

Mercè Oliva Rota, Professor of Visual communication.
Universitat Pompeu Fabra. Department of Communica-
tion. 08018 Barcelona.

Improving reality. An analysis of Spanish makeover reality television

Mejorar la realidad. Un análisis de los makeover reality shows en España

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ABSTRACT: The main aim of this paper is to identify the values conveyed by Spanish makeover reality television. There are two aspects that make these programmes relevant study objects: first, their widespread presence in Spanish television schedules, and second, the role they play in constructing the social imaginary due to their didactic and prescriptive nature. We analysed six Spanish makeover reality shows, *Cambio Radical*, *Desnudas*, *Esta casa era una ruina*, *Supernanny*, *Hermano Mayor* and *Ajuste de Cuentas*, using a methodology that combines narrative semiotics and the analysis of narrative form (plot/syuzet) and audiovisual style. This paper summarises the main research results and conclusions of a doctoral thesis presented in September 2010.

Keywords: Reality TV, makeover reality shows, discipline, narrative semiotics, narrative form, audiovisual style

RESUMEN: Este artículo analiza los valores transmitidos por los makeover reality shows españoles, programas que tienen como objetivo cambiar y mejorar a personas anónimas. La relevancia de este objeto de estudio reside en su amplia presencia en las parrillas televisivas españolas y en su carácter didáctico y prescriptivo. Para llevar a cabo este objetivo se han analizado en profundidad, mediante la semiótica narrativa y el análisis de la enunciación audiovisual (forma narrativa y lenguaje audiovisual), seis makeover reality shows: *Cambio Radical*, *Desnudas*, *Esta casa era una ruina*, *Supernanny*, *Hermano Mayor* y *Ajuste de Cuentas*. En este artículo se sintetizan los resultados y conclusiones de una tesis doctoral presentada en septiembre de 2010.

Palabras clave: telerrealidad, makeover reality shows, disciplina, semiótica narrativa, narrativa audiovisual, lenguaje audiovisual

1. Introduction

Supernanny, *Cambio Radical*, *Esta casa era una ruina*, *Hermano Mayor*, *Ponte verde*, *Soy lo que como*, *Reforma sorpresa*, *Madres adolescentes*, *Las joyas de la corona*... In recent years Spanish television schedules have been invaded by reality television shows that aim to influence reality and who explicitly define themselves as a way of improving the lives of Spanish citizens. Families with conflictive children, with economic problems or with rundown houses, women unhappy with their bodies and young people with anti-social behaviour are now turning to television programmes in search of help to solve their problems and be transformed. These programmes are makeover reality shows.

There are two aspects that make makeover shows relevant study objects: first, their widespread presence on television screens in Western countries, as they are currently one of the main trends in the reality television macro-genre; and second, the role they play in constructing the social imaginary due to their prescriptive nature. These programmes convey lifestyle models by representing initial undesired states (portrayed negatively), final states to which we should aspire (portrayed positively), and the ways and means of achieving these final states. In addition, given that makeover reality shows are related to do-it-yourself and educational programmes, many of them have the explicit intention of influencing the viewer's behaviour.

Despite this, in Spain makeover shows are still a fairly unexplored territory by the audiovisual communication research field. It is therefore vital to study the Spanish versions of these programmes in depth in order to understand their characteristics as texts and the values they convey. This is the main objective of this paper.

In this article we bring together the main research results and conclusions of a doctoral thesis that was presented in the Department of Communication of the Universitat Pompeu Fabra in September 2010¹.

2. Makeover reality shows

Makeover reality shows narrate the metamorphosis of an ordinary person (the participant) or one of their belongings (for example their home) in the

¹ Cfr. OLIVA ROTA, Mercè, *Disciplinar la realitat. Narratives, models i valors dels realitats de transformació*, Doctoral thesis, Department of Communication, Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona, 2010. Available online September 2011: <http://www.tesisenxarxa.net/TDX-1008110-124403/>.

hands of the programme experts. The transformations presented in these shows can affect all imaginable areas of life, but always in the private sphere (personal or professional): remodelling houses and gardens, the physical appearance and people's behaviour and attitudes (family and couple relationships, nutrition and personal hygiene habits, product consumption, etc.).

Makeover shows are a subgenre of reality television, with which they share their basic characteristics: they are hybrid programmes (they combine the formal codes and conventions of documentaries, the narrative structure of serial fiction and characteristics of genres such as game shows and educational and do-it-yourself programmes), their protagonists are ordinary people, and they represent certain events and actions influenced or guided by the programme. Finally, these programmes claim to have a privileged relationship with reality², basing their audiovisual and narrative strategy on the "reality effect"³.

Makeover shows were born⁴ in the second half of the 90s in the United Kingdom with (United Kingdom, BBC1, 1996-2004) and (United Kingdom, BBC1, 1997-2005), which represented material transformations, improving home décor and remodelling gardens respectively. These shows were broadcast in prime time, and mixed the characteristics of daytime do-it-yourself and gardening shows with elements of entertainment and television fiction. Thus, the focus of the programme moved from the didactic (showing in detail how to do a certain task) to the spectacular, by maximising the distance between and representing fast transformations in a race against the clock, and showing

² Su Holmes and Deborah Jermyn in their attempt to define reality television conclude that perhaps the only trait that all reality television programmes have in common is this claim to "the real". Cfr. HOLMES, Su, JERMYN, Deborah, "Introduction. Understanding reality TV", in HOLMES, Su, JERMYN, Deborah (eds.), *Understanding reality television*, Routledge, London, 2004, pp. 1-32.

³ The "reality effect" refers to the textual strategies through which a work connotes "reality". The term is taken from the study by Roland Barthes on the realist novel, in which he identified the inclusion of insignificant or "useless" details in descriptions as a way of creating this effect. Cfr. BARTHES, Roland, "El efecto de real", in PIGLIA, Ricardo (ed.), *Polémica sobre el realismo*, Tiempos Contemporáneos, Buenos Aires, 1972, pp. 141-155.

⁴ This historic review of the beginnings and evolution of the genre is based on: MOSELEY, Rachel, "Makeover takeover on British television", *Screen*, vol. 41, n° 3, 2000, pp. 299-314; BRUNSDON, Charlotte, "Lifestyling Britain. The 8-9 slot on British television", *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 6, n° 1, 2003, pp. 5-23; BRUNSDON, Charlotte *et al.*, "Factual entertainment on British television. The Midlands TV Research Group's '8-9 Project'", *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 4, n° 1, 2001, pp. 29-62 (pp. 51-57); and OUELLETTE, Laurie, HAY, James, *Better living through reality TV*, Blackwell Publishing, Malden (MA), 2008.

the participants' reactions when they first see the metamorphosis of their house or garden in "the reveal" (to achieve this effect, the participants and viewers only receive limited information on the remodelling process).

From transforming houses and gardens, makeover reality shows then moved on to transforming people in programmes that aimed to change the physical appearance of an ordinary person (normally a woman). The pioneering format of this trend was *What not to wear* (United Kingdom, BBC1, 1999-2007), which improved the wardrobe of women without style and which introduced the tactic of the expert humiliating the participant in order to obtain their submission.

In 2002, in the United States, the subgenre evolved with the release of *Extreme Makeover* (USA, ABC, 2002-2007) and *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* (USA, ABC, 2004-present). In these programmes the participants were transformed in far more radical and dramatic ways: it was now not enough just to change a person's wardrobe or their home décor, now cosmetic surgery was involved and whole houses were demolished and reconstructed respectively. Both programmes were extremely dramatic in character, and they defined themselves as forms of charity that allowed people in need to improve their lives. In these two formats the link between makeover shows and do-it-yourself programmes was definitively dropped, as the genre made its way towards spectacle and fiction.

From 2004 makeover shows expanded the areas in which they acted to include transformations of behaviour and attitudes, which are more complex to achieve and represent. These makeover shows deal with all kinds of problems: for example, changing the bad behaviour of children (*Supernanny*, United Kingdom, Channel 4, 2004-2008), or dogs (*It's me or the dog*, United Kingdom, Channel 4, 2005), improving the nutritional habits of families (*Honey, we're killing the kids*, United Kingdom, BBC) and the cleanliness and hygiene of homes (*How clean is your house?*, United Kingdom, Channel 4, 2003-09).

In recent years, makeover shows have multiplied and extended geographically, making their way to Spain. These television formats first appeared in this country in 2006 with the arrival of channel Cuatro (for example, programmes like *La casa de cristal*, *Supernanny*, *S.O.S. Adolescentes* and *Ponte Verde*), although other channels such as Antena 3 also broadcast programmes of this genre, such as *Equipo G*, *Cambio Radical* and *Esta casa era una ruina*. In most cases these shows are adaptations of successful British and North American formats, and thus the low innovation level of Spanish television contents also stands out in this subgenre.

3. Objectives of the study

The general objective of our research is to identify the values that Spanish makeover shows convey. To do this, we specified three specific aims:

- Identify the images projected of the social groups that appear in these programmes, given that the presence or absence of certain collectives and how they are represented have consequences in relation to the capacity of these programmes to make certain social groups visible or invisible, stereotype them or otherwise. This objective was carried out with a character analysis: we analysed the characteristics of the participants and experts, the roles and type of actions they perform and the relationship established between them.
- Identify which lifestyle models and life goals are proposed and endorsed by these programmes with an analysis of the problems (initial state) portrayed and the aspirations (final state) and the means of achieving them prescribed.
- Understand how makeover shows construct the reality effect through which these programmes claim a privileged relationship with “the real”. This is a fundamental aspect for fully comprehending this reality television subgenre.

4. Methodology

We chose to use textual analysis in this research because although in recent years this analysis perspective seems to have lost popularity due to the importance given to the viewer’s capacity to interpret the text freely, we cannot forget the responsibility of the text in relation to the values conveyed in it and endorsed by it. That is, the text itself, independently of the readings that can be made from it, is the base of viewers’ interpretation, it is what centres and guides their reading. Therefore, we believe that a rigorous, detailed study of the text is still relevant. Moreover, despite the interest these programmes have aroused among researchers worldwide, textual analysis is not a common perspective for studying this subgenre⁵. Therefore, our research has a second

⁵ With a few exceptions, such as the interesting analysis by Charlotte Brunson on *Changing Rooms* and *Ground Force*. Cfr. BRUNSDON, Charlotte, *op cit.* and BRUNSDON, Charlotte *et al.*, *op. cit.*

objective of an instrumental nature: to determine a new analysis model that allows us to obtain a deeper knowledge of this subgenre.

Our analysis takes into account two levels of the audiovisual texts: first, the story or *fabula*, which “embodies the action as a chronological, cause-and-effect chain of events occurring within a given duration and a spatial field”⁶, and second, the plot or *syuzhet* (the actual arrangement and presentation of the story events in the television programme) as well as the audiovisual style (the programme’s systematic use of audiovisual devices). In other words, we have analysed “the story that is represented and the actual representation of it, the form in which the perceiver actually encounters it”⁷.

The story was analysed using narrative semiotics, which consists in studying the story structure, determining how the narrative roles (*actants*) are distributed among the characters and examining their states, actions and transformations (that is, the static and dynamic levels of the story). For the analysis we took into account the contributions of A. J. Greimas and Joseph Courtés⁸, founders of the discipline, as well as Xavier Ruiz Collantes⁹, who adapted this methodology to analysing audiovisual texts. To these more abstract elements we have added the study of the characters’ traits (gender, age, social class, etc.) and the spaces the programmes are set in.

In order to study the audiovisual style and the plot or , we analysed the audiovisual techniques used in the programmes (types of shots, camera angles and movements, sound and music, editing, computer graphics, lighting) and their narrative form: plot organization (narrative acts, seriality), time (the temporal relations between the story and the plot: order, duration and frequency), point of view (focalisation¹⁰ and ocularisation¹¹) and the presence

⁶ BORDWELL, David, *Narration in the fiction film*, Routledge, London, 1985, p. 49.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁸ GREIMAS, Algirdas Julius, *Semántica estructural. Investigación metodológica*, Gredos, Madrid, 1971; COURTÉS, Joseph, *Introducción a la semiótica narrativa y discursiva*, Hachette, Buenos Aires, 1980.

⁹ Cfr. RUIZ COLLANTES, Xavier *et al.*, “La imatge pública de la immigració en les sèries de televisió”, *Quaderns del CAC*, nº 23-24, 2006, pp. 103-126; RUIZ COLLANTES, Xavier, “Anexo. Aportaciones metodológicas. Parrillas de análisis: estructuras narrativas, estructuras enunciativas”, *Questiones Publicitarias*, Monograph nº 3, 2009, pp. 294-329.

¹⁰ The focalisation or cognitive focus refers to the distribution of knowledge (information) between the viewer and the characters, that is, the viewer can know more, less or the same as certain characters. Cfr. GAUDREAULT, André, JOST, François, *El relato cinematográfico. Cine y narratología*, Paidós, Barcelona, 1995 (pp. 148-154).

¹¹ “The ocularisation characterises the relationship between what the camera shows and what the character supposedly sees”. GAUDREAULT, André, JOST, François, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

of narrators and narratees (characters that occupy the viewer's position inside the story)¹². The aim of this formal analysis was to determine the programmes' characteristics as texts and identify the interpretation these texts propose: how the programme wants to be read and the "model viewer" it creates¹³.

In this study makeover shows have been analysed as narratives. Therefore, this paper is beyond the debates about whether the events represented in the programme are true or a manipulation of reality.

This work follows an intensive qualitative approach. We studied a sample made up of six Spanish makeover shows broadcast in prime time during the period 2007 to 2009. One season of each programme was studied in detail:

- *Cambio Radical* (Antena 3, 2007), Spanish adaptation of *Extreme Makeover*, in which women who do not like their physical appearance are transformed through plastic surgery.
- *Desnudas* (Cuatro, 2007), adaptation of *How to look good naked* (United Kingdom, Channel 4, 2006-10). This programme aims to improve the self-esteem of women who do not like their physical appearance through psychological therapy (changing the perception of their body) and learning how to choose clothes that suit them better.
- *Esta casa era una ruina* (Antena 3, 2007-present), version of *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*. The objective of this programme is to reform a rundown house owned by a family without economic resources.
- *Supermanny* (Cuatro, 2006-present), version of the British show of the same name, in which parents are helped to improve their children's behaviour.

¹² The analysis of the programmes' formal features was based on the contributions of: BORDWELL, David, *op. cit.*; BORDWELL, David, THOMPSON, Christine, *El arte cinematográfico*, Paidós, Barcelona, 1995; GAUDREAU, André, JOST, François, *op. cit.*; KOZLOFF, Sarah, "Narrative theory and television", in ALLEN, Robert C. (ed.), *Channels of discourse, reassembled. Television and contemporary criticism*, Routledge, London, 1992, pp. 67-100; DOLEZEL, Lubomir, *Heterocósmica. Ficción y mundos posibles*, Arco/Libros, Madrid, 1999, pp. 209-249; FISKE, John, *Television culture*, Routledge, London, 1999; CAsETTI, Francesco, DI CHIO, Federico, *Análisis de la televisión*, Paidós, Barcelona, 1999, pp. 249-292; ARANDA, Daniel, DE FELIPE, Fernando, *Guión audiovisual*, UOC, Barcelona, 2006.

¹³ The model viewer is the viewer planned and created by the text: "A text is a product whose interpretation should form a part of its own generative mechanism: to generate a text means applying a strategy that includes the forecasts of the movements of the other" (ECO, Umberto, *Lector in fabula*, Lumen, Barcelona, 1981, p. 79). Obviously, an empirical viewer could interpret a text in different ways to the one proposed by it, but this type of interpretation is not considered in the present study.

- *Hermano Mayor* (Cuatro, 2009-present), adaptation of *Pascal, le grand frère* (France, TF1, 2006-09), which aims to improve the behaviour of conflictive, violent young people without life goals.
- *Ajuste de Cuentas* (Cuatro, 2007-present), adaptation of an Israeli show in which families with debts are taught how to manage their money correctly.

This sample was chosen in order to encompass the different themes covered by Spanish makeover shows. Although there is a thematic imbalance in favour of psychological transformations as well as a bias in channels (all these programmes were broadcast on commercial channels, and channel Cuatro stands out), this actually reflects the imbalances in the television schedules.

5. Analysis results

Below we detail the transversal elements that have emerged from the analysis of the six programmes in the sample: their actantial structure, the characters' traits, the problems and solutions represented, and the recurring formal elements (narrative form and audiovisual style).

5.1. Common actantial structure

Despite their different themes, the makeover shows analysed share a very similar and strict semio-narrative structure, with few differences between shows or episodes.

In the usual makeover show, the story starts with an incomplete participant (in a state of *disjunction* with respect to an object), that is, they have an initial lack in their private life (personal or professional). The participants do not have the necessary competence¹⁴ to act and achieve the object required for filling the lack themselves; they want to act (to fill the lack) but they do not know how to or are unable to. However, the programme expert does have the necessary competence for acting; they know how and are able to help the participant to achieve the object to fill the lack, the question is whether they will want to help or not.

¹⁴ There are three modalities of competence: wanting-to-do, knowing-how-to-do and being-able-to-do.

In this way the story reaches the contract stage, in which the participant is the sender and the expert is the receiver (in some cases the sender role is the only active part that the participant is permitted to play). For the participant to convince the expert that they deserve their help, the participant needs to seduce them (make them want to act) and awaken their compassion by confessing their problem and the suffering it causes.

Once the contract has been established the expert takes on the role of hero (*subject of doing*) as they are the only character who is able to act, while the participant is the beneficiary of their actions (*subject of state*). The expert's transforming actions are aimed at the participant gaining something, either the necessary competences or the desired object. Depending on these two outcomes, we can distinguish between two makeover show models (outlined later). In the participant's transformation process the expert always faces an opponent, normally the actual participant (who resists the actions of the expert) or natural elements (like time).

Finally, the expert is successful in their actions and the participant is transformed into a competent and/or complete character (conjunction). Normally, the expert is recognised as a hero and receives their reward: the participant's gratitude. Thus, the expert (and by extension the television programme and the channel) is represented as an altruistic hero who helps ordinary people in difficult situations with the sole motive of "doing good".

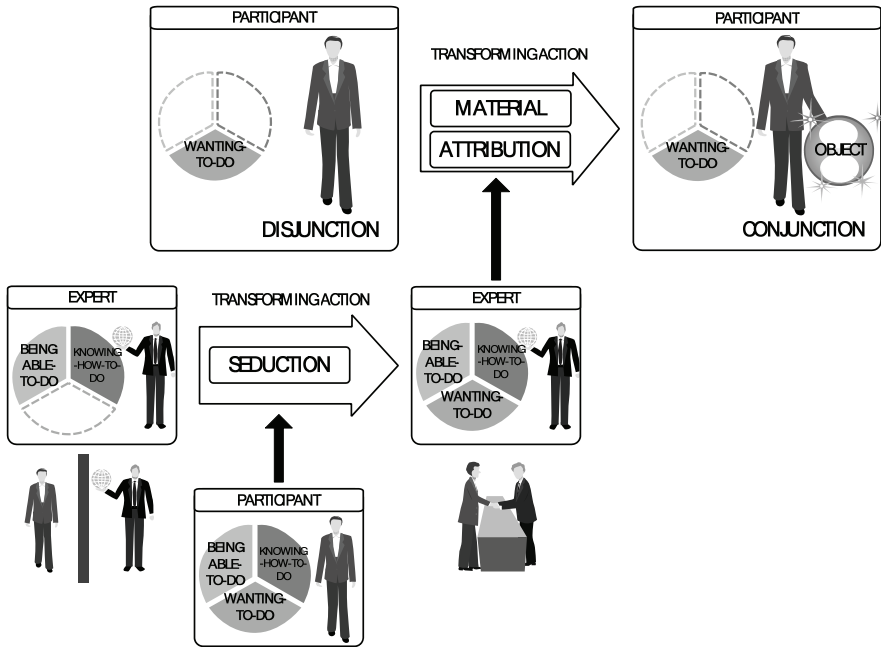
As we can see, in all of these programmes a strong inequality is established between the experts and the participants in terms of their capacity to act and decide.

To finish this section, we propose classifying makeover shows into two models based on the actantial structure. In function of the objective of the expert's actions and the participant's capacity to act in their own transformation process, we can differentiate between two makeover show models: the charitable model and the educational model.

In the charitable model (exemplified by *Cambio Radical* and *Esta casa era una ruina*) the expert transforms the participant directly, usually by a material action (plastic surgery or demolishing and rebuilding a house), while the participant is totally passive in the process since the desired object is given to them (*attribution*). At the end of the story the participant is complete but continues to be incompetent: if later on they have a new problem they will not be able to solve it themselves. That is, the expert only acts within the ambit of appearances.

Figure 1 shows the narrative programme of the charitable model, and clearly shows the inequality between the participants and experts.

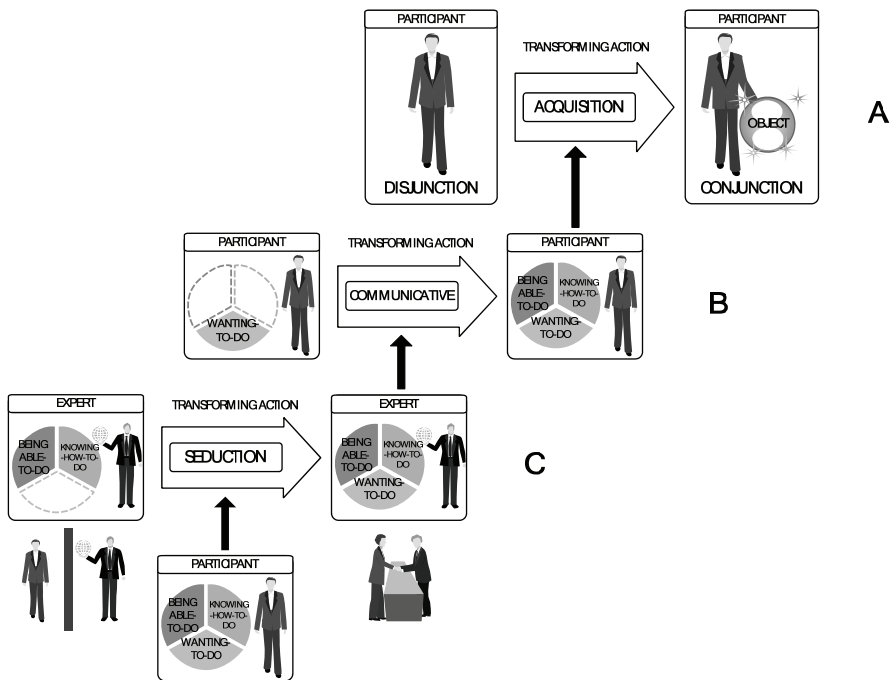
Figure 1. The narrative programme of the charitable model



In the educational model the real transformation showed in the programme is that the participant becomes competent, they become a hero (*subject of doing*) capable of acquiring for themselves what they want or need. The expert's actions are communicative and the participant's incompetence is related to "not knowing". In this category we find makeover shows that focus on transforming behaviour: *Supernanny*, *Desnudas*, *Ajuste de cuentas* and *Hermano Mayor*.

There are some differences in relation to the previous model. First, in these programmes there is a discourse on effort that is not present in the charitable model: the participants should act, internalise the guidelines established and put them into practice. Second, at the end of the story the participants are not only complete (theoretically) but also competent to face other similar problems in the future.

Figure 2. The narrative programme of the educational model



As shown in Figure 2, the story told in this type of makeover show is formed by a main narrative programme (A) and two narrative sub-programmes (B and C). The main narrative programme (A) recounts the participant's transformation from a state of disjunction to a state of conjunction with respect to the desired object, in which the participant is both the *subject of doing* and the beneficiary of the transforming action (*subject of state*). Narrative sub-programme B recounts the participant's process of acquiring the necessary competence, in which the expert is the *subject of doing*. Narrative sub-programme C recounts the expert gaining competence in the contract phase (going from "not wanting to do" to "wanting to do").

However, in this type of makeover show the main narrative programme (A), in which the participant is the hero, is basically skipped over (totally or partially), and it is the two narrative sub-programmes (B and C) that are recounted in detail in the plot or *syuzhet*. In other words, these television programmes convert the first narrative sub-programme (B), in which the expert is the hero, into the centre of the narrative, and equate the end of this narrative with the final state of the main narrative programme, in which the participant reaches the state of conjunction with respect to the desired object.

Doing this, these makeover shows establish a direct relationship between having the necessary competence for acting (wanting to/ knowing how to/being able to) and being successful in the actions and obtaining the desired object. That is, in the educational model the psychological transformation processes are simplified and there is no possibility of failure.

5.2. Characters

A significant number of the participants of the makeover shows analysed belonged to the lower classes (*Cambio Radical*, *Esta casa era una ruina*, *Hermano Mayor* and, in some cases, *Ajuste de Cuentas*). These people are represented as particularly incomplete, incompetent and passive. They are connected with more serious deficiencies or problems that imply a higher degree of humiliation. The desired object is often given to them, that is, they do not achieve it themselves, and they are not permitted to act in any way (beyond being the sender of the contract). In contrast, lighter problems are represented in the programmes featuring middle class people (for example *Supernanny*).

In terms of gender, in these programmes women appear as the object of male desire, and it is made clear that their physical appearance should be their utmost concern. Moreover, the makeover shows in which only women appear are related to physical appearance, self-esteem and beauty ideals.

Most of the families portrayed in the shows are traditional nuclear families (*Esta casa era una ruina*, *Supernanny*, *Ajuste de Cuentas*). The only programme in which single-parent families systematically appear, *Hermano Mayor*, deals with far more serious problems. Therefore, traditional families are legitimised, single-parent families are stigmatised and other family models are made invisible.

Finally, most minorities are excluded from makeover shows. For example, there are no immigrant or homosexual participants; thus, these groups are made invisible. Sick and disabled people do appear (in *Esta casa era una ruina*), but always as helpless individuals who can't look after themselves and who need outside help.

Most of the experts have learned their skills from formal education and/or professional experience. Only in one case are the expert's skills based on personal experience (*Hermano Mayor*), and thus this is a marginal kind of expert. Consequently, in general the profile of the makeover show expert is fairly traditional. In some cases the expert's professional activity is linked to the privileged classes (as in *Cambio Radical*, *Esta casa era una ruina*, *Desnudas* and *Ajuste de cuentas*) so that these programmes connect the participants (from the lower and middle classes) with experts that they cannot normally access.

A direct relationship is apparently established between the expert's area of specialisation and the area in which they need to act. However, in many cases these two areas do not match up completely when the expert attempts to change attitudes, beliefs and ways of understanding reality. For example, Vicens Castellano (*Ajuste de cuentas*) as well as giving economic advice also tries to improve the participants' couple and family relationships; Juanjo Oliva, fashion designer, works on the participant's self-esteem in *Desnudas*; and Pedro García Aguado (*Hermano Mayor*) deals with behaviour disorders other than drug addiction (area related to his personal experience). Therefore, psychological transformations are represented as quick and easy: in these programmes some superficial advice is enough to achieve significant changes.

As we have seen in the analysis of the actantial structure, there is a strong hierarchical inequality between participants and experts in relation to the capacity to act. This inequality is also reflected in the types of actions the experts carry out: tough, aggressive and intrusive. They use methods like home visits (*Esta casa era una ruina*, *Supernanny*, *Ajuste de Cuentas* and *Hermano Mayor*), video surveillance (in *Supernanny*, *Ajuste de Cuentas* and *Hermano Mayor* the participants are recorded while the experts are not in their homes) and shock therapy (activities with a very high emotional impact in *Ajuste de cuentas* and *Hermano Mayor*).

The expert's superiority and their right to make the participant yield to their authority is readily recognised by the latter, and if not, the participant is humiliated and psychologically attacked in order to overcome their resistance. That is, the participant that doubts the expert's authority is punished. For example, in *Ajuste de Cuentas* Vicens Castellano verbally attacks the participants who refuse to follow his instructions. The text does the same, humiliating and ridiculing the participants, representing them as ignorant and irresponsible. These types of actions, however, do not occur as often as they do in the British and North-American programmes, in which they have become standard.

Finally, the expert develops a close relationship with the participant, distancing themselves from a strictly cold, professional relationship. That is, the expert makes it understood that they are personally involved in the case and that they care about what happens to the participant. This attitude is reflected in the physical contact between the expert and participant, who often hug each other. Experts are represented as people with feelings, who are emotionally moved and who explain their subjective experiences to the camera. All this humanises and legitimises their hierarchical superiority: they take on the role of authoritarian and/or compassionate "parents".

5.3. Problems and solutions

Makeover shows apparently deal with a wide range of problems linked to self-esteem and physical appearance, housing, family relationships between parents and children and family economy. However, there is one topic that stands out above the rest: family relationships. Not only do *Supernanny* and *Hermano Mayor* talk about this, family conflicts also appear in *Cambio Radical*, *Esta casa era una ruina* and *Ajuste de cuentas* as a consequence of the main problem.

Although all the problems portrayed have deep social, economic or ideological roots, the participants' deficiencies are always represented as individual problems that need individual solutions. Consequently the actual participants are indicated as the cause of their own problems. The participant is therefore blamed for their situation, which in some cases justifies the humiliation they are subjected to or the expert's authoritarian attitude.

There are three main solutions to the participant's problems endorsed by makeover shows:

- Consumption as a way of changing deep and complex issues, such as individual personality, personal and family relationships, social situation and, ultimately, life quality (*Cambio Radical*, *Desnudas*, *Esta casa era una ruina*). These programmes establish a direct relationship between material goods (prostheses, clothes, houses) and identity.
- Psychological therapy (*Desnudas*, *Supernanny*, *Hermano Mayor*, *Ajuste de cuentas*), which has been popularised by these programmes. However, the lack of preparation of many of the experts and the superficiality of the proposed activities (often subordinated to the need to make interior transformations visible) trivialise psychology.
- Discipline, which in Spanish makeover shows is the main solution recommended to the participants. That is, participants must follow some rules (imposed by the expert) to maintain order. For example, in *Cambio Radical* and *Desnudas* the body is disciplined through plastic surgery or restrictive underwear respectively in order to make it conform to beauty ideals; in *Supernanny* and *Hermano Mayor* discipline is the concept that must govern the relationships between parents and children to maintain family harmony; and in *Ajuste de cuentas* discipline is the way to achieve healthy family finances.

As we can see, the shows take a purely individual rather than a social approach to the problems.

5.4. Narrative form and audiovisual style

The makeover shows analysed use a large number of narrative and audiovisual techniques and have many layers of information. Although the six programmes of this sample seem to be quite different they share certain common traits with respect to the formal elements used as well as how these are employed.

First, in all except one of the six programmes analysed there is a narrator. Most of the narrators are heterodiegetic, that is, they are not a character in the story¹⁵, and follow the tradition of the expository documentary narrator¹⁶: they are a voice-over narrator (not present in the image) who is authoritarian, omniscient, objective and reliable, and their function within the text is to give an “authorised” narration. The narrator has a very dominant presence because everything is explained verbally in these programmes. In addition, all makeover shows superimpose texts on the image that carry out the same function as the heterodiegetic narrator. Therefore, in all of the programmes there is a narrating agency with authority within the text that guides the viewer’s interpretation.

As well as the narrator there are also sub-narrators, that is, narrators within the main story. It is the participants that carry out this function, explaining their situation to the camera and expressing how they feel. As they are subjective, homodiegetic, unreliable subnarrators with only partial information about the facts they do not have sufficient authority to authenticate what they narrate. Therefore, the purpose of their sub-narration is to express their emotions (sadness at the beginning of the programme and joy at the end), a fundamental element for constructing the reality effect.

Second, there are narratees, characters that occupy the viewer’s position within the text, who indicate to the viewer how they should interpret the represented events. The narratees are especially important in the programmes that narrate material transformations because “the reveal” is based on these characters and their reactions (as we will see further on).

The audiovisual style of makeover shows is based on the codes and conventions of observational documentaries: the cameraman carries a hand-held camera, filming the action without interfering and being ignored by the par-

¹⁵ The distinction between homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narrators is taken from KOZLOFF, Sarah, *op. cit.*, pp. 81-85.

¹⁶ Cfr. NICHOLS, Bill, *La representación de la realidad. Cuestiones y conceptos sobre el documental*, Paidós, Barcelona, 1997, pp. 68-72.

ticipants and experts who act as if the camera were not there. Moreover, the moments in which the characters talk directly to the camera and the moments in which the action takes place are strictly separated, thus preserving the illusion of spontaneity and reality.

These documentary characteristics are combined with a large number of techniques of fiction and televisual spectacle to emphasise emotions and establish how the text should be interpreted. For example, close-ups are often used to capture the participant's emotions and underline the intensity of their feelings. On some occasions the experts are also shown in close-ups to demonstrate their emotional involvement (for example in *Esta casa era una ruina*). Slow motion is also used for an expressive purpose (*Cambio Radical*, *Esta casa era una ruina*, *Hermano Mayor*) and extradiegetic music and sound effects accentuate the tone of the sequence (dramatic, fun, joyous etc.).

In relation to the narrative form (plot or *syuzhet*), all the makeover shows analysed have an episodic structure, in which one case is presented and solved in a single episode. On a temporal level, summaries are used to explain the transformation process (the reconstruction of the house in *Esta casa era una ruina*, the plastic surgery in *Cambio Radical*) or iterative plots are used in which something that has happened many times in the story is recounted once in the plot (for example in *Supernanny*, *Ajuste de cuentas*). Therefore, the transformations are simplified and portrayed as quick processes. Repetitive narrative structures also stand out: in each programme everything is explained several times in different ways (the initial state, transformation process, the final state). Finally, these programmes play with focalisation to create intrigue in the viewers and participants, especially in *Cambio Radical*, *Desnudas* and *Esta casa era una ruina*, which all include a "final reveal".

The main function of the formal elements (narrative form and audiovisual style) used in these programmes is to ensure an unambiguous interpretation of the text, limiting the polysemy as much as possible and guiding the model viewer's interpretation. Through the intensive use of the audiovisual and narrative techniques described above, these makeover shows try to hide the weaknesses and gaps that can exist in the story, naturalising the relationship between the problems, causes and proposed solutions. For example, in *Cambio Radical* the programme establishes a direct and straightforward relationship between physical insecurities and physical features, without taking into account the psychological nature of self-esteem problems. Therefore, all the audiovisual and narrative techniques are used to construct the participant's body as being "objectively" flawed and as the only cause for their lack of self-esteem. For example, this is explained by the presenter, the voice-over narrator, the participants and their family. Moreover, the participant's body is

fragmented into cut-ins that isolate the flawed trait, computer graphic effects are used to highlight the flaws and a repetitive narrative structure is employed in which each sequence starts by returning to the defect.

The narrative form and audiovisual style of these programmes also reinforce their actantial structure: the participant's state of disjunction is represented and the suffering that it causes is accentuated, importance is given to the desired object, the expert is legitimised, and a happy, closed ending is constructed. For these texts it is vitally important that the transformations are made visible because it is on these that the reality effect is built and the programme proves its capacity to intervene in "the real". To understand this mechanism it is necessary to differentiate between programmes that narrate material transformations and programmes that narrate inner transformations.

In the makeover shows that narrate material transformations the images work mainly as indexical signs¹⁷, i.e. they are evidence of the metamorphosis. In this sense, there are four pivotal points in the story:

- The representation of the initial lack, e.g. showing cut-ins of the defects of the participant's house in *Esta casa era una ruina* and the participant's flawed body in *Cambio Radical*.
- The representation of the transformation process and the irreversible actions the expert performs on the participant or their belongings, e.g. plastic surgery and demolition of furniture and walls, which are of central importance in each episode.
- "The reveal", a mandatory sequence in which the final appearance of the participant or their home is showed for the first time.
- The comparison between *before* and *after*.

In all of these sequences the images certify that reality has been changed. In addition, the formal techniques outlined above reinforce what the documentary images show us and introduce other values and meanings that are difficult to represent visually, for example, that changing your physical appearance can have an effect on your personality or identity, and transforming your house can lead to changes in your life.

¹⁷ C.S. Peirce distinguishes between three types of signs according to the relationship they have with their referent: iconic signs (relation of similarity or analogy), symbols (arbitrary and conventional relationship) and indexic signs (the sign and its referent have an existential connection). Cfr. SEITER, Ellen, "Semiotics, structuralism and television", in ALLEN, Robert C. (ed.), *Channels of discourse, reassembled. Television and contemporary criticism*, Routledge, London, 1992, pp. 33-39.

For example, “the reveal” sequence in *Cambio Radical* is designed to maximise the contrast between *before* and *after*, show that a new body also brings a new identity and finish the story with a happy ending. After a few seconds of anxious suspense the participant appears and reveals their new look to their family and the viewers for the first time. Here, family members play the part of narratees: their reactions (shown in extreme close-ups) indicate to us how we should decode the images. The participant comes onto the set dressed in very feminine attire and walks down a catwalk while the public seated on either side applaud. At her back we can see the images of how she looked before, thus the contrast with the participant’s current appearance is evident to the viewer. This all aims to visually represent the physical transformation, the participant’s change in identity and the future success that awaits her.

In the makeover shows that narrate “inner” transformations that are difficult to represent visually, there is an obsession with making these changes perceptible. Three strategies are used to achieve this:

- Through verbalisation, that is, everything is made explicit verbally by narrators, sub-narrators and superimposed texts that explain to the viewer what the participant is thinking and feeling. The clearest examples are *Supermanny* and *Ajuste de cuentas*, in which words play an important role.
- Through provoking emotional reactions in the participants, which are evidence that the expert’s actions have effects on reality. This strategy is used in *Ajuste de Cuentas* and *Hermano Mayor*, two programmes in which the expert’s confrontational attitude and their proposed activities have a large emotional impact on the participants. These types of actions are also used to represent an inner lack. For example, in *Desnudas* the participant is made to take off all her clothes in front of three mirrors and explain what she doesn’t like about her body, so that her face shows her feelings of inadequacy about her body.
- By transferring the inner psychological work to the outside through physical activity, used a lot in *Ajuste de cuentas*, *Hermano Mayor* and *Desnudas*. Instead of showing participants talking and reflecting on their attitudes and beliefs, they are showed smashing up cars as a way of managing their rage or walking up escalators in the wrong direction as a metaphor of the interests of bank loans.

Once again we can add to these strategies the narrative and audiovisual techniques outlined above. Let’s look at some examples.

To represent the initial lack, *Supermanny* combines the verbal account of the voice-over narrator and the sub-narrators (expert and participants) to explain the children’s bad behaviour, the suffering of the parents and their inability to solve the problem by themselves, with indexical images showing

the children being naughty (proof of the parents' deficiency), extradiegetic music that conveys tension and a repetitive narrative structure.

A good example of the use of physical activities to represent the transformation process is *Hermano Mayor*. In this programme the psychological work is represented through physical exercise: for example, smashing up a car with a hammer as a form of therapy. Many narrative and audiovisual techniques are used to make it clear to the viewer that while the participant breaks things they are undergoing a psychological change, such as cross-cutting (parallel editing), through which it is implied that each blow of the hammer is equivalent to the memory of a past misdeed that the participant wants to change, the colours of the images, slow motion and extradiegetic music, which emphasise the drama of the moment, etc.

Finally, these programmes also use narrative and audiovisual techniques to finish the story with a happy ending. For example, the final sequence in *Ajuste de cuentas* uses the voice-over narrator, the superimposed texts, and dialogue between the expert and participants to explain the improvements experienced by them, together with close-ups that show us the smiling faces of the participants (which are contrasted with the initial sequences) and happy extradiegetic music. Although in most of the programmes analysed the participants still have debts at the end of the episode, the formal elements gloss over this aspect. These "false happy endings" are not isolated cases, they are common in all the makeover shows analysed.

6. Conclusions: values and lifestyle models conveyed by Spanish makeover reality shows

Now that we have looked at the main results of the analysis of the six Spanish makeover shows in the sample, we will now finish the paper by presenting the principal conclusions of our research.

6.1. Democratisation of the television representation

The birth of reality television at the end of the 80s marked the entrance of "ordinary" people, who had only their personal experiences and emotions to offer, into television world. Until this time television had been an area of discussion of public topics between experts, politicians and prestigious personalities. In some reality television programmes (especially talk shows and reality shows) the statements of the experts and the ordinary people were placed at the same level, thus valuing the direct experience of normal people over the

abstract and theoretical knowledge of experts. This change fired up debate on whether these programmes were trivialising the televisual public sphere, introducing personal, intimate issues and giving a voice to people “without qualifications”, or actually democratising the public sphere by giving a voice to marginalised minorities (for example, women and the lower classes) to talk about their concerns¹⁸.

Makeover shows, in which ordinary people explain their problems in front of the camera, reopened this debate. Therefore, can we consider that makeover shows contribute to the democratisation of television representation? Do they give certain social groups the opportunity to express themselves in their own terms, to explain to society their problems and life goals? Our analysis shows that these programmes only appear to democratise television representation, for five fundamental reasons:

First, the ordinary people that appear in these programmes are represented as being deviant from the norm, incomplete, incompetent and passive. Thus, the participants are not given a voice to express themselves in their own terms, explain their motives or defend themselves; they are only examples of what not to do.

Second, through the characters represented on the show and the problems and topics they systematically deal with, makeover shows stigmatise the lower classes, single parent families and women, and make other groups and minorities invisible.

Third, unlike the talk shows in the 90s, in makeover shows an unequal relationship between experts and participants is established. The experts hold a position that is hierarchically higher than that of the participant, who doesn't have the legitimacy to express their opinions and make decisions about their own transformation process. In addition, the relationship established is unidirectional as only one person is able to influence the other: although the experts apparently become emotionally involved, they do not evolve from one episode to the next.

Fourth, although the participants speak a lot during the programme (they are normally sub-narrators), in reality their discourse is not valid for itself

¹⁸ See BONDEBJERG, Ib, “Public discourse/private fascination. Hybridization in ‘true-life-story’ genres”, *Media, Culture & Society*, vol. 18, n° 1, 1996, pp. 27-45; LIVINGSTONE, Sonia, LUNT, Peter, *Talk on television. Audience participation and public debate*, Routledge, London, 1994; MEHL, Dominique, “The television of intimacy. Meeting a social need”, *Reseaux*, vol. 4, n° 1, 1996, pp. 73-84; and TERRIBAS, Mònica, PUIG, Carmina, “La teatralització de l'esfera privada i la hibridació dels gèneres televisius. El cas Big Brother” *Formats*, n° 3, 2001.

as the programme shapes it to a strict narrative structure. Moreover, the participants are not able to authenticate what they relate: their condition as homodiegetic, subjective and fairly unreliable sub-narrators means that other sources are needed to corroborate what they explain (the voice-over narrator, the superimposed texts, the presenters, the experts).

Finally, the participant's confession of their lack, a mandatory sequence of all makeover shows, is an act of humiliation that is not an end in itself. This confession is not therapeutic and nor is it concerned with public reaffirmation¹⁹ as a way of the participants defining themselves, claiming rights and making visible the social group they belong to. Its sole function is for the participant to take part in a "competition of misfortunes", in order to convince the expert to help them by arousing their compassion.

6.2. *Makeover shows and neoliberalism*

Makeover shows have a strong interest in acting and having tangible effects in the real world. Based on their "positive" impact on reality these programmes set themselves up as a new form of public service, following the path marked out by the first reality television formats in the 80s and 90s²⁰.

The traditional definition of public service broadcasting is television that has a positive influence on the whole of society by televising quality programmes. These types of programmes generally don't have a tangible effect and frequently don't make an economic profit. However, the new definition of public service proposed by makeover shows is based on playing a direct role in the lives of a few individuals, achieving a tangible impact as well as economic benefits. In fact, it is no coincidence that all Spanish makeover shows are broadcast on private channels.

That the real protagonists of the story are the experts (who play the role of altruistic heroes) and that the story must finish with a happy ending can be linked to this new definition of public service, given that the television can only claim this role if it is successful in its actions, i.e. if reality is better after its interventions.

¹⁹ Two functions of confessional television explained by (cfr.) DOVEY, Jon, *Freakshow, First person media and factual television*, Pluto Press, London, 2000, pp.103-132; and MEHL, Dominique, *op. cit.*

²⁰ Cfr. PRADO, Emili, "Telerrealidad. Globalización y uniformización", in VIDAL BENEYTO, José (ed.), *La ventana global*, Taurus, Madrid, 2002, pp. 369-394.

Therefore, through these programmes the television is presented as an alternative to public institutions, which never appear in these shows. It is the makeover shows themselves which are represented as carrying out the functions of the public institutions, which is entirely consistent with the British and North American origin of these formats. International research has described makeover shows as programmes constructed on a neoliberal ideology. According to authors such as Laurie Ouellette, James Hay and Gareth Palmer²¹, these television programmes construct and legitimise a model of society in which the State has no role to play and in which individuals and companies should look after themselves and the other members of their community. These makeover shows comply with this duty through charity, in programmes like *and*, and education, in programmes like *and* in which the participants (and the viewers) are taught how to look after themselves. The limitations of these actions with respect to the idea of a welfare state are evident. This model of society also appears in the Spanish versions of these formats, although, unlike the original programmes, it is not explicitly legitimised.

6.3. *The malleability of personal identity*

Makeover shows represent problems with deep social, political and economic roots as individual problems that need individual solutions, as personal dramas devoid of a wider significance. In other words, *Cambio Radical* and *Desnudas* don't talk about the role women play in society, but rather about individual women with self-esteem problems; *Esta casa era una ruina* doesn't talk about housing problems, but rather about specific families with uninhabitable houses; *Supernanny* and *Hermano Mayor* don't talk about family as an institution, but rather about parents with disobedient children; and *Ajuste de Cuentas* doesn't talk about the economic situation in Spain, but rather about families that are unemployed and in debt. The emphasis placed on the participants' emotions and the link with fiction deepens this individualisation even more.

²¹ Cfr. OUELLETTE, Laurie, HAY, James, *op. cit.*; PALMER, Gareth, "Extreme Makeover: Home Edition, an American fairy tale", in HELLER Dana (ed.), *Makeover television. Realities remodelled*, I.B. Tauris, London, 2007, pp. 165-176.

This stress on personal and intimate issues is not surprising given that, as observed by Eva Pujadas²² with respect to the first reality shows, this is an area in which television can have visible and spectacular results. This is exactly what these programmes aim to do: their objective is to show quick, radical transformations both at the story/ and plot/ levels, since a few months, weeks or even days are enough to solve very complex problems, and one episode is enough to tell the story.

Thus, makeover shows convey the idea that personal identity (understood in these programmes as the sum of the mental structures through which we understand the world, our behaviour patterns, our taste and our social position) can be easily transformed and is therefore malleable. This is consistent with the results obtained by international researchers. According to authors such as Guy Redden and Gareth Palmer²³ makeover shows legitimise the idea that in today's society the social position occupied by each person is determined solely by their individual actions and decisions and is not due to their social and economical context. In these programmes it is the individual who defines their own destiny. This is consistent with the type of solutions endorsed in these programmes: consumption²⁴, psychological therapy²⁵ and discipline as a way of facing social problems and improving the behaviour of each citizen.

Finally, makeover shows are optimistic programmes based on the idea of continual improvement, the possibility of social mobility and the perfectibility of the individual due to the mandatory happy endings. However, it

²² Cfr. PUJADAS, Eva, "Formes narratives i nous pactes ficcionals. Redefinició dels límits de la comunicació audiovisual. El cas dels talk shows i els reality-shows", IV Congreso Internacional Comunicación y Realidad, Universitat Ramon Llull, Barcelona, 2008.

²³ Cfr. REDDEN, Guy, "Makeover morality and consumer culture", in HELLER, Dana (ed.), *Makeover television. Realities remodelled*, I.B. Tauris, London, 2007, pp. 150-164; REDDEN, Guy, "Economy and reflexivity in makeover television", *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, vol. 22, n° 4, 2008, pp. 485-494; PALMER, Gareth, "Introduction. The habit of scrutiny", in PALMER, Gareth (ed.), *Exposing lifestyle television. The big reveal*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2008, pp. 1-13.

²⁴ These programmes can be related to the concept of "lifestyle", which combines identity, class and consumer goods, given that they show the participants how to choose the goods that are most appropriate for their real or desired identities. Cfr. TAYLOR, Lisa, "From ways of life to lifestyle. The ordinari-ization of British gardening lifestyles television", *European Journal of Communication*, vol. 17, n° 4, 2002, pp. 479-493; LEWIS, Tania, "Introduction. Revealing the makeover show", *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, vol. 22, n° 4, 2008, pp. 441-446.

²⁵ Consumption as a way of improving both personally and socially is more present in British and North American makeover shows, while in Spanish television there are more makeover shows that deal with psychological transformations.

is also conveyed that whoever fails in the attempt to transform themselves hasn't acted well enough or been determined enough. If we combine this idea with the fact that in these programmes the participants are often identified as the cause of their own problems, it is easy to see that a meritocratic society is represented and legitimised, in which each person gets what they deserve.

6.4. *An authoritarian text*

In the analysed programmes, the images that show the intense, spontaneous and uncontrollable emotions of the participants as well as the material transformations of their bodies and belongings are the main resource the shows use to claim to a privileged relationship with reality. These transformations and emotions are a way of demonstrating the programme's effectiveness and legitimising it as a public service, and at the same time limiting the artificiality of the narrated situations and the possibility of participants playing up to the camera²⁶.

In this type of sequences the indexical nature of the image is of utmost importance, and is highlighted by the use of observational documentary codes and conventions. The images focus our attention as viewers on the real events that happened in front of the camera. Therefore, we can conclude that in these programmes "the real" is defined as that which is visible (tangible and felt by the senses), emotional, intimate and spontaneous (which here is a synonym for sincere²⁷).

But these moments of "reality" appear within a very restrictive structure. We have seen that makeover shows use a large number of formal elements to convey a preferential interpretation and limit the polysemy of the text. At the same time, each makeover show episode has the same structure, so that the reality shown in these programmes is homogenous and without nuances. The programmes do not take advantage of the possibility of enriching the stories narrated with the individual characteristics and diversity of each particular case or the different reactions of the participants. These reality television

²⁶ The possibility that the participants perform for the camera is one of the limits of the reality effect of reality television. Cfr. MOSELEY, Rachel, *op. cit.*, pp. 313-314 and HILL, Annette, *Reality TV. Audiences and popular factual television*, Routledge, London, 2005, pp. 57-78.

²⁷ John Ellis also refers to the centrality of sincerity of the reality television participants' emotions as one of the bases of this genre. Cfr. ELLIS, John, "The performance on television of sincerely felt emotions", *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, n° 625, 2009, pp. 103-115.

shows do not experiment with the format, but rather they build on schematic and rigid narrative structures, which impoverish the genre and limit its creative potential.

Therefore, discipline and authority emerge as central elements of makeover reality shows due to the consistent relationship established between the story and *how* the story is told. In the same way that the experts are authority figures that discipline the participants, these programmes are authoritarian texts that discipline reality (by modelling it so that it fits into a very strict narrative structure) and the “model viewer” (by not letting them interpret the text freely, and thus limiting their role as a viewer).

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