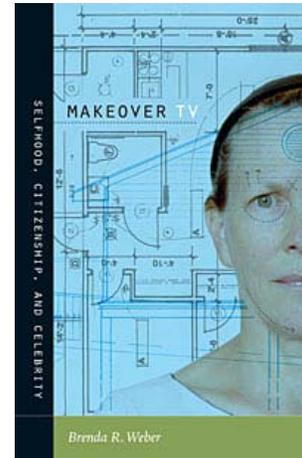


Brenda R. Weber, **Makeover TV: Selfhood, Citizenship, and Celebrity**, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009, 324 pp., \$84.95 (hardcover), \$23.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by
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Although makeover television is often looked down upon, Brenda Weber argues that it depicts inherent aspects of Americanness and neo-liberalism. The genre, which consists of “reinventing” an individual or a product by transforming him/her/it from an unwanted “before body” to the desired “after body,” is scrutinized and dissected meticulously in this well-crafted book. After reviewing more than 2,500 hours of reality television programs, ranging from MTV’s *Pimp My Ride* to ABC’s *Extreme Makeover*, the author identifies common narratives spanning these shows that serve as indicators of cultural trends and societal contradictions. Whether the show’s topic is celebrity—*Theme One: It Could Happen to You*—or real estate—*How Clean is Your House?*—Weber argues that makeover television provides its participants with ways to find their inner selves and to emerge from their experience as validated citizens.



There is a bit too much academic jargon in *Makeover TV*, but nonetheless, the author makes us aware of the intrinsic incoherence in those programs. Weber argues that the path to finding one’s true self lies in a drastic transformation of one’s body (or car, for that matter). She also identifies a clear pattern in all of these shows: the introduction to the “before body”; the experts’ observation of the problem and what needs to be done to overcome it; the participant’s acceptance of and submission to the experts’ opinion; the transformation process; the revealing of the “after body”; and finally, the participant’s euphoria.

Weber divides her book into five distinct sections: Makeover Nation; Visible Subjects; I’m a Woman Now, What Makes the Man; and Celebrated Selfhood. The topics discussed in those sections range from the inherent Americanness of makeover shows to the portrayal of gender and its consequential reinforcement of broad stereotypes. Weber effectively illustrates this point, arguing that female makeover participants are always expected to fit into perfect models of femininity. Even though certain shows, such as *What Not to Wear*, introduce tomboys and women with masculine traits, the underlying rationale is that a feminine self is lurking somewhere just waiting to be unleashed. Similarly, the rare, but usually less successful makeover shows dedicated to the restyling of men, (e.g., *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*), inevitably reinforce the stereotypical masculine heterosexual ideal expected from all-American males.

Weber’s argument about race and ethnicity is persuasive. Although the ethnicity and race of makeover television participants is never included in the initial discussion of the “before body,” these traits often are cited as part of the experts’ final positive critique of the makeover. In other words, physical attributes linked to ethnicity can only be mentioned in a positive light to avoid accusations of racism.

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Weber posits that the "TV makeover's homogenizing gestures, which code all women as universally similar, thus purportedly disallows for the particularities of racial and ethnic experience" (p. 132). The uniformization of beauty and gender on television does not receive enough critical attention, nor does the absence of consideration of diversity with regard to ethnicity.

Although *Makeover TV* provides important insights, its structure is often confusing, which sometimes makes it difficult to follow key arguments. Further, the subhead titles, while clever, are mostly uninformative about what is to be discussed. For instance, information about the depiction of masculinity and the relevance of male bodies to makeover television is found in the section titled What Makes the Man and in its subhead: You've got a cute little figure. I mean, you've got a great body.

Weber's argument that makeover television promotes and validates the American dream, American citizenship, and its capitalistic free-market values might have been stronger. For instance, Weber argues "the notion that good looks, a beautiful house, or a pimped-out ride are requisite for full citizenship in a larger dating, employment, and social culture manifests consistently through all of the U.S.-based makeover shows" (p. 45). Perhaps, but what does it mean that most of these shows are replicated, or at least watched, in other countries? In fact, the model for many of these programs first originated outside the United States. And, given the rapid expansion of makeover television since 2000, the inclusion of a political, economic, or sociological analysis of the reasons behind the sudden increase in viewership for these shows would have been welcome.

Weber does lucidly underline the contradictions that are inherent in the genre and the limited ambitions of makeover contestants without any hint of condescension toward participants in these shows. She admits to being a fervent and willing spectator of makeover television, even as she exposes the ugly truths behind the genre. She insists that these shows can be enjoyed without a guilty conscience partly because, in many cases, they actually help participants set a new, more positive direction for their lives. It is bold and perhaps risky for a gender scholar to admit enjoying shows that reinforce stereotypes surrounding males and females. Neither does Weber shame viewers for their addiction to shows that project stereotypical gender messages.

Overall, *Makeover TV* offers a timely snapshot of a television genre full of contradictions that entices participants and viewers alike to believe that a drastic change is needed for them to find their inner selves. By making connections between shows that deal with a wide range of makeovers, Weber makes a strong case that the desire to conform is omnipresent in our society. Whether this desire expresses itself via physical appearance or home decorating, the individualized self is the result of a transformative journey toward a model of excellence embodied by experts or celebrities. Weber presents an important paradigm shift for viewers of makeover television by opening their eyes to the underside of seemingly innocent transformations.