

Makeover Television and the Cinderella Myth

The past couple of years have seen a marked increase in what has become known as lifestyle television. A significant strand of lifestyle programming has been the makeover format that advocates a transformation of home, garden, manner, clothes and facial/bodily features. Gareth Palmer has pointed out that the simplification of life as merely a question of lifestyle fits perfectly in an enterprise culture which envisages the self as a project. Furthermore, class disguised as “taste” is very much on the ideological agenda of lifestyle television : *Such television is possible because it is now widely agreed and understood that ‘appearance’ is everything...The individuals/victims endure suffering because the eventual benefits are substantial. They look better and in the process believe themselves to have become ‘better or at least happier with themselves’...*

The subjects/victims are being taught to create a self by learning middle-classness through the operations of taste. What such programmes do is not simply marginalise eccentricity by demonstrating that it doesn’t work. Rather, they appear to threaten to take away any faith the individual might have in self-expertise by encouraging a belief in the norm (1)

Racheley Moseley points out that the transformation narrative with its moment of spectacular makeover - “before and after” - has its origins in women’s magazines and the woman’s film.

As such, she argues, it is the most visible marker of the ungendering of “feminine culture”. (2). While it is true that makeover shows are opened up to men as participants, male candidates represent a minority and they are less problematized/objectified than their female counterparts.

Lately a new wave of British programmes have hit upon ridicule and shame as “amusing” methods for persuading the subject to change style according to their middle - class rules. The most successful fashion programme on British television is BBC2’s *What Not To Wear* (now into its 4th season and also broadcasted on the Flemish lifestyle channel Vitaya) hosted by two upper - middle - class “style gurus” Trinny Woodall and Susannah Constantine who are licensed to abuse in their quest to transform the predominantly female targets. In a heated moment on one programme David Dimbleby called the co-hosts “two of the cruellest women on television” and it is difficult to disagree with such an assessment. The targets seen to be in need of style transformation are surveyed and observed through “ secretly” filmed surveillance footage – providing the basis for the hosts’ verbal abuse. Nearly every “victim” is found guilty for looking too big, too masculine, too common or for dressing too young for her age .

Typically, Susannah will say “that is the Michelin man going shopping”. And in response Trinny will berate the subject : “there is a woman under there but for some reason she wants to hide it” or “she’s got potential but we need to give her more faith in herself”. Any amount of bullying and abuse is necessary for the individual to be improved. After Trinny and Susannah have criticized and discarded much of the subject’s wardrobe (“it looks better on the hanger than on you”) the individual has to expose herself in a

360 degree mirror, something that everyone registers as a humiliating experience. The rationale is that this represents an opportunity to see herself “objectively”, as others do, in preparation for the necessary transformation. Properly humbled, the subject is given £2000 to spend in the highstreet. Even this exercise is filmed so that Trinny and Susannah can rush in and “correct” her choices.

The subject records her responses to the process in the form of a video diary, clips of which are interspersed throughout the show. This footage is presented in unflattering monochrome, in contrast to the glorious decor and technicolour glamour of Trinny and Susannah.

The most interesting aspect of *What Not To Wear* is that the show actually flaunts the sadomasochistic ideology behind the transformation narrative, leaving some space for resistance. Even though most participants end up paying lipservice to the “new you”/quest to selfhood ideology, the actual process of being coerced into following “the rules” often proves to be an unpleasant ordeal and some reluctant female victims will admit to feeling uncomfortable with their transformation.

The American show **Extreme Makeover** that enters its second season (and inspired a Flemish remake *Beautiful*) pretends to offer men and women “a real life fairy tale”. This make over format invites applications from individuals (or their friends, family, colleagues) who “deserve” a second chance. Once-in-a-lifetime surgery, performed free of charge by an army of medical experts labeled The Extreme Team is presented as a life-changing/ enhancing experience that will finally allow inhibited, flawed Cinderellas to meet prince charming or to enjoy a more fulfilling marital life/relationship. Each episode features two “patients” who undergo various procedures (including standard dental and eye corrections) and finally reveal their “new improved selves” to their friends, families and indeed the viewer who is also kept in suspense during the final restyling phase by means of close-ups/partial revelations of the “spectacle”. In episode 15, the 47-year old Regina Wade, a black single woman and mother, undergoes a Brazilian buttlift, a nose-correction and a tummy tuck to get rid of her “duck in the pond” complex. Properly dressed and made-up, she emerges as “a swan in the lake”.

Nellie, a 35 year old waitress and single mother gets an eyelift and a lipcorrection that will finally allow her to kiss the man of her dreams. Significantly, the very emotional stories and radical transformation of working - class women Nellie and Regina are intercut with the humorous grooming of Beverly Hills attorney Benjamin Sternberg who is transformed from a beach bum into a sexy, respectable lawyer who finally “looks what he is” as a friend puts it. Indeed, the male candidate in this episode is only found guilty of a minor fashion crime and his “mini extreme make over” marked by dynamic montage and upbeat music constructs him as an active professional who is never really problematized or on display. Even though 1 in 4 patients in *Extreme Makeover* is male, the representation of the candidates is very gendered indeed. If the male participants can do with some improvement, the women are systematically represented as pathetic “cases” who are desperately in need of radical surgery to even qualify for a decent life. Filled with shame (about their “ugliness” before the transformation) and gratitude (after the m a

ke over) the female patients are constantly reduced to a tearful humiliating spectacle. Since a Cinderella story demands sadism, the actual ordeal/suffering of the female patients is also visually foregrounded and exploited in spectacular close-ups of deformed, bruised and battered faces. As Nellie comments on the grotesque post-operative spectacle : “I look like a creature from another planet”.

If the Extreme Makeover format is invested in idealising plastic surgery, MTV's I Want a Famous Face draws attention to the artifice of the make over concept. The programme distances itself from the exhibitionistic candidates who subject themselves to reconstructive surgery to look like their favourite celebrity (Jennifer Lopez, Brad Pitt, Elvis Presley ...) with a disclaimer : “The subjects of this documentary series decided on their own to get plastic surgery. MTV then asked to document their journey. MTV did not pay for any surgery performed on these subjects”. The overall tone of the programme is ironic (“the scalpels are sharpened, ready and waiting”) and at times, demystifying. The actual surgery is shown realistically, in graphic detail, the participants and surgeons are introduced as cartoon figures and the show does not withhold the negative emotional and physical effects/consequences of plastic surgery (break-ups, painful recovery, medical complications) . Yet, like all the other make over programmes the MTV format concludes with a happy ending, confirming the beneficial effect of plastic surgery. Ultimately, the transformation is embedded in a goal-oriented narrative (boosting a singing or modelling career) and every single celebrity look-a-like testifies to having achieved her/his goal and feeling more confident.

According to American statistics, television programmes that showcase plastic surgery as a commonplace procedure affect young women in particular since they have the worst body image. Nowadays breast augmentation has caught up with nose jobs as the most common high school graduation present in the U. S. (3)

Over the past 2 years, The American Society of Plastic Surgeons noted a 43% increase in the number of teenage and adolescent girls who have breast implants. Moreover, teenage girls in particular are not aware of the risks of a serious operation. They regard a new set of breasts as a fashion item on a par with having their hair done or buying a new watch, encouraged by the ever growing number of television shows that promote cosmetic transformation as a form of self-empowerment.

(1) Gareth Palmer ; The New You. Class and transformation in lifestyle television. Understanding Reality Television (eds) Su Holmes and Deborah Jermyn, Routledge, London / N Y, 2004, pp.186-188. (2) Rachel Moseley ; Make over take over on British television, Screen 41.3, 2000, pp.299-314 . (3) <http://www.alternet.org/story/19114/>