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Culture and subjectivity in neoliberal and postfeminist times

Rosalind Gill

My aim in this paper is to think through a number of issues concerning the relationship between culture and subjectivity. It seems to me that exploring the relationship of changing forms of political organisation, social relations and cultural practices to changing modes and experiences of subjecthood and subjectivity are among the most important and urgent tasks for critical intellectual work. These questions go to the heart of understanding power, ideology and agency and they require research that is interdisciplinary, psychosocial and intersectional. My particular focus in this short article is on the interrelations between changing representational practices in visual culture and changing subjectivity/ies. I argue that neoliberalism and postfeminism are central to understanding contemporary media culture, and I put the case for research which does not retreat from exploring how these broader social/political/economic/cultural discourses and formations may relate to subjectivity.

Bringing subjectivity back in

Current scholarship on culture and subjectivity is marked by a stark imbalance. On one hand there exists a well-developed intellectual apparatus for analysing representations and cultural forms, particularly those which are visual and/or textual. We have a whole array of sophisticated languages and conceptual tools available to us for minutely dissecting and examining cultural representations or discourses -- from semiotics to deconstruction to discursive analysis. Yet it seems to me that the other side of the relationship -- the focus on subjectivity -- is relatively underexplored, with the exception of a few ground-breaking and important studies (e.g.(Bhabha, 1994; Blackman & Walkerdine, 1996; V Walkerdine, 1997; Valerie Walkerdine, Lucey, & Melody, 2001) and a small body of work in postcolonial studies (eg (Bhabha, 1994; Bhaskaran, 2004) There is

very little understanding of how culture relates to subjectivity, identity or lived embodied experiences of selfhood. We know almost nothing about how the social or cultural 'gets inside', and transforms and reshapes our relationships to ourselves and others. Indeed, even the language seems blunt and impoverished: do we even need a notion of 'inside'? Is subjectivity the same thing as interiority? How can we think subjectivity in ways that are not simply intra-psychic, that do not abandon the social, political, cultural? How to develop an understanding of power that does not reduce it to a single cause, be it economics, politics or the psyche?

Until recently, thinking through this relationship was at the heart of critical work. In Marxist-influenced scholarship it was framed as a question about ideology. This asked -- as Peter Golding and Graham Murdoch (Murdoch & Golding, 1977) famously put it -- how it is that the gross injustices and inequalities of contemporary capitalism come to be understood as natural, inevitable and -- crucially -- as legitimate by those who benefit least from them. To answer this they turned to the media to explore its role in promulgating ideologies that served to sustain and justify relations of domination. Foucaultian-inspired research on discipline and regulation, asked not dissimilar questions -- especially that of feminist researchers. Sandra Lee Bartky (Bartky, 1990) and Susan Bordo (Bordo, 1993) are among the scholars responsible for an important body of research concerned with feminine subjectivity and new modes of disciplinary power. Moreover in feminist social psychological research too there has been a long-standing interest in questions about the relationship between culture and subjectivity, which has found expression in a body of work concerned with the connection between women's relentless bombardment by idealised images of female beauty and a raft of 'psychological' problems concerning body image and self-esteem (Grogan, 1999; Wykes & Gunter, 2005).

The retreat from cultural influence

But in recent years there has been a significant move away from these kinds of research agendas by a variety of critical scholars. Serious analytical and political misgivings about their conceptions of the subject and of influence, alongside the difficulties of actually specifying the processes through which culture and subjectivity are interrelated has led to a retreat from this kind of research agenda and a growing hostility to it. Indeed in 2000 the UK Labour government's 'Body Image Summit', set up to explore the connection between magazine images of ultra thin models and the growing prevalence of eating disorders among young women, was (to a large extent) derided by critical intellectuals for its simplistic understanding both of media influence and of eating disorders, which, as one critic noted, were effectively recast as cultural 'reading disorders'. Some scholars publicly distanced themselves from this agenda with a move to 'new' topics (e.g. food production), framed in terms of materiality rather than culture (e.g. Probyn 2007).

I have considerable sympathy with this critique -- particularly of social psychological 'effects' research with its hypodermic understandings of cultural influence. There is clearly no simple one-to-one relationship between viewing images of very thin models and developing anorexia. But in rejecting this simplistic hypothesis is it necessary to abandon the terrain of 'culture' altogether? Do critical scholars today really have nothing to say about the way in which a cultural habitat of images may discipline, regulate and shape subjectivities -- as well as about the resistances to this that may be possible? Do we really believe -- for example - that the shamefully low conviction rates for rape have nothing to do with cultural representations and myths of male and female sexuality? Can we seriously suggest that there is no relationship between a profoundly gerontophobic media, and current fears and anxieties around ageing? Do the forms of racism and abuse experienced by asylum seekers really have no connection to popular newspaper constructions? None of these phenomena can be explained solely in relation to 'culture' -- and such reductionist thinking would be unhelpful -- but does that mean that culture has no effectivity at all?

I am concerned that we are in danger of throwing the proverbial baby out with the bathwater, and inadvertently falling back on a curiously a-social concept of subjectivity. A paradoxical aspect of the current 'critical' writing on this topic is that it reduces culture to a mere epiphenomenon, rather than seeing it as a collection of material practices which can and do have real, material effects. Representations matter, I want to contend, and their relationship to subjectivity is too important for critical scholars to ignore -- thus leaving it to the individualistic effects paradigm.

Choice, agency and the new autonomous subject

Underlying the move away from attempts to 'think' this relationship there is, it seems to me, a far more profound shift going on: a shift in nothing short of the way in which the subject is conceived. This shift regards Marxist, Foucaultian and some feminist work as too totalising in their accounts of social relations, and as producing a patronising and politically offensive model of the subject as (variously) victim of 'false consciousness', governed 'docile subject' or 'cultural dope'. Against this, a new body of work accords significantly greater autonomy and agency to subjects. I see evidence of this shift in the widespread take-up of Deleuzian ideas in social theory, and the theoretical space they make for 'lines of flight'. It is present also in a new generation of feminist writing, particularly that concerned with sex work, which emphasises autonomy and choice and rejects the 'old' vocabulary of 'victimhood' or 'trafficking' (eg (Agustin, 2007)). I have encountered it too in writing about young people and the media.

A recent article by Duits & van Zoonen is in many ways typical of this latter trend. It examined the moral panics in Dutch society occasioned by two articles of clothing -- the Islamic headscarf and the 'hypersexualised' (their term) g string. Duits and van Zoonen assert that public reaction to these garments denies girls and young women 'their agency and autonomy', and they argue that the proper

response from feminists and other critical intellectuals is that all girls' sartorial decisions should be understood as autonomous choices. Such a position, they argue, is respectful of girls own agency.

Their call for empirical research which listens to and respects young women's voices is clearly important. But I am sceptical of the terms 'agency', 'autonomy' and 'choice' that are mobilised so frequently in their argument. To what extent do these terms offer analytical purchase on the complex lived experience of girls and young women's lives in postfeminist, neoliberal societies? Moreover, what kind of feminist politics follows from a position in which all behaviour (even following fashion) is understood within discourse of free choice and autonomy? The girls in Duits & van Zoonen's argument seem strangely socially and culturally dislocated. They neither seem to operate in a world in which there are authoritarian parents or teachers or in which organised religion or fashion exert any influence. Indeed, in the desire to 'respect' girls 'choices' any notion of cultural influence seems to have been evacuated entirely. Yet how can we account for the dominance of a fashion item such as a g-string without any reference to culture? Why the emphasis on young women pleasing themselves when the look that they achieve -- or seek to achieve -- is so similar? More fundamentally I wonder what has happened to social theory when simply acknowledging cultural influence is seen as somehow disrespectful, and when being influenced is regarded as shameful rather than ordinary and inevitable? Conversely, why are autonomous choices so fetishised? As Tania Modleski (Modleski, 1991) has written in a broader context:

'It seemed important at one historical moment to emphasise the way "the people" resist mass culture's manipulation. Today, we are in danger of forgetting the crucial fact that like the rest of the world even the cultural analyst may sometimes be a "cultural dupe" -- which is, after all, only an ugly way of saying that we exist inside ideology, that we are all victims,

down to the very depths of our psyches, of political and cultural domination.' (Modleski 1991: 45)

Twenty years ago Judith Williamson (Williamson, 1986) wrote a searing critique of the tendency of 'critical' media scholars to move away from critique towards a search for 'strands of resistance' in everything they saw or read: 'It used to be an act of daring on the left to claim enjoyment of *Dallas*, disco dancing or any other piece of mass popular culture. Now it seems to require equal daring to suggest that such activities, while certainly enjoyable, are not radical' (1986:14).

Williamson argued that the search for resistance was a response to melancholia about the apparent disappearance of radical political activism; in this sense finding 'subversion' in popular culture offered a comfort or compensation against its absence on the streets or in traditional sites of resistance. How useful might such an analysis be today, I wonder? Is the theoretical shift towards revaluing, sometimes celebrating, agency a similar 'compensatory' move? Perhaps we require a political economy of theory to help us understand this re-valorisation of the autonomous subject at this particular moment?

Yet one of the problems with this focus on autonomous choices is that it remains complicit with, rather than critical of, postfeminist and neoliberal discourses that see individuals as entrepreneurial actors who are rational, calculating and self-regulating. The neoliberal subject is required to bear full responsibility for their life biography no matter how severe the constraints upon their action (Walkerdine, Melody & Lucey, 2001). Just as neoliberalism requires individuals to narrate their life story as if it were the outcome of deliberative choices so too does some contemporary writing depict young women as unconstrained and freely choosing. In this sense, the analysis seems trapped within the very neoliberal paradigm that requires our trenchant critique. Moreover, analytically, it simply sidesteps all the difficult and complex questions about the relationship between culture and subjectivity – how it is, for example, that socially constructed

ideals of beauty or sexiness are internalized and made our own, that is, really, truly, deeply our own, felt not as external impositions but as authentically ours.

Advertising and postfeminism

It is difficult to overestimate the extent to which discourses of choice, agency and empowerment have become central to neoliberalism and postfeminism. In advertising, it is well understood that at this moment of 'viewer scepticism' and 'sign fatigue', consumers -- especially young, media-savvy consumers -- must be interpellated through discourses that appear not to be selling or promoting anything, that flatter the consumer that she is too knowing and sophisticated to be 'got at' by an advert, and which stress that in buying a product, style or idea one is purchasing a sign of one's own individuality and empowerment (Goldman, 1992; Macdonald, 1995).

In a number of books and articles over the last few years I have charted the rise of a new figure constructed to sell to women: a young, attractive, heterosexual woman who knowingly and deliberately plays with her sexual power and is always 'up for' sex (Gill, 2003, 2007a, 2007b). Following Douglas Rushkoff I call her the 'midriff', but note that she goes under various appellations: David Machin and Joanna Thornborrow (Machin & Thornborrow, 2003) have identified her as the 'fun fearless female,' an increasingly globalised figure who appears in different transnational sites in magazines like *Cosmopolitan*, while others simply refer to the 'new', confident, powerful, sexy femininity she embodies (Arthurs, 2004; Lazar, 2004; Macdonald, 1995)

One of the issues this shift raises concerns the adequacy of our theoretical and political vocabularies. To what extent can our current terms, our familiar genres of criticism, make sense of and intervene in this new way of representing women? Perhaps the key term in the lexicon of feminist critique of visual culture is the notion of 'objectification'. For decades it has been used as an analytic

concept, to grasp the way power operates at a representational level, and it is also deployed in political activism against such representation e.g. in sticker campaigns declaring 'This advert objectifies women'. Jean Kilbourne(1999) sums up the widely taken for granted understanding of objectification when she argues: 'Turning a human being into a thing, an object, is almost always the first step towards justifying violence against that person... This step has already taken with women. The violence, the abuse, is partly the chilling but logical result of the objectification' (1999:278).

Yet how much purchase does the notion of objectification have at a moment when far from being presented as passive objects of an assumed male gaze (some) women are increasingly presented as active, desiring heterosexual subjects? Take for example one of the famous bra adverts from the last decade which showed the model Eva Herzigova hailing us with a quotation from Mae West: 'Or are you just pleased to see me?' The first part of the quotation -- 'is that a gun in your pocket?' with its implication that the male viewer had an erection -- was left out for us as viewers to fill in. This woman is no mute object but a 'sexy' and playful subject, who uses her knowledge of the power her appearance may give her over male viewers to tease them, with humour. A crucial aspect of the shift from objectification to sexual subjectification is that this is framed in advertising through a discourse of playfulness, freedom, and, above all, choice. Women are presented as not seeking men's approval but as pleasing themselves, and, in so doing, they just happen to win men's admiration. A recent advert, for example, featured an attractive young white woman wearing only her lingerie and a nun's habit and rosary. The slogan, 'Wear it for yourself', ties the brand identity to women who dress for themselves rather than for men - even if they are not nuns. 'If he's late you can always start without him', declares another lingerie advert in which the mise en scene constructs a picture of seduction, complete with carelessly abandoned underwear, but in which a sexual partner is absent.

As a way of conceptualising the dynamics of power and gazes within such adverts the notion of 'objectification' seems a blunt tool. It fails to make any connection between representational practice and subjectivity -- for example, the ways in which a cultural habitat of images may be internalised to form a pernicious disciplinary regime. The fact that this appears 'freely chosen' and playful makes it even harder to critique. Furthermore, as a term of political critique it would seem largely to miss the mark -- particularly at a moment in which feminist critiques may be knowingly or ironically incorporated into many advertisements. Any serious engagement needs to address the extent to which the construction of active, desiring subjecthood within the verbal texts of such adverts may act as an alibi for visual representations which -- without such playful slogans -- might attract considerably more criticism..

Elsewhere (Gill, 2007b) I have considered this figure in considerable detail, looking at the exclusions she rests upon relating to age and heteronormativity, and interrogating her as a racialised, classed, postfeminist icon. In the remainder of this piece, however, I want to highlight her pertinence for thinking about the relationship between culture and subjectivity at this particular postfeminist, neoliberal moment.

New subjects and subjectivities

The midriff marks a clear example of a 'new' subject -- a 'new femininity'. This figure is notable for opening up a novel vocabulary for the 'sexualised' representation of women in advertising, which aims to banish the emphasis on passivity and objectification in favour of a modernised version of heterosexual femininity as feisty, sassy and sexually agentic. This new set of meanings is produced through the combination of sexualised representations of women's bodies (focusing in particular on breasts, bottoms, and flowing hair, made up the lips and eyes) juxtaposed with written or verbal texts that purport to speak of women's new sexual agency and power. 'I bet I can get a taxi on New Year's

Eve 1999' declared a woman clad only in a black, cleavage enhancing bra -- raising her arm in the internationally recognized gesture for hailing a cab. 'Look me in the eyes and tell me that you love me' says another similarly attired -- knowingly highlighting the fact that her breasts might win out in the attention stakes. Femininity here is powerful, playful and narcissistic -- less desiring of a sexual partner than empowered by the knowledge of her own sexual attractiveness.

The relationship of this figure, this new subject, to any actually existing woman's subjectivity is far from straightforward- but, for me, it is precisely this complexity that is interesting, marking out a space or intersection of personal history, agency, cultural constructions. This new postfeminist figure highlights the way in which power and ideology operate through the construction of subjects not through top-down imposition but through negotiation, mediation, resistance, and articulation. This notion has, of course, been central to the work of Althusser, Gramsci and Foucault in different ways. Stuart Hall offered one of the most fully developed and worked through analyses of the role of new subjects in the re-making of ideology and 'common sense' in his study of Thatcherism. He was interested in correcting the view among the Left at the time which saw Thatcherism as an external, alien force imposed on the masses. Hall (1988), by contrast, sought to look at how it made itself ' a part of "us" ' (1988:6), and, indeed, took hold of the popular imagination extremely quickly and pervasively. His analysis of articulation drew attention to the ways in which Thatcherism as a hegemonic project sought to sever people's connections with existing discourses and points of identification and re-articulate them to new subject positions -- such as 'concerned patriot', 'responsible home-owner' and 'self-reliant citizen'. In this way, by harnessing popular discontents and articulating them to a new set of discourses and subjects, it was able to win hearts and minds and redefine the very content of common sense

Ideology and affect

One of the things that is most valuable about this approach is that it offers a dynamic and historical reading of subjecthood. Rather than seeing the subject as formed once and for all in infancy, it offers a way of understanding how subjectivities can be made and remade; in short, it has space to theorise change. This is what makes Hall's work so important in thinking the relationship between culture and subjectivity. What Hall did not do, however, was to pay attention to how the process of articulation works in psychosocial terms. The affective dimensions of ideology have been somewhat overlooked in favour of an analysis of processes or dis-articulation and re-articulation that is largely presented in rational terms. This represents a new challenge for contemporary analyses. We need to address questions of investment and desire in order to grasp the power of some constructions, some new subjects- to understand why some disappear without a trace whilst others take hold in public imagination.

It is possible to identify a proliferation of new subjects in recent years -- and it is especially interesting how they relate to fields of struggle and contestation. For example on the terrain of gender relations we have the 'new man', the 'new lad', and the 'metrosexual', each tied to distinctive articulations of masculinity, as well as ongoing struggle around the figure of the 'yummy mummy' versus her alter egos the 'slummy mummy' and the 'chav mum'. Thinking of any of these contemporary examples, it is interesting how heavily laden they are with what we might understand as sticky affects. As Imogen Tyler (2008) has argued in her wonderful analysis of the figure of the 'chav', the 'affective and emotional qualities attributed to this figure slide into corporeal qualities' which literally materialise him or her. Tyler's study is an example of the bringing together an older theoretical language concerned with ideology with a contemporary focus on affect to think about the way that specific subject positions become 'overdetermined and publicly imagined and represented in excessive distorted and/or caricatured ways that are expressive of an underlying crisis or anxiety'. In the case of the figure of the 'chav' -- this is literally the ideological-affective made

real. Derek Hook's (xxxx) work on racism as a technology of affect marks a similarly creative and important attempt to mobilize new theoretical resources for understanding racism as a simultaneously material, discursive and affective phenomenon.

Modernising femininity

Returning to the midriff -- she is not only a new figure and potential point of identification or mobilization, but also an attempt to redefine femininity. In Hall's terms midriff advertising might be understood as seeking to rewrite the rules of femininity so that it can be understood as residing in possession of a sexy body, above all else, and its earlier connections with a chain of meanings associated with caring, domesticity, cooking are re-articulated to this modernised version of selfhood. Indeed, other versions of what it means to be feminine (all problematic and exclusionary) are explicitly rejected in many adverts in favour of a construction organised around what Hillary Radner (H Radner, 1993; Hilary Radner, 1999) has called a 'technology of sexiness'. 'Make love. Not dinner' says a 2007 advert for L'Oreal hair care products. 'I can't cook. Who cares?' asserts the tiny slogan positioned in between the breasts of a woman modelling a type of uplifting bra. Such adverts make explicit the idea that earlier traditional feminine skills such as cooking are deemed irrelevant at a moment in which beauty and sexual skills are a woman's greatest assets. This is not just the idea that women 'should' 'look nice' or even that they are judged entirely by their looks (Wolf, 1990) But, more fundamentally, this is the idea that a particular kind of beauty and sexiness has become a prerequisite for subjecthood itself. To 'compulsory individuality' (Cronin, 2000) , then, we may now have to add compulsory (sexual) agency, as a required feature of contemporary postfeminist, neoliberal subjectivity. This is much more than a remoulding of the body; it is nothing short of a remaking of subjectivity.

This is central to what I understand as the contemporary postfeminist sensibility. This sensibility is characterised among other things by a marked intensification of the scrutiny of women's bodies, a quite obsessive and punitive regulation by the media in which no 'transgression' is seemingly too small to be picked over and the woman subjected to excoriating attack. Yet the discourse of freedom, choice and playfulness occludes this and renders practices such as surgical breast augmentation or liposuction knowable through discourses of 'pleasing oneself' or 'feeling good about oneself'. In this modernised neoliberal version of femininity it is imperative that all one's practices (however painful or harmful they may be) be presented as freely chosen -- perhaps even as tampering or indulgence. This seems to me to be doubly pernicious, to add a further layer to the operation of power, and it is why I am exercised by the similar evacuation of notions of cultural influence or social construction in critical writing too.

Intimately related to the stress upon personal choice is the new emphasis on self-surveillance, self-monitoring and self-discipline in postfeminist media culture. Arguably, monitoring and surveilling the self have long been requirements of the performance of successful femininity -- with instruction in grooming, attire, posture, elocution and 'manners' being 'offered' to women to allow them to more closely emulate the upper-class white ideal. In women's magazines femininity has always been portrayed as contingent -- requiring constant anxious attention, work and vigilance, from touching up your makeup to packing the perfect capsule wardrobe, from hiding 'unsightly' wrinkles, age spots or stains, to hosting a successful dinner party. What marks out the present moment as distinctive, however, are three features: first the dramatically increased intensity of self surveillance, indicating the intensity of the regulation of women (alongside the disavowal of such regulation); secondly, the extensiveness of surveillance over entirely new spheres of life and intimate conduct; and thirdly the focus upon the psychological -- upon the requirements to transform oneself and remodel one's interior life. For instance, being 'confident', 'carefree' and 'unconcerned about one's appearance' are now central aspects of femininity in their own right- even

as they sit alongside injunctions to meet standards of physical beauty that 'only a mannequin could achieve'(Kilbourne). Indeed, if Nikolas Rose were writing his seminal book about the psy complex today, it might be called 'Making over the soul'.

The makeover paradigm

More broadly, it might be argued that a makeover paradigm constitutes postfeminist media culture. This requires people (predominantly women) to believe first that they or their life is lacking or flawed in some way, and second that it is amenable to reinvention or transformation by following the advice of relationship, design or lifestyle experts, and practising appropriately modified consumption habits. Not only is this the implicit message of many magazines, talk shows and other media content, but it is the explicit focus of the 'makeover takeover' (Hollows) that dominates contemporary television. It started with food and homes and gardens, but has now extended to clothing, cleanliness, work, dating, sex, cosmetic surgery and raising children.

Such shows start with the production of 'toxic shame' (Peck, 1995) in their participants through humiliation -- about their inadequacies in the wardrobe/cleanliness/dating/child-rearing department, alongside the gleeful and voyeuristic display of their failings to the audience. Participants are then variously advised, cajoled, bullied or 'educated' into changing their ways and becoming more 'successful' versions of themselves (e.g. looking younger, getting past the first date, having a better relationship with their children, etc). A frequent 'third chapter' of the shows' format allows the hapless victim to be set free to 'go it alone' (e.g. on a date or buying clothes) while, behind the watchful eye of the hidden camera, the 'experts' offer their judgments.

As Helen Wood and Beverly Skeggs (2004) have argued, the ubiquity of such shows produce 'new ethical selves' in which particular forms of modernised and

upgraded selfhood are presented as solutions to dilemmas of contemporary life. The shows reinvigorate class antagonisms which, in this moment of compulsory individuality, no longer work on such 'crude' categories as occupation or social location, but play out on the women's bodies, homes, cooking skills and ability as mothers, through notions of good taste and cultural capital.

Postfeminism, neoliberalism and subjectivity

Finally, I want to turn to the connections between post feminism, neoliberalism and subjectivity. What makes a postfeminist sensibility quite different from both prefeminist constructions of gender or feminist ones is that it is clearly a response to feminism. In this sense postfeminism articulates a distinctively new sensibility. Some writers have understood this as a backlash (Faludi, 1992; Whelehan, 2000; Williamson, 2003) but I would argue that it is more complex than this precisely because of its tendency to entangle feminist and antifeminist discourses. Feminist ideas are both articulated and repudiated, expressed and disavowed (McRobbie, 2004). Its constructions of contemporary gender relations are profoundly contradictory. On the one hand, young women are hailed through a discourse of 'can-do' girl power, yet on the other their bodies are powerfully re-inscribed as sexual objects; on one hand women are presented as active, desiring social subjects, yet on the other they are subject to a level of scrutiny and hostile surveillance that has no historical precedent. The patterned nature of the contradictions is what constitutes the sensibility, a sensibility in which notions of autonomy, choice and self-improvement sit side-by-side with surveillance, discipline and the vilification of those who make the 'wrong' 'choices' (e.g. become too fat, too thin, or have the audacity or bad judgment to grow older).

These notions are also central to neoliberalism, and suggest a profound relation between neoliberal ideologies and postfeminism. In recent years a number of writers have explored neoliberalism, to highlight the ways in which it has shifted from being a political/economic rationality to a mode of governmentality that

operates across a range of social spheres (Nikolas Rose, 1990; N Rose, 1996; Valerie Walkerdine, Lucey, & Melody, 2001). Neoliberalism is increasingly understood as constructing individuals as entrepreneurial actors who are rational, calculating and self-regulating.

What remains underexplored, however, is the relationship of neoliberalism to gender relations and specifically to circulating postfeminist ideas. But it appears that there is a powerful resonance between postfeminism and neoliberalism. This operates at at least three levels. First, and most broadly, both appear to be structured by a current of individualism that has almost entirely replaced notions of the social or political, or any idea of the individual as subject to pressures, constraints or influence from outside themselves. Secondly, it is clear that the autonomous, calculating, self-regulating subject of neoliberalism bears a strong resemblance to the active, freely choosing, self reinventing subject of postfeminism. These two parallels suggest, then, that postfeminism is not simply a response to feminism but also a sensibility that is at least partly constituted through the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideas. However, there is a third connection which might imply that the synergy is even more significant: in the popular cultural discourses examined here it is women who are called on to self-manage, self-discipline. To a much greater extent than men women are required to work on and transform the self, to regulate every aspect of their conduct, and to present all their actions as freely chosen. Could it be that neoliberalism is always already gendered, and that women are constructed as its ideal subjects? Further exploration of this intimate relationship is urgently needed to illuminate both postfeminist media culture and contemporary neoliberal social relations.

Conclusion

It seems to me that this neoliberal postfeminist moment is importantly – perhaps pre-eminently – one in which power operates psychologically, by ‘governing the soul’ (Rose, 1990). Indeed it is not simply that subjects are governed, disciplined

or regulated in ever more intimate ways, but even more fundamentally, that notions of choice, agency and autonomy have become central to that regulatory project. My call here, therefore, has been for a critical engagement that does not begin and end with respect or celebration of autonomous subjects, but engages with the complex ways in which we are all entangled in the relation between culture and subjectivity.

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