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## **The Chawners Last Chance: A Textual Analysis of the Dynamics and Function of Middle-Class Disgust in a Televised Reality Programme.**

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Middle-class disgust is an important source of distinction which serves to maintain classed boundaries and privileges even where material conditions may be converging. This article presents a detailed analysis of *The Chawners' Last Chance*, a televised reality show which, it is argued, illustrates the dynamics and function of middle-class disgust. Analysis of content, editing, camerawork and narration uncovers the manner in which class disgust is actively and consciously produced. Placing *The Chawners' Last Chance* in the context of theoretical and empirical studies of contemporary class disgust, it is argued that although direct reference to class is now eschewed in derisory discourse, class disparagement is nonetheless ever present and arguably of increasing significance to the formation of class division.

### **Introduction**

In our modern media-saturated society, any important media source deciding to forward the idea that “the lower classes smell”, originally used in Orwell’s *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), would be (quite correctly) quickly rounded upon. Orwell lived in a culture where it was not a problem to make derogatory generalisations about entire groups of people, while at the same time, thinking it only proper and good manners to show individuals the utmost civility (Steele 2003, p.43). Today, the modern sophistication of the media ensures that class is not directly referred to, yet, (Lawler 2005, p.437) through representations and

associations attached to the working class. This suggests that the times may have not changed as much as we would like to think.

The connection of the disgusting or tasteless with the working class is not new (Orwell 1937, Bourdieu 1984, Miller 1997 and Sayer 2005), but specific analysis of middle-class disgust is relatively recent (Skeggs 2004, Lawler 2005 and Raisborough & Adams 2008). If changes in contemporary society have altered class awareness away from traditional markers and more towards identifications, attitudes, lifestyles, patterns of consumption and, more specifically, representations and contestable relations, then middle-class disgust becomes central to a discussion of class (Raisborough & Adams 2008, p.32).

Contemporary understandings of class rest more on a dynamic process of evaluations, moral attributions and authorizations, rather than simple indicators of type of employment and housing (Skeggs 2004, p.117; Lawler 2005, p.430). Class has become a matter of concern less as regards inequalities in material resources and more as a source of stigma (Sayer 2005, p.948). The attribution of negative values to the working-class is a process, which attaches positive values to the middle-class; for example, marking oneself as tasteful by the attribution of tastelessness to others (Bourdieu 1984). It is the everyday judgements; the minutiae of the everyday, that form class based divisions and maintain them: “Every middle-class person has a dormant class prejudice which needs only a small thing to arouse it” (Orwell 1937 [2007], p.80). The middle-class, therefore, is seen to create value for themselves through processes of denigration, distance and disgust. So in an age where definitions of class are becoming more dynamic and increasingly circulating around issues of culture, it is important that issues like the one this media text brings to the fore, be highlighted.

Studies of class disgust have so far only referred to television programmes in broad strokes, as exemplars of the concept, rather than as a specific focus of analysis. This essay examines, as a contribution to a small but important body of work, a specific example of the concept of class disgust in action: the television programme *The Chawners' Last Chance* (2012). The programme clearly expresses what Tyler (2008, p.17) described as “the grotesque and comic” figures of the working class, which have appeared in the mass media in recent years. This essay argues that the producers use of content, editing, camerawork and narration, collectively construct a discourse of middle-class derision or disgust. The direct employment of disgust in the creation of meaning may be viewed as an ‘escalation’ of negative attribution in this medium.

### **The Programme**

*The Chawners' Last Chance* is a documentary television programme produced and broadcast on the Biography Channel. Over six episodes, the documentary follows the daily lives of members of one family living in a working class area of Blackpool: the father Philip, mother Audrey, and their two adult daughters Emma and Samantha. The point of interest, at least from the maker’s point of view, is that all are unemployed for the past eleven years. The reason for this is their morbid obesity. All four are in receipt of state benefits, totalling £22,000 per year. The producers, ostensibly, are there to help the family lose weight and ‘get a better life’, but the family- despite their claims of exercise and healthy eating - are presented as reluctant to achieve this. The style adopted is primarily fly-on-the-wall with narration, but the participants are sometimes also interviewed by an off-camera voice. Using Stuart Hall’s model (Devereux 2007, p.129) of encoding/decoding, I assert that the producers use a dominant code involving, mockery, ridicule and disparagement, based on the family’s class position.

## **Class Disgust**

An important point to note here is that the processes exemplified in *The Chawners' Last Chance* are as much about what the middle-classes see themselves as *not being* (disgusting), as it is about what they see themselves as *being* (normal). Class disgust establishes where you are and who you are in society through the creation of opposites. Even though the working-class have always been divided into unrespectable and respectable, as a group they have always remained 'different' (Skeggs 2004, p.97) The working-class 'other' then provides a foundation upon which middle-class identity can be laid and, just as importantly, maintained. The delegitimizing of the working-class is a way of justifying the division of society, which is why representations are so important (Skeggs 1997, p.95) and (Jones 2011, p.137).

Disgust as a concept entails a kind of moral judgement; it brings about a ranking or an ordering of people and things. Disgust involves, according to Miller, an active aversion to something seen as potentially dangerous, because of its power to "contaminate, infect or pollute by proximity, contact or ingestion" (1997, p.2), or as Menninghaus puts it "a nearness that is not wanted" (2003, p.1). Disgust, unlike other emotions, suggests the sensory; we talk of our senses being offended. Disgust invokes smell, touch and taste, a quality that gives it a visceral element. Disgust therefore is attached to metaphors of sensation, otherwise it is not disgust (2003, p.218). Menninghaus (2003, p.6) outlined three fundamental features of disgust: repulsion, proximity and, in various degrees, a subconscious attraction or even an open fascination.

This fascination immediately presents a paradox, whereby what we find to be disgusting naturally repels us, but sometimes we are drawn to such things. Herz (2012, p. 144) suggests that part of the explanation may be that disgusting experiences, like all powerful experiences, give us a kind of thrill, that

sensation-seeking is part of the human personality. High sensation-seeking people are more likely to enjoy scary and gory movies, than low sensation-seeking individuals (p. Herz 2012, p.145 - 153). A readily identifiable example is the near irresistible attraction of car-crashes. All these 'exposures' have in common an aspect of distance; the experience is either on screen or separated from us by a screen, it is a 'safe high' so to speak. In the final analysis, Herz (2012 p.147) suggests that as human beings we have a natural curiosity. Often what is disgusting is harmful, but given the chance to safely explore it, we will. This may explain why programmes like The Chawners are commissioned at all; the producers being aware of, and therefore attempting to tap into, this very fascination. Disgust shocks, and can entertain by shocking, but it never leaves us neutral (Miller 1997, p. 17).

## **Taste**

Bourdieu developed the concept of distinction, whereby tastes and preferences correspond to education level and, in turn, social class (Jenkins 1998, p.138). For Bourdieu, the individuals everyday decisions on issues of food, clothing, entertainment and even bodily posture, act as a medium by which they symbolise social difference and social similarity. Everyday consumption continually classifies as 'alike' or 'different' (Bourdieu 1984, p.479). While the boundaries that are created this way are not permanent, existing only as ongoing practices, they are however crucial to the maintenance of the underlying class structure. Connected to this is his concept of social violence. This suggests that societies impose categories of thought and perception on their dominated classes by indirect cultural means, rather than by straight coercion. Once the dominated class sees and evaluates the world in these terms they legitimize the social order (Jenkins 1998, p.104), this legitimization being akin to the Marxist idea of false consciousness. This 'soft' violence is reproduced through a process

Bourdieu referred to as misrecognition. The work of Skeggs (2004, p.80) also shows how class is produced as a cultural property. Involving the embodiment of value and its expression through difference and moral attribution, class is rarely named directly, representations here instead being recoded to avoid explicit reference.

Media representations such as those of the Chawners on digital television or of working-class women in Paulsgrove estate by newspaper journalists (Lawler 2002), through the attribution of negativity to the working-class, also work as a means of attributing positive value to the middle-class; the latter are made tasteful through assessment of the former as tasteless. Furthermore, having the authority to attribute these values maintains the class division (Skeggs 2004, p.118). The opportunity for marginalised groups to communicate experience in the mainstream has not improved, even with the explosion of new media. Media and social institutions are still the domain of the elite, so it is hardly surprising that social hierarchy and inequality are reflected in their composition and allegiance (Tyler 2008, p.32). As suggested earlier, representations can be seen to have the collective function of maintaining class positions (Miller 1977). Through distancing, denigration, mockery and disgust, misrepresentation actively blocks social mobility. This denial of mobility is entrenched not only through the 'othering' of the working-class but also through the stigmatization of where they reside. Devereux et al (2011) demonstrated that such negative representations can have profound effects on life chances, and access to those capitals, cultural, economic and social (Bourdieu 1984), which may facilitate such social mobility. Yet as class disgust denies mobility it concurrently disseminates the belief that everyone should become middle-class (Jones 2011, p.138). The working-classes are in this way not so much recognised, as mis-recognised as deficient in humanity and consequently a source of unease; a mis-

recognition in order to deny recognition, the effect of which is to make working-class poor excluded, invisible and voiceless (Tyler 2008, p.185).

Middle-class control of political and media interests to a large extent allow the construction and the maintenance of a discourse on the working-class. Discourses are the ways of talking or thinking about particular things that are united by common assumptions (Giddens 2009, p.96). Foucault described discourse as “language in action”, it is what shapes understanding and defines identity. He saw the determination of identity as important in that it creates boundaries and possibilities and, thereby becomes an exercise of power. For Foucault, power works through discourse in influencing and to some extent regulating our thoughts and actions, and shaping attitudes towards social phenomena (Danaher *et al* 2000, p.31). The kinds of discourses and stereotypes held to convey class disgust come in various guises and can change, for example, according to the agenda set by the latest moral panic (Devereux 2007, p.199). Foremost of these panics, in the current economic environment, is welfare fraud or ‘dole-scroungers’. The work of Golding and Middleton (1982, p.82) indicates that “The Devils Poor”, as their research describes them, are particularly disparaged. A notably widespread discourse, Renvall and Vehkalahti (2002) discussed welfare fraud from a Finnish perspective. In the USA the term ‘Welfare Queen’ may have come into the vernacular as a result of Ronald Regan, but the representation persists and has resurfaced in the current Republican Primaries (Blake 2012). In an Irish context, the intensity of debate that surrounded a withdrawn ESRI report suggesting that social welfare is a disincentive to work, provided the basis for the latest moral panic on apparent working-class fecklessness (Taft 2012). The essence of these various representations is to portray the working-class as immoral and idle.



## **Modern Representations**

One could claim that through the ages, working class people have never been properly respected. In fiction, from Victorian times right up to World War II, working class people, when they appeared at all, were mostly caricatures, objects of pity or comic relief (Jones 2011, p.109). As Lawler (2005, p.437) indicates, recent times have not seen any change in this actual sentiment, the working-class still represented by stereotype and as the object of disparagement or disgust. The modern use of the word 'stereotype' almost always involves a term of abuse. When the term was first coined in 1922 by Walter Lippmann he did not intend that its use be confined to the pejorative. Nonetheless, today it is described as a one-sided, exaggerated and, as a rule, prejudicial description of a group or class (Abercrombie et al 2006, p.380). Acting not simply as linguistic shortcuts, stereotypes bring with them an ordering process and an expression of value and belief (Dyer 1993, p.11). Stereotypes serve a number of important functions. They can be used to justify the status-quo, establish a social identity and confer a sense of order and predictability on the social environment. Stereotypes are a cognitively efficient means of organising and interpreting the mountain of social information we receive on a daily basis (Moreno and Bodenhausen 1999, p.6). It is because they serve so many important uses, that stereotypes and thus working class stereotypes persist over time, leading to Lippmann's (1996, p.98) affirmation "there is nothing so obdurate to education or to criticism as the stereotype".

Going further, Berger and Luckmann's (1967, p.126-127) model of the social construction of reality tells us that a society's ordering process is directly coupled with the power relations in that society, The capacity of stereotypes to persist is allied to the power of those who operate them, the more powerful, that is "he who has the bigger stick", having the better chance of imposing their definition of what constitutes reality. Pfohl (2008, p.12) saw the relationship

between socially constructed reality and power as a “field of forces” - some dominant, others dominated - which permit social action and allows the interpretive construction of human meanings and morals. Central to the concept is the idea that social order is a human product, so that dominant or hegemonic social constructions are seen as ‘natural’. Power consequently gives our knowledge of the world its socially constructed form.

In modern expressions of disgust, class is not directly referred to, but rather, the traits considered disgusting, are presented as the responsibility of the individual or the family. This process of individualisation involves placing the accountability for unemployment, illness or poverty not on the state but the individual as part of their duty of self-care. The poor therefore, are now to blame for their own position, the result of their own behavioural deficits (Mooney 2009, p.447; Jones 2011, p.10). They become individually responsible for their collective position. Individualisation is a structural phenomenon, which must not be confused with individualism. The latter is an issue of inclination or frame of mind. Individualisation, however, does not come from a choice or preference, it is imposed by modern institutions (Beck 2007, p.681). Individualisation would suggest that as people have to act and think about their position in society in an increasingly individualised manner, class would be undermined. However, as Atkinson (2007) demonstrates that far from being dead, class is still seen as a matter of occupational difference, society is still seen as divided by class, and people are still socialised into a sense of class by their family origin. While individualisation has seen class emerge as representing ‘status’, or ‘station’ and a means of establishing social distance more than the traditional political ‘class war’, what is clear is that class has been re-coded so that people at the bottom are seen as somehow deserving of their lot.

Modern representations of the working-class are mediated; their tastes, clothes, bodies, and where they live, are connected with identity. These identities are taken to be ignorant and tasteless, the disgust as such, being attributed to, and a property of, the identity. According to Owen Jones speaking on BBC radio (Thinking Allowed 2011); all we see now are either middle class people portrayed fairly positively, or alternatively grotesque characterisations of working class people, without any reference to how working-class people actually live. Tyler (2008, p.18) attributes the emergence of the ‘chav’ figure in England, the ‘ned’ figure in Scotland and ‘white trash’ in the U.S.A. (to which we could add our ‘scumbag’ or ‘lowlife’ in Ireland) to the process of class formation, which attempts to distinguish the upper and middle classes from the working-class. These figures are all mediated in terms of social class as well as expressions of disgust, and they work, as Miller (1997, p.8) states, to stratify our political order. So, these representations can be seen to have the collective function of maintaining class positions, presenting claims of superiority, or informing as to the ‘proper’ position one has in the hierarchy.

### **Class Disgust & ‘*The Chawners*’**

I approach *The Chawner’s Last Chance* as a media text to call attention to it as a structured, culturally-located, symbolic product which through and together with its readers generate meanings; in this case, setting up a discourse of welfare dependency. Exterior shots of The Chawner’s home showing it to be a small working-class terrace house, establish their social status. The audience are immediately welcomed to “Chawnerville” or “Chez Chawner” mocking the family home with faux middle-class pretention. The family themselves never refer to their home in this way, so the producers, subtly, set the tone in the opening scenes. This tone consistently sneering and one of ridicule, is in harmony with the points raised by Jones (Thinking Allowed 2011). Menninghaus (2003, p.112), suggesting that laughing at something, much like

vomiting, resembles the overcoming of disgust, an act of expulsion or rejection. By the rapid discharge of a high tension, a state of relaxation is achieved, a sense of 'all clear'. Tyler (2008) points out that like disgust, laughter is community forming, contagious and generates proximity. According to Tyler (2008, p.23), laughter is often at the expense of another; we set the other as an object of comedy, moving us away from the thing we are laughing at, creating a distance between 'them' and 'us'. Returning to Menninghaus (2003, p.11) he reinforces this idea by proposing that laughter and disgust are just different but complementary ways of "admitting to an alterity". This practice therefore constructs boundaries and, just as in this programme's case, invites moral judgement and the adoption of a superior class position. The audience is then informed that this family has not worked in over a decade and live by means of state benefits, this revelation always accompanied by a shot of the whole family on a couch in front of the television. This image is clearly constructed to play directly into stereotypical notions of working-class fecklessness and idleness. If the point is not made clear enough for the audience, the family are described directly as "malingering" and 'fairground' type music accompanies (particularly the mother's) efforts to get up or get about.

The tone throughout is maintained by an off-screen narrator. The function of any narrator is to provide a union between the textual subject and the viewer. During the course of watching, the spoken discourses of a voice-over are constructed with the intention of aligning the audience to a proposed interpretation of what is seen (Wilson 1993, p. 138). In essence, the audience is being directed as to what is of interest, and importantly, how it is to be regarded. The rationale of voice-over is that the viewer appropriates the meanings intended by the producers. Of course that is not suggest that the text as a whole

cannot be de-coded in an oppositional way, but this text's narration is as central to its underlying class-distancing as the images it projects.

The work of Tyler (2008 p.17) shows that the stereotype of 'dole-scrounger' is consistently linked across various media forms to chav identity. Jones (2011) similarly points out that the chav figure has condensed various folk devils to become a middle-class hate figure, one seen as lazy, ignorant, and idle. In terms of class disgust, working-class people are further constituted as disgusting by representations involving disparaging behaviour, appearance, and taste. Behaviourally, the figure of the chav is framed by association to excessive consumption which is devoid of displays of 'taste'. Stereotypes of chav taste centre on excesses, on 'bad' or 'vulgar' choices; cheap but large jewellery, cheap cigarettes and branded shell suits with white trainers (Lawler 2002, p.107). This narrative of excess is further attached to appearance in connection to the body itself, the fat body seen as embodied excess, evidence of a lack of self-control and irresponsibility. The body itself is seen as literally the physical manifestation of class taste (Skeggs 2004, p.102). Miller (1997, p.8) noted that disgust requires images of bad taste, ugly sights and smells to communicate its judgements, and this concept is evident in the editing seen in the chosen text. Examples include floor level cameras pointing up, ensuring the least flattering angle of view, and extreme close-ups of each member eating. Deliberate inclusion of flatulence as 'comedy' also points to an agenda of provoking derision and disgust in the audience. The family are pathologised as a manifestation of lack (Lawler 2005, p.431) in taste, self-control and personal responsibility. This sort of symbolic violence operates within Bourdieu's (1984) processes of distinction. He saw taste as functioning as a type of social orientation, one of the key signifiers of social identity, and as such it both unites and as such it both unites and separates. Taste for Bourdieu is the basis of all that one has, or is, for others and is embodied through socialisation. Different

classes are therefore oriented towards the practices or goods which benefit the occupants of their social position. Legitimate and middle-brow taste thereby classify ‘different’ or popular taste as unnatural and rejected, provoking disgust (p.56). Jones points out that these programmes “put an entire class in the stocks” (2011, p.122) so as to illicit middle-class judgements of social inferiority and, in turn, bestow on the viewer a sense of superiority.

*The Chawners’ Last Chance* is ostensibly about ‘renewal’, helping these people lose their weight, and thereby enabling them to find work and ‘a better life’. However, the programme from the start constructs the disparaging frame within which this apparent reconstruction will take place. Even when members of the family do take constructive measures like exercise disparagement is present. When while walking a forest path two of the family express fatigue, the narrator suggests that mountain rescue may be required; the comment synchronised with a helicopter flying close by. In viewing this programme one may be tempted to adopt the attitude that it may be produced with a post-modern sensibility, a sort of self-awareness or with ‘a wink to camera’. But as Lawler rightly asserts, does a knowing smile really do enough to undo or undercut symbolic violence (Lawler 2005, p.437). All it really does is permit the producers to abandon responsibility for their representations while disseminating pejorative stereotypes and perpetuating class disgust.

## **Conclusion**

The media text *The Chawners’ Last Chance*, when examined from the sociological perspective, exhibits the characteristics inherent in the concept of class-disgust. This article has shown that the programme through its use of association, confers traits of disgust on the family. These traits are characterized as the result of their own behavioural deficits. The Chawners are represented in

the context of class disgust stereotypes, welfare dependent, feckless and idle. Their obesity is portrayed as the embodiment of a lack of self-control and irresponsibility. The use of narration, editing (both visual and audio), and camerawork combines to lend a sneering, mocking narrative style. Where this particular text differs from the subjects of other analyses of class disgust, is in the type of symbolic violence employed. Rather than focusing solely on distinctions in taste, this programme, as we have seen, specifically targets characteristics and actions that it hopes are commonly regarded (Miller, 1997) as disgusting like fecklessness, the corpulent body and flatulence. As Miller noted it is in the intersection of disgust, contempt and a lowly 'other' that the construction and maintenance of hierarchies occur. It is this texts 'mainlining' of disgust that provides distinctions and reassurances of the 'natural' and what constitutes 'rightful' order. The programme, by consistently refocusing the viewer on their working-class circumstances; where they live, their benefit dependency, their working-class habitus in effect, can thus be fairly accused of an active 'othering' which is central to the concept of class-disgust. When inequalities are circulated through such a powerful symbolic and cultural medium as television, while at the same time holding individuals accountable for a collective class position, attention needs to be drawn. This is not only in the interests of the working-class but us all.

*“Where justice is denied, where poverty is enforced, where ignorance prevails, and where any one class is made to feel that society is an organised conspiracy to oppress, rob and degrade them, neither persons nor property will be safe”* (Frederick Douglas 1886).

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