

## THE FULL RICH LIFE & THE NEWER MASS ART: SEX IN SHINY PACKETS

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### The Full Rich Life

[...]

Outdoors, and especially in the more public parts of the cities, the cleaner lines of the twentieth century have made their impression, in the post-offices, the telephone kiosks, the bus stations. But in the working-class shopping and amusement areas the old idiom – in its modern style – persists; it persists, for example, in the huge furniture stores, in the marzipan super-cinemas, and in the manner of window-dressing retained by the cheaper clothiers and outfitters. There is a working-class city centre as there is one for the middle classes. They are geographically united, they overlap, they have concurrent lives; but they also have distinctive atmospheres. The centre belongs to all groups, and each takes what it wants and so makes its own centre – favourite streets, popular shops (with ‘Wooley’s’ – Woolworth’s – a clear favourite with working-class people), tram stops, parts of the market, places of amusement, places for cups of tea.

In the working-class area itself, in those uneven cobbled streets to which until recently motor-cars seldom penetrated, the world is still that of fifty years ago. It is an untidy, messy, baroque, but on the whole drably baroque, world. The shop windows are an indiscriminate tangle of odds-and-bobs at coppers each; the counter and every spare stretch of upper space is festooned with cards full of proprietary medicines. The outer walls are a mass of small advertisements, in all colours. There are hundreds of them, in all stages of wear-and-tear, some piled a quarter of an inch thick on the bodies of their predecessors.

In those towns where they are still retained, the trams are obviously much more in place in the working-class areas than when they run up to the ‘good residential’ districts. Their improbable ‘Emmett’ shape, their extraordinary noisiness, which makes

From Hoggart, R., 1990, *The Uses of Literacy*, London: Chatto & Windus, pp. 144–9, 246–500.

two or three together sound like a small fairground, the mass of tiny advertisements which surround their interiors, their wonderful double necklace of lights at night – all make them representative working-class vehicles, the gondolas of the people.

All this is the background to specific acts of baroque living. Most working-class pleasures tend to be mass-pleasures, overcrowded and sprawling. Everyone wants to have fun at the same time, since most buzzers blow within an hour of each other. Special occasions – a wedding, a trip to the pantomime, a visit to the fair, a charabanc outing – assume this, and assume also that a really special splendour and glitter must be displayed. Weddings are more often than not attempts for once to catch some of the splendour associated with the idea of upper-class life. The large cake is no doubt ‘good’, but the elaborate white dress and veil can only be poor imitations of a real thing which would cost a hundred guineas. The bridesmaids are all dressed alike, down to little arm-bands, long net gloves, and large hats; but the finish and the fit are not good. The drink flows freely and includes the richer varieties – port, especially.

The fairgrounds, like the furniture, have an intensely conscious modernity. The lovely stylized horses have almost gone, and so have the fantastic mechanical organs; each year bigger and louder relay-systems and more and more Coney Island-style coloured lights appear. But again the new materials are adapted to the old demands for a huge complication and exotic involution of colour, noise, and movement. The same demands are met in the large holiday camps; if you look closely at the interiors of the great public halls there, you may see the steel girders and bare corrugations of the roofs: but you will have to peer through a welter of artificial trees, imitation half-timbering, great dazzling chandeliers.

Most illuminating of all is the habit of the ‘chara’ trip. For the day trip by ‘chara’ has been particularly taken up by working-class people, and made into one of their peculiar – that is, characteristic – kinds of pleasure-occasion. Some even take their week’s holiday in this way, in successive outings. In its garishness and cheerfulness the ‘chara’ trip today still speaks the language of:

Oh, I do like to be beside the seaside.

These buses, sometimes from a big town fleet, but often one of a couple owned by a local man, are the super-cinemas of the highways. They are, and particularly if they belong to a small firm specializing in day trips for working-class people, plushly upholstered, ostentatiously styled inside and out; they have lots of chrome bits, little flags on top, fine names, and loud radios. Every day in summer the arterial roads out of the big towns are thick with them humming towards the sea, often filled, since this is a pleasure which particularly appeals to mothers who want a short break and lots of company, with middle-aged women, dressed in their best, out on a pub, club, or street excursion. Their hair has been in curlers the night before; they have eased themselves into the creaking corsets they do not wear every day, have put on flowered summer dresses and fancy shoes. One year, I remember, the fashion, except on really warm days, was for fur-lined bootees, the kind which show thick fur round the upper edges but are not so thickly lined throughout. They have gathered together all the bits-and-bobs of equipment which give a working-class woman, when she is dressed up, a somewhat

cluttered and over-dressed air – things around the neck, a prized item of jewellery, such as a brooch or a cameo, pinned to the centre of the bodice, and a tightly clutched handbag.

The 'charas' go rolling out and across the moors for the sea, past the road-houses which turn up their noses at coach-parties, to one the driver knows where there is coffee and biscuits or perhaps a full egg-and-bacon breakfast. Then on to a substantial lunch on arrival, and after that a fanning-out in groups. But rarely far from one another, because they know their part of the town and their bit of beach, where they feel at home. At Scarborough they leave the north side to the lower middle-classes who come for a week or two, and take rooms in the hundreds of little red villas. They leave the half-alive Edwardian elegance of the south end (it hasn't a beach anyway; the sea is a splendid frame for an esplanade and formal cliff-gardens) to middle-aged professionals, West Riding businessmen who are doing quite well and have come in their Rovers. They walk down Westborough to the half-mile-long centre-piece around the harbour, where Jews up from Leeds for the season with van-loads of gaudy knick-knacks jostle for space with lavatorially tiled fish-and-chip saloons ('Fish, chips, tea, bread and butter – 3/-: No Tea with own Eatables'). Here again the same clutter, the same extraordinary Bartholomew Fair of a mess, but even messier and more colourful than that they are used to in their own shopping-areas at home. They have a nice walk past the shops; perhaps a drink; a sit in a deck-chair eating an ice-cream or sucking mint-humbugs; a great deal of loud laughter – at Mrs Johnson insisting on a paddle with her dress tucked in her bloomers, at Mrs Henderson pretending she has 'got off' with the deck-chair attendant, or in the queue at the ladies' lavatory. Then there is the buying of presents for the family, big meat-tea, and the journey home with a stop for drinks on the way. If the men are there, and certainly if it is a men's outing, there will probably be several stops and a crate or two of beer in the back for drinking on the move. Somewhere in the middle of the moors the men's parties all tumble out, with much horseplay and noisy jokes about bladder-capacity. The driver knows exactly what is expected of him as he steers his warm, fuggy, and singing community back to the town; for his part he gets a very large tip, collected during the run through the last few miles of town streets.

[ . . . ]

### The Newer Mass Art: Sex in Shiny Packets

#### The Juke-box Boys

This regular, increasing, and almost entirely unvaried diet of sensation without commitment is surely likely to help render its consumers less capable of responding openly and responsibly to life, is likely to induce an underlying sense of purposelessness in existence outside the limited range of a few immediate appetites. Souls which may have had little opportunity to open will be kept hard-gripped, turned in upon themselves, looking out 'with odd dark eyes like windows' upon a world which is largely a

phantasmagoria of passing shows and vicarious stimulations. That this is not today the position of many working-class people is due mainly to the capacity of the human spirit to resist; to resist from a sense, even though it is not usually defined, that there are other things which matter and which are to be obeyed.

But it may be useful to look now at some of those points in English life at which the cultural process described [ . . . ] is having its strongest effect. We should see there the condition which might already have been reached were it not for the resistances [ . . . ]. One such illustration is to be found in the reading of young men on National Service. For two years many of them are, on the whole, bored; they are marking time until they go back to their jobs; they are adolescent and have money to spare. They are cut off from the unconsciously felt but important steadying effect of home, of the web of family relationships; perhaps also from the sense, at their place of work, of being part of an organization which has a tradition in its own kind of skill. They are as a result open to the effects of the reading, both fragmentary and sensational, so freely provided for them. The only bound books read by a great many, my own experience strongly suggests, are likely to be those written by the most popular crime novelists. Otherwise, they read comics, gangster novelettes, science and crime magazines, the newer-style magazines or magazine/newspapers, and the picture-dailies. Luckily, National Service lasts only two years; after that, they go home and back to work, still readers of these publications, but soon also men with commitments, with more demands on their time and money, probably with a good chance of picking up older, neighbourhood rhythms, with a good chance of escaping from the worst effects of what can be a glassily hermaphrodite existence ('life like a permanent wank [masturbation] inside you,' as a soldier once described it to me), and one not connected to any meaningful sense of personal aim. I know there are exceptions and that much is being done to improve matters; but, given the background described in the preceding chapters, this is for many the predominant atmosphere during the period of National Service.

Perhaps even more symptomatic of the general trend is the reading of juke-box boys, of those who spend their evening listening in harshly lighted milk-bars to the 'nick-elodeons'. There are, of course, others who read the books and magazines now to be discussed – some married men and women, perhaps in particular those who are finding married life a somewhat jaded affair, 'dirty old men', some schoolchildren – but one may reasonably take those who, night after night, visit these bars as typical or characteristic readers of these most developed new-style popular journals.

[ . . . ] The milk-bars indicate at once, in the nastiness of their modernistic knickknacks, their glaring showiness, an aesthetic breakdown so complete that, in comparison with them, the layout of the living-rooms in some of the poor homes from which the customers come seems to speak of a tradition as balanced and civilized as an eighteenth-century town house. I am not thinking of those milk-bars which are really quick-service cafés where one may have a meal more quickly than in a café with table-service. I have in mind rather the kind of milk-bar – there is one in almost every northern town with more than, say, fifteen thousand inhabitants – which has become the regular evening rendezvous of some of the young men. Girls go to some, but most

of the customers are boys aged between fifteen and twenty, with drape-suits, picture ties, and an American slouch. Most of them cannot afford a succession of milk-shakes, and make cups of tea serve for an hour or two whilst – and this is their main reason for coming – they put copper after copper into the mechanical record-player. About a dozen records are available at any time; a numbered button is pressed for the one wanted, which is selected from a key to titles. The records seem to be changed about once a fortnight by the hiring firm; almost all are American; almost all are ‘vocals’ and the styles of singing much advanced beyond what is normally heard on the Light Programme of the BBC. Some of the tunes are catchy; all have been doctored for presentation so that they have the kind of beat which is currently popular; much use is made of the ‘hollow-cosmos’ effect which echo-chamber recording gives. They are delivered with great precision and competence, and the ‘nickelodeon’ is allowed to blare out so that the noise would be sufficient to fill a good-sized ballroom, rather than a converted shop in the main street. The young men waggle one shoulder or stare, as desperately as Humphrey Bogart, across the tubular chairs.

Compared even with the pub around the corner, this is all a peculiarly thin and pallid form of dissipation, a sort of spiritual dry-rot amid the odour of boiled milk. Many of the customers – their clothes, their hair-styles, their facial expressions all indicate – are living to a large extent in a myth-world compounded of a few simple elements which they take to be those of American life.

They form a depressing group and one by no means typical of working-class people; perhaps most of them are rather less intelligent than the average, and are therefore even more exposed than others to the debilitating mass-trends of the day. They have no aim, no ambition, no protection, no belief. They are the modern equivalents of Samuel Butler’s mid-nineteenth-century ploughboys, and in as unhappy a position as theirs:

The row of stolid, dull, vacant plough-boys, ungainly in build, uncomely in face, lifeless, apathetic, a race a good deal more like the pre-Revolution French peasant as described by Carlyle than is pleasant to reflect upon – a race now supplanted . . .

For some of them even the rough sex-life of many of their contemporaries is not yet possible; it requires more management of their own personalities and more meeting with other personalities than they can compass.

From their education at school they have taken little which connects with the realities of life as they experience it after fifteen. Most of them have jobs which require no personal outgoing, which are not intrinsically interesting, which encourage no sense of personal value, of being a maker. The job is to be done day by day, and after that the rest is amusement, is pleasure; there is time to spare and some money in the pocket. They are ground between the millstones of technocracy and democracy; society gives them an almost limitless freedom of the sensations, but makes few demands on them – the use of their hands and of a fraction of their brains for forty hours a week. For the rest they are open to the entertainers and their efficient mass-equipment. The youth clubs, the young people’s institutes, the sports clubs, cannot attract them as they attract many in their generation; and the commercial people ensure, by the inevitable processes

of development in commercial entertainment, that their peculiar grip is retained and strengthened. The responsibilities of marriage may gradually change them. Meanwhile, they have no responsibilities, and little sense of responsibilities, to themselves or to others. They are in one dreadful sense the new workers; if, by extrapolation simply from a reading of newer working-class entertainment literature, one were to attempt to imagine the ideal readers for that literature, these would be the people. It is true, as I have said, that they are not typical. But these are the figures some important contemporary forces are tending to create, the directionless and tamed helots of a machine-minding class. If they seem to consist so far chiefly of those of poorer intelligence or from homes subject to special strains, that is probably due to the strength of a moral fibre which most cultural providers for working-class people are helping to de-nature. The hedonistic but passive barbarian who rides in a fifty-horse-power bus for threepence, to see a five-million-dollar film for one-and-eightpence, is not simply a social oddity; he is a portent.