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'Celebrity Chav: Fame, Femininity and Social Class' Draft

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There is nothing new about celebrity culture. It is an intrinsic feature of a world structured by mechanical reproduction. However, what has been visible over the last few years in Britain is a modulation of representations of celebrity figures in entertainment and news media through reality TV series, newspapers and gossip magazines. In a somewhat cynical turn, certain celebrities have been depicted increasingly as exploitative, aspirational *parvenus* whose public performances we should respond to not with desire, admiration or benign interest, but rather with a pleasurable blend of contempt, envy, scepticism and prurience. This shift of representational emphasis involves the oppressive and punitive foregrounding of class, whereby selected celebrities are understood to be ineluctably anchored to an essential class identity regardless of the extent to which their social and financial circumstances have been transformed as a result of their conspicuousness or notoriety.

In this article, we argue that celebrity is an increasingly significant means by which reactionary class attitudes, allegiances and judgements are communicated. In contradistinction to claims that the concept of social class has lost its analytic value in the context of contemporary consumer society with the growing ideological purchase of meritocracy and choice, we contend that class remains central to the constitution and meaning of celebrity. A central premise of this article is that celebrity culture is not only thoroughly embedded in everyday social practices but is more radically constitutive of contemporary social life. We examine this claim through a consideration of the ways in which celebrity produces and sustains class relations. Until recently social class has been marginal to scholarly accounts of the social phenomenon of celebrity. However, recent work on reality television, notably that of Bev Skeggs and Helen Wood (2008), Su Holmes (2003) Gareth Palmer (2004) Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn (2005) and Irmeli Karl (2007), suggests that class is re-emerging as an important analytic frame within Media and Cultural Studies. Taking its lead from this scholarship this article explores the structural inequalities of contemporary fame. Celebrity, 'the condition of being talked about', is understood herein as a distinctly disciplinary sphere of social life, a class pantomime through which the establishment of social hierarchies and processes of social abjection (*qua* punishment for sexual and social transgression) are acted out figuratively (Little et al, 1973). We argue that a new category of notoriety or public visibility has emerged and is embodied in the figure of the working-class female celebrity, who operates as what Skeggs terms the 'constitutive limit to propriety' within celebrity culture and wider social life (2005: 968).

The first part of this article challenges claims that the putative dominance of celebrity represents the 'dumbing down' of culture, as well as neo-liberal arguments that celebrity culture is 'democratizing' or symptomatic of wider 'social levelling'. Rather, celebrity is understood as a hierarchical domain of value formation characterized by struggles over the social worth and meaning of selected classed, gendered and racialized bodies. The second part of this article refers to a range of news and entertainment media, including blogs and online discussion fora, to consider how 'celebrity chavs' are systematically reproduced as abject, gauche, excessive tragi-comic figures. In the conclusion we argue that these figures frequently migrate beyond newspaper gossip columns and celebrity magazines to a wide array of social spaces, where they are a means of maintaining class and gender distinctions so that, for example, celebrity chavs are cited as evidence of the moral delinquency of white working-class girls.

### **Celebrity Culture**

Celebrity culture is disseminated across such a broad range of media and communication forms that its boundaries are difficult to delimit; as Su Holmes notes, celebrity 'saturates the "everyday"' (2005: 24). In addition to a wide range of celebrity-oriented commercial and promotional media, celebrity culture is also produced and sustained by a range of public institutions and leisure industries. All of these interests profit from, promote, manufacture and trade in celebrity and the celebrity branding of consumer goods has deployed celebrities in every quarter of consumer culture. Journalistic commentary and celebrity gossip extend these personae into everyday social exchanges and practices, and whilst financial gain is clearly a key function of celebrity for those who stand to profit (including celebrities themselves), to understand the impact and

significance of celebrity culture we must think beyond the restricted financial exchange value of celebrity. We need an expanded understanding of 'the economic' to understand the increasing visibility of celebrity within everyday life.

Over the last decade British sociologists have powerfully reformulated our comprehension of the dynamics of social class. Influenced by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, feminist sociologists, such as Skeggs, Stephanie Lawler, Diane Reay, Valerie Hey and Valerie Walkerdine, have demonstrated how social class cannot be understood in terms of economic capital alone. One of Bourdieu's central contributions to class scholarship was to establish the role of non- or indirectly economic factors, such as 'symbolic capital' (status, reputation, the right to be listened to) and 'cultural capital' (education, competencies, skills, taste), in generating and maintaining class distinctions and correlatively in enabling or obstructing social mobility. As Lawler suggests, for instance, one way in which class inequality is reproduced is through processes of 'making working-class subjectivities pathological, so that class relations are not just economic relations but also relations of superiority/inferiority, normality/abnormality, judgment/shame' (1999:4). This classification process is central to celebrity culture. Fascination with celebrities' social class is evident in discussion about the 'backgrounds' of famous men and women, the proliferation of celebrity biographies and autobiographies, and the close scrutiny of the deportment and discrimination of individual celebrities. Systematized through an expanding taxonomy (A-list, B-list, Z-list), it is important to note that this classification process operates unequally along gender lines, with male celebrities less exposed to the inquisitive attention directed at women, and more able to ascend the scale of celebrity value. Despite this incessant emphasis on class within celebrity media, few academic accounts of celebrity culture have undertaken a class-focused analysis or considered the increasingly central function celebrity plays within wider social processes of class-making. Whilst scholarly work on fan cultures and stardom has always paid some attention to class and economic inequality, the construction of celebrity within everyday communication practices and entertainment media is clearly distinct from conventional expressions of fandom in its ambivalence towards its object. For instance, many of the social networking sites, blogs and discussion groups devoted to the analysis of celebrity behaviour, express intense, hyperbolic hatred and aversion rather than love or admiration. Hatred can be a community-forming attachment to a 'bad object'; however, it is not the mode of identification we normally associate with 'fandom', but rather a perverse, if equally fanatical, 'anti-fandom'.

### **Celebrity Scholarship**

Jessica Evans (2007) argues that two central arguments about the classed meanings of celebrity circulate within Media and Cultural studies. The first, made by Daniel Boorstin in 1961, is that celebrity culture epitomizes the narcissism and superficiality of market-driven society and thereby marks the decline of traditional values and institutions (the atomization of family and community, the spread of secularism and aesthetic relativism). The rise of celebrity culture is often cited as indisputable evidence of the 'dumbing down' or decadence of public culture, particularly across mainstream entertainment media but also in such domains as education and parliamentary politics. Recent comments by British broadcaster Sir David Attenborough about developments at the BBC, exemplify this view: 'It's all about celebrity, which is a disaster; it's ghastly. The celebrity cult means you are famous without talent [...] Popularism has pervaded our society. It is a distorted form of democracy and

egalitarianism' (Pierce, 2008). The ascendancy of this debased, commercialized culture is typically understood as a deeply uncritical populism that masquerades as democracy but which, in fact, represents the erosion of social and cultural values by the market. This argument perhaps relies on a questionable celebration of high culture, but nevertheless Attenborough's complaint recognizes that the celebrity culture industries do promote fantasies of participatory democracy. Claims about the inclusive, emancipatory effects of contemporary celebrity culture should be examined carefully and contested.

A second key argument is, indeed, that the rise of celebrity culture, and the supposed demise of hierarchical, élitist systems of fame and public visibility, demonstrates the democratization of public life. In such accounts, celebrity culture, understood as a recent phenomenon, is offered as evidence of wider processes of social levelling (see Evans, 2007: 14). Claims that celebrity culture is democratic hinge on two premises; the first is that the visibility of members of 'marginal' groups demonstrates that celebrity culture creates 'employment opportunities' for social groups that were previously socially and culturally disenfranchised. The increased visibility of (unpaid or low paid) working-class people and members of ethnic minority groups on television has led many to concur. Sociologist Joshua Gamson, for example, has suggested 'celebrity is a primary contemporary means to power, privilege, and mobility' (1994: 186). While perhaps true for some individuals, it remains the case that groups historically marginalized from media production, are evidentially not producing mainstream content. Empirical research suggests that the media industry is growing more, not less, exclusive in its employment practices.<sup>1</sup> Turner observes that, on the face of it, celebrity culture appears to have 'opened up media access to women, to people of colour and to a wider array of class positions; there is every reason why the positive by-products of this increased volume and diversity might excite optimism about its democratic potential' (2006:157). However, he cautions that these effects are accidental and that 'It is important to remember that celebrity still remains a systematically hierarchical and exclusive category, no matter how much it proliferates' (Ibid.). It is certainly questionable whether the appearance of a more diverse range of figures on television (as presenters, interviewees, documentary subjects, game-show contestants and fictional characters) is an indication of their greater editorial control over the manipulation and presentation of those appearances, much less wider access to the means of production and distribution of television content. As Biressi and Nunn (2005), Holmes (2003), and Skeggs and Wood (2008) have all argued, this democratizing argument is frequently used by media producers as a cynical defence against accusations that those reality genre programmes that are complicit with the phenomenon of celebrity culture exploit their unwitting subjects.

The second source of evidence cited in defence of celebrity culture's democratic potential is the increase of 'participatory opportunities' for commentary by media audiences such as the widespread use of phone and online voting in gameshows and TV news, and the opportunity for 'feedback' via online forums and video file-sharing sites like YouTube. John Hartley has optimistically named this fusion of democratic forms with entertainment media 'democrataintment', although again it is unclear to what extent the opportunity to publish commentary about media content is emancipatory or critically effective (1999). A survey of the letters pages of newspapers and magazines, online entertainment blogs and discussion groups, suggests that the opportunity to express an opinion publicly is unlikely to produce oppositional or critically reflective interpretations of celebrity

media. More often than not it is taken as a chance to participate in consolidation of the dominant meanings of a celebrity, already encoded within celebrity media. In other words, the democratizing claim risks becoming indistinct from neo-liberal ideologies of market meritocracy, which use the rhetoric of 'equality of opportunity' to disguise and sustain massive inequality.

In debates about the value and meaning of celebrity culture, class is frequently encoded euphemistically through references to 'ordinary' or 'real people' (Blacker, 2008). The term 'ordinary' here generally retains disparaging connotations: 'often depreciatory: common-place, somewhat inferior. Not distinguished by rank or position, of low degree: common, vulgar, unrefined' (Little et al. 1973:1461). Arguing that progressive changes within the class constitution of celebrity are related to media change, Turner comments that there has been 'a programmatic shift in the preferred territory for the development of celebrity in particular media platforms – television and the internet in particular. This is a shift from the élite to the ordinary' (2006: 154). However, this is no simple movement of levelling and the category of the 'ordinary' retains its negative sense. As Skeggs observes, class is rarely named directly but, rather, is connoted 'through moral euphemism', whereby processes of interpretation 'do the work of association' (2005: 965, see also Bromley 2000). Moral euphemism is thus one means by which the class identities of individual public figures are signalled, although, in the case of celebrity chavs, class judgements are increasingly explicit. In the last decade in Britain, the contemptuous term 'Chav' has become widely used to describe young, white, working-class men and women as shiftless, tasteless, unintelligent, immoral or criminal. The celebrity chav is a figure who has become rapidly and unexpectedly wealthy or publicly visible – typically through reality television - and is represented as constitutionally unable to manage this change of circumstance with dignity, sangfroid or prudence. Oxymoronic in terms of an increasingly hierarchized celebrity culture, the celebrity chav is the excessive embodiment of class hatred.

### **Celebrity as Class Pantomime**

Celebrity is a form of improvisatory, excessive, public theatre. It is class pantomime and the 'chav', a vicious and grotesque representation of the undeserving poor, is a stock character<sup>ii</sup>. Despite its apparent unpredictability (through regular *exposés*, scandals and embarrassments), celebrity culture has a highly formal structure with coherent, bounded narratives that permit and contain extemporization by a cast of recognizable social types. Vulgarity is a predominant theme and a central spectatorial pleasure of this bawdy theatre is that it enables audiences to experience and reassert class difference: to affirm, '*I am not that*'. As celebrity journalist Polly Hudson writes, the reason 'we can't get enough of The Goody and Katona shows, is simply - even though it's uncomfortable to admit - because they make us feel better about ourselves' (2008). Such media engagement is not merely directed towards the pleasures of a comparative sense of self-worth. It also serves to reinforce the understanding that 'we', the audience, occupy a secure position from which to make evaluative assessments of the inferior class status of others (see Skeggs, 2005: 977). As Carole Anne Tyler notes, 'to have class is to be at a controlling distance from what signifies its lack' (2002: 53).

Criminologist Ruth Penfold suggests that celebrity can be understood as a rather more violent, punitive mode of spectacular performance, a public ritual analogous to 'a penal system' (Penfold, 2004; see also Palmer 2003).

The apparently insatiable desire for celebrity gossip and scandal arguably demands increasingly cruel dramas that recall Michel Foucault's account of the 'theatres of punishment' (such as the scaffold, the chain-gang and public torture) of earlier historical periods (1977). Participation, and the sense of belonging to a community of viewers and readers, is central to celebrity culture, whether through the physical presence of members of a studio audience, or through remote and virtual forms of participation. This is scarcely evidence of democratic accountability and, if we extend the Foucauldian analogy further, we can understand contemporary audiences as performing a role similar to that of 'the baying mob'. As Foucault suggests, the mob was not 'free' or self-organizing, but directed and coerced by public officials to 'participate' in torture and executions. This historical comparison is not so unimaginable if we picture the over-excited, jeering crowds who watch the weekly 'eviction' of competitors in the *Big Brother* game-show from the programme's set. The following extract from an entertainment blog, discusses the ways in which audience participation is orchestrated by television producers on eviction nights:

1. . Time to tackle the baying mob, I've been at a few evictions and some of those people see eviction nights as something in them selves, a chance to turn up, (armed in some cases) to humiliate the evictee.
2. It's the BB producers who help whip the crowd up into a frenzy
3. BB orchestrates the chanting
4. Ooh ....I was one of them great unwashed.

**REF**

Affective 'audience participation' is integral to such programmes, and responses of 'moral outrage' are a crucial component of spectatorial engagement. Indeed, the entertainment derived from celebrity lies in the opportunity to participate in the humiliation and debasement of its 'actors', although the blogger's comments above suggest an additional, more complex spectatorial pleasure of self-abasement. Becoming a member of such an audience involves (for this individual at least) the licentious thrill of slumming it – temporary, ironic imaginary identification with an abject class position.

### **Celebrity Femininity**

Citing Kathleen Hall Jamieson's study of the history of public speech, Liesbet van Zoonen argues that women have historically been excluded from achieving fame because of their position as 'private persons' and the 'vigorous restrictions' this imposed on their speech. As Jamieson notes, 'Long after ducking stools and gossip bridles had become curiosities in museums, the silence they enforced and the warnings they imposed continued to haunt women' (Jamieson, 1988: 68 in van Zoonen). Van Zoonen suggests that a shift from an economy of fame (inaccessible to women by virtue of its emphasis on heroic masculine attributes and public speaking) to a culture of celebrity (in which fame depends less on certain forms of achievement and public speech and more on attributes such as appearance) privileges 'femininity'. However, as van Zoonen suggests, celebrity is restricted to those who can display femininities of highly specific kinds. The forms of celebrity available to women are, like the concomitant forms of femininity, regulated and relentlessly disciplined. The archaic 'ducking stool' is, thus, one of the central organizing principles of celebrity culture.

Femininity has never been easily accessible to working-class women. As Skeggs suggests, 'Both black and white working-class women' have historically been coded 'as the sexual and deviant other against which femininity [is] defined' (2001: 297). It is precisely because femininity is associated with the middle and upper classes that working-class women imagine that acquisition of the correct femininity is a central means of acquiring cultural capital and social mobility. However, while femininity is often employed by working-class women as a way of 'deflecting associations of pathology, poverty, and pollution', their attempts to 'do femininity' are often read as a *class drag act*, an unconvincing and inadvertently parodic attempt to pass (Skeggs 2001:298). A defining feature of celebrity chavs is an inability to perform femininity correctly. Indeed, these celebrities are subject to invasive levels of public surveillance in which the slightest 'error' in appearance or speech can expose them to negative class judgements. Carole Anne Tyler observes that 'a real woman is a real lady; otherwise, she is a female impersonator, whose "unnaturally bad" taste — like that attributed to working-class women or women of colour - marks the impersonation of such' (2001: 61) Chav celebrity is constituted by this incompetent or unsuccessful impersonation, and the exposure of this failure is a key source of pleasure in celebrity culture.

Some of the most withering examples of this ritual of 'class outing' in British publications are found in the extensive commentary on Coleen McLoughlin, wife of British professional footballer Wayne Rooney. For example, in a *Sunday Times* profile, entitled 'Coleen McLoughlin: Triumph of Teen Spirit and Awful Taste', an anonymous journalist responds scornfully to the news that McLoughlin was to feature in British *Vogue*, unironically described as 'the classiest of women's monthly glossies and trendsetter for high maintenance females' (2005). The article states:

Vogue has never compromised its high standards with plebeian taste. And McLoughlin is to style what a bicycle repair kit is to a Formula One car. She is a shopaholic whose undiscerning accumulation of expensive clothes — paid for with Rooney's gold credit cards — has earned her the term "looting chic". She is, in short, a "superchav", the uncrowned queen of chav.[...] A girl of average looks, an unremarkable figure and no discernible talent is to have the ultimate self-affirming accolade of being showcased as a style leader in the June issue of *Vogue*. (2005)

Accounts of the white poor have always foregrounded physical appearance, tending to emphasize a perceived incontinence and excess of (bodily) materiality. Indeed, newspaper accounts of 'chavs' (UK) and 'white trash' (USA) vividly recall Victorian and Edwardian accounts of the dangerous, libidinal lower classes: the great unwashed (Tyler, 2008). Nevertheless, the venomous class semantics of this article about McLoughlin are worth reiterating. It reminds us that McLoughlin is an *arriviste*, brought up on the 'grim Croxteth estate' in Liverpool, and employs a rich lexicon to signify her as pathologically working class: *plebeian, rough, grasping, uneducated, care-work, cleaners, prostitutes and brothels, slappers, drunken brawls, screaming abuse, fists and feet and domestic violence*. Whilst the mockery and derision of many marginal and disadvantaged groups is widely considered to be in 'bad taste' in highbrow public culture, in British newspapers such a caricature remains acceptable. McLoughlin is a public figure who strives to increase her cultural capital and acquire 'class'

through charity work, and the presentation of herself as educated and thoroughly respectable. However, the sneering press coverage of her 2008 wedding to Rooney suggests such attempts are futile. As Marina Hyde commented in *The Guardian*:

If you had the remotest doubt that snobbery is thriving in this country, it must have been erased by the spectacle of sections of the media reminding the most talented footballer in the country of his place, and that of his family. "It's a long way from Croxteth," they tittered, while "a source" confided to the Mail that "Coleen was told in no uncertain terms that guests should look like they were at a top wedding. The [OK!] magazine bosses were terrified they would turn up looking too chavvy." [...] What really lies beneath, of course, is a gibbering terror of social mobility (2008).

In contrast to McLoughlin's desire to 'better herself' through the emulation or adoption of middle-class habitus, other celebrity chavs trade more forthrightly on their pathological working-class personae, their primary value in the celebrity market place.

### **Kerry Katona**

Kerry Katona's frequently cited 'celebrity biography' always includes the following information: Born in 1980 in Warrington, a large post-industrial town in North West England, Katona was brought up by an alcoholic, abusive and suicidal mother and never knew her biological father. She spent periods of her childhood in care homes or with foster parents and at 16 embarked on a career as a lap-dancer, stripper, glamour model, touring with a dance troupe before acquiring minor celebrity singing in the pop group Atomic Kitten (1999-2001). Her 2002 marriage to a fellow pop star, Westlife singer Brian McFadden, was headline news. After becoming a mother Katona moved into television, appearing on and presenting daytime magazine programmes and her celebrity profile dipped. However, when she won the 2004 British series of reality TV game-show *I'm a Celebrity... Get Me Out of Here!*, Katona was thrust back into the celebrity spotlight. Media coverage from this period constructs her as an archetypal 'ordinary celebrity', the working-class girl 'done good' (figure 1).



Figure 1: Front cover of *The Daily Mirror*, (Feb. 10<sup>th</sup>, 2004)

As the show's winner, Katona's 'coronation' as 'Queen of the Jungle' was a high-profile media event that extended beyond the TV programme itself. In an inversion of the normal dictates of neoliberal girlhood, Katona's lack of education, bourgeois graces and proper speech, her vulgarity, *naïveté*, and bodily excess were very briefly granted positive value. Indeed, the figuration of Katona in this period can be read as a contemporary example of what Mikhail Bakhtin (1941) termed 'the carnivalesque': a ritualized interval in which class hierarchies are temporarily reversed and an anti-classical counter-aesthetic briefly emerges. Inevitably, though, there is scant liberatory potential in this over-turning of the normal hierarchies of femininity and class, for what ultimately makes figures such as Katona highly marketable is their signification of class otherness. Katona's celebrity was initially assembled around a grounded, respectable working-class character marked by tenacity and lack of pretention. This image of virtuous ordinariness was carefully developed within the framework of a 'rags-to-riches' narrative employed both by British journalists and Katona herself. For example, her best-selling ghost-written autobiography, *Kerry Katona: Too Much Too Soon - My Story of Love, Survival and Celebrity* (2006), details her harrowing, impoverished upbringing and rise to fame, whilst her novel, *Tough Love* (2007) extends this 'working-class heroine' persona into a fully fictional account of a successful glamour model. In a knowing echo of Katona's own 'return' to her roots, the protagonist, Leanne Crompton, loses her job and is forced to leave London returning to her previous life with her chaotic, violent working-class family in the North of England.

This carefully managed persona was quickly supplanted by storylines in the press documenting her excessive behaviour and, crucially, her failure as a mother. In 2005 Katona starred in a television show, *My Fair Kerry* (ITV), which, as the title suggests, parodies the scenario of George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1913) and its musical adaptation, *My Fair Lady*. However, rather than an acerbic attack on the British class system, *My Fair Kerry* is pure class pantomime. The promotional press release revealed that Katona would attempt 'to turn herself into a high society princess in just two weeks', leaving 'her Warrington home for a fairytale castle in Austria', to be tutored by etiquette coaches in 'deportment and speech' and 'proper table manners'. Katona speculates gamely in the press release, 'It might be a new me when I finish [...] You might never see the common Kerry again. This could be a new start, a new voice, a new way of sitting!' (ITV, 2005) Much of the comedy derives from the contrast between two different class stereotypes, embodied by Austrian aristocrats and Katona and her family, and from the audience's recognition that the acculturation and disciplining of Katona is doomed to fail, precisely because her class identity is an essential, inescapable element of her celebrity persona.

*My Fair Kerry* derives from the sub-genre of 'make-over' reality programmes and gameshows, such as *Faking It* (Channel 4, 2001-6), *Strictly Come Dancing* (2004-7, BBC), and *Ladette to Lady* (ITV, 2005-8), the latter of which set out to transform 'some of Britain's most extreme binge-drinking, sexually shameless, anti-social rebels into respectable ladies' (ITV). These programmes explore the contingency of existing social relations, and their investment in appearance, by dramatizing individuals' attempts to induce misrecognition, but all the same our engagement stems from the improbability that the incorrigible contestants will be able to pass successfully in an unfamiliar role. As Carole Anne Tyler notes in another context, 'passing can only name the very failure of passing, an indication of a certain impossibility at its heart, of the contradictions which constitute it' (1994: 212). In this respect, *My Fair Kerry* is less about passing than *class drag*, as Katona is required to act out in an exaggerated fashion what are imagined to be the bodily dispositions of a white working-class woman, displaying an excessive and incontinent combination of naïveté, ignorance, playfulness, unruliness and vulgarity. The effects of this performance on the audience are the only unpredictable element within this scenario.

A group of women discussed *My Fair Kerry* in an online entertainment forum in the following way:

1. did anyone watch my fair Kerry... how funny is she, she is common and does not try to be anything else..i think she is great and is absolutely stunnin lookin too..anyone agree??:
2. Arh Yeah! She made me laugh loads last night. She's not like any of the other celebrities who love talking about their rough pasts, she really has had a rough past and she loves the way she is. And so do I!
3. I also used to think she was nothing more and a 'gobby northern bint.'...and her early attempts at TV presenting were toe curling...hihi: but her and Jordan both won me over with their 'true' personalities when they appeared on 'I am a celebrity get me out of here...!' They showed sheer guts and overcame many fears and stuck it out unlike Daniella and that 'embarassing' Appleton woman! I know who I would rather have a girlie night out with....:)

4. I don't like her, she really does my head in. Being commons not a good thing, I only saw the advert for *My Fair Kerry* and when she burped I was just like oh my god girl wheres your manners!!!
5. I just thought- you scrubber! As soon as she burped.. just said it all for me. Her parents must be so proud really
6. do people forget that most of us on here are 'northern bints' and if you were on the tele you would sound as common as she does its only cos you mix with other northern bints that we all sound the same....i werent born wi a silver spoon in mi gob an i wunt pretend to be somat i aint either!!!!!!!!!!!!:rant:

(Anonymized extract from Sheffield-based entertainment forum, 2005)

As the discussion on this forum suggests, celebrity is a contested domain of value-formation. It is clear that there is no single public response to figures like Katona since they are a site of struggle over the meaning of class among other things. This struggle is epitomized by the ambivalence evident in newspaper accounts of the recent death of Jade Goody, many of which were concerned with reviewing the media coverage of her career<sup>iii</sup>. If *My Fair Kelly* directs its audience towards a reading of Katona as irredeemably unrespectable, the audience members negotiate this reading in the context of their own social positioning. Hence, for some of these forum participants, Katona's performance in *My Fair Kerry*, and her resistance to grooming reinforces her authenticity as a 'real' working-class girl who is therefore an object of identification. For other viewers she is contemptibly common and threatens to 'show them up', embarrassing them through association. While David Morley (1980) has argued that the heterogeneous social composition of media audiences potentially opens up a range of readings and decoding strategies, positive and even defiant readings of Katona are nevertheless hard to sustain in the face of the 'scandalous' press reports that continually envelop her. So closely identified with indignity is she that any veneer of respectability has been prised away.

The virulent disparagement of Katona in the press and online entertainment news forums and blogs, can be read as part of what Tyler has identified as an intensification of 'hate speech' against the white poor in the last decade (2008).

Katona's perceived lack of cultural capital helped propel her career as a celebrity, but this 'ordinariness' also constrains her ability to capitalize on her fame and 'trade-up' her celebrity status. Katona is one of a number of working-class female celebrities to trace this narrative arc. Initially admired for their 'authenticity', they rapidly become 'objects in a plot in which the only position for them to occupy is one of pathology' (Lawler,1999:15). Those managing Katona's celebrity persona have, of course, capitalized on the moral outrage generated by regular press releases and news stories about her bad behaviour. As a passage in *Tough Love* observes:

Lisa didn't mind reading about Leanne when it was bad news. In fact she enjoyed it [...] The magazines were talking about it being the end of her. But Lisa knew that if Leanne was smart it could be the making of her. She could turn her hard-luck story into a lucrative rags-to-riches, riches-to-rags story (2007: 17).

The 'fly-on-the-wall' documentary series, *Kerry Katona: Crazy in Love* (MTV, 2007-8), is just such an attempt to exploit her status as celebrity chav. Steph Lawler identifies the three main axes around which working class

women are characterized as abject thus: `their bodily appearance (assumed to mark a deeper, pathologized, psychology); their ignorance or lack of understanding; and their inadequacy as mothers` (2004 115). These three vectors of `deficiency` trace precisely the semantics of Katona's celebrity in *Crazy in Love* in which she is depicted as an unhappy, slovenly mother barely hanging onto her sanity. Adopting a reality TV format in its documentation of the mundane, domestic intimacies of its subjects' lives, *Crazy in Love* recounts Katona's relationship with new husband Mark Croft (always described as an `ex-cabbie`, and widely reviled) and her four children. The series also details the celebrity activities that occupy Katona, such as photoshoots, TV chatshow appearances, performance in a feature film, consultation over the development of a range of perfumes, and regular meetings with her famous (now former) publicist Max Clifford.



**Figure 2: 'Kerry Katona: Crazy in Love, Catharine Street', William Fallows, 2007.**

The image used to publicize the series pictures Katona and her husband wearing straightjackets, bound together in a literal rendering of the series title (see fig. 2). The image refers to Katona's well-documented `bi-polar` disorder and periods in rehabilitation for drug and alcohol abuse, and also foregrounds her pregnant body which appears to be `bursting out` of the jacket. This body is thus rendered as `a body beyond governance` (Skeggs, 2005: 965). The image also emphasizes Katona's large breasts, which are a key signifier of working-class female celebrity, associated with glamour modelling and pornography, especially when surgically enhanced. As Shane Watson suggests bluntly in *The Sunday Times*:

As class indicators go, you can't beat a pair of breasts. Accent used to be the big one, but that's no longer foolproof [...] Wardrobe was also once a reliable gauge of provenance, but that has ended when glam trash became the preferred look for everyone from Posh Spice to Liz Hurley. Run through the old standard tests—manners, postcode, lifestyle choices, bidets—and you realize that, these days, none of them is anywhere near as revealing as breasts. The size and shapes of boobs are sure-fire ways of placing someone on the social spectrum (2006:58 in Karl 2007).

Frequently condemned as a 'bad mother', and for having too many children, Katona is excessively reproductive, as her body attests, and the theme of irresponsible maternity is developed across various episodes of *Crazy in Love* that show the pregnant Katona modelling for a semi-nude photo-shoot, and smoking and drinking before giving birth to her fourth child. She is portrayed as, by turns, infantile and demanding, brash, tasteless, outrageous, and distraught, and the structure of the episodes emphasizes her instability. Edited discontinuously, the programmes radically condense, reassemble and possibly reorder conversations and events into montages of significant shots and discrete statements or punchlines, with reaction shots inserted to provide an ironic frame, such as a repeated cutaway from Katona's conversations or behaviour to the family dog watching events in apparent bemusement. Pop music is used throughout as a means of bridging between scenes and disguising temporal discontinuities, and also as implicitly ironic commentary upon the images and events we see.

Although the series might be classed as documentary it eschews the ethical care traditionally taken by documentarists to represent their subjects with respect. The film-makers remain off-camera and exchanges between the subjects and the crew are almost entirely edited out to leave the impression of an objective, observational account. The mechanics of staging are carefully disguised. Furthermore, the manipulation of the resulting programmes betrays a deeply judgemental or supercilious attitude towards the subjects. The constant impression is that Katona and her family lack self-awareness; they are dupes who do not understand or have misjudged how their seemingly unguarded exchanges will appear when edited and narrativized for television. Nor do they appear to grasp the unequal terms of the compact they have entered into with the insouciant programme-makers who are making entertainment from the exposure of their subjects' intimate lives and their bathetic aspiration to respectability. As a result the dignity of Katona and her companions is repeatedly undermined by the structure of the programme.

Katona evidently 'acts up' to the cameras, taking on a pantomime dame-style role of vulgar, bawdy, class other. The role of female celebrity chav hinges on excessive corporeality and the continual exposure of a lack of cultural capital, of style and taste, and she performs this role enthusiastically. Whilst the broad quality of her performance suggests calculation and playfulness, which might in turn allow a resistant reading of the show, or even the sense that she is a knowing collaborator, this is undercut by scenes in which Katona appears intoxicated, exhausted or distressed.

### **Celebrity Chavs**

Celebrity chavs are 'repositories of negative value, bad taste' who offer great entertainment (Skeggs, 2001: 298). We laugh at their *faux-pas* and share our disgust at their shameless promiscuity, their tasteless lifestyles, parental incompetence and bigotry. Writing about another iconic British celebrity, Rebekah Wade, editor of the

newspaper, *The Sun*, summarizes the logic of these parodic Cinderella narratives, in which a non-descript young woman is transformed into a princess only to be revealed finally as white trash:

Jade Goody went into the Big Brother house appearing to be simply a fun-loving working-class girl canny enough to have made millions from her 15 minutes of fame. It was all a meticulously manufactured lie. She has left the house with her true personality laid bare - a vile, pig-ignorant, racist bully consumed by envy of a woman of superior intelligence, beauty and class (2007).<sup>iv</sup>

The scandal and moral outrage that adheres to these celebrities has an economic function: falling/failing celebrity extends the transformation narrative and the profitable duration of the celebrity commodity. Moreover, these abject celebrities function to generate celebrity capital for 'real' stars, allowing them to differentiate themselves as comparatively skilled. As performer Rachel Weisz observes, 'I am an actress. I think celebrity is a vulgar thing. It's so easy to be famous, turn up in a certain frock, present a show, take your top off. [...]. I can't stand them' (Anon, 2007). For figures such as Kerry Katona, their celebrity is not an invitation to aspire to or vicariously enjoy a perfect life. Rather, it affords the pleasures of collective engagement with shaming, name-calling and abjection. Chav celebrity owes more to the grotesque spectacles of Bedlam, the freak show and the pantomime than to the promotional circuits of Hollywood cinema, with the spectacle of these lives offering audiences the *schadenfreude* of what Mick Hume terms 'prole porn', through which 'respectable folk can get a thrilling glimpse of society's "dark underbelly"' (2008). Critical approaches that conceive of celebrity as rooted in positive attachment need to be rethought to account for a growing 'celebrity underclass' of working-class women whose appeal rests as much in their ability to incite abjection as to inspire identification.

## Conclusion

In previous work on the figure of the chav, Imogen Tyler explored the ways in which a new vocabulary of social class had emerged in Britain in which the word 'chav' alongside its various synonyms and regional variations, has become a ubiquitous term of abuse for white working-class subjects. She argued that the level of disgust directed at this figure was suggestive of a heightened class antagonism, a class hatred that Julie Burchill has provocatively described as 'social racism' (2005). One focus for this class hatred is those who are imagined as undeserving recipients of wealth, a category that includes benefit recipients and illegal immigrants at one end of the economic scale and celebrities at the other. Extrovert or 'showy' celebrity chavs are perceived as luxuriating in 'too much': too much wealth, leisure and pleasure. Media portrayals of these celebrities employ connotations of 'the undeserving poor', (representing them as workshy, and uneducated) to generate accounts of 'the undeserving celebrity'. Rather than protecting them from judgement, the conspicuous and imprudent consumption of these celebrities justifies the hostility with which they are treated.

What is interesting about the current production of chav celebrity, and the forms of audience participation it compels, is what is revealed about wider attitudes to social class. As Skeggs suggests, the figure of 'the immoral repellent woman is [...] not just a matter of representation' (2005: 966). For example, the figure of the celebrity chav migrates to enable the production of meta-discourses in which claims about the 'dumbing down' of culture, and reports about the increasing bad behaviour of celebrities merge in powerful accounts of the rise of a new criminal underclass of young women. As one blogger writes:

Kerry Katona? A talentless piece of trash who's landed 'lucky' [...] quite frankly, I feel the urge to vomit at the mere mention of her name. Kerry Katonas are ten a penny-just visit any council estate in Britain and you'll find hundreds of them (Anonymized extract from online entertainment blog, 2008).

The seamless extrapolation from the figure of Katona to hundreds of similarly abject young women in council estates across Britain, is indicative of how celebrity chavs can be employed to contribute to wider processes of social stigmatization and marginalisation. Indeed, alongside scandalous stories of *déclassé* celebrities, sensational accounts of 'violent bad girls' are proliferating.

Criminologist Anne Worrall (2004) has suggested that a new figure, the delinquent 'bad girl', dominates accounts of girlhood in Britain. She argues that the perceived rise in 'bad behaviour' amongst young women is understood not in terms of social exclusion and poverty, but in the terms of an individualized and criminalized language of 'moral delinquency'. As journalist Paul Bracchii, concludes in a *Daily Mail* article entitled 'The Feral Sex: The terrifying rise of violent girl gangs':

What's clear is that there has been a dramatic coarsening in the behaviour of an entire underclass of young women - driven partly by the destruction of the nuclear family and the lack of a strong father figure, but also by a celebrity culture in which female so-called "stars" - famous only for appearing on Big Brother or its equivalents - are photographed blind drunk and fighting in the gutter with other women outside nightclubs (2008).

Chav celebrities, marketable because they 'act badly', are constructed by the same media conglomerates and institutions that blame them for producing a generational underclass of morally bankrupt young women. As Bracchii's article suggests, the lexicon of ladettes, chavs, binge-drinking, vulgarity, sexual excess and single motherhood predominates in the construction of both celebrity and 'real life' women as 'offensive'. Arguably the steady accumulation of representations of the excessive behaviour of white trash celebrities helps enable this moral panic to take hold. Certainly, one consequence of this moral panic is that it feeds back into the political decision-making process, where it is (cynically) mobilized as a means of authorizing 'tough' responses (see ICAR, 2004: 5). Indeed, as Worrall demonstrates, young women are increasingly criminalized through mechanisms such as 'Anti-Social Behaviour Orders'. Worrall suggests that a flexible definition of antisocial behaviour means that these court orders can categorize as illegal activities that might previously have been viewed as misguided, youthful rebellion (2004: 44). Whilst the relationship between celebrity culture and the kinds of class-stereotyping that characterize these moral panics about young women falls beyond the scope of this article, it warrants further exploration.

As Toynbee and Walker observe, regardless of the general signs of increasing affluence, in contemporary Britain:

'Social mobility is barred. Where people are born they are destined to remain, more fixed than even thirty years ago, The fifteen-year boom [...] has cemented people more rigidly to their class [...] General mobility is a myth' (Toynbee, Walker, 2008: 9).

In this context, the cautionary narrative of the celebrity chav's progress reminds us of the difficulty and undesirability of transgressing class boundaries. What makes figures like Kerry Katona and Jade Goody both

comic and poignant is their conviction that it was possible to escape rigid class origins through highly visible careers in entertainment.

Scholars in Media and Cultural Studies have long argued that social classifications are complex political formations characterised by representational struggles. All processes of social classification - such as gendering and racialization - are necessarily mediated and these representational struggles are often played out through highly condensed figurative forms. We have argued that celebrity figures play an increasingly central role in the mediation and communication of class differences. Celebrity is a key vehicle through which *value* is distributed in public culture, and is instrumental in practices of distinction-making between individuals and groups in everyday life. For example, 'celebrity preferences' are now regularly invoked alongside other social cues, such as accent, ways of dressing, eating habits, television viewing habits, as a means of making class judgements. Indeed, celebrities are frequently employed as a shorthand designation of class: 'she is a "Britney"/"Jade"/"Kate"'. Despite deepening economic polarization (see Toynbee and Walker, 2008: 5), social class in Britain is in many respects harder to read on the bodies of individuals than previously. As a result, celebrity has become an important means of identifying class distinctions precisely because older forms of class distinction no longer operate effectively. In this respect, celebrity media, from *Hello!* magazine to online infotainment blogs, function as etiquette guides that are employed by readers as a means of making wider class distinctions and judgements.

In this article we have argued that social class is not only the unacknowledged framing device through which individual celebrities are judged and valued, but is the central axis from which this entire field of cultural production unfolds. Celebrity culture cannot be conceived as a distinct sphere of cultural production; whilst specific media, such as magazines, television shows and films, are the engines of celebrity culture and publicity, the distinctions between these platforms are increasingly blurred as online news and entertainment forums and blogs and celebrity brands extend celebrity personae into everyday life. As the media through which celebrity is communicated proliferate, celebrity figures and celebrity gossip play an increasingly central role in everyday practices of social classification. However, whilst the distinctions between the producers and audiences of celebrity are also eroded through more participatory media such as blogs, it is a mistake to view this 'widening of participation' as indicative of 'social levelling'. On the contrary, celebrity needs to be theorized as a disciplinary field within which social values and morals are continually negotiated and reaffirmed. The different social positioning of audiences always allows for resistant readings, but nevertheless, it is imperative that we acknowledge the central role of celebrity culture in legitimating often virulent class antagonisms in contemporary Britain. A better understanding of the ways in which celebrity stories, bodies and identities are used and exchanged in the processes and circuits of class-making not only enables a greater awareness of the lived inequalities reproduced by these processes of social classification, but it also enables prejudice to be identified and challenged.

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<sup>i</sup> See for example Sutton Trust, (2006) 'The Educational Backgrounds of Leading Journalists' <http://www.suttontrust.com/reports/Journalists-backgrounds-final-report.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> See Tyler, 2006, for an account of the popularization and etymology of the term.

<sup>iii</sup> See, for example, Street-Porter, 2009 and Mangan, 2009.

<sup>iv</sup> See Hari, 2009, for an account of the vilification and misrepresentation of Jade Goody.