

Transformation as Narrative and Process: Locating Myth and Mimesis in Reality TV.

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Abstract:

The terrain of television has been perceived as mythopoeic with its ability to integrate the real and the unreal, crafting a liminal space which is always betwixt and between. The recent debates about the medium have centred on the genre of reality television where new boundaries are constantly transgressed. This paper re-visits the theories of television as a myth space and examines why reality television is accommodated within this liminal paradigm where the familiarity of folklores and storytelling fuse narratives of transformation in lifestyle-based reality programmes. This transformative agency in television assumes both concrete and abstract forms reflecting both the cultural context of a society and the power of the medium to represent and distort the real.

Key words: myth, reality TV, narrative, ritual, Lifestyle programmes

Introduction

Lifestyle television has been classified as a sub-genre of reality television in as much as it claims to represent the real (Palmer 2004). This paper examines reality television particularly the lifestyle-based makeover programmes by relating it to theories of television as a myth space where reality and fantasy occupy a liminal world. It argues that the reality television genre capitalises on the mythic dimensions of television to construct transformation narratives in makeover programmes. Myth and mimesis (of the real) are co-conspirators in constructing a mediated reality. In relating myth and mimesis to lifestyle television and makeover formats, this paper draws considerably from Roger Silverstone's theories of television and the medium's ability to locate itself between two worlds and to transgress boundaries between not only reality and fiction but between common and specialist knowledge. Equally, reality television's intrinsic ability to blur boundaries further augments this process.

Gareth Palmer (2004) in discussing the class discourses and ideologies in lifestyle makeover shows moots the need to enquire further into ordinary people appearing on

television. In identifying that people 'understand television as an active agent of transformation', he asserts that 'we need to ask what they expect from it?' (Palmer 2004: 190). While this paper does not set out to answer this particular enquiry, it nevertheless seeks to analyse the transformative agency of television. It contends that the transformative element manifests in television in material forms as visual and textual narratives and equally as an abstract process where an ordinary person's appearance (and perhaps journey) in this public space and communal consumption signifies a liminal world between their ordinary lives and celebrity status. This paper argues that this liminal experience is enabled through the appropriation of both myth and rituals in the formats of makeover programmes.

The compression of time and manipulation of visual imagery often enact a story in which the transformative narrative constitutes a pivotal element in lifestyle television. The television space in this sense is depicted as a transformative sphere where miracles and makeovers can happen and where happy outcomes are embedded within the narrative plot. In tandem with the integration of this distinct transformative space is the emergence of television experts who weave magic into the everyday and mundane lives of people, leaving nothing unchanged. The relentless ability to effortlessly transform badly-behaved children, gardens, homes, outdated wardrobes, wrinkled faces and obese bodies is a distinct characteristic of makeover reality shows. Their popularity and their inherent ability to convince that change can happen are bound with the mythic and folkloric tradition in every culture. In our contemporary culture, television appropriates this myth space where its location as a liminal space between reality and fiction and its accent on the visual enables transformative narratives to draw on the mythic as well as the primitive. It's a space where new forms of order are imposed and restored and where people's anxieties about their context, environment and nature are dealt with through these transformation narratives.

The act of the public gazing into the personal and ordinary lives of people constructs reality television as a transformative space where the public gaze alters the ordinary lives through the act of public consumption. Nick Couldry's (2003; 2004) 'celebrification' is a

reference to this transformative space in which a programme's formats and rituals construct an individual as being altered through his or her participation in the programme. With the incorporation of non-celebrities into reality television formats, television is perceived as a transformative space in which the public gaze can possibly provide celebrity status (Turner: 2006; Palmer 2005). The transformative space, or more specifically this process of celebrification, is tied to a media economy in which ordinary individuals may enjoy a considerable circulation and currency in tabloids and magazines through their appearance in reality television. Palmer (2005) notes that 'here it is the television exposure per se that constitutes the basis for an often very short but intensive moment of fame.'

Reality television as a transformative space is rooted in both the mythic dimensions of culture as well as the media economy which widens the transformative sphere beyond the television space. The belief in the transformative potential of television then accords it a degree of both concrete and abstract power. James Carey (1989: 87) invokes 'reality as a scarce resource because so few command the machinery for its determination and the fundamental form of power is the power to define, allocate and display that resource. Reality television's association with the 'real' further accentuates its power to negotiate boundaries in society where these demarcate and define the relationships between entities.

Television's mastery over time and images and the ability to narrate changes in seconds and minutes recreates it as a magical sphere where reality and make believe fuse into new reality television formats where technical and specialist discourses are woven to transform and to instantly gratify audiences. The transformation of ageing bodies through the intervention of medical science (i.e. plastic surgery) is both a reflection of our anxieties and primitive fears as well as our need to find instant solutions to them. The mediation of common and specialist knowledge into singular narratives highlight the ability of television to transgress many boundaries between science and lay knowledge (Livingstone 1999; Silverstone 1999).

Myth and Television

Levi-Strauss perceives myth as a basic element of culture which conditions its possibilities and significance in and for societies and consequently he asserts that one can understand the mode of societies' thoughts through myth. Myths as prototypical stories concretise fundamental themes of human existence, weaving archetypal characters and situations, articulating the basic curiosities, hopes, fears, desires, conflicts, choices and patterns of resolution (Sheehan 2001:2). Fiske (1992:86/87) points out that primitive myths are about elemental themes such as life and death, men and gods, good and evil, and a myth is a story by which culture explains or understands some aspect of reality or nature. Like Levi Strauss, structural theorist Roman Jakobson (1970) implored the idea that the human mind works with binary opposites and these contradictory themes become the underlying frames of human culture. Myth then mediates between profane and sacred, common sense and arcane, and between the individual and the social (Silverstone 1988:23) resolving a myriad of contradictions. Myth signifies a culture thinking about itself in symbolic and metaphorical ways while locating itself in the physical and literal world.

According to Roland Barthes, 'myth is a type of speech....a mode of signification' (cf. Easthorpe and McGowan; cf. Fulton 2005: 6) where language can be linked to the formation of ideology and the 'naturalisation of values, truths and beliefs' (Fulton: 7). As a metaphorical and narrative tool, myth provides society a means to articulate about themselves and about other people as well as about the wider complex world of natural and man-made objects which they occupy. The narrative realm then provides for 'symbolic action that creates social reality' (Walter Fisher 1987: 93).

Ernest Laclau views myth as a necessity and requirement with the increased fissuring and dislocation of contemporary societies (cf. Couldry 2004). From this functionalist

perspective, myths are collective dreams which provide meaning to everyday life. Myths are carved out from old dreams and become the building blocks of new dreams: and myths are generated from fantasy, both collective and individual (Sheehan 2001: 7). Helen Sheehan (2001:2-3) argues that myths as a collective consciousness not only reveal and capture the zeitgeist of a time and place but also shed light on the forces at work, illuminating its problems and crystallising its values, embodying 'prophecy, incarnation, epiphany, mission, migration, metamorphosis, martyrdom and resurrection'. Myths when transformed into folk tales often assume a narrative predictability and are often associated with rituals. This communion of mythic narratives and rituals define space and time while highlighting the social and cultural contexts of their utterance. Myths as primitive and associated with man's proximity and relationship to nature and to the supernatural is a resonant element in various sociological theories (Ernst Cassier, Lucien Levy-Bruhl and Mircea Eliade; cf. Silverstone 1988) and represent the ways in which the primitive perceives the world. Myth, ritual, magic and folktales are inextricably bound together and are perceived as the preserve of primitive cultures. In our contemporary culture our sense of reality is increasingly structured by narratives (Fulton 2005: 1) and the television space is no exception. Television and myth in many ways conjoin values with narratives. Storytelling is an inimical part of television as media narratives tell us stories about who we think we are, and in so doing they are historically and culturally positioned to turn information and events into structures that are already meaningful to their audiences (O'Shaughnessy & Stadler 2002:127; cf. Fulton 2005:1).

Roger Silverstone (1981; 1984; 1988; 1994; 1999) in his many books and essays eloquently inquired into the incestuous relationship between myth and television as a folk medium. He articulates that the primacy of myth in everyday life is also intrinsically bound with the everydayness of television:

Myths are elementary but often extremely complex; elemental but often superficial. Television is like myth. It occupies the same space of intimate distance. (Silverstone 1988: 24).

Television, like other forms of mass communication, uses specific items of folklore, myth

and representation of ritual (Silverstone 1981; Burns 1969; Denby 1971; Bocoock 1974; Shils and Young 1953, cf. Silverstone 1988). It conveys the same messages and in similar ways. For Silverstone (1988:24) television's appropriation of the mythic space raised various sociological issues where the medium creates both an immediacy, ephemerality and displacement. He relentlessly argued that the 'public broadcast texts of television images, narratives, icons, rituals are the site of contemporary mythic culture' (1988: 25). The highly technological world of television inexorably manufactures a magical space in which the boundaries between reality and fantasy is constantly transgressed and where fact and fiction fuse into various permutations to combine our primitive fears and our endless anxieties about the constructed world which lie beyond our control. Television is emblematic of culture as it draws on frameworks of culture to tell its stories where programme formats take the form of rituals to enforce beliefs and values as well as make-believe. 'So much of television culture consisted in the display of simple stories, easily recognizable, continually reiterated and remarkably similar in form and content not only to each other but to other stories in other cultures at other times' (Silverstone 1988:22).

Silverstone suggested that television occupies a liminal space between the 'taken-for-granted world and that of the unreachable and otherwise inaccessible world' (1988: 25). Victor Turner's (1977; 1982) concept of liminality and the transient journey between two worlds has been used by others to theorise the medium of television (Martin 1981; Newcomb and Alley 1993; Dayan Katz and Kerns 1984; cf. Hoover 1988). For Silverstone 'movement into and out of the liminal, which Arnold Van Gennep considered the heart of the ritual process, is a feature of television-making where it entails a journey from the everyday and mundane into another world' (Silverstone 1988:25). In this sense, consuming television was a journey from the constraints of the normal and everyday into another, and one is then transformed by the experience.

The incorporation of myth and new forms of rituals into the medium of television makes the complex relationship between culture, technology and our value systems even more problematic as television is more than make believe. It in many ways constitutes a reflection of the contextual paradigms and our cultural responses to them making

television both a cultural text and text produced through culture and society. The search for the mythic in contemporary societies is grounded not only in the plausible expectation that 'we too perforce must find ways of expressing basic concerns, core values, deep anxieties; and equally we must find ways of expressing publicly and collectively our attempts at resolving them' (Silverstone 1988:24).

Television does not make magic happen without our underlying beliefs and value system or cultural frameworks and this explains its ability to appropriate and capitalise on the mythic space. The integral association between societies and myths and folklores provides a stage to integrate new formats into the television space where ordinary people can seemingly transform their habitats or personal appearance. Myth is intrinsic and inseparable to the medium of television and its manifestations in reality television are ever more potent. Transformation in the guise of makeovers draws from the familiar and from primitive folklores. Metamorphosis is possible and achievable through television experts and image manipulators who convince and deliver instant gratification creating an intimate distance in which miracles can happen.

Silverstone, in quoting Durkheim's nephew Marcel Mauss (cf. Silverstone 1988), reiterates the interconnections between magic and belief;

[magic] is still a very simple craft. All efforts are avoided by successfully replacing reality by image. A magician does nothing, or almost nothing but makes everyone believe he is doing everything and all the more so since he puts to work collective forces and ideas to help the individual imagination in its belief (Mauss 1972: 141-142; cf. Silverstone 1988).

The narratives of metamorphoses in lifestyle television are in part the manipulation of time and images but mostly it is the invocation of the collective beliefs and anxieties which enable the crafting of a television reality. To paraphrase Marcel Mauss, such genres of reality television 'makes everyone believe it is doing everything' when it is essentially igniting the primitive and collective psyche of an audience.

Kavka and West (2004: 137) emphasise that 'reality TV pursues intimacy (emotional closeness) through immediacy (temporal closeness) coupling the proximity, made by the

medium of television right from the start that viewers can traverse space in the blink of the eye', where it creates a 'now thisness of the medium' (Heath 1990: 279; Kavka & West 2004: 137). While television can re-order time through its representation, reality television dismantles time by often trying to convince viewers that events are unfolding as they watch and the elements of surprise and unpredictability are built into the narrative of reality television. Here reality television uses technology to leverage on the collective cultural psyche to suspend and invent new forms of reality. The seamless flow of TV (Raymond Williams), transience of imagery and an abundance of information build television as a medium that requires a disappearance of the 'just-seen' to make way for the 'now-seeing' (Houston 1984; cf. Kavka & West 2004: 137).

Time is manipulated, mechanised and woven in the rituals of the programming format where 'before' and 'after' assume a synthetic time where transformations and metamorphoses happen. Couldry (2004:59) defines rituals as 'formalized action organized into a form or shape that has meaning over and above any meaning of the actions taken by themselves' (and can reproduce building blocks of belief without involving any explicit content that is believed). Rituals by their repetitive forms reproduce categories and patterns of thought. In the same vein, transformative images become ritualistic where audiences expect radical changes to happen in the blink of an eye. Reality television delivers both the need for instant gratification as well as the illusion of instant solutions to complex and primitive fears about physical form, ageing and the lack of aesthetic beauty in one's environment.

Crossing Boundaries in Reality television

Writings on television in the last few years have centred on the 'post-documentary culture' (Corner 2001) of reality television. While the term 'reality television' has invited various interpretations, there is an implicit and overarching recognition that it claims to represent reality to some degree by depicting ordinary people and lives (Holmes & Jermyn 2004; Friedman 2002). Chad Raphael (2004: 120) defines reality television as 'an umbrella term for a number of programming trends that have rapidly expanded since the

late 1980s across all hours of network schedules, first-run syndication, and cable.’ One disconcerting element of reality television is its ability to cross boundaries and to blur demarcations between bounded genres (Nichols 1991). In production terms reality television is often seen as less scripted, with an assemblage of live coverage and pre-recordings which creates a seamless narrative misconstruing temporality and reality. The growing literature on reality television nevertheless confirms its popularity and its consolidation in contemporary culture (Reiss and Wiltz 2004; Holmes & Jermyn 2004).

Media and social scientists have explored various issues associated with this genre ranging from an enquiry into the essential understanding of realness that manifests in this genre, the political economy behind the emergence of this format, and issues of temporality to the processes and rituals that have popularised these genres the world over (cf. Doane 1990; Caldwell 1995; Berenstein 2002; Derrida and Stiegler 2002, Couldry 2002; Raphael 2004). The writings have also centred on new forms of empowered audiences where the act of voting constructs audiences as having the agency to determine the outcome of the programme (Tinckell & Raghuram 2004). Here agency is recast through people’s engagement with new media technologies and interactive elements which compel audience participation through push-button technologies and mobile telephony. The authenticity of ‘realness’ and ‘liveness’ have come under scrutiny (Botz-Bornstein 2006) whilst acknowledging the increasing spaces on television which cater to lifestyle and people-oriented reality television.

The pervasiveness of watching the personal lives of people has been a major debate in reality television literature where reality television is seen to be transgressing the boundaries between private and public and between entertainment and voyeurism (Kilburn 1994, Dovey 2000, Hill 2000). The debates on the production values of these formats coupled with their rising popularity have nevertheless renewed interests in understanding new media audiences as citizens as well as the politics of gazing into the personal lives of people. Television’s double articulation in this instance is understood through its representation of the everyday as well as the ‘social technology’ of ‘the popular’ as ‘people watch it all the time, are affected by it and incorporate it into the

structure and references of their daily lives' (Kavka and West:138).

Makeover shows such as *Ten Years Younger*, *Extreme Makeovers* and *What Not to Wear* celebrate the possibility of transformation in ordinary people's lives. The number of programmes both in public broadcasting service and satellite channels that cater to makeover shows has been on the rise. Gareth Palmer (2004), in commenting on lifestyle as a sub-genre of reality television, probes how these shows enact a new public sphere where the audience re-question their role as citizens and consumers. Palmer (2004: 174) contends that the concepts of lifestyle and surveillance are part of a new discursive formation of prime-time consumption. Here the act of gazing occupies new levels of the liminal in celluloid culture where private and public boundaries are transgressed and blurred constructing a perverse novelty that is constantly exploited in different ways. In discerning the class discourses in makeover shows, Palmer (2004) confirms that the increasing number of 'lifestyle programmes in Britain both feed into and contribute to the nation's preoccupation with style, and outlets for styling life, home and garden.' The everydayness of life, home and garden are re-told in programme formats in which change, transformation and a promise of 'altered states' are built and drive audience expectation. Such programmes deliver instant gratification in transformative narratives which couch change as empowering and as a remedy for socially constructed problems or deviance.

Rachel Moseley (2001:34) conceives the extension of programming into the private realms of the everyday (i.e. the garden, the self, and the home) as the privatization of the public sphere, which marks a shift in the ethos of public-service broadcasting. Moseley (2001) also points out that there is a blurring of gendered preferences as spheres traditionally considered as feminine now occupy prime-time television but more importantly it re-mediate the boundaries of what can be considered as public.

Palmer (2004) emphasises that the heart of makeover and lifestyle television is 'the reveal' where contestants (and audience) get to see what the transformation is. This

'Cinderella' effect often unfolds through the process of a television narrative where disorder and lack of control over houses and bodies is socially constructed and the narrative plot then seeks to impose new forms of order through television gurus who make transformations happen. The transformation or change is seen as achievable within the format of the programme, manipulating temporality to function in accordance with the visible narrative of television. These narratives reflect both the anxieties as well as our construction of social deviance. In makeover shows, deviance can come in the form of poor selection of apparel, neglect of bodies or the natural process of ageing. In a society where youth culture dominates the media, ageing is seen as a social deviance and science, in the guise of invasive surgery, is portrayed as a form of salvation often reducing technical and medical discourses into heroic narratives. According to Barbara Herrnstein Smith (1981:225) 'we know a 'Cinderella' story when we hear one and 'Cinderella' is a heavily coded term in our culture'.

In tandem with makeover shows, other reality shows such as *Make Me a Supermodel*, *Faking it*, *Come Dancing*, reality-based talent shows and a myriad of other formats emphasise the ability of amateurs to become professionals (or non-celebrities to become celebrities) through the process of their television journey. Here amateurs are expected to turn into professionals through the process of a television programme. Reality television caters to our need for instant gratification by delivering transformation in half-hour and one-hour slots and in weekly formats which trace change taking place in front of the viewers. Surveillance shows such as *Big Brother* cater to the transformative element by fusing the process of celebrification where ordinary people and lesser known celebrities become famous through their appearance in these programmes. In talent shows, audiences are led to feel that they are creating celebrities and TV personalities through their votes. Hence the transformative element is encoded within the genres and the accent is on instant gratification where makeovers on both property and people can be done in matter of minutes.

The notion of transformation can manifest in two main ways. It can be visually documented through images or it can entail an abstract process where the act of being

watched transforms an ordinary person into a celebrity. The process of celebrification is also tied to the wider economy where press, magazine and online space may further extend the period of scrutiny and coverage that may be accorded to reality television celebrities. The liminal space of television allows this rite of passage where a contestant or ordinary person leaves a familiar world and enters into an unfamiliar one and returns transformed by their experience. Thomas De Zengotita advances the notion that 'for human beings, our need to be recognised is almost as basic as food' and he contends that the force behind the virtual revolution is primordial where there is a fundamental need for acknowledgement and significance within the human tribe (2005:117). The proliferation of spaces from reality television to blogs, create public platforms for individuals to narrate private experiences enabling people to re-mediate their identities and experiences through technology and public consumption.

Reality television in part caters to this need for recognition with its increasing use of non-celebrities in its programme formats. These narcissistic tendencies have been perceived as the democratization of celebrity culture where the spaces for acquiring recognition have increased with more access to the machinery of celebritization (Braudy 1997; Stark 2003). Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn (2004: 47) contend that the phenomenon is 'celebrated as a democratization of public culture and the deconstruction of the components of fame'. The re-mediating of individual experiences through public gaze and spectacle is also viewed as a form of self-validation and self-promotion (Palmer 2005) where these appearances constitute new conceptions of fame.

Transformation as Communal Resolution

Television as a mythic space fuses both reality and fiction but it also intrinsically communicates our anxieties, fears, as well as hopes. The increasing emphasis on form and physical appearance has constructed ageing and unfashionable bodies as deviance and medical science in the form of plastic surgery as a panacea (Doyle and Karl 2006; Banet-Wiser 2006). These transformation formats embrace medical science and technology as solutions and appropriate technical and specialist discourses into personal

narratives. Body makeover narratives reflect society's anxieties and fears while the appropriation of specialist discourses reflect its attempt to portray science as a heroic discourse to resolve primitive fears with regard to nature and the wild. Television's transformative abilities are conveyed in its ability to compress contradictory and competing discourses into a singular narrative to forge its own commentaries and forms as well as responses to our primitive fears and modern anxieties. Television by mediating between the popular and the inaccessible converts the arcane into storytelling formats (Silverstone 1999; 1985; 1984). The mix of personal narratives and science as utopian and as a discourse of salvation in makeover formats reflects television's intrinsic ability to mediate between common and specialist knowledge while constructing new forms of mediated reality.

Silverstone (1988: 36) in arguing that 'television is a contemporary expression of myth' implicates television's role in our everyday life in equally sustaining 'knowledge that informs everyday life'. He contends that this knowledge of common sense is both shared and fragmentary (Silverstone 1988: 36-37) and works to negotiate the boundaries between the familiar and the unfamiliar. While common sense is a contentious term both in the disciplines of sociology and political science, Silverstone refers to common sense as 'the knowledge I share with others in the normal self-evident matrices of everyday life' (Berger & Luckmann, 1967: 37, cf. Silverstone 1988). Common sense is then not finite and is forever evolving with the context of our existence. It is often contrasted with specialist knowledge and equally associated with rituals and mythic narratives (Geertz 1975; cf. Silverstone 1988). Mythic narratives in the form of television play a role in sustaining common-sense reality by bringing together diverse and incompatible elements and in the process it negotiates the known and unknown. Television has the ability to create its own culture and its own forms and to impose its singular narrative while drawing contradictory and incompatible discourses together. Hence science (e.g. discourses of plastic surgery) and nature (e.g. anxieties about ageing) often occupy an equivalent space as both are intrinsically beyond reach (Silverstone 1988: 37; 1985).

The transformative process is manifested in the framing of science and specialist knowledge in television where programme narratives involve the transformation of multiple realities into a singular narrative expression (Silverstone 1985; Singer 1966) where the presentation of science is an attempt to resolve the demands of myth and mimesis of the real. For Silverstone (1988: 35), if the mythic in television documentary draws the viewer into a world of fantasy (i.e. of the heroic) then the mimetic pulls her or him towards the real (Silverstone 1988: 35). Television's technical and aesthetic invisibility and the familiarity of narrative formats underpin its ability to narrate transformations and to equally represent a transformative space. Makeover programmes by the virtue of their emphasis on change and 'alteredness' capitalise on television's ability to transgress both the boundaries between real and fiction as well as common and technical knowledge.

Conclusion

Transformative narratives in television in the form of reality lifestyle programmes capitalise on the mythic sphere of television. Television as a liminal space between the real and the unreal and between the familiar and unfamiliar also constructs a space where journeys and rituals of transformation can happen. The 'Cinderella' effect as a television narrative is consistently woven into reality television formats where there is an expectation of change and the documentation of this change through visuals and images. The changes are often portrayed as positive outcomes and as solutions to socially constructed problems and anxieties. The transformation narratives, with their emphasis on change and the possibilities of altered states, offer instant gratification to complex social and biological issues while feeding narcissistic and primordial tendencies for individuals to be recognised through lifestyle television formats. The act of public consumption and the incorporation of non-celebrities into reality formats offer spaces for ordinary people to explore celebrity status and to be transformed by their journeys in the television space. The ability of television to transgress other boundaries (i.e. between common and specialist knowledge) and to draw science into the popular accords its power to further celebrate its transformative potential.

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