



Made in Like Chelsea

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Abstract

It would be easy to write off *Made in Chelsea* as very bad television, the embarrassed and embarrassing exposure of the empty days of a bunch of spoilt metropolitan brats – what Amber, a 19-year old Chelsea socialite, describes as ‘the whole like Chelsea socialite thing’. It is indeed very bad television – crass, vulgar, inept and shameless. It is a kind of anti-psychoanalysis, doing for the *haute bourgeoisie* what Jeremy Kyle does for the *lumpen proletariat*. But it may be worth a closer look for what it tells us about contemporary British society and about the beneficiaries of neo-liberalism – those important people whose lives are untouched by the experience of austerity imposed on the rest of us. This article was written in March 2013: the series may well change and continue to change after the time of writing.

Contributor Note

After teaching History and Cultural Studies at the University of Roehampton in London for many years, John Seed is now a superannuated gentleman-scholar and walker. Recent publications include *Marx: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: Continuum, paperback 2010), *The Gordon Riots: Politics, Culture and Insurrection in Late Eighteenth-Century*, coedited with Ian Haywood, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) and *Manchester: August 16th and 17th 1819*, (Intercapillary Editions, London 2013).

Chico: 'What'll I say?'
 Groucho: 'Tell them you're not here.'
 Chico: 'Suppose they don't believe me?'
 Groucho: 'They'll believe you when you start talking'.
 Marx Brothers, *A Night at the Opera*

The radiator of a Bentley, some expensive shop-fronts – Cartier, Tiffany; a young woman, leather boots and atrophied thighs, walks towards the camera carrying several branded shopping bags. VICTORIA flashes up on the screen, image of a little crown above her name. Her phone rings and there follows an exchange with an ambiguous youth called MARK-FRANCIS. He too has a little crown above his name. He is standing outside Prada with a minder and no less than seven branded shopping bags. 'It is so wunday', poor vulnerable Victoria complains, brushing luxurious curls from her weary windswept brow. Note that in Chelsea 'windy' can rhyme with 'Monday'. Mark Francis shares her pain: 'I knooow. I'm sooo boored with this weather. I've decided we need to have a pordy (party)!' Unfazed by this *non sequitur*, and by her inclusion in a 'we' that has already had what she needs decided for her, Victoria tries to sound positive: 'Oh that could be good...' But Mark-Francis is enthused: 'Fifties chic but more Jackie O. than Marilyn Monroe ... that sort of era'. 'Oh for sure...', says Victoria, her polite way of saying wtf. And we are in Chelsea – or some idea called Chelsea, some fancy glossy colour catalogue selling the dream-commodity 'Chelsea'.

Made in Chelsea is just one of a series of recent TV shows in Britain and the U.S. – including *Laguna Beach*, *The Hills*, *Jersey Shore*, *The Only Way is Essex*, *Geordie Shore*, *Desperate Scousewives* – shows in which 'real people' with 'real lives'

become 'characters' in strange combinations of 'fly-on-the-wall' documentary and scripted soap opera. *Made in Chelsea* describes itself as 'a scripted reality show'. In other words, it is not 'a reality show' – though there is not much trace of a script either. It is what is now termed in the business, apparently, a 'constructed reality' series. The term suggests, perhaps, something like *The Truman Show*. Truman Burbank thinks he is living the American dream in Seahaven – rosy-cheeked, apple-pie, Norman Rockwell, small-town middle-America. In reality, as he eventually discovers, his life is a scripted soap-opera, managed by teams of directors, producers, technicians and scriptwriters, watched by 5,000 cameras and an audience of millions. (There is a theory of ideology here.) But, in some ways, *Made in Chelsea* is precisely the opposite of *The Truman Show*. The participants not only know that they are in some kind of soap-opera, they actively exploit its possibilities, financial and otherwise. It is we, the viewers who may be Truman Burbank, deluded that this 'Chelsea' actually exists in space and time. How it seems to work is that the programme's producers set up scenes loosely based on the *personae* of the cast members, weaving them into some kind of soap-like storyline. And so, a couple of dozen twenty-somethings, male and female, circulate in pairs and groups, among the bars and night clubs and fashionable shops along the King's Road and Kensington and Knightsbridge. They also occasionally appear suddenly – without the tedium of having to travel on trains and planes and taxis – in Amsterdam or Capri or the South of France. They sit around over drinks, they engage in a kind of talk, they fall out and form alliances, they indulge in a strange kind of romance and so the hours pass and turn into weeks. It would not be difficult



to write off *Made in Chelsea* as a truly dreadful piece of television, the embarrassed and embarrassing exposure of the empty days of a bunch of spoilt metropolitan brats, with money and, despite many years of expensive private schooling, not much else going for them; what Amber, a 19-year old Chelsea socialite, describes as 'the whole like Chelsea socialite thing'.

But this would be a superficial reading of a programme which has unexpected and unintended ironies. One is already signalled in the very title. Because, of course, nothing much is made in Chelsea or in *Made in Chelsea* – apart from money. It wasn't always so, of course. Originally a rural suburb a couple of miles west of Westminster, by the nineteenth century Chelsea was well known as a centre for the manufacture of porcelain, china and pottery. There were many workshops producing furniture as well as stained-paper factories and a large floor-cloth factory. There were also several breweries and along the river there were wharves and coal and timber yards. One of these many industries – and one that has particular significance for viewers of *Made in Chelsea* – was brought to London by a young plumber from Yorkshire, Thomas Crapper, 'manufacturer and supplier of sanitary appliances;' in other words, flush lavatories. His premises on the King's Road survived until 1966. I am not sure that *Made in Chelsea* was stamped inside a million toilet bowls but it would be good to think that the district's fame was spread in this way far and wide across the Empire – and that the programme's title is an *homage* to Thomas Crapper.

Made in Chelsea is also a kind of *homage* to Jane Austen, though this is *Pride and Prejudice* or *Emma* read

through Samuel Beckett. *Made in Chelsea*, if it is about anything at all, is about the interactions and courtship rituals of young men and women of property. If marriage, and the couplings of inherited capitals, is the ultimate prize of these games this is discreetly not mentioned at any point. As in Austen the hand of the servant is invisible and nothing is ever seen being produced, not even a cup of tea. No horny-handed son or daughter of toil has a speaking part in this snooty romance. And it shares with the novels of Jane Austen both a relentless materialism and, at the same time, a remarkable prudishness about the human body and even about consumption. I'm not sure that I have seen anybody eat in *Made in Chelsea*. I remember Andy and Lucy meeting for lunch in some kind of restaurant but after a few exchanges she departed without any food being ordered. There is much alcohol around because the favoured space of every kind of interaction is the wine bar, the fashionable pub, and the party. But again I'm not sure I have actually seen drink being purchased or even drunk, except somewhere in the background. Sex is everywhere in *Made in Chelsea* and yet it is always implicit. It is rarely directly mentioned much less seen. When it comes to sex and bodily functions and the vulgar materialities of everyday life, *Made in Chelsea* is as prudish as Jane Austen. In this 'Chelsea' 'constructed reality' means the exclusion of everything but occasional moments of a kind of sociability in the very limited public sphere of parts of SW3 (SW£ I mistyped!). And globalism has not penetrated SW£; the cast are very white, Home Counties, plummy 'English'. Even Gabriela, who is partly Greek, was born in Chelsea and brought up in Henley-on-Thames.



But in contrast to Jane Austen there is not much in the way of narrative and little or no development of character either. 'Relationship' is much too strong a word for these casual encounters. Thrown together with nothing to say to each other and no language to say it (or not say it), the drama consists of tortuous exchanges, punctuated by awkward embarrassed silences and dazed meaningful looks into the middle distance. Hell is other people in the wine bars along the King's Road. There is something of the world of Samuel Beckett too – who lived in Chelsea for a couple of years in the 1930s and set his early novel *Murphy* there. But *Made in Chelsea* is bleaker than *Waiting for Godot* or *Endgame*. There at least there was anger and rage against the meaninglessness of existence on a wrecked planet spinning through empty space. And in Beckett there was always wit and humour, irony and satire – and moments of poetry. Here in Chelsea language has been reduced to incoherent mumbling, existence to a wearying, repetitive and somehow timeless series of encounters. Nobody comes and nobody goes. Nobody changes and what happened last week or last month is forgotten – and exactly the same thing might happen again next week. There is little or no humour, no passion or rage or desire in SW£. Oh god let's have a pordy or go somewhere else – some other bar, some other hotel lounge, some other like planet! 'I suppose it isn't necessarily the ideal time to see rich kids having fun', young Spencer, the porky lothario, recently confessed. I see very little trace of fun – or joy or happiness – in *Made in Chelsea*. (And apparently he experienced some hostile responses at first. 'Online, especially Twitter, was bitchy at first. It's changed now, though. I've been on Twitter for four weeks, I've got 22,000

followers and most of them are 15-year-old girls sending me love hearts. Let's just say I'm wishing lots of people good luck with their GCSEs right now'. Be very very careful there Spencer!)

Perhaps there is a Marxian sub-text here too. Apparently untouched by the politics of envy, apart from these few bitchy remarks on Twitter, *Made in Chelsea* hints at the *denouement* of the Thatcher project. Our entourage tells us something about where entrepreneurial values and free-market utopianism ends up in the next generation. Here in twenty-first century Chelsea we meet a sample of the products of Eton, Harrow, and several other expensive private schools. Only one of them, Gabriella, was educated in a state school – in Henley! And what are they doing now? Several of them have a somewhat mysterious economic base, in other words family money sustains them. But it is always a good idea to seem to be doing something. Old Etonian Spencer, if we begin with him, started out as a PR Manager for West End night-clubs. He also describes himself as a 'broker'. This doesn't seem to interfere with his endless leisure – though he seems to be pursuing a future in show business as well as writing his memoirs, *Confessions of a Lady Thriller*. His buddy in the earlier series, Hugo Taylor, 24, whose head doesn't seem to be on quite right, is described as 'a full-time party PR man' for Bourne Capital. He is an Old Harrovian and daddy is one of just 14 solicitors to have been made a Queen's Counsel and mummy works at Christie's. 'There's more to life than polo and riding horses', according to this ex-flame of Princess Eugenie, but then he goes and spoils it: 'I'd love to own my own Formula One racing team'. He too is now likely to turn up in some low budget day-time TV 'reality show'. The *femmes fatales* of the first series were Caggie Dunlop and Millie

Mackintosh. Caggie went off to be a singer. Millie, confectionery heiress, great-great-granddaughter of the John Mackintosh, who launched Quality Street chocolates, is apparently 'a make-up artist'. It all seems a bit ... a bit flimsy, a bit tawdry, a bit un-'aspirational'. These were the four lead characters of the first two series.

Underneath the fake tans and the dyed hair, other members of the cast have entrepreneurial ambitions – or, at least, hopes, ideas and plans. Binky, a sometime receptionist at an investment firm, has some ideas about launching her own clothing line. Kimberley Garner is the daughter of a millionaire property developer and has, apparently, dabbled herself, revamping houses at the top end of the market. She hopes to venture into fashion, creating her own clothing label. Chloe Green is the daughter of Topshop and Arcadia tycoon Sir Philip Green which may have something to do with her plans to launch a shoe collection at Topshop. But then there is Oliver Proudlock, another old Etonian, creator of the Serge DeNimes fashion label. He introduces himself on his [website](#):

Ollie Proudlock is an artist and has had a love for fashion from a young age. Having integrated his art into t-shirts designs for several years, he recently decided to take this one-step further and created Serge DeNimes. He hopes to create exclusive t-shirts of the highest quality, expressing unique cutting edge designs at an affordable price. It has been his dream to one day start up his own fashion label, and now he is following this dream. (<http://serge-demines.com/serge-tem/>)

His dream is realised in selling t-shirts online at between £49 and £55 a throw. Several others hint at launching their own clothing labels. Spencer's girl-friend Louise, for instance, when she is not being a student or appearing in an advertising campaign buried naked under a mound of Cadbury crème eggs. The storm-tossed Victoria (Baker-Harber) is apparently designs swimming-trunks. Jamie Laing, a McVitie's heir, has launched a sweet shop called 'Candy Kittens'. More dreams that money can buy:

Whilst other young boys dreamt of becoming a footballer or film star Jamie always had dreams of running his own business. He has a passion and love for all things sweet and now wants to add his own flair to the confectionery industry that has been a large part of his family history. 'I wanted to have beautiful, sexy, fun, flirty girls alongside the sweets'.

But this pre-pubescent erotic fantasy has also involved launching a clothing label. Go to the very pink website (www.candy-kittens.co.uk) for more.

However, for the true spirit of neoliberalism have a closer look at Francis (Boulle). What has been his biggest challenge as a young entrepreneur so far, he was asked while speaking in the Oxford Union in January 2012. After some difficulties in articulating a coherent statement a light suddenly goes on behind his eyes: 'but I guess if there was one challenge in particular ... erm... I guess... I guess tax is really... really... it's just such a shame... it's a damn shame that exists...' Francis would much prefer to buy his own army, navy and air-force. He admits to a business motive for joining 'the cast' of *Made in*

Chelsea. Publicity will be good for business, especially if the programme is a success in the United States. 'By having that exposure in America you open your market up drastically to any project you want to push forward'. Perhaps 'drastically' is not quite the word he was looking for here. But Francis Maximilien Yvan Christophe Boule has projects and likes pushing forward and is very keen to represent himself as a cut above the others. He doesn't need *Made in Chelsea*, he says, to make a success of his life because he has so many other things going on. 'The other people on the show – not naming names – need this because otherwise they wouldn't do anything'. Six minutes into the first episode, we are introduced to Francis by Millie: 'the last I heard he was like... doing some like... diamond mining or something'. And where, Caggie asks, looking puzzled, 'does he go to do that' – obviously as nonplussed as I was by the image of young Francis labouring in the diamond mines of Chelsea. 'Madagascar or somewhere!' Lady Bracknell could hardly have dismissed a silly question more completely. Just in case we missed young Francis's day job, his companion at the bar – Fred – then asks him how 'the diamond thing is going'. And Francis responds with all the energy and commitment of any rising entrepreneur: 'Yeah, no, no, it's going well. We've had a couple of private banks contact us. And yeah... we're... we're... we're...' Fred interrupts before Francis spirals into bad infinity, but this is our first example of one of Francis's symptoms: he can never quite finish a sentence. They like trail off into kind of like erm ... mumbling incoherence or... or erm something. No, sorry, yes that sentence of mine did actually kind of like end? The question mark, incidentally, does not indicate that a question is being asked. It signals another verbal tic of the Chelsea

nomenklatura – for which I blame Kylie Minogue: the ingratiating half-questioning intonation at the end of statements? Francis's interlocutor here, half-Icelandic Fredrik, is a short hirsute, stubby and gnomish kind of young man-about-town. He is 'a model', presumably finding gainful employment in the various Peter Jackson/ Tolkein films which have hugely increased the demand for hobbits? Millie admires his muscular arms, invisible to the human eye: 'He just looks kind of like a kind of sculpture'. Indeed he kind of does Millie – except when he moves.

But back to young Francis: he describes himself as a 'charming, objectivist, polymath – I'm more erudite than other people in the show'. He also describes himself as 'a self-made businessman from the age of twelve'. That he was suckled at the poisoned teats of Thatcher – another sometime inhabitant of Chelsea, though no more – is suggested by one of his earliest business ventures. At his boarding school he used to allow the younger boys to cuddle his bunny, at a charge of one pound per ten minutes. My initial anxieties were soon calmed. There seems to have been an actual rabbit, generating a good return on a modest initial investment. But I still shuddered at his gleeful retelling of this profiteering from the loneliness of children. Francis's status as 23-year old 'self-made' millionaire is somewhat tarnished when we discover that his father is the multi-millionaire head of the Boule Mining Group, a firm involved in 'developing' – note that word -- mineral deposits in various parts of the world. The firm's website (www.boule.com) also claims the family's affiliation to one Andre Charles Boule. He was 'Premier ebeniste du Roi', employed at Versailles for his marquetry inlay by Louis XIV, 'a true patron of the arts', as the Boule

Mining Group's website reminds us – as well as being a diminutive power-crazed despot whose territorial ambitions wreaked havoc across Europe for two generations, of course. Maintaining the family tradition of artistic endeavour, young Francis runs the website SexyMP.co.uk – which allows users to rate Members of Parliament on their looks. Capitalism makes you beautiful, according to Francis. But as I watch him posture and pose before the camera, I am reminded of Macaulay's comments about a portrait prefixed to a volume of bad poems: the author, he says, 'appears to be doing his very best to look like a man of genius and sensibility, though with less success than his strenuous exertions deserve'.

Made in Chelsea exposes how 'the whole like Chelsea socialite thing' consists of rich and expensively-educated young men and women who are mostly not very bright, nor very interesting nor even – with a few exceptions – very good looking. But perhaps the joke is on us. Because they are cultivating a profitable celebrity which may bring in funds for years to come, moving in that shady space where the old landowning elite mix with foreign oligarchs (true patrons of the arts), advertising executives, property developers, drug dealers, professional footballers, third-rate TV actors, and other minor media celebrities: Ollie serving as 'a VIP host' for a nightclub owned by a friend of Pippa Middleton (the well-known chef and author); Mark-Francis Vandelli Orlov-Romanovsky, heir to the fortune of his mother, 'a Russian princess', and surely a distant great-nephew of Bertie Wooster; Chloe Green, daughter of Topshop tycoon Sir Philip, dating someone who apparently appeared on *Celebrity Big Brother*; and last but not least, Amber, a 19-year old socialite with her own

jewellery website who is somewhat disturbed by a large macho-looking young lady called Cheska who has a blog and who has arrived to do something on Amber's exclusive party of 'celebrities and high-profilers' for which she has hired a night-club. 'I think she's just going to go with the whole like Chelsea socialite thing and that's just soooo not me', pouts Amber.

They are chancers these gilded youths, Arthur Daleys of the demi-monde, without his emotional intelligence. Despite an air of nonchalance and privilege they are hungry to make money and shameless about using *Made in Chelsea* as a way of advertising themselves as a 'brand'. It all seems tawdry and desperate and vulgar and gives a new meaning to an old term, 'the dignity of labour'. And yet labour there is – and a faltering protestant work ethic too. There have been problems with members of 'the cast' turning up late or drunk, or not turning up at all. Several cast members have been suspended. In March 2012 the production manager Heidi Birkett was forced to send out a stern email to the whole cast:

As many of you now have outside interests as a result of *Made in Chelsea* I would urge you to think how this could have a knock-on effect to such things as personal appearances, magazines, other TV projects, branding etc. I would also ask all of you to think whether you would act in such a way in any other job without expecting similar repercussions. (*Daily Mail*, 4 March 2012)

So their brief celebrity becomes exchange value as they attach their names to various money-making ventures, all at the ephemeral end of the

market and few of which will outlast the final episode of *Made in Chelsea*. Ah, 'final episode' sounds sweet – and just for a moment I can almost imagine watching a 'constructed reality' show set in the Petit Trianon, observing the ennui

and incoherence of Marie-Antoinette and her dodgy entourage. Perhaps a Boule did a bit of marquetry there too?

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