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# Shear Class: a visual ethnography of the British hair salon

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# Inés Rae

## Shear Class: An Ethnographic Study of the British Hair Salon

In his book *The Ongoing Moment*, the English writer Geoff Dyer (2005) draws out some of the common themes that have concerned photographers over the last century. His focus is the documentary tradition, primarily American, and within it he notes the homage that younger photographers pay to the history of image making that has gone before them. Barbershops are one example. Tracing a lineage from Walker Evans through Robert Frank to Michael Ormerod, with a short detour by way of Diane Arbus, he notes the ways in which the barbershop has been a recurring motif, how different people have photographed the same things. His reading of Ormerod's image of a closed barbershop is turned into a commentary on the appropriateness of a subject for photography. The implication being that as a subject it is over and done with; the barbershop is "a site of abandoned meaning" (Dyer 211).



Barbershop interior, photograph by Diane Arbus 1963

In my own recent project *Kurl up n Dye*, there is a similar nod to the motifs and pictorial strategies from which other photographers work: there is a long tradition in using photography to document and explore aspects of British popular culture and sometimes with a nostalgia for disappearing worlds. There is a point to be made here about the stories that don't get told, or that need a differently skewed vision. Perhaps as Diane Arbus felt when she made the image of an interior of a barbershop, there is always another way of seeing a place. Arbus emphasises the visual contrast between the pin-ups of semi-clad women on the walls with the men that inhabit the shop.

My own photograph of *Sheila* at New Image salon is also a picture about image-generation, her head the same size as the many collaged heads above and around her. As I spent time there watching, waiting, chatting, this picture declared itself to me; as an image about the aspirational space of hairdressing possibilities, or the pressures of living up to an impossible ideal of beauty.



Sheila, New Image salon, photograph by Inés Rae, Preston 2001

Finally, it is about the most interesting aspect of documentary now for me: in its turning its gaze outwards, towards the world. There is always a danger of sentiment or nostalgia when investigating certain kinds of class or gender histories, and the question becomes one of how to work with nostalgia in negotiating this loss. In collecting these images of salons in a book it is at the same time, a celebration and a desire to assure some kind of continuity. Perhaps rather than mourning the

disappearance of these small local businesses we need to understand their adaptation in the face of neglect and un-interest.

The image of the hair salon or barber shop is there in the backgrounds of other British photographs – in Tom Wood's *Liverpool* of the 1980s, as a backdrop to the life of the street, or part of the haphazard and vulnerable arrangement of shop-fronts on these high streets. Its continuing representation is a compelling interest for photographers; we gravitate towards them as the way into a community. Martin Parr found his way into Salford in the 1980s through small local bakers, hair salons, and shopping centres. He delights in the vernacular; "I'm glad that I'm showing this run-down area, because I'm also interested in making the photographs work on another level, and showing how British society is decaying, how this once great society has fallen apart" (Williams 160). *Point of Sale* (1985) received little media attention at the time it was made. It has been described as ordinary. Which it is, as well as having warmth for its subjects that Parr was rapidly to leave behind (Williams 2004). Much of his work since then has been both more popular but heavily criticised, "unless it hurts, unless there is some vulnerability there, I don't think you're going to get good photographs" (Williams 159). Does being respectful stop you making work that everyone wants to see? How does a photographer responsibly negotiate the complex social space occupied by the subjectivity of another person, how does he or she enter that space without intruding, without introducing an alienating effect into the representations that she brings away from that place? Photography legitimises the nosiness, the inquisitiveness, the voyeurism in us, it licenses us to look and gaze, but it is also a tool of those eager to learn and investigate. When a photographer conducts an inquiry with responsibility and respect, photography can be communicative.

My own interests are not detached -- the contradictions of glamour on people from very different places is one of the subjects of this work. And these apply to me as much as to the people and places I am photographing. I am both seduced and

intimidated by the culture of appearance. I too have an ambivalent relationship with salons, in the ambiguity of both the pleasure and the pain of the commodification of femininity, the pain of objectification and the pleasure in being perceived as attractive. The function of glamour is as present in my own life as it is in the people and places collected in *Kurl up n Dye*.



*Kurl up n Dye*, photograph by Inés Rae, Leeds 2000

Since 2000, I have systematically photographed backstreet hair salons across the UK, initially where I lived and worked in the North of England. The first salons were chosen according to the aspiration and creativity their names evoked; the double meanings that imply a connection between hair and styling, for example; *Kurl up n Dye* and the typeface used to convey the message. Some names recur across the country, *Crowning Glory*, *Scissors Palace*; others are purely one-offs, inspired sometimes by contemporary culture e.g. *Thatchairs* or *Bobbits*, *Hairlennium*, *Hairlucinations*. Many are profoundly visual in their communication.

In the playful nature of these forms, there is a deliberate disrespect for formal grammar and serious culture. Bourdieu

(1979) describes that as a transgression, conferring aesthetic status on objects or ways of representing them that are excluded by the dominant aesthetic of the time. His is still a useful sociological analysis and re-evaluation of popular taste, drawing our attention to previously unacknowledged popular pleasures and forms of attention.



Bobbits, photograph by Inés Rae, Warrington 2004



Hairlennium, photograph by Inés Rae, Keighley 2002



Shear Class, photograph by Inés Rae, Rhymney 2006





Thairapy, photograph by Inés Rae, Llanelli 2006

# HEADHUNTERS

Headhunters, type -style from photograph by Inés Rae, Bolton 2005

The aspiration behind the names and typestyles *Millionhairs* or *Shear Class* are often in tension with their immediate surroundings on the edges of cities. The street corner becomes a site where desire and fantasy are mediated by cultural capital. Some names come from brainstorming; typefaces from trying to stand out from the rest, some are gimmicky or themed. Some names are passed on, their kitschness accepted. Names also speak of personal stories and the culture of hairdressing in a knowing way; *Inhairitance*, is the name of a salon that a father left to his daughter. *Thairapy*, a reference to the emotional work hairdressers do; *Headhunters*, is named for its proximity to a cemetery. My emphasis is on privileging the details of social commentary within the images. If I use a frontal

shot of a façade, my intervention comes in combining the aesthetic appeal of street signs with an awareness of the social contexts in which they appear. In using typography, shop facades, interiors, and portraits; no one form of description is privileged. The relationship between material culture, the street, and the hair salon as a social space is negotiated visually.

In linguistics, the vernacular prioritises the native, local, and indigenous. But the image of the vernacular as a cultural comment is not merely an innocent sample of popular life – *British Hairways* is more sophisticated in its appropriation of a significant corporate symbol and re-makes it, parodying the conventions of established taste. The pun is dependent on the changed context, bringing the corporate down to street level. It also benefits from its knowingness; it is a 'cool' sign because it plays with the dominant meaning of the logo, sending it up but at the same time trading off its representation of the establishment, a familiar household name and reliable brand. In the words of Ellen Lupton "Appropriations like these are made not from *above* mass culture but from *within* it; a view from the street not from the laboratory. Such designs represent vernacular images not as examples of a naïve and innocent dialect, but as the visible traces of corporate power" (Bierut, Drenttel, Heller & Holland 107).



British Hairways, photograph by Inés Rae, Sheffield 2000

We can see the messy, crude, frivolous signs of these street-corner hair salons clamouring for attention. And they do not go away. These objects of material culture often have a spellbinding quality and typography turns language into a visible tangible artefact. Much in the way that Walter Benjamin sought out the unassuming, the tiny and the playful, these outdated things which, precisely as the “trash” of history, or the unacceptable nature of the recent past offer a construction of history that looks backwards, providing a contrast to the myth of historical progress (Buck-Morss 93). And perhaps also reminds us of the 1980s as the unacceptable face of graphic design history. For example, in Gary Hustwit’s 2006 film *Helvetica* it is interesting to set the signage from these backstreet stores against the global reach of this most dominant typeface. Helvetica is variously described in the film as clear, direct, efficient, neutral, corporate and most significantly by one commentator as clearing away “the horrible burden of history” (Hustwit).

As my project developed, it became apparent that economic differences in different parts of the country would offer pockets of particularly fertile examples, such as South Wales, a traditionally

working class, mining community that has been neglected and under resourced since the dismantling of the mining industry in Britain during the 1970s. Now certain areas have been earmarked for regeneration. But often you have to go to the 'ugly' parts of town to see the 'cool' signs. Unlikely to be saved as being architecturally significant most of these salons are based in far more makeshift buildings very vulnerable to changing economic fortunes. However they often offer an important social space for the local community. These places apparently don't belong anywhere in the thinking of the town planners. For Ray Oldenburg (1999) this is the archetypal "third place":

In cultures where mass advertising prevails and appearance is valued over substance the third place is all the more likely not to impress the uninitiated. Plainness keeps the regulars safe from unwanted visitors. As soon as it becomes an in place or is re-furbished it ceases to be a third place. (Oldenburg 36).

The very shabbiness of the décor will put unwanted groups off. Smarter middle-class people may think twice about how seriously the salon takes their business if they are prepared to make a joke of their name. It may make them cautious about what kind of service they might expect to receive. Meanwhile the regulars remain undisturbed. The shop names and typefaces point to economic and class status beyond the frame of the image; in the words of Simon Grennan;

The humour in the shop names is self-directed, belonging entirely to the independent salon owner – to the lower rent, non-corporate, "other mainstream" undertaste that laughs at the aspiring by making deprecating laughter part of the pleasure of aspiration itself. (Grennan & Rae 30)

There is a knowing parody here of the conventions of more established middle-class taste and a refusal to conform to what might be considered "good taste" (Bourdieu 47). The joke involves bringing something down to a different level...what is ugly if you already like ugly things? (Grennan 30) The deprecating laughter is an all-inclusive laughter, where the high is brought low to confront the otherness, which is excluded from many institutions of the modern world.

These places suit some people, but not everyone would choose to

use them. Where some enjoy the more direct and immediate pleasures on offer, others will choose to invest in a different aesthetic as a form of detachment. Customers will use the salon to place themselves socially rather than refuse entirely the ideals of beauty ideology. I've spoken to many women who get their style cut in an upmarket salon but use a local place to save money when they need a trim.

The typefaces can reveal to us what we are getting and how much it costs. The frontage for *Off Your Head* is too fussy for the clarity loving global marketplace of *Toni and Guy*, *Muji*, *Urban Outfitters* and *American Apparel*. If we can understand popular culture as having mixed qualities, as articulated in the work of Tony Bennett, rather than seeing mass culture as set in opposition to the dominant culture if we see the two as a negotiation between "dominant, subordinate and oppositional cultural and ideological values and elements... 'mixed' in different permutations" (Bennett 12) then perhaps we can evaluate popular culture as consisting of both good and bad (Storey).

The people and places in *Kurl up n Dye* understand the operation of glamour's contradiction in their lives. In the words of the song title from the Buzzcocks' Howard Devoto, "*Some will pay (for what others will pay to avoid)*" (Devoto 6). The shops encompass the contradictions of glamour (if glamour is understood as not seeing the work that goes into a thing but seeing only the surface). In its vernacular sense, glamour is a charm or spell that makes things seem better than they really are. There is an art to creating this illusion. The people in the salons are not glamorous. Yet the salon is a place for the creation of glamour – where a certain amount of work goes into creating an atmosphere of pleasure. The salon is seen as a pleasurable experience, a place for pampering, time away from day to day worries, and this is obtained through the pursuit of an image of pleasure. Although we can imagine what that image of pleasure might be, the experience of it remains invisible, contained partly within the intimacy of social contact.

I am using documentary traditions that don't show us the

invisible – no one image can do this, there has to be a relationship between different visual fragments to put together a picture of an experience which is about desire, glamour, ritual and social expectations. What are the functions of glamour on people from very different places when glamour offers anyone the chance to use artifice to transform him or herself? The significance of the typeface or shop sign lies not in the thing itself but in the readings it allows; irreverence lets the owner or user maintain his/her own space and activity, and an important element of autonomy.

Most of these businesses are one-woman bands. This offers flexibility, sociability, and a capacity to incorporate the domestic needs of their owners. Hairdressing is generally derided as trivial while it is also a form of artistic practice, a social practice, a leisure activity, a ritual form of sexuality, a means of communication and “a way of speaking through the body” (McRobbie, 1991: 195), as well as a source of pleasure and fantasy. Suburban salons are almost like women’s clubs, a feminine social space, somewhere to have a laugh and where people will often stay for hours. In high street salon chains, such as *Toni and Guy* time is very precisely portioned out – but in the local salons, *New Image* or *Hairline*, it is more fluid; people want to linger and chat, they are places of gossip, conversation, and innuendo. These establishments are often the last places to go because they serve an important function, the personal service is vital. They also offer a connection to a locality and community; they play a social role, which high street places do not. Oldenburg argues, “what distinguishes the third place is that decency and good cheer consistently prevail” (Oldenburg 84). So a lot of places are not third places. There may be a danger of over-romanticising the third place. It adapts to survive.

However there are tensions in amongst the prevailing sociability; the tensions of real economic deprivation. Some independent traders actively want re-generation for their businesses, for someone to invest in the area. *Mane Attraction* is embarrassed about its position in a rundown part of Swansea. The owner of *Thairapy* is happy to be located in an area deemed by the

planners as quaint. This depends on the diversity of a neighbourhood already existing. When another "third place" disappears, the non-place takes over and makes life a little easier for people new to the area. In a non-place a familiar logo beckons which offers the predictable and the familiar. One difference between commercial high street salons and backstreets is that the regeneration of cities also kills a complex of social practices, many of which functioned in terms of what Samuel Delaney calls "contact" (Delaney 28). This is more than simply community ties, but an opportunity for classes to interact. Informal face-to-face contact allows for accidental, serendipitous encounters more than do groups with shared interests in a more structured networking situation. High street chain salons, although they look smart and appealing, can be fraught and tense places where the power dynamics between the professionalized expert opinion of the hairdresser and her judgement are more clearly at work.

Ultimately, the importance of small things and their use of improvisation, irreverent humour and intimate contact need to be seen and valued alongside the gigantic, spectacular, showy and corporate. Photography too can look at these places with more than a nostalgic sensibility for small shops; beyond the aesthetic appeal to middle-class tastes in photography. They remain of compelling interest because the hair salon can be so much more than a place to get a haircut.

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