Making Over Gender and Sexuality: Queer Exploration and Commodification on YouTube

The makeover genre has flourished in a neoliberal climate that emphasizes individual responsibility for a plethora of “failings,” while reserving the right to define the specific parameters of success and failure. The makeover narrative boasts an array of subgenres, featuring the expertise to help us renovate our homes, careers, families, and prevalently, our bodies. While shows like The Biggest Loser delineate acceptable from aberrant bodies, others like What Not to Wear dictate how to appropriately clad the body, with the professed motivation of improving self-esteem, thereby masking the socio-economic factors that contribute to obesity, choices in clothing, and other modes of bodily presentation. These shows suggest the cure-all for social ills: “becoming the subject who is consumable and consumptive in the ‘right’ ways” (Ringrose and Walkerdine 239). The high incidence and variety of popular cultural narratives of bodily shame and remedy facilitates the spread of an ethos of self-regulation, causing individuals to internalize blame for bodies that deviate from artificial social ideals.

By tying socially acceptable bodily presentation with particular spending trends, the makeover genre promotes the class stratification and consumerist impulses inherent to late capitalism. The compulsion to purchase self-esteem through socially sanctioned consumption and disavow toxic social stratification, as well as potential challenges to these discourses, can be examined through a reading of the YouTube series, Transfashionable, which takes the popular cultural trend of utilizing external makeovers as internal therapy and gives it a makeover of its own. The show engages the possibilities and limits for transgression in the commodification of queerness, presenting people of various sexualities and gender expressions undergoing makeovers conducted by drag queens to assuage their inner turmoil, hence the show’s tagline: “Don’t be a drag, learn from a drag queen” (“DRAG QUEEN MAKEOVER”). Transfashionable
represents a clash between neoliberalism’s tendency to sell and appropriate the counter-normative and a subversive commitment to exploring trans aesthetics and the tension of celebrating multiple gender and sexual identifications while concurrently enforcing body-policing.

Transfashionable is featured on the now defunct YouTube Channel, The Stylish, owned by Magical Elves, the producers of various televised reality shows (“The Stylish”). Transfashionable consists of nine episodes aired between September 2012 and March 2013 and is one of the most popular recurring series from the channel. While the producers view Transfashionable as a “progressive series” (“Transfashionable”), is it hard to say whether the show is primarily a platform for subversion or for commodification. It is useful to look at the constituent elements of the series before interrogating how they manifest together. In many ways, Transfashionable represents the resilience of the dominant makeover narrative, one which requires a spectacle-based transformation of visible alterations, followed by a normative resolution that celebrates individuality. The fact that new technologies of expression like YouTube and non-normative gender identities such as drag queens are plagued by the same problems regarding the transgressive presentation of corporeal difference as previous formulations of the makeover genre emphasises capitalist culture’s reluctance to give platforms to subversive voices.

The work of Katherine Sender and of Jessica Ringrose and Valerie Walkerdine is informative for locating makeovers in a neoliberal context. The prominence of the makeover in popular culture, dating back to the 1940s, has consistently demonstrated the underlying premise that “consumption facilitates positive change” (Sender 134). As always, consumerist imperatives are intertwined with class politics, demonstrated by Sender’s discussion of the prototypical
television show *Queen for a Day*, in which the winning contestant’s “main prize was being […]
treated like a person of an entirely different class” (Sender 131), representing the “striving for
[…] a specifically bourgeois femininity” (Ringrose and Walkerdine 233) present in a variety of
other shows. As the makeover genre evolves, this directive of “consuming oneself into being”
(Ringrose and Walkerdine 230) targets a variety of genders and sexualities in addition to specific
female embodiments. Sender’s work on *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* highlights the deliberate
incorporation of heterosexual and homosexual male bodies into this narrative. *Queer Eye*, in
which “gay male consumption habits” are used “to reform a heterosexual masculinity compatible
with neoliberalism” (Sender 132), makes demands of conformity on multiple facets of the male
viewing public: instructing gay men to function as “good-looking arbiters of taste” (Halberstam,
*Failure*, 98) and straight men to become “an improved romantic partner […] [and] a more
flexible, employable worker” (Sender 131).

The links between exploring gender and sexuality and class-stratified consumerist
imperatives persist in altered formations in *Transfashionable*. Most episodes feature make-up
artists, manicurists, and personal shoppers—a labour force created in response to the ever
expanding market for altering body image—and the necessity of make-up, wigs, and clothing for
building self-esteem is routinely emphasized. The persistence of product placement and the
bombardment of directives to spend money cement *Transfashionable*’s place in the lineage of
makeover programming, but the lack of a specifically targeted group of consumers suggests a
significant departure. The gender and sexual diversity of the recipients of the makeovers on
*Transfashionable* is unique, as is the intended end result of each episode. The majority of the
series follows non-normative trajectories: a married straight man into a drag queen, a woman
into a drag king for the first time, and someone self-identifying as androgynous into a more strictly feminized look, to name a few.

The variety of the makeovers on the show constitutes a rejection of a master narrative or recipe for self-improvement and instead suggests that exploring the performative nature of gender is a component in fostering a positive self-perception. However, the diversity of the show’s participants could also be interpreted as an effort to assimilate broader ranges of gender and sexual identifications into a culture of consumption, as Judith Halberstam aptly notes that “bodily flexibility has become both a commodity […] and a form of commodification” which allows for the selling of “transgression as individualism” (*Queer Time*, 18-19, emphasis in original).

Additionally, the introduction of new technological mediums used to disseminate makeover narratives requires critical contemplation. YouTube has undergone significant alterations since its inception in 2005, changing from a near utopian alternative for the distribution of a variety of media that “exemplif[ied] a social environment in which everyone has the potential to be both a consumer and purveyor of content” (Haridakis and Hanson 317). The new medium upset pre-existing power relations between entertainers and the companies that usually exercise a certain degree of control over them, disrupting traditional narratives of producing and consuming culture.

In many senses, YouTube functions as the natural next step in the increasing reach of cultural output through constantly evolving technological capabilities, as outlined in the prescient ruminations of Walter Benjamin. Benjamin emphasis the importance of mobility and accessibility of art to achieve mass exposure, qualities typified in the construction of YouTube. With over 1 billion unique visitors per month globally and 100 hours of video being uploaded
every minute (“YouTube Statistics”), YouTube exemplifies contemporary mastery over “public presentability” and “fitness for exhibition” (Bejamin 46), distributing entertainment and art “for simultaneous collective experience” on a previously unrivaled scale (Benjamin 49). YouTube’s resulting popularity and basis in independent, user-generated content has provided a sounding stage for voices that have limited representation in mainstream media, such as those with non-conventional genders and sexualities featured on *Transfashionable*.

However, *Transfashionable*’s rise and fall on an increasingly commercialized YouTube complicates things. Jin Kim outlines an important shift from user-generated content to professionally generated content on YouTube (53), claiming that professionally generated content like *Transfashionable* better facilitates an “ad-friendly media environment that links content and advertisements smoothly” (Kim 59), as opposed to less predictable and less marketable, user-generated content.  

1 YouTube attracts advertisers by claiming to “select your target audience by gender, age, interests and location,” thereby allowing them to “Zero in on the right people based on who they are, where they’re located, and what they’re interested in” (“Start Advertising on YouTube”). In theory, this technique perfects the neoliberal ideal of self-surveillance: the internet content you consume dictates the advertisements you are presented with, hoping to influence you in the consumption of specific products and services—essentially you target yourself.

While Kim’s conclusion that “YouTube constitutes an evolution of the present media milieu, rather than a revolution” (53) seems apt, Debbie Levin, Executive Producer of Magical Elves, comments on “discover[ing] a creative freedom made possible by social media that is still impossible for television” (Lanning) through her experiences in making shows like *Transfashionable* on YouTube. There is a reason Magical Elves attempted the series on
YouTube, and not on television—it provides a place to test out ideas, for messiness, for failure, and with comparatively little bureaucratic struggle or financial detriment. By deploying Halberstam’s queer construction of failure which associates it “with nonconformity, anticapitalist practices, […] negativity, and critique” (Failure, 89), the eventual financial collapse of the YouTube channel can be seen as its redemption, emphasising the unsuitability of a countercultural interest in non-normative expressions of corporeal difference for a profit-driven context and for the makeover formula.

To further unpack the implications of the attempts and failures of the show, it is important to turn away from the generic history and impact of the medium on the series and towards the bodies of Transfashionable. Transfashionable’s use of drag queens demonstrates how drag has taken an increasingly visible place in the arena of popular culture and entered the mainstream imagination. Drag queens perform gender on a varied spectrum and have received an array of commentary: some interpret drag queens as empowering “transgendered provocateurs of dichotomous notions of gender,” while others critique them as “gender royalists and aspirants to masculine power and ultimately misogynists” (Schacht and Underwood 2).

Regardless if a particular drag queen’s performance bolsters or subverts oppressive social divisions, it is significant that they deploy their bodies as texts full of social commentary. While many drag queens have had careers in other media, the aesthetics of their identity have remained central to the politics of their art. As Martin Manalansan states, “The body is the terrain where the […] disparities […] of power in gender, race, class, and sexual orientation are mapped out” (73) and, as such, drag queens, through their use of bodies as texts, are poised to interrogate these inequalities. Drag queens primarily confront gender binarism by failing at conventional
performances of gender dichotomies, presenting alternative identities open to gender multiplicity and fluidity.

This denial of gender fixity is central to Transfashionable as is the use of makeovers to bring a plethora of gender performances into the consumerist fold by exploiting and encouraging participants’ interest in gender performativity. The complexities of this process are captured in the sixth episode, which claims to “lift the veil on a quiet, yet thriving community of married, heterosexual cross-dressers” (“STRAIGHT HUSBAND GOES DRAG”). Kirk, presented as a typical cisgendered, heterosexual man, is on the show due to his growing interest in dressing in drag. As gender illusionist Courtney Act works on Kirk’s makeover, she talks about the various labels for gender-bending, asking for Kirk’s preference. His simple answer, “I’m fine being me… it’s just me is in transition,” undermines notions of gender as binary and inflexible, without the necessity of compartmentalization to a term that makes his experience comprehensible to others.

This picks up on the idea that “sexuality is a dispersed relation between bodies and things” (Halberstam and Livingston 8) and articulates the importance of this reciprocal relation, while denying it definitive authority: bodily presentation through materiality matters to gender and sexuality, but does not dictate either one. However, the reaction of Kirk’s wife Katrina to the evolving embodiment of his identity shows how the mutual dynamic between things and bodies is crucial to the formation of artificial social constructions that often inform the levels of acceptance encountered by individuals who transgress the normative. When Katrina sees Kirk fully in drag, after the completion of his makeover, she announces “I’m not going to hug you,” in part because “he looks like a woman,” demonstrating the way in which the collision between
things and bodies does carry significant social power, even if it does not control self-identification.

While Kirk’s traversing of an unexpected trajectory of gender performance is depicted as something cathartic and liberating, the dominant narrative of the makeover genre, and its investment in appearance-policing, reasserts itself throughout the series. The mere fact of the existence of a show like *Transfashionable* is not a reason for celebration; rather, it is reminiscent of Foucault’s claim that “Visibility is a trap” (200) and Halberstam’s emphasis on “subjects who are manipulated precisely when they become legible” (*Failure*, 10). Mere visibility of alternative gender and sexual identities does not equate with subversive representation, but can present opportunities for these subjectivities to become assimilated into systems of oppression, operating as adherents to a class-stratified neoliberalism that promotes body-shaming.

For instance, episode three chronicles the makeunder of Heather, a primary component of which is a reduction in her use of cosmetics. Somewhat ironically, drag queen Willam Belli interprets Heather’s makeup as a sign of her need for a style intervention and evidence of her poor self-esteem. After her makeunder, as if to announce her successful assimilation into a neoliberal work ethos, Heather declares “I look amazing. I’m ready to send some faxes and some e-mails marked urgent. I don’t feel like I blend in, but I feel like I could fit in” (“DRAG QUEEN MAKEUNDER”). The takeaway message: in order to retain your individualism, but still function effectively in neoliberal society, just change your makeup, your performativity. Another episode featuring Devin, a “busted Drag Queen,” portrays host Jonny Makeup fulfilling the stereotypical role of the homosexual man wielding authority over questions of style, declaring that Devin’s look is “trash bag drag” (“BUSTED DRAG QUEEN”). Acquiring the “right look for LA” requires expensive wigs, makeup, and clothing, and a team of seven makeover specialists,
representing the ever-expanding aesthetic market. The audience is informed that “Since his makeover, Devin has booked multiple shows in the LA area”: now that Devin is a subject who knows how to properly consume, he is also transformed into a more readily consumable object, able to generate income to fuel his hopefully altered spending habits.

These examples confirm Frederic Jameson’s anxiety, paraphrased by Halberstam, that “seemingly resistant and oppositional strains of postmodern cultural production […] [are] actually the marks of institutionalization rather than revolution” (*Queer Art*, 99). The ways in which *Transfashionable* succumbs to and resists convention highlight which social power dynamics are most resilient in the realms of gender and sexuality. For instance, in contrast to Kirk’s self-nomination, the fourth episode features lesbian Natasha after she is nominated by her brother who wants to see her “dress more stereotypically girly” (“DRAG QUEEN MAKEOVER”). She sits down to talk to her brother and Jonny about her aesthetic and the two men interrogate her about dressing so “masculine and hard.” While Kirk’s desire to explore femininity is celebrated as brave, Natasha’s gender performance, a threat to hegemonic masculinity, needs to be remedied. Natasha’s narrative clashes with the final episode, in which a young woman named Lanie is transformed into a drag king, facilitating a female body’s performance of overt masculinity. The lack of a metanarrative about gender between these two episodes regarding the censoring or celebration of female bodies performing masculinity is reflective of a social reality in which transgressive embodiment is greeted with a range of reactions.

In the penultimate episode of the series, Courtney and Willam perform a makeover on YouTube celebrity Miles Jai. Miles explains his self-identified gender expression as “androgynous” to which Willam replies “but that’s a man, Maury” (“MILES JAI POST-
BEATDOWN MAKEOVER!"), denying Miles authority over his own embodied identity. Once the African American Miles is clad in a wig reminiscent of Marilyn Monroe and the makeover into a more stereotypical feminine appearance is complete, Courtney approvingly declares “you look like a rich white woman!” The success of the makeover is intertwined with the recurring aspiration to bourgeois femininity, a neoliberal ideal that is importantly racially coded, steeped in the ultimately inaccessible nature of white privilege for Miles. Miles’ experience is a microcosm of the neoliberal co-option of Transfashionable: YouTube is used to present a narrative that does not hinge solely on gender binarism and fixity, but the deployment of the makeover genre functions to re-inscribe the dominance of wealth over poverty (and whiteness over blackness), as well as the need to consume.

Ultimately, the makeover Transfashionable performs on the makeover genre is far from revolutionary. It confirms that “subcultural activities are as likely to generate new forms of protest as they are to produce new commodities to be absorbed back into a logic of accumulation” (Halberstam, Queer Art, 98). Comparing the experience of the one heterosexual man to undergo a makeover on the series, Kirk, with other participants is telling: Kirk’s desire to subvert traditional gender performance boundaries is celebrated, while Natasha’s is undermined; Kirk’s refusal to give a binary label to his gender performativity is accepted, while Miles’ is ridiculed. The popularity of the makeover craze and the related social stratification are not dissipating, especially as it is adapted to evolving technological mediums that allow for bigger and more diverse audiences. The series’ inability to fully realize a subversive challenge to neoliberal consumption culture’s power over bodies invites speculation about alternative routes for future exploration. If nothing else, Transfashionable demonstrates that the links between bodily presentation, gender identification, consumption, and commodification are complex and
mutable, and that popular culture remains a crucial arena for understanding these evolving politics of embodied difference.

Notes

1. While Kim predicted this would be one of many issues that would lead to the “marginaliz[ation]” of user-generated YouTube content (Kim 62), his concerns seem to be partially unfounded as independent content-creators have thrived within the advertisement-ridden incarnation of YouTube. Many content creators have secured corporate sponsorships and YouTube has placed ads before their extremely popular videos. In fact, more than half of the top 10 most subscribed channels on YouTube (at the end of September, 2013) consist of videos which Kim would call user-generated content (“YouTube Top 100”). As evidenced in the trailer for a crowd-sourced upcoming documentary about YouTube vloggers, independent content creation has highly lucrative potential: there are “thousands of people making six figure incomes every year,” and people have begun considering YouTube a “career path” and “not just the future,” but “the present of entertainment” (“Vlogumentary Trailer”).

2. The issue of appropriate pronoun use is an extremely important and complex one. For the purposes of this paper, individuals are referred to using the pronouns deployed to represent them on Transfashionable.
Works Cited


[http://www.youtube.com/yt/advertise/](http://www.youtube.com/yt/advertise/).


**Works Consulted**


http://www.youtube.com/user/thestylishvids/about.