and the ugly. The sublime in these works is always about dissent: about pushing back against negative stereotypes, rejecting shame and making visible your reality. It speaks to a desire for experience, a will to be in the world, to be an active agent despite being a girl, or middle-aged and scarred from cancer, or fat and tattooed in a brightly coloured frock.

Who is the Anti-Pygmalion?

My conception of the Anti-Pygmalion, as both a *figure and a process*, describes an aesthetics of the working-class female grotesque as one of defiance. It is part of a process of pushing back that I hope will one day come to an end: when working-class women who do not conform to idealised, "classy" femininity stop being treated negatively and are given respect, then there will be no need

for an Anti-Pygmalion figure to rebel as. But to get to this point, inequality, sexism and classism would also have to cease to exist, as the “Pygmalion” goal of class-passing is a product of conditions which encourage women to aspire away from their working-class backgrounds in order to have their lives treated as mattering. This thesis has shown that written-off images of stigmatised working-class women can offer us new experiences of rich recognition of our shared humanity, and provoke sublime encounters full of the exhilaration of rebellion. The figure of the Anti-Pygmalion presents a radical alternative to classed and gendered conformity, showing us vicariously how it would feel if we too were that bold: if we too cast off shame to expose and reveal ourselves, in all our dissident beauty, and make new spaces of diversity demanding respect.

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Filmography

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