

Book Reviews

Makeover TV: Selfhood, citizenship, and celebrity

Brenda R. Weber

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In *Makeover TV: Selfhood, Citizenship, and Celebrity*, Brenda R. Weber provides a compelling analysis of the makeover process, driven by the influx of makeover reality programs on cable and broadcast lineups during the past decade. Based on a critical investigation of more than 2,500 hours of makeover television, she argues that such shows embody contradictory themes that make the genre exceptionally complex with regard to how individuals confront cultural expectations and challenges to achieve selfhood. A few of these paradoxical tensions are illustrated when people participate in makeover television and surrender to authorities to become empowered, undergo extreme alterations that conform to ideals of gender, class, sexuality, race, and ethnicity to attain normalcy, and feel pressured to physically look and behave like everyone else to become unique. Weber metaphorically refers to the process of being made over as a “makeover maze,” where these contradictions operate with the promise of helping individuals achieve a sense of self that is ultimately, celebrated. Ironically, the existence of these tensions unifies the makeover genre, making these

diverse programs both thematically and ideologically similar.

In her work, Weber acknowledges that the makeover genre encompasses shows that depict transformations of all types, including but not limited to one’s body, lifestyle, possessions, relationships, and homes. She points out that the transition from the “before-body” to “after-body” demonstrates the evolution of an individual, who lacks confidence and self-worth to one who is refueled by faith, social privilege, and value that merits celebrity. Furthermore, Weber emphasizes that makeover television affords the opportunity for one to reveal not only his or her true self but also an even “better” self that is appreciated, conventionally gendered, empowered, and socially accepted. She proposes that makeover programs do not attempt to construct selfhood but rather reclaim and reveal an identity that an individual already possesses. This subdued and constrained identity is consequently weak and prior to the transformation, socially condemned.

Weber notably suggests that television makeovers symbolically function to honor idealized citizens. Participation in makeover programs represents acceptance of an American culture that is driven by capitalistic ideologies and prides itself in optimism, agency, and individualism. Such qualities are inherent in those who belong and actively engage in a democracy. Hence, she uses the term “makeover nation” to describe

the strive for selfhood as a form of citizenship. The concept of surveillance is also integrated in Weber's work that attributes visual monitoring to the idea of allowing oneself to be subjected to the social gaze of others and considering shame as a "spectator sport." Ironically, makeover television accentuates the shame of social disapproval and at the same time assures minimization of being socially scrutinized.

In addition, Weber emphasizes that the makeover genre focuses more on women as subjects of transformation as compared with men. This gender imbalance suggests that women as compared to men may need greater assistance in their struggles to attain selfhood and that their journey to selfhood is only accomplished by modifying their appearance. Such assistance is represented in women surrendering to experts and authority figures in order to create more authentic selves, whereas men traditionally have depended on other facets for identity construction (e.g., financial success, self-determination, and physical strength). However, Weber argues that among the makeover programs that focus on male subjects, these shows raise awareness that masculinity is being challenged and remind men of the normative behaviors and appearances that are expected of them. In dealing with these cultural and social pressures that demand such makeovers, men are challenged to undergo self-improvement without "seeming to have done so" or with

minimal effort in contrast to the support needed by female subjects. From both gender standpoints, Weber proposes that the makeover text serves to link conventional forms of femininity and masculinity to the way selfhood is exposed, while reaffirming that gender regulations and traditions must be sustained.

In light of the proliferation of makeover programs, Weber provides an astute and rich examination into a genre that highlights the cultural struggles and desires individuals face to attain a self that is deplete of ambiguity. Paradoxically speaking, this intolerance for ambiguity can only be solved through extreme transformations. This book creatively dissects the ideological meaning of television makeovers, specifically by incorporating the notion that self-critique and subordination produces self-improvement and individuation which are praised. Moreover, Weber discusses the revelation of self as a result of the contradictions of subjecting to dominant principles and pressures that give rise to meaningful self-agency. Such an analysis warrants attention as themes of selfhood, citizenship, and celebrity provide implications for the impact of popular entertainment on American cultural standards of beauty and status and vice versa.

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