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To cite this article: Jessica Ringrose & Valerie Walkerdine (2008) Regulating The Abject, Feminist Media Studies, 8:3, 227-246, DOI: 10.1080/14680770802217279

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14680770802217279

Published online: 26 Sep 2008.

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REGULATING THE ABJECT

The TV make-over as site of neo-liberal reinvention toward bourgeois femininity

Jessica Ringrose and Valerie Walkerdine

In this paper, through an examination of mostly British make-over television programs we examine how the feminine has become a new site of limitless possibility and endless consumption, the fulcrum of intensifying processes of neo-liberal reinvention of continuously making over the self into successful, post-feminist bourgeois subjects. We argue that the central premise of contemporary make-over programs is the question: “Is the transformation of abject subjects possible?” We also suggest the focal object of transformation in many shows is the working class woman who fails both as subject/object of self-reflexivity, desire, and consumption. We argue it is her mind and body that represents a core site of abjection—a subjectivity designated as uninhabitable and therefore also a central site of regulation. It is upon the working class woman’s mind and body that the drama of possibility and limitation of neo-liberal reinvention is played out. We also argue that it is perhaps in reference to that which is made abject and uninhabitable that it becomes possible to talk about class as a dynamic of identifying against what we must not be, and which fuels incessant attempts to refashion selves into generalized and normalized bourgeois feminine subjects.

KEYWORDS self-reflexivity; self-transformation; consumption; working class; post-feminism

Introduction

In this paper we explore how neo-liberal discourses are productive of an ethos of autonomous individualism, where individuals are to become agents of their own success or failure in contemporary conditions of “late modernity” and globalization (Giddens 1991, 1998). We look at how psychological discourses prop up this neo-liberal subject, creating the conditions for practicing a “reflexive selfhood” (the foundation of “reflexive modernity”) through the internalization of the right sorts of expert knowledge to sustain an endlessly adaptive and reinventing self (Beck, Giddens & Lash 1994). Discourses of class and gender inequalities are emptied out of these contemporary individualized notions of selfhood (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2001), where the primary dynamic becomes one of consuming the self into being (Bauman 2001). In particular, we examine how the feminine occupies a contradictory role in these dynamics of practicing self-reflexivity and transformation through consumption.
Through an examination of (mostly) British television programmes, like *You Are What you Eat* (C4), *Get Your Dream Job* (BBC3) and *Spendaholics* (BBC3), we explore the contemporary production of neo-liberal femininity (Gill & Arthurs 2006) through a process of continually refashioning an appropriately feminine self. We suggest this successful femininity is bourgeois, yet coded universal, normal and attainable for all. Indeed we also argue that the central premise of contemporary make-over programmes is the question: "Is the transformation of 'abject' (Kristeva, 1982), working class subjects possible?" Drawing on Butler’s (1990) reworking of the notion of abjection, we argue the central object of regulation in the shows is the abject working class woman who fails as subject/object of desire and consumption, and lacks requisite qualities of self-reflexivity necessary for reinvention. We suggest we can see class as dynamically operative in the regulative processes enacted, and the complex identificatory practices set in motion, in the programmes.

**Psychology and the Neo-Liberal Production of the Autonomous Individual as Agent of Success or Failure**

By the late twentieth century, analysts of social class were incessantly heralding embourgeoisement and the “end of the working class” (Gorz 1982). The subject is now understood by many sociologists (e.g. Giddens 1994) as having been completely freed from traditional ties of location, class, and gender and to be completely self-produced. The affluent worker has given way to the embourgeoisement of the population and so the end of the working class is taken to have arrived. Freed from the ties of class, the new worker is totally responsible for their own destiny, and so techniques and technologies of regulation focus on the self-management of citizens to produce themselves as having the skills and qualities necessary to succeed in the new economy (Rose 1999a).

Jobs for life are being replaced by a constantly changing array of jobs, small businesses, and employment contracts. We no longer have a large manufacturing base which provides the pivot for an understanding of social stratification based on class divisions (Savage 2000). What used to be the working class is now dispersed into service industries based on individual contracts, piecework, home work, and work in call centers, with jobs for life having disappeared. Women’s employment is divided between those who have the education and skills to enter the professional and managerial sector, and those who leave school with little or no qualifications and enter a labor market defined mostly by poorly paid, often part-time work, little job security, and periods of unemployment. We are witnessing the complete collapse of civil society; thus, the attempt to further develop the psychological and social characteristics of the Robinson Crusoe economic man of liberalism (even if that man is now female) has to be created at this conjuncture as a subject who can cope without strong community roots or ties, hence the desire to make subjects responsible for their own lives.

It is these processes which, we could argue, have reached their zenith in what has been termed neo-liberalism (Rose 1999a). Difficult to succinctly define, it is possible to say that the emergence of neo-liberal states has been characterized by

the transformation of the administrative state, one previously responsible for human well-being, as well as for the economy, into a state that gives power to global corporations and installs apparatuses and knowledges through which people are reconfigured
The sets of political and economic changes which have led to neo-liberalism (the loss of power of trade unions, the end of jobs for life, the increase in short-term contracts, etc.) have emerged alongside a set of discourses and practices already well in place, but in which certain discourses and practices of class which stress class as oppositional have been replaced by those which stress the possibility of upward mobility, particularly for women. Here a narrative of escape from traditional familial and domestic arrangements bolsters a neo-liberal dream of reinvention through education and work-based identities (Walkerdine & Ringrose 2006). We see a convergence of particular forms of liberal feminisms into what are postfeminist, neo-liberal mythologies of success and possibility for women, where feminism is "recuperated" and rendered simultaneously "obsolete" (Gill & Arthurs 2006; McRobbie 2004a) in a discourse that empties out classed, gendered or racialized power differentials from contemporary thinking and meaning making (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2001).

In this economic, political, and social context, it is the flexible and autonomous subject who is demanded to be able to cope with constant change in work, income and lifestyle, and with constant insecurity. It is the flexible and autonomous subject who negotiates, chooses, and adapts in order to succeed in the array of education and retraining forms that form the new "lifelong learning" and the "multiple career trajectories" that have replaced the linear hierarchies of the education system of the past and the jobs for life of the old economy (cf. Gidden’s [1991] “reflexive project” of the self as a key marker of this new period of history; Gee’s [1999] “shape-shifting portfolio person”; du Gay’s [1996] “entrepreneur of oneself”). It is argued that these times demand a subject who is capable of constant self-invention.

Containing this kind of subject who can manage ongoing processes of fracturing and fragmentation is a key task for neo-liberal and globalized economies which are no longer willing to provide long-term forms of support. Modes of regulation are shifting from practices of policing and external regulation to technologies of self-regulation in which subjects come to understand themselves as responsible for their own regulation, as “free” and individual agents in the management of themselves as autonomous beings, which is central to a neo-liberal project in which the community, the state, the sociality itself is taken to have melted away (Rose 1999a). There is a continuous devolving of responsibility onto the individual as captain of their own “choice biographies” as neo-liberal, meritocratic logics take greater hold (Harris 2004). In these accounts, issues such as poverty, low wages or lack of maternity leave, can easily be read back as problems with and for the woman herself.

Such a subject is presumed by, as well as being the intended product of, contemporary forms of education and training. While self-realization is what is expected of the life project and one in which success is judged by the psychological capacities to succeed, the ability to handle uncertainty, the never knowing where work will come from, etc., in fact produces an almost inevitable failure that will be lived as a personal failing (Rose 1999a). The issue is that, in the Foucauldian (2006) sense, the practices of subjectification produce a constantly failing subject who has to understand their position in essentially personal and psychological terms. In this account, psychology has a special role to play in providing the discourse that props up the fiction of the individual, autonomous subject of choice (Walkerdine 2002). But psychology also facilitates processes of explanation and operates as a restorative practice,
using expert knowledge and new discourses and practices of counseling and therapy to help in successful modes of adaptation. As we will explore, the feminine is caught up in the production of neo-liberal subjectivity (as subject and object of consumption) in specific ways that recenter girls and women as sites of crisis, desire, anxiety, and possibility of success in living out neo-liberal subjectivity at present (Harris 2004).

**Femininity, Feminization, and Consumption**

Many sociologists and cultural theorists have also been arguing since the 1980s that consumption has replaced production as a marker of identity (Nava, Blake, MacRury & Richards 1997). So, it is no longer the case that being a worker, working, or middle class defines identity, but rather identities are taken to be created through marketing campaigns in the selling of goods and services to produce an identity in a lifestyle. As we know, lifestyle is used to sell almost everything. The huge proliferation of programs, which run from house purchase and home improvement to dress, personal, and homemaking skills for women and men and as far as the “extreme make-overs” of cosmetic surgery, testify to the central importance of consuming oneself into being in a life of constant and continual improvement and change.

This move to consumption as an economic strategy is evident in the transformation of the worker, the project of continual self-improvement in relation to the decline of manufacturing, the rise of service, and the loss of working class communities centered around workplaces, which all characterize post-industrial neo-liberal governance, where subjects are reconfigured as “entrepreneurial actors across all dimensions of their lives” (Brown cited in Davies & Bansell 2007, p. 248). The purpose of work, education, and leisure within this discourse becomes the possibility of consumption and thus the achievement of an identity produced through consumption. Consuming oneself into being becomes the neo-liberal market-driven basis of Giddens’ (1998) reflexive project of the self. It is the basis of being seen, being somebody, being noticed and belonging. The right labels, clothes, furniture, house, car, and so forth, become markers of belonging and acceptance.

Bauman (2001) argues that unemployed people experience complete boredom and breakdown because they cannot become a consuming subject, the subject for whom happiness is apparently possible—I will become this person and then I will be happy ever after. He suggests the goal of happiness is invested in the endless becoming of the unitary subject through turning oneself into a commodity and thereby owning the means to consume. It is a pleasure endlessly displaced and postponed, glimpsed in snatches of holidays, acquisitions as though it were life. It contains lack and failure inside it as an inevitability. It is that lack and failure which psychology is constantly asked to remedy, explaining the failure to appropriately consume as pathology.

But how do we gender this compulsion to consumption and a psychological discourse that explains lack and failure *vis-à-vis* consumption as individual pathology? Where does the feminine fit within this dynamic of consuming the self into being, when the feminine has traditionally been object of consumption (Bordo 1993; Jeffries 2005)? If we think about what is and has been demanded of women, who have always had to be desirable, presentable, consumable, we can think about what is happening under neo-liberalism as an intensification of feminine as site (both subject and object) of commodification and consumption. The new importance of the feminine is intimately linked to the rise of the psychological subject, a rational subject of choice, flexibility, who has to have the necessary skills to succeed in the constant necessity to change oneself and
cope with constant instability across major sites of social formation—education, work, family (Aapola, Gonick & Harris 2005).

Adkins (1995, 2002) has argued persuasively that work and the labor market have been feminized. Indeed, the British Labour Party think-tank Demos, went as far as to say that the “future is female.” They argued in 1997 that women are set to enter the labor market in huge numbers. We could say, in one sense then, that feminism has come of age, giving women choices in work as never before. Changes in Britain and other “late-modern” societies (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2001) mean manufacturing, industry, and farming decline while communications and service are predominant. These are the kinds of work which stress qualities ascribed to femininity—service, empathy, communication, nurturance, to be looked-at-ness. However, Adkins’ study shows that this version of a female future, with a labor market operating on feminine values, is far too simplistic. She argues that it is, in fact, easier for men to perform femininity and therefore to enter the new labor market than for women to perform masculinity in professional and business domains. As Reay suggests, similarly in education (a key site in the production of feminized upwardly mobile, neo-liberal citizen/consumer, for instance) with its “growing emphasis on measured outputs, competition and entrepreneurship, it is primarily the assertiveness and authority of masculinity rather than the aesthetics of femininity that is required and rewarded” (2001, p. 165).

Indeed, there are mighty contradictions, between the opening up of the labor market to women, the “I can be anything” on the one hand, and the intensification of commodification and objectification (Jeffries 2005) of the feminine on the other, which need to be explored. The new work of “doing” feminine that girls and women must perform is to somehow juggle traditionally feminine qualities like nurturing, passivity, and sexual attractiveness as objects of heteronormative gaze (Butler 1993), with traditionally masculine subject positionalities like assertiveness, rationality, autonomy, economic and emotional independence, and buying power.

This is what McRobbie (forthcoming) calls the “postfeminist masquerade”—discourses where “a notion of female freedom is proffered in a context of wage-earning capacity and participation in consumer culture, while political subjectivity is overshadowed, marginalised or re-cast as consumer citizenship.” Gill’s (2007a, 2007b) incisive critique of postfeminist empowerment discourses utilized in the media and advertising industry, suggests women’s attainment of sexual subject-hood and “agentic” power has now become a question of whether women can succeed in the workplace and appropriately consume products that will help them to sculpt their bodies into objects of heterosexual male desire. Women are to unproblematically inhabit both a masculine, rational, productive, worker self, and a (hetero)sexualized feminine, (appropriately) reproductive identity that both consumes itself into being and is the object of consumption. In the context of such confounding, regulatory discourses it becomes difficult to formulate feminist critiques capable of reading both a class and gender analysis of “oppression” back onto this supposed easy and celebratory “feminization” of consumption and desire. As Beck & Beck-Gernsheim (2001) suggest, categories like race, class, and gender operate in the current cultural terrain as “zombie categories” with little currency for “real” people. As Reay has commented the break down of class analysis is particularly problematic: “class may be out there but individuals seem to believe it does not touch them personally. It has taken no hold inside” (2005, p. 923).
The “Postfeminist” Rise of the Yummy Mummy

We are all familiar with the tropes of the super-woman and women “having it all” (Erwin 1996) that exist as bourgeois ideals of femininity at present. As discussed, these discourses are theorized as “post-feminist” by McRobbie (2004b) and others because they represent reversals and appropriations of feminism, to stake out new truth claims about universal gender equality and all girls and women having “made it” in contemporary society. The feminist political dilemmas of housewife versus career woman and struggles for educational and workplace access and child-care provision have been replaced by narratives of renaissance women who juggle thriving careers (attained through the right modes of education) with motherhood. And although she may buy maternal services from the less successful and pathologized working class woman, this depends on her own (or family’s) financial power to do so, devolving responsibility increasingly onto the individual. Those working in education and girlhood studies suggest these myths of unambiguous female success are bolstered by educational debates that use girls’ superior achievements in school vis-à-vis boys to proclaim the future is female, and make sweeping claims about gender equity and girl power (Aapola, Gonick & Harris 2005; Ringrose 2007; Walkerdine, Lucey & Melody 2001). Many dichotomies, including clever/prettty, private/public, rational/irrational are apparently resolved in these new bourgeois fantasies of femininity—a new vision of a Stepford fembot who excels in the traditionally feminine terrains of the home and shopping mall as well as in the masculine domains of education, the office, and the gym.

The motif of “having it all” has recently become fetishized in British popular culture as the “Yummy Mummy” a fantasy of the “svelte figure . . . who can squeeze into size six jeans a couple of weeks after giving birth, with the help of a personal trainer” (McRobbie 2006). The iconic celebrity mom figure of Madonna, means the everyday gal must now balance the autonomous production of masculine success in the realm of the professional or material independence (production) in order to buy (consume) the appropriate designer goods, as well as cultivate feminine success as “fertile” nurturer (Smith 2004), while simultaneously maintaining sexual attractiveness (a set of contradictions around career/fertility/consumption/sexual attractiveness Madonna embodies, and has faced again recently as over-exercise and age have been blamed for no more “biological” babies, and a hernia revealed the costs of wearing designer bustiers and the limitations of her body to “reinvent” itself as eighteen yet again—although Madonna has now over-ridden her body’s limitations through the global marketplace of adoption). This new consumer/ mother/sex goddess is to surmount the Madonna/Whore dichotomy in the bedroom and be independent breadwinner/consumer in the market. It is in the aftermath, the impossibilities of this new explicitly bourgeois dream, that we see a boom of “chick lit” novels in the UK where the central anxiety is how women are to overcome the burdens of Bridget Jones singledom to find total fulfillment by reconciling all of these contradictory desires into domestic/career bliss (Gill & Herdieckerhoff 2006).

These various motifs are “postfeminist” fantasies where women and girls are celebrated as benefactors of equal opportunities, who must also retain their femininity (Gill & Arthurs 2006; McRobbie 2004c), while processes of regulation into the neo-liberal economic order are masked within the psychological discourses of individual adaptation and entrepreneurship. As mentioned, Gill (2007b) has outlined how make-over television reflects and is constructive of a specifically “postfeminist media sensibility”—a set of often anti-feminist discourses characterized by an emphasis upon inciting individualism,
self-surveillance, monitoring and self-discipline, a resurgence of sexual difference (and essentialized femininity as bodily property), and hyper-sexuality (i.e. wearing a thong, always being “up for it”) as the new mode for women’s empowerment.

We, however, want to understand how class relations play out in these gendered/sexualized dynamics of the make-over paradigm’s reworkings of femininity. We suggest it is an issue of striving for what is a specifically bourgeois femininity, even if this designation becomes generalized so far as to mystify capacity to distinguish it. These classed dilemmas are not resolved in these shows. Rather we find a set of complex contradictions painful and traumatic in the wake of a discourse of female success, which leads us back to the inevitability of some subject’s chronic failures to succeed in the bid to reinvent the self.

The Classed Dynamics of Abjection

Walkerdine’s (1991; 1996, p. 148) work has consistently explored how it is bourgeois feminine characteristics that are idealized then taken as normal through a pathologization of the working class and particularly working class women and mothers as threats to the moral order who must be monitored, controlled, and reformed. Skeggs traces how femininity was seen to be “The property of middle class women who could prove themselves to be respectable through their appearance and conduct … [and] use their proximity to the sign of femininity to construct distinctions between themselves and others” (1997, p. 99). This various work makes it possible to see how idealized femininity has operated as a bourgeois sign, with other unruly femininities marked as “other” or “abject” to use Kristeva’s (1982) terms, that which is cast out of the boundaries of acceptable:

The place of the abject is where meaning collapses, the place where I am not. The abject threatens life, it must be radically excluded from the place of the living subject, propelled away from the body and deposited on the other side of an imaginary border which separates the self from that which threatens the self. (Barbara Creed 1993, p. 65)

Abjection is part of the process through which the borders between the I and the other are created, what one rejects and excludes from oneself, and is explained as a process stemming from the “first site” of abjection—the mother’s body, which the child must separate from to become a subject, thereby “denying the primal narcissistic identification with the mother, almost” (Kristeva cited in McAfee 2004, p. 48). Almost, because Kristeva suggests that what is abjected continues to haunt the subject, holding fascination of desire and repulsion for what is deemed “other” to the self. Importantly, abjection is rooted in disavowal from the feminine body as site of boundary-less chaos, but also one-ness and union (McAfee 2004, p. 49). Abjection is not repression—it “remains as both an unconscious and a conscious threat to one’s own clean and proper self” and something desired (McAfee 2004, p. 46). And abjection is operative at the levels of culture and group as well through cleansing and purification rituals and practices. Kristeva described abjection as:

an operation of the psyche through which subjective and group identity are constituted by excluding anything that threatens one’s own (or one’s group’s) borders. The main threat to the fledgling subject is his or her dependence upon the maternal body (Oliver 1998, p. 2).
Abjection spirals out—it is the irrational, animalistic, sexualized, pathological constitution of the feminine, theorized from Freud to Lacan and beyond, to be identified against at all costs by the masculine subject, to somehow be negotiated ambivalently by the feminine subject (Walkerdine 1991). Abjection is site of risk and contamination that any feminine subject is at risk of slipping into, which marks the outside of the normative subject in Butler’s (1993) theorization of the process. The abject is an “uninhabitable” subject position, eliciting shame and disgust that must be cast outside the sense of self and identity. Here is Judith Butler’s theorization of normativity and differentiation through which the dynamic of abjection and otherization are staked:

The boundary of the body as well as the distinction between internal and external is established through the ejection and transvaluation of something originally part of identity into a defiling otherness. As Iris Young has suggested in her use of Kristeva to understand sexism, homophobia, and racism, the repudiation of bodies for their sex, sexuality, and/or color is an “expulsion” followed by a “repulsion” that founds and consolidates culturally hegemonic identities along sex/race/sexuality axes of differentiation. Young’s appropriation of Kristeva shows how the operation of repulsion can consolidate “identities” founded on the instituting of the “Other” or a set of Others through exclusion and domination. What constitutes through division the “inner” and “outer” worlds of the subject is a border and boundary tenuously maintained for the purposes of social regulation and control. (1990, p. 170)

We use Butler’s specific invocations of how abjection unfolds psychically. Abjection is a psychical process of enlivening exclusion and domination, but these are always “tenuous” bids to secure social regulations and normalization. We want to use this analysis to build on Skeggs’ (2005) recent work on how class, gender, and morality is formed in subjects through visual cultures that work to elicit disgust of working class women. We want to think further about how disgust operates through classed processes of abjection. We also want to look at how abjection operates as a psychical dynamic of constructing self and other and as an inherent part of neo-liberal transformation to bourgeois femininity—and examine how such processes recuperate classed distinctions yet offer no legitimate language to articulate class antagonisms.

Skeggs (2005) illustrates how increased ambiguity around sexuality and class norms, exemplified through shows like Sex and the City, where middle class professional women are sexually promiscuous and aggressive, creates a great deal of anxiety over borders and boundaries between good (idealized) and bad (abject) feminine, sexual subjects. This ambiguity creates moral crisis and increased demand for boundary marking. Skeggs argues boundaries and the “national constitutive limit to propriety” are re-inscribed through the visual cataloguing of white and black working class women as “tasteless excessive, ungovernable and atavistic,” primarily through an onslaught of reality TV and make-over shows (Skeggs 2005, pp. 966, 968).

“Blackness” and black and brown female bodies have long been regulated through the racializing and sexualizing imperialist gaze (Bannerji 1993). The symbolic hold of the “hottentot venus” (the South African woman put on exhibition in England and France to display her “unusually” large buttocks) offering a constitutive historical example of the representation of the black female body and sexuality as excessive and grotesque (Gilman 1985). Whiteness is a more permeable boundary and the working class is read onto the body through signs like excessive/fat white flesh and overly tight clothing (got her tits and ass out), brassy blonde
(or red) dye-jobs, flashy acrylic nails, hooker heels (to list only a few visual cues). We would suggest these symbols become “condensed” (Hey 2006) into those subjects, white-chavs, trash, tarts, slappers, hen partying women, laddettes, pram faces, who can then be easily read or positioned as other (Skeggs 2005; Wray & Newitz 1997; Youdell 2004).

This is certainly not a new process. A dynamic of abjection and working class shame was operative through the philanthropic culture of Victorian England, where the impoverished, dirty whore operated as symbolic site of revile and disgust, a designation working class women have had to navigate across generations (Walkerdine 1996). Moreover, significant class dynamics have operated through generations of Hollywood productions from My Fair Lady to Pretty Woman, focused on stories of rags to riches and moral degeneracy to social acceptance across international contexts (Berry 2000). We argue these symbolic designations of “other” on the small and big screen work through a process of psychical abjection—disgust and fascination—through which subjects (ourselves and others) become constituted as failing. We also show the particularly British fixation with habitually reconstituting binaries around working class and bourgeois femininity, visible in UK media and popular culture.

We suggest abjection does not only maintain boundaries as part of social regulation as Butler suggests, but we would suggest as Foucault ([1982] 1988) and Rose’s (1996) analysis of regulation and self-governance tells us, the abject incites manic desires for changing the self. What has intensified in our neo-liberal, individualizing times is the psychological imperative to improve and transform the self through the ready resources made available in self-help culture which dominates popular culture, particularly contemporary television programming. Psychology and its attendant experts play an important role in mediating disgust and repulsion (of self and others) generated in the dynamic of abjection, offering up the possibility of rules through which rehabilitation through regulation can become available to us all. Kristeva suggested that much literary creation has served as a means of catharsis or purging what is other or abject (McAfee 2004) and we might extend this reading to the contemporary production of mass media television shows on making over the self. Such fantasies of purging ourselves through the process of regulating and reinventing the repulsive/abject subject are playing out, as we will see, in nightly interludes between viewer and TV screens across the nation.

The Expert and the Abject: Regulating the Working Class Feminine Subject through the TV Make-Over

The concept of the “make-over” has been a staple of women’s magazines for many years. Valerie remembers wanting to turn the bedroom she shared with her sister into a “bedsitting room” with the aid of furniture rearrangement and “scatter cushions” in the early 1960s. Of course she also studied the hair, dress, and make-up make-overs offered to readers. She longed to rearrange her appearance to be prettier and more fashionable, and took pride in making her own clothes in fashionable styles. Jessica sees the make-over as a sort of meta-narrative for her entire girlhood where supermodels beckoned impossible body shapes from magazines, whose back pages began increasingly to offer the surgical procedures to somehow achieve these perfect proportions. Enduring cellulite-busting seaweed body wraps, while studying for exams at a salon near the university, or climbing millions of floors on the gym Stairmaster while reading Sociology textbooks (for courses paid for by tips from her performance in a pink ruffled apron as waitress in a local pancake...
house) were not in conflict, they synchronized into one giant life plan of clichéd bourgeois happiness: with enough effort she too could be made over into an educated, smart successful, rich, blonde, and thin enough (yet fertile) woman who gets and keeps the man. Whatever it took to escape the kitchen sink drudgery she felt to be embodied by her mother, who cleaned houses for a living in the wake of a divorce that decimated her income and aspirations for upward mobility.

The positioning of the girl/woman as the site of self-transformation and provision of to be looked-at-ness, whether it be self or home is, therefore, hardly new. However, the massive proliferation of media aimed at exploiting this age old question of transformation and the mass fascination it holds, and the methods of intense psychical and psychological scrutiny and the calling upon the subject to enact self-regulatory methods to accomplish an ever-adaptive self does seem to represent a discursive proliferation that indicates a discursive shift, to use Foucauldian (1980) terms (see also Gill 2007b). We would argue that these incitements have intensified enormously and work in important ways to normalize the neo-liberal ethos of continuously maximizing, bettering, and reinventing the self, but in class specific ways. It is the internalization of expert knowledge that creates the terms of recognition for appropriately adaptive self-reflexive subjects (Beck and Gernsheim 2001; Hey 2005).

Mosely (2000) has pointed to this proliferation as a “make-over take over” on British television. Wood and Skeggs suggest these urge individuals to “escape their ‘lack’ through the cultural self-knowledge imparted by television’s expert mediators” (2004, p. 206). These authors also point out that the shows highlight what are indelibly classed and gendered objects and learning how to display and perform the “right kind” of femininity: “when the ordinary woman has been made-over, the camera follows her into her daily life to observe whether she can maintain her new way of being” (Wood & Skeggs 2004, p. 206). This observation underscores a central dynamic we want to unpack, which is that most make-over shows are premised on the possibility of the transformation of a specifically abject subject (working class, wrong femininity) into something else. They point to the role of experts in sculpting new subjects, and these operate at the level of body and mind, with psychology holding a special place in opening up the potential for a perpetually shifting neo-liberal subject, who must continuously work to mold themselves into something better, different, acceptable. Wood and Skeggs also suggest that while some shows seem to offer a redemptive narrative of transformation, most actually forestall this possibility in a familiar story of “lack of taste, pathological culture and ‘bad choice’ in which the subjects are displayed with no possibility of redemption” (2004, p. 206). These expert knowledges and this dynamic of class and gender work in particular ways in this narrative to offer up a melancholic, endlessly prolonged possibility for transforming the abject working class (inappropriately) feminine subject. The role of the psi-sciences, expert knowledge, and the proliferation of self-regulatory and disciplinary techniques of self that are promoted as part of the make-over paradigm is what we will examine (Foucault 2006; Rose 1985).

A cursory look at any television guide reveals the massive intensification of the make-over theme. In scores of Do-It-Yourself programs television viewers are incited to rearrange their homes and gardens to make them fashionable, even if they have little money, by utilizing leftover pots of paint and scraps from the garden shed or storeroom. Expatriate escapes are a recurring fantasy for the British viewer fed up with bad jobs, inflation, and poor weather, who are told they can turn themselves into an inn keeper or perhaps a wine
merchant, by revamping a ramshackle farmhouse in the south of France or Spain, and then sell their “products” to the masses of disaffected Brits.

But where the centrality of formations of neo-liberal femininity as bourgeois sign, the failures of working class women to approximate these ideals and the proliferation of psychological discourses to address and regulate these failures become most striking is in the programs designed to make over the working class family, mother, female body, and psyche. The TV make-over is undoubtedly a “process of transforming private subjects into marketable objects . . . a spectacle, primarily of female transformation” (Deery 2004, p. 212), but this transformation is profoundly classed. A central theme in all these programs is the marshalling of expert knowledge to instill personal skills and moral responsibility to break the “cycle of deprivation” in typically working class families (Gillies 2005).

This is amply evident in shows like Honey We’re Killing the Kids! (BBC3), which focus on the unhealthy lifestyle choices and socialization environment of primarily working class families. Employing a team of psychologists, counselors, and graphic artists the show draws on a staggering array of technological wizardry to construct projections of the deprived, or over-fed, or smoke exposed (etc.) children as they might look in adolescence and adulthood. The horrific images illustrate tooth decay, wrinkles, hair loss, growth stunting—all visual representations associated with class disadvantage and poverty—are used in an attempt to shock and scare the parents (who often become distraught while viewing these projections) into adopting dramatic new parenting strategies.

The working class mother as failed object comes under even sharper scrutiny in the range of nanny shows in the UK, Super Nanny (C4), Little Angels (BBC3), The House of Tiny Tearaways (BBC3), and the US Nanny 911 (FOX). In these newest twists on Foucault’s panopticon, psychologists monitor families through close circuit TV, while, typically, mothers wear earpieces to receive the proper parenting strategies. These woman psychologists are the new bourgeois gods, bearers of middle class manners, who dole out rebukes and praise into the waiting receptacle for change—typically, a working class, often single, mother. There is a minutia of regulation in these programs, which entrench moral truth claims around parenting, evident in a recent episode of Little Angels (BBC3), where a working class parents’ use of juice bottles and movies at bedtime is painstakingly critiqued through elapsed time that tracks each subsequent outburst from the child’s bedroom over eight hours. The frames congeal into a narrative of parental abuse, laziness, and stupidity.

The specter of working class failure also emerged in the recent Jamie’s School Dinners (C4), where working class children were shown to not know the names of most vegetables (one boy couldn’t identify an onion) and to “prefer” the toxic concoction of turkey twizzlers to “proper” food. Jamie Oliver assumes the role of nutritional expert taking the mums grocery shopping to learn a new dietary regime. The neo-liberal economic context of school boards use of globalized corporate entities for food products in order to generate profit on school lunches, is quickly overshadowed by the drama of assigning blame to the working class family for poor “choices” and “preference” in their children.

Unsurprisingly, single, working class mothers are also usually the target of the make-over in the series of body-focused shows like Diet Doctors Inside and Out (FiveTV) and You Are What You Eat (C4). Poor women are ridiculed for being obese and for pushing obesity onto their children because they do not understand the basic foundations of nutrition (or own a juicer, the right cookbooks, or memberships at a gym). In a recent installment of You Are What You Eat (C4) an obese mother who “guzzles” cola and gets kebab take-a-ways for her and her
daughter is transformed from “one big mama” who was “making herself sick and setting an awful example for her daughter” to a “Yummy Mummy” who dances on screen to “Soul Sister” in new smaller sized designer clothing. The abject body is deciphered for us in each show in excruciating detail, with close ups of cellulite thighs, fat rippled stomachs, sagging breasts, varicose veins, and double chins, each a separate site of objectification and abjection to be reduced, reshaped, reinvented. The anorexic appearing Dr. Gillian McKeith works overtime with various forensic techniques such as examining feces to shame clients into a better monitoring of self. (This is not limited of course to working class women; a recent episode saw her reducing a single vicar with middle-aged spread to sobbing tears as she interpreted his weekly sojourn to the church bake sale as the sin of “gluttony.”) The Diet Doctors (FiveTV) team likewise examines the patients’ body, habits, and routines in methodical microscopic detail, assessing those hidden sites of bodily excess that reveal the patients’ sickness and pathology—the feces, tongue, calluses, blood content, each offering a measure of the damage inflicted through poor diet and lifestyle. A range of psychological and motivational techniques such as donning a “fat suit” to see further incremental effects of lifestyle over time are used to incite clients to rework their bodies.

The show 10 Years Younger (C4) focuses on middle-aged women who have abused or overworked their bodies and apparently abandoned desire for bourgeois femininity. A team of experts in a range of fields give them minor surgeries, fitness regimes, new hair-dos, make-up, wardrobes, and self-esteem coaching. In the US, ABC’s Extreme Makeover goes further with dramatic face/body overhauls costing many thousands of dollars the women could not possibly afford (Heller 2007). The micro surveillance of the body is perfected in these prototype make-over shows, where what is abjected and is “not to be” is placed in pictoral contrast to both the desired result and what is actually achieved in surgery and other treatments. What Not to Wear (BBC) is another show where upper class “ladies” Trinny and Susannah transform hapless, out of date dressers into someone who understands how to flatter their body shape with feminine designer fashions. The brutal dissection of the subject-in-need-of-change is similarly fetishized in the show, with Trinny and Susannah slapping and poking their own and other women’s “tits” and “asses” in an altogether now normal postfeminist discourse, where it is positioned as hilarious for women to objectify the female body (self and others) so thoroughly that it can be seen as a fantasy towards one’s own omnipotence and transcendence of the surveillance and power dynamics of what Butler (1990, 1993) calls the heterosexual matrix. As Gill suggests, we are witnessing a shift “from an external male judging gaze to a self-policing narcissistic gaze . . . [Where] not only are women objectified (as they were before) but . . . they are to understand their own [and others] objectification as pleasurable and self-chosen” (2007b). This is part of what Walkerdine (1996) and Rose (1989b) have identified as intensified dynamics of self-policing practices within contexts of neo-liberal governance, and our point is how the abject feminine operates as prototype of transformative subject at present.

In these shows, participants become “both consumers and objects; consumers of a self whose image is being sold to viewers whose viewing of their image is being sold to advertisers” (Deery 2004, p. 213). As McRobbie (2004c) has suggested in her analysis of What Not to Wear, these dynamics of production and viewership are thoroughly classed, actively promoting forms of symbolic violence against the female body and class antagonism between women. But is the question simply one of class antagonism? Or does the repeated designation of an abject subject position and abjected sites of bodily shame and disgust involve all women, who are incited to repeatedly refute and reclassify against the abject,
always at risk of surfacing. This process involves projecting abject qualities out onto the other (the fat, loud, vulgar working class woman), in a bid to psychically inhabit the shaky subject position of “yummy mummy,” for instance, the subject who is consumable and consumptive in the “right” ways. The question is also one of internalizing the right expert knowledge, being made increasingly available to subjects in the incessant neo-liberal momentum to modify the self—which involves the concomitant dynamic of constructing as abject those who do not possess this “self-reflexive insight” or self-regulative power (Hey 2006). As Gill and Arthurs insightfully suggest, “the significance of [neo-liberalism] for cultural analysis is in the way it represents the extension of market rationalism to all other areas of life, and in so doing interpellates individuals as entrepreneurial actors whose moral autonomy is measured by their capacity for ‘self care’” (2006, p. 445). This logic, of course, leaves the individual accountable for the success or the failure of such a venture.

A recent episode of the BBC3 show Get Your Dream Job took the explicit subject of failed working class femininity as its object of transformation, when single, working class, mother Cheryl showed up for a job interview at a funeral parlor in a bubble gum pink suit and matching pink Timberland boots, white blond hair with inches of black roots and giant gold hoop “ghetto” ear-rings. This time it is a business psychologist who is enlisted to transform Cheryl in three days into a “credible candidate” through dance therapy, wardrobe counseling (where she is told to “lose the hoops”), a photo-shoot, and a session of swimming with sharks to face her fears. Her “transformation” into confident “business woman” was “tested” on passers-by who were shown a picture of the new Cheryl, and who said she looked “dynamic” and guessed her to be a “professional” making “over 30,000” a year. The show (as with the others) positions consumption of the right products along with the right personalized coaching as offering a path toward respectability, a proper job, and ultimately material security. We are left wondering, however, if such a transformation is really possible, sustainable?

The make-over shows hinge, we would argue, on the meta-question of whether it is possible to transform such abject subjects and their abject body parts into a subject who is able to appropriately consume and be consumed. Since as Skeggs (2005) argues, exchange value is the condition through which being not just middle class but a subject with any value at all is being constituted and legitimated at present. The conditions of possibility around asking the question of whether class transformation and upward mobility is possible have changed historically, but the way the question reconstructs the divisions between an abject other and that which the other is incited to become remains. Because these divisions are shakier than ever in contemporary neo-liberal conditions of everyday material insecurity and future risk, these programs work to hold out the possibility of transformation, and of securing the type of expert knowledge through which changes can be performed. But they also repeatedly caution that transformation from abject to acceptable might not really be possible, which re-establishes the boundaries around what it means to actually be middle class (with all its accompanying cultural, symbolic, economic, and emotional capitals) from those who seek to change, to pass themselves off as entitled, equal, worthy (Bourdieu 1986).

This is why many make-over shows contain critical dramatic moments where the subject is demanded to confront their old selves, evident in other recent UK shows Ladette to Lady (ITV1), Australian Princess (ITV2), and ASBO Teen to Beauty Queen (FiveTV), which focus explicitly on whether it is possible to transform white trash, working class, violent and/or colonial girls into someone who could pass for a middle or upper class woman. Australian Princess employed Princess Diana’s former butler Paul Burrell to somehow refine
and culture the crude colonials. Expert knowledge taking a strange twist as servant comes to occupy the position of gate-keeper and judge of class and propriety, as the girls are groomed to occupy the dual position of desirable femininity and successful careerist, since the crowned princess did not marry a prince but rather toured Australia afterwards promoting the syndicate. At one point, the runner up princess must confront pictures of herself as an obese, farm hand, riding a mechanical bull, and Paul and the others ask her to account for her prior self and whether she will be able to keep up her new practices of femininity (as one judge put it, will she be able to walk in her heels on the sheep farm?). This likely incites great pain for her and either identification with this pain for some viewers or confirmation of the impossibility of such subjects ever really transforming. It is a perpetual question of whether the transformee can retain her “new way of being” (Wood & Skeggs 2004). It is significant that this doubt likely contributes to her not winning the title.

This doubt relates to the much larger, anxiety-filled question that dominates our neo-liberal era of whether not only transformation but continual adaptation, monitoring, self-surveillance, and self-marketing is sustainable for subjects. Similar moments are staged in the newest show ASBO Teen to Beauty Queen, where girls with anti-social behavior bans from Manchester are chosen to compete to become the UK’s first entrant to Miss Teen International beauty pageant under “expert” tutelage of former American Beauty Queen, Michelle Fryatt. We follow the girls through grooming, testing, behavior modification, and weekly eliminations. In a particularly painful episode, one of the feistier competitors, Pavia Ward, is indicted with “aggressive behavior” unbefitting a beauty queen and is to be sent home. The scene finds Pavia defending against the shame of defeat, yet every profanity she yells at the panel and competitors confirms her abject subjectivity, her inability to transform, her entrenchment in the conditions of working class abasement—failed, violent femininity—she has sought to escape.

It is the continuous re-incitement of doubt that creates a need for psychological expertise and tools for success to be incorporated into subjects’ psyches. This continuous risk of failure set in dynamical opposition to the potentiality for ultimate success—stability, surety, permanence, having finally “made it” by following the complex instructions and rules offered up in the programs—is what gives the shows the fantastical hold of suspense for such a massive range of viewers. Subjects are called upon to identify and dis-identify with the unfolding story in complex ways (Benjamin 1998). Perhaps class becomes visible in these dynamics of (dis)identification, through which the abject signals which we must not inhabit or “be,” and must identify against. Of course what is crucial to our argument is the way that designations of abjection and failure always root back to individual pathologies that are classed and gendered in age-old ways (how could she keep off that weight, remember not to swear (etc.) when the show is over?) thereby always occasioning new momentum for cures and regulatory techniques of which the psi sciences are constitutive (Rose 1996).

Indeed, we now find shows that constitute what we would call a make-over from the make-over. BBC3’s Spendaholics enlists a “shopping and lifestyle expert,” a self-help author, and a psychologist, to help those whose pathology is not being able to control or manage the self as middle class consumer (mostly working class women and gay men). A recent episode of the show featured care worker, Ali, fifty thousand pounds in debt. Ali shops adductively at Prada and Dolce and Gabanna and drives a new BMW. She also has a strained relationship with her obese working class mother, who works in a charity shop that her daughter cannot bear to enter. Indeed the episode focuses on a new sort of phobia Ali has developed, which is that she cannot physically enter cheap shops like Peacocks. This is a fascinating reversal...
of Skeggs’ (1997) research on working class women’s fear of entering posh shops, because of the store clerks’ (themselves often working class women) disdain. What is interesting discursively is the psychologist attributes this phobia to a fear of abandonment by her father who died when Ali was a child. No discourse of poverty and class oppression is available; it is an absent presence. To better manage the anger she has been “channeling” through shopping, she is given boxing lessons and a punching bag. The rage and pain of working class identity is pathologized as a feminine inability to healthily express aggression (Austin 2005; Walkerdine 1991). As Wood and Skeggs suggest “the self-hood displayed is not part of the individual reflexive biography project identified by Giddens; it cannot be rationalized by the ethical scenarios of good choice and transformation” (2004, p. 207). The working class girl who has made herself middle class through high class buying, is brought down to reality. Ali is revealed as not able to adequately transform and change her working class, feminine pathology—to be a subject who lives for the moment, spends all her money, desires too much for her own good. And she is also given the hard psychological lessons of how to rationally adapt herself to market forces, that which is necessary to live out an appropriately feminine neo-liberal subjectivity. The cycle of “lack” and need for expert help to address this lack or deprivation is perpetually sustained (Gillies 2005).

Conclusions

Gonick argues, to “become somebody,” the task of neo-liberalism, is an impossible task, revealing “the delusionary character of self-determining, individualistic and autonomous ideas of subjectivity” (2001, p. 204). If the working class, as understood typically in terms of a male manual worker allied to trade union struggles and a particular form of politics, barely any longer exists in the West, reinvention takes on a different and more central place: a place in which both women and men are incited to become self-reflexive subjects, to be looked at and in that sense feminized and in charge of their own biography in Rose’s sense, but in which the feminine takes on a particular significance. We have the erosion of a discourse of the working class, while at the same time, values of flexibility, adaptability, and making over the self – the values of a psychology and interiority usually ascribed to women – are taking centre stage. Femininity is constructed as a site of limitless possibility for transformation and reinvention.

One way we are suggesting that we can read class processes back into these context-evasive technologies of individualization and self-adaptation, that are core to neo-liberal discourses, is through a theorization of the abject, those sites of otherization that constitute what the bourgeois feminine is not. What we have shown is how this abject is symbolized through the qualities and attributes of working class feminine culture in varying, repeated, intensifying formations eliciting disgust and imperatives for fixing and transforming to something more amenable to a bourgeois aesthetic. As suggested by Skeggs working class mothers, ladettes, hens, pramfaces (etc.) are mutually sustaining and similarly coded representations “who exist to embody all the moral obsessions historically associated with the working class now contained in one body: a body beyond governance” (2005). We have explored the dynamics of attempting to govern these sites of abjection as a regulative process writ large in contemporary UK make-over television. The stupid, morally suspect, tasteless, and visually repugnant (failed subject and object of consumption) working class woman is repeatedly banished, crushed, made over in regulatory processes in which psychology and expert knowledge is called upon to intercede upon the self. And it is this
self-surveilling, self-governing (Foucault 2006; Rose 1996) process that comes to constitute an appropriate contemporary reflexive self-hood or a means of becoming a “reflexivity winner” in our neo-liberal times (Erasaari cited in Hey, 2005, p. 858). In this way the make-over shows offer glimpses of a central dynamic through which neo-liberal logics of individual improvement operate. The shows tap into an anxiety almost impossible to be outside of, in our current political-economic context. But what we have pointed to, in particular, is how working class women are the primary “vessels” (Harris, 2004) of transformation—identificatory sites of desire, disgust, and fear of failure in the constitution of rational, reflexive subjectivity. They constitute the central figures through which a drama of abjection is being played out nightly in living rooms around the nation, shoring up the limits and (im)possibilities of living neo-liberal subjectivity at present.

NOTE

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