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Brenda R. Weber, *Makeover TV: Selfhood, Citizenship, and Celebrity*. Duke University Press, 2009. ISBN 978-0-0223-4568-8 (pbk)

Katherine Sender, *The Makeover: Reality Television and Reflexive Audiences*. New York University Press, 2012. ISBN 978-0-8147-4069-9 (cloth)

Somewhere in the midst of Brenda R. Weber's expansive, richly textured investigation of over 200 makeover programmes on U.S. television, the reader begins to understand why she dubs this extensive terrain the Makeover Nation. With a keen critical eye for the constitutive contradictions of identity that underpin makeover logic, Weber convincingly argues that this ubiquitous format, spanning constructions of selfhood from citizen to celebrity, is deserving of serious scholarly consideration. Three years on, Katherine Sender has provided the companion piece to Weber's cultural analysis of makeover texts with a nuanced audience study that concentrates on viewer responses to four programmes broadcast in the U.S.: *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* [Scout Productions, BRAVO, 2003-2007], *Starting Over* [Bunim/Murray Productions, NBC, 2003-2006], *What Not to Wear* [BBC Worldwide Productions, TLC, 2003-present] and *The Biggest Loser* [3Ball Productions, 25/7 Productions, Eyeworks, Shine America; NBC, 2004-present]. While Weber and Sender approach their corpus from different methodological standpoints, the effect of reading these books together is pleasingly dialogic, with both scholars finding similar issues of self-making, gender codification and social mediation at play in makeover formats. Ultimately, the strength of both studies is their refusal to take a simplistic approach to this influential format, with each resisting the tendency to damn the shows outright as handmaidens of neoliberal capital or to celebrate them uncritically as handbooks of self-empowerment.

In effect, both books begin from the same point, by recognising the contradictions that structure makeover logic and, by extension, viewers' appraisals of the shows. Weber signals her refusal to simplify such contradictions by tracing her own fascination with the makeover to its 'thematic paradoxes' (p. 4), which frame self-empowerment in terms of submission, the 'normal' in terms of extreme intervention, 'true' femininity/masculinity in terms of hyper-gendering, and unique selfhood in terms of the gaze of others (p. 5). Such paradoxes of identity formation, Weber argues, underpin rather than undermine the makeover format precisely because the shows are sensitive to the competing social pressures that demand self-

transformation and self-authenticity in equal measure from citizens of the Makeover Nation.

Sender finds such contradictions reflected in ‘the tensions that structure audience’s discussion of makeover television’ (p. 3). Drawing on interviews with regular viewers of makeover shows, Sender notes that these audiences developed highly sophisticated critiques of the shows’ production conditions at the same time as they ‘used makeover television as a resource to articulate the self as a reflexive project’ (p. 15). For Sender, ‘reflexivity’ is a term which neatly articulates both the viewers’ awareness of the constructedness of makeover shows as well as their willingness to find an emotional realism amongst participants that allows the viewers to ‘make sense of their [own] life trajectories’ (p. 15). Both Sender’s and Weber’s analyses thus remain sensitive to the core contradiction of the makeover format: these shows are patently commercial, regulatory constructs which nonetheless speak to viewers’ vexed experiences of self-making in contemporary culture. To make sense of the appeal and import of the makeover show, each author argues, we must be attuned to both sides of the paradox.

What sustains the dialogue between the two studies is the fact that both take a feminist approach, recognising the makeover as a site of ‘identity work’ (Weber, p. 9) that adopts gender as a primary determinant. Sender notes in her chapter on ‘Gender and Genre’ that the shows in her audience study ‘each present crises in gender as the candidate’s defining problem’ (p. 32), whether this means obesity as a crisis of sexuality in *The Biggest Loser*, immaturity as a crisis of adult masculinity in *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, or any number of crises for femininity framed in terms of women’s disempowering habits, tastes and sartorial decisions in *Starting Over* and *What Not to Wear*. Weber devotes two of five main chapters to a gender critique of makeover shows, the first on ‘femme-ing the normative’, and the second on the ‘self-made man’ whose masculinity is both threatened and salvaged by the objectifying scrutiny of makeover logic. Despite the fact that the majority of viewers and participants of self-transformation shows are female, both scholars note that ‘[m]akeover shows have democratized gendered structures of looking and being looked at’ (Sender, p. 81), so that increasingly both men and women are subject to the social gaze.

Neither Weber nor Sender, however, believes that gender operates alone as an identity marker on makeover television. Weber is highly sensitive to the intersection

of gender with race and class, especially to the attempts of the cosmetic makeover format to construct a 'post-racial' identity of 'ethnic anonymity' (p. 5) that is also post-feminist in its assumed appeal to the male gaze. Sender plumbs the material provided by her interviewees, who often seem to adopt the post-racial stance mooted by Weber, yet she is careful to delineate the interview participants' race, class, sexuality and gender where relevant, as well as to highlight the relatively rare instances when interviewees do note the implications of non-majority identity positions for makeover subjects (e.g., p. 149).

In addition to the nuanced work done by both authors on gendered identity construction in makeover shows, the greatest contribution of the two studies comes in the interrogation each undertakes of emotionalism and affective labour, especially Weber's attention to the complexities of shame and Sender's investigation of *schadenfreude*. Both authors agree, from different theoretical standpoints, that the function of surveillance on makeover shows is related to the shaming of participants, who in most formats are forced to present their Before-bodies, often stripped down, to the scrutiny of the mirror or peers or strangers on the street, as well as a nation of TV viewers. This has long been the grounds for critics' angry dismissal of such shows for mandating the ritual humiliation of candidates and, worse, providing viewers with the opportunity to take unseemly pleasure in another's injury.

In her insightful chapter 'Economies of Looking, Pedagogies of Shame, Sights of Resistance', however, Weber argues that makeovers enact a 'regulatory pedagogy' (p. 89) which functions by first shaming participants and then offering them, through the 'love-power' of the experts, redemption and enlightenment (p. 96). In this way, surveillance takes on a 'caring function' (p. 96), she claims, within an affective economy that trades the subjects' shameful self-recognition of inadequacy for the pay-off of having one's After-body lovingly enveloped by the approving gaze of experts and audiences – who thereby learn how to avoid their own shaming. Sender's research supports this notion of an affective economy, finding that regular viewers 'rarely critiqued the show's disciplining gaze, instead almost always seeing it as necessary and functional' (p. 87) for 'the journey of self-improvement' (p. 91).

Sender further argues that audiences in her study made a distinction between shame, which they considered productive, and humiliation, which was seen as exploitative and 'evoked sympathy' in many of the interviewees (p. 91). Because of this alignment between viewers and makeover participants, Sender found very little

evidence of *schadenfreude*, or viewers taking pleasure in makeover subjects' humiliation (p. 94). On the contrary, her interview subjects were more likely to express sympathy for the people before the cameras. Sender's research thus bears out what Weber calls the 'redemptive story of shame to salvation' in the makeover (p. 136), which depends on the circulation of negative as well as positive emotions for the production of transformed selves. These studies, then, insist that we reflect carefully on the makeover's 'caring function' rather than writing it off simply as the marketing of humiliation.

It is perhaps no coincidence that, in closing, both authors reflect on the relationship between their own expertise and that of the shows, as though there is something inherent to the makeover show that calls for self-reflexivity. Brenda Weber's 'Confessions and Conclusions' include a moving reflection on the 'interest and pleasure' she herself takes in watching makeover programmes, despite their formulaic and restrictive logic (p. 263). Katherine Sender in turn reflects on her position as a researcher and, further, on the role of reflexivity inscribed in her audience research methods. She closes her study by noting that there is a structural similarity between makeover audiences and interview participants, since both are 'offered [and enjoy] a chance for the performance of reflexivity' (p. 190). Through this performance, in which viewers and scholars alike are caught up, it becomes clear why the makeover deserves serious consideration: if, as Weber's and Sender's studies suggest, the makeover offers a reconstruction of gender codifications articulated around paradoxical imperatives, then the work of gender critique is to articulate this reconstruction through reflexivity. Of course, being reflexive about the makeover means both that we aim to reveal its regulatory intents *and* that we revel in its promise to improve our own gendered self-making. With their different but compatible methodologies, the two studies beautifully bookend this home-truth. Each book is indispensable in its own right, but if you ask me, they must be read together.

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