

Transformational Tales:
Media, Makeovers, and Material Culture

By

Orit Kuritsky

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Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Masters of Science in
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ABSTRACT

This thesis probes into current American makeover culture, through three detailed case studies that represent an increasing confluence of commerce, entertainment, and, at times, spirituality. Each of the chapters is devoted to a niche media property, or genre, dedicated to the domestic sphere. The first chapter focuses on the genre of home decorating TV shows and practices of their consumption. The second centers on a single television program – TLC’s *What Not to Wear*, and the interpretative activities it provokes among viewers. The third chapter examines the *FlyLady* – a transmedia property with a strong internet base, described by its founder as a “behavior modification system” that coaches its subscribers in getting their houses in order.

This study was driven, among other things, by the following questions: as the ‘commodity frontier’ gets increasingly intermingled with our daily lives, with the help of increasingly pervasive media, how do certain communities respond, and with what methods of meaning-making? What draws audiences to engage with media properties so intermingled with commerce in the first place? And, what constitutes these properties’ entertainment value as well as the other values audiences find in them?

The answers vary with each case study, yet, there are many commonalities pertaining to meanings associated with consumer goods in late capitalism. The media properties described here capitalize on the movement of meaning from culture through consumer goods to individuals. At the same time these three chapters exemplify many cases of redirecting, filtering, and damming up the flow of meaning on the part of viewers and subscribers.

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INTRODUCTION

Due to a particular (yet not that extraordinary) constellation of events, part of my family is ultra-orthodox. My mother, a textile designer and among the first graduates of Israel's first design school, is the sister of two longtime yeshiva students, who as customary in their circles, study the torah from dawn to dusk, and depend for their livelihood on state stipends.

I first realized the ever-present (yet unarticulated), option of defection witnessing the expression on my mother's face, while recounting to her an exciting talk by a rabbi who stopped by my secular elementary school. While never being a really compelling option to me (yet not implausible, given a soaring 'return to faith' phenomenon taking place in Israel), I was always intrigued by my extended family's way of life. As a child I kept running 'what if' scenarios in my head. My cousins and I were very different, yet very similar in many ways. While some of my male cousins would turn their gaze away as we exchanged mandatory civilities (to avoid the sights of my 'indecentcies'), and while I always hoped that none of my friends would pop in when my ultra orthodox relatives came to visit, our common gene pool, indifferent to the likes of sidelocks and shorts, manifested itself in inescapable ways, as did our common past – from time to time my mother and her brothers would tease each other with some of the details of growing up together in a mildly religious household – a family history that now posed challenges to both parties.

But still, distinctions were more prominent than similarities: for every little prop in our middle class and secular life, there was a correlate in the other universe. Instead of my mother's art and design books, 'they' displayed on their shelves rabbinical tracts and other religious manuscripts. Instead of my father's casual work attire, my uncles dressed up year long in black suits and hats, and the place of our cool toys was taken by what seemed to my brothers and me to be a hodgepodge of lackluster hand-me-downs. In some cases the difference were articulated via numbers; it was 0-1 to us when it came to TV sets, 10-3 to them in children's beds and cribs, and (due to strict interpretation of Jewish dietary laws), the score was them 4, us 1 in the kitchen sink arena.

When I moved to the US, once again, I was struck by a similar sense of stepping into a parallel universe furnished by an uncanny mix of the familiar and the unfamiliar. I met many people with whom I shared values, favorite music and books, and a certain kind of curiosity about the world. Yet, accustomed to an environment that still exhibited its socialist past, I was struck by some of my new girlfriends' high heeled shoes, by the number of offerings for a device as mundane as a can opener at Kmart, (as well as the sheer number and uniformity of such chain stores), and by the very existence of the exchange of Hanukah presents, unheard of in my native Israel.

This combination of familiarity and incongruity extended also to my television screen; it was easy enough to watch South Park, or The Sopranos in Tel-Aviv. (In fact, the latest season of the latter was easier to get back home than it was here.) What we didn't have in Israel at that time, with the exception of two cooking shows, was the abundance of so

called lifestyle programs. The plenitude of design, gardening, and cooking programs (and networks!) in the US seemed improbable at first; I kept asking myself why that would be considered entertainment, and an effective one that is, as was evident from my growing sense of fascination.

When I first started thinking about this very question (first on my own, and then as an assignment for a class taught by Henry Jenkins which I audited in 2001), a small and illuminating book by art historian Norman Bryson came in handy. In *Looking at the Overlooked* Bryson tackles the seeming theoretical neglect of the Still Life genre in art history, and the dubious place the genre and its subject matter occupy in culture. Bryson reminds his readers that:

Every one of us lives our life in the orbit of basic routines of self-maintenance: cooking and eating, shopping, seeing to domestic chores, keeping out creaturely habitat in viably good repair. Such activities are objectively necessary for our welfare and respond to inescapable conditions of human life. But how these activities are viewed and appraised – what value is placed on the life of creaturely routine – is very much a matter of culture, and of history. Whether these activities are respected or dismissed, valued or despised, depends on the work of ideology.¹

Each of the following chapters is devoted to a media property, or genre, dedicated to “creaturely routines”. These three case studies, not unlike Still Life (which has been, by and large, a ‘niche’ genre throughout history) deal with niche media properties; none of them, even at its peak, reached much more than 1.5 million viewers or users at a time. The first chapter focuses on the aforementioned genre of home decorating TV shows, practices of consumption of these shows and the shape they both took around 2001. The second Chapter centers on a single television program – TLC’s What Not to Wear and the interpretative activities it provokes among viewers. The show (which still runs on TLC as I’m writing this) – as its name implies – focuses on wardrobe transformations. As a case study for my third chapter, I have chosen the FlyLady – a transmedia property with a strong internet base, which is, as its founder likes to describe it, a “behavior modification system” that coaches its subscribers how to get their houses in order.

These media properties, consumed mainly by women, are focused on subject matter that, by nature, embodies simultaneously the familiar and the unfamiliar. On the one hand, by virtue of constant variables like the laws of physics and of human form, the artifacts associated with ‘creaturely routines’ endured cultural pressures for centuries. (Bryson points at the generic, untouched character of the shapes of plates, bowls, and jugs, which can be extended to the likes of skirts and beds, as well as to some hygiene routines.) This endurance, according to Bryson, poses a threat for cultural establishments that, therefore, tend to demean creaturely routines and relegate them to the realms of those “outside the charmed circle of history and greatness”, first and foremost women.² On the other hand, these creaturely artifacts and routines, with their local and temporal inflections, are the

¹ Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked . Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990). Page 137.

² Norman Bryson. Page 156.

most prominent markers of cultural distinctions (not surprisingly they are first to grab the attention of an outsider like the immigrant).³ This ambiguity presents a charged mix that makes this subject matter especially ripe for the work of culture, history and ideology.

But what are the cultural and historical forces behind the *current* media properties devoted to ‘creaturely’ routines that are described here? Like media genres of the past, they did not emerge out of the void, but are closely related to systems of patronage, cultural exchanges, and tastes, that interact and influence each other. To begin with, these media properties represent an increased confluence of commerce and entertainment, which is part of a broader phenomenon that Henry Jenkins called ‘media convergence’.⁴ The growing frustration of advertisers with technologies that facilitate the bypassing of TV commercials (like video recorders and TiVo), and growing sophistication and resistance to simplistic persuasion devices on the part of audiences, led to the emergence of forms of entertainment that bypass audiences’ bypassing techniques. One such form of entertainment involves the less and more sophisticated product and service placement on television (like the placement of Pottery Barn furniture on *Friends*, or the integration of instant messaging into *American Idol*’s contest mechanism, respectively).⁵ A different approach that emerged is hitting audiences where they live – in their niches. This approach led to the advent of cable networks catering to specific demographics of already interested audiences (like home improvement enthusiasts) that ‘sell’ these groups of audiences to advertisers. On these cable networks products and brands get exposure during commercial breaks and within the shows themselves. Since ‘creaturely routines’ are closely related to certain goods, e.g., furniture, utensils, and garments, it is not surprising that they get a large representation on such niche cable networks, where the first two media properties described in this thesis also reside.

Yet the ‘nicheing’ of culture does not stop with cable TV. As Chris Anderson observed, the internet facilitates the flocking together of formerly discrete consumers and fans, which enables the creation of new niches unsustainable beforehand.⁶ Furthermore, as noted by Brynjolfsson, Hu and Smith, the current flourishing of consumer niches brings about a second order effect – as groups and as individuals, audiences develop tastes for even more idiosyncratic niche offerings.⁷ These last two processes are part of the backdrop for the emergence of the FlyLady – the media property described in the third chapter, which presents a rather unusual mode of intersection between content and commodities (at least in the current media landscape).

³ See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction : A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984). Page 77.

⁴ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture : Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006). Page 308.

⁵ Henry Jenkins. Page 59.

⁶ Chris Anderson, *The Long Tail · Why the Future of Business is Selling Less of More* (Hyperion, 2006).

⁷ Brynjolfsson, Erik, Hu, Yu Jeffrey and Smith, Michael D., From Niches to Riches: Anatomy of the Long Tail. *Sloan Management Review*, Vol. 47, No. 4, pp. 67-71, Summer 2006

Hence, without any directing hand, ‘creaturely routines’ find themselves, again, at the niches.⁸ Yet, there are also cultural, not only economic, forces at work in these niches. Virginia Postrel lists makeover programs on TV as one exhibit in many, pointing at a larger cultural trend. She claims that economic processes, like the fairly recent falling of trade barriers and of manufacturing costs, brought about an abundance of new consumer goods to the US, and that this sheer abundance made a qualitative difference in consumer sensibilities. She argues that a democratization of tastes has been taking place and that new licenses for self expression had emerged, which were reflected in these shows.

Self expression and, even more so, refashioning of the self, is a central trope that runs throughout the media properties described here; even if constricting to a greater extent than other more open-ended modes of transformation, these media properties all suggest the possibility to self-transform through the ‘making over’ of creaturely artifacts and routines. While these refashioning processes focus on material objects, objects are situated within these media properties sometimes as proxies for the self, and as props in self transforming experiences on others.

In this regard, makeover programs on television as well as the FlyLady coaching system can be seen, using Grant McCracken’s terms, as kinds of ‘transformation vehicles’. According to McCracken, the notion of self has, itself, undergone a radical transformation in recent years. He states that we now exercise ‘expansionary individualism’, by playing hosts to various selves within us; selves that engage in transformations of various kinds, exploiting transformational routines aggregated by our culture. This new kind of individualism, according to McCracken, stresses range of expression over authenticity.

Micki McGee, who studied the American self-improvement industry, also portrayed a new flexibility of the self, although in rather grim colors. She claims that behind self improvement media properties, like home decorating shows, makeover programs, and self help books, is a new notion of self driven by economic factors. She argues that the ever growing economic instability in the US (caused, among other things, by stagnated salaries, job insecurity, and costs of housing) pushes people to constantly rework themselves in order to stay employable. This constant self-engineering, according McGee, brought about what she called ‘the belabored’ self.⁹

⁸ There was a moment, around 2003 when it seemed that ‘creaturely routines’ are moving to primetime, marked by a wave of makeover shows on major networks, the unprecedented ratings (for a niche cable network) of TLC’s Trading Spaces, and the high visibility of Barvo’s Queer Eye for the Straight Guy. Yet this trend was short lived and ratings plummeted rather quickly. It is also worth mentioning that makeover programs that crossed over usually involved other, non niche elements like sensationalism (Extreme Makeover, the Swan), patriotism (Extreme Makeover home edition), or a tong in chick approach (queer eye).

⁹ Micki McGee, *Self-Help. Inc.: Makeover Culture in American Life* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

While McCracken also acknowledges that some transformations stem from what he called ‘involuntary improves’ responding to outside circumstances not unlike those described by McGee, he also claims that

... examining the range of transformational activities in which people engage, I was encouraged to think that we are sometimes driven by a sheer curiosity about what is possible, a pure inclination to try things on, a fundamental temptation to rummage through the definitional possibilities now open to the self and ... see.’¹⁰

This tension between the voluntary and involuntary motives behind makeover culture runs through the three chapters of this thesis. On the one hand, these case studies demonstrate a good deal of this ‘sheer curiosity about what is possible’ as in turning one’s kitchen into an idyllic French country room with a view to an atomic disaster, walking around in high heel shoes for the first time, or reinventing one’s career from librarian to a guitar playing storyteller. On the other hand, economic circumstances and other external pressures (e.g., to be more attractive on the job market) are also prominent in the discourses of these media properties, as well as in texts generated by their audiences.

Another cultural factor that stands in the background of the following three chapters is the dense webs of meanings material goods carry in late capitalism. Evidently, objects and meanings were closely associated throughout human history, as illustrated in the following passage from *The Gift* by Marcel Mauss describing a Haida household:

...The houses and decorated beams are themselves beings. Everything speaks—roof, fire, carvings and paintings (...) Each of these precious things has, moreover, a productive capacity within it. Each, as well as being a sign and surety of life, is also a sign and surety of wealth, a magico-religious guarantee of rank and prosperity.¹¹

Another example would be Michel Foucault’s description in *The Order of Things* of the medieval symbol system that lumped together celestial bodies, Christian saints, animals, rocks, and minerals in self-referential nets of meanings. These nets, according to Foucault, got disentangled with the advent of what he called the modern subject. (A landmark in this disentangling process is Cervantes’ novel *Don Quixote*, which epitomized the tension between these old and new epistemic systems.)¹² Yet, fairly quickly, and somewhat counter-intuitively, modernity saw the re-coupling of objects and meanings, to the point that now, once again, “everything speaks”, from shoes to can openers. However, in contrast to systems associating meanings and objects of the

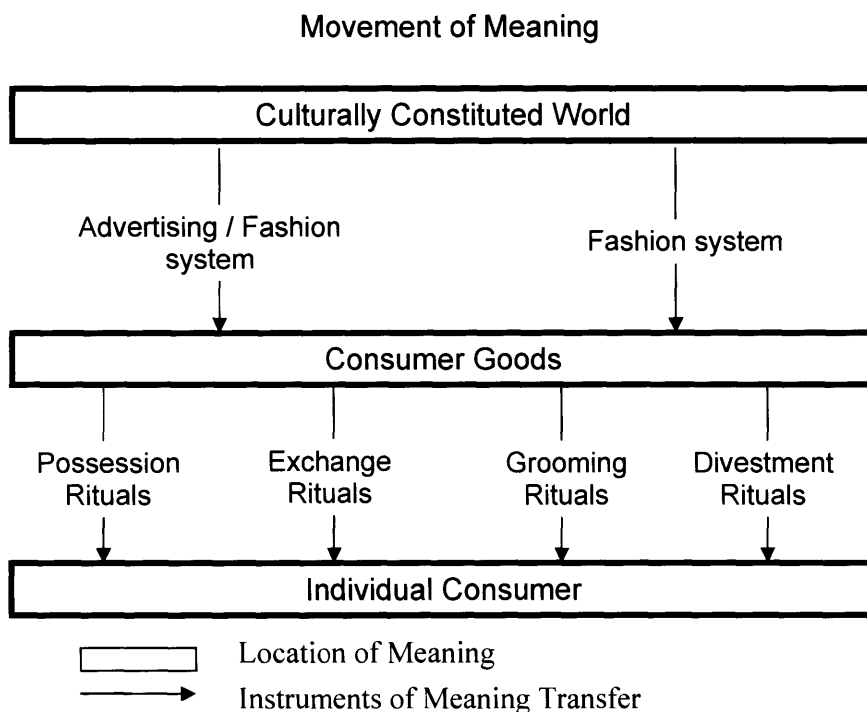
¹⁰ Grant David McCracken, *Transformations . Identity Construction in Contemporary Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008). Page 303.

¹¹ Mauss, Marcel, *The Gift : The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, London : Routledge Classics, 2002, c1990. Page 43.

¹² Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things; an Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973). Part 1, chapter 2.

past, the new ones, closely related to the advent of capitalism, reflect market forces to a greater extent, and are ever more transient, decentralized, and dynamic.

Starting probably with Marx's writing on 'commodity fetishism', there is an increasingly growing body of work grappling with the semiotic aspect of consumer goods and its everyday manifestations.¹³ One such work, to which I found myself repeatedly coming back throughout this thesis, is Grant McCracken's description of meaning flow between culture, consumer goods, and individual consumers, encapsulated in the diagram reproduced below.¹⁴



McCracken claims that various cultural agents (like advertisers and fashion writers, as well as other style mavens) mediate the flow of meaning between “the culturally constituted world” and consumer goods. What is particularly instructive about McCracken’s model for my purposes is the spelling out of specific rituals of meaning transfer taking place between consumer goods and consumers, such as the gifting of meaningful properties (exchange rituals), the ‘housewarming’ celebration (possession rituals), the preparations for a ‘night out’ (grooming rituals), or the cleaning of a newly purchased house from the traces of its previous owners (divestment rituals).

¹³ See for instance: Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (St. Louis, Mo.: Telos Press, 1981); Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Mary Douglas and Baron C. Isherwood, *The World of Goods* (New York: Basic Books, 1979); and Paul Sweetman, “Tourists and Travellers?...” from *After Subculture*, Bennett and Kahn-Harris, (Palgrave 2004).

¹⁴ Grant David McCracken, *Culture and Consumption : New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 174. Page 72.

The media properties described in the following chapters all capitalize on, and at the same time pose disruptions of, this movement of meaning. These media properties dramatize the flow of meaning in its various aspects, and turn it into entertainment as well as manuals for self improvement through the (re)creation of rituals similar to those described above. Home decoration shows, and even more so their fans, emphasize the expressive and creative potentials in manipulating consumer goods and their associated meanings. TLC's *What Not to Wear* foregrounds the interpretative tensions built into the flow of meaning from culture to goods and individuals, which prompts its fans to debate contesting interpretations and to deal with meta questions like who gets to determine meanings and why. *The FlyLady*, on its part, highlights the emotional and spiritual aspects of engagement with rituals of meaning transfer.

The three chapters, presenting a chronological progression, also mark a progression in the penetration of commodities into everyday life. The media properties discussed in them attempt to redirect the flow of meaning in points of interventions that get increasingly close to the individual consumer. In this regard, these properties mark the advancement of what Arlie Hochschild called "the commodity frontier" into people's homes, lives, and skins.¹⁵ Yet McCracken's model of meaning transfer is also useful in identifying points of resistance on the part of viewers and subscribers, as these three chapters exemplify many cases of redirecting, filtering, and damming up the flow of meaning.

A few questions that I tried to answer are the following. As the commodity frontier gets increasingly intermingled with our daily lives, with the help of increasingly pervasive media, how do certain communities respond, and with what methods of meaning making? What draws audiences to engage with media properties so intermingled with commerce in the first place? And what constitute these properties' entertainment value as well as the other values audiences find in them?

More than in making sweeping theoretical claims or broad-stroke evaluations (are makeovers sanctioned by corporate entities good or bad?; is the push for ever multiplying niche communities a sign of 'balkanization' or 'democratization'?; what may the similarities between some of the fan communities described below and certain feminist communities indicate about both parties?), I was interested in recounting what I saw, read, and heard on TV, radio, and internet message boards (as well as in some one-on-one conversations) and tried to 'bring home' to myself, as well as my readers, what seemed at first as parallel universes. I hope that the following chapters manage to capture (even if in snapshots) what I believe is a drastic change in the rapport between people (especially women), media properties, and consumer goods, and that they might make a small contribution towards a more comprehensive evaluation of this change.

Finally, it would be probably apt to finish this introduction with the tale of my own transformational journey at the time of writing this thesis, reflected in a gradual change in its tone. It would not take for a particularly perceptive reader of the following three

¹⁵ Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Commercialization of Intimate Life · Notes from Home and Work* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

chapters (written in chronological order in the span of almost seven years), to recognize that writing in English has gradually become more comfortable for this writer, or at least so she hopes. Feeling more at home in English brought about new freedom of expression and allowed for a diversion from strict academic writing, which culminated in the inclusion of first person narration in the third chapter, accordingly named “Millions Of Other Wings Are Flapping With Their Dusters”: My Adventures With The FlyLady.

Besides a change in language capabilities, this embedding of memoir segments also reflects some of the intellectual influences I absorbed during my studies at MIT. From Henry Jenkins’ work, which is often situated simultaneously within and outside of fandom, through Michael Fischer’s reflections on challenges for the traditional mimetic model in the social sciences, to Sherry Turkle’s insistence on honest to goodness reporting on the intermingling of technology and the self, I read, listened, and took mental notes. These academic influences, to a greater or lesser degree, also share some common traits with a broader cultural influence that is central to the media properties described here, namely quintessentially American therapeutic and confessional discourse.¹⁶

This discourse – at first very foreign to me – became an effective channel of expression when I tackled the subject matter of the third chapter, which struck too close to home due to recent experiences that made over my own life. Overwhelmed and overflowed, I suddenly found myself, like my informants, inclined to share and bear testimony, first and foremost for my own sake, as a therapeutic measure, but also as a way to communicate with others. Yet, staying within an academic framework, I tried to harness this direct engagement with confessional culture and use it for the benefit of my work as an intellectual device, expanding the universe of discursive possibilities, as well as a sheer provocation, attempting at neutralizing knee-jerk taste judgments regarding the FlyLady and its subscribers. For how (and if) it all adds up, and for some of the gory (as well as exhilarating) details of my own transformation, as they say on TV – please stay tuned.

¹⁶ See for instance; Mimi White, *Tele-Advising : Therapeutic Discourse in American Television* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992) and T. J. Jackson Lears, 'From Salvation to Self-Realization: Advertising and the Therapeutic Roots of the Consumer Culture, 1880-1930', in *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History, 1880-1980*, ed. by Richard Wightman Fox and Lears, T. J. Jackson (New York : Pantheon Books, c1983., 1983).

CHAPTER ONE

The Lost Decorators: Home Decorating TV Shows and Practices of Their Consumption

LESTER (cont'd)

Christ, Carolyn. When did you become so... joyless?

CAROLYN (taken aback)

Joyless?! I am not joyless! There happens to be a lot about me that you don't know, mister smarty man. There is plenty of joy in my life.

LESTER (leaning toward her)

Whatever happened to that girl who used to fake seizures at frat parties when she got bored? And who used to run up to the roof of our first apartment building to flash the traffic helicopters? Have you totally forgotten about her? Because I haven't.

His face is close to hers, and suddenly the atmosphere is charged. She pulls back automatically, but it's clear she's drawn to him. He smiles, and moves even closer, holding his beer loosely balanced. Then, just before their lips meet...

CAROLYN (barely audible)

Lester. You're going to spill beer on the couch.

She's immediately sorry she said it, but it's too late. His smile fades, and the moment is gone.

LESTER

So what? It's just a couch.

CAROLYN

This is a four thousand dollar sofa upholstered in Italian silk. This is not "just a couch."

LESTER

It's just a couch!

He stands and gestures toward all the things in the room.

LESTER (cont'd)

This isn't life. This is just stuff. And it's become more important to you than living. Well, honey, that's just nuts.

Carolyn stares at him, on the verge of tears, then turns and walks out of the room before he can see her cry.

LESTER (cont'd) (calls after her)

I'm only trying to help you.

(excerpt from *American Beauty*, screenplay by Allan Ball)¹⁷

¹⁷ American Beauty (1999, director Sam Mendes) screenplay by Alan Ball
http://www.hundland.com/scripts/AmericanBeauty_final.htm. Accessed December 12 2001.

Home decorating TV shows are all about "stuff"; they are filled with couches, countertops, tassels, pillows, window treatments, area rugs and many more items. It is not easy to watch these shows with an innocent and unprejudiced eye. Even before one considers them in any detail (their format, the economic motivation underlying them, or their viewers' profiles) home decorating shows are objects of suspicion, since their very subject matter – domestic 'stuff' – carries dubious meanings in western culture. This can be illustrated with numerous examples, among them is Socrates' vision of plain, serene, and earthy habitation in the in the second book of *The Republic*.

..They will feed on barley-meal and flour of wheat, baking and kneading them, making noble cakes and loaves; these they will serve up on a mat of reeds or on clean leaves, themselves reclining the while upon beds strewn with yew or myrtle. And they and their children will feast, drinking of the wine which they have made, wearing garlands on their heads, and hymning the praises of the gods, in happy converse with one another. And they will take care that their families do not exceed their means; having an eye to poverty or war....

When Socrates starts describing what will happen if people will act otherwise, once again, sofas are prime suspects; they are first in a long list of redundant items:

...In my opinion the true and healthy constitution of the State is the one which I have described. But if you wish also to see a State at fever heat, I have no objection. For I suspect that many will not be satisfied with the simpler way of life. They will be for adding sofas, and tables, and other furniture; also dainties, and perfumes, and incense, and courtesans, and cakes, all these not of one sort only, but in every variety; we must go beyond the necessities of which I was at first speaking, such as houses, and clothes, and shoes: the arts of the painter and the embroiderer will have to be set in motion, and gold and ivory and all sorts of materials must be procured. ...

The proximity between sofas and courtesans is only one step in a morally charged rhetoric move. Socrates argues that the voracious character of a state accustomed to the likes of sofas will lead it to exhaust its means and eventually to pray on its neighbors' resources, which must end up in war. "...Then without determining as yet whether war does good or harm, thus much we may affirm, that now we have discovered war to be derived from causes which are also the causes of almost all the evils in States, private as well as public."¹⁸

Similarly, Calvin tells his followers while commenting on The Book of Isaiah (and embellishing the original with a few anachronisms) that "...the prophet mentions here expensive household furnishing, by which he means the Jews brought God's judgment by the lavish way they decorated their houses. For with pictures he includes expensive tapestries like Phrygian embroidery and vases molded with exquisite art."¹⁹

¹⁸ Plato, the Republic, translated by Benjamin Jowett. The Internet Classics Archive <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.3.ii.html> retrieved December, 15 2001.

¹⁹ John Calvin, *Commentary on Isaiah* 2:12,16 quoted in Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990). Page 116.

Calvinist and Protestant morals played vital roles in the formation of American culture and economy, even if, as noted by Max Weber, they evolved significantly in their naturalization process.²⁰ However, these religious sentiments for simple living resurfaced in the US during the late 1960s, usually combined with newly imported Eastern mysticism, as manifested in the life and work of the likes of Stephen Gaskin – a psychedelic writing professor turned religious farming guru.²¹

To a large extent the film *American Beauty* articulates nostalgia to the countercultures of the 1960's and 1970's. Its protagonist, Lester, expresses a growing aversion to his suburban life, and, as part of his rebellion process, begins smoking marijuana and listening to 1970's rock bands like the Pink Floyd. (Things would have looked quite different if, instead, Lester had pierced his body, consumed Ecstasy, and listened to Trance music, i.e., if he were interested in other kinds of "stuff", not associated with a bygone idealized era.)

When I first watched *American Beauty*, I identified with Lester's character and resented Carolyn's (his wife). While watching the movie again, after reading dozens of messages written by women on web forums related to home decorating shows, what I primarily saw was a man telling a woman what is important in life. When we examine home decorating shows, it may be useful to avoid joining forces with others who, like Lester, were "just trying to help" in the name of godliness, absolute justice, and even self-fulfillment. I hope to be able to do this here.

What Are Home Decorating TV Shows?

Most of the shows that fall under this category are broadcasted either on the Home and Garden Television Channel (HGTV) or on the Discovery Channel.²² The lineups of these shows consist of different combinations of the following components:

- Tours of houses
- Interviews with homeowners, designers and architects about their design approach, and the ways it is implemented in the houses that are toured
- "How to" segments: demos of decorating projects and techniques
- Makeovers of rooms and entire houses
- Tours of trading spots such as furniture shops, department stores, flea markets and the like.
- Visits to artists' and crafters' studios
- Survey of products as furniture and craft materials
- Reading viewers' mail (either requests for design advice, or photos of projects that had inspired by the show)

²⁰ Max Weber, Peter Baehr and Gordon Wells, *The Protestant Ethic and the "Spirit" of Capitalism and Other Writings* (New York : Penguin Books, 2002). Pages 1-202.

²¹ See David E. Shi, *The Simple Life · Plain Living and High Thinking in American Culture*, Galaxy Book, GB 813 vols (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). Pages 260-61.

²² Other shows in this genre are "Celebrity homes" (E! channel) "House Beautiful" (A&E), Trading spaces (TLC) and Martha Stuart Living (WBUZ at the Boston area).

The Economic Logic of Decorating Shows

Like most TV networks, HGTV is a profit-oriented enterprise that gains revenues through the sale of broadcast time to advertisers. A unique feature of HGTV, however, is its specialization in niche marketing. What it actually sells to advertisers is the opportunity to reduce the costs of locating potential buyers:

....Financially, HGTV has outperformed all projections. In the first quarter of 1998, after less than four years on the air, the network was cash positive. A combination of loyal viewers and consumer categories, such as: home decorating, improvement and maintenance, and landscaping and gardening--gives HGTV unprecedented strength with advertisers who spend billions each year to reach precisely such buyers. "The future is about creating content that targets the right group of passionate viewers," says Lowe [President and CEO]. "When you marry that passion to a group of advertisers, you have a very good business opportunity."

The Discovery Channel and other networks broadcasting home decoration TV shows are not as generous with information regarding their business plans, but it is probably fair to assume that the economic logic behind their home decorating shows is pretty similar.

Introducing goods on HGTV shows and other home decoration programs is not restricted to commercial breaks. Throughout "how to" and makeover segments, as well as tours of trading spots, different goods (like craft materials, furniture, and design books) are presented, often with their brand names and the information on where and how to purchase them.

It is also worth mentioning that various hosts own businesses that are promoted through their shows. Christopher Lowell, Lynette Jennings, and Martha Stuart all have their own lines of home decoration items which are promoted on their respective shows in more and less direct ways. Linnet Jennings is also the spokesperson of The Home Depot (last broadcasting season Jennings started to incorporate in her shows "how to" segments that are shot at Home Depot stores).

Rhetoric Devices of Commercials

In light of the economic logic outlined above, it is not that surprising that the shows themselves share some features with TV commercials.

Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright state that "advertising encourages consumers to think of commodities as central means through which to convey their personalities".²³ This is also true of home decorating shows with their use of expressions such as "your house should reflect your personality", "transfer your house into a home," or "use your house as a blank canvas to express yourself".

Another advertising strategy according to Sturken and Cartwright is "to invite viewers/consumers to imagine themselves within the world of advertisement."²⁴ In home

²³ Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking . An Introduction to Visual Culture* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). Page 198.

²⁴ Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright. Page 189.

decorating shows, one can find many examples of invitations of this sort, such as the following, from an episode of the Lynette Jennings Design program: “Have you ever dreamt of living by the sea, in that perfect little cottage? Weathered, weathered siding, white trim furniture inside, all upholstered in really faded old fabrics, reading poetry Sunday morning.”

Grant McCracken notes that “advertising works on a potential method of meaning transfer by bringing the consumer good and a representation of the culturally constituted world together within a frame of a particular advertisement”.²⁵ Later McCracken describes the interaction between the verbal and visual aspects of advertisements: “verbal material serves chiefly as a kind of prompt which instructs the viewer/reader in the salient properties that are supposed to be expressed by the visual part of the advertisement”.²⁶ These types of interactions are abundant in home decorating shows. In fact, it is rare to see an image on such a program without an accompanying voice over. It is always the audio channel that interprets the visuals as “elegant”, “cozy”, “whimsical” or “inviting”.

Thus, home decorating shows, like advertisements, put to work certain devices that, according to Sturken and Cartwright, could serve as “means to create demand for products, which make people buy more than they really need”.²⁷ But, it is not obvious that these devices are successful, at least not in a direct and uncomplicated manner, as illustrated by the following correspondence in the HGTV bulletin board regarding the show “Sensible Chic”:

Sensible Chic – What did you think?

by pinky

10/23/2001 10:31 AM

This was the first time I was able to watch the show. I thought it was good, even though the \$4000 was more than I could spend on a room, let alone \$40,000. They have some good ideas.

Reply 1:

Subject: RE: Sensible Chic - What did you think?

By: mck

The show is okay but the money they spend on the "knock off room" is still extremely expensive. They need to find a way to lower the price of the redo a little.

Reply 2:

Subject: RE: Sensible Chic - What did you think?

By: lct

"Sensible" is relevant to income. There is nothing sensible about their knock-off rooms as far as I'm concerned. I find the show somewhat interesting but enjoy Decorating Cents much much more. I would rather start with a \$500 room and build up! They need to understand their audience better. Not many folks are out there doing \$4000 makeovers on their bedrooms. If I do, it better come with Tom Selleck.

²⁵ Grant David McCracken, *Culture and Consumption : New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988). Page 77.

²⁶ Grant David McCracken Page 79.

²⁷ Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright. Page 199.

Reply 3:

Subject: RE: Sensible Chic - What did you think?

By: anonymous 3

Sorry, but everyone isn't dirt poor who watches Sensible Chic or HGTV... there are plenty of other programs catering to poor folks, i.e., Trash to Treasure, RoomxRoom, Decorating Cents, Surprise Gardener.. Why do all the shows have to cater to one segment of the TV viewing audienc

Reply 4:

Subject: RE: Sensible Chic - What did you think?

By: To: Anonymous 3!!!!

You are VERY RUDE. You obviously have more money than sense!

Reply 5:

Subject: RE: Sensible Chic - What did you think?

By: Anonymous

how can you say that woman is rude when she makes perfect sense? if every show on HGTV was like decorating sense, the whole country would be hot-glueing felt to their walls. way to go Sensible Chic for showing beautiful rooms! You don't have to use everything they use, have some imagination!

Reply 6:

Subject: RE: Sensible Chic - What did you think?

By: Jennifer

I think that she thought the woman was rude because of the manner in which she used the terms "dirt poor" and "poor folks." Whether it was intentional or not, it sounds like an insult from a snooty rich person.

I agree that hotglueing felt to walls is gross (I saw it on Trading Spaces--brown felt and an orange ceiling!) and that HGTV should offer a variety of shows. But I think that the rudeness of the reply was not in its content, but rather in its attitude, which is reminiscent of a rich little girl looking down her nose at a poor girl on the playground at school²⁸

It is probably fair to infer from this correspondence (as well as from other viewers' messages) that:

- These viewers are very much aware of their means and take them into account as they negotiate with the content of these shows.
- Viewers watch these shows critically and filter the ideas presented in them through their own tastes and budgets.
- Viewers use these shows to satisfy their own needs ("the confidence and ideas to go and do it myself and be creative") not necessarily by executing what is suggested. They use the shows more as an inspiration than as written notes that should be executed accurately. ("I guess the main idea was to stay on the central theme and things will come together.")
- Viewers demonstrate quite a matter-of-fact attitude towards objects and goods. There are almost no traces of adjectives that suppose to link objects to "the culturally constituted world" (as "elegant," "sophisticated," "sensual." etc). Actually, reply number 3 ("it better come with Tom Selleck") is a parody on badly executed

²⁸ http://www.hgtv.com/HGTV/post/1,1190,DEID_forum_3_415338,FF.html Accessed Dec 16 2001.

- commercials that make simplistic links between objects (like bedroom furniture) and the “culturally constituted world” (living in a movie world with a muscular star).
- Viewers use these shows and the interactions around them to examine and debate assumptions about class and taste.

Before and After

While, as we have seen, viewers seem to resist some of the more direct sale pitches included in them, home decoration shows, like home decoration magazines, can still be seen as contributing to a therapeutic culture that promotes consumerism in a less direct manner. Sturken and Cartwright claim that consumer culture developed alongside the idea that “everyone was potentially inadequate and in need of improvement. (...) This resulted in the rise of commodities that were intended to aid in self-improvement. This therapeutic discourse is essential to consumer culture.”²⁹ In home decorating shows everything is potentially an object for makeover, which can be executed either by purchasing ready-made commodities and hiring professional labor, or through do-it-yourself efforts (which, of course, also involve the purchase of goods, but of different kinds). Makeover segments usually employ the “before and after” trope, and here again, the auxiliary audio channel serves as mediator between objects and culture. The descriptions of the “before” stage commonly use pathologising terms such as “uninviting”, “lack of harmony”, “dull”, “cold”, “cluttered” and “dark”. Nowhere is the “before and after” trope more pronounced than in the phenomenon of faux finishes, which are the subject of the next segment.

Faux Finishes

A proportionally great amount of time of home decorating programs is allocated to faux finishes, which involve making plain surfaces as plywood look like marble, leather, mahogany, and the like. Another artistic technique that makes a great comeback in these shows is the tromp l’oeil. Oftentimes the aesthetics of the tromp l’oeil is extended to the creation of whole themed environments like “log cabin”, “romantic bedroom”, “cabana”, “sea side cottage”, or “Zen sanctuary”. In the creation of these environments, faux finishes and trompe l’oeil are frequently combined with the use of ready-mades like patterned wallpapers and linoleum tiles.

Faux finishes are almost as old as civilization, as evident from simulated Mahogany grain marks painted on ancient wood coffins excavated in Egypt.³⁰ Throughout history, the status of faux finishes fluctuated with trends and fashions in home decoration and they resurfaced during the 1980’s with the advent of the post-modern style in architecture and home decoration.

The movie “Wall Street” by Oliver Stone was made in 1987. It depicts the rise and fall of a young stockbroker (played by Charlie Sheen) from a blue-collar family who gets involved in illegal insider trading and other prohibited activities. A distinctive milestone in his upward social mobility is the purchase of an apartment in Manhattan and its

²⁹ Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright. Page 385.

³⁰ Karen S. Chambers, *Trompe l’Oeil at Home. Faux Finishes and Fantasy Settings* (New York : Rizzoli, c1991., 1991). Page 224.

decoration with the help of an interior designer who becomes his girlfriend. An essential feature of the new decoration is a faux Pompeian fresco made with the likes of faux plastic breaks, gold leaf and plastic molding. The faux fresco is positioned in the movie against the original art collection of his gluttonous affluent employer; it becomes a metonym for the stockbroker's corruption, to a transformation away from an "authentic" true-to-self state.

Reading Home decorating TV shows in light of Wall Street's set of values is pretty alarming: it is not about one errant stockbroker anymore but an epidemic; myriads of impostors now keep away from their roots and want their homes to look like those of the rich. Yet I would like to suggest that home decorating shows may reflect a more nuanced approach to both moral values and aesthetic pleasures.

Watching Wall Street today gives us an opportunity to recognize the extent to which our culture has become hypermediated. Home decorating shows reflect (and are part of) a culture saturated with juxtaposed images and media, which also tend to re-present each other. This abundance, noticeable in digital media, television, and print, found its way also to American habitats. Using Bolter and Grusin's terms, we can trace the double logic of immediacy and hypermediacy in viewers' home decoration.³¹

Subject: RE: bedroom made to look like log cabin

I ONCE LIVED IN A SMALL MOBILE HOME,AND WANTED A LOG HOUSE
LOL .I STARTED WITH 2 BOARDS 1LARGER AND ONE SMALLER TO
LOOK LIKE ACTUAL LOGS.I SWIRLED THE BRUSH EVER SO OFTEN SO IT
WOULD LOOK KNOTTY, ALL I USED WAS 2 LARGE BRUSHES AND
PAINT.IT WAS REALLY EASY ONCE I HAD STARTED MY LINES.AS FOR
THE TOP,MAYBE GO SO FAR UP AND THEN DO A DAY OR NIGHT SCENE
FROM THERE GLOW STARS STENCILED OR STAGGERED BY HUNG
FISHING LINE. HOPE THIS HELPS YOU!

In order to create a persuasive *look* of log cabin, lumber is painted to look like logs (immediacy). In order to generate the *experience* of staying in a log cabin, it is suggested to create a two or three dimensional "scene" on the ceiling and to juxtapose the two (hypermediacy).

Different people from different backgrounds (class and education) react differently to (and participate in the generation of) hypermediacy. Elaborately decorated fingernails for instance, can be seen as some women's version of artist Sterlac's vision of the body "not as an object of desire but as an object for designing".³² Similarly, faux finishes may be certain peoples' low-tech take on sentiments, not unlike those expressed by MUD users and digital media artists.

³¹ J. David Bolter and Richard A. Grusin, *Remediation . Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, Mass. ; London: MIT Press, 1999). Page 295.

³² J. David Bolter and Richard A. Grusin. Page 240.

Hypermediacy in home decorating, like in other areas in life, makes us conscious, through previous re-mediations of the fact that the notion of “authentic” home decoration (which is implied by Stone’s movie) is in itself quite contrived³³. Hypermediacy opens a whole new scope of possibilities, while at the same time points at a sense of loss, at what was previously perceived as natural and immediate and is no longer there.

On Wall Street the opposition between ‘authentic’ and ‘inauthentic’ also extends to the notion of family. The protagonist’s disloyalty to his class values and development of taste for the aesthetic of ‘faux,’ is tied to a familial betrayal – his actions at the brokerage arena bring about his fathers’ financial downfall. Watching the many theatrical and hypermediated settings in home decorating shows (where sometimes each room in the same house is devoted to a different theme) brings to mind contemporary theatrical images of disturbed families such as the fighting couples on the Jerry Springer Show or the Clinton family as represented in the tabloids. As opposed to TV programs of the 1980s, in many contemporary TV shows, like *The Sopranos*, *Malcolm in the middle*, or *South Park*, basic premises like the love of parents to their children are no longer taken for granted.

Therefore, it may be tempting to relate images of disintegrating families and the consumption of commodities that participate in the creations of sets like “romantic bedroom”, or “Zen sanctuary”. Consumption and creation of faux environments can be read as submission to capitalist mechanisms that market commodities as the remedy for anxieties caused by social maladies. However, things may be a little more complicated than they first seem.

In one recent episode of *Ultimate Kitchens* on *The Food Network* the host takes a tour of the kitchen of a newlywed couple. The walls and the kitchen cabinets are painted with pastel colors and the windows are decorated with red gingham draperies. The couple speaks about the gloomy kitchen that they got and their efforts to make it more cheerful with a French country theme. Then the camera focuses on a perplexing tromp l’oeil painted in shades of red and black above the kitchen sink, which is also framed in red gingham draperies to simulate a window. “Ah, this...” says the homeowner “When my mother came to visit she said it would be nice to have something to look at while washing the dishes. So we decided to do a mural. My husband came up with the idea to paint a scene of an atomic disaster. So that’s what we did. I think it has a twist”.

If at all anxieties are an issue here, the whole setting (“French country kitchen with a window view of an atomic disaster”, as museum curators would have it) can not be read simply as an adaptation of some ideal of “the good life” suggested as a remedy by market forces, but more as a *means for expression* and negotiation with anxiety. This expressionist setting might deal with actual fear of atomic disaster, with the pitfalls of

³³ To choose one example from many – the so-called “American Colonial furniture” is actually a late invention. Around the time of the Centennial Celebration Americans coming from British ancestry started furnishing their houses with English furniture *of their own time*, to differentiate themselves from immigrants from non-British countries. See Witold Rybczynski, *Home : A Short History of an Idea* (New York, N.Y., U.S.A.: Viking, 1986). Page 10 n.11.

new marriage at an age of soaring divorce rates, or with neither. In any rate, it calls for more nuanced modes of explanation than the ones we have at hand.

The Design Doctor

Christopher Lowell finishes each episode of his show³⁴ with a sermon-like speech that encourages the viewers to change their home environments. In his speeches he makes explicit linkages between home decoration and mental states like “a cluttered home is a reflection of a cluttered mind”, “surround yourself with the things that really make you happy” or “change is good”. Each speech ends with the sentence “Remember, you can do it! Bye for now”. In other occasions, the therapeutic discourse is manifested literally (though humorously) when Lowell pays visits to viewer’s homes and gives design consultation wearing a physician outfit and calling himself “the design doctor”. The show frequently incorporates “you did it” segments in which viewers show and tell how, inspired by the program, they transformed their houses.

Very often the viewers participating in the “you did it” segments describe how the show had helped them overcome the loss of a beloved one, or the depression following a sudden layoff, or a severe illness. The following is a letter written to Christopher Lowell by a woman named Robin, who had recently been filmed to a “you did it” segment:

....Due to an ongoing illness, I was forced into bed for weeks and the only new stuff I got was medical equipment and the diagnosis of Lyme disease, which answered a bunch of ongoing medical situations. I have plenty of fun and learned, and continue to live, through the people I got a chance to touch as a Registered Nurse employed by Hospice, I also received an advanced degree in helping people with Aids. Now, however, I am unable to practice medicine due to my own immune system which has been compromised by the Lyme disease.

Anyway, one wonderful day, while stranded in bed, with an IV pole as the most deliberate design statement, up your face popped on my TV. You gave me an unexpected smile which continues into my everyday thoughts and bed rest became time for what I call “Think Play”. Once I was able, I got up and started designing my state of mind.

The pictures I am sharing today touches on my Wizard of Oz state of mind design. But as situations change, so do my displays. Please know, pictures give the impression of permanence, but the only permanence is the importance of the thought, there is no place like home....

As you get out of your car and walk to my door.... You are now standing in my entryway, home in Oz, Dorothy is singing and wishing. The tornado comes, for me it is my illness, I have gotten lots of great responses as what every ones tornado might be that day. An old mailbox (Dorothy’s house) has landed on the Wicked Witch of the East. You will travel through Munchkinland and start your journey down the yellow brick tulips...”³⁵

³⁴ The Christopher Lowell show, on the Discovery Channel.

³⁵ <http://pub9.ezboard.com/ftthelostdecoratorswhatsonyourmind.showMessage?topicID=247.topic>

Robin's illness, like other participants' life hurdles shared in "you did it" segments, is concrete; it is not a construct of capitalist persuasion mechanism. Yet, while she seems to be very aware of the transitory nature of states of minds and their artistic representations, the makers of the Christopher Lowell show preferred to chain her to their own version of therapeutic discourse. "... I can say *I* here [at the Lost Decorators] as many times as I want, thank you. I did however get uncomfortable saying *I* during the filming. The producer tried to get me to concentrate on the idea that I am good and "did it"...."³⁶

The shaping of Robin's story by the producers of the Christopher Lowell Show is not that surprising given the medium's prevailing editing conventions. What is more remarkable is that Robin uses the show (together with others) as a jumping off point for the creation of a space in which she feels comfortable saying *I*.

The Lost Decorators

The Lost Decorators' bulletin board is a virtual community of Christopher Lowell's fans, all of whom are women. The messages on this bulletin board cover a wide array of topics such as home decorating, news, gossip, and health issues.

The Lost Decorators watch the Christopher Lowell show with close attention and archive its episodes both in writing and on tape. One of the site's features, called "my file cabinet", is a compilation of past episodes information, combining input from the official Discovery Channel website with "vernacular" interpretations made by group members who fill gaps in Lowell's demos on air.

As a group and as individuals, the Lost Decorators have developed a vast body of knowledge regarding painting techniques, faux finishing, carpentry and the like. This knowledge goes way beyond what is presented on the show itself. In addition, members of this community assist each other in solving design dilemmas and technical queries, and are willing to share their acquired body of knowledge with everyone who might be interested. ("We're Waiting for Your Decorating Questions" is the subtitle of the bulletin board.) It should be noted that fan activity on the web forums of the Discovery Channel or the Home and Garden network is quite similar, although the style is more businesslike and less personal.

Robin's vision of Oz is central to the world vision of The Lost Decorators and some of her phrases are borrowed by other members to express their own struggles in life. Combined with the therapeutic spirit of The Christopher Lowell Show, the world of Oz is an element in the creation of an ethos, or a meta-text, of self-growth ("having heart, courage and brain"), healing through creative activity, community, and spiritual support (praying for each other is a common practice on this bulletin board).

Pictures of Robin's Oz room can be still be found here:

<http://www.geocities.com/infodiva2000/index.html> (as of July 8 2008).

³⁶ <http://pub9.ezboard.com/fthelostdecoratorswhatsonyourmind.showMessage?topicID=247.topic>

Accessed December 15 2001.

Using Howard Becker's terms, the Lost Decorators functions as a micro art world in which home decorating projects are exhibited and evaluated (via pictures and text).³⁷ The bulletin board's community provides moral and technical support to the creative activity of its members. But first and foremost The Lost Decorators serves as an alternative social community as the following Christmas poem written by one of its members illustrates:

The Ladies have gathered, the timing is right
The crafts are for Christmas, perhaps done tonight.
There's sharing and caring, for everyone here
To CL* we hollar and give a big cheer
The prayers are abundand, and no one's left out
For Anniversaries and Birthdays they love without doubt.
These ladies are different, unique as a whole
I'm so glad that I found them, a gift to my soul.³⁸

Henry Jenkins describes five levels of activity that characterize what he calls 'media fandom' (that is fandom related mainly to popular fiction).³⁹ In short, these levels of activity involve:

- a. watching media with scrutiny and engagement in social interactions around exchanges of details deriving from these close observations
- b. the emergence of interpretative practices unique to fan communities, and the creation of alternative meta-texts for the media properties that are the subject of fandom
- c. consumer activism to protest discontinuations of programs or plot lines that do not go along with fan's meta texts
- d. development of alternative economies of cultural production and circulation (like the exchange of fan fiction) that go against market forces
- e. development of alternative social communities

The comparison between these fan communities and the Lost Decorators is striking; the latter share with media fans almost every feature of fan activity (putting aside genre differences), except for those related to public visibility.

Unlike media fans, the Lost Decorators don't engage in consumer activism. Although implied criticism is expressed from time to time on the bulletin board, the Lost Decorators don't demand anything from the Christopher Lowell Show. This might be the outcome of the positive ethos of these ladies, but it is also true of other viewers of the show. Postings on the Discovery Channel website indicate that many of the devoted viewers are becoming increasingly less happy with the show, but despite this, I didn't find any trace of organized protest.

Unlike media fans, The Lost Decorators don't publish fanzines, wear special clothing, and don't attend special conventions.⁴⁰ The Lost Decorators itself is an anomaly. From

³⁷ Howard Saul Becker, *Art Worlds* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

³⁸ <http://pub9.ezboard.com/fthelostdecoratorswhatsonyourmind.showMessage?topicID=267.topic&index=18> CL stands for Christopher Lowell.

³⁹ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers · Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, Studies in Culture and Communications (New York ; London: Routledge, 1992). Pages 277-287.

apparently one million daily viewers of "The Christopher Lowell show" only 135 are registered to *The Lost Decorators*. As far as my research goes, this is the only active non-commercial website that is devoted to Christopher Lowell fandom, or to home decorating television fandom in general.⁴¹

As for the reasons for this difference, one can only speculate. My guess is that unlike other groups of media fans that are "largely middle class"⁴² and consist of people who are confident to claim that they "have 'got a life',"⁴³ the Lost Decorators, by and large, seem to come from more humble socio-economic backgrounds. In addition, a considerable amount of the Lost Decorators are self-described "home makers." As indicated by Jenkins, being a fan involves being stigmatized as socially marginal. This may be a social price that can be paid only by those who can afford it, that is, those who share enough commonalities with middleclass non fans, or have some clout in the job market.

As a fan of a home decorating show, on the other hand, one doesn't have to transgress the homemaker niche, and can, at the same time, "fool" her surroundings and "steal" some pleasures such as gaining professionalism, expressing oneself creatively, and participating in an alternative community.

Like media fans, The Lost Decorators and other home decorating shows enthusiasts are poachers.⁴⁴ Their poaching might be less of an "*impertinent* raid on the literary preserve" than that of the media fans, but (even if civilly) it still "takes away only those things that are useful or pleasurable to the reader".⁴⁵ The Lost Decorators resist a commercial-like rhetoric that encourages them to buy things regardless of their needs and means, they choose to focus on the "how to" segments and use them as an encyclopedic source of art techniques, and they create social interaction around their art projects.

However, when it comes to creativity, there is a big difference between the "landowners" in these two cases. While Lucas film and other media producers hound fans for using characters and concepts for their fan writing, home decorating shows encourage their viewers to use the decorating ideas presented to them. The difference lies, of course, in the different economic logics underpinning these two forms of entertainment; in the case of home decorating shows, heads of networks are more than glad to present advertisers with statistics on increased consumption of home improvement goods among viewers.

⁴⁰ With the exception of one gathering of community members, which, not accidentally, I believe, took place in one member's house and not in a more public space like a hotel.

⁴¹ There are some traces on the internet for communities that were active when "Interior Motives", Christopher Lowell's previous show (see below), was on. Other non-commercial fan sites have only few postings, and my attempts to register were unsuccessful. The Lost Decorators is somewhat of a secret society. It can't be found by a simple search for Christopher Lowell + Fans on Google. The name Christopher Lowell doesn't appear on the title of the bulletin board, and most of the time the users refer to him with the acronym CL. I found the bulletin board only after a long period of monitoring the official website of the Discovery Channel when someone suggested it to another user for information on previous episodes. It is of course possible that there are similar "semi secret" websites that had slipped my attention.

⁴² Henry Jenkins. Page 1.

⁴³ Henry Jenkins. Page 21.

⁴⁴ I am using De Certeau's expression as used by Jenkins

⁴⁵ Henry Jenkins. Page 24.

Given viewers' interest in art techniques, home decorating shows present a unique situation of convergence of interests between producers and viewers/consumers. The fact that networks gain profit should not belittle viewers' creativity. (Art education institutions, the makers of Macromedia Director, and canvas manufacturers all gain profit from their services and products, which says nothing about their consumers' artistic skills.) One could push this argument even further and suggest that from the The Lost Decorators's perspective, Home Depot, Ikea, and other advertisers, in effect, sponsor an art education institute, one that distributes knowledge of art techniques (like faux finishes) for free.

In light of this almost utopian vision, it is interesting to look at the discourse of creativity manifested in these shows. The Christopher Lowell Show is particularly interesting because it is a phenomenon which shares many features with other home decorating shows, but amplifies what is unique about the genre (in a way somewhat similar to The Lost Decorators and what they amplify about home decoration fandom).

Creativity in the Closet

The Christopher Lowell show is unique from many different perspectives. Compared to presenters on other programs, Lowell is, by far, the least committed to traditional techniques of faux finishes and faux environments, as exemplified by a canopy bed made of PVC pipes masquerading as bamboo stalks, a MOMA-style light fixture made of hot-glued traditional lampshades, and shoji screens made of industrial light-fixtures, to name just a few examples.

The show stresses the notion of *faux* by the mere fact that it is taped in a mock house on a set at Universal Studios. (Other programs are taped in real houses or in undisguised television studios.) When it comes to "the art of disguise" (Lowell's expression) Lowell's recurrent line is "If your guests come that close [to snoop and find out that the upholstery fabric was attached with staple gun, for instance] you don't want them in your house anyway".

Unlike other home decoration programs the Christopher Lowell Show stresses its entertainment value. Projects are held amidst makeovers to function as cliffhangers and maintain suspense for later segments of the show, humor is used throughout the show and particularly in short skits, and most importantly, Lowell's screen persona is extremely extroverted and flamboyant.

The Christopher Lowell Show encourages viewers' creativity more explicitly than any other program in the genre. Besides the "you did it" segments and the closing "you can do it" speeches mentioned earlier, Lowell presents photos of viewers' projects and invites them to the studio to demonstrate craft techniques of their own invention. No other show allocates the same amount of time to comparable activities.

It is interesting to look at the transformation of Christopher Lowell (the person and the show) over the years. Lowell started his television career in 1996 as the host of the show

Interior Motives on the Discovery Channel. Previously, he had different careers as an actor, musician, set designer, owner of a gift shop, and advertising creative director.

On a recent episode of *The Christopher Lowell Show*, Lowell presented a segment from his previous show, *Interior Motives*. The segment (which, like all recycled segments from past shows, was titled a “Christopher Classic”) is a demonstration of a technique of attaching fabric to a wall with liquid starch. In the segment Lowell looks significantly fleshier than he does today and his front teeth are misaligned (something that has since been taken care of). He wears a beige polyester training suit and stands near a viewer guest who demonstrates the starch trick. When she finishes, he hugs her in a melodramatic manner (as if they were both starring in a soap opera and were just reunited after a ten year coma). This is a serious hug and a parody on a hug at the same time. It seems to signify: “for some people what we’re doing here may look ridiculous and weird, but this is who we are, and we are celebrating it”, a message that seems to work well for both Lowell and his guest, who laughs heartily, suggesting that she is part of the joke, not its object.

At the present time, Lowell would never be seen in a beige polyester training suit. Even though he never articulated his sexual orientation before or after, Lowell’s televised persona has undergone a very visible transformation. His character morphed from a camp phenomenon (in appearance and behavior) into a stereotypical “mainstream gay” (more fit and neat looking and less flamboyant). In parallel to this transformation, Lowell has also built a thriving business of interior design, accessories, and books that complement his television career.

At the end of one of his recent shows dealing with “creative spaces,” Lowell read the following letter accompanied by photos:

Dear Christopher Lowell,

I did it! I turned my nightmare closet into a functioning sewing room. It’s been wonderful having a creative space. Thank you for all the “you can do it”s

After praising the writer and reading a couple more viewers’ letters, Lowell began his closing speech:

...I hope you’re looking around for that little space that you can make your own; some place that you can really go and tap into your creative self. That is important. Trust me this is *so* important. You know, it doesn’t really have to matter what you create, because it’s really the process that’s fun and rewording (...) so, the more you create the more wonderful that journey is. Take charge. You are responsible for your creativity, nobody else is. Bring something into three dimensions for other people to say: “ooh you did it”, because you did do it, because you can do it. Bye for now everybody.

“Creative spaces” in closets, laundry rooms, and alcoves are widespread images in *The Christopher Lowell Show*. The show’s discourse (as well as that of other home decorating shows) stresses the creative process over the end result with expressions like “the house is a never ending project” or “the creative journey”. When there is not an end

result or a defined product, there is no room for public recognition, not to mention material reward. In this bacchanalia of creativity there is only one who gets paid, who “can do it” without the approval of external authority, only one who gets out of the creativity closet and gains wide recognition as a ‘designer’.

This discourse is underpinned by a long tradition that labels the products of women’s creativity as “craft” rather than art, and erases the names of women artists. The tradition extends to “respectable” art institutes where women artist salaries and rates of representations are significantly lower than men’s.⁴⁶ Second wave feminist artists and intellectuals protested these forms of discrimination (for example by creating exhibitions with monumental objects created by women’s labor). Third wave feminism has a different approach:

Every one of us here is also interested in “the arts and crafts”. We’re feminists and we do create art (...) We curl up on a couch in afghans or quilts we’ve created, or send cards to friends that we’ve created from handmade paper. We photograph horses and write short stories. We do calligraphy and mold clay, paint and knit. We crochet and make jewelry.

And we firmly believe that make us artist too, and not just anonymous footnotes.... We see innovation and art in the creation of our daily lives and in the things we dream about or feel connections too.⁴⁷

The members of the 3WWave share their art projects with each other and present them on the website, which begs the comparison with the Lost Decorators. There are many differences between these two groups of women – in education, social mobility, and political stands. However, both groups are engaged, among other things, in the creation of art worlds, although with different sets of artistic conventions. Howard Becker claims that “Art worlds do not have boundaries around them.”⁴⁸ Juxtaposing these two art worlds raises interesting questions: will they cross paths? and if so, what types of interaction might we imagine?

Conclusion

The similarities between The Lost Decorators and the WWWave community, like the resemblance between some practices of home decoration and the more prestigious self-refashioning through role-playing in cyberspace, call for a more nuanced explication than these shows usually get. For the present time, the genre of home decoration TV is critically disparaged, and largely overlooked (somewhat similar to still life painting, which also in other ways can be thought of as a cultural ancestor⁴⁹).

As I tried to demonstrate above, The Lost Decorators, like other fans of home decoration shows, engage in a modern day form of folk art and crafts. Traditionally, these kinds of

⁴⁶ see Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (London : Pandora, 1987), p. 184

⁴⁷ http://www.3rdwwwave.com/display_article.cgi?54 Accessed Dec, 16 2001.

⁴⁸ Howard Saul Becker. Page 35.

⁴⁹ Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked : Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).

activities entail the reuse, refashioning, and appropriation of culture's ready-mades to express more marginal points of view, tastes and sentiments.⁵⁰ Similarly, fans of home decoration shows play a part in an alternative economy through which they appropriate ideas that reach them while tied to commodities. These fans are pretty deft at decoupling ideas and commodities, finding lower cost methods of execution, and modifying ideas to suit their own tastes and needs.

Like other kinds of art, the activity around home decoration shows is rooted in its time and cultural climate – as we have seen, many fans' projects reflect a postmodern and hypermediated aesthetic which seems to correspond with, and react to, digital culture. Finally, *The Lost Decorators* and other fans of home decoration TV shows engage in folk art, but their art is specifically *women's* folk art, traditionally classified as 'crafts'. For better and for worst, and unlike other kinds of fandom, *The Lost Decorators* maintain very low public visibility. Marginalized twice; as fans in general, and particularly as fans of a quintessentially feminine genre devoted to "stuff", they remain close to the private sphere and do not challenge cultural structures. Yet, their participation in fandom is an alternative source for respect and appreciation which, as argued by Pierre Levy, may indicate that the digital space does facilitate a drastic change in the nature of authority and expertise.⁵¹ It remains to be seen how far and wide this change will reach.

⁵⁰ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers : Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, Studies in Culture and Communications (New York ; London: Routledge, 1992). Page 271.

⁵¹ Pierre Lévy, *Collective Intelligence : Mankind's Emerging World in Cyberspace* (New York: Plenum Trade, 1997).

CHAPTER TWO

“This Isn't the Stepford Wives, Get Real”

Misti

A young woman stands near her toddler son in a petting zoo. She bends towards him and with a tender gesture helps him brush the back of a goat. She wears a black V-neck shirt and a pair of jeans. Cut. A man and a woman accompanied by a filming crew march quickly at the zoo, a few close-ups of goats behind fences, and the two are tapping the woman on the back: “hi Misti, come on hon come to the shade. I’m Clinton, this is Stacy..” They take her to a corner of the zoo where a group of friends and family is waiting. On the way Misti squints her eyebrow like a rebellious child, smiles and says “I know who you’ll are”. Stacy London and Clinton Kelly are the hosts of *What Not to Wear*, a makeover show which airs on Discovery’s Learning Channel.

It is not clear yet why Misti is on the show. With Misti’s family and friends as a backdrop, it is actually the hosts who look out of place. Fresh out of makeup and wardrobe, wearing brand new clothes that have never been to a washing machine, with their urban style of bold patterns and colors, they stand out in the midst of the wrinkled, faded, and monochromatic mass of fabric one expects to see in a petting zoo. It is only later, when Stacy points at Misti’s “clunky” truncate black shoes and exhibits one of her animal print dresses (stolen from her closet by a relative) that finally one gets it – Misti, (at least sometimes) is a Goth.

Since she’s familiar with the show, Misti already knows the drill: the hosts will now tell her that someone nominated her for a makeover and that they’ve been secretly filming her in the last few weeks. Then they will show her a visa card and offer her \$5000 to buy a new wardrobe. But in order to get the money, she will have to abide by their rules; she will have to give herself to them (as they say in each and every episode) “mind, body, and wardrobe”. Before Clinton and Stacy say any of this, Misti puts on an angry face, sharply contrasted with her former tenderness, and yells at her acquaintances “who did this?” and “I don’t dress that bad”.

Like other participants in WNTW, Misti knows she needs to give a fight. Not unlike professional wrestlers (in the vein of those described by Roland Barthes in *Mythologies*),⁵² both hosts and participants improvise on a preexisting script that defines the expectations from each party. What is expected of the hosts is to be mean and patronizing. Participants, on their part, are supposed initially to disobey the hosts’ rules, mock their preppy attitude, and generally give them a hard time. At the end, the hosts will have it their way, with the exception of some symbolic gestures towards the participant.

The goal of this paper is to try and make sense of this curious construction of spectacle in WNTW, and the kinds of needs of viewers it might fulfill.⁵³ In order to do so, I will

⁵² Roland Barthes, “*The World of Wrestling*” in *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957).

⁵³ In the first two seasons (2003), the show was extremely successful and garnered the highest cable ratings in the women 18 to 34 category (1.18 rating). However in the following year it dropped 42 percent.

examine both viewers' messages on the show's web forums and the makeup of the program itself.

Theatrical Rituals of Domination and Antagonism

WNTW, originally a British format, changed with its migration to TLC.⁵⁴ Like Stacy and Clinton, the British hosts, Susana and Trinity, can be pretty blunt with participants, but the way they position themselves while doing so is very different. The dissimilarities between the opening sequences of the two versions illustrate this well. In the British version, the two hosts are tearing each other's clothes apart while criticizing each other, until they are left naked, with their hands covering their breasts. Finally, in a deliberate and orchestrated manner, they reveal themselves and the logo of the show covers their private areas. This symbolic gesture of self-exposure is in line with their style all the way through; they frequently discuss their own bodies and the ways they compensate for what they perceive as weaknesses with "smart" dressing habits.

In the original opening sequence of the American version, two female extras, not the hosts, performed a stripping routine similar to the one enacted by the British hosts. In the new opening sequence, Stacy and Clinton act out magical makeovers a-la-Cinderella's fairy godmother on the streets of New York. The unwritten rule of the American WNTW is that the bodies of Stacy and Clinton are off limit areas for any kind of scrutiny on the show. (Not surprisingly, many discussions on the forum focus exactly on that.)

The Olympian distancing of the hosts adds to a format already rich with symbols of power domination, such as rule setting, garment-trashing,⁵⁵ and badmouthing. The authoritarian aspects of the program receive the attention of many viewers. After one of the airing of Misti's episode, the following message appeared on the show's forum, starting a long discussion thread:

I was Irate in seeing this episode, The way the stylists talked to her and made her feel was just wrong. I was VERY upset when that woman, the one who thinks she knows what people should dress like, made the comment "If I saw someone like her walking towards me I would cross the road". I would say that is a type of cultureism, What right of it is theres to judge a person by how they dress. Not only is that vein in their part, but it is insulting to anyone else who happens to dress as such.

Not only that, But they proceed to call her "White Trash" just because of a shirt? Be whatever you want don't conform to "What they think is right" and "Harsh", Or "If I was

According to industry analysts, in addition to market saturation cable makeover programs lose viewers to primetime makeover shows like Extreme Makeover. In the case of TLC, it is a double blow since its brand identity in recent years has been centered on the ground breaking (rating-wise) home makeover program, Trading Spaces. When Trading Spaces plummeted due to Extreme Makeover home edition, most of the channel's programs suffered a dramatic drop in viewership. See: Janet Stilson *TLC's Fashion Police*, Television Week October 27, 2003; James Hibberd, *Makeovers Losing Luster; As Self-Improvement and Home Remodeling Shows Proliferate, Network and Cable Ratings Sag* Television Week September 6, 2004.

⁵⁴ There are also technical changes in addition to the changes in attitude described below, for example "stretching" the program from 30 to 60 min (a common practice in the adaptation of BBC formats) and adding makeup and haircut segments.

⁵⁵ The trashed clothes are given to charity.

a guy I would be afraid to approach you". I think they should keep their mouths shut, Big Hariy deal that they work for such stars as... It doesn't impress me, I happen to like the show. But I take personal offence to what was said.
(part of message posted by randabear 03-12-05, 07:18 PM)

One of the feedback messages was:

I understand what the original poster is saying also, but the real world IS very harsh. We get judged for our looks every time someone meets us, and no one can deny that first impressions and gut reactions are truly important. I'd rather have someone be brutally honest with me on how to improve myself rather than try to be nice and not say anything (..) S & C can be harsh, but I believe their motivation is good. They're pointing out all the things that people may say about the person so that s/he is aware of how her/his dress is affecting the opportunities that may come across her/his way.
(Part of a message posted by chicagrrl 03-13-05, 05:19 PM)

This is a very typical exchange. Much of the discourse around the show involves debates over its very premise – the hosts' right and authority to tell other people what and what not to wear. The first poster writes that she likes the show, yet is annoyed by its most fundamental components. As the following message indicates, this, too, is not an unusual position:

....There have been people on this board who have complained about this show for the last two seasons, but they still keep watching the show (which TLC loves) and they still keep posting. It's like a personal addiction. ...
(part of a message Posted by centralpa 12-22-04 05:58 PM 12-22-04 05:58 PM)

A careful look at the history of the show's web forum reveals exactly that – many people are very critical of the show and its very premise, yet keep watching it and posting messages, for months and even years.

It seems that the agonistic structure of the program is part of its appeal. There is an aspect to watching it that resembles the viewing convention of a wrestling match. Last year, one of the participants, a nascent professional musician, got a series of postings on her webpage from viewers of the show (none of whom knew of her before) congratulating her for "not selling out," and refusing to dye her hair on the program. My impression is that the more recalcitrant the participant on the program is, the more postings there are on the show's web forum after it airs. Depending on their argumentation style, participants who quarrel with the hosts are either congratulated for having a "great personality," or condemned for being rude. However, the few who do not give a fight, hardly get any attention.

Finally, if WNTW is a sort of tournament, almost everyone involved seems to be aware that it is rigged and staged. It is very common for participants to post on the forum before and after their episode airs and share their experience. The most common remark is on the differences in hosts' personas on and off camera. (They are much nicer in "real life.") Then, there are many comments on the editing:

This is a TV show- it was meant to be entertainment. Yes, there is some aspect of reality to it, but at the same time- they also chose to portray me in the worst light possible so that there would be a greater visual impact to the show. (..) In the 2 days of shopping- I spent the majority of the time picking out tasteful work clothes- but those times obviously got left on the cutting room floor. It was far more entertaining for the audience to see me picking out bustiers and mini skirts that Stacy and Clinton could critique (..)I don't go to those extremes at all times. I won't say I didn't own those clothes- I did- and I won't say I didn't dress sexy and frumpy to work- I did- but there was definitely added sensationalism to create a more dramatic makeover
(Part of a message by faziongurl posted at 02-14-04 01:13 PM 02-14-04 01:13 PM)

As a critical viewer put it, the program presupposes the following viewing conventions:

TLC seems to love it when the bb goes bananas over how rude the MO was to Stacy or Clinton or how they picked out such ugly clothes on the first day because, after all, they have NO FASHION SENSE at all and MUST have the dynamic duo⁵⁶ to save them from themselves.
(Part of a message by gottaluvit 01-21-05 04:21 PM 01-21-05 04:21 PM)

However, for most viewers, the awareness of the theatrical aspect is not a holdback. It might even be part of the attraction.

You have to keep an open mind when watching because the nature of TV is to push peoples' buttons a little too much. Sometimes things are staged and it shows, but it's all in fun. Lighten up and enjoy!
(posted by Leobee 04-27-05 04:01 PM 04-27-05 04:01 PM)

TV formats, by definition, impose structure on filmed events. In order to attain the legitimacy to carry a price tag in the television trade, formats must be able to claim an original combination of rules, procedures, and orders of occurrence. These manifest themselves in the actual program in recognizable and recurring segments. These segments, in turn, can be viewed as televised rituals,⁵⁷ especially when constituting patterns for social interactions.

As illustrated above, theatrical gestures, or rituals of domination and rivalry, are central to the WNTW spectacle, but they are not the only components of this spectacle. In fact, I would like to suggest that these rituals of domination and rivalry can be understood only in light of their interaction with other properties of the program. In the next couple of sections, I will discuss what I think are the other main essential components of WNTW as a spectacle and the ways they shed light on the discourse of domination that runs throughout the show. These components fall under the categories "rituals of consumption" and "rituals of surveillance." But before I get there I would like to make a few comments on the history of reflecting on the role of fashion as a stage for the conflict between social structure and individual agency.

⁵⁶ The allusion here is to a TLC promo, referring to Stacy and Clinton as "the dynamic duo"

⁵⁷ As suggested by Nick couldry in "*Teaching us to fake it: the ritualized norms of television's reality games*" appeared in Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette ed. *Reality TV remaking television culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2004.)

Fashion, Society, and the Individual

WNTW capitalizes on a long tradition positioning fashion as a site of conflict between cultural domination and individualism. While both the notions of domination and individualism have morphed throughout history, and the interplay between them assumed various theoretical models, fashion seems to have remained, till this day, a potent metaphor for, and visible manifestation of, this contention. Starting with Immanuel Kant's comment on fashion in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, there is a tendency in intellectual work to view dressing fashionably as an imitation of one's superiors in the social structure:

The human being has a natural tendency to compare his behavior to that of more important person A law of this imitation, which aims at not appearing lower than others, especially in cases where no regard to utility is paid, is called *fashion*. Fashion therefore belongs under the title of *vanity*...a compulsion to let ourselves be led slavishly by the mere example that many in society give us.⁵⁸

At the same time, Kant lays the foundation for the formulation of a principle (later articulated by Simmel), under which fashion is in constant flux due to a dialectic process of imitation and differentiation:

....All fashions, by their very concept, are mutable ways of living...Accordingly, it is novelty that makes fashion popular, and to be inventive in all sorts of external forms, even if they often degenerate into something fantastic and somewhat hideous, belong to the style of courtiers, especially ladies. Others then anxiously imitate these forms, and those in low social position burden themselves with them long after the courtiers have put them away.

In George Simmel's influential writing on fashion, its function as an interface arena between individualism and conformism is much more explicit. While clearly influenced by Kant's comments about fashion, he also borrowed from Kant the idea, formulated in the *Critique of Judgement*, that the human being can be free and individuated and at the same time share universals like taste with others.

However, where Kant saw a universal aesthetic 'common sense'⁵⁹ and a 'community of taste', Simmel assumed plural communities of taste, based on social standing. According to Simmel, fashion provides common schemes through which people can express their individuality and yet reassert social structures:

.... Fashion is the imitation of a given example and satisfies the demand for social adaptation; it leads the individual upon a road which all travel, it furnishes a

⁵⁸ Immanuel Kant and Robert B. Loudon, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Pages 142-3

⁵⁹ which in Kantian thinking applies only when utility and sensual pleasures are put aside and therefore clearly does *not* pertain to fashion. See: Immanuel Kant and James H. Meredith, *The Critique of Judgement* (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1952, 1952). Page 84.

general condition, which resolves the conduct of every individual into mere example. At the same time it satisfies in no less degree the need of differentiation, the tendency towards dissimilarity, the desire for change and contrast, on the one hand by a constant change of contents, which gives to the fashion of today an individual stamp as opposed to that of yesterday and of tomorrow, on the other hand because fashion differ for different classes – the fashions of the upper stratum of society are never identical with those of the lower; in fact, they are abandoned by the former as soon as the latter prepares to appropriate them. Thus fashion represents nothing more than one of the many forms of life by the aid of which we seek to combine in uniform spheres of activity the tendency towards social equalization with the desire for individual differentiation and change.⁶⁰

Like Kant, Simmel assigns fashion's dynamic nature to processes of imitation and differentiation taking place among the classes (these formulations, somewhat unjustifiably, later become known as 'the trickle down effect').

Social forms, apparel, aesthetic judgment, the whole style of human expression, are constantly transformed by fashion, in such a way, however, that fashion--i.e., the latest fashion --in all these things affects only the upper classes. Just as soon as the lower classes begin to copy their style, thereby crossing the line of demarcation the upper classes have drawn and destroying the uniformity of their coherence, the upper classes turn away from this style and adopt a new one, which in its turn differentiates them from the masses; and thus the game goes merrily on.... We may often observe that the more nearly one set has approached another, the more frantic becomes the desire for imitation from below and the seeking for the new from above.

Simmel's trickle down theory had not completely fallen out of fashion, so to speak, and is still alive in popular imagination, as evident from the following replica from the movie *The Devil Wears Prada*.⁶¹ In this scene, Miranda Priestly (played by Meryl Streep), editor of an influential fashion magazine refers to a blue sweater worn by her assistant (Anne Hathaway), an aspiring journalist who observes the world of fashion with contempt:

"in 2002, Oscar de la Renta did a collection of cerulean gowns, and then I think it was Yves Saint Lauren – wasn't it – who showed cerulean military jackets, and then cerulean quickly showed up in the collections of eight different designers. And then it filtered down through the department stores and then trickled down into some tragic Casual Corner, where you no doubt fished it out of some clearance bin".⁶²

⁶⁰ Georg Simmel, 'Fashion', *The American Journal of Sociology*, 62 (1957), 541-558

⁶¹ Directed by David Frankel and released in June 2006, (after the gathering of ethnographic data for this chapter has been completed).

⁶² The text, and a detailed debunking of Priestly's trickle down chain, (as well as a the current adequacy of a trickle down theory of fashion in general) appeared in: Eric Wilson, 'The Devil Knows Nada', *The New York Times, Sunday Women's Fashion Magazine*, August 27, 2006..

This kind of elite-to-mass trickle down effect, which is not so much driven by a dynamic between classes but rather by instantiations of fashion itself (that no doubt, can be mapped, among other things, into class differences, but still are not motivated by them), is more in accordance with Blumer's model, which reverses cause and effect in Simmel. While commenting on Simmel, he argues:

The efforts of an elite class to set itself apart in appearance takes place inside the movement of fashion instead of being its cause. The prestige of elite groups, in place of setting the direction of the fashion movement, is effective only to the extent to which they are recognized as representing and portraying the movement. The people in other classes who consciously follow the fashion do so because it is the fashion and not because of the separate prestige of the elite group.⁶³

Blumer, who writes sixty years after Simmel, states that the linkage between fashion and class "does not fit the operation of fashion in our contemporary epoch, with its many diverse fields, and its emphasis on modernity". This belief that an adequate model of fashion should keep up with contemporary social formation is prevalent in the writing on fashion and in fact starts with Simmel himself:

Fashion plays a more conspicuous role in modern times, because the differences in our standards of life have become so much more strongly accentuated, for the more numerous and the more sharply drawn these differences are, the greater the opportunities for emphasizing them at every turn.

The treatment of fashion as a quintessential modern (and western) phenomenon has been echoed several times since Simmel. In *On Human Finery* Quentin Bell states: 'it is we in the west who are peculiar; fashion is probably our invention. At all events we and we alone have given it that dizzy speed that we now take for granted.'⁶⁴ Similarly, Fernand Braudel poses the rhetorical question: "Can it have been merely by coincidence that the future was to belong to the societies fickle enough to care about changing the colors, materials, and shapes of costume, as well as the social order and the map of the world—societies, that is, which were ready to break with their traditions? There is a connection."⁶⁵

In *The Beauty Myth* Naomi Wolf also ties between fashion and modern processes:

The beauty myth in its modern form gained ground after the upheavals of industrialization, as the work unit of the family was destroyed, and urbanization and emerging factory system demanded what social engineers of the time termed "the separate sphere" of domesticity, which supported the new labor category of the "breadwinner" who left home for the workplace during the day.Most of

⁶³ H. Blumer, 'Fashion: From Class Differentiation to Social Selection', *The Sociological Quarterly*, 10 (1969). Pages 281-2.

⁶⁴ Quentin Bell, *On Human Finery* (London : Allison & Busby, 1992). Page 63.

⁶⁵ Braudel, *Capitalism and Material Life* quoted in Grant David McCracken, *Transformations : Identity Construction in Contemporary Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008). Page 216.

our ideas about beauty date from no earlier than 1830s, when the cult of domesticity was first consolidated and the beauty index invented.....For the first time new technologies could reproduce – in fashion plates, daguerreotypes, tintypes, and rotogravures – images of how women should look....⁶⁶

Under Wolf's description the domination manifested in the fashion system and other contributors for the 'beauty myth', is mainly the domination over women, and it does not allow much room for individual agency. Wolf's bestselling book is of particular importance here because of its popularity and prominence in popular culture (far exceeding other, maybe more nuanced, feminist works on the subject). Even though Wolf keeps maintaining that the beauty myth is *not* the construct of a conspiracy theory she writes:

Since the industrial revolution, middle class Western women have been controlled by ideals and stereotypes as much as by material constraints. This situation, unique to this group, means that analyses that trace "cultural conspiracies" are uniquely plausible in relation to them.⁶⁷

Wolf's claims are in accordance with Quentin Bell's statement that "fashion is at best a tyrannically democratic force". This linkage between fashion and forms of government can also be traced back to Simmel, who made the following comment while discussing the 'dude' phenomenon – the dandy who follows fashion fads to their extreme:

... even Bismarck and other very prominent party leaders in constitutional governments have emphasized the fact that inasmuch as they are leaders of a group they are bound to follow it. The spirit of democracy causes persons to seek the dignity and sensation of command in this manner; it tends to a confusion and ambiguity of sensation, which fails to distinguish between ruling the mass and being ruled by it. The conceit of the dude is thus a caricature of a confused understanding, fostered by democracy, of the relation between the individual and the public.⁶⁸

The theories reviewed above, although different on many interesting dimensions, share the idea that fashion is determined in centers of power and trickles down to the rest of the population. The writing of Dick Hebdige is different in this respect. Writing about subcultures in Britain, Hebdige adapted Levi Strauss's concept of bricolage to describe the de-contextualization and appropriation of elements from mainstream culture by subcultures such as the Teddy boys, the punks, and the mods. However, subcultures' innovative rearrangement of hegemonic messages, as well as their disruptions, is, according to Hebdige, short lived. He claims that the life cycles of subcultures consist in a process of deviation from hegemonic culture followed by incorporation into it.

⁶⁶ Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are used Against Women* (New York : Perennial, 2002). Pages 28-9.

⁶⁷ Naomi Wolf. Page 29.

⁶⁸ Georg Simmel. Page 541.

Youth cultural styles may begin by issuing symbolic challenges, but they must inevitably end by establishing new sets of conventions; by creating new commodities, new industries or rejuvenating old ones (think of the boost punk must have given haberdashery!). This occurs irrespective of the subculture's political orientation: the macrobiotic restaurants, craft shops and 'antique markets' of the hippie era were easily converted into punk boutiques and record shops. It also happens irrespective of the startling content of the style: punk clothing and insignia could be bought mail-order by the summer of 1977, and in September of that year *Cosmopolitan* ran a review of Zandra Rhodes' latest collection of couture follies which consisted entirely of variations on the punk theme. Models smoldered beneath mountains of safety pins and plastic (the pins were jeweled, the 'plastic' wet-look satin) and the accompanying article ended with an aphorism-'To shock is chic'-which presaged the subculture's imminent demise.⁶⁹

This and similar descriptions of the lateral movement of fashion symbols from the margins to the mainstream not only challenge the trickle down model, but also open a door for the discussion of influences of various marginal groups (e.g., immigrants or teenagers) on the fashion scene, leading at times to reassessment of fashion that remains in the confines of the mainstream itself, as noted by Jukka Gronow:

Now the individuality of individual taste is expressed in the relative weight which objects of different styles or fashion have in a compilation of objects. The idea of style as 'bricolage' (See Hebdige 1983) would not then be restricted to modern youth culture, but would rather characterized the whole of modern consumption culture from the very beginning⁷⁰

This quote from Gronow highlights what some have claimed to be a predicament in Hebdige's model, with its postulation of a clear demarcation between 'parent' and marginal cultures. Scholars such as David Chaney, Gary Clarke, and Paul Sweetman have gone even further than Hebdige suggesting in different ways that dichotomist models such as his are inadequate in postmodern and postindustrial times, when the flow of fashion symbols (as well as cultural meanings in general) is multi directional.⁷¹

As we shall see, subcultures and their styles play a pivotal role in WNTW. However, the show's treatment of the interplay between individualism and social structure tends to be

⁶⁹ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style (New Accents)*, 1st edn (Routledge, 1981. Page 96.

⁷⁰ Jukka Gronow, 'Taste and Fashion: The Social Function of Fashion and Style', *Acta Sociologica*, 36 (1993), 89.

⁷¹ Paul Sweetman, 'Tourists and Travellers? 'Subcultures', Reflexive Identities and Neo- Tribal Sociality', in *After Subculture : Critical Studies in Contemporary Youth Culture*, ed. by Andy Bennett and Keith Kahn-Harris (Houndmills England ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); David Chaney, 'Fragmented Culture and Subcultures', in *After Subculture : Critical Studies in Contemporary Youth Culture*, ed. by Andy Bennett and Keith Kahn-Harris (Houndmills England ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) ; Gary Clarke, 'Defending Ski-Jumpers: A Critique of Theories of Youth Subcultures', in *On Record . Rock, Pop and the Written Word*, ed. by "Defending Ski-Jumpers: A Critique of Theories of Youth Subcultures" Frith, Simon and Andrew Goodwin (London: New York : Routledge, 1990).

in tune with older conceptions of the role that fashion plays or should play in society. In particular, the show tends to presuppose something like a top-down trickle down theory of the interplay, and as far as subcultures are concerned, a clear demarcation between parent- and marginal-cultures, even when reality proves to be more complex, plausibly more in tune with the views of Chaney, Clarke and Sweetman.

Rituals of Consumption

In *Culture and Consumption*, Grant McCracken argues that the meaning of goods in general, and of fashion items in particular, resides in three locations: culture (“the culturally constituted world”), the artifact (“consumer good”), and the consumer.⁷² In this context, McCracken describes the role of fashion journalists in directing the flow of meaning in the “fashion system:”

“The viewer/possessor must have been given prior acquaintance with new meaning so that he or she can identify the cultural significant of the physical properties of the new object. In short, the designer relies on the journalist at the beginning and then at the very end of the meaning-transfer process. The journalist supplies new meaning to the designer, as well as to the recipient of the designer work.”⁷³

The hosts of WNTW, as well as of other makeover shows, serve in the traditional capacity of fashion journalists as described by McCracken’s model. They mediate between “the culturally constituted world” and “consumer goods,” and influence the transfer of meaning from the first to the latter. What is radically novel about makeover shows is that the work of interpretation is done (only for a few individuals that serve as exemplars, but yet) at the retail level. The transfer of meaning is customized for a single person at a time; for their specific coordinates of class, gender, age, skin tone, profession, position in life, etc’. The following exchange illustrates such a process of meaning-transfer customized for a specific participant named Laura, a 33 old accountant from Chicago.⁷⁴

(Stacy Clinton are now watching the secret footage with Laura)

Clinton: what’s with the short shorts that you’re mom’s holding up?

Laura: They are just comfortable shorts.

Stacy: There’s something which is just inappropriate about a career woman walking around like you know, a 2\$ hooker.

Laura: Oh, that was mean.

The customized interpretative process starts in the “before” phase and continues to the “after” phase of the makeover:

(In the “reveal” segment, Clinton comments on Laura’s new attire.)

Clinton: There’s something, rich – very quietly – and sophisticated about it. It’s just the rich chocolate suede and the violate sweater. It just looks very authoritative and it doesn’t

⁷² Grant McCracken, *Culture and consumption: new approaches to the symbolic character of consumer goods and activities* (Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1988). Pages 71-89.

⁷³ Grant McCracken. Page 82.

⁷⁴ All the examples in this section are taken from the “Laura” episode WNTW 3rd season.

call too much attention to itself and says “I’m in control, I’m in charge of the accounting department.”

What is also significantly different about makeover shows compared to fashion magazines is their emphasis on the gap between the meaning participants assign to their clothing items, and the meaning other people assign to them. One of the sources of dramatic tension in the WNTW spectacle is disagreements over meanings, methods, and levels of interpretations between participants, on the one hand, and friends, family, and the hosts, on the other hand:

(Stacy and Clinton are watching Laura’s “secret footage” before ambushing her. She is captured saying to an interviewer, who poses as a market researcher, that her clothes signal the she is “laid back and a lot of fun to be around”)

Stacy: She thinks her style says “laid back and a lot of fun to be around”.

Clinton: This is a woman who has no idea. She really doesn’t. It’s either her 13 year old daughter, or her mother’s style (...).This is so not appropriate

Stacy: Not only for a 33 year old, but also for a financial worker in an industry business.

Another important part of McCracken’s fashion system that viewers get to see on WNTW is a set of rituals of meaning transfer from goods to consumers. First, there are possession rituals. These are external and internal processes in which individuals “...attempt to draw from the object the qualities that it has been given by the marketing forces of the world of goods.”⁷⁵ In WNTW, these rituals appear usually in the form of soliloquies (oftentimes while participants look at themselves in a mirror) or of conversations with the hosts:

(Laura in a store, talking to the camera)

Laura: I think my opinion on what I’m wearing has changed. Honestly. When I look at the mirror now with the clothes I’ve selected in the last couple of days, I think that I honestly look younger because I’m dressing my age. I’m a lot happier, a lot happier.

(At “the reveal”)

Clinton: You thought that dressing like an adult will make you feel old. Do you still feel that way?

Laura: I don’t feel any internal conflict right now with what I’m wearing

Stacy: Is that a surprise for you? Because you fought us pretty hard about that.

Laura: Yes. If somebody would have said: “oh this is a cute outfit for you,” I probably would have freaked out

The opposites of possession rituals are divestment rituals: “when the individual is about to dispense with a good ... an attempt will be made to erase the meaning that has been invested in the good by association.”⁷⁶ In WNTW, divestment rituals take place during

⁷⁵ Grant McCracken, *Culture and consumption : new approaches to the symbolic character of consumer goods and activities* (Bloomington : Indiana University Press, 1988) p. 85

⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 87

the clothe-trashing segment, when hosts urge participants to let go of whatever sentiments that still attach them to outdated and not form-fitting garments.

Finally McCracken mentions grooming rituals in which individuals “..insure that special and perishable properties resident in certain clothes, certain hair styles, certain looks, are, as it were coaxed: out of their resident goods and made to live, however briefly and precariously , in individual consumers.”⁷⁷ Of this category, the most prominent are “going out” rituals. All makeover formats, by definition, include such ritual – also known as “the reveal,” in which the participants show off their new assets. WNTW actually includes two such rituals: in the first, the made-over participants model their new look to the hosts. This is followed by a second ritual taken place in participants’ hometowns in which they are ‘revealed’ for the first time to spouses, family, and friends. (Usually they are all gathered in a hotel or restaurant, so despite the unusual circumstances, McCracken’s “night out” convention is maintained.)

The interesting similarity between the meaning-transfer rituals described by McCracken, and the recurring segments on WNTW pose the following question: what does the inclusion of such, usually private, rituals of consumption in the program contribute to its entertainment value? In other words, what kind of pleasure do viewers get from watching other people befriending their new purchased attire?

The first possible answer is that like infomercials, WNTW provides viewers with information they value. No doubt, as postings on WNTW’s web forum show, some viewers are interested in the specific products shown on the program and in how to get hold of them. Other messages reveal a more abstract interest in the informative side of the show – for example when people try to assess whether fashion principles stated on the show are applicable to their own life, as illustrated in the following message, posted after the first broadcast of the Misti episode:

I have a lot of the same tastes as Misty, and I also am close to 30 years old and probably shouldn't be wearing the same things as high school kids. This is my favoritist episode of all. Even the manikins they show reflect a "betty page" era silhouette and more funky prints and styles than usual. Not everyone can pull-off retro cardigans and a leopard purse, but her style and fun personality carry it beautifully.
(posted by Valesamm 09-25-04 02:15 AM 09-25-04 02:15 AM)

But most of the discussions that are related to the program involve more abstract reflections on the “rules” hosts pose to specific participants, and suggestions for others that could serve participants better. Some messages, like the following, focus on the characterization of the hosts’ tastes and its effects on the rules they impose on participants:

I tend to agree that there does seem to be a sort of "urban chic" look that Stacy and Clinton steer almost everyone towards, and it's definitely preppy -- layered upper bodies are practically their signature, though I know almost no one who habitually dresses in that way. Especially, I know NO ONE who dresses with their shirt tails straggling out

⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 86

from under a sweater or blazer, or God forbid, a suit jacket. That simply looks unkempt to me, and frankly I don't see a lot of adults in any professional capacity walking around Chicago like that.

(part of a message by kittyfolk posted 04-11-05 12:43 PM)

If Stacy and Clinton are in the business of “meaning transfer”, then most of what fans do on the “show feedback” forum is some sort of fashion hermeneutics. This message relating to a newspaper interview with Stacy London certainly is:

“...Lastly, she said I don't consider myself a fashion expert. I like to think of myself as a translator. I take what you see on the runway and make it possible and appropriate for you.'

I agree with the statement that she's a fashion translator, rather than an expert. She does translate fashion. I just don't always agree with, or understand her translation. I agree with the part about 'I take what you see on the runway and make it possible...' but I don't necessarily agree that she always makes things appropriate.

One example; (In keeping with the topic of this thread...) pointy shoes. For me, they are not now, never have been, and will never be...appropriate for me. If I were on the show...she'd try to get me into a pair of those, no matter my lifestyle. Appropriateness does need to be translated. Most times, I just wish she spoke the same language as the MO⁷⁸.”

(part of message by whats_the_buzz, posted 05-13-05 11 59 AM)

In *Modernity at Large*, Arjun Appadurai makes the case for a dramatic shift in the face of consumerism, coinciding with the spread of electronic media. The shift, he claims, is an outcome of the combination of the following three factors:

1. the advent of a trend in literature, film, and advertising, which he calls, after Fredric Jameson “nostalgia for the present;” a trope of glorifying and mourning the present as if it is already gone.
2. changes in patterns of money lending; short phases of lending and borrowing based on salary cycles transformed into life-long lending based on the projected values of assets as houses and shares of corporations.
3. The growing role of commodities as vehicles for fantasy.⁷⁹

These factors combine to make dramatic and difficult-to-predict changes in the values, longevities, and meanings of goods. As a result, according to Appadurai:

“Consumption has now become a serious form of work ... The heart of this work is the social discipline of the imagination, the discipline of learning to link fantasy and nostalgia to the desire of new bundles of commodities, ..the labor of reading ever-shifting messages, the labor of debt servicing, the labor of learning how best to manage

⁷⁸ MO stands for the person who is “made over”

⁷⁹ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at large: cultural dimensions of globalization* (Minneapolis, Minn: University of Minnesota Press, 1996). Pages 66-85. This stops short of being an over-simplification, but it's impossible to recreate the entire argument here.

newly complex domestic finances...learning these multiple rhythms (of bodies, products, interest rates, gifts, and styles) and how to integrate them is not just work – it is the hardest sort of work, the work of the imagination.”

This description of current consumer culture provides a context for understanding the meaning transfer rituals on the show and the interpretative discussions on its web forum. In a world where meanings of commodities are in constant flux, and where commodities are essential for all kinds of meaningful interactions, interpretation of artifacts becomes an invaluable skill.

The acquiring of cultural capital, like taste, has always been used for the purpose of upward social mobility and conversion to monetary capital.⁸⁰ In other words, in some circles wardrobe has always been an investment portfolio of sorts. However, in a cultural climate where meanings of artifacts are so ephemeral and ambiguous, the conversion charts keep changing. The spending of \$5000 on clothes in WNTW is a sort of investment exercises: which clothing items will bring more dividends for this specific participant in both financial and cultural currencies. Motives like “investment”, and “appropriate for her/his job” (no matter if they are rock guitarists or accountants) repeat both on the web and on the show:

(The hosts and Laura in the reveal)

Clinton: And it’s gonna help you climb the corporate ladder. Who knows where life can take you, so you might as well look the part of an executive when the opportunity does arrive, and you’d be able to slide right in there.

Laura: All because of my clothe (Chuckling ironically)

Clinton: And your intelligence and your style.

Stacy: Yes we like to think that they go hand in hand a little, intelligent people use their style well.

Laura: (serious) Well, I hope I managed to that well.

Stacy: You certainly had and this is why we are so impressed.

In their remarks and clothing suggestions, the hosts’ premise is that in culture there is something like a “natural habitat” (or habitus) where “a 33 year old financial worker in an industry business” dwells with the rest of the people with the same social markers, and that there is a distinct dressing code which is appropriate for all of them. However, constant homologies between certain tastes, classes, age groups, ethnic groups, and income level, of the kind described at the end of the 1970s by Pierre Bourdieu, are becoming increasingly rare. As noted by David Chandy, culture has gone through a process of “balkanization” in recent years, through which it has become less stratified and more heterogenic in terms of lifestyles.⁸¹ As a result, different tastes and fashion statements migrate across different niches of society (that are also in transformation) and change their values in the process.

⁸⁰ See Pierre Bourdieu, *Chapter 2 : The social space and its transformation in Distinction a social critique of the judgement of taste* (Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1984).

⁸¹ David Chandy, “Fragmented Culture and Subcultures” from *After Subculture*, Bennett and Kahn-Harris, Palgrave 2004.

I would like to suggest that the appeal, or soothing aspect, of WNTW is exactly what is so infuriating about it: the authoritarian disciplinary tone. The use of this tone by the hosts presupposes that there are fixed correlations between objects and meanings, that it is even possible to ‘correct’ participants, as if they mistake windmills for giants (or “2\$ hooker” for “laid back and fun to be around”).

The alluded analogy with Cervantes’ Don Quixote can serve us further: when family members and hosts ambush participants, the whole setup resembles very much the book burning scene where Quixote’s friends and family (including a priest and a barber!) try to get rid of the cause for his madness.⁸² The spectacle of WNTW is one of disciplinary acts made of switching codes of interpretation. It might be humiliating for the participant (although always wrapped in a discourse of care and tough love), but it provides the rest of us with a world in which artifacts have stable meanings, one that is possible to decipher and navigate through. An hour of WNTW is an hour in which we can rest from “the hard work of the imagination.”

Goths and Bikers

One of the symptoms of WNTW’s adherence to a somewhat dated model of culture is its attitude towards subcultures. Since the program is constructed around disciplinary discourse it relies on a constant supply of new and different types of “transgressions”, for the sake of variety. The more distinct (and reducible to a slogan) the transgression, the easier it is to be dramatic in describing the makeover. Styles associated with subcultures come in handy, because they are identifiable categories in culture, and hence easy to verbalize. Thus, whenever possible, WNTW jumps on the opportunity to label participants as “a clubber,” “a biker,” “a surfer,” “a punk,” or “a Goth.” Curiously, the show keeps branding subcultures and gives them visibility far beyond their actual presence in participants’ lives.

Misti, the participant described at the beginning section, is a case in point. Before and after the makeover, Misti has been, in Paul Sweetman’s terms, more of a tourist than a traveler in the land of Goths. Sweetman’s distinction suggests that a traveler’s attitude towards the subculture which they adopt is ‘modernist;’ it is committed and claims to be authentic. Tourists, on the other hand, are knowingly not committed to the subculture they pick to emulate from the “dressing-up-box of past subcultural styles.”⁸³ Misti’s “before” wardrobe was an amalgamation of nondescript items, combined with some more distinct “punk,” “Goth,” and “retro” items. According to her posting after the makeover, she still picks and chooses from the “dressing-up-box”:

I'm glad you all liked my epi. My hair was actually blonde this summer, but I had a tan. And I stil like all my freakish stuff. But, I reserve it for going to a show or out w/ friends. Now, my tan is gone & the hair is almost the same as my show. I have learned to love the way I look, and dress to fit my short stature. BUt, I still have some pedal pushers & 50's stuff. I love it & can't let it go. Only now, I don't look like a bag lady (.....)

⁸² Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, Volume 1, Chapter 6

⁸³ Paul Sweetman, p. 195

(Part of a message by petitfleur posted 10-26-04 12:01 PM 10-26-04 12:01 PM)

David Chaney argues that the whole notion of subculture, as described by Dick Hebdige and others, renders itself archaic in late modernity due to social changes (discussed above) as fragmentation and hybridization. In such a situation, he writes, “all cultural practices are adaptations, and the idea of core and subcultures is no longer necessary. In a fragmented culture the tensions between diversity and conformity require newer and more sophisticated metaphors of representation.”⁸⁴ Being an entertainment form and not an academic venture, WNTW is exempted from such a pursuit. Moreover, in the context of WNTW – an agonistic spectacle that largely builds on the trope of tension between diversity and conformity – the old metaphor of subculture makes perfect dramatic sense. Like stock characters in *lazzi*, the Goths and the bikers in WNTW are there because they are identifiable simplifications of life.

Yet, one can rightly wonder why the direction transformations take on WNTW and other makeover programs are always from the margins to the mainstream;⁸⁵ why aren't there makeover programs reworking folks to let their inner Goths or bikers out? The answer, I believe can be found, at least partially, in the economic model underpinning these shows. WNTW gives exposure to clothing chains and brands, and enables the hosting network to sell advertisers the opportunity to market their goods to an already interested segment of the population. However, as the push towards increasingly specific niche media continues, the advent of makeover program tied to less mainstream lifestyles may not be implausible, for instance a show sponsored by surfing gear and attire brand (on TV, the internet, or another platform). TLC's *Miami Ink*, a reality show taking place in a tattoo parlor, might be seen as a step in that direction.

Theatrical Rituals of Surveillance

Central to the actual and symbolic power system in WNTW is surveillance. WNTW employs exaggerated and theatrical modes of Foucauldian panopticism.⁸⁶ Besides the ambush segment and the “secret footage” mentioned above, there's the 360 degree mirror – a mirrored chamber with a camera, where we see the participants observe themselves wearing their old clothes. Then the hosts also spy via a portable monitor on participants while their shopping and ambush them in one of the stores. Like other elements of the program, this ambush is very scripted and ceremonial; the hosts always tiptoe, there is special music playing, and so on. In addition, participants keep a video diary throughout the makeover process, from which segments are incorporated into the program. Traditionally, the show ends with participants' arrival back at their hometown “reveling” themselves to the friends who ambushed them at the beginning of the show. Lately, some of the old episodes were re-edited to include new secret footage, indicating whether participants “keep up with the rules.”

⁸⁴ David Chaney, p. 195

⁸⁵ As pointed out to me by Henry Jenkins.

⁸⁶ Foucault, Michel *Discipline & Punish. The Birth of the Prison* (NY: Vintage Books 1995). Pages 195-228.

Naturally, participant cannot ignore the fact that they are being filmed in such a hermetic manner. Reactions vary from acting up for the camera (see below), through complaints (“stop jumping at me in places”), to subversive acts. (One of the participants dragged the TV crew taping her all around a department store in search of the hiding hosts who were watching her at the same time.)

Posters on the show’s web forum have found interesting ways to react to and extend the surveillance mechanisms used in the program. Occasionally, someone will start a thread in which posters report what they wore that day:

After thinking for a while, I realized that we all post on here to help each other figure out what to wear, but what do we wear ourselves? Just for fun, please post a description of the surely fabulous outfit you wore today! I'll start..... Today it was really warm, so I wore a yellow chiffon skirt with soft pleats from Banana Republic (...)
(posted by fashionfabulouschick 04-07-05 07:41 PM 04-07-05 07:41 PM)

This particular thread lasted eleven days. Such threads exist also on some unofficial message boards devoted to the program, and there, too, the goal is to list what one wears today and not much more.

Some of fans’ versions on the theme of surveillance are on the more subversive side, for instance a thread in which viewers posted what clothing items they wouldn’t have brought with them to the studio had they been nominated to be on the show (so the item wouldn’t be trashed by the hosts).

It is almost tempting to argue that these extensions of the show’s surveillance mode into viewers’ actual and imagined spheres is an indication of internalization of the authoritarian gaze of the hosts or anything it might stand for (hegemonic/patriarchal society etc’). Alternatively, it might be a mere reminder of the fact that this kind of internalization has already taken place, as Slavoi Zizek suggests about Big Brother: “What if Big Brother was already here, as the (imagined) gaze for whom I was doing things, whom I tried to impress, to seduce, even when I was alone? (...) what if in our “real lives” we already play a certain role- we are not what we are, we play ourselves? The welcome achievement of ‘Big Brother’ is to remind us this uncanny fact.”⁸⁷

This might be the case. These shared surveillance-posting threads on the forums, however, seem to me, more than anything, like means for community building. The idea that someone is watching, presupposes that they care enough to do so. These threads connect people by means of mutual surveillance (each individual “reports” to the group what they wear) a concept which is hardly new. Traditionally, grooming-related social spaces like beauty parlors and barbershops, have served as sites for socialization in both its disciplinary and communal senses. In these spaces, the lines demarcating what is

⁸⁷ Quoted in John Hartley, “kiss me cat”, Shakespeare, Big Brother and the Taming of the Self”, in Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette ed. *Reality TV: remaking television culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2004.)

accepted (aesthetically and otherwise) in a community are constantly negotiated and re-defined.⁸⁸

I would like to propose that posters on the forum of WNTW remake patterns of interaction common to traditional grooming sites in the digital space. The disintegration of traditional communities and the greater difficulty to keep up with the flux of meanings culture assigns to things, especially when tied with economic and social anxieties of being left on the sidelines, bring about the need for a caring disciplinary gaze of a community. This can be tied to a larger cultural process described by Grant McCracken in “Plenitude”, which is the ever growing number of lifestyle species and the disappearance of institutions that traditionally suppressed cultural innovation.⁸⁹ In this regard, programs like WNTW can be seen as moving into slots left vacant by cultural authorities of the past.

Once again, we can see how another element of WNTW makes the show unsettling and soothing at the same time. On the one hand, many viewers find some of the surveillance methods it employs either silly (the more theatrical ones) or unethical (especially the parts of filming people without their consent and of asking them to agree for a makeover under group pressure). On the other hand, the hosts’ role-play of caring disciplinarians and cultural authorities (combined with the display of care coming from participants’ communities) has a feel-good factor that serves as a jumping off point for fans’ activities on the forums.

Gender Trouble

In its three years of existence, WNTW “made over” forty-two women and only twelve men.⁹⁰ Hence, more female “transgressions” went through the disciplinary mechanisms of WNTW than male. Furthermore, when it comes to female participants, the hosts are much more inclined to refer directly to markers of sex and gender, as exemplified in Jenny’s case:

(Stacy Clinton and Jenny stand near a mannequin demonstrating Jenny’s “rules”⁹¹)

Stacy: A dress for a grown woman all right? Because instead of looking like a 12 year old girl we want you to look like a 32 year old hottie, how would that be?

Jenny: You know...

Clinton: The idea that there’s a little of a metallic in it will help you grow up visually. You also going to find that the pleats at the side create a more womanly silhouette rather

⁸⁸ For discussion of such sites in African American culture, see Melissa Harris-Lacewell, *Barbershops, bibles, and BET : everyday talk and Black political thought* (Princeton, N.J. : Princeton University Press, 2004).

⁸⁹ Grant David McCracken, *Plenitude*, Culture by Commotion, bk. 1 vols (Toronto, Canada: Periph.:Fluide, 1997).

⁹⁰ While women participants have wide array of professions, a large portion of the men are in show business or its periphery (a radio personality, a rock guitarist, an aspiring actor, a martial artist, a music producer, etc’). This imbalance might represent a bias among the population that is likely to nominate a friend or a relative for a makeover: all kinds of sloppy women are in need for a makeover; sloppy men do not need improvement unless they are entertainers. It might also be the outcome of the same kind of bias on the part of the producers, or a combination of both

⁹¹ WNTW, second season, the “Jenny” episode

the blocky tired that you are going for right now (...)and to go with the metallic in the dress we have a metallic shoe.

Jenny: Never going to happen.

Clinton: Why?

Stacy: What happen to the hippy that we thought you were?

Jenny: I mean there are boundaries

Stacy: As long as you don't wind up with what you're wearing right now and what we get is a lovely womanly shape then you know what? we'll be happy

Clinton: We'll be **so** happy

As mentioned above, there are segments of WNTW in which the hosts are not present and participants are captured alone. These usually are segments in which participants are in clothing stores, trying things on, shopping, etc'. Other segments of this kind take place in the studio, when participants are "left alone" to talk about their feelings after their clothing were trashed, they just got their new haircut, or the like. Another such segment is the video diary that is recorded at participants' hotel rooms. Of course, participants have very limited control of the material filmed in these segments; it is the object of extensive editing. However, they do have **some** control over it; the makers of WNTW can rework, appropriate, and de-contextualize only the materials provided for them by participants.

Participants of course are aware of this, and deliver a wide array of performances. At this point devoted viewers of WNTW have probably seen participants doing it all -

- trying on or buying "crazy" outfits that were strictly ruled out by the hosts
- trying on or buying "crazy" outfits that comply ad absurdum with the rules set by the hosts
- trying on or buying outfits that they seriously think comply with the rules set by the hosts, but despite their efforts the result looks like reduction ad absurdum of the rules
- striking poses mimicking fashion models in an ironic and critical manner
- striking poses mimicking fashion models in a joyful manner and with a sense of self discovery
- pretending that they cannot wear high hills without stumbling
- pretending that they **can** wear high hills without stumbling

and much more.

Despite the obvious differences, in essence, participants' behavior in WNTW echoes, to a large extent, Gerry Bloustien's description of the teenage girls she studied, and their interaction with the camera. Unlike WNTW's participants, the participants in Bloustien's research had total control on the filming and editing of their own representation. In addition, they had nothing like an explicit set of rules according to which they were supposed to behave. Nevertheless, it is also true about WNTW's participants that:

In fact, their behavior renders many of the usual polarizations, such as notions of agency or structure or of submission or resistance, as quite impoverished. Rather, their strategies of play reveal an ambivalent and contradictory agency, an attempt to "create a fit" between the structural constraints of their internalized, embodied values and belief

systems and the particular demands and expectations of the current social relational world within which they are engaged, the spaces of objective relations.⁹²

Despite the nuanced and complex performances of femininity by participants, the official discourse employed in the program uses the adjectives “feminine” and “sexy” as flat scaled variables that need to be either cranked up or down (participants have either too much or too little of them). In this area too, WNTW’s discourse proves to be a field full of contradictions, “wrapping” complex reality in a dichotomist discourse that denies the full range of human agency.

Conclusion

In this chapter I tried to take a few steps towards understanding WNTW as a spectacle. I argued that the program is constructed, not unlike a wrestling match, around rituals of domination and antagonism, and made a couple of suggestions about the purpose of these rituals. Assuming that a spectacle is a construct that comes to life in the space between cultural artifacts and their consumers, I looked both at the structural components of WNTW and at the postings of viewers on its website.

The following is one of the feedback postings to the message concerning the Misti episode quoted at the beginning of this paper:

[QUOTE] I happen to like the "gothic" style, and the "Movie Queen" style. It's classic and Unique, instead of having to co-ordinate what shades of Pink we are going to wear a day, we pick what we like and stick too it. We are free to wear and be as we like...QUOTE]

So then, everyone who doesn't dress in the "gothic" style is boring, stuckup, and an obsessive coordinator of all things pink? This isn't the Stepford wives, get real.
(Part of a message by Catlover126 03-13-05, 09:25 PM)

The allusion to the Stepford Wives evokes a top-down model under which individuals, particularly women, are forced to behave in particular ways. As the poster indicates, this is not an adequate model of society, and it probably has never been. However, as a paradigm shift occurs and the idea of agency becomes prevalent in society at large, it opens up a door to a wide array of questions about the ways we conduct our everyday lives. In other words, if “this” isn’t the Stepford Wives, what is it exactly? What makes some dress like Goths, others with shades of pink and the rest with the entire range of possibilities in between? In *Dubious Equalities and Embodied Differences*, Kathy Davis writes about the role of agency in social theory:

As Giddens, one of the leading social theorists of agency has pointed out: “every competent actor has a wide-ranging, but intimate and subtle, knowledge of the society of which he or she is a member.” By underlying this knowledgeability, social action does not suddenly become a matter of “doing one’s own thing.” But neither can it be reduced to a simple knee-jerk reflex of social forces, imposed upon unwitting or deluded individuals. A

⁹² Gerry Bloustien "Ceci N'est Pas une Jeune Fille". *Videocams, Representation, and "Othering" in the Worlds of Teenage Girls* in Henry Jenkins, Tara McPherson Jane Shattuc ed. *Hop on pop · the politics and pleasures of popular culture* (Durham, N.C. : Duke University Press, 2002).

focus on agency opens the door to a sociological exploration of how people draw upon their knowledge of themselves and their circumstances as they negotiate their everyday lives

Many of the postings of viewers on WNTW's web forums read like a vernacular version of the sociological exploration about which Davis is writing. Some of the characteristics of WNTW that I discussed might explain why it stimulates such exploration. Throughout this paper I argued that WNTW's use of authoritative and disciplinary rituals is both soothing and unsettling. The imposition of a fixed and dichotomist view on a complex and rebellious reality provides a sense of security and of belonging to an imagined community with strict codes of behavior and interpretation. On the other hand, this imposition focuses the attention on the discrepancies between reality and discourse and hence provokes endless exegesis.

CHAPTER THREE

“Millions of other wings are flapping with their dusters”: My Adventures with the FlyLady

It may be a little ironic, but my first visit ever to Las Vegas was for a session of the annual convention of American Mothers Inc (AMI), the official sponsor of the American national Mother’s Day. AMI’s website asserts that “at a time when the return of family values has become a national priority, American Mothers, Inc. responds with educational, cultural, and spiritual programs for mothers of all ages.”⁹³ One of these programs, in the 2007 convention, the one I attended, was a five hour marathon with Marla Cilley, also known as the FlyLady, and a couple of her friends. Cilley is the founder of FlyLady.net and a related Yahoo group called FlyLadyMentors. It is the largest Yahoo group to date (consisting of more than 485,000 subscribers)⁹⁴, a fact which grants Cilley a seat on an advisory committee for Yahoo Groups. She is also the host of popular internet radio shows and the author and co-author of the successful “Sink Reflections” and “Body Clutter” (that made it to the New York Times bestseller list). Her weekly column appears in *The Deseret News* of Salt Lake City and is syndicated in about 200 newspapers in and out of the US, and plans for her own television show are in the works.

Despite Cilley’s success, I never heard of her before talking with fans of home organization TV shows and following their message boards. Even with some significant mainstream media attention (which I discovered in hindsight) and live appearances like the one I flew to Las-Vegas to attend, the FlyLady, from its very incipient, has been mainly a viral, internet based phenomenon. Yet, its catching effect has been high-flying in quarters of the World Wide Web with which I (like most of my friends and acquaintances) had been previously unfamiliar.

FlyLady subscribers often refer to the FlyLady as a system, and to themselves as ‘flybabies’. The goal of the FlyLady system is to instill in its users a set of daily, weekly, and monthly routines that will help them keep their houses, and lives in order. ‘The FlyLady’ is also Cilley’s nickname; a screenname that crossed over into ‘real’ life, chosen for her fondness of fly-fishing. However, as Cilley developed her system ‘FLY’ came to stand for Finally Loving Yourself, which is indicative of her wish to affect more than just the organization skills of her subscribers.

The first routine neophytes FlyBabies are asked to follow is “Shine your sink”, the rationale for which is posted on the FlyLady website:

..... I want you to have a sense of accomplishment. You have struggled for years with a cluttered home and you are so beaten down. I just want to put a smile on your face. When you get up the next morning, your sink will greet you and a smile will come across your lovely face. I can’t be there to give you a big hug, but I know how good it feels to see yourself in your kitchen sink. So each morning this is my

⁹³ <http://www.americanmothers.org/?q=node/29> last accessed July 22, 2008

⁹⁴ As of July 22, 2008, the number keeps growing steadily

gift to you. Even though I can't be there to pat you on the back, I want you to know that I am very proud of you. Go shine your sink! – FlyLady

The second routine, which is somewhat controversial among FlyLady users, is “Getting Dressed to the Shoes”. Cilley indicates that she was inspired for this routine by her days as a Mary Kay salesperson (only one item in her multi vocational career that included, among others, the position of county commissioner at Transylvania County NC, where she lives). Apparently the cosmetics company instructs its salespeople (called consultants), who work from home, not to make phone calls to customers unless they are completely dressed, shoes included, in a presentable manner.

(...)The reason behind this was that you act differently when you have clothes and shoes on. You are more professional. The customer can tell when you don't feel good about the way you look, even when you think you do. So if getting dressed makes that big of an impression on someone who can't even see you, then what is going to happen to those who can see you - - mainly yourself?⁹⁵

These two basic routines are followed by many others that FlyBabies are supposed to start implementing gradually, taking “baby steps”, while avoiding the paralyzing effect of perfectionism, which according to Cilley is the main cause for chaotic houses and lives. An essential practice in the system is “decluttering” – getting rid of unnecessary and unused objects from the house in order to simplify life in general and cleaning in particular. Another key element is the use of a timer; rather than embarking on epic housekeeping assignments the Flylady preaches breaking them down mostly to fifteen minute chores. As new FlyBabies internalize some of the basic principles, they are invited to join the rest of the community and work in the current FlyZone. Each portion of the month is allocated to the keeping of a different part (‘zone’) of the house, which entails specific cleaning and other missions tailored for this part. In addition, each month is devoted to the introduction of a new habit (‘tackling paper clutter’, ‘make your bed’). Finally, subscribers are encouraged to create a ‘control journal’ defined as “your own personal manual for listing and keeping track of your routines”. This journal supposes to contain, among other things, subscribers’ customized morning and ‘before bedtime’ routines, the items on their ‘Weekly Home Blessing Hour’ list (a one hour of detailed cleaning, taking place each Monday), and their master grocery list.

In order to keep track of the (ever multiplying) Flylady routines, missions, tips, FlyLessons and more, Flybabies are invited to peruse FlyLady.net. Alternatively, they can read Cilley’s book *Sink Reflection*, which was published a few years after the website was up and running. The most unique feature of the FlyLady media property is probably that users can subscribe to the FlyLadyMentors yahoo group and get email reminders of the system’s routines. This means getting about thirteen reminder emails at different times of the day, customized to the current ‘zone’, monthly habit, day of the week, and the hour he day (like the nightly 10:00 pm reminder to “Shine your sink”). In addition to the reminders, the FlyLady and other members of her crew send email messages with musings, tips, and forwards of chosen FlyBabies’ mail (called

⁹⁵ Marla Cilley, ‘Put on your shoes and get moving’, *Deseret News* (Salt Lake City), Jan 18, 2007.

testimonials). Recently FlyLady.net also started to offer a download of a toolbar dedicated entirely to the system.

The goal of this chapter is to chart the constellation of cultural, economic and media related factors that created a fertile ground for the advent of the FlyLady, and to try and understand its success and massive appeal to its subscribers. In the delivery of this chapter I occasionally divert from academic writing into memoir territory and describe my experience at the FlyFest in Las Vegas and other encounters with the FLYlady. These segments are first and foremost a tribute to the media property about which I am writing, and to some of its subscribers, and makers, who employ ‘testimonials’ as a vital communication device. In this vein is also, my use of (sometimes quite goofy) amalgamated titles containing the letters FLY. Another reason I took the memoir route is that I have been at work on this chapter in an exceptionally eventful time for me and I wanted my readers to be able to control for my personal predilections while writing it. Of course, to a large extent, all writers have these or other ‘personal predilections’, the increasing acknowledgment of which contributes to what George Marcus and Michael Fischer called “Crisis of Representation in the human sciences”, and mine is only one attempt to grapple with it.⁹⁶ The following then is my own FlyLady testimonial. It may not bring Marla Cilley to “Purple Puddles”, but it is written with some reverence nevertheless.

“What Happens In Vegas” Or How I Got Infatuated With the FlyLady

The morning session of the forth day of the AMI convention, which was taking place off the strip, at a hotel across the street from Las Vegas’ convention center had already been in full motion when I got there. According to the convention’s schedule this part of the morning was devoted to “an interfaith/memorial service breakfast” for members who perished during the last year. As I glanced through the semi open door of the specious conference room, dozens of women and a few men were sitting inside around circular tables while on a stage at the back a small woman choir was harmonizing a song. My gaze, however, kept wandering between certain women in the (overwhelmingly white) audience, dressed extra festively and adorned by pageant sashes. Later I learned that these were ‘mothers of the year’; elected by the state chapters of AMI, contestants for the 2007 “National Mother of the Year,” title, to be crowned later that day.

The FlyLady session (advertised as a FlyFest) was not supposed to begin for a while, but I was there, hoping to speak with one of the organizers; an email I sent to the flylday’s “media inquiries” address was never returned. In it, I asked for permission to record the FlyFest and ask Cilley a few questions. A lady with an AMI tag and a disarming smile pointed from the outside at Marla Cilley’s table and suggested that I simply approach her after the ceremonial part is over. (Even from a distance, FlyLady’s latest expansion to the realm of ‘body clutter’, as Cilley calls it, was evident; she looked thinner than in her pictures on FlyLady.net.)

⁹⁶ George E. Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer, *Anthropology as Cultural Critique – An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 205.

While I was waiting outside, a small crowd of women had gathered. These women, like me, were there only to attend the Flyfest part of the convention. As I participated in some of the conversations and eavesdrop on others, I learned that most of them were (either more or less observant) flybabies from Las Vegas, but some had made greater distances from other parts of the state and from Arizona. Although still overwhelmingly Caucasian and conservatively clothed, this crowd looked slightly more casual than the one inside the conference room; in contrast to the proper pinks and pearls inside, here it was mainly khakis, t-shirts and comfortable sandals. There were also some un-dyed locks of hair, one small island of bohemian touches, and I even spotted one tattoo. Since I had very limited experience with ethnographic research, I actually devoted some thought to what I should be wearing for this event. After long deliberation I opted to “be myself”, a hazy enough notion, gauged by what I would be wearing if this conference were taking place at MIT; the answer for which was a V-neck shirt, flat heeled sandals, and a skirt, which, like my others, was of the less preppy kind that is easier to find in Europe and my native Tel-Aviv than it is in the US. I felt that, by trying to ‘prepare for the occasion’ or fit into the FlyFest audience (as constructed in my imagination while packing my bag), I’d be literally wearing my preconceptions on my sleeve.

It would be disingenuous to say that I had no such preconceptions. When I first subscribed to the FlyLady Mentors list (before delving into message boards and talking with a whole gamut of FlyBabies), I was bombarded with testimonials by what felt like overwhelmingly white, straight, married, and Christian stay-at home moms. Some of these emails reflected conservative values regarding the roles of women in the family, with which I couldn’t sympathize. I also couldn’t ignore the value choice in Cilley’s cooperation with AMI; in spite of the organization’s claims to be “an interfaith, non-political, non-profit organization for women and men who identify with our Purpose of strengthening the moral and spiritual foundations of the family and the home.” it is a rather narrow sense of family that AMI tolerates. In the past, the organization passed a resolution to take a stand against same sex marriages “as such unions are detrimental to the moral and spiritual foundations of the family and the home,”⁹⁷ and AMI representatives have been vocal against such marriages in the national press.⁹⁸

I am not the first to form such first and even more lasting impressions of this kind; Weeks later, Leila, a member of a web community that defines itself as an ‘alternative’ FlyLady group, told me that she had been turned off by the FlyLady’s politics (one of Cilley’s older emails, she said, praised Ronald Reagan), by the recipes in the meal planning book

⁹⁷ As of November 7, 2007, AMI’s website asserts that “The Resolutions of American Mothers, Inc.® have expired and are no longer valid” and it has no trace of the resolution against same sex marriage. (<http://www.americanmothers.org/?q=node/35>). However the resolution can still be found on the website of AMI Nevada. (<http://www.americanmothersnv.org/AMINevadaBylaws.html>).

⁹⁸ See for example Associated Press, ‘Californians Vote Against Gay Marriages, 61%-39%’, *Deseret News (Salt Lake City)*, March 8 2000. and Peggy Fletcher Stack, The Salt Lake, ‘Organization Seeks Unity on Family Issues’, *Salt Lake Tribune (Utah)*, September 6 2003, p. C2.

Later I will learn that Cielly’s appearance at the convention has probably more to do with a personal connection to one of the organizers than with any political manifesto.

she co-authored (that focuses mainly on “casseroles and non-ethnic food”), and by the lack of emphasis on recycling (in a property which extols de-cluttering).⁹⁹

The singing of the choir (whose members very much resembled each other) was followed by a set of announcements and then the convention participants were left on their own devices at the buffet tables. This was my cue to get in. When I first introduced myself, my accent disserved me, and Cilley asked if I would like to take a picture with her. It took a few more explanations, but quickly she became welcoming and interested, and gave me her consent to record the event. Then, after we talked for a while, and quite unexpectedly, she grabbed the edge of my skirt, spread it out and said “look at you with your pretty skirt and everything, you are so cute!” As much as I enjoyed the compliment, what I read into this remark, and it may very well be my own projection, was “you don’t look the way I expected someone in cultural studies coming from Massachusetts”. But then Cilley said “let me hug you” and next thing she actually rose from her chair and we hugged.

What comes after is even more astonishing to me; I hear myself saying, with feebleness in my voice, how excited I am to see her and how glad I am that I actually got on that plane to Las-Vegas. For a few seconds, and probably for the first time in my life, I act like a fan. This is strange, first of all, because I am not a fan; I do find Cilley’s web and book persona amiable, despite what seems like some cultural and ideological differences. As time went by, I also came to appreciate her system and found myself, without initial intention, incorporating some of its elements (even if with major adaptations) into my daily life. However, even by a long shot, I can’t be considered a FlyLady devotee. Second, I was raised in a culture that for various reasons does not leave a lot of room for fandom in its American sense; mainly due to intense preoccupation with its very subsistence and harsh debates over its desirable nature.¹⁰⁰ Third, many years of working in media in two different countries made me somewhat disenchanted with the transformative potential of meeting celebrities in real life (and that includes some of my most cherished cultural heroes).

My conduct has probably something to do with the fact that I have been pregnant for a few weeks; this may be a classic case of what pregnancy books call “high excitability”. I am obviously also thrilled not to be kicked out of the FlyFest after getting all the way there, and to get recording permission. But this is not all; simply put, Marla Cilley is extremely likeable. She is just very forthcoming and charming. As Karen, a veteran FlyBaby from Ohio who attended one of the first FlyFests, put it to me on a phone conversation:

Oh, she’s so much fun, and she’s so friendly. I feel like I could just show up at her house and knock on the door and she’d let me in even though she doesn’t know me, you know. I mean, that’s how I felt, you know.

⁹⁹ All informants’ names are pseudonyms, with the exception of ‘Gloria’ and ‘Jenifer’, referring to Gloria Hanrahan and Jennifer Parks.

¹⁰⁰ This is reflected in the fact that in Hebrew only sports lovers are ‘fans’ per se, passionate lovers of all other kinds of entertainment are either called ‘groupies’ or simply “passionate lovers”.

Gloria, an Alaskan and another old time Flybaby said:

I think she's very authentic in what she puts out there for us (...) this is her journey, and she's sharing it with us....And she'll tell people, "Take it or leave it. If you don't like it, unsubscribe. You know, don't email me and nag me. This is my system, and if you want to join me, great." So, she seems very real to me even though I've obviously never met her.I only know the emails....She seems very real to me, yet not intrusive. You know, she's not the nagging grandmother or aunt or something like that.

And, to be sure, Cilley seems extremely comfortable in her own skin. But together with this down-to-earth quality, meeting her in person also evokes an air of old time pilgrimage; there is something about her conduct that bears a *promise* for a better, more soothing future if you'd just stick around. And although it goes very much against my upbringing and beliefs (or lack thereof), I have been as receptive to this kind of promise as anyone else in that audience, if not more. This convention's slogan – "The Magic of Motherhood" – jumping at me from every banner, poster, and flyer has been an annoying trigger for a whole array of thoughts I was trying to avoid. It's been only a couple of months since I finally managed to get over a previous pregnancy that ended prematurely and then, due to uncommon complications, pulled a Frankenstein, and refrained (for months) from fully withdrawing, despite escalating means of extermination.

While my Las-Vegas moment of infatuation with the Flylady may affirm the old maxim regarding atheists in foxholes, I would like to stress that I am *not* suggesting that FlyBabies are necessarily people in dire straits, or that they all have spiritual tendencies. In fact, most of those who responded to my interview requests were not in a crisis mode at the time of the interview. (Some however did mention previous hard times that were overcome with help from the FlyLady system.) Nor were they all inclined to make connections between their spiritual life and the system (but they all acknowledged that others do, as many posts on message boards also indicate). What I *am* suggesting is that the FlyLady phenomenon contains a spiritual component with which I was more in tune than usual at the time of the convention. Rather than writing off my impressions, I have decided to take this opportunity and probe into the nature of the spiritual promise encompassed implicitly in the Flylady's demeanor and explicitly in her speech and writing. I turn to that in the next section.

"I Don't Step On God's Toes"

The FlyFest starts with an introduction by Amy Benson Lacey, one of the members of the choir mentioned above, which, as it turns out, consists also of her mother and three sisters. Amy is a singer-songwriter of "Christian contemporary, country, instrumental, and sacred hymn" music.¹⁰¹ She is also a FlyBaby who uses the system for managing her home, family life, and musical career. A testimonial she sent to the FlyLady site a couple of years ago resulted in collaboration with Cilley on an inspirational CD of songs based on the Flylady principles.

¹⁰¹ According to www.amybenloney.com, accessed November 1 2007.

After Lacey's warm introduction, Cilley takes the stage. To my surprise she devotes a good chunk of the morning session not to her system, books, or merchandize, but to the overarching theme of the convention – motherhood. (Later, Cilley would tell me that this has been one of her most 'somber' talks, probably due to the ceremony that preceded it.) She starts by telling the audience how much she has been moved by the morning's ceremonial breakfast and then turns to Amy Lacey's mother and says:

(...) this morning Cecilia, (sobbing) seeing you standing on stage with your four beautiful daughters and the first time in my life I felt jealousy, I never felt it before, and I was jealous that I didn't have a mother like you. But I'm here because I had the mother like I had. Every bad thing that happened to me or to anybody might shape who you are today and without this suffering I won't be able to teach and to love and to hold each one of you in my heart.. (Crying, then smiling self-deprecatingly)...and I put on makeup twice already today (Laughs in the audience). God put me here to do what I needed to do, but as long as I had the clutter and chaos going on in my life I couldn't hear what god's words were. It didn't dawn on me that I could stand up before of a state, in front of thousands of people and touch you with someone. But I got the clutter out of the way and god told me 'you know you can do this' he sort of eased me into it (...)

This strong opening, like many segments to come of the FlyFest, has a few things in common with televangelism (as well as videovangelism and webvangelism). The basic setup (a lone speaker on a stage in front of an audience), the melodramatic swings between tears and laughter, and the speaker's self identification as a vessel for messages from a higher power, are all staples of these genres.¹⁰² Cilley will imply this last point again a little later, when asserting that she doesn't prepare for her public appearances and describing a conversation with a director, in charge of one of her recent TV appearances:

The director (...) said 'I need an outline' and I said 'no, I can't give you an outline' and he said 'I just need an outline ... I need to know what you gonna say and I said "I don't step on god's toes" and he said "what do you mean?" and I said "well, I say a little prayer before I go out on stage, and whatever comes out comes out."

This probably doesn't come as a huge surprise for those in the audience who are FlyLady subscribers; Cilley mentions god quite often in her emails, although usually without alluding to a specific way of worship. One of her favorite terms is "God Breeze", standing for epiphany or the presence of god in one's life.

Another element that Cilley shares with some religious media personalities is a testimony of rough beginnings.¹⁰³ In the quote above there is a hint of a

¹⁰² Eithne Johnson, "The Emergence of Christian Video and the Cultivation of Videovangelism" in *Media, Culture, and the Religious Right*, eds. Linda Kintz and Julia Lesage (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998) 191-200.

¹⁰³ See for example the webpage of televangelist Joyce Meyer who "discovered the freedom to live victoriously by applying God's Word to her life" following a life experience including childhood sexual

dysfunctional mother, which together with some other biographical details Cilley has shared with her audience over the years, create a somewhat grim picture of her past which apparently included two failed marriages (prior to her current one, which she describes as very happy) and a short hospitalization for depression.

However, this last feature is part of a broader phenomenon pertaining to therapeutic culture in America in general and to self-help in particular. In fact, Cilley's emergence as an online mentor figure resembles the trajectories of many of the early founders of American self-help, at times it was still called "mind cure" and "New Thought". Like Mary Baker Eddy and Charles and Myrtle Fillmore – ailing disciples of distinguished figures in mind cure who altered their mentors' teachings and founded their own spiritual and therapeutic movements – Cilley started her ascend to mentorship as an ordinary (yet very active) member of a self-help web forum.¹⁰⁴

By the end of the 1990s Cilley had been a regular on an internet message board called SHE's in Touch. The board had been set up by sisters Pam Young and Peggy Jones, authors of the self-help book *Sidetracked Home Executives: From Pigpen to Paradise* which was self published originally in 1979 (and gained wider circulation during the 1990's). As its title suggests, their book offers Young and Jones' own scheme for getting organized (which involves a card system, worksheets, activity lists, etc'). Cilley first became aware of the sisters and their system while watching the Phil Donahue show, which moved her to purchase their book. As she told me, she felt an immediate connection to them:

It felt like they were speaking right to me. ...They were giving me an organizational system that was for somebody that got sidetracked, not by somebody who was born organized. So, it, it just, it felt like they knew me.

Years later, when she got internet access, Cilley found out *SHE's in Touch*: "I discovered the web forum ... when I went back to college. Back when—my first time to be on the Internet I did an internet search for Pam and Peggy."

Cilley, who started posting on this forum, shared with the rest of that community changes and additions she was making to the sisters' system. Little by little these alterations evolved into the FlyLady system as it is today. In less than six months Cilley started sending, by request, Word documents with descriptions of her newly formed routines to members of the message board. Next thing, and after attending the first SHE conference

abuse, abusive marriage, and a battle with breast cancer. <http://www.joycemeyer.org/AboutUs/AboutJoyce/> (retrieved November 4th 2007).

¹⁰⁴ Mary Baker Eddy (1821-1910) was a patient and a student of magnetism guru Phineas Quimby before founding Christian Science and influencing other kinds of mind cure. Sickly Charles and Myrtle Fillmore, who founded in 1891 the Unity School of Christianity studied before that with New Thought mystic Emma Curtis Hopkins. See Donald B. Meyer, *The Positive Thinkers: Popular Religious Psychology from Mary Baker Eddy to Norman Vincent Peale and Ronald Reagan* (Middletown, Conn. : Wesleyan University Press ; 1988., 1988).

in December 1999, she started organizing mentorship for ‘newbies’ by veterans of the board.

But then the mentors went away, and I had 50 pairs, over a hundred people paired up. And then all of a sudden, the newbies would be e-mailing me saying, “My mentor doesn’t talk to me anymore.” And it made me feel bad, that here I depended on these folks, and they’re just sidetracked like me, but their house was still a problem, and what I realized is, if your house isn’t in order, you can’t help other people. So I started helping those people, in e-mail every day.

When sending daily personal emails became too much to handle, Cilley started using an email list she established at the SHE conference with the help of another forum member. This is when, in effect, she parted ways (amicably) with the *SHE’s in Touch* board, and started what later evolved into the “FlyLady Mentors” group on Yahoo and developed into her current trademarked media property.

Despite the religious overtones of her writing, there is no consensus among Cilley’s fans, as well as the wider public, regarding the centrality of the Christian element to her system, or its inclusiveness of non-Christians. When speaking in religious venues Cilley’s Christian background is emphasized:

“Ms. Cilley has a powerful testimony of God’s grace, and has helped millions across the world with her practical advice, challenge, and insights regarding home management”¹⁰⁵

However, in mainstream media coverage, there is usually no mention of religion, and the emphasis is on the universal appeal of the system. (Cilley has quite a significant following in the UK and Australia, as a well as in other foreign countries.) One indication of this lack of clarity can be found in the evolution of Wikipedia’s “FlyLady” entry, which in the past included the following sentence:

Cilley's messages are Christian and traditional, supportive and sentimental. The website is aimed at a hypothetical Christian homemaker deeply invested in home and family.”¹⁰⁶

which later transformed into:

“Cilley's messages are Christian and traditional, supportive and sentimental, but the system can actually be used by anyone seeking for help with his or her household.”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ as in this press release announcing her appearance in the evangelical Abba’s House in Hixson Tennessee: “Life In Balance” Women’s Conference To Be Held At Abba’s House”, posted March 17, 2006 on The Chattanooga.com. http://www.chattanooga.com/articles/article_82201.asp (last accessed November 13 2007)

¹⁰⁶ 17 February 2006 version, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=FlyLady&oldid=39946274>

¹⁰⁷ 22 April 2006 version, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=FlyLady&oldid=49566243>

In later versions this sentence was omitted altogether,¹⁰⁸ and currently there is no mention of religion in the FlyLady Wikipedia article.

In the past, subscribers confronted Cilley via email on the religion issue. One such email was forwarded to the entire community last year, an excerpt of which says:

“...I'm a Buddhist Unitarian-Universalist who is struggling just like everybody else to get my house and my life in order, but I increasingly feel that this program wants to just bless Christians.

To see how it might feel, you could go back and replace "Jewish" or "Hindu" in the emails and testimonials where you now read about Jesus and Christianity, and imagine that was the only faith reference you ever saw. Would you, as a Christian, feel welcomed, blessed, and encouraged?”

To this FlyLady replied:

FlyLady here: I have never pushed my religious beliefs on anyone. I try to love everyone. I feel that love is what makes the world go round.

I stood in front of a Christian audience two weeks ago and told them that FlyLady was for everyone. That women of all different faiths (and named them) and even those with no faith had the same wants and desires when it comes to their homes.

I heard a gasp from the event sponsor when I mentioned pagans and witches. I don't exclude anyone. You exclude yourself when you don't adapt our routines to fit your family.

The reason you don't see many testimonials about other faiths is that I don't receive them often. If we would all just try to love our neighbors as ourselves then the world would not be riddled with fear and anger.

I have never hidden the fact that God is a very big part of my life. God Breezes blow my direction every day.

Send me your testimonials and I will share them. We are all sisters and brothers living in one world!¹⁰⁹

While satisfactory for some, this response was perceived by others as insincere; a couple of the women I interviewed for this paper told me about non-traditional testimonials that were consistently sent to FlyLady and never became public.¹¹⁰ However, some

¹⁰⁸ Starting 26 September 2006

¹⁰⁹ The complaint email and Cilley's response were posted by a FlyLady subscriber to another internet message board and can be found here: <http://www.frugalvillage.com/forums/showthread.php?t=72435> (last accessed November 13, 2007). Cilley's response was also replicated in the "discussion" section of Wikipedia's FlyLady, as part of the revision process described above. See: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talk:FlyLady> (last accessed November 13, 2007)

¹¹⁰ A message board that supports these claims can be found here: <http://www.frugalvillage.com/forums/showthread.php?t=72435> (last accessed November 13, 2007)

evangelicals are critical of Cilley, as well. In fact, as she told me, she gets the meanest responses from Christians who perceive her as an apologist. Although some find her to be “a very strong Christian”¹¹¹, others, like Miss Michele Hagerman, a poster on the LAF (Ladies Against Feminism) website, are less impressed:

“.... FlyLady appears to be a Christian, with mentions of God, blessings, and “God Breezes” throughout her website, her book (*Sink Reflections*), and her emails. Upon searching, I have only found one reference to the Father, and no mention of Jesus Christ at all. She seems to be more of a deist, or perhaps she is just trying to reach the widest audience possible without offending anyone’s religious sensibilities. In addition, she admits to including *feng shui* techniques, which originate from oriental religious beliefs.

There is also a huge emphasis on raising your self-esteem and feeling good about yourself. (....) My pastor often says that self-esteem is not a Biblical concept.”¹¹²

While many evangelical women subscribe to the ‘regular’ FlyLady email mentoring group and are active on related web forums, others have created their own customized FlyLady groups which have adapted the routines to an evangelical lifestyle and pepper their messages with biblical quotes. However, the same goes for certain Jewish and Muslim FlyBaby groups, as well as for many other customized versions of the system to different lifestyles and belief systems.

This ambiguity regarding the role of Christianity in the FlyLady’s system reflects, aside from an astute meaning management approach on the part Cilley (to which I’ll return later), a wider cultural phenomenon, which is an ongoing process of (re)convergence of self-help and religion taking place in the US.

As widely known, evangelicals and Christian fundamentalists have become increasingly more visible and more involved in American public life starting in the late 1970s. Since then, an ever growing mass of “Christian” cultural goods has been entering mainstream US markets, competing, and maintaining a cultural dialogue with secular ones. Increasingly, Christian cultural artifacts are made in idioms, genres, and platforms considered exclusively secular beforehand (like environment friendly discourse, music videos, or teen magazines), one of which is the therapeutic- self-help genre.¹¹³

Previously rejected as narcissistic, the therapeutic idiom gradually started being incorporated into evangelical culture since the late 1960s, when it regained its status in American society at large, and sat deeper roots in popular culture. For Christians striving to influence, and to be part of, mainstream American middleclass society, the therapeutic

¹¹¹ See Heather Ivester’s blog post from May 7, 2006 “I Met the FlyLady!!!!!!”
<http://mom2momconnection.com/2006/05/07/i-met-the-flylady/> (last accessed November 13, 2007)

¹¹² “A Friendly Critique of FlyLady”, By Miss Michele Hagerman,
http://www.ladiesagainstfeminism.com/artman/publish/Homemaking_and_Other_Practical_Topics_15/A_Friendly_Critique_of_FlyLady_1751.shtml (last accessed November 13, 2007)

¹¹³ Heather Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus : Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture* (Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press, 2004). Pages 17-51. Mimi White, *Tele-Advising : Therapeutic Discourse in American Television* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992). Pages 110-144.

discourse provided “a ready made and familiar narrative trajectory; the eruption of a problem leads to a confession and diagnosis and then to a solution or cure”¹¹⁴, a trajectory identifiable from myriads of lay commercials, TV shows, and self-help books.

A milestone in the adoption of the therapeutic into Christian popular culture has been the advent of the Christian video in the middle of the 1980s (popularized initially by James Dobson’s Focus on the Family), which brought to the fore a new class of Christian lifestyle and self-help experts. This development found a fertile ground at first in evangelical ministries; their emphasis on outreach went hand in hand with interest in, and respect for, lay speakers who could help promote the spread of Christian messages.¹¹⁵

Christian inspirational products initially made the crossover to the larger self-help segment via the recovery market, but these days they reach even wider audiences:

...as inspirational, self-help, spiritual, and religious book categories begin to melt into each other, it becomes even more difficult to keep “secular” and “religious” straight. After all, Gwen Shamblin’s evangelical; dieting book, *The Weight down diet*, is now shelved in the same area of mainstream bookstores as the Dalai Lama’s *The Art of Happiness* and the chicken soup series of inspirational books¹¹⁶.

At the same time a parallel process has been taking place, which is the ‘spiritualization’ of the self-help market.¹¹⁷

However, this is hardly the first time in American history that the therapeutic and the religious melt into each other. Despite the seeming contradiction between the self-help genre (which, as implied in its name, emphasizes self reliance) and religion (which is predicated on submission to forceful powers outside the self), the two have been crossing paths quite often throughout America’s cultural history (unlike the European versions of both, that are much less intermingled).¹¹⁸ Mesmerism (a healing method combining spirituality, psychology and pseudo science, imported from Germany that did better in the US than in Europe), and a wide array of American born popular movements (led mainly by women), from Mind Cure to Christian Science and New Thought all straddled the line between popular psychology and spiritualism and had a great impact on American culture¹¹⁹. According to J.D Safran what these movements share with American born radical forms of Christianity, brought about by the Great Awakening, is the idea of

¹¹⁴ Mimi White, p. 218 p.77

¹¹⁵ Eithne Johnson, “The Emergence of Christian Video and the Cultivation of Videovangelism” in *Media, Culture, and the Religious Right*, eds. Linda Kintz and Julia Lesage (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998) 191-200

¹¹⁶ Heather Hendershot, p. 256 p.25

¹¹⁷ For survey of the academic reasoning for this surge in spirituality in the US see chapter two of Wendy Simonds, *Women and Self-Help Culture · Reading between the Lines* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

¹¹⁸ This is also true for American religions and therapeutic practices in general, including versions of therapy that are considered far more ‘respectable’ than self-help, like psychotherapy and psychoanalysis. See J. D. Safran, 'The Relational Unconscious, the American Enchanted Interior and the Return of the Repressed', *Contemporary Psychoanalysis*, 42 (2006), 393-412.

¹¹⁹ Donald B. Meyer, p. 426

healing through self liberation, rather than self control (a European notion imported to the colonies by the puritans). By and large the expansion of these movements stopped in the 1920s, when mainline Protestantism started adopting the language of healing in order to beat the competition (a process not dissimilar to the current evangelical espousal of self-help). However, there are direct lines connecting these movements, especially New Thought, and today's New Age and self-help books¹²⁰ (as well as other products like the fairly recent *Secret* digital phenomenon).

In addition to the convergence with New Age and Christian markets, the wide umbrella of self-help and self improvement has come, according to Micki McGee, to include, in recent years, also the theme of "life as a work of art". McGee states that this notion resonates well with current economic realities mainly the constantly morphing job market with its insecurities, and the identification of work with creative expression and leisure. A secular parallel to the idea of calling, this postmodern notion of self creation, substitutes the morals of religion and serenity of New Age with aesthetic values. Under this frame of reference, creativity and artistic expression are the way to transform, and the way out of, mundane life¹²¹. While very different from the 'exit strategies' of organized religion, new age, or therapy, it translates into self-help culture in a similar manner. This vein of self-help, which caters to a somewhat different demographic, takes part in the convergence process described above, and is not absent from FlyLady fandom. During her appearance at the AMI convention, Cilley mentioned Karen Kohlhass, a New York based theater director and drama teacher who recommends the use of the FlyLady system for actors. In an article posted on her website Kohlhass writes that at first "... most Flylady members from what I could tell did seem to lead quite a different life than most of us New York Theater types". However as she adds later:

"Underlying her brilliant system is Flylady's definition of a syndrome that I have not seen discussed at length (...) it is a phenomenon that is equally the enemy of stay-at-home mothers and cutting-edge artists*: Perfectionism. I believe that I read in one of Flylady's e:mails the statement "Perfectionism is a state of perpetual victimization." (*Note: stay-at-home mother and cutting-edge artist are not mutually exclusive job titles!)¹²²

Similarly, Leila , a former children's librarian who in recent years developed a (thriving) career as an independent storyteller, used the FlyLady system, among other things, to augment her performances with guitar playing:

Before I would get so depressed, because I would look at everything that I wanted to do, you know and think, "Oh, my goodness, I want to do this but I am so far behind." For example, I started playing guitar as an adult, and before I thought, "I really should have started as a child, as a teenager. I've lost all this time. There's

¹²⁰ Wendy Simonds, p. 267 p. 142, , J. D. Safran, p. 393-412

¹²¹ Micki McGee, *Self-Help, Inc. : Makeover Culture in American Life* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 288 <<http://www.loc.gov/catdir/toc/ecip053/2004024905.html>>.p. 111

¹²² The asterisk appears is the original text. <http://www.monologueaudition.com/flylady.htm> last accessed December 23, 2007

no way to get good at this point.” And I’m 35 now, but...It was after Fly Lady, I started to realize that I could do things in small increments.

While, as shown above, FlyLady users run the gamut of the self-improvement-spirituality-new age camp, it is still not clear what kind of self-help property the FlyLady *is* (putting aside the questions whether there is an existence to media properties independent of their audience, and if it is reasonable to search for their one constant essence). My impression is that this ambiguity is partly strategically cultivated by the FlyLady, one of the hints for that is Cilley’s avoidance of revealing her own exact Christian denomination, as she told me.

...and I get e-mails every day asking, you know, what religion am I: “Are you Muslim, are you, you know, Buddhist?” You know, they, they ask me all this stuff, and, and I think it’s great that, they don’t know what I am. I told them that I have a Christian background but I try to love everybody.

Regardless if Marla Cilley is a Born Again Christian (as some FlyLady subscribers hypothesize), her use of rhetorical forms common in evangelical circles (that promise salvation, no matter if therapeutic, artistic, or religious), as well as her use of her life story as a parable for hope and a promise for change, resonate with the wishes and expectations of a wide array of audiences; One of the key aspects of the union between the self-help and the religious-inspirational markets is that implicit contracts between producers and consumers became very similar across these genres over the years. This means that as long as Cilley does not overstate her religious inclinations and keeps blending non religious self-help motives into her franchise it will probably keep being the relatively wide tent property that it currently is. The FlyLady, as I will discuss later, fluctuates between ambiguity on some issues, and exceptional disclosure when it comes to others. Beside religion, another major area of ambiguity is the FlyLady’s positioning as a property by and for women, an area which I explore in the next segment.

The Mother of all FlyBabies

Since at its heart the FlyLady is a housekeeping system, traditionally a female domain, it is worth asking if it is for men, women, or both. In posing this question I am interested in locating the FlyLady on the cultural map (and tracing its cultural ancestry) rather than assessing its value for women’s liberation, an issue which I will touch briefly later.

In her book *Sink Reflections* Cilley writes under *FlyLady’s Definition of Marriage*:

... Many have complained that I don’t understand that husband and wives have an equal responsibility in keeping the home working, YES, I do know this. But unless your husband or wife is part of this group, I can’t help them. I can only help you. I don’t expect you to do it all, but you can and thousands have. What I have noticed is that when a member of our group, either the husband or the wife, gets their routines in place... they have found that the other spouse come around and start to help, and so do the children. ... there are many reasons for our members not to get their Frannies up and moving. Most are just excuses...
So what is your excuse? Are you sitting pouting ‘cause your spouse does not do his or her share? You can only change yourself and your own attitude. Get the mot out of your eye

first. As you set the example, by getting your HOT SPOTS clean, you are going to be so surprised at the changes in your family¹²³.

This statement, phrased in a very Politically Correct manner, is somewhat complicated by the fact that, as Cilley told me, ninety five percent of FlyLady subscribers *are* women. In addition, often in phrasing her email messages Cilley is not as careful as she has been in her book and addresses women only. Back at the AMI convention, as the morning session progressed, Cilley continued to share her thoughts regarding motherhood:

Well ladies, I'm not about cleaning, I'm about getting it done so you can have some fun and if you do that you'll have time for your babies, you will have time for your husband, you will have time for yourself. And that's the most important part, having time for **you**. Because if your cup runs over, you can keep giving. When your cup is empty you have nothing else to give, and that's when you become the martyr, the angry mother, and all the ladies of north Carolina will understand this: if mama ain't happy ain't nobody happy. And who's going to make us happy? Nobody in the house can make us happy, it has to come from within, and that has to come from you taking care of you, you nurturing yourself, you doing the things that you have to do every day to make sure that you are taken care of, because as they say on the airplane, and I heard it three times coming to saint George, if the oxygen mask come down, you have to put yours on first before you help anybody else

I have already heard the oxygen mask metaphor used in a very similar manner. Curiously, the speaker was Suzanne Braun Levine, one of the founders, and editor for seventeen years, of the feminist *Miss Magazine*. She talked to me about the way third wave feminists accuse activists of her generation of a tendency toward martyrdom; of victimizing themselves by tending to 'the movement', work, and motherhood before their own basic human needs. The oxygen mask served as an illustration for a life lesson she and her comrades missed back then. It was on a pre-interview for a radio show I produced on motherhood from the perspectives of these two feminist generations. Despite the conspicuous cultural and ideological distance between Marla Cilley and Suzanne Braun-Levine, the use of similar imagery to illustrate similar points, as it turns out, may not be accidental. As I learned, feminism and feminist figures factor in American self-help culture in more than one way.

Partly as a reaction to the anti-feminist backlash of the 1980s and the failure of the attempt to legislate the Equal Rights Amendment, some feminists started focusing on, and congregating around, narrower, specific causes (as abortion rights, rape, and certain women's health and quality of life issues). Many of these groups were lead by 'graduates' of the women movement of the 1960s -1970s who put to use some of the items in the movement's toolkit like egalitarian leadership, small group meetings, and emphasis on sharing personal experiences ('survivor narratives', 'speak outs'). The gold standard for some of these efforts has been the Boston Women's Health Book Collective, whose research, discussions, and shared stories of private experiences brought about, a decade earlier, the first addition of the book "Our Bodies Our Selves".

¹²³ Marla Cilley, *Sink Reflections*, (Bantam Books. 2002).

Initially the self-help groups of the 1980s emphasized the social and material causes of their respective foci. However, as their evolution progressed, the therapeutic idiom became more prevalent in these groups' discourse. Verta Taylor, who examined the relationship between self-help and feminism in America, through the lens of the postpartum depression self-help movement, demonstrates how the emphasis in this movement has shifted gradually from the difficulties of new mothers in the face of unequal households and male dominated health establishment, into a more clinical perception of depression after delivery and a demand to recognize it as a genuine medical condition. Another new twist that some of these self-help groups brought to feminism was an extensive use of mass media, and mainly daytime television, as platforms for consciousness raising and recruitment. Using again Taylor's example, the postpartum depression self-help movement gained national recognition and massive support through recurrent appearances of some of its dominant figures on shows like *Oprah* and *Donahue*. Taylor argues for an "almost symbiotic relationship" between the modern self-help movements and TV and radio talk shows, and calls for reassessment of these shows, as well as similar self-help literature, as delivery mechanisms for feminism for the masses¹²⁴.

As mentioned earlier, the *Phil Donahue show* is also where Marla Cilley (at the same period that feminist self-help movements made their broad public debuts) became aware of Pam Young and Peggy Jones and their organizational system. This prompted Cilley later to join a web community of SHEs ('Sidetracked Home Executive', or homemakers who have a hard time keeping up). The appearance on the *Phil Donahue show* is not the only point of commonality between the SHE and the postpartum depression self-help movement. Putting aside the differences in gravity, 'SHEness', like 'postpartum depression', is a pathologising term for what could alternatively be seen as difficulty (or refusal, conscious as well as unconscious) to comply with normative womanhood.

Unlike other kinds of clinical labeling of women, for example the Victorian female hysteria, in both cases the labeling is self-imposed by women's communities and is part of the formation of a communal identity. In both cases these women's communities exercise a distinct women's culture of care that provides emotional and practical support (by sharing what Taylor calls 'experiential knowledge') for their members. Furthermore, the main focus of both communities is helping *individuals* relief their distress, as opposed to being liberated *as a group* (in contrast, for example, to the civil rights movement). However, unlike SHE (and later FlyLady), the postpartum depression self-help movement, and other feminist self-help groups, also posses (to various degrees) elements of *social* movements, in the sense that they locate their members' problems in a broader social context, which they also attempt to change (for instance through lobbying and consciousness raising in society at large). Furthermore, while SHE and FlyLady are *feminine* movements, the postpartum depression self-help movement and its likes are *feminist* in the sense that feminism shapes their social agenda (although, as Taylor argues feminism has also been shaped and transformed by these movements).

¹²⁴ Verta A. Taylor, *c* (New York ; London: Routledge, 1996).

Arlie Russell Hochschild who studied the popular-culture forms of self-help (mainly self-help books) noted that since the 1970s self-help culture has been borrowing (or hijacking) feminist rhetoric and characteristics, with its language of ‘empowerment’, ‘assertiveness’, and self esteem. This migration of feminist values into self-help involved, according to Hochschild, a dilution of their political dimension and the increasing insertion of what she calls “the commercial spirit of intimate life”; an emotional equivalent to Webber’s Capitalist Spirit – a call for austerity, extreme self sustainability, and calculated affection management (as in constant dieting, body sculpting, and playing hard to get). In this version of self-help, the female self is encouraged to assume masculine and domineering properties – the same properties behind the social maladies that got feminist activists to the streets in the first place¹²⁵.

Hochschild, who analyzed women’s self-help literature published in the 1970s to the 1990s, identified in them a gradual process of “cultural cooling”; a transition from “legitimizing a high degree of care and social support and offering scope for human need” to “presuming the individual should get by with relatively little support, and by presuming she or he has fewer needs¹²⁶”. Part of what defines the warmth of the self-help book is the tone of the author – warm books apply the “girl to girl back fence tone of voice”, typical of older self-help books, usually ones reflecting traditional patriarchal values.

As reflected in the above quote from Marla Cilley’s speech, FlyLady presents a somewhat mixed message along these lines as well. On the one hand, the property does propagate an image of a female self that, in Hochschild’s words, ‘ministers for itself’; mothers take care of husbands and children, but no one in the house can make *them* happy. Similarly, the system includes a ‘no whining’ decree, and the FlyLady’s cartoon is designed (even if as a humoristic takeoff) as a pink and purple winged drill sergeant lady. In the same vein are some of Cilley rather impatient replies to FlyBabies who in her view “make excuses” instead of making a change. However, at the same time, Cilley’s writing and speeches, while not exactly in the old fashioned over-the-back-fence tone, still exudes compassion, love, and care. She claims that with her email reminders she tries to replace the self criticizing voices in subscribers’ minds with caring positive messages.

Furthermore, as the excerpt above also indicates, self-love is a central element of the system; it stresses fulfilling one’s needs, and pampering one’s body and soul (Sunday is ‘Renew Your Spirit’ day, and, believe it or not, in addition to all the others, there are also FlyLady ‘pampering missions’.) In addition to that, the FlyLady cultivates a sense of community which is very foreign to the cold modern cowgirl ethos prominent in some women self-help manuals. Finally, as often reflected in her writing, Cilley is hardly the submissive wife; despite the conservative and traditional image of FLYlady, her emails portray an open and equal relationship with her husband.

¹²⁵ Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Commercialization of Intimate Life : Notes from Home and Work* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). Pages 13-29.

¹²⁶ Arlie Russell Hochschild. Page 16.

It is doubtful that loads of subscribers regard FlyLady as a feminist media property. However, some FlyLady subscribers do identify as feminists, and others reveal feminist values and sensibilities over conversations, social network sites, and blog posts like this one, from “Blue Dot Blog: A Blue Voice from the Red State Wilderness”:

Well, it's New Year's Resolution time, and mine is, as is has been for the past, oh, twenty years or so, to finally get myself organized. I have hit upon the perfect tool for me (I hope): Flylady.com. If you are a woman who can stand to read cutesy things like "DH" for "Dear Husband" and if you are, like me, hopelessly disorganized and awash in clutter, this site may be for you, too. Best advice: "You can't organize clutter, you can only get rid of it." Best acronym: CHAOS = Can't Have Anyone Over Syndrome. Main strategy: Work on a specific part of your house for 15 minutes per day. If you are a clutter-ridden man you may also like the daily email deluge ("Where are your shoes?" "Where is your laundry?") but you will have to ignore the fact that this site is definitely aimed at women.

Back in my young and foolish days I used to be a touchy feminist. Went to a really PC-driven school (land of "Freshperson Conference", etc.) and it took me a while to not be insulted by politenesses such as a man opening a door for me. Now that I am older and wiser I am still a feminist but I don't mind the cute and frilly and sappy touches of Flylady. I'm glad to be a girly girl, but I'm hoping to be a neat one too.¹²⁷

This blogger's reevaluation of feminism of days past may reflect more than a personal reassessment. On the radio show mentioned above, Suzanne Braun Levine commented as part of the generational mea culpa: “we may have overemphasized the liberating power of work as if getting a job, getting out there, getting your share of the system and getting equal pay for it was the only way to find expression to who you were besides being a woman and a mother”¹²⁸ This disenchantment with the workplace as the ultimate emancipating tool, moved some feminists, for better or for worst, to pursue empowerment and self fulfillment elsewhere, among other things in reclaiming traditional feminine domains like child rearing and crafting. (When asked if it makes sense to be a feminist and a FlyBaby Jennifer, a FlyLady subscriber from Georgia, answered that it does, and alluded to a feminist knitting circle with which she was briefly involved in the past to support it.). Furthermore many Third Wave Feminists who came of age as Riot grrrls fans, which entailed overt sexuality, girl power rhetoric, and DIY ethics and aesthetics, “matured” and in the same spirit now embrace mothering and homemaking (full or part time) as bona fide feminist choices. It is no coincidence that before a man joined their AltFly group, Leila and her friends, as she told me, referred to themselves as “AltFly grrls”.

Regardless of the underling causes (spillover from feminist self-help movements to commercial self-help through the common space they occupy in popular culture, cooption of “hardcore” feminism by the self-help industry, or passing of the torch to Third Wave feminists), reality is that self-help, FlyLady included, shares a few properties with feminism. These shared properties may tone down FlyLady's conservative notes for some progressively tuned ears. They also contribute to the ambiguity the FlyLady maintains in

¹²⁷ <http://bluedotblog.blogspot.com/search?q=flylady>

¹²⁸ http://www.theconnection.org/shows/2003/05/20030508_b_main.asp

certain, politically and culturally loaded areas, and helps the FlyLady keep a relatively wide base. (Another area of vagueness is her political views; while often mentioning her past as a county commissioner Cillely seldom brings up the fact that she run on a Republican ticket.¹²⁹) On the flip side, ambiguity also triggers debates and confrontations over interpretations, but as is often the case, these actually promote, rather than reduce, engagement with the property.

In previous segments of this chapter, I outlined several connections between the Flylady and cultural phenomena rooted in the past, such as organized religion, mind cure, the modern self-help movement, and daytime television of the 1990s. While these links may give the impression that the Flylady is an anachronistic phenomenon, I would like to argue here for the contrary. In a curious way, FlyLady, with all of its traditionalist characteristics, is very much in tune with current technology, economic conditions, and culture. In the following section, I attempt to describe the current backdrop against which the FlyLady came to be, mainly the combination of experience and ‘long tail’ economies, media convergence, and increasing commodification of the home and body frontiers. I will also argue that the FlyLady, with all its quirks, may be indicative of a future direction of other niche (and not so niche) media.

The FlyLady Experience

Although their prime examples are Disney and the themed resorts of Las-Vegas, the FlyLady introduces an interesting recent twist on what Joseph Pine and James Gilmore called “the experience economy”¹³⁰. The term represents what the two saw as the last frontier of abstraction in the developed world’s economy. They describe a continuum of stages in the creation of monetary value that includes commodities, goods, services, and experiences. Each stage (or economic offering) repackages the previous one, literally and metaphorically, in ways that increase its value. A commodity like acetone, for example, becomes a good once bottled and inventoried as a nail polish remover. The bottled acetone can be used by a service provider, like a worker in the beauty industry. It can also be used for the creation of experience, for instance by an outfitter of “spa parties”. Unlike the previous economic stages “experiences are inherently personal. They actually occur within any individual who has been engaged on an emotional, physical, intellectual, or even spiritual level.”¹³¹

If Carl Marx defined the conversion of a good into a commodity by virtue of human labor as changing it into “a thing which transcends its sensuousness” that grotesquely “stands on its head”, then in the experience economy as described above, goods float, bottom up, much more elevated than in the ages of commodity and service economies.¹³² Accordingly, writers less enthusiastic about capitalism than Pine and Gilmore see in

¹²⁹ It actually took a phone call to Transylvania County’s board of elections to find out Cillely’s political affiliation

¹³⁰ B. Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy . Work is Theatre & Every Business a Stage* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1999).

¹³¹ B. Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore. Page 12.

¹³² Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. I, London: Penguin Books, 1976. Page 163.

typical experience economy venues like Disney the final destruction of authenticity, or what Walter Benjamin called ‘aura’. Furthermore, they attribute to these venues a corruptive role as possessing imperialist logic and aesthetics, powerful enough to either expand into reality or obscure their audiences’ view of reality).¹³³ This objection to the expansive and penetrating quality of simulated themed environments is precisely the driving force behind a fifth, even more intangible kind of economic offering Pine and Gilmore postulate.

This fifth stage is ‘transformation’, which commodifies the change through which individuals go while engaging in staged experiences. Interestingly, Pine and Gilmore, who unapologetically, write a manual for entrepreneurs, become somewhat guarded when talking about transformations. As Martin Hall observed, they ascribe “transformation elicitors” (or people in the transformation business) “with a status that seems somewhere between therapist and priest”, including the moral obligations these vocations entail, at least in theory.¹³⁴

‘Somewhere between therapist and priest’ is not too bad of a description for the FlyLady. Marla Cilley has put forward a media property whose prime offering is transformation. When asked what her brand stands for she replied: “*It stands for finding peace in your life.*” Whether it actually delivers on its promises is, of course, up to its users to decide. As Pine and Gilmore contend, the value of transformation lies within individual’s perception of the physical marks, or the mental and emotional sediments, a staged experience leaves in them. Talking with a set of FlyLady users, and reading quite a few uncensored message board notes of others, makes it apparent that most of them are in it for the transformation. For example, Gloria, a flybaby from Alaska, wrote to me in an email:

I've been doing Flylady for five years. With four kids. With a job. With a 3,000 square foot house. With all of the business and challenges of every other family. I control my environment, it doesn't control me. Most people say marriage or the birth of their children were the most important things to happen to them. I consider finding Flylady the most profound change in my life. And I'm 50, so I've had plenty of changes.

If this may read as an atypical response of a die hard FlyLady fan, consider the following excerpt from a conversation with Leila (who refuses and resents the ‘FlyBaby’ title). Leila is probably the most heretic Flylady user I have interviewed. In fact, she is critical of the franchise to the point of unsubscribing from the FlyLady mentor list.

¹³³ See Michael Sorkin, *Variations on a Theme Park : The New American City and the End of Public Space*, 1st edn (New York: Hill and Wang, a division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1992); Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, *The Body, in Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994); Mark Gottdiener, *The Theming of America : Dreams, Visions, and Commercial Spaces* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1997).

¹³⁴ Although, as Hall also mentioned, when describing this kind of obligation, Pine and Gilmore use the somewhat counter productive analogy to the fiduciary responsibility financial services bear to their clients. The Reappearance of the Authentic in Ivan Karp, Corinne A. Kratz, Lynn Szwaja and Tomas Ybarra-Frausto (eds.) *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations*. Durham, Duke University Press, 2006

FlyLady has definitely helped me, in terms of pacing and thinking about long term goals as well as giving myself short term goals that are achievable. And one of the big things is that before Fly Lady I was so frustrated with our house, with all its quarks, and too small this, and now I'm able to make the house work for us. Instead of wishing for things I don't have I've learned more to be happy with what I have.

The FlyLady is, of course, not the only self-help venue stepping into the experience (and transformation) economy. To a large extent the self-help and self improvement industry is as a whole, a natural candidate for this kind of economic offering because of its transformational premise. In effect, it has been customary for decades for self-help authors to offer more than a mere reading experience and to enhance books with worksheets, questioners, and suggested exercises that suppose to intensify and prolong readers' engagement with the content. In addition, savvy self-help publishers have been sending their authors on lengthy book tours, above and beyond the ones customary for the marketing of books in other genres, since their audiences "... don't just want to read Sylvia Browne's books, or see her do psychic readings on a talk show. They want to see her live. Same goes for Wayne Dyer's lectures on the mystical properties of the Tao Te Ching: readers want the book and want to see him in person too".¹³⁵ Seminars and retreats given by self improvement authors have also become a flourishing industry since the 1980s. A more recent development in the "experiencing" of the self improvement is the life-coaching scene thriving in parts of the US.

In recent years self-help and spirituality have also been going digital as evident from AA, prayer, and meditation meetings ubiquitous in Second Life (as well as myriads virtual congregations of most existing religions and spiritual movements). In addition, Hay House – a leading publisher of new age and self-help books – operates an around the clock internet radio station, and Oprah Winfrey's website, Oprah.com, has been featuring for several years, digital workshops on a wide range of self improvement and spirituality issues.¹³⁶

While FlyLady should definitely be read against this backdrop, it also stands out, first, because it is a genuine creation of digital culture and not an outpost of analog property or belief system in a new medium (despite the fact that some of its elements can be traced back to Young and Jones's book). Second, compared to the examples above, the FLYlady experience takes place in, and constructed by, an unusual number of platforms for the genre. And third, for those letting it into their lives and consuming it to its fullest, the FLYlady presents a new level of pervasiveness.

The FLYaxy

'Transformation elicitors', according to Pine and Gilmore, 'elicit' transformations for who they call 'aspirants' by staging life transforming experiences. Successful players in the experience economy stage experiences for their clients in a memorable and theatrical manner that alters their experience of time, space, and matter. In their book, which was published in 1999, Pine and Gilmore use as examples mainly themed brick and mortar (or

¹³⁵ Mark Oppenheimer, *New York Times Magazine*, May 4, 2008 2008.

¹³⁶ Micki McGee. Page 59.

rather, faux marble and Astroturf) entertainment venues (while acknowledging the potential of the internet for the staging of experiences). Focusing on such venues, they stressed the importance of spatial design:

The sweet spot for any compelling experience - incorporating entertainment, educational, escapist, and esthetic elements into otherwise generic space – is similarly a mnemonic space, a tool aiding in the creation of memories, distinct from normally uneventful world of goods and services. Its very design invited you to enter, and to return again and again. Its space is layered with amenities - props - that correspond with how the space is used (...)¹³⁷

While this is probably also good advice for anyone engaging in the design of a virtual offering, be it a website, a video game, or a virtual museum tour, the FlyLady venue takes it a unique step forward by orchestrating for its users a continuous immersive experience that unfolds over a very long duration of time on various platforms.

The Flylady offers its users a comprehensive experience that augments their everyday reality and projects on it new categories of time and space, as well as an entire worldview. The ‘FlyLady universe’ (the mnemonic space discussed above by Pine and Gilmore), resides nowhere and in each subscriber’s home at the same time. It is furnished by many ‘props’, distributed over books, websites, emails, radio shows, live appearances, music CDs and a wide range of FlyLady products.

This multitude of platforms represents much more than the typical case of ‘brand extension’, or as common in the self-help industry – a book accompanied by a ‘tie-in’ website. If anything, it is the other way around; Cilley’s first book, *Sink Reflection*, published in 2002 looks like an attempt to capture the organically grown (and ironically, also quite chaotic) website into the more standard mold of a self-help book. The linear print format makes it easier for some FlyBabies to get the crux of the FlyLady system:

Gloria

for me to be able to sit down in the evening when the house was quiet and be able to read her book, even though it was the same informational format... It was in a format that would click for me. And Fly Lady likes to say, “When the student’s ready, the teacher will appear.” So I think it was...I was ready

In a similar manner, the FlyLady utilizes the affordances of the other media in which the property resides: simplistically speaking, web forums are for community, musical CDs are for motivation and mood boosting, radio shows are for Q&A, and emails are an effective reminder vehicle. While some of these media offerings are stand alones (like the books and the website), others cohere when consumed with additional offerings: for instance, the lyrics of Amy Lacy’s FlyLady CD, probably do not make total sense unless one has some degree of familiarity with the FlyLady system. On the other hand, the FlyLady Way channel on BlogTalkRadio presents a wide array of shows, on some listeners are likely to hear recounts of the system’s fundamentals, and others are on

¹³⁷ B. Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore. Page 43.

‘advanced’ topics like applications of the system to child rearing, yet others have no direct relation to the FlyLady system. Most importantly, all these media platforms promote each other in more and less direct ways; either through explicit references, or because they contain informational gaps that can be filled only through the consumption of the property on another channel. (To make sense of some of the email reminders, for instance, one needs to consult either the website or the book.) Not of less importance is the fact that every different entry point to the FlyLady universe contains also a reference to the FlyLady store and its products, which will be discussed later.

Despite this diversity of platforms, the FlyLady universe maintains enough consistency to stay cohesive and unified. The colors pink and purple, for instance, which are the trademark of the FlyLady cartoon character, are pervasive in all visual aspects of the property – from book covers, through the website’s design and the accents in Cilley’s wardrobe on speaking engagements, to some of the merchandize sold in the FlyShop (like the ever popular purple feather dusters). Similarly, the property is abound with acronyms and distinctive lingo used consistently across platforms. For instance, BO, stands for “Born Organized” (who are the opposites of SHEs); “Purple Puddles” is the state of being in tears (usually over a touching Flybaby testimonial), and “hot spots” are areas in the house that are “clutter magnets” (since, as the FlyLady proverb goes “clutter attracts clutter”).

Interestingly, FlyLady has been putting forward quite a coordinated multiplatform property at the same time as, and even before, some high profile American entertainment conglomerates and industry insiders were doing the same on a much larger scale; the first few years of the third millennium (the time when the FlyLady came to be) were marked by the advent of media properties ‘happening’ on several platforms at once, in the reality genre (*Survivor*, *American Idol*), fiction (*Push Nevada*, *The Matrix*), alternative reality gaming (*The Beast*), and documentary (*Race to Mars*). This is interesting since, in contrast to many of the above, the FlyLady was not a premeditated multiplatform property fabricated by a media corporation. (Rather, it is more of a media bricolage utilizing financially unrelated platforms like, among others, Yahoo groups, blogtalkradio, itunes, and recently also myspace.)

That the FlyLady, a small circulation media property that evolved bottom up, exhibits complex media architecture, is less surprising, considering Henry Jenkins’ argument that the advent of integrated media, or convergence, comes in a junction of not only economic and technological forces, but also cultural ones, all feeding each other. Therefore, in parallel to communication devices increasingly performing more functions, and media companies trying to leverage their investments by directing the flow of content along the increasingly multiple platforms they own, media patrons have also developed a taste for active and participatory multi-platform consumption.

In light of all this, it makes sense that once media consumers become media producers (either by joining media establishments, employing DIY media production practices, or something in between, like in Marla Cilley’s case), they also employ the economic logic and aesthetics of convergence. Yet, it should be noted that Cilley and her subscribers are

not the stereotypical early adopters; as Jenkins notes, in the US these are, by and large, middle class white men. However, some women communities, FlyBabies included, are defiantly “early adapters”; they are quick to utilize new media and adjust it to their own needs and doings, as Cilley herself noted:

We no longer have our sewing bees and our little church socials to get together as a community; we get together on the Internet. Women use the resource like no other people.¹³⁸

Women communities also tend to provide mutual help with the technical aspects of media consumption and production to their members, as evident from many FlyBaby forums and from research on other women’s groups.¹³⁹ In addition, Cilley offers features like an audio manual on how to use itunes to ensure that her subscribers hop with her over the digital gap.

The FlyLady also adopted (or adapted) some features of what Jenkins termed ‘transmedia storytelling’ – an aesthetics characteristic of convergence culture. “Transmedia storytelling’ is a coordinated delivery of story elements across different media channels, in a way that each channel provides a unique perspective on the story world, inaccessible from the other entry points. While the FlyLady is not a piece of fiction, it offers, nevertheless, as we have seen, a coherent world, presented through interplay among different entry points in different media. Whether the views from a property’s various vantage points are real or made-up, the multiplicity of such points, in and of itself, tends to prompt audiences to vividly construct, by means of mental triangulation, a continuous world sprawling between those points, and hence render the property more engaging, immersive, and believable. As a result, fictional characters the likes of Quentin Compson, Seymour Glass, and Gandalf the Grey historically got more audience attention than others, as did the Yoknapatawphas, wiz kid bands of siblings, or the Middle Earths in which their creators situated them.¹⁴⁰ These kinds of triangulated worlds also tend to ‘bleed’ into the real one, as suggested, for instance, by the real plaque commemorating fictional Compson, on a Bridge in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where the literary character jumped to its death.¹⁴¹ Situating entry points in different media increases the potential for immersion in believable multi dimensional worlds even further.

Engagement and believability are prerequisites for a successful self-help property, and, as demonstrated above, the FlyLady definitely puts its transmedia features to work at enhancing its messages. Interestingly, with its trademarked FlyLady cartoon (quite

¹³⁸ *Queens of the Internet*, Chicago Sun Times, January 6, 2005

¹³⁹ Susan J. Clerc, “Estrogen Brigades and ‘Big Tits’ Threads: Media Fandom Online and Off” in Lynn Cheney and Elizabeth Reba Weise (Eds.), *Wired Women: Gender and New Realities in Cyberspace* (Seattle: Seal, 1996).

¹⁴⁰ See *The Sound and the Fury*, *Absalom, Absalom!* and *That Evening Sun*, by William Faulkner, *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters*, *A Perfect Day for Bananafish*, *Franny and Zooey*, and *Seymour: An Introduction*, by J.D Salinger, *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Silmarillion*, and *The Book of Unfinished Tales*, by J. R. R. Tolkien.

¹⁴¹ Marcella Bombardieri, *Bridging Fact And Fiction Marker A Nod To Faulkner*, Boston Globe, January 19, 2001

curvier than Superwoman or the Invisible Woman), FlyLady pays a tongue in cheek tribute to one of the most ubiquitous genres of transmedia storytelling – the superhero – where it is customary for characters to show up in various sticky situations, on various platforms, and save the day. In the following section, we'll explore in more details the ways in which the FlyLady universe is created, or simulated.

Flyight Simulator

As mentioned in the introduction, the FlyLady system consists, among other things, in an elaborate cyclic calendar, pertaining to what should be done, at what time, in what part of the house (or “Fly Zone”). “Calendaring” and “zoning” life are, of course, very ancient and low-tech mnemonic techniques. However, it is the *manner* in which The FlyLady gives them off (that is the *experience* the FlyLady offers), which is simulated.

In a recent show on BlogTalk radio, Cilley mentioned that FlyBabies living in close proximity have no way to recognize other FlyBabies as such unless recurrently noticing them on “clean your front porch” day. To offset this, the FlyLady started early on offering message boards which enable ‘FlyBabies’ to communicate directly with each other, some of which were set up on a regional basis and in some cases resulted in, occasional face-to-face meetings and grassroots activities. However, by and large, FlyBabies are experiencing the system (and each other) in a highly mediated manner. I got a glimpse of that at the AMI convention, having lunch with a group of local FlyBabies, members of a message board, most of whom met face to face for the first time, despite the geographic organizational principle of their group.

The most obvious example for the simulated nature of the system are the automated email reminders (‘shine your sink’, “where is your laundry?”, “your bedtime routine will change your life”, “drink your water”) generated by the yahoo groups reminders feature, and recur at designated times. The mechanized effect is balanced by other, non recurring emails that are sent daily by Cilley and other FlyLady crew members and contain non recurring content like inspirational words, promotions of new FlyLady products, or reminders for the live FlyLady call-in talk show and its topic.

Another, very ubiquitous and very popular kind of emails, are the testimonials. These are messages that Cilley gets from (usually grateful) FlyBabies which she forwards to the rest of her subscribers, sometimes after adding a few words of her own. Even those testimonials, although based on real life experiences of real subscribers, are virtual in the sense that they are brought to users’ attention in an artificial and editorialized way. These testimonials enhance the FlyLady experience first by creating a sense that one is part of a larger community (even for those subscribers who are too busy to be active on message boards), as Jennifer put it:

It’s nice to know that other people are doing it, that that many people are still doing it, that it works, that it’s not just some cheeseball website that says it work but there’s no proof of it. And it’s kind of nice to know that, like, if, for some reason, I happen to mention it to somebody, it’s quite possible they’ve already heard of it and are already

doing it, you know, meet somebody at the grocery store kind of stuff. But I don't really have...I don't, like, have the pens and stuff that seem trigger that kind of conversation, so I haven't had any of that yet....

The testimonials also serve an editorial function by putting certain topics on the agenda, and thereby shaping or emphasizing certain aspects of the FlyLady experience. For instance, it seems that at the beginning and end of each month there is an attempt to select testimonials that are related to the monthly habit. In this respect, testimonials serve a similar function to that performed by Non Player Characters that drive a story line in certain massively multiplayer online games. Finally, some of these emails, praising FlyLady products, are used as marketing tools.

An interesting attempt to bridge the virtual nature of the property and users' immediate environments is the "Weekly Home Blessing Hour" podcast, featured on the Flylady Tools page on Blog Talk Radio. This podcast is the equivalent of an audio-guided museum tour in the realm of house cleaning. In it, Cilley extemporarily coaches and motivates listeners in real time through the execution of the system's weekly routine with the same name. An attempt to re-orient subscribers' use of time rather than space is found in a section of a FlyLady forum that invites FLYbabies to "*Join in TOTH (Top of the Hour) and BOTH (Bottom of the Hour) challenges*", to keep their "*message board time and FLYing time balanced*", and go about executing their daily routines, convening once in a while, and reporting their achievements to the group. These kinds of features, for those using them, turn subscribers' houses to what Lev Manovich called 'Augmented Spaces' – physical spaces layered with information that is either literally or metaphorically projected on them.¹⁴² As of now, this kind of augmentation is more common in the so called public sphere than in the privacy of people's houses, a point to which I will return later.

Flying Above the Care Deficit

On a more abstract level, the Flylady system can be seen as a simulation of care. What started as a small email list whose members were all known to Cilley is now an enterprise nearing half a million subscribers. Even though, as Cilley emphatically claimed on various occasions, she loves, cares, and is eager to help each and every one of them, the current enterprise must be a very different care experience than it used to be, just by virtue of its sheer size. Another element of artifice sneaks in with the automated email system since even the most caring and dedicated mother does not remind her offspring to drink water, shine their sink, or go to bed, with the same quotidian punctuation a parade float hits Magic Kingdom's Main Street in the afternoons. Furthermore, just as Main Street USA in various Disney Magic Kingdom themed parks mix very different regional architectural styles and add to them elements that are entirely fictional (like the Mad Hatter shop), the kind of partially computer-generated care offered by the FlyLady is a somewhat hybrid entity; it does not exactly resemble, or simulate, caring interactions common 'in the real world', as Marla Cilley explained about her subscribers:

¹⁴² Manovich, L. (2006). *The Poetics of Augmented Space*. Visual Communication 5, (p.219-240).

...They just want to be told, even though they, if it was their mother telling them what to do they would rebel against it, but they signed up for me. And if I tell something to do, it's a suggestion, and they can run with it, and they have fun.

The FlyLady emanates a mash-up of different care elements borrowed from parenthood, sisterhood, priesthood, friendship, and coaching. This introduction of a new, hybrid form of care provider corresponds to a broader, emerging class of new care professions that simultaneously simulate and reinvent care functions traditionally performed by and among family members. This class includes, among others, postpartum doulas, personal shoppers, breastfeeding consultants, and birthday party planners and monetizes care services previously out of the commodity circle. Pioneer consumers of these outsourced services are the upper-middle classes but the trend is steadily trickling down (although with less customization and exclusivity) to other parts of society.

Sociologist Arlie Hochschild has argued that the backdrop for this phenomenon is what she calls a 'care deficit' in America. By that, she means a concrete shortage of helping hands in a family (or the means to hire ones), especially for the care of children and the elderly. The term also refers to the emotional burden created by this shortage on care givers and receivers. As the main reasons for the 'care deficit,' Hochschild lists the increasing movement of women into the workplace, the increase in monthly work hours, and the 1996 welfare reform bill (as well as policies in the same spirit, put in place in the following years)¹⁴³.

Unfortunately, as Hochschild demonstrates with some astonishing figures, it is still mostly women who are wading in the red ink of care. The undertaking by women of full time paid jobs has not released many from being in charge of childcare and housekeeping, even when male partners work the same hours or less (a phenomenon she called elsewhere "the second shift" of women). The increasing divorce rate, puts many women in an even worse position; Hochschild cites a study according to which half the divorced fathers in five years after divorce had not seen (let alone taken care of) their children during the year previous to the study.¹⁴⁴

Hochschild claims that, at the same time that increasingly more (previously in-house) care functions are being outsourced by families, the notions of family in general and the mother figure in particular are being symbolically overcharged and sentimentalized. She claims that "The more shaky things outside the family seem, the more we seem to believe in an unshakeable family, and failing that, an unshakable figure of mother-wife".¹⁴⁵

The FlyLady, with its overwhelmingly female audience is, among other things, a media property responding both to the concrete and to the symbolic aspects of the care deficit. Offering women a foolproof plan for housekeeping, promoting the sentiment that someone (with some matriarch-like characteristics) cares for them, and encouraging community for mutual support can be seen as solutions offered for both the shortage in

¹⁴³ Arlie Russell Hochschild. Pages 30-44.

¹⁴⁴ Arlie Russell Hochschild. Page.125.

¹⁴⁵ Arlie Russell Hochschild. Page.39.

domestic manpower, and for the stress it causes. The emphasis FlyLady puts on the cultivation of subscribers' sense of self-worth may be seen as an offered antidote for the hyper-symbolized slot contemporary culture allocates for the woman-mother figure, and the unrealistic standard it poses for many women who find it extremely difficult to (in the language of some women magazines) "have it all" (while, as some may argue, purporting that it is possible to "have it all").

There is a longstanding debate among feminist and other social studies scholars regarding the merits of self-help solutions to the care crisis, and women's inequality in general. From *Mind Cure* to the very recent self-help literature, there seems to be a consensus that self-help is a symptom of women's social unrest.¹⁴⁶ Yet, while some leading suffragists were involved with *Mind Cure*, *New Thought and Spiritualism*,¹⁴⁷ and some modern day feminists (Gloria Steinem among them), flirted with self-help¹⁴⁸, by and large the academic verdict is that this unrest, on the whole, was never translated into progressive political action in its traditional sense. Quite the opposite, writers have emphasized the affinity between self-help (as well as New Age), ruthless capitalist logic, and the shrinkage of government-sponsored safety nets. A recurrent criticism is that self-help promotes (moot) individual escapes at the expense of collective struggles for social justice, even when consumed by a group and forms a community¹⁴⁹. Where writers like Verta Tylor (whose work on the self-help postpartum depression movement was mentioned earlier) differ, is in the assumption that groups of individuals coming together to help alleviate their personal difficulties can make a difference in social configurations.

Yet, Tylor's work focuses on feminist self-help movements rather than on their more standard counterparts, consisting of consumers of commercial self-help and more prominently part of popular culture. For some supporters of the former form of self-help, comparing it to SHE's in *Touch* and the FlyLady, as I did earlier, may be disconcerting since it highlights some of its political neutral elements. For those viewing feminist self-help as a dilution of feminist values, the very possibility to equate it with the FlyLady may serve as case in point. Still, it is worth noting that the kind of community building and cyber girl-power rhetoric practiced by FlyBaby groups is sometimes celebrated in cultural studies in and of itself, for instance in "A Thousand Aunts with Modems," by Elizabeth Reba Weise, even when there is nothing intrinsically politically progressive about the aunts or the circumstances that bring them together¹⁵⁰.

For better or for worse, The FlyLady embodies the political characteristics of older forms of popular self-help, and deserves the same criticism or accolades. It may even raise more specific concerns, like its vocabulary. There is an obvious patronizing aspect to naming

¹⁴⁶ See the conclusion of Donald B. Meyer, and Micki McGee. Page 180.

¹⁴⁷ Kathi Kern, *Mrs. Stanton's Bible. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the Woman's Bible*, (Cornell Univ Pr, 2002).

¹⁴⁸ See: Gloria Steinem, *Revolution from within. A Book of Self-Esteem*, 1st edn (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1992), p. 379., charlotte kasl, *Many Roads One Journey: Moving Beyond the 12 Steps* (HarperPerennial, 1992).

¹⁴⁹ Micki McGee. Wendy Simonds.

¹⁵⁰ Weise, E. R. A thousand aunts with modems. In L. Cherny, & E. R. Weise, *Wired Women: Gender and New Realities in Cyberspace*, (pp. vii-xv). Seattle: Seal. Baym, N. (1998).

its users Flybabies, while the only one who gets to be a ‘lady’ is Cilley. By calling her subscribers ‘babies’, Cilley is dooming them to (screen) lives as entities striped of status, property, insignia, and other traits (at least until their ‘graduation’, a term Cilley used in our conversation to indicate the act of unsubscribing from the email reminders once a user internalized the system).

This kind of relegation to babyhood brings to mind the liminal state of neophytes in traditional rituals.¹⁵¹ Hence, one might argue that judging this language use as infantilizing means failing to fully recognize the allusion to ritualistic scheme and the transformative association it carries. As claimed by Grant McCracken, the antipathy towards transformation is part of traditional male perspective, as well as the view that transformation is for women, gay men, and marginal people. Furthermore, as McCracken also notes, men were transformational beings even before the quite recent emergence of transformation routines for men (not only in the grooming department). However, the traditional constraint on men’s transformation was that it must move them closer to the ‘nature’ pole of the nature-culture dichotomy (as in getting drunk and becoming ‘elemental’)¹⁵². But since ‘natural’ is a cultural category one should be careful not to involve male bias in the evaluation of women’s willingness to hop on the FlyLady’s transformational bandwagon.

Another concern the FlyLady may raise is that, as we have seen, it is far more pervasive and immersive than self-help books or magazines. From a Frankfurt-school type of perspective on the prowess of media, the FlyLady, as a simulation of care, like I described it, may exemplify a sedative, numbing of audiences to divert them from harsh realities and from political action. Of course, framing the discussion as if women’s only choice is between discussing the merits of different dusters on web forums and barricading the streets in demand for subsidized childcare is quite simplistic – as Micki McGee has demonstrated, there is a host of practical, cultural, and economical factors behind the difficulty to translate the energy of self-help culture into political gains¹⁵³.

FLYonomics

The FlyFest reaches its final part with a Q&A session and one last song by Amy Lacey. Right after Cilley tells the story of the little boy who blessed the world, which is also a story about the feather duster sold at the FLY shop section of her website, she informs the audience that with this tale she closes most of her live appearances. It is obvious from her cadence that she does tell it often; in my ears it resembles the one reserved in the Jewish orthodox world for Hasidic folklore. As the story nears its end Cilley articulates, all chocked up:

.... he grabbed her duster and he took his little duster, and he ran to the back porch and threw his little arms into the air and he blessed the world!!

¹⁵¹ Turner, Victor, *The ritual process: structure and anti-structure*. Chicago: (Aldine Publishing Co., 1969). Page 95.

¹⁵² Grant David McCracken, *Transformations . Identity Construction in Contemporary Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008).Pages 163-167.

¹⁵³ Micki McGee. See in particular Pages 189-190.

Now when we teach our children that housework is not a chore, that housework is something we do to bless our families, and to love ourselves because we deserve to live in a home that is comfortable, that hugs us every single day, not just ready for company when company comes but is ready for us to live in, ready for us each and every day, we have done what god put us here to do because we create generations and generations of people that don't dread house work. Nothing says I love you better than a clean toilet bowl when you got the stomach virus. (laughs) ... We get to bless ourselves every day with a wonderful house that we can get into and not be ashamed of. I want you to love yourselves each and every day. I am going to be out here signing books until everybody have their books signed. I don't know if they'll run us off, but we'll be somewhere in the lobby if they run us off. I am not going to leave until every book get signed and everyone get talked to. Thank you so much for being patient. Michelle also has order forms. We don't bring products with us ..., our tools, I don't like to call them products, our tools – because it's too hard to travel with, but we can give you free shipping, so there is an order form. I love you all, thank you so much for having me (applauses)

Pine and Gilmore, recommend business owners who stage experiences to bill their clients per experience, or for the time interval in which the experience took place (as opposed to billing for the goods and services that are used for the staging of the experience). For example, they suggest that gadget shops like Sharper Image and Brookstone, whose main offering is the experimentation with novelty items, would charge admission fees (after upgrading the experience they are offering)¹⁵⁴. While advocating that “you are what you charge for” Pine and Gilmore admit that for some experience stagers the best path is still to rely on tangible goods as mediators in the process of profit making. As they note, the most ubiquitous source of income for experience stagers, visible in every theme park, is memorabilia – which, as its name implies, is used to extend customers' experience by evoking its memory. For more evolved experiences that involve transformation tangible good can serve as insignia items –

In the nascent transformation economy goods producers can also make the emblems aspirants purchase to commemorate the transformation they underwent. Rings crosses, flags, trophies.. signify that their bearers have transformed themselves in some way ... All of these emblems further enable people to identify those who have undergone the same transformations and thereby initiate conversations and form communities¹⁵⁵.

Some of the products at the FLYshop, as she likes to point out, are ‘tools’; timers, dusters, mops, and FLY CDs are necessary or helpful in the execution of the FlyLady routines. However even those are usually marked by the FlyLady logo and typical colors. Most of the products sold on the FlyLady website fall neatly into the categories of memorabilia and insignia, like pink and purple T shirts with a FLY print, “I'm FLYing” lanyards, FlyLady dolls, FLY tote bags and license plates are some of these items.

Selling tangible goods wasn't Cilley's first idea of profit making. In fact, she told me that initially her only goal was to cover the FlyLady's expenses, since she initially found herself relying on her husband's income to maintain it:

¹⁵⁴ B. Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore. Page 62.

¹⁵⁵ B. Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore. Page 74.

... so FlyLady needed to pay her own way. We set out to have an advertising area. We thought we could sell ads and people would buy ads, and then we had the big boom (..) in Silicon Valley and the, the Internet popped, and, nobody wanted to do advertising on a website that, had no track record (....) That model did not work. But the ladies asked for tools. They asked for a calendar, because they didn't know how to use one. And there wasn't one that was efficient. So we found a calendar that would work. And we sold this calendar.(....) We came up with feather dusters. (...) I got online and went to the Thomas Registry, and found a company in Vancouver, Canada that made feather dusters. And they signed an exclusivity agreement with me to only put purple feathers in my feather dusters. And we sell a ton of them every year. (...) I never set out to have a business; I never set out to even be a boss. I just wanted to help people. And then it just came along. One thing led to the next. Our first product was a little FlyLady Clingy. And we sold them for \$3.00 apiece. And we took them in mail-orders (.....) Tom opened all the envelopes, took the checks out [*pause*] and we uh, Kelly and I filled the orders. And it was \$768.00, and I'll never forget it. I've probably got the deposit slip somewhere here.

Since then, Cilley has become a poster child for what Wired Magazine's Chris Anderson termed the Long Tail. Paypal, a subsidiary of e-bay specializing in payment mechanisms for the internet, featured the FlyLady as a "case study" in a brochure from 2006. After recounting the FlyLady's humble financial beginnings the brochure reads: "Today FlyLady.net offers a wide array of products through its website and has 22 employees and a million dollar payroll. When asked about this growth, Marla replied, 'we're just in shock. And so much of it is because of PayPal'" ¹⁵⁶

That same year, according to Fortune Small Businesses, the FlyLady's sales reached \$4 million. ¹⁵⁷ In 2008 Cilley moved her first ranking WorldTalkRadio satellite (and internet streamed) radio show, with its approximate 140,000 listeners, to the newly founded BlogTalkRadio, where she established her own channel, accompanied by new web forums. BlogTalkRadio, which brands itself as a democratic citizen radio platform, features Cilley in a prominent way on its homepage as well as in its press releases. Alan Levy, co founder and CEO of BlogTalkRadio, who reached out to recruit Cilley for his new enterprise, ¹⁵⁸ referred to her (to her mild protest) as "my Oprah" on one of their recent joint radio hours. Since Levy shares ad revenues with his hosts, and since Cilley brings to the table a large audience formerly unfamiliar with BlogTalkRadio, the cooperation between the two seems to benefit both.

The coupling of experience economy with the internet begets a conducive environment (which we may call 'long tail experience economy') for the advent of niche experience stagers like the FlyLady. The possibility to aggregate a large enough audience for its idiosyncratic offering from geographically dispersed areas, the low overhead costs that are characteristic of online vending, and the lack of shelf-space constraints typical of

¹⁵⁶ https://www.paypalobjects.com/WEBSCR-510-20080402-1/en_US/pdf/flyladyCaseStudy.pdf.

These days the FlyLady.net site does not use the services of PayPal anymore and has its own site-specific paying mechanism, which is probably an indicator for a further economic maturity.

¹⁵⁷ According to Susan Hauser, *How FlyLady nags her way to millions*, Fortune Small Businesses, August 16 2007. http://money.cnn.com/2007/08/16/smbusiness/Fly_Lady.fsb/index.htm

¹⁵⁸ According to a FlyLady email message Apr , 05 2008

traditional retailers, make it possible for the FlyLady to be profitable, in a way that was unimaginable in a pre-internet era. But unlike the average niche website selling microbrewed Lager, Acid Techno MP3s, or alpaca yarn ipod cozies, FlyLady.net, as demonstrated above, is much more than an internet store; it presents, for free (and, as Cilley told me “We’ll always be free”), all the nuts and bolts of the FlyLady system: zones, routines, missions, “FLYing Lessons”, links to forums and to free email reminders are all included.

This embedding of commerce at the heart of a larger, non-commoditized experience, which blurs the line between experience (or content) and sales is also typical of Cilley’s manner of speech, as exemplified by the back and forth transitions between inspirational words and worldly vending details at the end of her talk at the AMI convention quoted above. A look at a weekly dose of FlyLady emails to subscribers reveals a similar mix; a majority of inspirational words and testimonials for the FlyLady *system* peppered with occasional announcements and testimonial of FlyLady *products*. Sometimes the messages are mixed; For instance, a recent ‘morning musing’ email discussing the FlyLady’s 15 minutes tenet ended with a link to the timer at the FlyLady store.

As Pine and Gilmore state at the opening of their book on the experience economy, the biggest challenge for any entrepreneur is not falling in “the commoditization trap”; that is disillusionment on the part of customers and a realization that what is packaged as a customized service, experience, or transformation is still, at the bottom, an impersonal money-making device, in which case “differentiation disappears, margins fall through the floor, and customers buy solely on the basis of price, price, price.”

Like all entrepreneurs in the business of experience staging, the makers of the FlyLady also try to strike the right balance between commerce and experience, or using terms from Pine and Gilmore’s book title, between “business” and “theater”. This is particularly difficult for a property that urges its subscribers to resist the temptation of mass marketing and the aesthetics of home decoration magazines, to de-clutter and get rid of excessive material goods from their houses. This inherent contradiction has not, of course, escaped FlyLady subscribers (or at least not Leila):

Leila :

she’s all into giving things away rather than doing yard sales, but then when she does so many product placements it seems like she’s trying get us to have more cluttery stuff in our house. And I think that’s a blind spot of hers. I don’t think she actually realizes she’s doing that, even if people have pointed it out to her.

However, it seems that actually there *is* an awareness of this conflict on the part of the FlyLady staff as apparent from the following, slightly apologetic text, found in the FlyLady shop section of FlyLady.net:

My Control Journal
\$12.95 plus Shipping and Handling
Also available with FlyLady's Office in a Bag (\$49.95)

You have asked for it and here it is!!! We have always had mixed feelings about offering a control journal for you when we have all of the steps of how to build one in the FLYing Lessons section of the website. Our members have prevailed and you can now purchase "My Control Journal" complete with notes from FlyLady describing how to fill it out, adapt it for you and your home, and make it your own. We are SHEs and we sometimes find ourselves spending too much time "creating" instead of "doing". This control journal (49 pages) has everything from detailed cleaning lists for zones, menu planning, emergency contact info, routines, shopping lists, and more. The pages are holepunched and will fit in a standard 3-ring binder.

Despite attempts like this, some flylady subscribers sense a growing trend of product pushing, for instance:

Mary Joe;

.... Over the years, as I have been with the Fly Lady group, I've noticed, especially in the last year, that quite a few, at least half of the testimonials now sound like an advertisement, and that kind of irritates me (....) another thing that I first liked was, "Yes, we have the stuff for sale, but we don't expect you to buy any of it." Every once in a while you would get a testimonial of how great the duster is. ...

As long as the FlyLady keeps offering goods for sale, there is probably no way around the inherent tension between commerce and experience. I would like to suggest that, to some extent, what alleviates this tension is the relatively small gap between business and theater when it comes to the Flylady, a claim that I will further develop in the next segment. For now, I would like to point out that Cilley's expressive fusion of the inspirational and the profitable, of "testimonial" in its original denotation with what it has become to signify by countless commercials and infomercials, goes beyond sale pitches. As the following quote demonstrates Cilley is steeped in this kind of discourse to the extent that positive thinking is one of her strategies for business expansion:

MC: ... I mean, I see the, the FlyLady logo on a Windex bottle. In my head. And I've got people reaching out to Windex. I mean, if I could get Windex as a sponsor I'd put me a little Windex bottle up in the right-hand corner, where the little Franny cartoon is. In a heartbeat. "FlyLady recommends such-and-such." 'Cause they trust me. I'm not going to tell them something I don't love. ... I mainly believe in, one-stop-shop: Windex will do it all. And Windex is crazy, for not wanting me to be their spokesperson. But guess what? I think I will be. And I, I have no doubt about that. That you're going to see the FlyLady logo on a Windex bottle.

OK: Do you, at this point, use the services of focus groups or marketing experts?

MC: No. I have my brain. I don't, I mean, why would I want to go there? I've got too much to do. I know this is going to happen, and I just kind of send the little messages out into the world, via e-mail like, I tell the world, you know, "One day I'll be FlyLady on the, Windex bottle." [Laughs]

That Cilley maintains a high degree of authenticity while interacting with fans does not mean she is not a savvy marketer, or, as she puts it: "*I don't have a degree in marketing, but I know how to cross-promote.*" She also knows how to harness fan participation and use it to

promote the wellbeing of her brand. Tapping on her own experience with the *SHE's in Touch* board, she used Yahoo Groups (and recently also the site of blogtalk radio), to jumpstart regional web based flylady groups and then kept hands off and let them self-manage. In addition, she always encouraged self forming groups. Most importantly, and despite what she calls her own 'bossy' attitude, (which others sometimes describe as severe intolerance), Cilley never tried to litigate against groups which she may perceive as 'errant' or bad for her PR and using her system (like "Altfly", gay man flybabies, Muslim Flyladies, and probably the most infuriating – "Flying without shoes"). Instead, Cilley does cultivate and frequently mention other adaptations to her system of which she is fond, like Jewish flybabies and Payroll SHE's, and simply ignores the rest.

Flyenticity; the Aura of the FlyLady

There is a contradiction at the heart of the Flylady system. On the one hand, it is, as we have seen, a theatrical simulation; a comprehensive experience that is coming at its users with great alacrity several times a day, is ubiquitous on different platforms, and is penetrating the minute details of their everyday life. On the other hand, the FlyLady is not really a slick immersive experience. The most conspicuous aspect of the FlyLady being rough around the edges is the website's design and graphics that even after a recent major facelift signals that FlyLady (as of yet) is not owned by a corporation and lacks the means, the aspiration, or both, to use what become the standard of professional looking websites. Similarly, Cilley's aforementioned insistence on improvising her verbal communications (and that includes not only live appearances, but also recorded ones, like the greeting message on her website) also give a somewhat unpolished impression.

Another chink in the otherwise quite efficient FlyLady universe is best titled "superfluous". Unlike many other immersive experiences the FlyLady provides its users with many details that are not necessary in order to create its main effect, as the following examples illustrate. On May 13, 2008 the title of the FlyLady home page, which changes daily read "Happy birthday Leanne!" But only FlyLady old timers knew that the Leanne in question is Leanne Ely, "the dinner diva", a nutritionist who co-hosts with Cilley their "Saving Dinner" radio show, and is her co-author on "Boddy Clutter". Similarly, in the written introduction for one of their co-hosted radio shows Cilley writes: "This show is about connecting the dots. Leanne and I were instant messaging this afternoon. We couldn't wait to talk about this on a show!" Yet another example for this kind of behind-the-scene information that does not add up to a cohesive and consequential message is Cilley's sharing in one of her recent emails the fact that her husband, Judge Robert Cilley will be retiring soon. This kind of quirks work against Pine and Gilmore's advice to create a highly effective mnemonic space that "is rid of any features that do not follow this function. Enter Club Disney. There, everything revolves around play. Anything detracting from the experience, such as the opening of birthday presents, is excluded."¹⁵⁹

But the element that embodies the most the lack of theater in the FlyLady system is the Flylady herself. Marla Cilley does not seem to make too serious attempts to edit her FlyLady persona and make it more conducive to the main "function" of her property (despite the aforementioned maintenance, sometimes deliberate, of areas of ambiguity,

¹⁵⁹ B. Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore. Page 43.

and at times because of it). In fact, Cilley's projected personality is characterized by some inconsistencies and contradictions. This might seem trivial since Cilley is a real human being, and as such, cannot, and is not expected, to present the same neat package of traits and back-story of a Disney character. However, real people, like fictional characters, are the subject of the editorializing process that comes with mediation.

For the sake of comparison, the 'about' section of the website of Phil McGraw (who, like Cilley, is in the business of self improvement), reveals an approach to self presentation which is a pole apart. The doctor, who preaches millions to "get real," presents an almost hyperreal self and family portraits. The blurbs in this section of the Dr.Phil.com website contain very few and carefully picked personal details that fit neatly together and coalesce in the depiction of a picture-perfect and wholesome family. (McGraw, who often tackles on his show obesity and marital problems, is "an avid tennis player, golfer and scuba diver" and is "married for 31 years". His wife Robin "has made 'family first' her mission". His son Jay is nothing short of "a star athlete, a licensed pilot, a black belt in Tae Kwon Do, a certified SCUBA diver and an avid golfer".¹⁶⁰)

In sharp contrast, the list of personal details Cilley anecdotally released over the years on different occasions and platforms can make one's head spin. For example, her career history includes being a Mary Kay consultant, an accountant, a fly fishing instructor, a county commissioner, and a sawmill attendant, to name a few. The list of personal hurdles she overcame consists of, in addition to depression for which she was briefly hospitalized, dropping out of college, having a messy home, and some serious economic dire straits (according to one of her email message she lived in her car for a while). Her "Body Clutter" book contains a very candid account of her (unfinished) struggle with being overweight, including some of its more unpleasant and unsightly details.

True, all of these details, as mentioned above, do amount to a classic trajectory of a therapeutic narrative so popular in the self-help genre. It is also true that Cilley has talked occasionally about finding her vocation by becoming the FlyLady – a standard script in Protestant discourse. However, it is rare that she, or the FlyLady property in general, make overt claims tying all these personal details together into neat and schematic press-release worthy paragraphs. I find it revealing that the FlyLady website does not contain an "about" section. It seems like the convention underlying such sections is a division between a property and the people behind it; between their official duties as contributors to the website or to the establishment to which the website is related, and what they do as civilians. An extreme example for this division can be found in employees in theme parks, who are allowed to have personal conversations only in confined areas inaccessible to visitors, and otherwise must stay in character.¹⁶¹ In contrast, Marla Cilley, is always, yet never, in character, since she (for the most part) is the FlyLady. When I called her, many months after the AMI convention, she agreed, on the spot, to be interviewed for this chapter. After noticing heavy breathing that was taking place on the other side of the line, I couldn't help asking if she was working out on her treadmill

¹⁶⁰ <http://www.drphil.com/shows/page/bio/>

¹⁶¹ According to Pine and Gilmore, who recommend business owners to follow this example; B. Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore. Pages.55-56.

(which she occasionally mentions in her emails). “No” she answered; “I’m de-cluttering a hot spot”.

Practicing what she preaches, not trying to pose as something that she is not, and "letting it all hang out" are all elements that render Cilley authentic. FlyLady’s original innovative uses of different media, its quirky design, idiosyncratic terminology, and pulling back the curtain on its inner workings, render the *property* authentic. In addition, Cilley’s open attribution of Pam Young and Peggy Jones’s (or “pamandpeggy”’s) organization system as the kernel of her own, and their endorsement of her system, are quite unusual in the overlapping territories of self-help, self improvement, and spiritual guidance, where un-attributed citations are abound,¹⁶² and debates over charlatanism go back to ancient history. Last but not least, Cilley’s insistence on providing the core elements of her system online, for free, is pivotal for the preservation (or fabrication) of the FlyLady’s aura. Doing so can be viewed as a measure against Pine and Gilmore’s “commoditization trap” since, as Igor Kopytoff noted, the exclusion of objects and services from the realm of commerce, can result, and in certain traditional societies has resulted, in their sacralization¹⁶³. (Keeping a consecrated core, untouched by commerce, accompanied by satellite services and products that are for sale is also a business model, so to speak, typical of many contemporary religious organizations, including some Evangelical ministries.)

I would like to suggest that this authenticity, or appearance there of, shaped by all these elements, is a major contributor to the FlyLady’s success. In times when “Work Is Theatre & Every Business a Stage”, as experience economy penetrates aspects of life from coffee sipping to health care, a good dose of perceived authenticity can grant an evolutionary edge to media properties and contribute to their long term survival. Not surprisingly, the latest book by the duo that conceived the term Experience Economy is called *Authenticity: what consumers really want*. In this book, alongside astute cultural observations, they teach readers how to render (or fake) their businesses authentic, with elaborate diagrams, examples, and taxonomies like real-real, fake-real, real-fake, and fake-fake¹⁶⁴.

Correspondingly, in “The Reappearance of the Authentic,” Martin Hall described how themed parks and museums increasingly draw on indigenous ‘ethnographic’ artifacts and works of arts, and inject them at the heart of simulated experiences that by and large do not contain traces of the ‘real’ world. As Hall reminds his readers, Jean Baudrillard claimed that such simulated experiences, with their hyperrealist esthetics, distract from the fact that such a ‘real world’ (or the immediate and unmediated experience of it) does not exist anymore, even outside the gates of theme parks and “official” simulations¹⁶⁵. The following is Hall’s description of the validation mechanism behind the opening of a

¹⁶² Micki McGee. Page.63.

¹⁶³ Kopytoff, Igor, *The cultural biography of things: commoditization as process in Arjun Appadurai, The Social Life of Things . Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986). Page. 329.

¹⁶⁴ James H. Gilmore and B. Joseph Pine, *Authenticity · What Consumers really Want* (Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business School Press, 2007).

¹⁶⁵ Jean Baudrillard.

branch of the Guggenheim Museum amidst the Venetian, the exhibition of old fashioned museum objects in Disney World's EPCOT, and the presentation of authentic African artifacts (and people) in Disney's Animal Kingdom Lodge:

Caught up in Baudrillard's vortex where third-order simulation generates the mass production of commodities, which in turn fuel the consumer-led demand for ever innovative simulation, how can the entrepreneurs of the experience economy anchor their themed environments in ways that will make them memorable, valued, and worth paying the premium? One solution is to put back the aura back on the work of art, to reverse, for very specific set of objects, the trend that Benjamin identified in his investigation of authenticity and reproduction¹⁶⁶.

Hall's description of the authority of native and artistic objects at the center of simulacra, like heirloom species in the midst of grotesque, grafted, and genetically engineered orchards, is somewhat problematic since, from a remote enough vantage point, most cultural artifacts are mutants or grafts.¹⁶⁷ There is no better example for this than "*Tiger Attacking a Bull*" by Henri Rousseau, that was on display at the Las Vegas branch of the Guggenheim from September 2001 to March 2002.¹⁶⁸ This lush jungle scene, painted by a custom clerk whose only experience of the natural world was at Paris' Zoo, and one of whose main artistic influences were illustrated children magazines portraying African wildlife, has quite a lot in common with the aesthetics of the Venetian resort, host of the Guggenheim museum, where it was presented¹⁶⁹. What sat *Tiger Attacking a Bull* apart from its surrounding while on display there, and enabled it to perform the role of anchor bearing an 'aura', is a certain cultural capital it had aggregated over the years that the Venetian resort and casino lacks (starting with the enthusiastic, yet rather ironic, embrace of Rousseau by some of the main figures of Surrealism, and ending with the prestige attached to the Guggenheim brand).

Having said that, the comparison between Hall's examples and the authentication mechanism found in the FLYlady is still informative; in the FlyLady case, authentic anchors are often of the same level of hybridity, and carry the same (thin) cultural patina, as the simulated ones. Furthermore, the "reappearance of the authentic" at the heart of simulated experiences, as described by Hall takes place inside discrete pockets within simulations; whereas in the FLYlady case the simulated and the 'authentic' are intermingled to the point that it is, at times, hard to tell one from the other. This is not to say that the apparent differentiation between the two, for those who are able to make the distinction, is insignificant, since auras are all about appearances.

¹⁶⁶ The Reappearance of the Authentic by Martin Hall in: *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures global Transformations* By Ivan Karp, Corinne A. (Duke University Press, 2006).

¹⁶⁷ For a discussion of the tendency to describe social phenomena as stable see James Clifford's discussion of the 'ethnographic pastoral' in On Ethnographic Allegory, by James Clifford in James Clifford and George E. Marcus, editors *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (University of California Press, 1986).

¹⁶⁸ Masterpieces and Master Collectors; Impressionists and Early Modern Paintings from the Hermitage and Guggenheim Museums, September 16, 2001-March 17, 2002
http://www.guggenheimlasvegas.org/past/exhibition_187_page_8.html

¹⁶⁹ As was evident from a 2006 exhibition at the Galeries Nationales du Grand Palais in Paris named Le Douanier Rousseau that emphasized Rousseau's influences

One of the characteristics of the FLYlady as a niche property is that its particular ‘authentic anchors’ are not as universally recognized and acknowledged as the ones employed by more middle-of-the-road simulated experiences of the past. As an offshoot of older web property (*SHEs in touch*), going back to the early days of massively available internet in the US, the FlyLady (with its own offshoots and permutations) presents an advanced case of what Brynjolfsson, Hu, and Smith have called “Second Order effect of the Long Tail”:¹⁷⁰

The Long Tail can also facilitate second-order changes in consumer tastes. As markets with increased product variety, and increased information about these niche products, allow consumers to discover and purchase products that otherwise would be unavailable, consumers are led even further down the Long Tail. They begin to cultivate deeper tastes for these niche products, just as Professor Clemons refined his tastes for India pale ales.

Brynjolfsson, Hu, and Smith also state that the possibility to share, annotate, and create media, typical of web 2.0 accelerates this push towards the tip of the tail:

The ability of consumers to openly share product information creates numerous opportunities for artists, entrepreneurs, marketers and IT developers to shape and benefit from these new markets for information.

As readers may recall, Cilley’s transformation from a niche media consumer to a niche media producer was facilitated by such, even if more primitive, sharing and annotation feature, part of the *SHE’s in Touch* website. Taking advantage of the site’s forum Cilley formed a media property that is even more idiosyncratic, and hence closer to the tip of the tail, than *SHE’s in Touch*. With such processes of replication through permutation, digital reproduction comes full circle; as a matrix for the generation of media properties that cater, and known, to a limited number of people, it fabricates new objects of rarity, hence endowed with a certain ‘aura’. Furthermore, when it comes to the realm of self-help and spirituality these processes of replication and permutation (quite literally) bear resemblance to the splintering and re-splintering of churches and other spiritual movements, although in a much more rapid pace.

Conclusion

In writing this chapter, I tried to explicate the success of the FlyLady as a niche media property dedicated to self-transformation, a property created bottom up as a splinter of another niche media property, and is now a player in something I called long-tail experience economy (borrowing at once from Pine and Gilmore and Chris Anderson). As we have seen, the FlyLady utilizes the affordances of different media platforms in suggestive ways, as well as the charisma of its founder, and devises for its users experiences that many find life transforming.

¹⁷⁰ Erik Brynjolfsson, Yu Jeffrey Hu, Michael D. Smith (2006). From *Niches to Riches. Anatomy of the Long Tail*. MIT Sloan Management Review, 47(4), 67-71.

From the three case studies described in this thesis, the FlyLady presents the most pervasive one. Going back to the account in the introduction of Grant McCracken's description of the movement of meaning from the "culturally constituted world" to consumer goods and then to individual consumers, of the three, the FlyLady's point of intervention is closest to the individual consumer.¹⁷¹ Older home decoration TV shows served – by and large, in the capacity of traditional taste makers (e.g. fashion journalists) – and influenced the flow of meaning from culture to consumer goods, and, makeover programs such as *What Not to Wear* made 'case studies' of the flow of meaning from consumer goods to selected individuals. The FlyLady, by contrast, streams meaning from goods to individuals in a habitual manner and *en masse*. By orchestrating and directing grooming, possession, and divestment rituals, pertaining to objects in subscribers' houses (including, but not limited to FlyLady merchandise), the FlyLady performs a unique kind of intervention that brings to mind some old and new pervasive cultural forms and institutions.

In this chapter, I argued that part of the appeal of the Flylady is its response to the 'care deficit' affecting the lives of many women in the US. In part as a result of this care deficit (but not only), the hospitality with which subscribers treat the intense penetration of the FlyLady messages into their inboxes and lives in general is also a marker of a cultural shift. Much has been written about the increasing ease with which intimate life details are being divulged online, but with that a parallel process is taking place which is the increase in the penetration of the "culturally constituted world" into individual's daily life. These parallel processes of increased flows to and from individuals blur the previously demarcated borders (even if imagined ones) between the public and the private spheres; for many people, especially women, life at home has become also *life@home* – lived somewhere in a new territory, between the private and the public¹⁷². These new forms of life thrive on internet message boards, blogs, and social networking sites. They are also evident in FlyLady testimonials, like the following, written by Marie, a FlyBaby from Florida:

....The other day, as I was reading testimonials, it hit me. They were saying much of what I have always known and felt. As I finished each one, I was so surprised to see that the writers were from Ireland, Australia, and other far-away lands, not just the USA. I became aware of just how many of us there are. Then came the "AHA!" moment...

I had to clean my room, do the dishes, mop the floor, etc., ALONE!
Through FLYLady messages reaching all over the globe, I have the feeling that I am doing this with a huge group of sisters. Everyone knows that "many hands make light work." I don't feel alone as I FLY about, I imagine all the other FLYBabies with me, doing what I'm doing, blessing our homes TOGETHER. When I flap my wings and my

¹⁷¹ Grant David McCracken, *Culture and Consumption · New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988). Pages 71-89. See the diagram in the introduction to this thesis.

¹⁷² I have been influenced here by Stefan Helmreich's discussion of *life@sea* in Stefan Helmreich, *Alien Ocean: An Anthropology of Marine Biology and the Limits of Life.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming).

awesome feather duster, I laugh, knowing that millions of other wings are flapping with their dusters, too. What a mental picture that is!!!

I know that my dd #2¹⁷³, who lives over a thousand miles away and turned me on to FLYLady, is working on the current zone the same day as I am. When we chat on the phone, I don't have to ask what she did today, because we did it TOGETHER! I have never been happier, and I have never accomplished so much around the home as I have since becoming a member.¹⁷⁴

By claiming that other testimonials express much of what she has “always known and felt” and combining it with the hyperbole “millions of other wings”, the writer encapsulates part of the allure of the FlyLady; it taps on the universal contradicting yet complementary needs for expression of one’s uniqueness and for a sense of belonging to a community of like minded people.

Trying to think of other kinds of membership (subsets of the general population) where it is obvious to one member what the other does each day and sometimes even in what part of the day, does not bring to mind that many examples. One kind would be vocational groups (baristas turn on the espresso machine first thing in the morning, radio producers go over wire services). Another kind would be certain types of fandom, (daily soaps, season tickets). The other realm would be religion and spirituality. (All orthodox Jews fast on seven designated days a year. Myrtle and Charles Fillmore, founders of the Unity School of Christianity enacted a ‘long distance’ Silent Prayer every night at 9pm.) Of these three categories, the FlyLady is closest to the latter in the degree of emphasis on simultaneous action among members. This adds to other spirituality features the FlyLady possesses, like the charisma of its founder, and its unique blend of Christian and New Age discourses. This is not to say that the FlyLady is a religion; it is not, first and foremost because its producers and consumers do not consider it to be one. It is, legally speaking, a trademarked brand. Referring back to Pine and Gilmore’s assertion that experiences “... occur within any individual who has been engaged on an emotional, physical, intellectual, or even spiritual level,”¹⁷⁵ the FlyLady is a new kind of brand that engages its loyal, along these levels. It is also a brand that evolved, as we have seen at a time of a surge in spirituality and a merger between self-help, new age, and organized religion.

In *The Culting of Brands* Douglas Atkins writes:

We live in a spiritual economy. There is a marketplace for world-views and communities as well as good services. There are both consumers and producers of belief systems and community. And the laws of supply and demand apply as much in the spiritual exchange as they do in the economic. (...). We’ve reached a unique intersection in society that favors marketers. On the one side, established institutions are proving to be increasingly inadequate sources of meaning and community. On the other, there has been a growth of a very sophisticated kind of consumerism. (...) The confluence of these two trends is leading to these commercial creations being embraced by a population disillusioned by altogether

¹⁷³ “Dear daughter”

¹⁷⁴ Sent Thu, 30 Aug 2007

¹⁷⁵ B. Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore, p. 254, P.12

less satisfying, and often less trusted organizations. *Alongside alternative religions, brands are now serious contenders for belief and communities*¹⁷⁶.

Another kind of such serious contender is media consumption. With the FlyLady both our notions of a brand and religion are challenged, as well as the notion of ‘media property’, and it may indicate that a day may come when it would be difficult to tell where one ends and the others begin.

After the FlyFest (including the lingering small talks, phone numbers, and email exchanges) is completely over I embark on the monorail. At the strip, where I step down, the desert of the real welcomes me with its glaring sun and ninety plus degrees. As I head towards the Venetian, I pass through another, older, casino where I get a concentrated dose of cigarette smoke, which makes me think of the short pause my doctor took before telling me it was ok for me to go on this trip. Inside the Venetian, I am fascinated by the sights but quickly find refuge at a quiet café since I am tired and hungry. [In fact I am starving. The FlyFest included lunch, catered by AMI, but curiously the organization found it fitting not only to exclude vegetarians (whose courses usually also conform to kosher and halal diets), but also pregnant women of all cultural backgrounds, by offering nothing but two cold-cuts lunch options. Consequently, I find myself nibbling on the rim of a turkey club sandwich while praying that listeria is busy somewhere else.] After a while I get the sense that I over extended my stay at the cafe, and resume my strolling of the Venetian’s made-up streets and canals. As much as I am curious to explore this corner of this iconic city, I am even more exhausted, and start questioning the wisdom of flying here at this stage. I checked out of my hotel in the morning and have no idea how I’ll make it to my late flight without any rest at a horizontal condition. In my dazedness it looks like I keep hitting the same spots; an arabesque banister, a fresco, the hem of a dress, all become vague signposts, like odd shaped rocks in the middle of the desert, signifying that I may or may not have been here before. I finally manage to get out of the loop by following signs reading *Venetia Tower* without having any idea what that may mean. Keeping on with the signs, I take the elevator to an upper level, where, after wondering the corridors for a while, I discover no less than an oasis. Behind a glass wall I see lounge chairs scattered around in quite incredible a setting (although I, personally, would go easier on the statuettes). Back home, just to make sure that the whole thing wasn’t a mirage I google the place and find out that indeed, at least in the realm of press communicates, it does exist:

Surprised and delighted by what they see, the view of the private garden terraces, languid pools and vibrant fountains just beyond the glass enclosure appear to be illusory, but guests are pleased to learn that they are real. As an expanse of architectural sophistication, Venezia houses a level of privacy and seclusion commonly found at the world’s finest resorts.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁶ Douglas Atkin, *The Culting of Brands · When Customers Become True Believers* (New York: Portfolio, 2004), p. 230 <<http://www.loc.gov/catdir/toc/fy045/2004044283.html>>. p. 201-202 my emphasis

¹⁷⁷ <http://www.venetian.com/venezia.aspx#bouchon>

What the blurb fails to mention is a constant stream of tacky Italian pop songs, which is what hits me first when I open the glass door. It is pretty obvious that I'm not supposed to be here, but the opportunity to lie down is too tempting. Luckily no hotel staffer stops me from getting in. (For the second time today I am grateful for my choice of clothing; the skirt I wear, purchased at a French equivalent of a bargain basement, renders me exotic enough to give me the benefit of a doubt.) As I drag a recliner to a shady area, I decline the help of the poolside waiter with fitting magnanimity, and set my cell phone's alarm to leave enough time to catch my flight. Lying down I think of the myriads of glass enclosures out there, and how, like Alice, we morph ourselves to get in, with our devices of choice; be it potions, meditations, dress-ups, or 15 minutes Fling Boogies. Then I recognize that nothing around this wonderland is exactly real, or left in its pristine form – not even the sky above, reflected in the windows of the hotel walls, rising high above this lower-level patio. But next I recall that actually, right here, there is one such thing, or as close as it ever gets (before Peekaboos, bedtime routines, *NASCAR*, or *Simulacra and Simulation* get into the picture). Then I fall asleep to the sound of “I just called to Say I love you” in Italian.

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