

# AFTERWORD

## The new world makeover

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EXTREME MAKEOVER APPLICATION  
Deadline – Saturday, March 31, 2006  
MAKING AN EXTREME VIDEO

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1. Have Fun! If you are not having fun making the video, we are not having fun watching it.
2. Make sure whoever is filming you is someone you are comfortable with. Do not read from cards or over rehearse what you want to say. Just talk to us like a friend.
3. Making the video:
  - a. Get creative and grab our attention immediately! Introduce yourself and tell us a bit about you. We get tons of applications, so try to stand out and think outside the box. Why do you deserve the *Extreme Makeover*? How will it change your life? Do you have any events coming up in the next few months that make this the perfect time?
  - b. Go from head to toe explaining what you would like changed. You do not need to know the exact procedure, just tell us what you don't like about your current features.
  - c. Get good close ups, about 30 seconds, of your face, profile and body. Also include close ups of any areas of concern that may be hard to see like teeth, complexion, scars etc. For your teeth, please get a good 10 seconds smiling from the front with teeth showing, bite closed. Then another 10 seconds in the same position from the side.
4. Please watch the video after to make sure the lighting is good and we can accurately see your problem areas. The light should be shining on your face and not behind you where it may cause shadows. Also check for the sound quality.

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These were instructions for people who wanted to appear on *Extreme Makeover*, a programme that ran on the US network ABC from 2002 to 2007. The application performed dual tasks. At one level, it was what it said it was – a recruitment device. As such, it was unreliable and rapidly becoming outmoded. In its second, covert, role – surveillance – it was a neatly targeted way of securing data about viewers that could be sold to advertisers. This intelligence was obtained gratis, under the demotic sign of outreach and public participation (via, for instance, plastic surgery for a soldier or fast-food manager who want to advance their job prospects) (Heyes 2007, 25).

That economic subtext runs right through the genre. For makeover television is part of the wider reality-television phenomenon, a strange hybrid of cost-cutting devices, game shows taken into the community, *cinéma-vérité* conceits, scripts written in post-production, and *ethoi* of Social Darwinism, surveillance, and gossip – bizarre blends of reportage, documentary, and fun. Makeover programmes take economically underprivileged people and offer them a style they cannot afford to

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sustain. The genre speaks to the responsibility of each person to master their drives and harness their energies to get better jobs, homes, looks, and families. It is suffused with deregulatory *nostra* of individual responsibility, avarice, possessive individualism, hyper-competitiveness, and commodification, played out in the domestic sphere rather than the public world.

Tania Lewis has done a fantastic job with this special issue of *Continuum* in bringing together the perspectives we need to understand the makeover phenomenon of the moment. Rather than shilling for the publicity department of corporations, as per all too many works of narcissography (aka fan studies); or buying into the determinism of political economy (aka ownership and control); or favouring the decontextualized, subjective assertions of textual analysis (aka the authority of the critic), she has produced an issue that blends the best of these and other traditions in a generously ecumenical form that permits methods to rub up against one another in a productive *frottage*. Whatever your view of makeover television, this is a signal achievement.

The makeover has old origins. The New York satirical magazine *Vanity Fair* (unrelated to its latter-day lounge-lizard/coffee-table/hairdressing salon namesake) ran from 1859 to 1863. Page 215 of the 27 October 1860 edition earned the periodical enduring fame: the first known use of the word 'makeover' appeared there, in a notice headed 'Adornment'. It referred to a fictional figure: 'Miss Angelica Makeover. The men like her and the women wonder why.' Angelica's gift was the ability to transform her 'coarse' hair 'into waves of beauty' through 'miracles of art and patience'. Her eyes were 'by no means handsome, but she ... learned how to use them', utilizing 'art and culture' to pass 'for a fine woman' ('Adornment' 1860; 'Adornment' 1860).<sup>1</sup> The word 'makeover' occasionally reappeared in women's magazines of the 1920s. In 1936, *Mademoiselle* magazine offered what has been described as the first formal makeover of an 'average' reader, who had asked for tips on how to 'make the most' of a self that she deemed 'homely as a hedgehog' and 'too skinny' (qtd in Fraser 2007, 177). It turned into a popular regular feature.

The makeover's power to fascinate is achieved through the ultimate consumer desire: self-invention via commodities. As Marx noted, commodities originate 'outside us' (1987, 43). But they are quickly internalized, wooing consumers by appearing attractive in ways that borrow from romantic love, then reverse that relationship. For example, people learn about romance from commodities, which proceed to become part of them through the double-sided nature of advertising and 'the good life' of luxury. Transcendence is articulated to objects, and commodities dominate the human and natural landscape. The corollary is the simultaneous triumph and emptiness of the sign as a source and measure of value. Commodities hide not only the work of their creation but their post-purchase existence as well. Designated with human characteristics (beauty, taste, serenity, and so on) they compensate for the absence of these qualities in the everyday.

Wolfgang Haug's term 'commodity aesthetics' captures this paradox (1986, 17, 19, 35), what Seyla Benhabib calls 'the *promesse du bonheur* that advanced capitalism always holds before [consumers], but never quite delivers' (2002, 3). It is embodied in the difference between those with and those without the class position and capital to define luxury and encourage emulation through identity goods such as fashion items (Berry 2000), even as viewers are interpellated as sovereign consumers who are economically and culturally ready to make informed and powerful decisions about the allocation of their resources. In Alexander Kluge's words, spectators sit 'in front of the television set like a commodity owner: like a miser grasping every detail and collecting surplus on everything' (1981–1982, 210–11).

Commodities appeal because they provide a way to dodge that old Hegelian dilemma: what to do about ethical substance? In the United States, a sense of ethical incompleteness comes courtesy of origins in the underclass of Europe and Asia, the enslaved of Africa, and the dispossessed of the

Americas. D.H. Lawrence identified 'the true myth of America' as: 'She starts old, old, wrinkled and writhing in an old skin. And there is a gradual sloughing of the old skin, towards a new youth' (1953, 64). This *ethos* of mobility is about regeneration of bodies as well as professions. Consider Hollywood's promise of the makeover, of turning an off-screen farm girl into a film star, or an on-screen librarian into a siren. It stands at the heart of such projects, and has been advertised as such ever since 1930s fan magazines promoted the emulation of actresses through cosmetics, with stars like Joan Blondell instructing readers that 'the whole secret of beauty is change' (qtd in Berry 2000, 106; see also 107, 27). Or wander through virtually any bookstore across the United States. You will be swamped by the self-help section, edging its way closer and closer to the heart of the shop, as the ancestral roots of an unsure immigrant culture are stimulated anew by today's risky neoliberal one. In the three decades to 2000, the number of self-help books in the United States more than doubled. Between a third and a half of the population participates in a US\$2.48 billion-a-year industry of audio recordings, DVDs, videos, books, and 'seminars' on making oneself anew, frequently with 'spiritual' alibis – a whole array of consumables and auto-critique in place of adequate social security. Each item promises fulfilment – but instead delivers a never-ending project of work on the self (McGee 2005, 11–12).

Many cultural critics demonize such tendencies. For example, Christopher Lasch's influential 1970s tract *The Culture of Narcissism* identified a turn for the worse caused by 'bureaucracy, the proliferation of images, therapeutic ideologies, the rationalization of the inner life, the cult of consumption, and in the last analysis ... changes in family life and ... changing patterns of socialization.' Lasch discerned a 'pathological narcissism' of the 'performing self'. People had become 'connoisseurs of their own performance and that of others', with the 'whole man' fragmented. This critique bought into a longstanding obsession, exhibited since the nineteenth century in literature and philosophy, that associated the nation with Adam prior to the Fall – that is to say, a site where new forms of life could be invented that reprised a life before desire (Lasch 1978, 32, 67–8, 93; Stearns 2006, 203; Crawley 2006).

The privileged status of the makeover in the United States can be linked to these complex cultural histories. In addition, makeover television – the focus of this collection – itself has a specifically televisual lineage associated with the crisis in paternalistic television versus populist television, educational television versus entertainment television, 'true' television versus 'pretend' television, costly television versus cheap television. When veteran newsman Edward R. Murrow addressed the Radio-Television News Directors Association in 1958 (re-created in George Clooney's 2005 docudrama *Goodnight and Good Luck*) he used the metaphor that television must 'illuminate' and 'inspire', or it would be 'merely wires and light in a box'. In a speech to the National Association of Broadcasters three years later, John F. Kennedy's chair of the Federal Communication Commission (FCC), Newton Minow, called US television a 'vast wasteland' (Murrow 1958; Minow 1971). Murrow and Minow were urging broadcasters to show enlightened Cold War leadership, to prove the United States was not the mindless consumer world that the Soviets claimed. The networks should live up to their legislative responsibilities and act in the public interest by informing and entertaining, going beyond what Minow later called 'white suburbia's Dick-and-Jane world' (Minow 2001). They responded by doubling the time devoted to news each evening, and quickly became the dominant source of current affairs (Schudson and Tift 2005, 32). But 20 years later, Ronald Reagan's FCC head, Mark Fowler, celebrated reduction of the 'box' to 'transistors and tubes'. He argued in an interview with *Reason* magazine that 'television is just another appliance – it's a toaster with pictures' and hence in no need of regulation apart from ensuring its safety as an electrical appliance.<sup>2</sup>

Minow's and Fowler's expressions gave their vocalists instant and undimmed celebrity.<sup>3</sup> Minow's phrase 'vast wasteland' has even, irony of ironies, provided raw material for the wasteland's parthenogenesis, as the answer to questions posed on numerous game shows, from

*Jeopardy!* to *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*. The ‘toaster with pictures’ is less celebrated, but has been efficacious as a slogan for deregulation across successive administrations, and remains in *Reason*’s pantheon of libertarian quotations, alongside those of Reagan and others of his ilk. Where Minow stands for public culture’s restraining (and ultimately conserving) function for capitalism, Fowler represents capitalism’s brooding arrogance, its neoliberal lust to redefine use value via exchange value. Minow decries Fowler’s vision, arguing that television ‘is not an ordinary business’ because it has ‘public responsibilities’ (Minow and Cate 2003, 408, 415). But Fowler’s phrase has won the day, at least to this point. Minow’s lives on as a recalcitrant moral irritant, not a policy slogan.

Fowler has had many fellow-travellers. Both the free-cable, free-video social movements of the 1960s and 1970s and the neoclassical, deregulatory intellectual movements of the 1970s and 1980s imagined a people’s technology emerging from the wasteland of broadcast television, as Porta-pak equipment, localism, and unrestrained markets provided alternatives to the numbing nationwide commercialism of the networks. One began with folksy culturalism, the other with technophilic futurism. Each claimed it in the name of diversity, and they even merged in the depoliticized ‘Californian ideology’ of community media, much of which quickly embraced market forms. Neither formation engaged economic reality. But together, they established the preconditions for unsettling a cosy, patriarchal, and quite competent television system that had combined, as television should, what was good for you and what made you feel good, all on the one set of stations; i.e. a comprehensive service. This was promised by the enabling legislation that birthed and still governs the FCC, supposedly guaranteeing citizens that broadcasters serve ‘the public interest, convenience and necessity’, a tradition that began when CBS set up a radio network in the 1920s founded on news rather than its rival NBC’s predilection for entertainment (Barbrook and Cameron 1996; Scardino 2005). The 1990s saw a shift away from the universalism of the old networks. Where sport, weather, news, lifestyle, and drama programming once had a comfortable and appropriate *frottage*, the new regime saw the emergence of highly centralized but profoundly targeted consumer networks that fetishized lifestyle and consumption *tout court* over a blend of purchase and politics, of fun and foreign policy.

This context, and its localized iterations in other countries, gives the lie to conventional shibboleths of reality programming. Makeover television, fixed upon by cultural critics who either mourn it as representative of a decline in journalistic standards or celebrate it as the sign of a newly feminized public sphere, should frankly be understood as a cost-cutting measure and an instance of niche marketing. Much makeover television originates in an under-unionized sector of the industry, with small numbers of workers required for short periods. This contingent, flexible labour is even textualized in the service-industry world of the genre, which creates ‘a parallel universe’ for viewers, tightly managed within profoundly restricted norms (Lewis, Inthorn, and Wahl-Jorgensen 2005, 17; Giles 2002). Just as off-screen television labour lacks job security and must remain nimble and skilful, so the makeover subject can never relax for a moment.

What of the claim that these texts empower their viewers? The Kaiser Foundation’s 2006 study of US reality television (Christenson and Ivancin 2006) drew on encounters with television producers and health-care critics and professionals to get at the dynamics of how medicine and related topics are represented in the genre. Kaiser found that, for all makeover television’s populist alibis, it constructs professional medical expertise as a kind of magic that is beyond the ken of ordinary people – and certainly beyond their engaged critique. Again and again, whether the focus is on plastic surgeons or paediatricians, miraculous feats are achieved by heroic professionals who deliver ignorant and ugly people from the dross of the everyday, transcending what off-screen primary-care physicians have been able to do for them. The Foundation could find nothing in US reality television even remotely critical of this model. Such representations of

expertise deem it ungovernable other than by its own caste. This landscape is not about powerful citizen-viewers; it's about deities in scrubs. The use of the commodity form to promise transcendence through the national health-care system, as embodied in patriarchal medicine, is sickening. As with makeovers of housing or personal style, it offers transcendence to the working and lower middle classes – which most such viewers cannot afford to emulate. Helpless, un-aesthetic patient bodies testify to the surgeons' skill – and generate more and more business for medical leeches preying on false needs (Heyes 2007, 19; Theobald et al. 2006). And research indicates that audience views of such procedures are quite wildly at variance with the facts in terms of what is medically advisable and financially manageable (Stevens et al. 2005).

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### Notes

1. The author would like to thank Peter Bliss from the University of California, Riverside library system, for bibliographic insight.
2. Not surprisingly, Alfred Hitchcock said it earlier and better: 'Television is like the American toaster, you push the button and the same thing pops up every time' (qtd in Wasko 2005, 10).
3. Minow was named 'top newsmaker' of 1961 in an Associated Press survey, and was on television and radio more than any other Kennedy official.

### Notes on contributor

Toby Miller is the author and editor of over 30 books, and is the editor of the journals *Television & New Media* and *Social Identities*.

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