

Revealing the Inner Housewife: Housework and History in Domestic Lifestyle Television

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- A I don't understand why everyone talks as though all housewives have a miserable time. Lots of women like being housewives.
- B It's ridiculous to pretend that anyone actually *likes* cleaning floors and washing dishes – how can they? Housework is awful work. It's lonely and boring. There's nothing to show for it – it's all got to be done the next day. You don't get paid for it either.

Speaker A and Speaker B could be two contestants on the domestic lifestyle television programme *Wife Swap* battling out their opposing viewpoints at the end of the show. Or script A could be delivered by the presenters on *How Clean is Your House?*, imploring a reluctant housewife to get more involved in her domestic duties or perhaps by Anthea Turner on *The Perfect Housewife* explaining why housework is such fun, whilst script B could easily be the contestant's retort. However A and B are none of these, they are two sides of a debate about housework used as an illustrative prototype conversation in Ann Oakley's sociological study of housework, published in 1974, over three decades ago (Oakley 1974, 186). As Oakley points out, there are two different approaches here: A is talking about the role of the housewife, whilst B is discussing the actual domestic chores. Oakley in her conclusion draws attention to the distinction between feelings about housework and the orientation to the housewife role: 'While the former is a question of job satisfaction in the home, the latter refers to the whole construction of psychological femininity and its "fit" in a social world predicated on gender differences'(Oakley 1974, 184–5). It is precisely this difference between the pleasurable status of being a housewife and the drudgery of unpaid physical domestic chores which has presented a dichotomy for feminism for decades. It highlights both the joy and the unhappiness associated with attending to the domestic. Furthermore it is precisely this split in definition between role and chores which differentiates the domestic lifestyle programmes viewed on recent British television. By considering these programmes in the context of previous moments when housework became a matter of prominence, this

chapter explores the different aspects of and approaches to housewifery presented on lifestyle programmes and, more broadly, questions why housework has become so prominent on our television screens at the start of the new century.

Recently, a number of reality lifestyle television programmes have focused on the domestic and housework: *How Clean is your House* (Channel 4 2003); *The Perfect Housewife* (BBC3 2006); and *Wife Swap* (Channel 4 2003) are of particular interest here. To differing degrees, these programmes concentrate on how we live in and manage our homes, they delve into our psychological relationships with the space we inhabit and seek to make links between the physical task of housework and our mental health. Highlighted in these programmes are issues of cleanliness (dirt is frequently regarded as the enemy), tidiness, household management, childcare and domestic responsibilities. Often strongly linked to this is a question about whether women work within or without the home. And whereas feminism, particularly 1970s feminism, has always had a troubled relationship with the housewife, domestic lifestyle television of the new century both embraces and relies upon promoting the value of the stay-at-home wife and mother as a point of reference. In assuming the significance of the housewife, difficult and broader ideological issues are avoided. As such these programmes echo the ‘opt out revolution’ of 2003–04, where a flurry of newspaper and magazine articles supported, as Vavrus has argued, a neoliberal regime of old-fashioned family arrangements (Vavrus 2007, 47–63). This continuing investment in the domestic sphere on our television screens helps to sideline political engagement with feminist concerns of the present and of previous decades.

Nonetheless, the resurgence of interest in lifestyle and domesticity has its roots in the feminism of the 1970s when housework and domestic issues became sites of political contestation, and the work of the home and the role of housewife were differentiated, one being linked to the labour market and the other to historical notions of femininity. Feminist

activism in the 1970s brought previously-hidden aspects of women's lives to the fore. Women's marches and demonstrations demanded that attention should be paid to issues which directly affected women's lives such as contraception and equal pay, or at least access to the workplace. As part of this consciousness raising, domesticity and work at home became politicized too. The idea of the 'housewife' became highly problematic for feminism. Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer and Ann Oakley in early second wave feminism all attacked the image of the housewife, urging women to reject a role of servitude; women were encouraged to create value in their lives outside the home. There were prominent articles in feminist magazines such as *Spare Rib* which engaged with Marxist debates about wages for housework, as well as in other engagements with the feminist debate in more mainstream women's magazines like *Cosmopolitan* and women's pages of the daily press (see Coates 1974, 28–9; Freeman 1973).

In both the feminist and the regular press, irony and political earnestness existed side by side concerning the age-old issue of women's unpaid and largely unacknowledged work in the home. Some mainstream press engaged in popular ridicule of strident feminism, and even some parts of the feminist press indulged in banter, name calling and the caricature of anti-feminists. The role of the 'feminist', whatever she was, had multiple manifestations: she might be the political activist, perhaps rejecting the domestic trap of the nuclear family to support wider campaigns; or she might adopt the role of 'earth mother' left over from the countercultural 1960s, pursuing feminine authenticity of identity by baking wholemeal bread and wearing home-made clothes. The 'feminist lifestyle' then was never one-dimensional. Even in the strident 1970s there was a lifestyle choice for women regarding the way they were encouraged to interact with their home and domestic life.

There were a number of fundamental issues not really addressed by feminism at this time, such as the disparities in class, race, wealth, education and aspirations. Whilst the

feminist press might have elided such differences in order to bring collectively more important issues to the public scene, other media explorations of women's domestic lives in the 1970s were more persistent in reflecting these differences between women. This can be exemplified by two generically different televisual examples from the decade. Mike Leigh's 1973 *Hard Labour* of the Play for Today strand (BBC1, 12 March 1973), depicts class differences between women most starkly when Mrs Thornley, a hard-working and unassuming working class woman arrives after a long bus journey to clean another woman's house only to find her middle class employer still languishing in bed reading the paper, and is dismissively asked to 'do the usual'. A very different view of women was visible through the highly popular Southern Television programme *Houseparty* (1972–1981) which performed on the TV screen the ritual of the coffee morning and became a mode of articulating female lifestyles, with conversation round the studio-set kitchen table ranging around domestic skills and paid work. Women's changing roles between home, work and family were a normalized expectation in this environment and homemaking and paid working skills were both seen as valid parts of the cohesion and variety of women's lives. Both the fictitious play and the drop-in coffee morning simulation provoked much interest and both reflected differently upon women of the time.¹

The second wave feminists of the early 1970s have since been criticized for devaluing family work and even, as Johnson and Lloyd argue, for inventing the 'happy housewife myth' of the 1950s in order to avoid looking at the contradictory nature of women's relationship to the domestic and the outside world. 'The "happy housewife myth" was not simply a product of popular culture conjured up in advertising but also – a myth of a myth – conjured up by feminism in the attempt to construct a narrative that would make sense of and dispel the sense of contradiction and tension women felt between public achievement and femininity'

¹ *Houseparty* was so popular it was taken up by Thames Television.

(Johnson and Lloyd 2004, 11). Feminists of the 1990s and 2000s, in what has been identified as 'third wave feminism', have further problematized feminism and housework (Heywood and Drake 1997). They have debated whether women ever could be 'happy housewives' and whether in fact women of these later decades have been failed by the claims of their feminist mothers of the 1970s who argued that women could succeed simultaneously in worlds of work and home (see Hakim 1995). For instance, Hakim has argued that 'The unpalatable truth is that a substantial proportion of women still accept the sexual division of labour which sees homemaking as women's *principal* activity and income-earning as men's *principal* activity in life' (Hakim 1996, 179). Nonetheless, the 1970s was a moment when the subject of housework was forcefully made public, there was serious debate and women's roles were questioned. The debate about gendered space of the home has continued and broadened with ideas which define differing zones, media and technology in the home and of course consumption for the home, itself a gendered activity.

Portraying the domestic on British television

The home as a major site of gender struggle has long supplied numerous scenarios both comic and serious for popular media. British television for decades now has used the home as a basis for many of its highly successful sitcoms, comedy series and even historical dramas such as *Bless this House* and *Upstairs Downstairs*. *Upstairs Downstairs* (London Weekend Television 1971–75), an instantly popular and award-winning series, followed the fortunes of a prominent Edwardian household. It was set in a grand London town house and the storylines which emphasized the butler, cook and maidservants were at least as interesting, if not more so, than those of the upper class family members. Of particular interest was the superbly nuanced dominance and mastery over the household enjoyed by the butler and the cook. Class conflicts abounded and in this reversal of class dominance the authority of the

servant classes was obtained not through ownership, of course, but through the hard labour necessary to maintain a large Edwardian household. *Upstairs Downstairs* was one of many period dramas of the 1970s as this was a time when the Edwardian era was held particularly high in nostalgic esteem. Such was the lasting impact of this drama series that a reality TV programme *The Edwardian Country House* (Channel 4 2002) did its best to emulate the atmosphere of class tensions so dramatically and nostalgically portrayed in *Upstairs Downstairs*.

The home has recently been re-idealized as a haven of harmonious order and tranquillity, and David Chaney's discussion of the 'enchantment of sentimentality' helps us in part to understand why (Chaney 2002, 155). In evoking an idealized household of an imagined bygone era, domestic lifestyle programmes are able to produce a nostalgic yearning for a perfect home and family. Here, imagined order and calm replace chaos and frenetic, perhaps technologized, activity. This sentimental ideal lies behind these programmes as a latent force informing the direction and content of this genre of reality television. In the collective imagination of the audience, uncertain of its values and objectives, there must be an ideal way to manage your home. This halcyon home is known by no one but can be imagined by all: home was a tranquil place, clutter hadn't been invented, and a sense of calm pervaded from surfaces and cupboards to smooth the metaphorical crumpled sheets of the inner psyche. Domestic lifestyle programmes offer differing modes of containing the domestic space: *How Clean?* combines old-fashioned cleaning, even evoking the image of a Victorian housekeeper, with scientific gloss; *Wife Swap* intervenes in questions of class and homemaking and *Perfect Housewife* idealizes the attainment of a middle class domestic space where creativity, efficiency and productivity abound and where true feminine contentment is to be found. Regardless of mode, current domestic lifestyle programmes aim to elevate the supremacy of the domestic realm for women in particular: the exterior world may be chaotic,

complex and virtual, but the interior world can be made ordered, straightforward, and responsive to the ‘real’ functions of everyday living. Moreover these programmes encourage the viewer to rediscover for herself the happiness to be found through homemaking.

Domestic didacticism in *How Clean is Your House?*

In the series *How Clean is Your House?* (Channel 4 2003) two indisputable experts, Kim Woodburn and Aggie MacKenzie, redoubtable women both, with levels of authority that knowingly invite comedic and parodic viewer responses, enter and inspect an ‘ordinary’ person’s home, proclaim it unspeakably, even dangerously filthy, and then proceed to demonstrate processes of ‘proper’ cleaning. White coats and fur-trimmed rubber gloves are donned, a team of cleaners employed and a systematic scouring ensues. These women combine two quite different approaches to professional dirt control. Aggie draws on her experience in working for the Good Housekeeping Institute (the part of *Good Housekeeping* magazine which tests products and recipes) as a journalist to lend scientific authority to her approach to dirt. Kim has an altogether more complex appearance: seemingly very ‘dressed up’ with evening jewellery and her hair piled up high, she suggests a 1960s working class sense of glamour.² This TV demeanour is at odds with the graft of cleaning, possibly posing an intentional incongruity with her own background as a cleaner since the age of 15. Certainly Kim’s is a no-nonsense approach to domestic chores as she is portrayed being practical, enthusiastic and energetic. The unusual combination of scientific and practical authority may well be responsible for two out of the couple’s three books reaching the home

² Kim’s appearance is acknowledged in the promotional on-line video where Aggie is said to call Kim ‘Hagrid in drag’ and Kim refers to her own press coverage in describing herself as a cross between Mother Theresa and Madam Whiplash! Retrieved from:

<http://www.channel4.com/4homes/ontv/how_clean_is_your_house/index.html>, March 2008.

and property best seller lists (*Bookseller* 2007, 40). The programme has been popular at home and abroad, with five series in the UK, some of which have been aired internationally in the US on BBC America, in Canada on W Network, and in Australia on UK TV. There have been foreign versions in a range of countries including France, the Netherlands, Iceland and the Philippines, in addition to a US version aired on Lifetime Network (2004). A Canadian version called *Kim's Rude Awakenings* is currently calling for Canadian families to apply.

This show is didactic reality television. The contestants are used as the means by which the viewing public may be informed and educated about the dangerous implications of keeping a dirty house, the potential consequences to family health, and most importantly the methods by which dirt and grime may be overcome. *How Clean?* illustrates a tangible sense of coming to terms with and dominating the domestic space. Dirt and grime are seen as the enemy, to be exposed, beaten back and banished. As a regular feature of this programme, hidden dirt is revealed by Aggie, not just by peeking behind the kitchen appliances, but also microscopically via a scientificized, laboratory-based analysis of any suspicious-looking bacteria lurking in the contestants' homes. This usually results in the dramatic revelation of near-fatal bacteria. The harmful dirt and grime harboured in the exposed households is given a horror-film style treatment by borrowing dramatic zooms, close ups and scary audio effects from the genre to emphasize the terror lurking in such a filthy household. A useful side effect of this technique is to augment the ignominy heaped upon the slovenly contestant.

In episode two of the first series, 'Climb a Mountain of Laundry', Kim and Aggie are to be found expressing disgust and disdain as they inspect untidy food cupboards and scrape muck with painted fingernails from behind the cooker of a disordered household of seven children and a completely overworked Mum. During the family interview the husband states that he simply will not participate in the housework explaining that: 'Catherine doesn't have to go out to work, so Catherine should be able to find some time during the day to do a bit of

cleaning and tidying.’ This evokes only very mild responses from the presenters and Catherine herself. Other issues, which might interest contemporary viewers, and which were certainly of interest to feminists in the 1970s, remain unexplored here, such as reasons for the unusually large family; the unaccommodating response of the husband regarding housework; and the sheer exhaustion of the mother (who can barely participate in the programme let alone look truly shamed). These issues are all sidelined by the format and structure of the programme and as a result feminism remains only latent. McRobbie has noted that in the present climate of post-feminism, ‘feminism is invoked in order that it is relegated to the past’ (McRobbie 2004, 262). But in television lifestyle programmes such as *How Clean?* feminism is not even given the prominence of a failed imperative; it is silently marginalized as though it were an inappropriate conceptual framework. What has taken its place is performed domestic responsibility, where, for the benefit of the cameras, as in the above example, the whole family including the baby and the reluctant husband are themselves instructed, and then demonstrate, newly learnt traditional cleaning skills. More complex issues of sustainable and equitable divisions of labour and reward are ignored as cleaning is reduced to a mere family game, apoliticized and ‘naturalized’ as part of home life for all family members. The overriding narrative remains one of the battle against the enemy – dirt – and only secondarily the lifestyle that has led to it.. The story is made no more complex than many a simple advert for a cleaning product. Other broader, more significant points remain unexamined, perhaps only existing as provocative discussion points for the viewers at home. Aggie does make a later jibe at the husband when he does not offer to help move the microwave oven, but actual root causes and domestic circumstances of the dirty home, and his part-responsibility for it, remain unexplored and unresolved.

The format demands that the contestants participate in the cleaning of their home and Kim manages to motivate all the children to join in the mass clear out and clean up. As the

children are filmed cleaning and tidying, the narrator frames his commentary in terms analogous to school homework. However, conversation with one child reveals the extent to which supremacy must be given to domestic chores: when the girl says she prefers to read a book than clean the house, it is clear that housework must be seen as equally important as reading. In this regime housework is to be privileged, and less culture may have to be consumed in the home in order to allow time for domestic chores. Housework here is not a lifestyle choice, but a basic necessity to ensure the well-being of the family. The combined authority of the domestic doyenne in the housekeeper-tutor, and scientific laboratory ‘proof’ of threat of disease, are seen to have a greater authority than the claims of feminism.

A sense of old-fashioned thoroughness prevails as our experts advocate the value of using white vinegar and bicarbonate of soda to return the bathroom to a pristine state, eschewing the modern expensive proprietary products in favour of their traditional household cleaning hints and tips. As they reveal their long-forgotten methods for removing limescale using only white vinegar, there is a sense of reinventing the Victorian housekeeper, or at the very least her trusty virtues, in the guise of the modern housewife, passing on hitherto forgotten domestic lore to the modern hapless participant. Aggie is even quoted in the *Guardian* as saying ‘In supermarkets, the shelves are full of products but we actually need very few things [to keep a home pristine].’³ Nonetheless, this devotion to old-fashioned methods and techniques of a pre-consumerist variety has not prevented the programme’s producers from accepting sponsorship deals from Lever Faberge’s Cif (a modern cleaning cream) and product placements from Clorox and in the US, Proctor and Gamble, nor from considering launching a range of their own branded spin-off products from Consuma.⁴ Besides incongruities between the overall message of the presenters, based on skill and

³ ‘If your mum could see this ...’ *Guardian* Wednesday 4 June 2003.

⁴ See *Advertising Age* 7 February 2005 Vol. 76 Issue 6 Special Section p. 2; *Marketing* 1 April 2004 p. 4;

Marketing Week 28 October 2004 Vol. 27 Issue 44 p. 12; *Brandweek* 6 September 2004 Vol. 45 Issue 31 p. 6.

experience and a devotion to the home, and the commercial lure of product partnerships, representing speed, economy and the home-as-unit, there are other slippages too. For instance, there is a slippage in class position between working class capability and middle class helplessness, and this is furthered by the presenters who, with Kim's comic-glamorous appearance and Aggie's schoolmarm approach are clearly 'outsiders'. History too is toyed with as the commanding housekeeper of the 19th century is evoked whereas the feminist activist of the 1970s is nowhere to be found. The modern feminist is eclipsed by this image of the past – the representation which 'works'. In this housework-as-horror genre of domestic lifestyle TV, dirt is seen as a tangible opponent to a well-ordered household, and other wider issues are ignored or at best skirted around. *How Clean?* is not about female choices regarding housework – there can be no choice in whether or not to keep a clean house – the tone is dictatorial: the imperative is towards making better choices and re-educating inefficient housewives.

Comparing housewifery in *Wife Swap*

In the same year as *How Clean is Your House?* Channel 4 also launched another new domestic lifestyle programme: *Wife Swap* (Channel 4 2003). Two female participants, whose differences are announced by extra-diegetic narration so that potential conflict is set up from the outset, undertake to swap roles and lives for two weeks. The first week they live in the other household according to the other woman's house rules (set down in a manual), while in the second week they are allowed to instigate changes according to their own preferences. Although the title 'Wife Swap' has overtones of sexual licence between couples, or 'swingers' of the 1970s, the focus is entirely on the household and not on exchanging sexual partners! There are some similarities of subject matter with *How Clean?* concerning issues of domestic order but *Wife Swap*, as an 'unscripted' reality show, probes much deeper in

exposing other, more sensitive, areas of modern domestic life. It has been hugely popular, attracting 5.7 million viewers within three weeks of airing,⁵ and having six UK series by 2007 and a US version. The programme offers the ultimate in reality TV voyeuristic pleasures: an intimate look into the daily functioning of other people's homes and families. The two wives are very often of different class backgrounds, and revealed in titillating opposition for the viewer's entertainment are the mundane details of their everyday lives. At the very least, to enable the show to function, it is likely that the women will have certainly made different lifestyle choices regarding the world of work, partners, approach to bringing up children and managing their homes. The differences between wives are often ferociously defended which lends a *frisson* to the incomprehension of one woman's life by another.

Bourdieu has discussed minor differences as 'diversity within homogeneity' where 'the singular habits of the different members of the same class are united' and major differences as those occurring between a different class or group (Bourdieu 1977, 86). A good example of class difference is made manifest in episode four of the first series which focuses on 'Lizzie' and 'Emma'. Emma, who works outside the home, describes herself as 'aspirational', and the programme emphasizes her detached house, two cars and two children from the outset. Her dream lifestyle would be to own a mansion, with a swimming pool and a butler. Lizzie on the other hand has eight children and lives on benefits with her partner in a council house.

Opportunities abound in this episode for judgement and disapproval. Ken Loach has described the programme thus: '*Wife Swap* ridicules people, making them look stupid and trying to put them in a position where they will row. It's puerile and disgusting.' (*Broadcast* 2007, 25). The show invites, even demands, comparison both between the contestants and between the viewer's own household and those of the televised families. There are stages of

⁵ Retrieved from BBC news website <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment>>, Wednesday 22 January 2003.

enquiry throughout: firstly there is the exposé of other 'ordinary' people's lifestyles; secondly the delving into the unseen family systems and dynamics; and thirdly the process of rationalizing differences. At each of these stages there is the potential for antagonism between viewer and participants, between families and the 'swapped' women, and ultimately between the women themselves. Conflict remains important throughout each episode of *Wife Swap*. Sites of contestation are domestic work; cleanliness; food choices and eating habits; income; husbands; social life; and other lifestyle choices. All of these factors are displayed to test the wives' devotion to home and family. What could be seen as tediously repetitive 'fly on the wall' reality TV is reframed into a suspense-filled narrative of tension and conflict because of the staged confrontation at the end of the show. This ending, where both sets of re-united couples come together is where all four adults, but frequently mostly the wives, can justify their lifestyle choices and practices. In the case of Lizzie and Emma, Emma maintains a middle class detachment whilst Lizzie is overrun by her emotional disapproval of Emma's hands-off attitude to motherhood and keeping house. Lizzie's earlier emotional outburst when she perceived Emma to be a 'home-wrecker' was in fact so uncontrolled that the usual course of the two week exchange was curtailed in this particular episode.

The display of raw emotions such as anger, jealousy or despair is provoked and encouraged at the end meeting of the two couples for the entertainment of millions of viewers. What previously would have remained private has been violated and this in turn exposes the violence that women do to themselves and each other. Women's private lives have been slyly exposed by a disapproving intruder who prefers her own different systems, and now is the moment of condemnation and justification. In this climax disagreement is expected, argument is anticipated and even physical violence has been displayed. So much has already been exposed about the way the women run their homes by this point that the big reveal is not only in the raw emotion of the women often struggling to articulate their whole

raison d'être, although this is often shocking and heart-wrenching enough, but also in the secondary comments made by husbands and children. The surprise is not that a more ordered household or home-cooked meals may improve general well-being, but that in an act of supreme disloyalty, the opinions of their nearest and dearest may just be voiced. These remarks, sometimes supportive but also often undermining, act as the final and supreme judgement on the woman's chosen mode of running her family. As has been argued, the access to reality is often through the unpredictable responses (Palmer 2004, 180), and in *Wife Swap* this is to be found in the final outpouring of opinion and resentment, long withheld under the constraints of nuclear family domestic life by the contestant's kith and kin. In the 'Lizzie and Emma' episode, much is revealed on the margins of the programme: there are suggestions of immoral codes, kept just beyond the viewer's reach; lies, love and jealousy all bubble to the surface. Whatever the revelations, narrative bias ensures that judgement is passed, so that although the programme is ostensibly about lifestyle choices of the homemaker, really it is about class disapproval. The privacy of the domestic is exploded by *Wife Swap*, and whilst exposing the public behaviour of others has long been media fodder, now this TV programme enables judgement to be passed on what used to be the most private of domains: the family at home. The focus is not directly on the labour of domestic chores as in *How Clean?!*: it is an assessment of the participant's compliance with the unspoken rules of general housewifery, an assault on her femininity, her approach and attitude to the role of housewife. Woman is set against woman in *Wife Swap*. Comparison and judgement are central, there is no feminist unity amongst women here. Each woman is judged to stand or fall in relation to that unknowable and unattainable gold standard of feminine perfection.

Performing middle class propriety in *The Perfect Housewife*

The Perfect Housewife (BBC3 2006) offers to provide help on the domestic front with a wide range of housewifery skills. The stress here is on performance. The unspoken premise of the programme suggests that through a certain style of homemaking, and certain domestic patterns, a middle class veneer of taste and behaviour may be acquired. This performance, the programme seems to imply, will not only improve the self-respect of the contestant (and viewers of course) but will also act as a statement of class membership. The host of the programme is Anthea Turner. Turner's performance is itself a reinvention of her old celebrity self. As the *Perfect Housewife* she implores us all to be better housekeepers and as such she suggests a younger British version of Martha Stewart. But it should be noted that Turner's credentials in the area of homemaking are especially dubious given that she had been described as the 'perfect home wrecker' in the press after her part in a divorce case (Hanks 2006). Her personal integrity seemed further threatened when she sold her wedding photos to *OK!* magazine and also appeared to be advertising Cadbury's chocolate at the same time. Portrayed as breaking up one family, and making a commodity of her wedding, more than a little irony was attached to her new TV role as a model homemaker. Nonetheless, as the 'perfect housewife' Anthea offers endless advice about running a home and demonstrates her domestic prowess to two hapless contestants in this show. The contestants compete (the prize is a mop) for Anthea's approval each week, which will be granted to the person (usually a woman) who most closely follows Anthea's advice and methods around the home.

Unlike the rather fixed subject position of *How Clean is Your House?*, there are a number of ways in which the viewer is encouraged to consume *Perfect Housewife*, adopting various subject positions. We can link the unreality of Anthea's life as a housewife with the animated Anthea augmented by the music from the sitcom *Bewitched* (ABC Network 1964–72);⁶ we can tune in to the narrator's sardonic mockery of Anthea's over-the-top display of

⁶ There was also a more recent film: *Bewitched* (Nora Ephron 2005).

housewifery, making her seem like a parody of herself; we can mentally store the interspersed set pieces of advice given by a previously-recorded Anthea; or we can empathize with the contestants, who are given ample time to feel inferior to Anthea's domestic supremacy.

There is more than a touch of fantasy about this programme in the improbable persona of housewife Anthea, both in her expectations of the contestants and in her manner of running a middle class home. In the very first episode Anthea demonstrates the correct way to fold a towel, edges in first and so on. In making sure all the raw edges are hidden, the towel folding stands as a metaphor for the control and seamlessness needed in the successful middle class home. What Anthea is demonstrating in all she does is 'the "right" kind of femininity' where individuals may compensate for their own inadequacies by following the guidance of television's experts.⁷ When Anthea shows us her ordered linen cupboard she offers viewers a shrine to unreality in the modern domestic world. But this is the height of domestic performance to which the contestants must aspire. Whereas in the Victorian era the middle classes 'aspired to a performance of housework invisible to those of highest status within the house' (Bryden and Floyd 1999, 7), in the 21st century, ironically, it is the lady of the house who must undertake these chores in order to achieve a similar class status. Imagined class migration through correct towel folding may seem ludicrous, even the contestants snigger, but the invisibility of the labour involved in creating a beautifully presented linen cupboard and the order it represents is the epitome of the desired controlled environment of the middle class household. If the quest is to become a perfect housewife, make no mistake, the holy grail is class acceptance.

⁷ For a related discussion see Helen Wood and Beverley Skeggs 'Notes on Ethical Scenarios of Self on British Reality TV' in S. Moorti and K. Ross (2004) 'Reality television', *Feminist Media Studies* 4:2, 203–31, p. 206.

The fairy tale of Anthea's own housewifery skills, sprinkling her fairy dust (the animated Anthea twinkles stars) on lesser mortals, helps us to understand the attraction of this lifestyle programme. Her wealth and gorgeous home are enviable, but the principle of order, even regimentation, in the home is where the real focus lies. Whilst she could clearly afford not to have to do her own housework, the point is she makes a virtue of what other women would see as chores bordering on drudgery. However, the contestants in this first episode provide a challenge to Anthea not wholly typical of the total series. Both Ann Marie and Kate also have lovely homes; their problem is that they are not performing their class status through their homes, or at least not Turner's version of class-bound domestic display. Ann Marie is in fact very witty, unable to control her scepticism at the faux seriousness of the towel demonstration, and suggesting that Kate is 'going over to the dark side' by appearing to accept Anthea's instruction. As the programme continues Anne Marie proves herself to be much more articulate than Anthea by expressing a more deeply thought-through rationale. Anne Marie argues a point about wanting to preserve her current lifestyle and role as full time Mum, identifying strongly with the presence of the children in her home, evidenced through her son's pictures on the wall. However, the format of the competition ensures that the much-treasured children's drawings must now be regarded as clutter and hidden away from general view. Anthea is allowed to look a little heated as she insists on this trivial compliance with her rules. What must dominate in the home is an impenetrable gloss which conceals all: mess; children; and, of course, the effort involved in achieving the gloss. Time, Anthea repeatedly assures us, will be saved by her methods. Needless to say, the time needed for this standard of housewifery, and the sacrifice of other more pleasurable activities is of course, in a middle class way, completely hidden. What Anthea offers are not just tips on being an expert housewife but access to a wholly class-determined way of living. Viewers are invited to behave in a certain way by reflecting on given modes of taste and choice, with the promise

that, if they follow all the rules of the Anthea Turner school of middle classness, their claims to inclusion in that group will be irrefutable.

Consumerism, of the middle class variety, is inextricably linked with lifestyle in this programme, from the opening shots of Anthea's own home, a Lutyens-style country mansion, to the relentless call by Anthea for appropriate storage containers for all corners of the home, to the types of food appropriate for a stylish party. Class is determined by the performance of certain codes of behaviour in housekeeping. Appearances, orderliness and the correct mode of purchase are very good places to start: white towels and bed linen are less vulgar than other more practical colours; party food does not include sausages on sticks and must be presented on beautiful tableware; for drinks it is best to stick to champagne! Lip service is paid to the notion of recycling, not because it saves the planet but because it offers a system for ordering the rubbish. In this TV model, the role of housewife is a 'performative one' in which as, Giddens argues, there is an expected division between appearance and self-identity (Giddens 1991, 58–9). In this case, the performance of the housewifery role is at a distance from the inner, originating sense of self. If then, the contestants can perform the role of a perfect housewife they can subsume any sense of inner identity and create firm middle class allegiances. Do all this, Anthea implores, and you will be happy. The link between an orderly home and a contented mind is made with alarming frequency. But even the regular press despaired at Anthea's performance: 'Watching Turner's control-freakery is moderately entertaining for a few minutes, but it's not enough to compensate for the neurotic air hanging over proceedings. And the format is setting back the cause of feminism by decades, if not centuries. Somebody put this back on the shelf.' (Hanks 2006). For, in a total reversal of early second wave feminism, in Anthea's fantasy world a woman need look no further than the confines of her domestic domain with its clear surfaces and tidy cupboards for self-fulfilment.

Housework is reinvented in domestic lifestyle programmes as something more than the drudgery of domestic chores exposed by feminists. In 21st century parlance, being a housewife has become a lifestyle choice. The choice is not whether to accept or reject the role of housewife, but which type of housewife to be, following highly standardized female identities. The removal of any larger dissent or debate about conforming to the housewifely role has allowed lifestyle television to present a complacent and unchallenging gender politics. Women need, it seems, to be retrained in the art of housekeeping not only because their skill levels have declined but because they have forgotten the 'joy' of keeping house. Lifestyle television in these programmes adopts a Reithian zeal to offer women a valuable opportunity to become refocused on the home. In a world where a postmodern sense of a disconnected self may leave a woman feeling disempowered, apolitical and unable to relate to the outside world, inside the home, so these television programmes would have us believe, is the possibility of a return to the security of a meaningful, well-defined role. Housekeeping has once more acquired a worthy status, and becomes a route by which a woman may newly feel in command of her life and confident in her redefined position in the family and in society.

These programmes suggest that the cure for a fractured identity is mastery over the domestic environment. The actual systems and management of home living are seen as having an impact on psychological health as they represent the link between the interiority of the individual and the functioning of that individual in society. By regaining control over the domestic the housewife gains well-being and a feeling of command over the self and thus her life. In this way a direct link is made between the chores of housework and potential happiness. Arguing against any feminist antipathy to the restrictions domesticity has placed on women's lives, domestic order is promoted as a strong, rooted and wholesome lifestyle choice for women. It is perhaps indicative of their gender politics that most domestic lifestyle

programmes are primarily aimed at women.⁸ They aim to restore the worthiness of housekeeping as a profession, with power, control and accomplishment as rewards with deeper meaning than mere wages for a job well done. In keeping an ordered household the housewife regains her sense of purpose which in turn provides a route to psychological health for herself and the whole family too who may now be better able to face the chaos of the world outside.

If women have lifted their gaze from their domestic interiors over the past few decades and become distracted by things like careers and political interventions, then this recent flurry of domestic lifestyle television programmes offers to refocus women's attention back on the home. Female viewers must *relearn* how to keep house, otherwise they might develop problems for themselves like the poor souls whose lavatories and fridges are shamefully revealed in such public viewing. In order to deliver their messages, domestic lifestyle television programmes are simple in structure. The viewer can anticipate the reveal at the end – everyone knows what a tidy house looks like – but the true reveal is in the participants' emotional outpouring at the end that can range from angry indignation to tearful gratitude. What is revealed here is the emotional landscape of the home. In this way housework, a seemingly unlikely subject for mass viewing, is packaged for consumption by millions in the guise of ever-popular cathartic self-therapy.

The image of the real, ordinary housewife then, as currently transmitted on British television, is not a site of feminist discourse but an opportunity to adopt a particular persona learnt through the world of lifestyle TV. Unlike the 1970s when enquiry into women's lives

⁸ For example, although *Wife Swap* often includes the roles of husbands (who often take much of the responsibility for housework and cooking), the makers of the programme, RDF, make it clear on their website that it is the women who change households, and that they remain the main focus of the show, 'The two women of each family trade places for ten days to see what it is like to live in another family's home.' Retrieved from www.rdftelevision.com/categories.aspx?cid=2&pid=144.

(either through personal or political avenues) resulted in multiple interpretations of female and feminist identity, domestic lifestyle programmes of the early 21st century offer little variety in the relationship of women to the home. A consistent image becomes a powerful one though, and the identification of the viewer with the domestic matriarch such as that suggested by Charlotte Brunsdon concerning British soap operas may be related here. Brunsdon's 'fantasy of ordinariness, of femininity achieved' helps us to understand the power of domestic reality programmes too (Brunsdon 2000, 66–71). The housewife on television, be she a member of the public or a celebrity posing as a housewife, operates as a figure which epitomizes the fantasy of ordinary femininity and as such, can be used to reach the underbelly of sensibilities in unconfident female viewers, to educate and inform them through the guise of entertainment. This fantasy of femininity in lifestyle television can display delightful class nuances, satisfy our cravings for voyeurism, chastise us, or make us feel self-satisfied in our own domestic practices, and perhaps most importantly of all, make us cringe with embarrassment when we see our own behaviour reflected on the screen. But thankfully for those worried about 'making it', domestic femininity is both significant and achievable.

Perhaps most disconcertingly of all, we can see that these programmes, by disengaging the role of housewife from feminist politics, make the figure of the housewife open to interpretation and manipulation from other, less woman-centred political arenas. Housework repackaged as therapy and as a means of reclaiming femininity serves a number of purposes: it offers entertaining instruction; it encourages conformity of an otherwise disparate group to a single idealized image of womanhood; it provides the perfect medium within the home from which to view other domestic spaces and reflect on our own; and it serves an increasing need for a narrative of the self. Furthermore, it registers housework as an apolitical potential career for women. Even if women of the 21st century have little stability and many

distractions, even if feminism is a disputed term and there is no actual agreed definition of femininity, there can be little doubt that modern politics of lifestyle and consumerism require women to be houseproud. So little surprise then that television and the popular genre of lifestyle TV are used as a medium through which to enlighten and retrain women in the historic art of housekeeping.

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