INTERROGATING **POSTFEMINISM**

Console-ing Passions

Television and Cultural Power

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GOVERNING THE SELF IN WHAT NOT TO WEAR

Over the past decade, television has been undergoing a radical transformation in response to the forces of new media technologies, neoliberal economics, and globalization. The transformation in question is not just technological or political economic but extends to television's very role and purpose in modern society. The history of television is typically told as a tale of two systems: on the one hand, the public service model, usually embodied by the BBC, which conceives of its role as educating and informing citizens so as to enable them to participate more fully in a democratic society; and, on the other, the commercial model, which is usually exemplified by American television, which provides popular entertainment in order to maximize audiences for advertisers. In recent decades, however, privatization, deregulation, and technological change have found public service monopolies increasingly having to compete with transnational commercial networks for audiences, while those networks, in turn, lay claim to the public sphere, blurring the distinction between public and private, citizens and consumers.

Lifestyle Television and Postfeminism

The emergence of what has become known as lifestyle television is one of the consequences of this transformation.[1] Gareth Palmer suggests that "the concepts of lifestyle and surveillance are part of a new discursive formation in which appearance is of paramount importance."[2] Television plays a key role within this formation. In a world where "it is now widely agreed and understood that 'appearance is everything,'" "people now understand television as an active agent of transformation."[3] Public service television in its traditional forms saw its role as the intellectual and moral improvement of citizens; lifestyle television is no less interested in improving its audience, but the forms of improvement in this case are those proposed by a consumer society and have more to do with, say, understanding wines, where to go on holiday, or the right way to shave than political participation. They are about the self and the achievement of social distinction through consumption. Thus is lifestyle television able to position itself as performing a new kind of "public service." For what is ultimately at stake, as Palmer points out, is the very raison d'être of television itself. He writes, "While television's influence has now extended to directly fashioning people—for their own good, of course—this is also for television's sake, to keep proving that somehow 'it,' the apparatus, *works*."[4] In a similar vein, Rachel Moseley suggests that the privatization of the public sphere in recent decades has led to a shift in the ethos of public service broadcasting, with television taking on a new role in the "care of the self, the home and the garden, addressing its audience through a combination of consumer competence and do-it-yourself on a shoestring."[5] Rather than a simple shift from citizen to consumer, Moseley suggests, today's lifestyle shows "represent a complex conjunction of the two, in which the personal and the private are figured as significant spaces in which citizens can, on a small local scale, learn to make changes, make a difference, improve the person for the national good."[6] In effect, lifestyle television transforms consumption *into* a form of citizenship, a duty that we are all, as responsible citizens, required to perform for the general good. Correspondingly, as we shall see, a sizable proportion of lifestyle television is devoted to the stigmatization of those who are laggardly or recalcitrant in their fulfillment of this duty and, through a combination of public shaming and financial incentives, to inducing them to become fully participant, consuming subjects in the neoliberal economy.

The production and management of social identities conducive to the economic interests of the corporations that underwrite lifestyle television are crucial to this project, and this is especially true in those series that sustain a specifically gendered mode of address. Since the earliest days of commercial television, women have been recognized as a crucial component of the television audience because of their spending power as consumers.[7] That principle is equally valid today and is one of the key tenets of lifestyle television. In particular, as I want to argue here, the hegemonic discourse of postfeminism, which has become so ubiquitous in media culture and popular cinema in recent years, has proved an especially useful tool for lifestyle television's construction of a model of feminine identity predicated on consumption, just as lifestyle television itself has emerged as a primary locus for the articulation of postfeminist ideology. If feminism has historically aligned itself with the Marxist critique of consumer society, elaborating a critique both of the commodification of women themselves and of models of femininity inseparable from mass consumption (fashion, cosmetics, etc.), the discourse of postfeminism has proceeded to stand this critique on its head, articulating a model of feminine identity unthinkable outside consumption and constructing a logic in which "empowerment"—perhaps the central tenet of postfeminist ideology—is shown as dependent on self-confidence and sexual attractiveness, which in turn depend on the services of the fashion and beauty industries—all of which, needless to say, must be purchased.

As Moseley has also noted, in recent years lifestyle television's production of consumption-based gender identities has been increasingly extended to men, both gay and straight, most notably in that latest figment of the media imagination, the metrosexual.[8] While gay male identity in its more bourgeois forms has long been associated with consumption, reinforced by contemporary style shows such as Bravo's *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, until recently straight masculinity has been more defined by its resistance (or at least sullen indifference) to the traditionally feminine pursuits of shopping, fashion, cosmetics, and cooking. Much of the ideological work of lifestyle television in recent years has accordingly been directed toward changing this, through what Moseley identifies as a degendering of such activities or, to put it another way, the projection of a heterosexual masculinity no longer incompatible with an interest in fashion, "grooming," or even cooking (celebrity chefs Jamie Oliver or Gordon Ramsay) and by extension with the shopping that

necessarily accompanies these.[9] In addition to the postfeminist consumer, newly style conscious, straight male designers and celebrity chefs are among the most significant projections of contemporary lifestyle television.

Governmentality

While a substantial body of cultural studies scholarship has emerged in recent years in response to the rapid expansion of lifestyle television, this scholarship has relied heavily (perhaps too heavily) on the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu. What I propose to do here instead is to examine lifestyle television within a different theoretical framework, one that has developed over the past decade around the concept of governmentality. Just as the concept of governmentality helps us to better understand lifestyle television as a disciplinary practice, as I hope to show, lifestyle television provides an equally useful case study for observing the role of mass media in the larger set of disciplinary practices known as governmentality.

First elaborated by Michel Foucault in a 1978 lecture at the Collège de France, over the past decade the concept of governmentality has become the basis for a new approach to the study of the operations of power in modern societies.[10] Understood, in Foucault's cryptic formulation, as "the conduct of conduct," the concept of governmentality has been increasingly deployed in the field of cultural studies in Toby Miller's concept of the "well-tempered self" and several anthologies devoted to the subject.[11] More recent scholarship has begun to explore the workings of governmentality in mass media: the role of television and other media in the process of what Nikolas Rose calls "governing the soul" or the production, shaping, and management of subjects useful for the purposes of the state and its associated institutions.[12]

Over the past decade, Rose has laid out a comprehensive history of the role of Enlightenment knowledge systems such as psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and psychology in the production and governance of the modern self.[13] A key factor in this process has been the rise of expertise in all its forms.

> [W]e have witnessed the birth of a new form of expertise, an expertise of subjectivity. A whole family of new professional groups has propagated itself, each asserting its virtuosity in respect of the self, in classifying and measuring the psyche, in predicting its vicissitudes, in diagnosing the causes of its troubles and prescribing remedies. Not just psychologists—clinical, occupational, educational—but also social workers, person-

> nel managers, probation officers, counselors and therapists of different schools and allegiances have based their claim to social authority upon their capacity to understand the psychological aspects of the person and act upon them, or to advise others what to do. The multiplying powers of these "engineers of the human soul" seem to manifest something profoundly novel in the relations of authority over the self.[14]

As the saturation of everyday life with the vocabularies of psychotherapy (denial, trauma, libido, passive-aggressive behavior) amply attests, such expert discourses have come to define our very way of thinking about our "self," its problems, and the solutions to them.

Rose's work is centrally concerned with tracing a historical genealogy of governmentality within modernity, but his analysis raises equally important questions about its contemporary modes of operation and how these may resemble or differ from its historical ones. One such question concerns the institutional basis of governmentality: who or what, institutionally speaking, is the driving force behind contemporary governmentality? Through what channels does it operate and in the name of whose interests? Historically, the answer to this question has been the state and its associated institutions, with the "conduct of conduct" being ultimately about securing and maintaining the control of states over their populations. A key problem within modernity, however, concerns the relationship between the state and capitalism and the notion that governmentality has been driven as much by the economic interests of capital as the political requirements of the state. While this is clearly a complex historical discussion, a strong case can be made that in the contemporary world, at least, governmentality is driven primarily by the agendas and interests of neoliberal capitalism as much as of the state, that, indeed, the state and its institutions are increasingly subject to these interests and have taken on an instrumental role in securing them. One need only think of the number of new psychological "disorders," along with the equally proliferating array of new pharmaceutical products to treat them, to find an example of the complicity between "expert" knowledge systems and the profits of the pharmaceutical industry.[15]

If we accept that governmentality in postmodern societies is driven primarily by the interests of the market rather than of the state as such, a further question concerns the role of commercial media in this process. Viewed from this perspective, lifestyle television and the new forms of expertise it

deploys can be seen as performing an instrumental role.[16] The developing body of work on governmentality in media studies promises to provide a much-needed consideration of the role played by media in the governance of contemporary postmodern identities, and the present essay is accordingly intended as a contribution to that literature. The instrumental rationalities governing the postmodern self, I suggest, are less those of the state than of neoliberal capitalism, with its associated ideologies of freedom and expressive individualism linked to consumption, which lifestyle television tirelessly reinforces.

A third question that arises in relation to my earlier discussion concerns the place of gender within governmentality and vice versa.[17] A governance of identities, clearly, also involves in part a governance of gender: the shaping of gender identities for particular ends, in this case the economic interests of the lifestyle industries. The discourse of postfeminism that pervades lifestyle television can be seen from this perspective as an instrument of governance in that it naturalizes a model of feminine identity and female power inseparable from consumption. It may be further suggested that gender itself is inescapably inscribed within practices of governance in that the social subjects whose conduct they seek to direct are always gendered subjects and therefore require different strategies and the mobilization of different rationalities depending on the identity of the subject in question.

What Not to Wear

> Your best friends won't tell you what not to wear, but we're not your friends. And we will.—WHAT NOT TO WEAR

In what follows, I will elaborate the preceding points through a discussion of the popular BBC fashion makeover show *What Not to Wear* (2001–), which I see as a paradigmatic example of the operations of governmentality in lifestyle television and the role of postfeminist ideology in that process. Currently in its fifth series in the United Kingdom, to date the show has generated five spin-off books and a DVD,[18] while its hosts, Trinny Woodall and Susannah Constantine, have become media celebrities, engaging in such ancillary activities as performing cameos on other popular shows, such as *Top Gear* and *The Kumars at No. 42*, and hosting London Fashion Week and the BAFTA (British Academy of Film and Television Arts) awards.[19] Like the home makeover show *Changing Rooms*, *What Not to Wear* has inspired numerous clones on American lifestyle

The British fashion makeover program *What Not to Wear* has achieved significant visibility in the United States via BBC America. The tagline used here is consistent with the series' rhetoric, which stresses that participants will be subjected to an unfriendly (even sadistic) process of transformation.

channels, including the Learning Channel's series of the same name; the Style Network's *Fashion Police*, *Style Court*, *How Do I Look?* and *The Look for Less*; and Bravo's *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (and now the *Straight Girl*).[20] The British series has aired in Australia and New Zealand, while a local Australian version has also been produced. *What Not to Wear* merits attention because it exemplifies some of the key characteristics of contemporary lifestyle television, most notably its naturalization of consumption, of a postmodernist model of self predicated on outward appearance rather than interiority, and of one of the central tenets of postfeminist ideology: that sexual attractiveness is a source of power over patriarchy rather than subjection to it.[21]

Gareth Palmer has noted the increasing ubiquity of surveillance footage on British television exemplified by *Big Brother*, a tendency that he sees as related to the pervasive presence of closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras in British society at large.[22] Elsewhere, Nick Couldry has expressed concern about programs such as the BBC's *Crimewatch*, which in turning television into an instrument of law enforcement blur the boundary between the state and media and thereby undermine the media's purported role as the representative of the general public.[23] *What Not to Wear* is clearly related to such developments, but it is only one of a number of shows on British and American lifestyle television that use the fashion-police metaphor such as the aforementioned *Style Court*, *Fashion Police*, or E! Entertainment's *101 Most Sensational*

Crimes of Fashion. Such shows are themselves only part of the growing number of television shows organized around the policing of social and sexual identities, from HGTV's *Garden Police* to the much-maligned *Cheaters* (Bobby Goldstein Productions).

What Not to Wear essentially reproduces the narrative structure of a cop show, following the successive stages of law enforcement from surveillance and arrest through interrogation, conviction, and release to ultimate rehabilitation. The process begins with the "setup," in which the sartorially impaired suspect (or "victim," in the show's parlance) is reported to the "authorities" by a network of informers—her own family, friends, or coworkers—and placed under observation.[24] After hidden-camera footage of the suspect in various forms of unflattering attire has established her guilt beyond a reasonable doubt, she is apprehended, in the company of those who have set her up (as the hosts never fail to mention, "you've been set up!"), and summoned to appear with her offending wardrobe in return for a kind of reverse fine (*bribe* might be a better word) in the form of a check for two thousand pounds for the purchase of a new one. At the first meeting, the detainee's clothing is submitted to a thorough inspection and most of it summarily disposed of in spite of protestations about sentimental value and the like. She is required to perform a compulsory self-inspection in the show's signature 360-degree "chamber of mirrors," shot from above from the classic surveillance-camera viewpoint. Issued with a set of preliminary guidelines, she is released on parole (or payroll) to begin shopping for her new wardrobe at a nearby mall—cue product placement for high-street shops such as French Connection, Zara, and Monsoon. Meanwhile, the experts monitor their protégée's progress as she gamely tries to put into practice (or often willfully ignores) the rules prescribed for her, intervening to scold fashion faux pas and provide on the spot training in the "right" choices. Interspersed with these sequences are black-and-white video diary segments in which the subject reflects, often tearfully, on the transformation process. Through a combination of coaxing and coercion, she is induced to choose the "right" look and duly emerges, in most cases visibly satisfied with her new image. Returned to her former life, she remains under surveillance, albeit approving this time, which confirms her successful rehabilitation, and the episode concludes with the enthusiastic responses of husband, family, and friends and footage of the preening fashion butterfly.

For Gareth Palmer, whose analysis draws extensively on the work of Bour-

dieu, shows such as *What Not to Wear* are primarily about naturalizing middle-class tastes and inculcating them in their petit-bourgeois subjects and audiences, teaching them how to pass "as citizens in the republic of taste."[25] In this sense, *What Not to Wear* has much in common with *Faking It*, another contemporary BBC show organized around the transformation of identities, which usually involves "passing" in a higher professional or social position than one's actual one. I would argue, however, that *What Not to Wear* goes to some lengths to suppress the class-based nature of its taste hierarchies, a suppression in part achieved through the device of the "rules." Rules are central to *What Not to Wear*'s discourse of expertise. They figure prominently not just in the show itself but in the *What Not to Wear* books and Web sites, while one of the series' most recent spinoff books, *What Not to Wear: The Rules*, explicitly foregrounds them. What kind of rules are we talking about? Ever since Roland Barthes's semiotic analysis of *Elle* magazine, theoretical analyses of fashion have been dominated by the Saussurean linguistic model in which fashion is conceived as a system of signs organized into cultural codes.[26] This semiotic model, in which fashion styles are understood as a signifying system encoding class, gender, race, ethnicity, age, and other social variables, has become almost taken for granted in postmodern consumer culture. From this perspective, what is striking about the rules taught by *What Not to Wear* is that they are based not on semiotics but on the body itself. In the commonsense world of *What Not to Wear*, choosing what (not) to wear begins and ends with the body and can be summed up in two key principles: flaunt your natural "assets" and hide your "defects": "It's about dressing to show off what you love and hiding what you loathe about your body."[27] The process begins by listing ten "problem areas," each the subject of a chapter of the first *What Not to Wear* book: "big boobs," "no boobs," "big arms," "big butt," "no waist," "short legs," "flabby tummy," "saddlebags," a "short neck," and "thick ankles and calves." The solution to these problems is, quite simply, to hide them, and *What Not to Wear* is permeated with a rhetoric of disguise, deception, of covering up. The "golden rules for big arms," for example, are as follows.

> Fat arms must always wear sleeves.
> Capped sleeves are an absolute no—they strangle big arms.
> Small prints cover a multitude of flabby flesh.
> Be ruthless—chuck out the clothes that don't suit you and treat yourself to some new ones that do.[28]

The injunction simply to "chuck out" ill-suited clothes and replace them with new ones occurs in no less than five of the book's ten sets of rules, exemplifying how self-renewal is synonymous with consumption in the show's worldview; how readers are to afford to "treat" themselves is never addressed. While the show does often reference semiotic meanings, usually in negative contexts ("She's dressed like a Ferrari mechanic"), it is the body and its appearance that remain the central reference point. This insistence on the body enables a universalist discourse that transcends class difference and makes even the social meaning of clothes foregrounded by semiotics seem irrelevant. No matter who we are socially and economically, the show seems to suggest, we are all equals when standing naked in front of a three-way mirror. While, as Palmer (via Bourdieu) has pointed out, the norms of taste enforced by the show are predictably upper-middle-class ones, the strategy of ideological "outing" neglects the larger point that by fixing attention on the (classless) body the show disavows class and can present its choices simply as the "natural" ones for the body in question. The very language used to talk about bodies on the show evidences a strategy of blurring class difference, with recognizably working-class terms ("arse," "tits," "bum," "knickers") being used ubiquitously along with middle-class ones ("boobs," the transatlantic "butt").

As in actual cop shows, much of the drama of *What Not to Wear* stems from conflicts between the representatives of law enforcement and their detainees. Typically, subjects begin by vehemently rejecting the "expert" assessments of their fashion style and denying any need for reform. The show thus becomes a narrative about overcoming resistance, as the subject, like the suspect in the interrogation room, has to be broken down and eventually acquiesces to the rule of law. Much of the interest of the show accordingly lies in seeing how resistant the subject will be, with the most entertaining shows being those in which the subject proves most recalcitrant. Some subjects (most notoriously Jane Anderson in series three) may prove exasperatingly tough nuts to crack, and their resistance can lead to heated exchanges, resulting in only an uneasy truce at the end. Ultimately, though, the show is about achieving consensus, a compromise between expert knowledge and personal quirkiness through a rational process of honest self-examination and disinterested, objective advice.

One of the reasons why the breaking-down process may prove so difficult

is that it amounts to nothing less than a breaking down of the subject's sense of her own identity and the literal fashioning of a new one in its place. As the video diary segments attest, the process can often be disorienting; as one subject remarks, "I feel like I'm looking for clothes for someone who isn't me at the moment" (Julie Nicholson, 3:1). Crucial to the project's success, however, is the subject's understanding that the "new" self is preexistently latent within herself. This new self must be liberated rather than being imposed from the outside ("There's a sexy woman in there that's trying to get out!"). This imaginary self must not only be "discovered" but experienced, paradoxically, as more authentic than the previous one, which henceforth comes to be regarded as inauthentic ("I feel like I've discovered the real me!"). The supposedly more authentic self, however, bears the unmistakable hallmark of the postfeminist, consumer-oriented self. It is, above all, a *sexier* self in which sexual attractiveness has been magically transformed from an oppressive imperative of patriarchy into a source of power *over it*, a brave new postfeminist self requiring continual self-monitoring and investment in salons and spas, fashion stores, and regular visits to the gym.

In his study of enhancement technologies, *Better Than Well*, Carl Elliott notes how those engaging in various forms of technological self-transformation, from body building to sex reassignment surgery, tend to experience this not as the creation of a new self but the discovery of a more authentic "true self" and therefore as a project of self-realization, of becoming who they "really are."[29] While such essentialist conceptions of self are easy to dismiss, for millions of people around the world they provide a basis for self-understanding and for decisions about the remodeling of their bodies and, increasingly, their minds.[30] The enhancement technologies deployed by *What Not to Wear* may seem benign compared to the procedures Elliott discusses, but they raise the question of how far one may be prepared (or allowed) to go in the discovery of the "true self."[31] What if the achievement of the true self involves more radical procedures than just a new wardrobe? An answer is already being provided by the current generation of American "extreme makeover" shows (Fox's *The Swan*, MTV's *I Want a Famous Face*, FX's fictional *Nip/Tuck*), which have turned cosmetic surgery into a new form of voyeuristic entertainment. The experts on such shows are no longer interior designers or fashion gurus but white-coated cosmetic surgeons and solemn-faced psychologists whose role is to support their often traumatized subjects through the painful surgical proce-

dures leading to the mirror-phase ritual known as the "reveal." While such shows clearly go several steps beyond those of the *What Not to Wear* variety, they are arguably informed by similar ideologies of personal transformation and expressive individualism, as well as highlighting how those ideologies coincide with the economic interests of the cosmetic surgery industry, not to mention commercial television.

It may come as no surprise that *What Not to Wear*'s preferred subjects are middle- and lower-middle-class professional women in their thirties and forties, many of whom are balancing a job with the demands of raising a family and at some point have given up on the imperative of perpetual attractiveness to their partners or men in general. The brief biographical sketches at the beginning of the shows and on the Web sites generally identify them by first name (full name in later series), age, number of children, and (less often) profession. Motherhood becomes a focus of particular attention in the fourth series. The Web site for the British series lists episodes entitled "Mums with Babies," "Mums with Glam Teens," "Mr. Commitment," and "Menopause," as well as a link to a page on "What to Wear in Pregnancy." This foregrounding of pregnancy and motherhood in a fashion show is unusual, and while it is no doubt related to the fact that both of the show's hosts were themselves very visibly pregnant at the time it is also connected to the show's postfeminist ideology.[32] The point being made, it could be suggested, is that, contrary to common assumptions, motherhood and fashion need not be mutually exclusive. One *can* have it both ways. One can both be a mother and continue to dress stylishly, even sexily, or, to put it in less "empowering" terms, being a mother, middle-aged, or menopausal does not mean that women can neglect their obligation to be stylish and simply let themselves go.

While men generally occupy a marginal role in *What Not to Wear* (usually in the form of dissatisfied partners), they remain implicitly present throughout, and their approval at the end of each show validates the transformation project. An episode of the second season, however, turns the tables on the usual complaining husbands by featuring the spouse of Maria Barraclough (1:4) from the first season, who had allegedly nominated his wife because he had "had enough" and wanted a "sexy wife" (BBC America Web site, episode guide 2:6, "Matthew"). The show was welcomed by female viewers (BBC America Web site, episode review 2:6), and several episodes of the third series were subsequently devoted to men and male fashion. Significantly, however,

the men in question were all celebrities (or ex-celebrities) in contrast to the anonymous women who are usually featured: Mick Brown (3:5) is a former host of *Top of the Pops* and a radio disc jockey, David Baddiel (3:3) is a popular TV comedian, and Jamiroquai (3:3) is the lead singer of the band of the same name. Predictably, male subjects tend to be more resistant than their female counterparts, which skews the dynamics of the show considerably. While they do end up looking a lot sharper, they do not take the show and its hosts all that seriously. Woodall and Constantine themselves also tend to be more deferential and are surprisingly upbeat about male fashion (or at least male celebrity fashion).[33] Still, the show's very attempt to bring men under its authority is symptomatic of lifestyle television's project of extending the boundaries of straight masculinity to include the traditionally "feminine" concerns of personal appearance and the domestic sphere, with the potentially lucrative implications for markets in the beauty, fashion, design, and food industries that this entails.

If *What Not to Wear* is concerned with policing middle-class norms of taste and promoting a postfeminist model of identity, it can also be seen as a characteristic example of the default (or what Glen Creeber calls "hideous") whiteness that has traditionally dominated British television programming in spite of the presence of significant immigrant communities in the wake of decolonization in the 1950s.[34] The fact that the overwhelming majority of its participants have been white is ironic given the larger shifts that have been taking place in British culture around it. Paul Gilroy has written recently of the grudging acceptance of immigrants that has taken hold in the country in recent decades, a condition for which he uses the term *conviviality* in preference to the largely outdated ideal of multiculturalism.[35] One consequence of this gradual process of integration has been the growing visibility of racial minorities in mainstream media culture, from the South Asian comedy series *Goodness Gracious Me* and its successor, *The Kumars at No. 42*, to the films of Gurinder Chadha. Gilroy comments in particular on the role of lifestyle television in this context.

> Reality TV has unwittingly done a great deal to transmit the idea that racial and ethnic differences are unremarkable contingencies of social life. Instead of adding to the premium of race, viewers discover that in consumer culture the things that really divide them are much more profound: taste, lifestyle, leisure preferences, cleaning, gardening, and child care.

> *Changing Rooms*, *Wife Swap*, and *Big Brother* reveal that what matters is how quickly your tasks are completed, how frequently you clean or redecorate your house, how often you chastise your children, and how much time you spend with your spouse. Alongside those habits, racial and ethnic differences appear mundane, even boring.[36]

An episode from the second series of *What Not to Wear* (2:3), which features a South Asian woman identified only as "Meeta," provides a good example of what Gilroy has in mind. Significantly, it is differences of class and taste, rather than race or ethnicity, that are the primary sources of conflict in the episode. While Meeta's cultural otherness is acknowledged (with references to saris and so forth), it is treated as purely incidental. Like most South Asians on British television, Meeta speaks apparently native English, while her accent connotes a regional British class identity (lower-middle-class, southern) rather than an Indian one. Just as the show's postfeminism has little time, it seems, for "boring" forms of political feminism, it takes a similarly no-nonsense approach to racial and cultural difference. Meeta is as British as the rest of us, the show seems to imply; as with postfeminism, the assumption is that we have somehow moved beyond the issue of racial and cultural politics. Another case in point was Woodall and Constantine's appearance on the 2004 Christmas special of *The Kumars at No. 42*, in which Sanjeev Bhaskar plays a South Asian amateur chat show host who interviews celebrities in his family's living room accompanied by his Indian grandmother and parents on the sofa. The guests themselves are iconically white British celebrities (Michael Parkinson, Patrick Stewart, Boy George), but what the show seems to be about is not so much a turning of the tables as the projection of a multicultural "conviviality," as Gilroy puts it, in which the imperial past, while continually acknowledged, is something we can now all poke good-natured fun at.

Theoretical discussions of governmentality have focused almost entirely on its workings in modern societies. The question of governance in postmodern societies, on the other hand, remains underexplored. It seems clear, nonetheless, that the pervasiveness of media representations takes on a far greater importance in this context, while the example of lifestyle television suggests that significant shifts have taken place in both the objectives and the strategies of governmentality and that the concept itself is in need of revision. At first sight, much of what Nikolas Rose writes about governmentality seems quite applicable to contemporary television.

> Through self-reformation, therapy, techniques of body alteration, and the calculated reshaping of speech and emotion, we adjust ourselves by means of the techniques propounded by the experts of the soul. The government of the soul depends upon our recognition of ourselves as ideally and potentially certain sorts of person, the unease generated by a normative judgment of what we are and what we could become, and the incitement offered to overcome this discrepancy by following the advice of experts in the management of the self. The irony is that we believe, in making our subjectivity the principle of our personal lives, our ethical systems, and our political evaluations, that we are, freely, choosing our freedom.[37]

Rose's reference to "experts in the management of the self" clearly calls to mind the endless parade of experts across contemporary lifestyle channels.[38] Similarly, his discussion of the paradoxical "compulsory freedom" that governmentality requires of its subjects seems especially applicable to *What Not to Wear*. What the show seems to require of its subjects, indeed, is that they freely choose a new, postfeminist image *for themselves*, albeit within the prescribed guidelines. This is most clearly on view in the sequences in which the subject is provisionally "released" into retail stores to begin shopping for her new wardrobe under the watchful eye of the experts. The point, repeated ad nauseam, is that she has to learn to make the "right" choices *herself*. As the frequent interventions that are necessary make clear, this contradictory objective is by no means easy to achieve, but it remains the object of the exercise because it enables the subject's transformation to be presented as a *self*-transformation, freely accepted and undertaken, rather than a form of social discipline. Thus is governmentality able to erase its own operations in the freedom of its subjects.

Where lifestyle television problematizes Rose's model of governmentality is in the latter's characteristically modernist emphasis on interiority. Rose's primary historical concern is with the governance of the inner life, of what he calls the "soul," which later becomes the "psyche," and the transfer in jurisdiction over it, within Western modernity, from Christianity to the secular knowledge systems of the Enlightenment, notably the psychological sciences.[39] Clearly, much of contemporary television, from Channel 4's *Supernanny* to Dr. Phil (whose hectoring, tough-love style of therapy in many ways anticipates Trinny and Susannah's), can be seen as a continuation of this process of governing the self through the normative discourses of psycho-

therapy, but lifestyle television suggests that governmentality in its contemporary forms is no longer concerned just with the psychological domain. Theories of postmodernity and postmodernism have often emphasized their preoccupation with surfaces, coupled with a suspicion of the modernist privileging of depth over surface, reality over appearance. For Palmer, on the contrary, lifestyle shows such as *What Not to Wear*, BBC2's *Would Like to Meet . . .*, or the aptly titled *Faking It* are characterized by an emphasis on appearance as the basis of identity.

> Rather like the home transformations, the model being proposed here is that emphasis can and should be laid on the surface, on the *look*, for that is the dominant feature. A concern with style has become fundamental to who we are. In many senses it is what we are. In this information age appearance becomes precious while effective symbolism becomes priceless—you are what "you appear to be." The pain of transformation is worth it to feel better about "you."[40]

For all its rhetoric of interiority, *What Not to Wear* is preeminently about the production and management of appearances. This is not to posit the existence of a putatively real, authentic self *behind* the superficial mask of the fashion self. In the world of *What Not to Wear*, the goal is the externalization of a supposedly more authentic inner self: you *are* what you wear. Arguably, it is this that makes it possible for the show's participants to believe that they have "found" who they really are rather than accepting a prefabricated identity from outside. In such a world, where how we look is meant to define who we are, modernist distinctions between surface and depth, representation and reality, become increasingly blurred. The governance of postmodern subjectivities, then, no longer works—or at least no longer just works—at the interior level of the psyche; the management of appearance, whether that of the home or that of the body, becomes the key to maximizing consumption.

Writing on the continuing pervasiveness of psychological expertise in contemporary media, Rose suggests:

> On every subject from sexual satisfaction to career promotion, psychologists offer their advice and assistance both privately and through the press, radio, and television. The apostles of these techniques proffer images of what we could become, and we are urged to seek them out, to help fulfill the dream of realigning who we are with what we want to be. Our selves

> are defined and constructed and governed in psychological terms, constantly subject to psychologically inspired techniques of self-inspection and self-examination. And the problems of defining and living a good life have been transposed from an ethical to a psychological register.[41]

While much of what Rose says is no doubt valid, it could be suggested that in the contemporary world what he here calls "defining and living a good life" has been increasingly taken up not just in a psychological but also in an aesthetic register. If in the world of religious belief the ethical domain is the principle of governmentality, and in the modern world of Enlightenment rationality the psychological, in the postmodern world the domain of aesthetics has become one of the primary arenas for postmodern forms of governmentality. The discourses of expertise deployed in *Changing Rooms*, *What Not to Wear*, or *Project Runway* are forms of aesthetic expertise; the new lifestyle experts are designers, journalists, or performers, certified by their professional training and experience in the artistic practices of the contemporary culture industries. In the face of such expertise, television seems to teach us, our only option is to listen humbly as our design skills, sense of style, or musical talents are scrutinized and dissected, our homes remodeled, our identities reformatted, and our intimate histories laid bare on back lawns for inspection, sorting, and disposal. Yet, as incontrovertible as it may seem, the authority of the lifestyle experts ultimately remains contingent on our assent and is therefore open to challenge. As Foucault reminds us, since governmentality depends on consent, the option always remains to throw off the selves that lifestyle television creates for us, to be who *we* want to be, to think for ourselves. For this reason, the most inspiring episodes of *What Not to Wear* are arguably those that feature the most strong-willed, confident subjects, who refuse to be intimidated and defend their personal taste under considerable pressure from the "experts."

Desperately Seeking Fashion

> Feeling desperate? Watch Sundays starting July 17.
>
> —BBC AMERICA WEB SITE AD FOR THE SERIES *FOOTBALLERS' WIVE$*

From Rosanna Arquette's portrayal of Roberta Glass in *Desperately Seeking Susan* (Seidelman, 1985) to the ABC series *Desperate Housewives* and the remake

of *The Stepford Wives* (Oz, 2004), the figure of the desperate housewife is one of the most pervasive images of postmodern media culture. But, whereas the source of female desperation in these and similar examples is typically the suburban hell of bourgeois everyday life and the oppressiveness of patriarchal gender roles, the fourth season of *What Not to Wear* opened with a different kind of female desperation.

> In contrast to previous seasons, the girls no longer pounce on unsuspecting victims. Instead, crowds of female volunteers who are *desperate* for some style compete for the duo's brutally honest wardrobe dissection. . . . From hundreds of applicants eager for the girls' cruel-to-be-kind treatment, Trinny and Susannah meet with a select few to learn more about their daily challenges. Then they choose two of the most *desperate* cases for the complete *What Not To Wear* transformation. . . . With full access to the women's lives for a day, Trinny and Susannah visit their workplaces and homes and talk to their friends and family. (BBC America Web site, my italics)

The narrative here elaborates a recognizably postfeminist ideology of female emancipation through *embracing* bourgeois gender identities and the consumer culture that goes with them in contrast to the feminist rejection of them. Rather than having to be coerced into participating, it seems, the show's would-be participants are now *turning themselves in* to the authorities en masse. Correspondingly, the latter take on a less disciplinary, more nurturing role, visiting the workplaces and homes of their charges like the social workers created by the modern welfare state. Where the first three series placed the subject's home and workplace under video surveillance but confined their disciplinary practices to public spaces outside these, the fourth goes a step further, entering the home and workplace for extended periods as an ostensibly benign but potentially more controlling presence. Again the parallels with Foucault's history of policing and Rose's history of the strategies of governance of the modern state are all too obvious, but they should lead us to consider the degree to which contemporary reality and lifestyle television have taken on the role of policing identities and behavior and their success in reconfiguring these in accordance with the economic interests of neoliberal capitalism.[42]

For those who continue to believe in narratives of media manipulation

and false consciousness, the developments outlined above may seem all too familiar if no less depressing. For followers of Bourdieu, they no doubt attest to the inexorable power of lifestyle media in securing the subservience of the lower classes to the symbolic authority of the socioeconomic elite and in reacquainting the habitus with the practice of consumption. For followers of Foucault, they may seem to suggest a similar ineluctability in the operations of governmentality. Before we fall into the gloom of a sociological fatalism, however, it is useful to remember that one of the most important flaws of Marxist media analysis, and in different ways of both Bourdieu and Foucault, is that of determinism and the failure of their theoretical models of power to account for the possibility of resistance. In contrast, Gramsci, de Certeau, and Hall have persuasively argued over recent decades that resistance is always possible, that no power can be absolute, and that all power is at best provisional and precarious. As we see time and time again in *What Not to Wear*, the imposition of the will of the authorities requires a constant, often wearisome struggle with the resistance or simply the inertia of their subjects and with little assurance of long-term effectiveness. From this perspective, the image of desperate housewives clamoring for the advice of the experts can be read as just another hegemonic strategy, a kind of propaganda or self-fulfilling prophecy (if this many people think the experts can help them, maybe you should too), or merely wish fulfillment—the media's dream of its own transformative power. Similarly, *What Not to Wear* and other shows that detail the media's magical powers of transformation arguably serve a primarily ritualistic purpose whose function is to convince their audiences (and, more to the point, sponsors and advertisers) that, as Gareth Palmer has suggested, they do actually *work* and *are* capable of producing substantial, lasting change in the everyday lives of their chosen subjects. Yet to date lifestyle television has produced little evidence that its transformative magic lasts any longer than the day on which it takes place. We can only speculate on how many women resume their former bad clothing habits, how many couples revert to the design of their former living rooms, and how quickly homes again fill up with clutter after the cameras have left. What we really need, of course, is a follow-up series depicting the subjects of such shows a week, a month, six months, a year, or five years after the makeover process, but to date lifestyle television has remained more interested in the quick fix than in documenting its own long-term effectiveness. The inertia of everyday life and the undertow of re-

sistance, it would seem, are apparently less easy to overcome than the hosts of *What Not to Wear* and shows like it would have us believe.

Notes

1. On lifestyle television, see Brunsdon, "Lifestyling Britain"; Palmer, "The New You"; and Bell and Hollows, *Ordinary Lifestyles*. On the concept of lifestyle itself, see Chaney, *Lifestyles*.
2. Palmer, "The New You," 173.
3. Ibid., 184, 189.
4. Ibid.
5. Cited in ibid., 174.
6. Cited in ibid.
7. See Spigel, *Make Room for TV*.
8. Flocker, *The Metrosexual Guide to Style*; Hyman, *The Reluctant Metrosexual*.
9. Moseley, "Makeover Takeover on British Television."
10. Foucault, "Governmentality." For a useful overview of the concept of governmentality and its application across a variety of disciplines in the social sciences, see Mitchell, *Governmentality*.
11. See Miller, *The Well-Tempered Self*; Burchell, Gordon, and Miller, *The Foucault Effect*; and Bratich, Packer, and McCarthy, *Foucault, Cultural Studies, and Governmentality*.
12. Palmer, "*Big Brother*"; Palmer, *Discipline and Liberty*; Palmer, "The New You"; Ouellette, "Take Responsibility for Yourself."
13. Rose, *Governing the Soul*; "Assembling the Modern Self"; *Powers of Freedom*.
14. Rose, *Governing the Soul*, 3.
15. For more on the relationship between psychotherapy and the pharmaceutical industry, see Rose, "Neurochemical Selves."
16. Rose has surprisingly little to say on this subject. Curiously for a work published as recently as 1990, his *Governing the Soul* does not include television among its index listings (although it does list the telegraph). References to film and television, whose role in the governance of the modern self arguably extends from the Mass Observation project in 1930s Britain to contemporary reality shows, are few and far between, and where television is mentioned at all it appears either entirely undifferentiated or in generic allusions to "soap operas" or "talk shows." On Mass Observation, see Highmore, "Mass Observation."
17. A good place to start is the gendered nature of the field itself: the literature on governmentality is overwhelmingly male dominated, and, while a few of the authors of contributions to the existing anthologies are female, the only article that directly considers governmentality in relation to gender is Lisa King's "Subjectivity as Identity: Gender through the Lens of Foucault." Mitchell Dean's introductory study, *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society*, does not address questions of gender difference in governmentality, and its index includes no listings under "gender," "women," or "feminism." While I am unable to speculate here on the reasons for this state of affairs, there is clearly a need for further consideration of the

place of gender in governmentality and vice versa, to which this essay is also in part addressed.

18. Woodall and Constantine, *What Not to Wear*; *What Not to Wear: For Every Occasion*; *Trinny and Susannah: The Rules*, DVD (Video Collection International, 2003); *What Not to Wear: The Rules*; *What You Wear Can Change Your Life*; *What Your Clothes Say about You*.
19. Woodall and Constantine began their collaboration in a regular "Ready to Wear" section of the *Daily Telegraph*'s weekend edition, which resulted in their first book, *Ready 2 Dress: How To Have Style without Following Fashion*, and an ill-fated Web site, Ready2Wear.com. For an overview of the background to *What Not to Wear*, see Merritt, "Yes, Your Bum Looks Big in That . . ."
20. The American *What Not to Wear* is culturally very different from the BBC show, not least because the show's style "gurus" (as they are called), Stacy London and Clinton Kelly (Wayne Scott Lukas in the first season), and their assistants take a kinder, gentler approach than their authoritarian British counterparts do. A comparison of the cultural differences between the more collaborative, team-oriented American show and its British model would no doubt be interesting but is beyond the scope of this essay. The hour-long length of the American show's episodes, in contrast to the half-hour format of the BBC show, also produces a more leisurely (if tedious) pace.
21. Like the cultural studies literature on lifestyle television in general, analyses of *What Not to Wear* have relied heavily on Bourdieu. See Gareth Palmer's discussion of the show in "The New You" (182–85); Angela McRobbie's "Extended Notes" on *What Not to Wear*, which accompanies her chapter on Bourdieu in *The Uses of Cultural Studies*; and her "Notes on *What Not to Wear* and Post-feminist Symbolic Violence." McRobbie's argument that the show is about inflicting symbolic violence to bring it back into line with the functional requirements of a consumer-based economy is quite similar to my arguments about governmentality, albeit using a different theoretical idiom.
22. Palmer, "The New You."
23. Couldry, *Media Rituals*, 112–13.
24. The use of the female pronoun here is deliberate. The victim in most cases is female, although some episodes in later series feature men and male fashion, which I will be discussing later.
25. Palmer, "The New You," 185.
26. Barthes, *Système de la mode*.
27. Woodall and Constantine, *What Not to Wear*, 7.
28. Ibid., 51.
29. Elliott, *Better Than Well*. See, in particular, the second chapter, "The True Self" (28–53).
30. See ibid. (chap. 2) on how users of drugs such as Prozac experience their emotional transformation as the discovery of who they "really" are.
31. See, for example, Elliott's astonishing chapter on voluntary limb amputation ("Amputees by Choice," ibid., chap. 9, 208–36).

32. Both have since given birth, Susannah Constantine to her third child and Trinny Woodall to her first (Erin Oates, BBC America forum, www.bbcamerica.com, 22 October 2002).
33. The Baddiel episode concludes with a strangely eulogistic photographic homage to the "Seven Tribes of Man."
34. Creeber, "Hideously White."
35. Gilroy, "From a Colonial Past to a New Multiculturalism." See also his *After Empire*. I am grateful to Diane Negra for bringing the article to my attention.
36. Gilroy, "From a Colonial Past to a New Multiculturalism."
37. Rose, *Governing the Soul*, 10–11.
38. So institutionalized has the television lifestyle expert become that s/he has recently (and perhaps inevitably) been transformed into camp in the form of the Style Network's Brini Maxwell, a drag queen whose deadpan delivery spoofs contemporary nostalgia for 1960s "retro" style with the earnestness of Martha Stewart.
39. Rose's preoccupation with psychological depth still seems tied to an essentially literary model of selfhood rooted in the nineteenth-century realist novel rather than the relentless superficiality of the contemporary image world.
40. Palmer, "The New You," 184.
41. Rose, *Governing the Soul*, 10–11.
42. See Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.