

# Brand New You

## Makeover Television and the American Dream

[Transcript]

### INTRODUCTION

#### **[Video clip: Extreme Makeover - Weight Loss Edition]**

-- *Like a hot mess, oh my god.*

-- *One year. What a transformation.*

-- *We started the show on my twentieth birthday and I just remember feeling so sad and desperate and just ready for change. And then you came along.*

**NARRATOR:** Since its beginnings, American television has told us intimate stories of peoples' lives of domestic comfort and human happiness. The rise of reality television told these stories about ordinary people, people like us. Makeover programs portray real people as they transform themselves into happier, healthier, more attractive people. This genre has proven extremely popular with millions of viewers watching dozens of makeover shows on network and cable television. What do makeover shows tell us about how to dress and act? How to look and feel? What do they tell us about who we are and how we might live the American dream? If we can get under the skin of American makeover television, we can investigate our contemporary American dreams and how these are shaped by our commercial media systems.

#### **[Media clip]**

-- *I have to have this dress.*

-- *I really want this cake.*

-- *We are going to win.*

### MAKEOVER TELEVISION

**NARRATOR:** Reality shows grew out of a long tradition of television documentaries, talent shows, and other programs about everyday people and unusual circumstances.

#### **[Media clip]**

-- *See you are on television, too.*

-- *Yes sir, I am. [Screams]*

**NARRATOR:** One type of reality television focuses on personal makeovers, transforming people to look and feel better about themselves. But is this idea so new? Where did it come from? And what happens to this idea when you see it on TV?

**[Media clip]** *You look so gorgeous!*

**KATHERINE SENDER:** Personal makeover shows tend to focus on the self as the central problem. The appearance, the body, the hair, tend to be the things that are the primary focus of the makeover. They use hosts or experts, usually people who have some kind of background in the field to make recommendations of what should change. And they focus on instruction and a lot of that instruction is consumer advice. They are very much centered around the idea of the reveal, so you have the before image and you have the after image, but the reveal is kind of the big emotional moment.

**BRENDA WEBER:** What constitutes a successful makeover across most of the shows has to do with some visually discernable difference between the before and after. And you need those images juxtaposed on the screen. This is what the before looked like. Here is what the after look like. And the show itself is the during.

*[Media clip] Oh my gosh!*

**SUSAN MURRAY:** The main goal perhaps of makeover TV shows, we can approach them in a number of ways, we can think of it as the main goal of the producers as to provide happy entertainment for people but also entertainment that provides a kind of view into somebody else's issues.

**MISHA KAVKA:** There is also in the makeover shows, and these are the personal makeover shows, there is a really strong sense that the outside both exactly mirrors the inside. And that if you can change one then you can change the other.

*[Video clip: What Not To Wear] Inside she's beautiful. The most compassionate, lovely person I know. So to see her on the outside look the way she is on the inside, it's really very touching. She looks gorgeous.*

**MISHA KAVKA:** So this sense that outside and inside match. The outside is something that can be changed, can be cut into, can be painted, can be dressed, can be re-dressed. And hence the inside is also going to be improved through this trajectory.

*[Video clip: Starting Over] You have the right to be who you are and to be a pioneer in every area of your life.*

**DANA HELLER:** Contemporary makeover shows are geared at getting us to reflect on what it means to be in possession of a self. What it means to be in the driver's seat. How to manage the self. And in the context of the United States, I'd say it's part of a long standing historical social contract. That we have a responsibility, that we have an obligation to know ourselves and that's a very modern idea.

*[Video clip: Funny Face] I don't want my hair cut. I don't want my eyebrows up or down. I want them right where they are.*

**NARRATOR:** Central to the American Dream is this idea of a reflexive self, where we can see ourselves from the outside and make choices about how to transform our lives. How does reality television re-craft these messages of aspiration and fulfillment?

**KATHERINE SENDER:** We tend to think about makeover shows, or the makeover, as a pretty new phenomenon. And these kinds of shows have been around since about the 2000s. But, in fact, the idea of personal transformation has been central to the idea of the American dream.

**[Movie clip: *The Great Gatsby*] I always knew that I could climb. I could only climb if I climbed alone.**

**BRENDA WEBER:** One of the things that stands as a sort of hallmark of the United States is what we call the self-made man or the self-made woman and a way in which one uses their own will power and tenacity and motivation in order to achieve what we call the American dream.

**NARRATOR:** The American dream is of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement.

**KATHY PEISS:** The expression the American dream is coined in 1931 by a historian, James Truslow Adams. And what he means by that is an evocation of a set of values that moves away from the European ranks and classes and the restrictiveness of a European world in which everyone fits into a social class. And the immigrant experience, as transformation, is a kind of makeover. I think actually fits closer to the model of makeover that we have today that involves a transformation of the outer appearance so that you can get along.

**NARRATOR:** James Truslow Adams encapsulated existing values of hard work, upward mobility, and individualism in his expression, "the American dream." American media, film, magazines, and television have been central in distributing ideas about lives worth living. As TV gained popularity, it re-worked these themes for its own ends, promoting the post-war consumer society.

**MISHA KAVKA:** So there is, on the one hand, the American dream, and everyone comes here in order to invent themselves and the whole capacity of the American dream is that you can also re-invent yourself. But there's also already this notion, I think quite early on, that the whole thing is a show, that it really is about appearances.

**KATHY PEISS:** So the first makeover was in 1936 in *Mademoiselle* magazine. The woman was Barbara Phillips, who was a nurse, and they brought her in and they sent her to a dentist, had her teeth capped. They put her in a wig, they put her in a glamorous gown, made up her face, and turned her into a glamour girl. And she was called "the madeover girl," and that's where the term "makeover" comes from.

**BRENDA WEBER:** The makeover is a part of a long history of narratives of transformation. And if you want to think about film and television, we can go back to now voyageur where

Betty Davis has this fabulous kind of makeover aboard a ship. So the idea of the makeover isn't specific to media, it's not specific to the twentieth or twenty-first century. I really think it's as old as narrative itself.

**SUSAN MURRAY:** The way that the makeover narratively is constructed, in particular, the way that it's tied to the American dream. The way that it promises some sort of transformation and salvation through consumerism is tied to obviously historical narratives in the U.S., but also narratives that have been around since early television and even radio.

**[Video clip: Queen for a Day]**

-- *Would you like to be queen for a day?*

-- *Yes!*

**SUSAN MURRAY:** We can look at these misery programs that were part of the post-war American television, like *Queen for a Day*, for example, and *Glamour Girl*. And these shows were about makeovers, but promised something that was a consumer product that would therefore transform their lives in some way.

**[Video clip: Queen for a Day]** *This is Eva Berch. Mrs. Berch has a boy who is fifteen and he has cerebral palsy. She would like a wheelchair and a special bike for him.*

**SUSAN MURRAY:** When I say misery programs, they are focusing on sad stories that women would bring about their lives. Usually as a result of their husbands being out of work, some sort of level of poverty or struggle, too many children not enough goods.

**DANA HELLER:** One of the great criticisms of shows, such as *Queen for a Day*, is that it's so horribly voyeuristic that it engages in such a vulgar level of schadenfreude that we should really be ashamed of ourselves somehow when we look back and realize how popular these shows were. But, in fact, audiences tend to tune in at the very end, which suggests that they really weren't interested in the stories of misery and despair. They were interested in the stuff. They were interested in the goods and they were interested in the prizes that the most unfortunate woman, whoever was voted most unfortunate woman, would win.

**[Video clip: Queen for a Day]** *...four dozen coronations of red roses for you.*

**KATHY PEISS:** Over time, I think that notion of the American dream, especially by the late twentieth century, is almost entirely a concept of freedom that is based on consumerism and achieving fulfillment and self-expression and self-realization. Not necessarily through hard work and establishing yourself in a business, but rather by being recognized for success through celebrity, achieving wealth. That there's been some transformation of what the American dream is.

**NARRATOR:** The American dream has gone through its own transformation in the twentieth century. Today's television is telling new stories about how to achieve success and happiness, how to feel in control of our lives, how to shape a world of material goods.

What do they offer us in a time of global economic uncertainty when the structures of social class, family, or religion hold less sway? According to these stories, what kind of person are we supposed to be?

**[Video clip: *The Biggest Loser*]** *David, you can't come in here and be the same old guy you've been. Mr. Dangit, Mr. Quit, Mr. Give Up, Mr. Victim, you don't get to do that here.*

## **REMAKING THE SELF**

**NARRATOR:** Makeover programs offer us compelling templates for living in our fast moving, success driven world. They tell us who, and what, has value. Some of these values are material, how to earn more money and what to buy with it. Other values are moral and relational. Who is a good person? And what is important in life? How can we read makeover shows as a code that tells us what, and who, matter?

**[Media clip]** *People say that life is better when you're blonde. It's, like, life is better when you have big boobs. Way better.*

**MISHA KAVKA:** And what the makeover show does is to remind us that certainly in the American cultural context, image is not just appearance. Image itself is capital.

### **[Video clip: *What Not To Wear*]**

*-- If Alana were to come in dressed like I saw her in the video tape, I'd talk to her a little bit about dressing appropriately for an interview.*

*-- It's already perfect.*

*-- Now, you really look the part of the job that you want.*

*-- Hugs and goodbye.*

**MISHA KAVKA:** Makeover shows offer then to transform image capital, to raise image capital, to kind of bring one several rungs up on the ladder. And in doing so, however, they're working to a particular model. There's one model for good female image capital, you know. And there's another model for good male image capital.

**KATHY PEISS:** Because of a long history of definition of women as being the gender who is beautiful, who is sexualized, who is objectified, and even with all the changes that have taken place in womens' lives I think that does not disappear. And the belief that you can improve yourself, your fortunes, your love life, your ability to navigate the world, by improving your appearance. I believe men increasingly think that. But that is so deeply imbedded in what femininity means.

**[Video clip: *10 Years Younger*]** *And it would be, of course, very nice to have a man in my life.*

**BRENDA WEBER:** Invariably, whether it's style or plastic surgery or any other kind of makeover, there's a sense that, just like with the self, that there's a coherent self, there should be a coherent, locatable, and not vascillating notion of femininity.

**[Video clip: *The Swan*]**

-- *You look hot. How are you feeling?*

-- *I feel so feminine!*

-- *Finally!*

-- *I know!*

**BRENDA WEBER:** So there's a way in which the makeover itself reinforces a notion of not only normative femininity, but a sort of heterosexist normative femininity where it's always geared toward re-making women so that they'll be attractive to men. Or so that they will be re-attractive to their male partners.

**[Video clip: *10 Years Younger*]** *She's got a good body.*

**SUSAN MURRAY:** The people that go on makeover shows certainly vary, yet they do tend to be white, middle class, sometimes working class, contestants, largely female but there's more men on the makeover shows that are particularly that are about weight loss.

**[Video clip: *The Biggest Loser*]** *The Biggest Loser.*

**BRENDA WEBER:** The television makeover is not uninterested in men, but it does tend to be a more feminized discourse. When men are in the makeover, there are particular strategies that television makeovers use in order to give them more credibility, more say, more options for resistance than woman typically have.

**[Video clip: *The Biggest Loser*]** *This is a game. I'm going to do what it takes to get to the end.*

**KATHERINE SENDER:** When *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* debuted in 2003, it was really interesting for a couple of reasons. The first was that it was the first time that openly gay men were being recognized for their work in the style industry. So as hair dressers, as makeup artists, as designers and so on. And so it was really striking to see that openly recognized on television. The other issue was that for the first time it was heterosexual men that were being positioned very much as the problem. And not only that they needed to become better boyfriends and husbands, but also that they needed to become better professionals and more upwardly mobile.

**[Video clip: *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*]**

-- *Have you ever thought about pushing yourself to, like, tackle that dyslexia or anything?*

-- *I feel if I ever did that, I'd be dangerous.*

**DANA HELLER:** One of the wonderful aspects of the makeover mythos, not only in American culture, but in American television is that it's always adaptable and able to expand to embrace and integrate new groups of people. So the makeover mythos can include people of all races, people of all ethnicities, people of all sexual orientations, all gendered manifestations.

**[Video clip: TRANSform Me]** *It's about finding your inner sexy. I was still the same person even though I had this exterior on. And for years before I transitioned, I always knew who I was inside. I was just afraid. I had to change the inside first.*

**NARRATOR:** A recent survey of more than 2,000 hours of television found that only 10% of makeover candidates were men and 25% were people of color. The makeover process reveals that our culture values conventionally gendered and white standards of attractiveness.

**MISHA KAVKA:** There is still kind of one model of image capital for women. However racially or ethnically marked that body is. And so that racially and ethnically marked body is basically meant to be de-marked.

**[Video clip: The Swan]**

*-- Kim's kind of decided at the last minute to do her nose. She's very specific about how she wants it to look.*

*-- No pig snout. No pinch.*

**MISHA KAVKA:** So that any kind of distinguishing ethnic features, noses and lips and ears and eyes, are meant to be kind of either, you know, played down or made up in order to look less marked or in the surgery programs actually cut into.

**[Video clip: The Swan]** *Wow! Oh my god.*

**BRENDA WEBER:** Typically race isn't mentioned except as a kind of style marker. Pink would look so great with your skin tone.

**[Video clip: What Not To Wear]** *Well, the great thing about your skin tone being mocha is that you can play with all kinds of color. You can do jewel tones. You can do red lips...*

**BRENDA WEBER:** I've never seen a procedure where they actively try to whiten the skin tone, but there have been ways in which whiteness as a category to aspire toward have been written on to these subjects' bodies.

**[Video clip: What Not To Wear]**

*-- Hilarious.*

*-- Okay. I'm afraid to ask what you think. So lets just dive right in.*

*-- Did you just say hilarious?*

*-- Yeah.*

*-- What's so hilarious?*

*-- Well, okay this maybe looks a little tacky but this looks like I'm going to have a cup of tea with the nuns from the local church. I mean really...*

**BRENDA WEBER:** Probably there's no better example than in The Swan. Even though the executive producer and life coach is Nely Galán, who is a major player at Telemundo and is

very proud of her Latina heritage. So we have this kind of interesting contradiction because we have a Latina woman who is bringing women of diversity into this experience for what she calls a process of transformation and empowerment. And yet the women end up at the end all with very straight, usually blonde hair, very white teeth, very big eyes.

**[Video clip: Ambush Makeover]**

-- *I'm going to take the first dread here. Here we go.*

-- *I love my hair. I love my hair.*

**BRENDA WEBER:** I believe that makeovers at large tend to work through a process of ethnic anonymity where it's about trying to erase certain kind of pronounced ethnic markers from the body.

**[Video clip: Ambush Makeover]**

-- *I still don't like my hair, but it's time to make a change.*

-- *I delivered Coolio a sharp new look. Now, he's CEO material. I'm William...*

**SUSAN MURRAY:** Not only do makeover shows promise the transformation of the self, they also have an implicit promise, many of them do, that's related to a kind of upward mobility that might be related to class. And it's about being trained in the taste and aesthetics and behavior of the upper classes as well, or maybe it's upper-middle.

**[Video clip: Style By Jury]**

-- *What do you do for a living?*

-- *I drive trucks.*

**BRENDA WEBER:** So the notion that one can make the self is very much predicated on a so-called class free meritocracy where it's really not necessary to know somebody or to have a certain kind of bloodline or to have been born in a particular place. But that it's really all on the individual that they will rise or fall based on their effort.

**[Video clip: Style By Jury]**

-- *Whoa!*

-- *What is the best thing that you just heard?*

-- *That I look more professional. That I didn't look like a truck driver which is great.*

**KATHY PEISS:** As is true with a great deal of U.S. history, there's a very, very strong mythology that's not necessarily born out in the social history of the United States. Geographic mobility is great. It's really great. But it's connection to economic mobility and social mobility is much less clear.

**NARRATOR:** Makeover shows embody the American dream. Through hard work, we can become a more valuable person, professionally and morally. Different types of makeovers offer different routes to these values. Some shows replace people's clothes and hairstyles, suggesting that consumption guarantees upward mobility.



**[Media clip]** *I think she looks outstanding.*

**NARRATOR:** Weight loss programs emphasize that hard work and will power are the means of self-improvement.

**[Video clip: *The Biggest Loser*]** *Do some double digits here.*

**NARRATOR:** Surgery shows offer a quick fix where luck and money lead to happiness ever after. These alternatives show that the American dream is not a single, all encompassing idea, but can accommodate different values and routes to attain these. Yet shows encourage makeover candidates to adopt their emphasis on personal appearance through consumerism.

**[Media clip]** *I love her style, but it could be a little better.*

## **WATCHING YOU WATCHING ME**

**[Video clip: *Honey We're Killing the Kids!*]** *With the latest, state of the art, computer technology I can offer you a projection of how your children might look in the years to come...*

**NARRATOR:** The contemporary version of the American dream requires us to be reflexive, to see ourselves from the outside, and to think about who we are and what we want to be. Makeover television uses discrete recording technologies to shame candidates into greater self-reflexivity.

**[Video clip: *What Not To Wear*]**

-- *Okay. Lets take a look at Bonnie.*

-- *All right.*

-- *Bonnie's a forty-two year old supermom who...*

**KATHERINE SENDER:** Central to makeover shows and reality television in general is the use of new, highly mobile recording techniques. So cameras and microphones that are really unobtrusive can be controlled remotely and so on. And what this has meant is that the genre is kind of predicated on a high level of surveillance.

**[Video clip: *What Not To Wear*]** *Okay, we're stopping this right here, Bonnie. What's on the bottom half...*

**SUSAN MURRAY:** Depending on the show, the surveillance can actually play a larger or lesser role in the process of the makeover. When I think of extreme ends, I think of *The Swan* which had, would present the person's problems on their body mapped out on a graphic for all of us to see and then in their underwear and it would be turned and this graphic of their body would be turned against a grid. And we would see each part of their body that was problematic so for all of us as viewers to have this critical eye to the subject.

**[Video clip: What Not To Wear]**

-- Lisa, what's going through your mind right now?

-- I'm still kind of in shock that I'm actually here.

-- Well, lets take a look at this secret footage and we might be able to figure out why you are here.

**MISHA KAVKA:** But mostly the surveillance asks the participants to survey themselves. I would think of it less than surveillance than a certain kind of refracted gaze. It asks the participant I think usually the women to put herself in a position where it's not her looking at herself but rather to put herself in a position where she has to look as others do at her.

**[Video clip: Style By Jury]**

-- Hi there!

-- Those people have been watching you very very closely since the second you walked into this room.

**KATHERINE SENDER:** And one consequence of this is that surveillance is very much associated with shame. So when we feel ashamed it's because we feel seen in a particular way, we feel seen as deficient or doing something embarrassing, but seeing as if from the inside. And so the genre very much relies upon the production of shame through these kinds of surveillance techniques.

**[Video clip: Style By Jury] All right!**

**[Video clip: The Biggest Loser]**

-- Everybody else is hurting too but they're doing the work.

-- So am I.

-- Take your knees off the ground.

**DANA HELLER:** In makeover television shame functions as a pedagogical device. The idea being again, that you really have to be humiliated and brought to your knees in order to open yourself to the possibility of radical transformation.

**[Video clip: The Biggest Loser]**

You just rolled your eyes at me again. Didn't I tell you not to roll your eyes at me. This ain't working. Come here, let me show you something. Let me show you something, come here. When you're ready to be serious, come back in my gym.

**NARRATOR:** Shaming is not equally applied to everyone however, women, working class people, and people of color are more likely to be shamed into seeing ourselves as needing self-improvement. But what do audiences make of these shaming strategies?

**KATHERINE SENDER:** Criticisms of these shows tend to assume that we're all just sitting on the couches, laughing and pointing at the people on the screen. But when you actually talk to people, it's actually much more complicated than that. And there's two things going on, one is that on one hand audiences do see some people as needing to behave better and

that if it takes going on television and having millions of people seeing them with their embarrassing habits then that's actually a good thing.

**[Video clip: What Not to Wear]**

-- *Your boss had to talk to you several times about what you were wearing to work. I mean do you see what your boss was getting at finally?*

-- *You're right; finally I've got it.*

**KATHERINE SENDER:** If it takes that extreme response to get them to change their ways, then so be it. And I see that as a kind of functional shaming. But on the other hand, the audiences were very critical of producers who they felt were humiliating candidates on shows simply to make a buck. And this came up particularly around *The Biggest Loser*. Where people were very sensitive to the idea and to the representation of overweight people being made to do things that were undignified and believed that this was simply to do with increased ratings and making more money.

**NARRATOR:** Makeover shows use surveillance techniques to encourage candidates to be reflexive, to look at themselves through the eyes of the hosts, the camera, and the audience. The genre demands that people trade their privacy to gain access to the bounty of American consumer culture that they could not otherwise afford. But audiences don't necessarily like how the shows make the people on-screen feel and are sympathetic to their personal challenges. The realness of the makeover candidates is central to audience's empathy with them.

**[Video clip: What Not to Wear]** *I'm a little embarrassed, and a little mortified, and a little ashamed of how I've allowed myself to walk around.*

## **THE REAL YOU**

**[Video clip: Queer Eye for the Straight Guy]**

-- *Isn't it great to finally come out as who you are?*

-- *It would be sort of a burden off of your shoulders.*

**NARRATOR:** Personal authenticity, being the real you, is central to American values of individualism and self-expression. Reality television builds on these values using intimate surveillance to suggest that we see the candidates on the shows as they really are. Yet, how real is reality television? What do viewers see as real and what do they know is constructed?

**MISHA KAVKA:** Reality television is part artifice, part authenticity, right? And reality television is the television mode that mixes these things most shamelessly, if we're talking about shame. So that absolutely kind of shows us as far as it's able, how these kinds of productions and how these things are put together.

**[Video clip: Ambush Makeover]**

-- *Right.*  
-- *And I'm going to shave off your beard.*  
-- *Uh huh.*  
-- *Will you let me?*  
-- *No.*  
-- *No!*

**SUSAN MURRAY:** One of the basic tenants of reality television is that these are ordinary people in some way. These are their real lives or present that nobodies acting. So in that way they are ordinary, there is an important point of identification with the viewer that's supposed to respond to this, that they could be me. Anybody can be picked out of the audience; we all have access to these shows. We all could be transformed by any reality show.

**[Video clip: Ambush Makeover] Yay!**

**SUSAN MURRAY:** The building of emotion and the expression of emotion is really central to reality TVs claim to realism, or its play with realism in construction. And certainly in the makeover it's present. Both in kind of the breakdown that often occurs, the expression of some kind of shame, or sadness, or confession about their lives.

**[Video clip: The Biggest Loser]**

-- *I just don't know when to stop.*  
-- *I help everybody else.*  
-- *I'm tired, I work all day.*  
-- *I just don't care anymore about myself.*

**SUSAN MURRAY:** And then of course on the other side the expression of relief, or of happiness in some way and tears usually are involved in the reveal. As again, the connection to the true self is supposedly reached.

**[Video clip: The Biggest Loser]**

-- *Too good to be true.*  
-- *My self-esteem is so horrendous, it's a wonder I make it day to day.*

**NARRATOR:** How are feelings put to work in makeover television? Through emotional labor, candidates, hosts, and audiences generate economic and affective capital. We work on our feelings, we value self-expression, and we become invested in the candidates and the process.

**MISHA KAVKA:** There's all sorts of labor that goes on in these makeover shows. There's the various forms of professional labor first and foremost. All of these people are providing a certain kind of service, a professional service within the service industry. And they're kind of doing their professional labor on this program. But I think the core is really the emotional labor of the participant herself or himself.

**[Video clip: Extreme Makeover]**

-- For Casey, two conflicting feelings: excitement and apprehension.

-- I love you, too. I mean I'm pretty sure that Dr. Palmen is, has really good things in mind for me and I'm sure it's going to turn out good. It's just scary.

**MISHA KAVKA:** We're far more interested in the kind of work that the participant has to do to still her fear at undergoing the knife, or to still her anger at being told that her clothes make her look like an old lady.

**[Video clip: 10 Years Younger]** *She looks like matronly and tired. She looks like she has absolutely ignored herself.*

**BRENDA WEBER:** Say The Biggest Loser is a really good example. One of the things that's required seemingly is for the subject to confess feelings of failure, to tell these stories of shame, to talk about the frustrations and anxieties that they have felt because of their size.

**[Video clip: The Biggest Loser]** *I hate the way I look, I hate the way I feel, and want nothing more but to live life like a strong capable man that I am.*

**BRENDA WEBER:** And through the process of the transformation, voice appreciation and happiness and gratitude, both to the trainers and to the larger structure that The Biggest Loser offers.

**MISHA KAVKA:** We can, in fact, feel very strongly about people that are on the other side of the screen. The other side of the TV screen that we can feel with these people, we can feel for these people. Now for me, that means that television itself is this technology of immediacy and that kind of proximity for me means that the medium is one of intimacy.

**NARRATOR:** Television's skill at creating feelings of intimacy with people on screen is central to the appeal of makeover programs. Even though we know the shows are constructed by producers and editors, we're invested in their emotional realism. We feel that we see the candidates true self revealed through the process of the makeover.

**[Video clip: 10 Years Younger]** *Oh my god!*

**[Video clip: Made]** *I have always just wanted to show everybody my true self. I was classified as a freak, whether I liked it or not.*

**SUSAN MURRAY:** The idea of authenticity certainly is central to virtually all genres or subgenres of reality television. And in terms of makeover shows it gets played out with both. Certainly that these are ordinary people or real people that are engaging in this way, but that there is a process of finding something authentic in the self in the process of the makeover.

**[Video clip: The Biggest Loser]** *Sometimes the biggest changes are within. Take a look...*

**SUSAN MURRAY:** So that through the makeover the authentic self is revealed. Both to the individual who sort of had an idea about it perhaps before but wasn't really clear on who the self really was but also to their family and friends and to the audience.

**BRENDA WEBER:** The one ideological system that the makeover doesn't seem to ever fall back on is what's called a sort of post-modern identity. Or a way that we can think about in play performance as a part of how we understand this subject. It very much wants to isolate and to locate a coherent self so it's not about, can you be this one day and that the other? It's I found who I actually am, and the promises that I will now continue to live in that state from hence forward.

**[Video clip: What Not to Wear]** *With these new clothes it definitely brings out my personality and who I am and who I've always been on the inside, it's just reinforcing it.*

**BRENDA WEBER:** What is so anxiety producing is the question of the truth of the self and the truth of the appearance.

**[Video clip: The Picture of Dorian Gray]** *If only the picture could change and I could be always as I am now.*

**KATHY PEISS:** Because in the 19th century and earlier to re-create your outward appearance without an inward transformation is to many people to engage in deception, in falsity, and artifice especially for women. By the 20th century some people still believed that.

**[Video clip: All About Eve]** *Eve!*

**KATHERINE SENDER:** The questionable authenticity was central to how people talked about makeover shows that featured cosmetic surgery. Cause whereas they tend to be quite sympathetic towards makeover candidates in general when it came to surgery shows that was one place where they felt quite contemptuous of the people on screen. And also quite embarrassed about their own watching of these shows there was something that they felt was not seemingly about their own fascination. And as I talk to people what I realized was that this was very much to do with the fact that surgery shows weren't necessarily concerned with inner transformation. They were seen as being very superficial and unlike other shows where there's this presumption that your inner self, your beautiful inner self will shine forth outside. Surgery shows were just seen as being fixing something on the outside in the way where it was just a kind of quick fix.

**[Video clip: The Swan]** *Tonight, two amazing transformations but only one will win a spot in the pageant and a chance to be crowned The Swan.*

**SUSAN MURRAY:** There was a response to those shows, both a fascination and a criticism of those shows. The Swan in particular was a bit controversial. It had a kind of surreal edge to it as well, in opposition to The Biggest Loser. It used these very artificial means to transform somebody and not just makeover and diet. They would have extreme diets,

liposuction, extreme plastic surgery on their face so that they would end up looking like almost a different person.

**[Video clip: *The Swan*]**

-- *And emerged a new woman*

-- *Almost didn't recognize her at first, she looks beautiful.*

**[Video clip: *Bridalplasty*]**

-- *With the highest score you are the top bride!*

-- *It feels amazing to finally win a challenge and my boobs!*

**KATHERINE SENDER:** Perhaps the most extreme example of a plastic surgery show that doesn't even pretend to any internal transformation was a show called, *Bridalplasty*, that was on the E channel. And this took twelve women who were just about to get married and each week they competed in these wedding themed challenges, and the winner would get plastic surgery of choice and the winner would get a boob job or a nose job or something like that. And then the loser would get ejected from the show.

**[Video clip: *Bridalplasty*]** *Your wedding will go on, it just may not be perfect.*

**KATHERINE SENDER:** This was a show where I just felt like I couldn't feel at all sympathetic towards the characters. And partly because there was no sense of interiority, they seemed entirely superficial. And I enjoyed the show, I thought it was really funny but it also made me feel quite uncomfortable because I felt like this was an example of one of those shows where I was actually sort of laughing and pointing.

**[Video clip: *Bridalplasty*]** *It just really upset me that she would come in and say that to me and then sit at your table.*

**[Video clip: *Dr. 90210*]** *It was kind of a sister's thing. I was like "well she's getting better ones I want to have good ones."*

**NARRATOR:** Surgery shows lack of interiority and emotional realism distances audiences from the makeover candidates. Most other shows offer points of identification for viewers, keeping us invested in the candidates and the shows. How are candidates and audiences emotional labor capitalized by makeover television to respond to the challenges of current media economies?

**[Video clip: *What Not to Wear*]**

-- *Thank you so much and thank you for all the help.*

-- *You look gorgeous.*

**SELLING THE SOUL**

**[Video clip: *Advertisement*]**

- *This is a deodorant.*
- *Not "a" deodorant Dan, Stopette Spray Deodorant. And there is nothing sissy about it.*
- *Ah, go on.*
- *Now, what's my line?*

**NARRATOR:** The American television system has been commercially funded since its beginnings. And shaped the American dream as a story about conspicuous consumption as a marker of success. How advertisers funded shows has changed over time, however. Audiences are increasingly fragmented and distracted challenging advertisers and producers to find creative ways of getting viewers attention. Makeover television is ideally suited to meet this challenge by linking personal authenticity with promoting products in highly naturalistic settings.

**[Video clip: *The Biggest Loser*]** *Rachel, tell me when you've completed four up and back.*

**[Video clip: *Queen for a Day*]** *You have a big... catalogue and a gift certificate.*

**SUSAN MURRAY:** It used to be that people would see those old TV clips and be sort of shocked by the way that product placement works. And yet as we move into an era in the early 2,000 with changes and technologies, networks fears about DVRs for example, and how consumers and viewers can then skip over advertising. There had to be an alternative for them in their minds of how they might attract advertisers within the text.

**KATHERINE SENDER:** Advertisers need to find different ways of advertising their products, and one very effective way of doing this is in product placement. So the host says, "you need to use this product!" the hairspray, the shoes, whatever and it gets integrated into the script.

**[Video clip: *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*]**

- *And painted your entire apartment.*
- *Wow!*
- *That's a Benjamin Moore color, it's called Concord Ivory.*

**SUSAN MURRAY:** Within the environment of television, that's pretty central to the larger industrial imperatives of television. The way that it wants to provide easy answers through commercialism, that their commercials have to be in an environment in which questions are not too troubling or not too difficult to solve.

**[Video clip: *What Not to Wear*]** *I guess I never realized how miserable I probably was to live with and to be around with all that negativity.*

**NARRATOR:** Makeover shows assume that shopping and self-esteem are simple solutions to the problems of life. But audiences don't necessarily agree with the expert's opinions and candidate's resistance to the host's advice can be one of the pleasures of the shows.

**[Video clip: *What Not to Wear*]**



-- *Can I be honest?*  
-- *Of course!*  
-- *I think this is the ugliest thing I've ever seen.*  
-- *Oh!*

**DANA HELLER:** On one hand we're given opportunities for endless product endorsement but well we can't necessarily predict in advance what products and objects mean to the people who consume them. And how they refashion themselves in relationship to consumer culture.

**[Video clip: Ambush Makeover]**

-- *Hi, I'm Anthony. You're on Ambush Makeover today.*  
-- *Really?*  
-- *I saw you from over there and I was like I need to go see if she wants a change because she needs one bad.*  
-- *I don't think so!*  
-- *You don't think so?*  
-- *I'm positively very happy, I've never been happier in my life.*

**KATHERINE SENDER:** People are actually very skeptical about the consumer advice on these shows. So, they'll criticize the hosts for really bad taste or for inappropriate kinds of advice that they offer people.

**[Video clip: What Not to Wear]** *I don't like the jacket; I think it's horrible.*

**KATHERINE SENDER:** But there's another level, which in some way is a little bit more troubling. Which is that even though they criticize the particular advice in a given show, they don't criticize the genres entire assumption that consumer culture is the appropriate place to solve the problems of the self.

**[Video clip: What Not to Wear]**

-- *It's a very expensive look.*  
-- *I did feel the need to tell you what expensive designers I was wearing with this I don't feel the need to tell you like what I'm wearing.*

**[Video clip: Extreme Makeover - Weight Loss Edition]** *My friends at Wal-Mart, they heard about your story. And they want to help you continue to live better.*

**NARRATOR:** The format of makeover shows allows for easy product placement where companies pay the shows to advertise their goods and services within the narrative. Makeover candidates don't necessarily follow the shows advice but they rarely criticize the central idea, that consumer goods can solve our most deep-rooted problems. Through consumerism, surveillance, and shame, reality television has subtly transformed our ideas of happiness and success. With what consequences for the American dream?

**[Video clip: Extreme Makeover - Weight Loss Edition]** Here's a \$50,000 gift card from Wal-Mart.

## **REALITY TELEVISION**

**[Video clip: Queen for a Day]** Queen for a day!

**NARRATOR:** American makeover television developed from earlier stories about self-transformation using new technologies to sell product and self-improvement along the way. Makeover television demands that we re-think our ideas of the American dream in the 21st century.

**[Video clip: The Biggest Loser]**

-- 274, you lost 8 pounds!

-- This has been nothing but a dream come true. I saw this path and it surpassed all the dreams that I have ever had, and it's setting me up for the happiest life that I feel like I can live.

**BRENDA WEBER:** One of the things that I think is really fascinating is that particularly through contemporary makeover television we're seeing a different iteration of what constitutes the American dream. So that one has to be both happy and confident, as well as a new sort of imperative for celebrity. "I'm famous and therefore I've made it." That was never a part of the way it was conceptualized in the 30s.

**[Video clip: The Swan]** Beautiful.

**KATHY PEISS:** The understanding of the self is shifting to be a self that is understood more in relation to others. So that there are others who are scrutinizing you and in the process of that scrutiny, you are beginning to imagine yourself in this outer point looking in.

**[Video clip: What Not To Wear]** Oh my god! This mirror is the worst thing that has ever happened to me.

**[Video clip: The Swan]** Oh my god!

**NARRATOR:** New versions of the American dream require a self-reflexivity that would have been unimaginable to James Truslow Adams, with his faith and hard work and meritocracy. How are these new values being exported by makeover shows as they are circulated through contemporary global media systems?

**KATHERINE SENDER:** Makeover shows aren't uniquely American. They didn't originate here and we can see examples of shows like What Not to Wear that was actually originally in the UK and was re-made for an American market.

**[Video clip: What Not to Wear (UK Version)]**

-- Do you think she should show some cleavage a bit more often?  
-- We don't have cleavage occasions here.

**KATHERINE SENDER:** But we could argue that they have kind of quintessentially American values so things like individualism, consumerism, upward mobility that we are increasingly circulating around the globe.

**[Video clip: *The Biggest Loser (Swedish Version)*] ... *Biggest Loser***

**KATHERINE SENDER:** So a show like *The Biggest Loser* has been really popular, not only in the US but also has versions in 26 different countries or regions around the world. So this really begs the question of what audiences outside of America, outside of the West, might be doing with these television shows. And on the one hand we could be cautious or anxious about American values, kind of blanketing the world through makeover television. But on the other hand one would hope that audiences in other parts of the world would seemingly kind of think about these messages a bit more critically.

**DANA HELLER:** If we try to understand not only the commercial nature of the American television industry but the pleasures that the industry generates, well then I think we have to look very differently at the kinds of transformation narratives that television has tended to traffic in. How does television's commercial imperative play along side the genuine pleasures and the fascination with content that keeps us returning to television even when we know that we're being sold to advertisers in the process?

**[Video clip: *The Biggest Loser*] Our partners at Jennie-O are here with us tonight throwing a taco party for some of our favorite biggest loser family members, and the entire audience!**

**NARRATOR:** Television didn't invent the idea of the American dream but it has shaped it to insist on abundant consumerism to promote the self. Makeover programs have situated this dream in the most intimate parts of ourselves; our feelings of worth and authenticity. The shows demand that we are self-reflexive, observant, and expressive. They locate the rightful place of reflexivity and feeling on the most ruthless ground of consumer-capitalism. And they export this particular version of the American dream around the world. But what do audiences do with these shows? In the fantasy of before and after, do we wonder what people's lives are like afterwards? How is makeover television an enabling of a different view of life; of the world? However, superficial makeover television might seem it addresses a question that has long troubled philosophers, spiritual leaders, and ordinary people trying to get by: how to live.

**[End Credits]**

**SUSAN MURRAY:** I don't think I've ever really wanted to be on a makeover show.

**BRENDA WEBER:** Yes, absolutely! I absolutely want to go on a makeover show.

**KATHERINE SENDER:** No, I wouldn't.

**DANA HELLER:** Yes and no.

**BRENDA WEBER:** There are lots of things that I'm still thinking about that I haven't done yet.

**MISHA KAVKA:** I have never wanted to go on a makeover show. You realize that there is something just completely freaky about doing a documentary about makeover programs and having to sit under the lights.

[END]