



Sender, Katherine
***Brand New You:
Makeover Television and
the American Dream***
Northampton, MA
[Media Education
Foundation](#)
2014
53 Minutes
ISBN: 1-932869-93-X

The Biggest Loser. Extreme Makeover. The Swan. Bridalplasty. What Not to Wear. These are only a few of the makeover shows that have been on television over the past several years. These shows repeat an old narrative: changing one aspect of a person's life (in this case how one looks or dresses) can have a significant impact on the rest of his or her life. Many have bought into this narrative; one exemplar of this trend is actress Heidi Montag, who underwent 10 plastic surgery procedures in one day (see Lunceford, 2014). After her surgeries, Montag proclaimed, "I'm very excited for the world to see the new me, and a real me" (Garcia, 2010, p. 84). In these shows, the "real" person is available to those who lose weight, undergo plastic surgery, wear the right clothes, or do their hair the "right" way. The normative role of these shows is clear; they are far more than simple entertainment, and scholars have also found a correlation between watching reality television shows featuring cosmetic surgery and a desire to have surgery themselves (see Markey & Markey, 2010).

Brand New You asks, "How can we read makeover shows as a code that tells us what, and who, matter?" Sender takes the viewer on an extended discussion of how these makeover shows are connected to the mythology of the "American Dream." These shows are not merely about changing the appearance of the individual, but also about instilling a sense of upward mobility through consumption and adopting white values and appearance by downplaying racial and ethnic markers. The implication, according to Sender, is that changing the way one looks will allow that individual to enjoy a whole new lifestyle that transcends his or her previous one marked by class, race, or gender in order to adopt one that is more in line with white, upper-middle class values. This is strikingly illustrated in the video during a clip of one woman, a truck driver who was a contestant in the show *Style by Jury*. In response to the question "What is the best thing that you just heard?" she said, "That I look more professional. That I didn't look like a truck driver, which is great." In short, even though she *is* a truck driver, she must not *look* like a truck driver, even if such clothing may be impractical for her profession.

Sender is at her best when illustrating how these makeover shows resonate with audiences.

Shows such as *The Biggest Loser* draw on our own anxieties and the perceived authenticity of the contestants to forge identification between audience and contestants. Indeed, for Sender, this emotional labor is a key factor in her analysis. The audience becomes privy to the inner emotions of the contestants as they reveal fears and doubts concerning their bodies. This view of the emotional interior allows viewers to see the candidates as authentic and reinforces the narrative that the external transformation is also an interior transformation. In contrast, Sender argues that shows such as *The Swan* hinder this identification because the change is explicitly superficial. I also found her linking of narratives of self improvement, consumer culture, and physical transformation with the American Dream mythology to be well argued. Sender also does a good job of noting how financial considerations are able to drive certain aspects of the narrative, such as corporate sponsorships which are woven into the script, once again reinforcing the ideal that consumption facilitates individual transformation.

One weakness of the video is the tendency to lump all makeover shows into similar categories. For example, there seems to be considerable differences in shows like *Bridalplasty*, in which women compete with other women for plastic surgery before their wedding, and *Ambush Makeover*, which takes people directly off the streets and updates their wardrobe. The differences in these shows go beyond the invasiveness of the procedures that the contestants are willing to undergo. There is also the question of authenticity; in one, the women likely audition to be on the show, and in the other the people are unwitting participants in the experience. I also wonder if recent additions to the makeover genre that are less celebratory of plastic surgery as a means of reaching transformation, such as *Botched*, a show on E! which shows plastic surgeons fixing the work of previous plastic surgeons, would alter some of this analysis.

For communication scholars, I could see this video being used in a wide range of media studies courses, with its emphasis on media constructions of gender, class, ethnicity, and beauty. This video could also be used in gender studies and sociology classrooms.

References

Garcia, J. (2010, January 25). Obsessed with being perfect. *People*, 73, 80-88.

Lunceford, B. (2014). [The ethics of seeking body perfection, with continual reference to Heidi Montag](#). In S. J. Thompson (Ed.), *Global issues and ethical considerations in human enhancement technologies* (67-95). Hershey, PA: IGI-Global.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.4018/978-1-4666-6010-6.ch005>

Markey, C. N., & Markey, P. M. (2010). A correlational and experimental examination of reality television viewing and interest in cosmetic surgery. *Body Image*, 7(2), 165-171.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2009.10.006>

Brett Lunceford
brettlunceford@gmail.com