

## **Making over the Talent Show**

One of the concerns of recent studies of popular television has been to try to develop understandings of cultural democratisation (Holmes and Jermyn 2004, 9). Much contemporary lifestyle programming revolves around the illustration of good, beneficial choices in the lives of those who act as participants. Of great importance is the characterisation of the people on whom these discourses depend: in the main they are so-called ordinary people who become the focus of scrutiny. This category does not simply arise from marking of persons in terms of class, race, gender, or sexuality so as to equate citizens with normative social identities. The ordinariness at stake is better thought of as a kind of layperson status. Members of the public are shown going about their everyday lives. Their televisual interest is predicated on their initial *lack* of qualification or complete competence in some aspect of life, and it is this that warrants the intervention of their counterparts: the experts whose advice enables a process of apparent improvement that is the very core of the shows.

As Lisa Taylor puts it with reference to gardening television, 'ordinari-ization' strategies 'construct a discourse of lifestyle achievability and accessibility' (2002, 480). Experts act as counsellors, assisting their clients in fulfilling their stated desires. In the course of this their superior professional knowledge in matters of taste and behaviour is redistributed to the participants, and by extension to the viewing population as a whole. On the face of it,

television of this kind constitutes and illustrates an egalitarian mode of cultural transmission in which the keys to living well are made widely available, enhancing the life chances of its addressees.

However, enfranchisement of the populus in this mediated world is more complex and paradoxical than it may seem. The narrative structure of makeovers and other shows based on personal lifestyle modification require that people are changed in the end. This raises questions about what some of the conditions applied to participation in this world might be. The presence of the public is something more than an unadulterated expression of the vox populi. People are there for something to happen to them, to be adjusted, not simply be 'themselves'. Accordingly, we need to question whether the appearance of citizens on our screens is necessarily progressive in light of the fact that the terms upon which they appear are tightly controlled by the TV formats they are admitted to.

A complicating factor is that televisual ordinary people are not confined to lifestyle shows. Reality television is also focussed on observing them, and itself may be seen as part of a trend towards personalisation across the media: the tabloid leaning towards personal stories that is evident in chat and soft news (Dovey 2000; Macdonald 2003). Ordinary folk are not the exclusive property of a genre, and interest in them is paralleled by an obsession with celebrity in all its forms. Just as lifestyle shows change the person, a great number of reality game shows are premised upon the achievement of celebrity by participants. Although useful rubrics like 'lifestyle' and 'reality' have been used to capture significant changes in non-fiction television, some of the broad conventions –

ordinari-ization and celebritization included, are mobile elements that appear throughout popular media.

This paper draws upon some of the cross-border traffic between non-fiction genres that feature ordinary people. My interest is how the person-improving narrative logic of the makeover can spread across television beyond the strict genre of that name. The programming in question is the new generation of talent shows that appears to have ameliorated the decline of free-to-air Saturday night television, at least in the UK. A genre that previously peaked in the 1970s and 1980s with *New Faces* and *Opportunity Knocks* has itself been made over. The new versions combine elements of lifestyle and reality with the classical talent search. The melange is no weak rag-bag, but an international killer application that, through the more successful variants, such as those belonging to the *X Factor* and *Pop Idol* franchises, constitutes a strain of widely-discussed 'water cooler', or 'event' television (Holmes 2004a, 215).

While the entertainment value of the shows is high, I argue that the currency of the reinvented talent searches lies partly in their articulation of aspirational concepts of personhood that are embedded in the broader neoliberal cultural economy. They offer alluring parables of opportunity and mobility through the assured transformation of winning contestants into celebrities. Yet how democratising is a model of life-improvement that promises passage to elite status for a few, and where does the implied value system leave the meaning of being 'ordinary'?

## **Rediscovering the Talent Show**

As Bell and Hollows note, a key feature of lifestyle media is its tendency towards proliferation and hybridization (2005, 9). One reason for this is the diversity of phenomena that can be considered germane to it. At the risk of tautology, lifestyle television could be expected to accommodate any discourse that is about how lives may be lived. In practice, however, this is normally broken down to the minutiae of how individuals could elect to act in particular spheres, say fashion, interior design or cooking. Furthermore, commodity consumption is central to many shows, meaning that the focus is not the full range of conceivable ways of living, so much as ways of styling the self that are mediated by the possibilities of contemporary consumer culture. The experts who effect the refashioning of the personal link that world with the exigencies of industry production, inducing a kind of fruitful personal labour in consumption (Redden 2007).

Nonetheless, the proliferation of the makeover has been marked and has taken it beyond the purview of lifestyle qua leisure. Anxieties about health (e.g. *You Are What You Eat*), domestic labour (e.g. *How Clean is Your House?*), and personal finance (e.g. *Bank of Mum and Dad*) are addressed. There has also been a discernible 'behavioural' turn in British shows, many of which showcase the use of tough love to turn people around.

These are not already well-intentioned consumer-citizens seeking further self-development, but apparently recalcitrant types whose inability/unwillingness to act properly distinguishes them from implied norms of personhood. They are made to stand for general life failure before their possible redemption under the tutelage of mentors. Of particular interest, in the terms presented by the shows, are: unruly children (e.g.

*Supernanny*), unfeminine women (e.g. *Ladette to Lady*), unproductive and aggressive young men (e.g., *Bad Lads Army*), and single mothers (e.g. *Help! I'm a Teen Mum*).

The shifting terrain of makeover television has also seen it embrace the sphere of production. In the UK a number of small-business makeovers have run. They tend to focus on leisure-related businesses (e.g., *The Hotel Inspector*). *Ramsay's Kitchen Nightmares*, in which Britain's top chef advises failing restaurateurs, is the most well-known. However, it is just part of a trend towards competitive cookery in which demonstrated improvement in skill of amateur or low-level professional cooks is rewarded by a life-changing prize in the form of a top job or business opportunity. This includes 3 interlinked series from Jamie Oliver in which young people are trained up (*Jamie's Kitchen; Cutting The Apron Strings; Fifteen*) and also Raymond Blanc's *The Restaurant* (2007). The aspect of lifestyle at stake is not things that can be done with disposable income. It is its necessary corollary; the other side of commodity culture: successful processes of selling one's labour or profiting from that of others.

The new talent shows are congruent with this expansion of lifestyle concern to the realm of work and, more broadly, personal behaviour beyond consumption. There are sound media industry grounds for extending successful formulas across topics and into new formats. Television appears to be increasingly cross-generic in pursuit of programmes that can satisfy multiple audience interests (Morris 2007, 43-44). The personal dramas created by the makeover framework guarantee conflict, resolution and the self-learning of characters in addition to the inherent interest of topics at hand. The before-after contrast

around which the narrative is built and suspense is generated, guarantees change (Moseley 2000). It is no wonder then that the means-end fascination created by the makeover can breathe life into such potentially dry topics as time management or financial discipline. It is also no surprise that it can be used to resurrect the once magnificent genre of the light-entertainment talent show.

The new era of talent TV was heralded by *Popstars*, a public contest to find members for a pop group, which was first aired in New Zealand in 1999. After high ratings, and the launch of the group, *True Bliss*, Australian and British versions were quickly released, followed by numerous others around the world. The bands formed enjoyed huge exposure and instant success; though in the UK only *Girls Aloud* remain popular at the time of writing. *Popstars* was soon superseded by *Pop Idol* and then *X-Factor* in the UK. By the mid-2000s talent shows were topping the ratings in many countries. *American Idol* is by far the most popular prime-time series on U.S. television (CNN 2008), and in the UK *X-Factor* goes head-to-head with BBC dance show *Strictly Come Dancing* (which is the source of the international *Dancing with the Stars*) on Saturday and Sunday nights, capturing up to 80% of the viewing audience between them during finals (Reality TV World 2005).

Perhaps unsurprisingly the producers of highly similar singing shows have been involved legal disputes about format rights. The original British season of *Pop Idol*, which ran in 2002, was even more successful than *Popstars*, launching the careers of the solo singers Gareth Gates and Will Young. However, after the first series 'Idol' was required to drop

the 'Pop' from all of its titles to protect the integrity of the *Popstars* brand (BBC 2004). In turn, Simon Cowell, a record producer and the most famous judge on *American Idol* was the target of copyright claims by Simon Fuller (whose 19TV owns the *Idol* format) after Cowell launched *X Factor* with Fremantle Media. Given the history of highly similar TV talent shows, the importance of Cowell as an *Idol* judge, and the financial rich pickings all round, the case resulted in an out-of-court settlement (BBC 2007). All three franchises are still active internationally, and have launched numerous pop groups and solo artists.

Taken together the shows constitute a revival of TV light entertainment, an area that infotainment (seen as all factual programming with an emphasis on entertainment value) has displaced over recent years (Bonner 2003, 20). However, on the whole the new talent shows eschew the more traditional variety form. Instead they tend to focus on a single skill in the performing arts. Contestants undertake numerous tasks to demonstrate their facility with the discipline under the watch of panel judges and mentors who are professional experts in the specified area. As a result, performances can be scrutinised closely and comparatively in line with industry criteria. This focus on single disciplines is combined with clarity in goals. The prizes for winners are real-world, well-remunerated contracts to work in the chosen field, as with *X-Factor's* UK prize of a one-million-pound recording contract. These high-stakes rewards help to focus the narratives. They also indicate that the shows act as direct routes through which successful contestants, including those who do not win but who are still able to launch entertainment careers, become commodities managed by prescribed culture industry agents (Dann 2004). In a

neat and manufactured form of cross-media symbiosis, the 'stars in the making' are also manna from heaven for the convergent media of the celebrity-lifestyle complex which create content by scrutinising week-to-week and outside-show lives of contestants. In so doing they boost the broader exposure of the performers to the point where they have viable (if often short) careers.

### **Transforming the Talent Show**

The talent show is now going through a period of diversification somewhat similar to that when the makeover moved beyond interior design and personal appearance in the early 2000s. There is a proliferation of weaker versions of the hits and shows applying talent searches to disciplines beyond pop singing. Some get people competing to be a leading man/woman in musical theatre, adding acting skills into the mix. They offer auditions to find the next Maria (*How Do you Solve a Problem like Maria?*, BBC), Joseph (*Any Dream Will Do*, BBC), Sandie and Danny (*Grease is the Word*, ITV). The BBC seems to have a proclivity for dance shows, including *Dance X* and *Strictly Dance Fever*. But if the Beeb can get celebrities dancing (*Strictly Come Dancing*), ITV can get them dancing on ice (*Dancing on Ice*, ITV).

Having enlivened Saturday night entertainment, talent formulas are breaking into weekday prime-time. Lifestyle talent is crossing into makeover territory. In *Interior Rivalry*, Channel 5 home makeover guru Ann Maurice stands as judge and jury not on

homes themselves, but on the wannabe interior designers who would make them over. As previously mentioned, cooking television increasingly revolves around competition, with *Masterchef Goes Large* (BBC) being a good example of a population-wide talent search, and *Great British Menu* (BBC) of a celebrity-chef variant. Now we even have a canine talent show, the *Underdog Show* (BBC) where we can find Fun Lovin' Criminals' lead singer Huey pitting his pooch against a motley crew of celebrity mutts in matters of agility and obedience. And we have talent shows set in the world of business, most famously, *The Apprentice*.

These generic transformations arise from industry creativity, which itself militates against the settling of talent TV into a stable genre. Indeed, recent shows have largely been considered under the rubric of 'reality TV'. Couldry (2002, 288), for instance, considers *Popstars* to be one of the first major reality shows in the UK. Holmes regards the singing contests to be the incorporation of music television into the realm of reality programming, helping to revive an area where ratings were flagging in the form of conventional pop performance programmes, such as *Top of the Pops* (2004b, 151). This makes sense on various levels. Although there are celebrity versions which show known personalities struggling to perform outside their normal craft, most of the shows feature *real* people, and work up their ordinary status systematically. As Biressi and Nunn note with reference to *American Idol*, the quality of ordinariness is constructed by a bundle of recurring testamentary techniques which portray the backgrounds, friends and families and the self-commentaries of contestants (2003, 49). Combined with this is the sense that something real is happening to them. The prize of a contract means that someone really

will become a performing artist and star, rather than simply play the role. There is much in common with the person-watching mode of television associated with *Big Brother* and similar formats where contestants reveal who they are to an audience that judges them through their repeated performances. Such programmes revolve around a series of unfolding events that leads to a final resolution in the moment of winning, a process that has been marked out by rituals (such as eviction) that generate, fulfil, and deny expectations of who the winner will be and how they will get there (Scannell 2002).

Similar temporal structures are even more elaborate on pop talent shows. *Idol* starts with regional auditions in the community, goes through two further audition stages, and ends up with the 'short-list' of 10 or 12: the small number of the most talented who we get to know intimately, and are then subjected to weekly elimination rounds (Coutas 2006, 372; Holmes 2004b, 153). Each stage allows for differences of emphasis and production, contributing to the overall narrative arc in which citizens take extraordinary journeys: one of them to the very end, while the majority return to the generalised public from which they emerged (Cowell 2004, 6).

However, the affinities between talent and reality shows do not mean that the former are derived from the latter. The talent show is a long-standing genre, and, with reality game shows, it stands alongside others which articulate the competitive sociality of capitalism. As Holmes (2006) has shown, quiz shows have provided the most enduring site for the participation of ordinary people throughout the history of television. TV has always presented a range of competition—sport, quizzes, game shows—all of which revolve

around the ritualization and evaluation of competitive social behaviour (Whannel 1990).

Entertainment value is easily derived from a narrative driven by questions of who will win and lose, with what costs and results. In their structuring and narrating of events, programme makers can exploit the familiar poles of risk, opportunity, chance and serendipity and how they come to bear upon a character's fortunes.

It was rather prescient of Whannel to comment nearly twenty years ago that 'it is noteworthy that television seems increasingly prepared to turn almost anything into the stuff of competition' (108). This was said before a slew of reality TV had stripped the focus of competition right back to form a new kind of popularity contest in which participants themselves, their personal qualities and ways of life as social beings, became the criteria for determining their success or failure.

As John Tulloch notes (cited in Whannel 1990, 105), all game shows have a logic of remuneration whereby a performance of knowledge or skill is exchanged for a reward. While the classic quiz show tests knowledge demonstrated in response to questions, one controversy surrounding reality game shows of the *Big Brother* type is that the merit that is being rewarded is not so clear. A great deal of the disapprobation targeted at them centres on the supposition that they valorise talentless people, thereby feeding a celebrity culture where people are famous for being famous, rather than any kind of outstanding contribution to culture (Biltesyt 2004). However, the talent show rewards achievement in artistic performance and leads to 'deserved' fame. And its reckoning, rating and ranking of skill involves more complex evaluation than the objective tests of knowledge

in most quiz shows. Yet, while it deals with matters of taste, such that it is impossible to demonstrate universal right and wrong, reference to standards of performance in the area of skill is necessary. Hence, there is a need for a panel of judges to mediate discourses of evaluation in combination with the audience voting that helps to bring them to conclusion. Much of the distinctive entertainment of the genre derives from the interplay of conflicting opinions surrounding these processes.

### **Transforming Lives**

To summarise so far, the new talent searches can be viewed as part of a longstanding swathe of game-oriented programming in which ordinary people appear as participants in some form of competition and are rewarded (or not) relative to how well they do something. What those 'somethings' are, the nature of the rewards, and other elements are subject to variation. The pop talent shows also signal a kind of return to light entertainment – but in different forms from conventional variety and musical performance, and key ways they are structured as texts are shared with competitive variants of reality TV. In short, the potent mix of suspenseful competition (game show), person-watching (reality TV) and stories of personal transformation (lifestyle) are all added to light entertainment. The result is a supremely successful televisual hybrid.

I now want to argue that what is most distinctive about the new talent shows is their promise to change people. The reward is not to be a richer version of yourself,

empowered with a cash prize to use as you will, nor enjoyment of commodities you have somehow earned. Rather, it is the exchange of your old self for a new one.

The older talent shows focused mostly on the moments of performance and their assessment by judges. In the new crop with their higher stakes, real-job prizes, the central moral focus behind the ordinary contestant formats is the guarantee of a new life for the single winner. Reijnders et al. argue that *Idol* acts to place 'exemplary' members of the community on a pedestal so as to celebrate their ritual transformation. Comparing it to Dutch talent shows of the 1960s they find that whereas the older programmes offered brief weekly transformations of participants into stars, *Idol* extends the process over the entire series (2005, 287-9).

Whatever they are applied to, makeover narratives depict processes that may lead to a dramatic increase in *value*, whether use-value (newly loving the home or body you inhabit) or exchange-value (being able to sell that better home, impress others with that better body, etc), which is presented in the final narrative resolution. They amount to a kind of interrogation of the person, mobilising the evidence for their need to change, and figuring the solution (Palmer 2004, 183-5). In work-based programming, such as *The Apprentice*, a similar means-end logic is applied to job performance, and thus the final value of the worker who has been tested. Despite the light-entertainment wrapping, talent shows also essentially involve participants learning to labour for success. The goal is to achieve a performance that brings the person to signify correctly as a subject in a given professional context, allowing them to access associated entitlements. However, the

competitive reward structure determines that only a few can attain the extraordinary outcome of stardom.

The performances themselves have become embedded in an ever-increasing focus on the contestants' backgrounds, dreams, experiences, efforts, and their responses to their unfolding fates in light of their bids to transform themselves. From the very beginning to the very end participants are positioned as seekers of a better life, not simply wannabe performers. The hosts insistently use phrases like 'life-changing prize', and 'change your life forever' with reference to contestants, who duly supply their own aspirational sentiments.

Comments made around the performances in a single X Factor episode (of first-round auditions held in three cities) highlight how such claims constantly frame performances, and are part of programme structures, rather than being occasional asides:

JUDGES TRAVELLING TO AUDITIONS IN AN EXECUTIVE JET

LOUIS (JUDGE)

Today I'm very optimistic because all we need is one person to walk into that room with star quality. (...)

AT THE BELFAST PUBLIC AUDITIONS

NARRATOR

So as Simon, Sharon, Dannie and Louis take their seats, and the auditionees all hoping they can leave their everyday life behind and hit the big time.

AUDITIONEE 1

Instead of plastering I want to do singing well.

AUDITIONEE 2

I can't go back to being a sales assistant.

AUDITIONEE 3

I want to say goodbye to Tony the café owner. (...)

#### AT THE NEWCASTLE PUBLIC AUDITIONS

NARRATOR

The X Factor is open to people of all ages; proving you are never too old to follow your dreams is 70-year-old shop worker, Maria. (...)

NARRATOR

Next up and desperate for a 'yes' is 20-year-old Sam. Growing up in a small corner of Newcastle he never thought he'd get his chance to follow his dream, until today. (...)

#### AT THE BIRMINGHAM PUBLIC AUDITIONS

NARRATOR

Outside the hopefuls continue to arrive, all hoping that the X Factor can change their life forever. (...)

NARRATOR

The end of the day in Birmingham. One of the last contestants to see the judges is 28-year-old Natasha and her 7-year-old daughter Jasmine. Natasha needs her dream to come true more than most. (...) Being a single mum means Natasha has no one to look after Jasmine, so they will be facing the judges together.

NATASHA

It's really important for me to get through today, putting the past behind me and actually seeing for the future and helping myself and my daughter get a better life.

(X Factor, ITV1, 8 September, 2007; Fremantle Media/Talkback Thames  
S04E04)

An important aspect of the shows is the ethos of the open talent search that will consider all-comers. As the above illustrates, all kinds of ordinary folk that the nation has to offer are admitted for consideration. The one constant amid all the characters presented is that they want to live their dreams of success and leave their old lives behind. In some cases, such as Natasha's, this is presented as a pressing need.

At the beginning of series three the makers of *X-Factor* proudly claimed their show to constitute the largest British talent search ever, with 100,000 people having auditioned. However, by series four the numbers had apparently doubled to 200,000 (ITV 2007). Arsenal Football Club's Emirates Stadium was used for the London auditions of 50,000.

Although the mass of have-a-go heroes are left in the audition halls, the discourse of opportunity is sustained throughout the series. It intensifies as contestant numbers reduce and the air-time given over to each personal story increases. In these later stages they have to learn and adapt to the professional requirements demanded of them in tasks. Various techniques track characters at multiple points through the overall process. They are shown in training; they are interviewed about the progress of themselves and others; they may be shown living and interacting with other contestants and mentors in the day-to-day of rehearsal, in partner and teamwork and in the social interaction between contestants that is constructed through recreational activities.

In the final of *Any Dream Will Do* (BBC1 9 June, 2007; BBC entertainment, S01E11) the three remaining contestants are still called upon to justify why they deserve their intended reward. Why should they remain in, win the prize? They reiterate routine answers given throughout the shows and which articulate individualistic, achievement-oriented virtues liable to be approved by sections of the audience as grounds for worthiness (Reijnders, et al. 2005, 289). They claim they should stay because they have a dream to fulfil, passion, self-belief, determination, faith of supporters to repay, abilities to work hard, learn from mistakes, etc. Such qualities are illustrated through footage taken from the series, charting their highs and lows. On top of the performances in the final itself, previous ones are recapped, strengths and weaknesses are assessed by judges, emotions are revisited, and intentions are renewed. In their final weekly trip (to Mallorca), the candidates reaffirm their own trajectories of life makeover. For Keith, 'It would mean everything for me to win this. From 10,000 people to be the one left standing; it's like a dream, a dream I

always had when I was young, and a dream I've always had becoming a reality.' While for Lewis, 'To be in the west End. I've always said it ever since I was a little kid. (...) That's what I was born to do. I worked so hard to get where I am. I feel like I am the right Joseph.' Host Graham Norton then interviews Connie Fisher, winner of the linked show, *How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?* His single question to her is: 'Last time you were on this stage you were a telesales girl, now you are an award-winning leading actress; in what ways has winning the role of Maria changed your life?' Both Keith and Lewis, incidentally, fail to take that final step.

It is not that previous talent shows did not express similar aspirational sentiments to some extent. Both the old and new versions revolve around the core activities of artistic performance by members of the population, followed by their rating by judges and audiences. However, different frameworks are built around these defining features. The extensive paraphernalia of person-watching and review was absent from the previous shows. Selection processes are also much more complex and sophisticated now. There has been a ratcheting up of the judging and voting aspects to the extent that they play a much more important role than in '70s and '80s classics like *New Faces* and *Opportunity Knocks*. In the latter (which ran with gaps from 1949 until 1990), studio audiences expressed their responses to acts through the loudness of their applause as captured in haphazard fashion by a 'clapometer'. Voting was by postcard. In the earlier series of *New Faces* (1973-88) panel judges exclusively dealt with scoring, telephone voting only being introduced towards the end of the show's life. Now, the intimate, interactive relationship between audience and the world of the show is centralised through rapidly-processed

telephone and text voting, giving audience members power to help decide the destinies of contestants, while also earning huge sums for the producers to add to advertising revenue and profits made from contestants' singing and celebrity careers.

The consequences of the performance evaluation are heightened by the dramatic tearful rituals of 'selecting out'. This is the gradual elimination of candidates based on negative screening, isolating their relative failure/unpopularity and voting them off until the proverbial last person remains standing to live the dream. This is the inverse of the conventional competitive rounds of *New Faces*, in which the winners of weekly rounds (each a separate contest with assorted different contestants we hardly know) make it through to finals. Selecting out is crucial to the new shows. It emphasises the 'all or nothing' nature of the goal, and allows for the week-to-week continuity of contestants, and thus elaboration of their fortunes in soap opera-like through-narratives. Indeed, much of the overall air-time is chat about and with the people. This is not only an element of the main shows, but also spills over into dedicated supplementary programmes. For instance, *X Factor* is actually four programmes that are aired across ITV's channels: the main one, the results, and two chat/docusoap shows that track contestants: *The Xtra Factor* and *The X Factor 24/7*.

All this makes for a tenor distinct from the classical variety talent searches in which members of the public, or as yet undistinguished professionals, 'gave it a go', being uncoached and free to exhibit their talent as they saw fit. They often expressed irony and wit in light of audience preferences for novelty acts. The world in which singer and

comedian Su Pollard was beaten by a singing dog in *Opportunity Knocks* 1974 (BBC 2002) is a different one from that of *Idol* and *X Factor*. Although some (like 'Chico' in X Factor series 2) play the joker, the new shows are concerned with professional standards in every aspect of being a performer. The tasks prescribed by judges constantly measure contestants' fitness to purpose.

### **The People's Meritocracy**

The talent show then depicts what it means to be successful in productive processes, and to earn a new kind of status as a result. The genre has grown to a point where consideration of matters of the suitability of the person that were previously implicit are now the focus of intense interest in discourses that endlessly evaluate their rightness for the role and the rewards that come with it. The narrative added value is in the processes of *lifestyling*, questions of how to be and act so as to fulfil a goal, in conforming to work demands made.

It is tempting to construe this kind of TV peopled by ordinary persons as being entertainment above all else. However, while lifestyle television in general may have muscled out some more sober kinds of factual viewing from the schedules, as Tania Lewis (2007, 292) has pointed out, it is an error to assume it has no educational rationale amid its pleasures. This is intensely pedagogic television which presents how people should act.

This returns us to the issue of the terms of participation of ordinary people in popular television and the matter of whether they can be conceptualised as democratising.

The critical questions that I would like to highlight revolve around the value of persons in a setting where they appear on condition that they must seek to change towards something better. Made over talent shows rely on a moralistic notion of enterprising selves who modify their behaviour towards an end that is invested with overriding value.

On the face of it the models of success in play are instantiations of the pervasive capitalist myth of 'making it'. Talent shows have always had a certain kind of democratising power in that they effect social mobility. They have in quite literal ways provided mechanisms for talented but unknown performers, from Lenny Henry to Victoria Wood, to launch careers. Although those who make the journey are few, talent shows may contribute to what Geoff Dench refers to as the 'people's meritocracy' of popular entertainment (2006, 9). As a cultural sector almost wholly responsive to demand, entertainment provides opportunities for ordinary people to earn fabulous sums irrespective of background and privileges afforded to them.

However, the intensity with which the new talent shows pitch the dream for life-change, while offering high rewards to the best, would seem to articulate particular structures of feeling of an aspirational society. The discourses of success presented may be seen to advance a chronic anxiety about remaining ordinary. As Jo Littler (2003, 13) has noted the contemporary valorisation of celebrity normalises the idea that to be ordinary

nowadays may actually involve the desire to become an extraordinary person, in particular, a celebrity.

The ethos of social inclusiveness claimed by *X Factor*, *Idol* and counterparts revolves around unrestricted, non-discriminatory access to opportunities, represented as democratisation of life chances for those who audition. Yet there are fundamental contradictions in espousing the enfranchisement of all through *chances* to be successful, under conditions that ensure success and its entitlements remain scarce. Inevitably the shows cannot but dramatise 'how capitalism necessarily works for the few at the expense of the many' (Holmes, 2004b, 158). Quite literally, what they turn into a spectacle is the commodification of labour, the selection, reward and performance management of workers on highly competitive terms. This is by definition a process in which the value of the person is instrumental. In the kind of market setting depicted, and which holds in the broader economy, people are worth not an inherent value, but the surplus value that can be derived from them by the parties that are providing and controlling the opportunities.

While the shows act as literal mechanisms of mobility, they legitimate, by their association with pleasure and optimism, a meritocratic sleight of hand: equality of opportunity amid inequality of reward. Their structures ensure that the mobility achieved is dependent upon hierarchy, as one winner takes all, monopolising rewards and status gains. While all may give it a go, only a few make it, and they make it big. The structural corollary of the extraordinary success of the individual is mass relative failure of others. In a sense this is to be expected in a genre that depends upon the dramatic tension of

competition, and which takes place in a society in which different rewards for labour are normal. However, the innovation of 'life-changing' prizes and their centrality to the shows articulates a more extreme rationality of neoliberalism. This is not just expressive of an unchanging competitive sociality of capitalism. It involves outlandish claims about the ability of markets to 'deliver' happy people.

Such rhetoric of opportunity pervades populist British political discourse. Eager to distance itself from a more brutal Thatcherism (with little sensitivity to the social consequences of markets), since its inception in 1997 the 'New' Labour government has staked its progressive credentials on the claim that it will help all citizens to make the most of a market society, and create, in the electioneering words of minister Alan Milburn (2005), 'a nation based on merit, not on class' (cited in Lister 2006, 232). However, such a view of social justice favours equality of opportunity over actual material parity between citizens. The latter is the equality traditionally associated with social democratic labour and fiscal policies that effect greater social security and wider distribution of wealth than markets alone. In contrast, the main policy thrust of the supposed opportunity society of New Labour is to leave markets ('wealth creation') unhindered by regulation, while the state is considered the custodian of the human capital markets require ('education, education, education'). According to the OECD's flexibility index, the UK has the second least regulated labour market in the developed world, after the United States (Coats 2007, 132).

In her assessment of the egalitarianism expressed by the current British Labour Government, Ruth Lister (2006) shows how the theories of meritocracy espoused have very little to do with equality. Businesses do not exist to deliver it. They provide employment only insofar as, and on terms that, they create profit. Meritocracy is not a 'principle of distribution of rewards' (232). Indeed, the ascription of merit is precisely a differential determination of value, such that different people putatively get 'what they are worth' in the narrow definitions of those with the power to judge and interests in doing so. In contexts where this is left to market logic (aided by the liberalisation of employment laws to promote ease of hiring and firing), meritocracy promotes economic inequality (233). Indeed, a series of recent studies have suggested that inequality is increasing in the UK. A 2007 Joseph Rowntree Foundation report concludes that it is at its highest in forty years (Dorling et al.). A particular feature of modern Britain is its increasingly polarised labour market, with the dynamic knowledge economy (above all financial services) creating a wealthy elite, while the largest growth in jobs created—and related life chances—is in the low-skilled and low-paid service sector (Cruddas 2006, 205).

That is not to say the new talent shows are solely an epiphenomenon of such neoliberal social relations. There is no doubt that they combine dimensions of a range of pre-existing genres of television, including previous talent shows, and that in doing so they appeal to longstanding audience interests in spectacle, character and narrative. However, it would be equally banal to assign them the status of 'just entertainment'. The elements which make the new generation of talent TV most distinctive, principally those

techniques which foreground the personal stories of success and failure, are very much embedded in a recognisable broader social world in which a great deal of moral responsibility for risk and welfare is assigned to private persons and agencies. As Couldry (2006, 8) notes, when discussing the affinities between *Big Brother* and the surveillance of worker performance in the contemporary workplace, the point is not that television simply reflects neoliberalism. Rather, the ritual expression of its norms may be thought of as a cultural fascination that enables societal reflection upon common forms of experience that are presented in displaced form.

In the new talent shows, the discourses about human potential that overlay the entertainment and provide the rationale for action are explicitly driven by the declarations of all involved that, above and beyond the joys of artistic performance, the overall meaning of participation lies in the life-change to which it might lead. In this, the currency of makeover talent shows is dependent upon the kind of structural inequality that is symbolically maintained by their reward structures. The dream that is shown to come true, in spectacular, ecstatic fashion somewhat akin to winning the lottery, is one of vaulting from one side of the hourglass economy to the other. This is a confirmation that the myth of making it and the ethics of individual success and achievement upon which it depends, are imperatives of societies that provide many with a formal right to progress materially, but not necessarily the capacity to do so (Collinson 2003). The shows stand as a kind of magical intervention into social reality, whereby those without any of the forms of economic, educational and social capital that often determine levels of success enter a world where they are not necessary, and the dream becomes real.

Yet there is little doubt that the tears of failure that issue from other contestants' inability to live out hyped up life chances are also very real. This counterpoint of symbolically legitimated joy and pain represents the kind of interplay between anxiety and hope that Frederic Jameson (1979) identifies in popular culture texts which contain and ultimately license social tensions of their historical moment. Having signed up to the project, unsuccessful participants have no grounds to blame the mechanism that gave them the chance.

But what of the 'rest' who have been implicitly separated out from the 'best'? While the opportunity afforded to the final lucky contestants who make something from the shows acts as a parable of social mobility, the new talent TV simultaneously represents working class life as something to be escaped from by individuals through the labour market, rather than something that can be developed by sharing the benefits of wealth creation more equitably. In pitching its dreams, it repeats the twin myths that the value of a person is purely what the market assigns to them and that they morally deserve the life that this buys them. It is the same structure of feeling articulated by a government that denies the existence of and politics of class, and instead overrides it with high-blown rhetoric of aspiration, as though the telos of free market capitalism is to turn everyone into a millionaire. Meanwhile, social research shows that the principal goals of real ordinary people are good, stable jobs that allow them to live well in their existing communities and reference groups (Roberts 2006).

If in 'meritocracies, dignity and respect are no longer an automatic birthright,' but are 'conditional and have to be earned and achieved' (Collinson 2003, 531), talent television, by commending those who can show themselves to be exceptional, provides a way of inscribing ordinary people and their lives as inferior. The new stars are valorised not for emerging as lucky representatives of 'our' pop culture (as I would argue the persons of the older talent shows were), but for their having passed over to an elite. Life transformation is not a developmental model of progress. It requires a rupture. It requires that in order to live a good life an ordinary person must break with their past, leave it behind to be their best self. Their existing life is not worth improving, only improving upon. In the midst of disparity of rewards, this beguiling, entertaining, apparently democratising form of television consigns the 'meritless' majority to a position of no dignity and respect.

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