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College Quarterly

Fall 2010 - Volume 13 Number 4

Makeover Television: Instruction and Re-invention through the Mythology of Cinderella

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Makeover shows are ideal sites from which to examine mediated images of the individual and the cultural values imparted through program viewing. Althusser asserts, "All ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects" (2006, p. 85) and as such, texts and media reach and affect individuals in different ways according to their positioning to the text and the ideology in which they exist. Similarly, McRobbie argues "representations are never objective; they are interpretations steeped in ideology and, as such, produce a variety of meanings negotiated from person to person" (A. McRobbie, 2000, as quoted in Gallagher, 2007). With this in mind, I ventured to investigate the interpellation of viewers and the decoding of the messages and ideology of the television program *What Not to Wear* (WNTW), a popular weekly makeover program which focuses on the physical appearance of its "ambushed" victims. WNTW speaks to viewers as learners with "rules" on how to dress for a better appearance, but it also carries messages and implications of the necessity to improve oneself, along with strict definitions of gender correctness. Saturated, throughout the narrative is the implication that through the retail experience of purchasing new clothing and make-up, that you too can be improved and re-invented. The text includes repeated cues, narrative, and heightened moments of drama to allow viewers to follow a weekly script. Tension is created through the often humiliating exposing of the "bad" physical appearance of the participant followed by a transformation to a new, improved image; a pseudo-Cinderella story, packaged as education.

Do viewers recognize the hegemonic messages of prescribed notions of gender and acceptable appearance, or do the rituals of the program disguise them as natural parts of the narrative so as to desensitize viewers to the forces at play? In order to answer these questions I undertook an exploration of viewer participation as the program was both watched and discussed, listening to feedback and impressions of a group of 6 women, during the airing of WNTW. Through these observations and my own participation in the viewing of the program, I was able to explore the implications of WNTW for a particular audience, examining the meaning taken from the experience, both overt and suggestive.

What Not to Wear – History and Format

WNTW invites nominations of friends, family members, or co-workers, considered to be inappropriately dressed, to become candidates for a fashion makeover. Hosts and fashion experts Stacy London and Clinton Kelly ambush their victim (after taking a week of secret footage), offering them a \$5,000 budget for a new wardrobe. The candidate must travel to New York and surrender to Stacy and Clinton's criticism and rules for new purchases. The victim must bring his/her entire wardrobe so that he/she can model each item in front of a 360-degree mirror, in order to be shamed into learning "what not to wear". Following the guidelines provided by Stacy and Clinton, victims have two days to buy a new wardrobe after which he/she is sent to Nick Arrojo and Carmindy Bowyer for finishing touches of hair and make-up. The transformed participant returns home to unveil his/her new look to friends and family.

By the end of 2003, WNTW was TLC's most popular program with 2.3 million viewers and the highest cable television ratings from the audience of women, 18-34 (Sender & Sullivan, 2008, p. 574). Makeover shows are part of the genre of lifestyle television that emerged in the 1990's, where the power of transformation is developed through a narrative. Meanwhile, participants in makeover programs are shown to be learning "skills and items of knowledge that enhance their ability to act in the world" (Redden, 2008). Like other make-over programs, WNTW is essentially based on the inability of the victim to choose or

decide properly for herself, poring over the poor choices and their meaning to the lives of the individual. The relationship women have with their clothes is important and should not be overlooked in examining the format and premise of WNTW. Research has found that "[older clothes] represent a tangible connection with one's past history which is tied in with remembering both self and one's relationship with others" (Banim & Guy, 2000). WNTW breaks down this relationship in order to construct a new identity. The program then wraps all of this instruction and reinvention in a guide to becoming a better consumer. As Sender and Sullivan attest, "WNTW is more concerned with addressing self esteem: mostly female candidates need to care for the self in order to improve their confidence and consume more effectively" (Sender & Sullivan, 2008, p. 582).

Consuming the New You

Social acceptance, desire, and the satisfaction of needs through the purchase and consumption of goods; this describes the ideology of consumerism, practiced and accepted in the culture of television viewing. Andrew Wernick refers to this as our "promotional culture" where promotion perpetuates unsatisfied desires. (Wernick, 1988, p. 181) According to Redden, "makeovers can be seen as consistent with other textual forms of consumer culture that symbolically invest commodities with promises of personal like-improvement" (2008, p. 485). In WNTW, the transformation of the participant demonstrates the capacity of products to symbolically improve the individual's life. One of the resulting key messages for viewers is that you can purchase your way to a new and better self. What some viewers fail to appreciate is that the transformation (inner and outer) is only made possible by the consumption of goods and services. Having is being.....better.

The reality/makeover genre facilitates the promotion of products as they are seamlessly incorporated into the narrative. Make-up companies, garment brands, and teeth whitening products are just some of the unobtrusive commodities embedded in WNTW.

The Need for Advice

What gives WNTW its strong hook with audiences, is its formula as a source for fashion and etiquette advice. According to Lewis, this is where such makeover shows depart from the standard reality show format, adding a focus on advice and the provision of expertise (Lewis, 2008, p. 442). As far back as Victorian times, taste and etiquette were provided in advice manuals. Makeover shows capitalize on our need for advice, while selling consuming audiences to product manufacturers ready to pay for the transaction. "Makeovers take consumer advice to a level where consumption is intimately associated with personal growth" (Redden, p. 492). No longer just domestic advice, citizens seek information on fashion, morals, and identity. Lewis points out that the reality show form "can be seen to play an increasingly central role in inducting viewing into the new neo-liberal modes of self-governing citizenship" (p. 444).

Becoming an *Appropriate* Woman

WNTW falls within the genre of self-improvement shows, similar to home improvement shows, but focusing on physical improvement through wardrobe. As the hosts interact with participants, they impart their views on what an *appropriately* dressed woman should wear, revealing social dictations on femininity (Douglas, 2008, par. 2). Sender (2007) refers to makeover shows as creating templates for appropriateness where the standards are largely that of white, heterosexual, middle class women. Women are represented as being in need of re-working to fit dominant notions of gender. Butler (1990) describes the "limits" that are set in hegemonic discourse, coded in the binary structures, appearing as universally rational (quoted in Gallagher & Pecot, 2007, p. 75). "Many episodes of WNTW work to make candidates more acceptably 'feminine' – age appropriate, professional, and sexually decorous" (Sender, 2007, p. 16). Such was the case in the recent "Jessie" episode where a 52 year old woman was told that she was too old to dress as she did so the experts insisted that she select more conservative, non-sexual looking clothing. The result was a very unhappy participant who promptly got a new hair colour and extensions as soon as she got home. In their research, Sender and Sullivan (2008) found that WNTW viewers support the assumption that by addressing their image flaws, candidates would be more professional and socially successful.

Stacy and Clinton often remind contestants that despite their abilities, they will not be given a chance or

taken seriously if they do not look good. "WNTW entices women to revere a fashionable appearance in the workplace over more important attributes such as intelligence, competence, and character" (Busch, 2008, Para. 20). Such was the case in the WNTW episode of Mayim where she was told that people would be shocked to learn that she has a Ph.D. since she does not look intelligent.

Encoding/Decoding and the Rituals of Participation

WNTW is an excellent site of Hall's encoding/decoding process (Hall, 2006), where messages are encoded as meaningful discourse, but must be decoded to be used or understood. As Hall describes, the production and reception of the message are not identical, but they are related: "differentiated moments within the totality formed by the social relations of the communication process as a whole" (Hall, 2006, p. 165). The placement of codes, the naturalization of those codes, and the use of signs will all have impact on the decoding process and the reading of the program by the audience. The denotative sign of outdated clothing, for example, may be easily connotative as the need for intervention or even a reflection of poor self image by some, where others viewing WNTW will simply see the clothing as unique extensions of the person wearing them. Such was the case with my focus group study, which I will expand on later in this paper, along with the varying positions from which the messages of WNTW were constructed. Since some audience members see clothing value as superficial, they could not see or take part in the codes and rituals of the program (the ambush, the humiliation process, the secret footage, and wardrobe trashing).

Spectacle vs. Ritual

Meaning from texts is delivered through a series of rituals and the creation of emotion (Real, 1996), or through the spectacle as reality becomes intertwined and infuses our thoughts and actions (Debord, 2006). Through the spectacle, participants are separated from their own lives; just as passive participation in the spectacle require that we become separated from actively producing our lives, lost instead in the media circus of materialistic fantasies. WNTW is rich in elements of spectacle, placing the participants in the centre of their own show: the secret footage, the 360 mirror, and the final reveal (from behind a curtain with a *ta-da* sound followed by applause) are all larger than life, creating a representation of the self.

Viewer Observations, Readings, and Interpretations of What Not to Wear

For my study of viewer responses to WNTW, I participated along with six female viewers, between the ages of 40 and 50, documenting their comments during an episode viewing, and following up with questions about two other episodes watched later. What I found was that rather than regarding WNTW as a spectacle to be lost in, several of the females in my study pulled out the rituals and methods of operations of the show, appropriating them to produce alternative or "oppositional" readings. I found that the program hailed them each in very different ways. Some were positioned maternally, or as a friend to the victim in the show, hoping the victim could feel good about themselves, hating having to endure the humiliation processes and wardrobe trashing. Others were more critical of the participant taking a more negotiated position to the text of the program. They agreed that the victim needs to realize her fashion blunders and believes she can be recreated into a more attractive version of herself.

What was particularly interesting about the viewing process was how many focus group members changed their perspective or role during the program. For example, one person initially was on side with the need for the makeover of Mayim, saying out loud how bad she looked and how laughable her clothes and hair were. Later in the show, that same viewer began to sympathize with Mayim, saying that Stacey and Clinton had gone too far in their humiliation process. One viewer was unhappy with the trashing from the beginning, saying "Why do they have to do that; why can't they just give her the \$5000 and let her go shopping". Most viewers understood there was a process that needed to happen for the victim to be willing to start over. In fact, the Mayim show was unusual since there was no viewing of the "secret footage" with friends and family. When Mayim made a few questionable fashion purchases, one viewer said "she wasn't scarred enough to change". What were particularly noteworthy about the ethnographic study of viewers of WNTW were the varying vantage points from which the women saw value and pleasure in the program. Rather than enjoying the humiliation process, as was suggested by one author, the women in my study enjoyed the building of self-esteem, and in fact disliked the humiliation process the most. "WNTW is an important cultural text because it demonstrates the attraction for viewers in seeing a woman be embarrassed, reformed

(literally), and then praised" (Douglas, 2008, Para. 20). Of the six women in my study only one said she related to the show from the perspective of the expert, and only one said she watched it for fashion tips. Other viewpoints included confirmation that this is not a good program to watch, that the victims were manipulated, and that any body shape can look good. Although half said they watched the program with any regularity, only one attested to believing the program's message that physical appearance was worth investing money in to bring improvements. "It's worth it to invest in myself" said one viewer. A dominant viewing position was a more caring view, watching to see a person made happier and transformed emotionally with the attention and support of her friends.

As confirmed by many participants, the experience of watching reality TV is not just the viewing experience alone, but also the resulting community discussions that follow. The conversations about physical health, self-esteem, and the value of intelligence over fashion trends were revealing to say the least. Through my study I was pleasantly surprised to find that many of the fears of reinforcement of gender appearance and value (as cited earlier in this paper) did not resonate with most of the women in my focus group. Most were able to enjoy the program from a negotiated position, taking from it what they pleased, remaining critical about the value of consumption and appearance as a determinant of acceptance. This was not the result I was expecting, but I was thrilled with this response. I would suspect that studies of younger audiences, those without children, or those of other socio-economic situations might have varying interpretations of the text of WNTW. As Wajcman states, "The capacity of women users to produce new, advantageous readings of artefacts is dependent on their broader economic and social circumstances" (Wajcman, 2007, p. 294).

Is the ideology of Gender bias and hegemony reproduced in WNTW accepted or rejected? In answer to my original question it appears the power to view and enjoy popular sites of hegemony from oppositional positions is possible, and even commendable.

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