From ‘Caterpillars to Butterflies’: the ‘work ready’ makeover on reality TV

Dr Anita Biressi, Roehampton University, London

This paper addresses popular factual programming such as Benefit Busters (C4 2009) and Working Girls (BBC3 2011) which feature women being made over to prepare them to enter the job market. Focusing especially on an episode of Benefit Busters which was devoted to encouraging single mothers into paid work, it explores the tensions embedded in the show as it struggles to accommodate the fact of gender inequality, poverty and illness within a rhetorical framework of choice, individual responsibility and entrepreneurial individualism. In doing so it examines the complex political balancing act adopted by ‘social entrepreneurs’ on television such as the private agency trainers who instruct the mothers. These trainers, together with the woman who owns the agency, are styled as self-directed individuals who have moved beyond gender or class-based politics to become ‘ideologically adaptable’ (Leadbeater: 56) and are thereby fit to lead others out of poverty and apathy. Overall, the paper questions the degree to which these formats could be said to constitute a popular platform for political debate about gendered and classed social mobility in the current moment.

Author biography

Anita Biressi is Reader in Media Cultures at Roehampton University. She serves on the steering group of the MeCCSA Women's Media Studies Network. Her research interests include class politics, popular journalism and tabloid culture, media spectacle, documentary and factual television. Her new book (with Heather Nunn) entitled Class in Contemporary British Culture is forthcoming from Palgrave Macmillan.