Are we ever gonna be respectable?

Doing culture the 'right way'
vs doing it the way you want to

By Lynsey Hanley

Why *Respectable*?

- Social mobility in a context of inequality
- Individuals suffer while undergoing a process they are told they *must* undergo, or aspire to, in order to be fully accepted in society
- 'Respectability' is both a way of preserving dignity and enacting dominant values
- Class itself has pernicious psychological effects
- Social mobility exposes individuals further to those effects because of what it reveals about the myth of meritocracy and the way we have internalised our class position up to that point

What does this have to do with arts engagement?

- Education, social mobility and high cultural capital are inextricably linked
- The 'middle-class conversation', which feeds into greater facility in the 'new economy', greater professional opportunities and wider social value/acceptance, is based on wide general and cultural knowledge
- The appearance of worldliness/urbanity

Shaniah glared at me as we neared the Hayward. Before I could say anything, she froze and said that she wasn't going into the gallery. "It's not me dad, it's not me".

David Osa Amadasun

Respectable: what I learned

- My experiences of and reaction to entering 'the middle class world' were not unusual among socially mobile people; profoundly uncomfortable and makes people ask if they really belong anywhere at all

- The 'fields' of arts engagement in which I grew up were surprisingly mixed yet I always had a strong sense of what was and wasn't 'for me'; how did the two become disconnected?

- Attempts at arts engagement in the context of school always felt like one-off efforts at getting us to like something we hadn't come to ourselves

Our school took us once to the Queen's Film theatre and once to the Lyric theatre. They were fantastic, but felt foreign – it was like being on safari.

Mark Cousins, *The Guardian*, 2014

Class, culture and complexity

- *The Uses of Literacy* – is it sociology? Is it ethnography? Is it cultural studies?
- Overall it is a vital personal document of a time and place which retains its vitality *because* it is focused on *an experience of class*
- It doesn't matter that it is Hoggart's account: it has universal resonance because it highlights the way social structures impinge on individual consciousness and how we produce and respond to cultural stimuli

What does *this* reveal about class?

- That 'voice' is classed; cultural and media discourse are heavily classed in that they are skewed (to say the least) towards middle-class voices, language and perceptions
- Middle-class 'voice' can be acquired and learned through acculturation into a middle class-skewed educational system
- Once you've got that, are you 'one of them'?

Building bridges/burning bridges

- Does the internet *really* widen access to knowledge when algorithms rule?
- Canalisation of television: why is there a BBC4?
- Public libraries – a place to reflect & find out
- Popular music – no Top of the Pops
- University now seen as be all and end all where once it wasn't, for better and possibly for worse
- Widened university access presents the issue of professionalisation of knowledge and further marginalisation of people without a degree

Finding a way in

- How easy is it now to be an autodidact?
- Does the internet make it more, or less, easy to teach yourself about the world?
- Social media has the effect of narrowing information paths due to 'friends'/'likes' system
- Widened university access presents the issue of professionalisation of knowledge and further marginalisation of people without a degree

Confidence: what is waffle?

- What we are talking about really is the acquisition of cultural and social capital if you don't already have it

- If you grow up in a milieu of high cultural capital it is second nature to you to engage in arts and culture as they add to 'the richness of life': participatory, confident, assertive

- Arts participation depends a lot on having an opinion – informed or otherwise – about things which you can readily express to someone else: this requires verbal and embodied confidence

Finding a way in

- With practice you can achieve this level of confidence but it requires repeated engagement and a degree of faking it till you make it

- Social boundaries make us, and in turn we remake, or reproduce, them: back and forth it goes, between what we are 'told' (though rarely explicitly) we are entitled to in terms of education, social esteem, pay and political power, and what we 'tell' others through our cultural choices

The cultural field

Mostly likes and engagement
  Electronic, urban & rock music, modern art, science fiction, TV comedy, playing football, eating indian and chinese food

Professional/managerial, well-educated, young

Overwhelmingly dislikes and avoidances
  Especially 'high' cultural forms
  Watch 5+ hours TV each weekday

Routine jobs, poorly educated, young

Mostly likes and engagement
  Impressionist painting, modern literature, French restaurants, Opera, art galleries, museums, orchestral concerts, stately homes

Professional/managerial, well-educated, older

Mostly dislikes and avoidance
  Especially modern music and art. Also sport and going out. Likes country and western music, musicals, fish & chips

Routine jobs, poorly educated, older

In the pseudo-democratic, oddly cautious and fearful, babbling Internet era, Bowie maintained a purist loyalty to the idea of progress, and the importance of a distinctive, disobedient imaginative action.

Paul Morley, *The Age of Bowie* (2016)

Disobedient, imaginative action

- CPP: Sunderland 'cultural spring' a long time in the making
- Pop Recs Ltd arising out of a culture of DIY music-making and teaching each other, which itself grew out of The Bunker and relationship to the Sunderland Detached Youth Project
- A true example of people doing it themselves & using popular artform as a way into self-expression through all forms of art
- This came about because of a culture of sharing, not hoarding, knowledge & findings-out