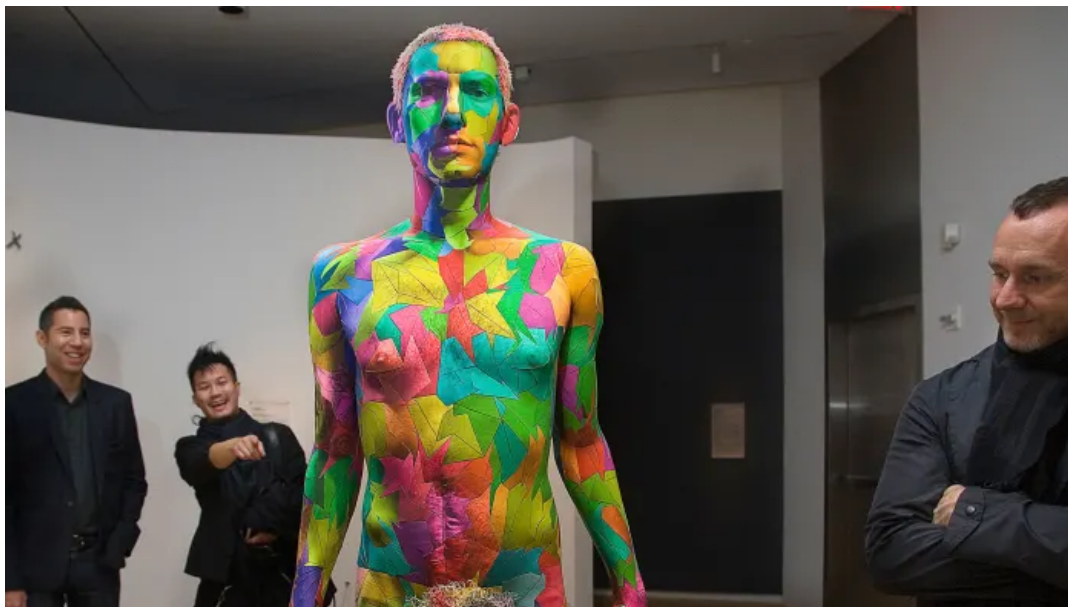


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Why I'm pretentious — and proud of it

It's easy to make fun of people's pretensions, but social mobility only works if we get ideas above our station



'Alex' (2009), by Oliver Herring © Martine Fougeron

Dan Fox FEBRUARY 5 2016

I grew up during the 1980s and 1990s in a small country town near Oxford. I was arty but badly coordinated on the sports field. Reading, painting and listening to music were escape hatches from the anxieties of my local comprehensive school. I was drawn to books on modern art and the counterculture, to magazine articles about art-house films I had no access to unless they appeared late at night on Channel 4. Money earned from my Saturday job was spent on records I'd heard John Peel play on the radio. I was captivated by my older brother Mark's record collection: David Bowie, Kate Bush, Japan, Roxy Music, The Smiths.

None of this made me unique among angsty teenagers in provincial Britain. I understood that these things weren't for everyone, in the same way that playing snooker, birdwatching, mending bikes or learning about physics were not for me. The objects of my fascination provided clues for leading an interesting life. At the same time I learnt that subtitled films, modern art, avant-garde literature and people with unconventional taste in clothes were often written off as "pretentious". That puzzled me, as I pursued these interests out of genuine attraction not affectation. Decades later, with an art school degree and 17 years experience as an editor and critic working in the field of contemporary art, you could say I've spent a life embedded in pretension. But what, exactly, would that mean?

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understanding of what the line means; a neat spin on the British love-hate relationship with the French, a bullseye right between the eyes of self-important snobs who boast of their refined tastes and worldliness through language.

But press harder on what the gag might represent: that it's pretentious to speak another language because it's a mark of education? That it represents social climbing or — God forbid — an interest in a culture that has produced some of the world's most celebrated artists, designers, writers and chefs?

When we smell pretension, our instinct is to assert our own ordinariness. Pretension is taken as evidence of bad faith in the behaviour, taste or aspirations of others but never oneself. You'll smile at the *Fawlty Towers* zinger because self-deprecation is good manners. To call another person pretentious is to affirm your sense of your own authenticity and common sense. It's an accusation thrown from a baseline calibrated according to slippery assumptions about what's "real" or "normal". (Qualities not only futile to measure but dangerous to believe in, if you think anyone different to your norm in some way poses a challenge to morality, taste or common belief.)

People scrabbling up the class ladder are often described as being pretentious. But there is downwardly mobile pretension, too. Exaggerating how much you're just one of the crowd, or acting "prolier-than-thou". Like Ricky Gervais' character David Brent in *The Office* — the branch manager so insistent about how well he gets on with his staff and how universally appreciated his sense of humour is that he cannot see his own boorish status obsessions — calling out pretension in others is a way of asserting just how salty your salt-of-the-earth credentials are.

Ask yourself what you mean when you use the word "pretentious". For some, it might describe the feeling of bafflement and exclusion that contemporary art leaves them with, or the fripperies of the fashion world. It could refer to the rococo terminology of wine-tasters, or to those awful people down the street who named their kid after the town in Tuscany where they have a second home. Perhaps it's that person talking about how much they're enjoying reading the latest [Jonathan Franzen](#) novel — because they couldn't honestly be enjoying it, could they? Or hipsters riding fixed-gear bikes, colonising once-affordable parts of town with their bottomless accounts at The Bank of Mum and Dad.

Maybe it's a catch-all term for "arty" films with subtitles. (Google the phrase "pretentious foreign films" and you'll see how often the assumption is made that any movie not scripted in English will be "boring" or "difficult", its formal qualities camouflaging intellectual bankruptcy. But what,

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It was through Bowie I discovered Burroughs and Brecht, Pop Art and German Expressionism

It's taken as axiomatic that pretension is something bad — the cousin of affectation, friend to charlatanism, snobbery and narcissism. It's a snarky way to criticise what people do with their money. Yet "pretension" is a more complex word than it first appears. Crack it open and out spills a mess of insecurities about class, the arts and the role of intellect. Its usage often says more about the accuser

than the accused. As musician Brian Eno observed in his 1996 diary *A Year With Swollen Appendices*: "The common assumption is that there are "real" people and there are those pretending to be something they're not. There is also an assumption that there is something morally wrong with pretending. My assumptions about culture as a place where you can take psychological risks without incurring physical penalties make me think that pretending is the most important thing we do. It's the way we make our thought experiments, find out what it would be like to be otherwise".

The morality of pretending is tied up with age-old fears of con-artistry, yet we enjoy the deceptions of the stage illusionist, and love films about mistaken identities. Pretending is associated with children playing make-believe. But playing make-believe is what we give actors license to do in theatre and cinema. Buried deep in our distaste for pretension is a wariness of actors, and perhaps a distrust of those making claims to power. (It's worth noting that the classical Greek term for a professional actor was *hypokrites*, from which we derive the word "hypocrite".) Yet for the majority of us, the issues of power we deal with on a daily basis are those of class and identity — money, race, gender, sex. And it is from this tangle of feelings and ideas around status that the insult of pretentiousness draws its full charge.

We accuse someone of pretentiousness to call out false authority and deflate delusions of grandeur. But we're also using the word as a tool of class policing: a way to tell a person to stop putting on airs and graces. In Britain, where we obsess over class fidelity and betrayal to the point of neurosis, to charge a person with pretension is to accuse them of behaving in ways they are not qualified for, because of their economic circumstances or educational background. (She can't possibly have an interest in modern art, because she grew up on a council estate and it is pretentious for her to believe she can expand her horizons — her interest surely must be an affectation.) Pretension is confusing: the term is a tool for puncturing pomposity but it can equally function as a mechanism of disempowerment — a form of anti-intellectualism and prejudice against difference, a way of bullying people out of curiosity about the world around them.

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Pretension can never be fully absolved of its associations with snobbery, but whereas the snob is obsessed by what other people are thinking of them, the pretentious person might be acting out of innocence. A person's interests or creative efforts might look ridiculous to others, but in many instances they come from a place of sincerity, marking a genuine interest in some aspect of their life or the world around them. A pretentious person may simply be an amateur, having a go out of enthusiasm. It doesn't necessarily mean they're good at what they do, but it marks the willingness to try, and across the arts, that willingness to make an effort and possibly fail is vital to creative progress. The person who embarks on an artistic project with the knowledge that it will succeed, knowing precisely what it will look or sound like, will rarely discover anything new in the process. As Woody Allen once said: "If you're not failing every now and again, it's a sign you're not doing anything very innovative."

Before firing the charge of pretension, first answer the question: "Pretending to be what?" The accuser of pretension rarely itemises both what is being aspired to, and just why it fails to make the grade — for example, the guilty party's amateur hour antics flatter your own professional discernment. Remember that even the professional, before they acquire the authority of certificates and experience, starts out as an amateur. The British are conflicted when it comes to this. We love the idea of the amateur engineer, for instance, coming up with an invention in their garden shed that will go on to transform our lives. We are proud of our contributions to the history of pop music created largely by self-taught bedroom musicians and intellectual autodidacts.

Yet we also like to slam those whose efforts might not tally with our idea of an acceptable creative act — as much as we embrace innovation, we are also suspicious of the unconventional. Why the charge of pretension is so cruel in class terms is that it suggests a person is aspiring above their station to produce something they cannot possibly have the capability to understand. Tell a person that their interest in experimental literature, avant-garde music, modernist architecture, or fashion design is pretentious (and only for the middle classes) is to deny the possibility that intellectual curiosity can translate into social mobility.

And social mobility is a profound problem facing the UK today. Last week saw the publication by the government of the Social Mobility Index 2016, which "sets out the differences between where children grow up and the chances they have of doing well in adult life". It reports that out of London's 32 boroughs, 30 are in the top 20 per cent of "social mobility hotspots" countrywide. Over half the country's "coldspots" were in the East Midlands and east of England. Certain affluent parts of the country also do badly for those from poorer backgrounds — Oxford, for instance, ranks among the bottom 20 per cent of "social mobility coldspots". Alan Milburn observes in his foreword to the report: "ours is a small nation characterised by a large divide".

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David Bowie performing 'Rebel Rebel' in 1974 © Redferns/Getty

Many of the most celebrated British talents of the second half of the 20th century bloomed because of access to free higher education in art and drama schools, in universities and technical colleges. Working class actors, artists, musicians, designers and writers such as John Lennon, Ray Davies, Keith Richards, Julie Walters, Steve McQueen, Brian Cox, Harold Pinter, Ali Smith, Helen Mirren, Alan Bennett, David Hockney, Sarah Lucas, Alexander McQueen, Damien Hirst, Ian Dury, Bryan Ferry and Jarvis Cocker — and that's to name only a few — all benefited from a system in which students from a wide variety of social backgrounds could be exposed to a wide variety of ideas and models for living your life — in Eno's words, to “find out what it would be like to be otherwise.” With the introduction of tuition fees by the Labour government in 1998, their steady rise since, and the abolition by chancellor George Osborne in 2015 of [higher education maintenance grants](#), the doors to discovery — and social mobility — are being shut.

Brixton-born [David Bowie](#) came through those doors, educated at Croydon College's School of Art. When politicians David Cameron and George Osborne paid tribute to Bowie, following his death in January this year, they paid tribute to precisely the kind of working-class artist their policies are systematically turning away. Shortly after, when actor Alan Rickman passed away, musician Billy Bragg observed: “Both [Bowie and Rickman] were working-class kids from council estates who went to art school where they gained enough confidence in their own creativity that they were able to go on to find fame and fortune . . . The social mobility that Bowie and Rickman experienced is increasingly stifled.”

The day Bowie's death was announced, I walked from my office in New York's SoHo neighbourhood to his old apartment block on nearby Lafayette Street. On the way, I bought roses from a local deli and wrote on their paper wrapping a short message of thanks and love to Bowie

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voice in my head telling me that it was mawkish to mourn a celebrity musician.

But it was Bowie who not only helped alleviate feelings of adolescent loneliness — as he did for many of his fans — but who helped develop my cultural literacy. It was through him I discovered William Burroughs and Bertolt Brecht, German Expressionism and Pop Art — his were records that made me want to visit not just the dance floor but the library and the museum too. The flowers I left were not for a famous personality; they were, rather, a way of acknowledging that my life would have been significantly different without the example of creative risk-takers such as him. Without people prepared to make the effort, life would be colourless and drab. Pretentious, *moi*? You bet.

Dan Fox is co-editor of frieze magazine and author of 'Pretentiousness: Why it Matters', published by Fitzcarraldo Editions on February 10

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Letter in response to this article:

[Autodidact Bowie left school at age 16 / From Jon Dennis](#)

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