

Reality TV, Faking It, and the Transformation of Personal Identity

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**Joanne Morreale,**  
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**Abstract:** In her paper, "Reality TV, *Faking It*, and the Transformation of Personal Identity," Joanne Morreale examines the hybrid makeover, game, and reality TV show *Faking It* as a cultural form that portrays the transformation of personal identity through performance. Morreale argues that the contents and performance of the show intensify the link between consumer culture and the fabrication of identity by teaching that fulfillment comes from becoming, rather than having, a commodity. In the show, participants learn to perform new selves that are perceived as "better." *Faking It* thus puts on display the processes of fabrication whereby the self is created and is best understood through the logic of simulation rather than representation.

**Joanne MORREALE**

### **Reality TV, *Faking It*, and the Transformation of Personal Identity**

Reality television programs have now infiltrated virtually every area of the medium, and they occupy a significant portion of the televisual terrain. Like viruses, reality programs reproduce themselves by hijacking pre-existent forms: cop shows, dramas, soap operas, sitcoms, game shows, and self-improvement shows. They have irrevocably altered our mediascape, and to the extent that our interactions with mass mediated cultural forms shape our identities, they are in the process of altering us. One of the most recent developments in reality programming has been the makeover show, where participants are offered everything from redecorated apartments to redesigned bodies. Here I consider the hybrid makeover, game, and reality show *Faking It* as a cultural form that intensifies the relationship between commodification and personal identity. *Faking It* (itself an ironic name for a so-called reality program) began airing in the UK on Channel 4/BBC in 2002, and currently appears in the States on BBC America. After *Faking It* won Europe's top entertainment award at the Montreux International Television Festival in 2002, the US-based Learning Channel bought the program. The American version first went on the air in 2003, and it is currently in its third season. While there are some stylistic and thematic differences between the English and American versions, here I will bracket them and focus on the more significant commonalities. The same production company, RDF media, makes both British and American versions, and thus the similarities are more extreme than might otherwise be the case. Both versions are premised on the idea that, given up to one month and a coterie of specialist trainers, an ordinary person can transform him or herself well enough to fool a panel of experts. Participants don't just learn the skills associated with a particular profession, but they must also adopt the appropriate personas. Thus, *Faking It* provides a televisual Petri dish in which to observe the contemporary production of the self as commodity sign, inscribed by markers of class and identity. Much of *Faking It* involves class passing, most typically upward -- a carpenter becomes an interior designer, a punk singer becomes a classical music conductor, a housepainter become a conceptual artist, or a hot dog vendor becomes a chef. The English version has an episode entirely devoted to social class, where a chemist's assistant becomes an "aristocrat." There are also programs that revolve around gender, for example when a drag racer becomes a drag queen, or an androgynous Harvard graduate becomes a professional cheerleader.

*Faking It's* implicit premise is that these new selves will offer fulfillment, that transformation is commensurate with improvement. In this way, *Faking It* reaffirms the therapeutic ethos that marked the rise of twentieth century consumer culture and has continued to define the contemporary milieu (see Lears). Stated briefly, the therapeutic ethos replaced the Protestant ethic of salvation through self-denial. It emerged in the late 1800s as the result of a confluence of factors: urbanization, new technological developments, the rise of the market economy, the growing authority of science and medicine, and the decline of religious institutions. The therapeutic ethos promises self-fulfillment through consumption, through having rather than being, and thus explains the constant quest for products that bring physical, emotional, or spiritual health. Most importantly, *Faking It* refigures the therapeutic ethos by promising fulfillment through becoming a commodity rather than having one. Identity becomes a lifestyle choice, and its fabrication is inextricably linked to practices of consumption. *Faking It* replays the process of socialization whereby people assemble disparate parts -- behavioral "bytes" -- to project an integrated self-image. The participants try on newer, cleaner, brighter, more desirable, or simply different selves that they can parlay into social capital. Not only do they adopt clothing and hairstyles, but they incorporate qualities, attitudes, behaviors, gestures, movements, and skills, to the extent that there is no distinction between identity and image. They become what they embody. *Faking It* implies that identity and social class, like Judith Butler's take on gender, is inherently performative, an "incessant and repeated action" which exists only as its played out in continuous enactments (112). Although these categories appear natural, they are only manifest by doing, by performing the kinemes of class, social identity, and gender that we consciously and unconsciously learn from others. Butler writes, "Such

acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means" (136). *Faking It* thus condenses, speeds up and makes overt the performative genesis of identity, which is regularly concealed. *Faking It* puts on display the processes of fabrication whereby the self is created. It popularizes the idea that identity is created through social performance; it highlights that identity is a game one plays, the product of role-playing and rehearsal of already-fabricated images. Paradoxically, however, *Faking It* both frees and shores up the self. The self may be fluid and mobile, but it is still constrained by the capitalist ideology of individualism: with willpower, determination, role models (and the right hair and clothes), people can re-incarnate themselves as particular social types. While appearing to transgress the rules of social order and hierarchy, *Faking It* in fact supports the status quo.

*Faking It's* frame as reality rather than fiction accords it an assumed veracity. Yet, every episode follows the same formula, and even the jury at Montreaux commended it for its drama rather than realism. According to one jury member, "It treats the reality genre with complete sympathy for the participants and combines great storytelling with compelling drama and emotions, and is truly groundbreaking?" (Turner <<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/thr/index.jsp>>). The particular situations and experiences viewers see are also confined to what plays well on television. The professions selected are visually compelling: chef, ballet dancer, horse racer, cheerleader, aristocrat, drag queen. Dramatic music underscores important scenes, and the camerawork and editing are highly stylized throughout the program. Time-lapse photography frequently represents an activity that took several hours in just a few minutes (and thus signals that transformation is virtually instantaneous). Situations are sometimes set up for the camera's benefit, and it is common knowledge that scenes on reality programs are occasionally scripted for dramatic effect. While the filming of the entire show takes place over the course of three weeks to a month, viewers see less than an hour's worth of footage. The highly contrived result is filtered, packaged and marketed as "reality." Within the context of the narrative, coaches and a mentor encourage participants to take on the identity of the kind of person involved in a particular profession. The coaches become role models who teach participants the ritualized sets of behaviors, rules, norms, and expectations that correspond to a particular stereotype of a social class and occupation. Participants are always uprooted from their homes and taken to unfamiliar places, the more unfamiliar the context, the easier to transform oneself. They live with either their coach or mentor, and the intense relationship that develops is typically what motivates the participant; the motivation can either be positive or negative; sometimes participants want to succeed in order to "show them" rather than to please them. Not all of the relationships go smoothly. Viewers see signs of the often painful labor that is involved in this personal transformation; these signs serve as visual markers of authenticity that demonstrate that the participant is truly suffering on the path to self-fulfillment. Both the participants and coaches independently provide a video diary where they express their feelings to the camera. In the case of the participants, these "authentic" moments of personal revelation reinforce the therapeutic idea that self-reflection and self-knowledge, made possible by participating in *Faking It*, makes transformation possible. The coaches' video diaries also serve a dramatic purpose. In every episode there is a moment of crisis where the participant falters and the coaches voice their concerns on-camera. The coaches and/or mentor then have a motivational talk with the participant, where they stress that he or she needs to try harder and to believe in him/herself (a recurrent theme). The participants succeed in re-asserting themselves only after submitting to the disciplinary control of these "authorities."

It is also significant that participants on *Faking It* are filmed as they learn their new identities. Being seen is an important aspect of identity formation, and serves as a pivotal moment in *Faking It*. Every episode includes both a make-over and a shopping spree where coaches help participants choose appropriate clothing and accessories. A mirror then serves as a metaphor for the participants' transformation. They are always shown gazing at their new selves, freshly coifed and dressed in clothes that mark their new social positions. As in Lacanian theory, the mirror marks the moment of (mis)recognition, when they see themselves as whole and complete, as the actualization of potential. Ricky the drag racer says it best when he gazes at himself made-up as a drag

queen for the first time, "I looked in the mirror and I saw that I had become Portia -- not me." On-line questionnaires where people can apply to be on the show make clear that the producers seek participants who are "in a rut," "have never realized their dreams," and "have never stepped outside their safety zone" (and those are just the first three questions). Participants thus begin from a position of lack, of inadequacy, and it is only when they see their images in the mirror that their transformation can take place. They are given the illusion of a unified self who is "better" than what was there before. As one on-line fan wrote to Lesley, a Harvard graduate who became a cheerleader for the Atlanta Falcons, "If your mirror isn't showing you how special you are, then get a new mirror. The one you have must be broken." Viewers are reminded of the importance of being seen at the conclusion of every program, when the coaches and mentors watch the candidate perform for the panel of experts from a surveillance station located off-site (as Mark Andrejevic notes, the naturalization of surveillance is an important feature of reality programs). Participants do not win monetary prizes; everything rests upon a final performance where a panel of judges tries to guess which is the imposter in a group of supposed professionals. Participants succeed if their new identities are recognized, or validated, by the judges, and less obviously, by viewers watching them on television. The stakes are raised as these "others" who judge the participants are considered experts who ostensibly should know the real from the fake. Even when the participant fails to fool all of the experts, the coaches are inevitably proud of the performance (participants rarely fail to fool at least one judge, perhaps a testament to how little the so-called experts know). Transformation is attainable, given the participant's continued motivation and effort (i.e., willingness to play the game). As in life, success is judged by the performative skill of impression management.

*Faking It* is a modern version of the television game show *What's My Line?* (1950-67), and it is instructive to compare the two. Like *Faking It*, the participants on *What's My Line?* were ordinary people selected for having somewhat unusual occupations. But *What's My Line?* centered on a panel of minor celebrities who tried to pose clever and amusing questions, while the participants, often guided by the advice of the host/mentor, would simply answer yes or no. The celebrity panelists were blindfolded; thus the game solely relied on language cues, and the goal was to find the "correct" answer. If the panel failed to guess, the contestant would win a small monetary prize. *Faking It* shifts the focus onto the contestants, in accord with reality television's preoccupation with amateurs (who work for free). The candidate's occupation is here a starting point from which to make some kind of qualitative shift -- a dancer to a show-jumper, or a beer expert to a sommelier, or a telephone operator to a television producer. While *What's My Line?* was tied to the logic of representation, *Faking It* is better understood in relation to the simulacrum. The participants on *Faking It* simulate rather than represent their professions and identities. According to Brian Massumi: "A common definition of a simulacrum is a copy of a copy whose relation to the model has become so attenuated that it can no longer properly be said to be a copy. It stands on its own as a copy, without a model? The simulacrum is less a copy twice removed than a phenomenon of a different nature altogether. It undermines the very distinction between copy and model? The thrust of the process is not to become an equivalent of the "model" but to turn against it and its world in order to open a new space for the simulacrum's own mad proliferation"

(<[http://www.anu.edu.au/HRC/first\\_and\\_last/works/realer.htm](http://www.anu.edu.au/HRC/first_and_last/works/realer.htm)>). *What's My Line?* was an attempt to faithfully represent the real. But "experts" on *Faking It* are not asked to select who is real, but to identify who is not real. Who is the least convincing simulator of a drag queen? Interior designer? Polo player? It is not surprising that judges rarely get it completely right or wrong. In a thirty-day crash course, *Faking It* contestants learn to copy their models, who are themselves "copies." As noted by Erving Goffman, ordinary behavior is highly ritualized; people act out and live social ideals, presenting stereo typical images of themselves to others (1-9). What we know of an aristocrat, dancer, carpenter, or drag queen is already a fabrication. *Faking It* is thus a hyper-ritualized representation of a representation. The new personas that are created, whether they indicate gender or class mobility, all indicate the desire to fulfill oneself by becoming the imaginary other, the idealized image that is somehow more complete.

In the English program called *Lady Lisa*, for example, a chemist's assistant was taught to become an aristocrat. She had a voice coach, etiquette and deportment coach, and an upper class male mentor who was a Society Editor at *The London Daily Mail*. Lisa had lessons on how to walk, how to talk, use upper-class table manners, and introduce appropriate conversational topics; further, her appearance was altered by make-up, a new hair style, and new clothing. Lisa was encouraged to "educate" herself by visiting art galleries in the little free time she had. Her guides clearly meant for viewers to see her as a latter day Pygmalion. The deportment coach even remarked to the camera soon after meeting her, "I'm dying to tidy her hair, get her some make-up. Everything needs to be chiseled, the edges sorted out." The mentors and coaches, while at times approaching parody, provide a condensed version of the way we learn class, identity and gender through instruction, emulation and practice. Lisa rehearses words until she enunciates just like her coach; Lesley the cheerleader is taught to smile and "adopt the proper attitude" for a cheerleader. Ricky the drag queen learns the difficult art of how to walk not like a woman, but with the deliberate excesses of a man playing a woman. But the purpose of their mimicry is not to become indistinguishable from their teachers; the simulacrum does not bear a simple relationship of resemblance to the model. Instead, imitating their role models allows participants to differentiate and alter themselves. Their mimicry affords them an advantage in the game, whether that is *Faking It* or the world outside. It is through mimicry that they redefine their value as commodity signs. Massumi's description of mimicry in the animal kingdom serves as a useful analogy: "Resemblance is a beginning masking the advent of a whole new vital dimension. This even applies to mimicry in nature. An insect that mimics a leaf does so not to meld with the vegetable state of its surrounding milieu, but to reenter the predatory realm of animal warfare on a new footing" (2).

There were several participants who clearly used what they learned to "put themselves on a new footing." Paul the housepainter has become a conceptual artist. Lisa, the ultimate game player, later revealed that she was an actress who saw the game as a good opportunity to hone her skills and get an agent (which she has). Most of the participants who appeared on the show reported that they were altered by the experience, typically for the better. This is part of the ideological project of the program, and one of the *Faking It* rhizomes is a follow-up show called *Faking It Changed My Life*. Stephen Lambert, producer of the program, states, "This is a programme of hope which shows how people are capable of extraordinary things given the right support and encouragement. Many of the people featured have found their lives changed forever by the experience" (Sherwin 11). Chris Sweeney, who moved from punk rocker to classical conductor, asserted, "My life had to change. *Faking It* came along at the right time and gave me the push I needed. I was at school. People never thought I'd amount to anything. Now I'm determined to go and be someone." Lucy Craig, who went from ferry stewardess to racing yacht skipper, said, "Now I need to use my newfound confidence to fulfill my potential. I have always been held back by a fear of failure before, but I have broken free of that." David Keith, radiographer to fashion photographer, declared, "My attitude toward people changed. I became much more open to people, much more friendly. I had to fit in visually and that meant getting a new sense of style." According to Joy Press in the *Village Voice*, discussing the episode where Alex Gieke, a shy chemistry student turned into a nightclub bouncer, and then came out as gay, "The experience of forced reinvention gives him the impetus to totally change his life. It is as if the trials of impersonating a totally new character revealed what a sham his "real self" was. *Faking It* ultimately suggests something both inspirational and unsettling: that we lack any essential character, and our personalities and life paths are merely by-products of the opportunities presented to us" (Press 48). Like the happy consumers in television advertisements, participants offer the possibility of self-fulfillment, premised on the unstated notion that identity is open, transient, up for grabs. You do not like your identity? Change it! No guilt, no worries, no repercussions, just do it!

*Faking It* exhibits a kind of staged performativity which obliterates the line between reality and fabrication. Participants play themselves learning to play a new version of themselves. For example, in the follow-up to the episode where Sian, an initially reserved cellist became an extroverted disc jockey, she noted, "I started to feel a bit confused about who I was, which part of me was *Faking It* and which was real" (she continues to work as a disc jockey on weekends). On one level,



the performances are clearly not-real; the participants can quit the game and drop their roles at a whim. At one point, Lisa broke down and was subsequently allowed an unplanned trip home for the weekend. "I'll always be a Yorkshire lass," she sobbed, though was it Lisa the actress or Lisa the Yorkshire lass who addressed the camera? Lesley the cheerleader-in-training ripped out the hair extensions that were supposed to make her look more feminine and refused to wear make-up to one of her coaching sessions. Lesley was one of the most resistant and least altered of all of the participants. As a Harvard graduate and yoga teacher, she was clearly slumming it in the marketplace of possible identities. But while participants were aware of playing a game, its duration was the real time of their lives. At one point Lisa's coach criticized her by saying, "You have to have an awareness that when you laugh, when you're more emotionally up, that's when the accent can reappear." And despite Lesley the cheerleader's efforts to remain detached, she could not contain her excitement when she saw her face on the giant screen after her cheerleading tryout. Through the staged performances of ordinary people in live situations, the line between reality and fabrication disappears. *Faking It* is all about the simulation rather than the representation of class and identity. Simulation thus produces the real, which is to say the hyperreal where images are no longer anchored by representation. *Faking It* is thus a way that the culture speaks to itself and renders tacit knowledge explicit. It makes visible that the ways that identity is created through rehearsal and performance of already fabricated images. It naturalizes the idea that identity is fluid and mobile, a commodity sign that we circulate in an endless attempt to make meaning. *Faking It* confirms that there is no coherent core, no deep interior behind the surface appearance of a social self. As Kenneth Gergen writes, "Slowly we are losing confidence that there is a coherent, identifiable substance behind the mask. The harder we look, the more difficult it is to find 'anyone at home'" (<<http://cms.psychologytoday.com/articles/pto-19921101-000023.html>>). Our becoming, our transformational potential becomes confined to image consumption and production. Our existence is limited only by our resources. According to M.W. Smith, author of *Reading Similacra*, "If you sport a Gold Visa you can even define your gender if you wish -- at the local gender market, buy an organ transplant package including dual hair removal and hormone shots, complete with lipstick and make-up for the final touches. In the capitalist and consumerist axiomatic of Barbara Kruger, 'I buy, therefore I am'" (9).

In the logic of capital, if commodities provide the source of our identities, we are endlessly required to buy and buy again in the quest for self-fulfillment. Yet, despite (or because of) this big day out at the mall, we become anesthetized rather than enlivened; we become increasingly numb to experience. Reality television continues to self-replicate, just as the boundary between public and private, subject and object, reality and fabrication, representation and simulation continues to dissipate. FX has commissioned a pilot for a show called *Thirty Days*, where a Christian will become a Muslim, or a prosecutor will spend a month in jail. *Total Makeover*, *I Want a Celebrity Face*, and *The Swan* completely alters the physical appearance of participants. The next stage in make-over programs is the entire family. Casting calls are out for a family who wants to have their entire lives transformed. The description is as follows: "Each one-hour long episode will follow one family through every step of a total makeover that will encompass each element of their lives, with the help of top experts from various fields they want to improve. More than just a quick once-over, the families will be amazed as they are remade from the top down, from home to wardrobe to much more personal and psychological aspects beyond possessions and appearance. This life-changing experience is designed to improve the lives of the selected families in ways that will astound and engage the viewing audience" (48). Here we see a magnification of the problem of the commodified self in the thrall of the therapeutic ethos. Initially the therapeutic ethos was promoted as a means to heal the wounds inflicted by a newly impersonal, bureaucratic, urbanized society, but it quickly became a means of social control, used to help people adjust to a developing corporate system. Lears writes that the same factors that led to the emergence of the therapeutic ethos in the late nineteenth century also fostered widespread feelings of anomie, a sense of "unreality," and a longing for the intense, authentic, experience of "real life." He writes, "As early as 1909, cultural commentators were lamenting the 'Era of Pre-digestion,' which had rendered vigorous, firsthand experience obsolete" (7). If anything, mediated, mechanized, and secondary experi-

ences are even more predominant today. It is not uncommon to come across a passage such as the following: "Just as millions live on top of the San Andreas Fault, we all walk private and societal surfaces, full of cracks and structural breaks, that when pressed, release in us that intense and profound need for a sense of belonging, for a sense of the "real."

Unfortunately, millions of Americans feel that our remote government/corporations and fractured neighborhoods seem no longer able to nurture this need. How do we then live with the realization that society, as we have constructed it, does not satisfy our hunger for the "real"? (Dorfman <[http://www.corpse.org/issue\\_11/critiques/dorfman.html](http://www.corpse.org/issue_11/critiques/dorfman.html)>). Yearnings for "authentic" experience may partly account for the appeal of reality television. While appearing to satisfy our desire for "reality," *Faking It* puts on display the processes of fabrication whereby the real is created. Ostensibly a representation of the real, reality television offers yet another secondhand experience. Now people are offered a pre-packaged, mass-mediated version of self-fulfillment. In the event that they feel rootless, fragmented, and disengaged, they -- and soon their family -- are provided with a pre-fab identity that comes pre-validated by a cadre of so-called experts. While reality shows such as *Faking It* and its follow-ups acknowledge the fluidity of identity, they do so only to freeze it into pre-established molds.

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