From Making Do to Making-Over: Reality TV and the Reinvention of Britishness

RACHEL JENNINGS

Do you live in track suits to conceal your saggy tits and big bum? Do not despair—you can still go to the ball. If you are brave enough to face those scary godmothers Trinny and Susannah, they will tell you in no uncertain terms What Not to Wear. Do you suspect your garden may have inspired T. S. Eliot to write The Wasteland? No fear. The matey experts from Ground Force can transform it into a pastoral idyll in two days. Has your pokey, gloomy British house been stagnating on the market? Perhaps you need the infamous House Doctor to breeze through and eradicate both your personal history and personality with a few cans of magnolia.

A significant proportion of British reality TV is in the makeover line, involving the rapid transformation of some facet of a person’s lifestyle through a process that blends fairytale themes with religious ritual. The subject (or victim) on each episode is a Cinderella character (hereafter referred to collectively as “Cindy,” whether an individual, couple, or family unit) who relinquishes existential responsibility and personal power to one or more authority figures. These fairy godmothers (of both sexes) navigate Cindy through a battle to give up the past leading to her rebirth, frequently on the third or seventh day.

It is easy to comprehend why makeover shows are a hit in the United States—they slot neatly into the American dream of constant reinvention of the self, played out on a moving frontier. Examples such as Style Court, Extreme Makeover: Home Edition, Queer Eye for the Straight Guy, Pimp My Ride, and The Swan “connect to myths of American immigration, evangelicalism, and expansionism” (Heller 347). In contrast, Britons are known for making do, rather than making-over. And yet the current wave of these shows originated in
Britain. Do British makeover shows reinvent Britishness? In particular, do they demonstrate absorption of American cultural values?

Who better to point out deficiencies in British culture than visitors from the New World? Four British shows employ American fairy godmothers: *Life Laundry* (BBC 2), *House Doctor* (Channel 4), *Life Doctor* (Channel 5), and *Brand New You* (BBC 1). In the nineteenth century, British travel writer Fanny Trollope scandalized the United States with her harsh critique of the *Domestic Manners of the Americans*; today these shows acknowledge a reversal in the historical parent/child relationship between British and American culture because Americans tell Britons how to live. The interaction between Cindy and the fairy godmother is akin to that between the colonized and the colonizer, with the unequal power struggle and ambivalence that such a relationship entails. While she is not exactly invaded, in each show Cindy invites the Other into the contact zone of her house, garden, or closet to transform her home life.¹ Postcolonial theory, therefore, provides, ironically, useful tools to compare the construction and reinvention of Britishness in makeover shows. To determine how far the style guru is a colonizer is not only applicable to shows with American invaders, but aids comparison of those with all-British casts.

As the British Broadcasting Company is a bastion of Britishness, it makes sense to scrutinize national identity in three highly successful, pioneering BBC makeover shows with British godmothers. In one way, the godmothers of *Changing Rooms*, *Ground Force*, and *What Not to Wear* are not colonizers promoting change, because their shows can be interpreted as projects that shore up the concept of a stable national identity and present Britain as a cohesive (though diverse) happy family. This contrasts with the contemporary disintegration of traditional Britishness (which signifies “mostly Englishness” as opposed to Welshness, Scottishness, or Northern Irishness) apparent in devolution and postwar immigration to the United Kingdom. For instance, in *Changing Rooms*, *Ground Force*, and the second format of *What Not to Wear*, the lifestyle teams travel around the nation visiting working- and middle-class people from a range of ethnicities and sexual orientations. These varied Cindies are presented to the viewer as ordinary Britons. If one of the roles of reality TV is to teach viewers how to be a good citizen (Hill 99; Ouelette 232; Wood and Skeggs 205), these shows promote a utopian, liberal national identity in harmony with the British reputation for tolerance. In this way they celebrate Britishness “as is,” or as they construct it. On the other hand, these shows also identify so-called
weaknesses in British lifestyles, involving at least a revamping, if not a total reconstruction, that ranges from changing rooms to the more ambitious goal of changing lives.

From *Changing Rooms* to Changing Lives

*Fairy Godm(Others)*

The first makeover show, *Queen for a Day* (1956–64), was an American program featuring an underprivileged housewife. In this case, Cindy was not exquisitely adorned to attend a ball, but was given a household appliance, such as a washing machine, to make her work less backbreaking (Lowry in Jennings et al.). However, while *Queen for a Day* was an isolated case, the BBC’s *Changing Rooms*, running from 1996 to 2005, was the first flake in what has since become a snowball of makeover shows. As Moran notes, “Over 15 series it regularly attracted ten million viewers—better than *EastEnders* [a long-running prime-time soap] on a bad day,” and it was “the BBC’s most successful ever franchise” (6). It has also been successful in the United States, where the title was made over to *Trading Spaces*, because the pun on *Changing Rooms* (British English for Fitting Rooms) is invisible to an American audience. Despite the pun, the show focuses on rooms rather than closets.

The premise revolves around two couples (friends or neighbors) who temporarily switch houses. Each couple is given two days to transform a room in the other’s house beneath the guidance of a designer who is very avant garde, or what an average Briton may term “arty farty.” Unlike Cinderella, who trusts the fairy godmother unflinchingly, the householders on these shows frequently react to the designers as if the latter, hailing from fairyland, are out of touch with reality. The colonizers’ culture is portrayed as quirky rather than superior. This is illustrated well in each episode during a stock scene in which the designer and Cindy-couple sit together on the floor around a can of paint the designer has selected. Suspense is built until the moment the designer removes the lid to the couple’s expressions (both verbal and facial) of horror and disbelief. (That the reaction is consistent, whether the paint is vomit green or tame beige, suggests there is an element of performance.)² Such scenes ensure that the show’s tag phrase, “Trust me, I’m a designer,” is received with a dose of humorous skepticism by viewers.
The most (in)famous designer is Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen. This dandy, who admits that he belongs in the eighteenth century (Moran 6), can thank Changing Rooms for making him a major star in the United Kingdom, with his own line of household products. Referred to by copresenter Carol Smillie as “Cuffs,” he is notorious for his 1970s style shirts, leather trousers, and luscious locks. His colorful character adds life and conflict to the episodes as he pushes conservative British householders to be daring. In one example, his team is in the process of transforming a bedroom from “neutral” to what the husband describes as “raw meat” (Changing Rooms: Trust me, I’m a Designer). This involves, among other things, constructing a chiffon-draped four-poster with MDF naked women for posts, and covering the walls with giant puce paintings of female nudes, legs akimbo. The husband expresses concern that his neighbors will dislike the room because it is “too arty” and the wife suggests they should go no further. In response, Llewelyn-Bowen gives a rallying speech, applauding their risky room because it has “guts” and “heart.” It certainly does. Not to mention breasts and buttocks.

While Laurence and company are frequently figures of fun, the fairy godmothers on Ground Force are portrayed very differently. First, conflict is absent between Cindy and the gardeners because Cindy is away for the weekend, unaware that her garden is being transformed. Secondly, designer Alan Titchmarsh, water-feature expert Charlie Dimmock, and construction specialist Tommy Walsh cause no conflict with Cindy’s partner and neighbors because, rather than arty farty, they are down to earth people (appropriately, for gardeners) with regional accents. Diminutive Alan is cuddly and constantly cracks jokes in his northern tones. In addition to precipitating a successful career as a writer of novels and gardening books, the show made him a sex symbol, which is another marker of Britishness—it is difficult to imagine this happening to such a short, average-looking, fiftyish man in the United States. Alan’s cohort Charlie is giggly, with a soothing west-country accent—as she is unhampered by hair spray or a bra, she would make an ideal Cindy for What Not to Wear. The third godmother, Tommy, is a big, buff, no-nonsense cockney bloke. All three quaff frequent cups of tea and pints of beer to sustain them as they work to a background of flatulent brass band music that creates the ambience of an English summer garden party. In short, the Ground Force experts are not portrayed as colonizers from an alien culture, but fit right in.

In stark contrast, Trinny Woodall and Susannah Constantine (described on BBC America as “the original style gurus”) of What
*Not to Wear* generate considerable friction. This show is another success story. Its formula has traveled to the United States and its godmothers have published two bestsellers: *What Not to Wear*, and *What You Wear can Change Your Life*. The struggle between colonizer and colonized is first due to the show’s concept: dressing is more personal than decorating. Cindy (who is most often female) is nominated by friends and family and then ambushed by the style gurus who offer her £2000 to transform her wardrobe in exchange for her past and her soul. The goal is to excavate the “real” Cindy from beneath her appalling apparel using tough tactics. For example, early in the show, Cindy stands quivering in her undies in a 360° mirror where her body is coolly assessed. Following this, she is forced to discard her old clothes (no matter their sentimental value) and follow a strict new dress code. The show’s structure involves humiliation and sacrifice.

In addition to the show’s structure, the conflict is heightened by Trinny and Susannah’s on-screen personae, which combine features of the strict English governess played by Anne Robinson on *The Weakest Link* and the playful brute Petrichio from Shakespeare’s sixteenth-century makeover show, *The Taming of the Shrew*. These godmothers are considerably more oppressive than Llewelyn-Bowen and company. It is one thing to have your living room painted orange behind your back; it is quite another to have your knickers yanked off in a store in front of millions of viewers because they produce an offensive VPL under your skirt.

Despite their tough love tactics, unlike typical colonizers, Trinny and Susannah are refreshingly open about their own flaws. For example, in one episode when Cindy (Liz) thinks her bum looks big reflected in a fitting room mirror, Trinny responds (as the camera zooms in on her own derriere) “Do you want to see a big arse? Look at mine. Cellulite and everything”; in another, Susannah says to Cindy (Sarah), “I look like I’m about to have my fourth child . . . I’m the one who should be paranoid about my stomach, not you.” Their bluntness regarding their own physical shortcomings (expressed in Anglo-Saxon vocabulary such as “knickers,” “tits,” and “arse”) makes them a refreshing contrast to the rather bland hosts of the American version of the show. Nevertheless, despite the revelation of the style gods’ human side, the journey toward makeover land remains traumatic for Cindy. Like Katharina (if analogy mixing is permitted), she is spirited and obstreperous as she wrestles with her two Petruchios. The degree of this struggle is not only due to the nature of the combatants, but is also linked to the degree of transformation.
Transformed or T Befom Up?

If you’re producing a British show, it makes sense to select an area where Britons have a reputation for backwardness, to ensure an entertaining contrast between the before and after shots. While a penchant for DIY is (or has been) a characteristic of Britishness (Poulter 39), style is not. The stereotypical British home looks like Wallace and Gromit’s. This is exploited in an IKEA television commercial aired in the United Kingdom in the late 1990s in which a drab, miserable-looking, fifty-ish housewife has her drab, miserable-looking house invaded by a gang of Swedish male style police in Gestapo chic (blond crew cuts, shades, black leather jackets) who urge her to “stop being so British.” Relinquishing Britishness in this case involves decorating and furnishing her house in bright colors. The contrast between Britain and IKEA-land in this commercial is analogous to that between dowdy sepia Kansas and glorious Technicolor Oz. The entrance of Dorothy into Oz is replayed at the close of each Changing Rooms episode as homeowners open their eyes on rooms that are often larger and brighter than life, with the fanciful qualities of movie or stage sets.

One reason the rooms often resemble sets is that they are decorated on a modest budget of £500–£750, necessitating use of inexpensive materials such as MDF and junk salvaged from the garage. If a made-over fireplace appears to be marble, chances are it is not the genuine article but has been cleverly painted to create an illusion. In fact, in the penultimate scene of each episode, the show’s host and designer recline in the transformed room for a cozy chat about the makeover. This includes an inventory of the cost of each item, during which designers boast about how cheaply they transformed a bland piece of furniture into a Balinese-style wardrobe with bamboo veneer.

In this respect, Changing Rooms contrasts with the many makeover shows that have a “consumerist ethos,” such as Bravo’s Queer Eye for the Straight Guy (Hoffer in Jennings et al.). One critic attacks Queer Eye because it “associat[es] material objects with personal worth” and “The quest for authenticity, the journey to self-discovery, is achieved through consumption . . .” She goes on to complain that it is, therefore, “not serving the best interest of the gay community or the community as a whole” (Velazquez-Vargas 6). Despite some critics’ wishes that consumerism should not be linked to gay identity (see also Cohen), consumerism is certainly not at odds with American identity (Heller
348). In contrast, materialism is not a traditional facet of Britishness—Changing Rooms acknowledges this by blending making over with making do.

While Britons are not known for stylish home interiors, they are known for cherishing beautiful gardens, as the title of the celebratory video, The Best of Ground Force Garden Rescues indicates. The garden gurus’ mission is to “rescue,” not to transform—their aim is to make British gardens more traditionally British rather than challenge national identity. While Ground Force is more consumerist than Changing Rooms in that spending is not so restricted, this fact is de-emphasized because the budgets are not disclosed.

What Not to Wear is more consumerist than traditional Britishness allows because a key ritual in each episode involves the culling of Cindy’s wardrobe. In a reversal of the paint-unveiling scene from Changing Rooms, the godmothers expose Cindy’s clothes to viewers and express horror at her style choices, though these clothes are not rags as in the fairytale. The godmothers ruthlessly rend piles of clothes with plenty of mileage left in them to make way for Cindy’s new wardrobe at a price that feels extravagant to her. For example, during her transformative shopping trip, Sarah wants to buy jeans priced £34 instead of the £100 pair advocated by Trinny and Susannah. However, the style gurus argue that the extra money is justified because the expensive jeans are designed to slim her thighs and she will “wear them to death.” Concessions to British moderation are made with such commentary—Cindy is not encouraged to go on a wild, unrestrained spending spree.

The pain of the price tag is accompanied by the wrench of relinquishing the past. Unlike Cindies on plastic surgery makeover shows who are (rather horrifyingly) eager to embrace the knife that pares away the old self, giving up the past is a trial for What Not to Wear Cindies. For instance, at the close of one show, the new Liz retrieves her beloved puce wool tank top (sweater vest) from the trash, frames it, and hangs it on her living room wall as a relic. It is difficult to imagine Cindy on The Swan displaying the same nostalgia for the fat sucked from her thighs, or the cartilage removed from her nose.

In this way, What Not to Wear is tame when compared with the plastic surgery makeover shows that originated in the United States. Trinny and Susannah’s philosophy is that Cindy should accept her body. Yes, Cindy is changed, but in a sensible and measured fashion in the British tradition—it is a rather oxymoronically moderate
transformation. Obviously, it would be overly simplistic to represent the differences between early-British and later-American makeover shows as resulting from national identity alone. As formats for established reality shows lose their novelty quotient, subsequent shows have to be more extreme to gain audiences. However, national identity is, undoubtedly, a significant factor. While plastic surgery shows are now plentiful in Britain, it is notable that they are a US import; likewise it is significant that modest makeovers were born in Britain.

Like *What Not to Wear*, the transformations on *Changing Rooms* and *Ground Force*, though dramatic in their own right, are modest in that Llewelyn-Bowen dandifies only individual rooms, while Titchmarsh only “tart[s] up back gardens” (Joseph 19). They do not bulldoze the whole house, as is the case in *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*. The latter show is strikingly American by contrast. The teams are armies, the budgets are obscene, and the transformations are radical. Coproducer Denise Cramsey describes this show as “a modern-day barn-raising” (qtd. in Oldenburg 1). First they raze a small house to the ground; then they raise a mansion in its stead in a process similar to the way Las Vegas hotels are routinely demolished and replaced, with no regrets about the past. Far from being sentimental about losing the old fireplace and so on, homeowners (who observe the demolition on film from an exotic vacation destination) look on gleefully as their old house bites the dust. To British eyes, the new house may appear extremely incongruous next to its modest neighbors. A useful comparison is the remark of a British man interviewed on his opinions of *Changing Rooms*. He argues, while laughing, that Llewelyn-Bowen’s transformations are “wacky” and purposely controversial to create drama, going on to say, “I mean, who on earth is going to like it. Like a gothic living room in the middle of Clapham!” (qtd. in Hill 95). The assumed cultural norm is that Britons want to fit into a context. In contrast, the homes on *Home Edition* are lauded at the unveiling because they stand out. Reactions to the revelation scene are, therefore, also indicators of national identity.

*From Stiff to Quavering Upper Lips*

The climax of makeover shows, the unveiling of the resurrected room/garden/body, which producers (with an irritating disregard for grammar) term “the reveal,” is revealing when it comes to national identity.
Although not as radical as those on *Home Edition*, some of the makeovers Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen orchestrates are so dramatic, it is apparent that they will have an impact. In the example described earlier, the conservative husband and wife whose Wallace-and-Gromit bedroom is transmogrified into a classy bordello are thrilled and seem eager to be liberated from their (presumably) former mediocre sex lives. The counterpart couple, on the other hand, is disgusted, finding the décor far too modern for an eighteenth-century house. The wife sounds like a traditionalist at a contemporary art gallery, pronouncing it to be, “absolute crap.” Many of the shows have similar negative reveals, making *Changing Rooms* British in that there is no guaranteed happy Hollywood ending. There is a strong chance that the colonized will resist assimilation to the imposed culture.

*Ground Force* is different in that it resembles a second fairytale: *The Elves and the Shoemaker*. In this makeover story, the old tired shoemaker retires to bed beset by worry because he cannot manage his workload. He awakens next morning to find a miracle on his workbench: the most beautiful shoes magically made by elves overnight. There is no risk of the old shoemaker exclaiming, “Oh my God, what have they done? These shoes are crap.” Similarly, the tension in *Ground Force* is not created by anticipation of Cindy’s reaction; rather, it is generated by the time pressure and the infamous British wet weather, which frequently steps in as an antagonist to thwart the speedy setting of concrete. Rain notwithstanding, it all culminates in a happy ending in which Cindy loves her new garden.

However, Cindy’s ecstasy may not be easily detected by a non-British viewer. A telling example is the “reveal” of the first episode in which Cindy, a fifty-something white woman, clutches her poodle to her breast for security as she wanders around her new garden in a speechless state of shock. Responding to this scene, John Thornicroft, the series director and producer, recalls that he was surprised by such a strong emotional response and, after witnessing it, realized the BBC was onto a winner with this format. However, a viewer from a more expressive culture would find Cindy’s response ambiguous. Instead of jumping for joy, she has a blank expression reminiscent of Jack Nicholson’s following his lobotomy in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. Even Alan Titchmarsh remarks to her (although apparently pleased by her response), “What do you think then? I’m not sure if you like it or are about to have a nervous breakdown” (*The Best of*). Heart-warming
though the series may be, in general, the viewer is denied the emotional catharsis provided by an American show such as *Home Edition*, in which hundreds turn out to the reveal to cheer, hug, and weep.

The reveal scenes of *What Not to Wear* are similar to those of *Ground Force* in that, on encountering her ensemble for the first time in a full-length mirror flanked by Trinny and Susannah, Cindy may shed a few modest tears, but declines to skip about singing. In fact, she is often reticent and contemplative, remarking that it will take time for her to adjust to her new image. However, diminished emotional catharsis in the reveal is compensated for in a subsequent confessional scene between Cindy and the camera where she analyzes her experience in between the final credits. In a typical example, Vanessa confesses that, “I have trouble trying to equate what really is kind of tops and trousers and dresses and stuff with [copious tears] something much deeper about me and how I express myself. . . . It’s been a strangely emotional experience.” In this aspect, *What Not to Wear* contrasts with other early-British makeover shows that generally demonstrate that the emergence of a more touchy-feely Britain on the death of Princess Diana was apparently an anomaly.

In addition to the display of emotion, the confessional scene demonstrates that Cindy now trusts Trinny and Susannah unreservedly in a turnaround from her previous feisty independence. In the middle of one episode, for example, Sarah calls Susannah “vile,” and confesses to the camera that she had been under the misconception that shopping with other people’s money would be fun, but is shocked to discover she has “never felt so bad in all [her] life.” Sarah’s continuous fight with the style gurus makes her admission, at show’s end, all the more dramatic: “They tell it like it is and it’s hard to take. But this is the end result and, as you can see, it’s fantastic.” She has converted.

At this point, a resisting viewer (to adapt Judith Fetterley’s term) may question whether the style gurus have indeed discovered the real Cindy, or whether, like colonizers, they have imposed a persona. Homi Bhabha’s concept of mimicry, coined to describe the manner in which a colonized subject adopts the culture of the colonizer in a way that critiques the dominant culture, provides a useful lens with which to read these scenes. For example, “Before Liz” has a whimsical sense of style evident in multicolored messy hair, a stripy puce tank top, clashing khaki combat pants, and socks decorated with homemade pompoms. “After Liz” looks much more conventionally attractive with
groomed hair, magazine-cover make-up, and coordinating clothes. However, a resisting viewer mourns the loss of her individuality, and wishes that, like Elizabeth Taylor’s shrew, her conversion speech was a parody rather than a sign of unreserved faith in the godmothers’ creed. These emotional conversion experiences and pseudo-psychotherapy in *What Not to Wear* make it the most American of the early-British makeover shows discussed here, as is apparent when comparing it to British makeover shows with American godmothers.

From the New World to the Old World

While *What Not to Wear* involves subtle absorption of American cultural values, makeover shows with an American godmother overtly promote this process. American Cindies apparently concede to the British upper hand in the areas of gardening in *Ground Force America*, and disciplining children in *Supernanny*. When it comes to plastic surgery, however, as in the BBC’s *Brand New You*, the obvious place for a British Cindy to be transformed is La La land. In one case, Jane, in a limo en route to her hotel from LAX, enthusiastically describes to the camera her plans to have an augmentation to “fix” saggy breasts, her teeth capped, laser surgery on her eyes, her caesarean scar removed, loose skin cut away, laser treatment on her face for acne and blotches, and a nose job.

What makes this program disturbing to resisting viewers is Jane’s unqualified enthusiasm to have her past entirely sliced off, the fact that all the surgeons are males who apparently see no ethical problems with transforming a thirty-five-year-old mother into a teenaged Barbie doll, and the absence from the show of any analysis of how Jane’s transformation will impact her personal life and relationships. One wonders whether the term “plastic surgeon” refers to these men’s professions, or whether they are made from the substance. For example, the dentist, flashing immaculate pearly whites, notes that while “The British don’t have the greatest reputation for looking after their teeth . . . Jane’s . . . teeth are actually pretty good . . .,” but he can make them, “absolutely perfect.” In this case, “perfect” signifies uniform and white with no individuality. While the American stereotype of Britons is that they have bad teeth (à la Austin Powers), the British stereotype of Americans is that they have fake smiles. A resisting viewer questions whether Jane undergoes a makeover or a fakeover.
Less disturbing, but equally ripe for a skeptical response is *Life Doctor* in which an American life coach invades the habitat of Britons with sagging careers and problematic personal relationships. Using colonial discourse, Hoggart describes the coach as an “alien [who] doesn’t displace the native species [, but] . . . licks them into shape” (23). The episode reviewed by Hoggart involves Rhonda Britten’s badgering of an underemployed Robbie Williams tribute artist who is shirking his family responsibilities. To fuel the conflict, this show requires a godmother who can utter something like, “Have a Nice Day” without irony, or, in Hoggart’s words, one who is “mercilessly positive and enthusiastic” (23), in contrast to traditional British pessimism and apathy.

While bad teeth and pessimism are stereotypical British qualities, *The Life Laundry* uncovers a lack in British identity that is more of a surprise: clutter management and closet organization. This show has had a noticeable impact on British culture outside TV: its American godmother Dawna Walter’s *The Holding Company* has spawned “a whole industry of advisers who come and help those who feel too overwhelmed by their clutter,” such as California Closets that combines organizing clobber with “light psychotherapy” (Van Der Post 10). The use of the term “California” connotes space and a new start—these are the promises of Walter’s show, in which she assists British homeowners simultaneously to purge their homes of superfluous trappings and their psyches of painful memories. One episode concerns Carolyn, a middle-aged woman whose home is an obstacle course: a postdivorce small house bursting with copious predivorce belongings. With a mixture of practical advice, pseudopsychotherapy, and hugs, Walter enables this Cindy to clear her living space and break with her past. In a painful ritual scene, reminiscent of a New-Age ceremony, Carolyn casts precious memories of her failed marriage into the steel jaws of a vicious-looking machine called the crusher, egged on by a chorus of cheers from encouraging onlookers.

There is some similar light psychotherapy in the second format of *What Not to Wear*, the most American of early-British makeover shows. In the latest series, frumpy Moms or menopausal women recline on a couch in a simulated therapist’s office while either Trinny or Susannah asks searching questions such as, “How many jumpers do you have?” or, “When was the last time you wore a pretty dress?” However, this remains an emotionless process for the godmother, who coolly jots down Cindy’s responses on a clipboard. It takes an American godmother such as Walter to hold Cindy and cry with her.
Not that all American style gurus are cuddly. In *House Doctor*, a more extreme version of *Life Laundry*, it is the task of a Californian designer, Ann Maurice, to diagnose why a house has been stuck on the market and ruthlessly to make it attractive to buyers. The show opens as violated homeowners watch footage of potential buyers verbally ripping their precious house and its contents to shreds. Enter the *House Doctor*, a reincarnation of infamous British travel writer Fanny Trollope who, in 1832, published the fact that Americans lived like pigs. Maurice, a colonizer confident in the superiority of her culture, is equally disparaging about the domestic manners of the British who have small, cramped houses filled with atrocities such as carpet in their bathrooms, and radiators gobbling up wall space (Stanford). The House Doctor is a sterilizing force, as her title suggests, who imposes Apollonian order on Cindy's Dionysian chaos by eliminating clutter and painting all the walls in neutral tones. After the house's transformation, the original house-seekers walk through a second time, are amazed at the rebirth, and acknowledge they would consider making an offer. Although not as radical as *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, *House Doctor* embraces the American penchant for reinvention. Cindy's family's history is entirely erased.

**Will Makeovers Ever be Over?**

In previous centuries, the British used to travel when they had identity crises. However, over the past ten years, on television, and in the publications and enterprise it generates, they increasingly invite aliens into their homes to engage in encounters with the foreign that precipitate a process of self-analysis. Most makeover shows rely on conflict, so the greater the difference between the colonizers and the colonized, the better, especially as the genre matures and requires more drama to entice viewers. In the case of early-British makeover shows, transformations are moderate and involve some making do. However, as time goes on, such shows inevitably absorb more and more American cultural values of materialism, religious conversion, pseudo-psychotherapy, and reinvention. This is most obviously so in those with American gurus, but is also increasingly the case with British shows with British style gurus.

In addition to postcolonial theory, another way to use travel to explore national identity (only touched on here) is to consider the ways in which the shows themselves travel, or “flow,” to use Harrington and
Bielby’s terminology (834). Brian Briggs, a producer for Endemol, explains the process through which reality shows are exported: “we take a format that works in one country, strip everything cultural off of it . . . then, over time, add cultural aspects of [the second] country to it” (qtd. in Magder 147). Early-British makeover shows were part of what Hill defines as “The second wave of reality programming,” also including docusoaps, that originated in Britain and “[partially] travelled from Britain to Europe and beyond in the mid-to late 1990s” (24). Hill notes that “Whilst American reality TV championed the ordinary person doing extraordinary things,” docusoaps dealt with ordinary people doing ordinary things and were therefore too mundane to appeal to many viewers outside Britain (29). Presumably, when docusoaps were stripped of everything culturally British, there was nothing left. This was not the case with makeover shows—they were insufficiently boring to remain in Britain, but proved marketable worldwide. It would be illuminating to compare the original Changing Rooms with its offshoots in Australia and the United States.

After an impressive lifespan of nine years, Changing Rooms was finally axed in 2005 because, according to Llewelyn-Bowen (in vocabulary that reveals his perception of the show as a national project), “the nation has now been taught so much that [the show] is no longer needed” (Poulter 39). With its herald show put to rest, it would be productive to predict when the makeover genre as a whole is likely to approach exhaustion. Are viewers of various nationalities still more closely aligned with Walt Disney’s Cinderella, fully trusting of, and unreservedly grateful to her fairy godmother; or are they inching toward the attitude of Princess Fiona in Shrek 2, who, after being inundated with clothes and furniture to make her happy ever after, announces, “Thank you fairy godmother, but I really don’t need all this stuff”?

Notes

1. “Contact zone” was coined by Mary Louise Pratt in Imperial Eyes to describe the meeting point of different cultures in a postcolonial setting.
2. For a detailed discussion of performance in reality shows, see Hill 57 – 78 and Lewis.
3. What Not to Wear makes Cindy more feminine and upper class. For discussions of class and gender issues in makeover shows, see Hart; Maher; Wood and Skeggs.
4. I am indebted to my colleague, Susan Lowry, for this insight. In a presentation we gave together (Jennings et al.), I showed clips from Changing Rooms, Ground Force, and What Not to Wear. She followed with Home Edition. It provided a striking contrast.
5. The first wave, according to Hill, consisted of American reality crime shows of the late 80s. Other critics locate the beginnings of reality TV with MTV’s *The Real World* in 1991 (Mittell 197; Murray and Ouelette 3).

Works Cited


*Cinderella.* Dir. Clyde Geronimi and Wilfred Jackson. Disney, 1950. Film.


*One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest.* Dir. Milos Forman. United Artists, 1975. Film.


Rachel Jennings is a professor of English at Antelope Valley College in Southern California, where she teaches composition and literature. Her articles explore women’s travel, the American road trip, and teaching writing. Her recent interview with Joan Fry, author of How to Cook a Tapir, is on the Studies in Travel Writing Web site.