



**THE GREAT AMERICAN  
MAKEOVER**  
**TELEVISION, HISTORY, NATION**

EDITED AND INTRODUCED BY  
DANA HELLER

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*Again, for G. T., makeover artist extraordinaire*

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Dana Heller  
Norfolk, Virginia

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## CHAPTER 1

# BEFORE: “THINGS JUST KEEP GETTING BETTER . . .”

DANA HELLER

A DISTINCTIVE SUBGENRE OF REALITY TELEVISION, contemporary makeover shows invite us to participate in fantasies of individual as well as national transformation and advancement. Consider, for example, ABC's successful series, *The Biggest Loser*, a show dedicated to the dangerous “pathology of fatness” and its threat not only to the overweight contestants who compete throughout the season to lose weight and attain the strength and confidence associated with “hard bodies,” but also to the United States and its ability to function as a healthy, unassailable nation.<sup>1</sup> A thinner citizenry is a more desirable citizenry, the series suggests, and contestants must demonstrate fierce discipline, motivational team-spirit, and theatrical emotional candor in order to realize their makeover from fat to fit, or from object of ridicule to agent of self-control. The national ramifications of this metamorphosis are plainly expressed in one fitness coach's reference to himself as “America's trainer.” *The Biggest Loser*, from this perspective, conveys a double meaning: not only does it refer to the contestant who sheds the most flab, but also to all nonparticipants in the nation's collective boot camp, those who are marked by the bodily and psychological stigma of national nonbelonging—excessive fat being one such obvious stigma. Interestingly, what American makeover shows often tell us is that self-realization and conformity to cultural ideals are twin virtues founded on one's unrealized desire for belonging: in this sense, makeover shows promise to make subjects more truly themselves by making them look, dress, decorate, and desire as others ostensibly do.

Increasingly we witness reality television's preference for programming arranged around the theme of self-transformation. We see it in makeover

shows that annex and transform the private space of the home (e.g., *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, *Design on a Dime*, *Trading Spaces*, *While You Were Out*), in shows that arbitrate and surgically transform the body (e.g., *Extreme Makeover*, *The Swan*, *I Want a Famous Face*), in shows that transform the dynamics of the intimate familial relations (*Supernanny*, *Wife Swap*, *Nanny 911*), in shows that promise to transform ordinary persons into celebrities and celebrities into ordinary persons (e.g., *American Idol*, *I Want to Be a Hilton*, *The Osbournes*, *Simple Life*), and in shows that perform a total overhaul of consumer lifestyle (*Queer Eye For the Straight Guy*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Girl*, *Pimp My Ride*). Some of these shows have proved controversial, eliciting both protest and praise from audiences and critics; however, few if any television commentators have noted the striking congruity between makeover as contemporary televisual format and makeover as a distinctive national historical myth. Indeed, in the United States, where ratings for shows such as *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* have posted higher than popular scripted dramas, gaining audiences in a surge that has stunned industry executives, the complex cultural origins of makeover narrative can be broadly traced to myths of American expansionism, evangelicalism, and immigration. Robert Thompson, Director of the Center for the Study of Popular Television at Syracuse University, summarizes these connections:

If you had to describe the American mythos in one single word, “reinvention” really would not be a bad choice. One could argue that from the time of the Pilgrims’ arriving at Plymouth Rock, a lot of at least the European settlement story of America has been about reinvention, leaving the Old World for the New. It’s American culture as the annihilation of history, of the past. . . . *In a very real sort of way, the history of the United States is one big fat makeover show.*<sup>2</sup>

Here Thompson points to the historical currents, practices, and precedents that shape the production and reception of contemporary makeover television in the United States, opening the way toward a genealogy of a national makeover mythos. However, what Thompson’s commentary does not explicitly account for are the gendered, racialized, and sexualized notions of self-realization, consumption, power, and pleasure that inform the “big fat makeover,” otherwise known as American cultural history. Makeover industries that address white, middle-class women as their principal subjects and offer feminine instruction and advice in physical appearance, deportment, and lifestyle remained staples of nineteenth- and twentieth-century popular culture, from magazines such as *Ladies Home Journal*, to 1950s “misery shows” such as *Glamour Girl* (1953–1954) and *Queen for a Day* (1956–1964) to fitness, well-being, and lifestyle gurus such as Jane Fonda, Oprah Winfrey,

and Martha Stewart. However, contrary to the assumption of a natural correspondence between white bourgeois femininity and U.S. consumerism's transformational rituals, American history reveals countless examples of the makeover myth's wider social, cultural, and political relevance. This is evident in the popularity of nineteenth-century advice manuals for boys on how to reinvent oneself for success in the business world, as well as in the frequent refashioning of racial self-image performed in American literature and folklore, as seen in the plantation tales of Joel Chandler Harris, and in the political agitations by reformers such as the abolitionist John Brown. In the twentieth century, the makeover impulse continues to reverberate through the scholarly Adamic myth of R.W.B. Lewis, the commercial celebrity of "Charles Atlas" (born Angelo Siciliano, an Italian immigrant) and the men's body-building culture he helped spawn, the popularity of African American lifestyle magazines such as *Ebony*, and the indeterminate number of people, both men and women, gay and straight, who have enjoyed exercising with Richard Simmons.

Thus, the interdisciplinary essays that comprise this book will seek to identify, interrogate, and historicize the American makeover and explore its relation to national myths that have circulated throughout the cultural history of the United States, up to the current television "makeover takeover" (to use the phrase coined by Rachel Moseley, in an essay examining the format's ubiquitous presence on British television).<sup>3</sup> In this way, this book considers makeover television formats as backward-glancing, or as descended from earlier national myths and practices of reinvention and transformation. At the same time, writers for this volume are committed to the analysis of contemporary makeover culture as forward-looking insofar as it registers faith in myths of perpetual progress and upward mobility. In other words, this collection will demonstrate that the makeover is a crucial link between earlier and emergent forms and processes of engagement with the national imaginary.

As a case in point, we might consider the July 2003 premiere of Bravo's lifestyle makeover series, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. When that show began setting new records for ratings at the cable network (reaching 3.35 million viewers by the third episode), media critics scrambled to account for the phenomena. Certainly, historically the moment seemed right. The euphoric "summer of love," inspired largely by Canada's recognition of same-sex marriage rights and the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark ruling in "Lawrence versus Texas," appeared to foreshadow the unprecedented extent of incorporation of gays and lesbians into mainstream social, civic, and cultural life. At the same time, figures released in July 2003 by the Consumer Research Center's Index of Consumer Confidence suggested a gloomy economic picture of the nation, as numbers for June 2003 took a sharp, unexpected downturn from levels already notably low.<sup>4</sup> In the midst of these controversial and uneven

developments, television viewers were treated to yet another reality show, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, this one featuring a posse of five witty, well-groomed gay men with a mission "to transform a style-deficient and culture-deprived straight man from drab to fab in each of their respective categories: fashion, food & wine, interior design, grooming and culture."<sup>5</sup>

*Queer Eye*'s meteoric rise to popularity prompted Bravo's parent company, NBC, to announce that it would rebroadcast a modified version of the show's premiere during its prestigious Thursday night lineup. When asked whether a major network was ready to embrace the *Queer Eye* concept, Jeff Zucker, president of NBC Entertainment admitted, "The sensational ratings speak for themselves."<sup>6</sup> But how might we make sense of these ratings? To begin with, *Queer Eye* conveys a message very similar to its nineteenth and twentieth-century cultural predecessors: self-realization, romance, and success are attainable through the acquisition of services and durable goods for the self and the home. *Queer Eye* demonstrates, within the time-honored framework of "before and after" juxtaposition, that our shortcomings and self-doubts are not necessarily the result of who we are, but of what we buy, how we present ourselves, and how we are consequently perceived. A classic loafer from Pink, a Zith exfoliant, and some Pottery Barn sectionals can all add up, from this perspective, to a new sense of our inner worth and an improved standing in the outer world. The upwardly mobile, can-do optimism that guides *Queer Eye* is a key component of U.S. makeover culture insofar as it satisfies the wish-fulfillment longings of viewers (presumably the female partners of the straight guys who need training) and provides endless opportunities for product endorsements. At the same time, this makeover spirit is a key element of a deeply power-stratified society that regards the middle-class (and, as on *Queer Eye*, often ethnically marked) body as protean and in need of supervision by administrators well-versed in the manipulation of consumer technologies designed to secure consensual belief in our perpetual personal—and, by extension, national—progress. In mid-summer 2003, there was no better community to assign this administrative function to than the gay community, one of the few segments of American society that seemed to be making any progress at all.

At the same time, *Queer Eye* shows American audiences something that they have not been accustomed to seeing on network television: nonviolent, mutually respectful, cooperative relations between openly homosexual and heterosexual men, in situations where the latter are outnumbered by the former. In this sense, the progress narrative generated by *Queer Eye* gestures beyond the individual consumer subject and addresses viewers as citizen subjects by suggesting through its weekly narratives the progress of liberal democratic society's widening embrace of social diversity and tolerance. This is well summed up in the final moments of an episode in which straight guy Chris Lim expresses his gratitude to the Fab Five: "You've really shown me what it *means* to be a man."

As Joanne DiMattia observes of this scene, which recalls the early twentieth century ad campaigns of Charles Atlas, the ironic "lessons learned, are not lost on the Fab 5 or their audience."<sup>7</sup> This optimistic narrative is belied, however, by the show's adherence to media stereotypes of gay men, the most pernicious of which is that there are no gay men of color. The fact that James Hannaham, the sole African American cast member, was dropped from the series as the "Culture Vulture" and replaced with the lighter-skinned Jai Rodriguez demonstrates *Queer Eye's* blindness to racial differences in the very process of its marketing of "culture" as the readily tradable property of the racially or ethnically marked other, himself apparently equally exchangeable.

Moreover, as queer caricatures, the so-called "Fab Five" are often shrill and cruel in their assessments of the lifestyles and behaviors of the men they tutor. Viewers receive no information whatsoever about their lives and histories. Watching *Queer Eye*, one would have to assume that gay men live in splendid isolation from emotion and desire, spending their days in upscale shops and salons, meditating over color-coordinated bath towels, and finally relaxing with a fluorescent-colored cocktail as they wryly observe straight men conduct the messy business of "real" life from behind the safety and insularity of their television monitors. On the other hand, straight guys do not fare much better, appearing for the most part a sorry lot of unkempt dimwits, still wearing t-shirts from the Reagan era and furnishing their apartments with castaway items pilfered from their mother's basements. Thus it comes as no surprise that the straight guy whose looks and environment are transformed in the space of an hour ritually expresses profound gratitude to the Fab Five as he prepares for his appointed task, be it a consequential dinner party, job interview, or marriage proposal. The point is this: more than accepting gay men as part of the rich, colorful tapestry of American life, the straight guys of *Queer Eye* must finally admit that they *need* gay men in order to realize their completion and, perhaps more importantly, to receive their compensation for the bankrupt pieties of classic heterosexual masculinity, a masculinity that the series suggests is inadequate, deficient, and in crisis. As the Fab Five heroically intervene to save the day, the strategic, well-executed consumer arts that they entrust to their straight charges cannot be thought apart from the larger cultural effort to sustain confidence in American masculinity, consumerist ideology, and the coherence of the national body in times of deepening anxiety over what the nation is becoming and uncertainty over who, ultimately, will bear the cost.

\* \* \*

The premise of this collection—as briefly demonstrated above and as explicitly stated in the subtitle of this volume—is that television, history, and

nation come together under the banner of the American makeover mythos. As a means of organizing this assertion, readers will note that this book consists of two parts. The first part includes chapters on what we are calling the “makeover mythos,” or the historical currents, practices, and precedents that inform contemporary makeover television programs. These chapters emphasize connections between past myths and the national imaginary, with an eye toward understanding how the current conjunction of makeover television shows is distinct and yet reasonably a part of this tradition. The second section includes discussions of particular popular makeover television programs of the last 50 years and their mediated social messages and functions. These chapters address the questions of why these shows matter and, perhaps more importantly for our purposes, why they matter in very particular historical contexts. In keeping with the makeover theme, readers will further note that the entire collection is framed by this introduction, the “Before,” and an “After,” written by television historian, Lynn Spiegel, which considers the art of American pop culture icon Andy Warhol as a critique of the makeover’s darker national significance.

There is little question that further research is called for: Indeed, while much has been written and published in the last few years on the global phenomena of Reality Television (RTV) and its hybrid formats, this is the first book to examine the makeover television phenomena, its origins and its pervasive influence in modern American cultural life.<sup>8</sup> If critical attention has not kept pace with the recent resurgence of makeover television formats, it is my hope, as editor of this volume, that *The Great American Makeover* will inspire others to take up and further analyze the genre of makeover television programming and its long-standing cultural precedents. Clearly, more work is needed to extend scholarship on global televisual formats, nationally rooted myths, and the relationship of television viewing practices to diverse, local cultural idioms and constructions of national identity and belonging. The writers for this volume agree that makeover television offers fertile ground for the cultivation of such discussion. If their task was initially to demonstrate the tenacity of the makeover mythos—its enduring ability to speak to our shifting national desires and anxieties—they have succeeded and have in the process revealed American television’s own enduring ability to reinvent itself.

## NOTES

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7. Joanna L. DiMattia, "The Gentle Art of Manscaping: Lessons in Hetero-Masculinity From the "*Queer Eye* Guys," in *Makeover Television: Realities Remodeled*, ed. Dana Heller (London I.B. Tauris, 2007).
8. Those works include, but by no means are limited to, Mark Andrejevic, *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched* (Lanham, MS: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004); *Reality Squared: Televisual Discourses on the Real*, ed. James Friedman (New Brunswick, NJ, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2002); Annette Hill, *Reality TV: Audiences and Popular Factual Television* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005); *Understanding Reality Television*, ed. Su Holmes and Deborah Jermyn (London and New York: Routledge, 2004); *Reality TV: Remaking, Television Culture*, ed. Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette (New York: New York University Press, 2004).



