4
Enacting ‘Reality’: Fat Shame, Admiration and Reflexivity

Host: ‘Well you look absolutely extraordinary.’
Biggest Loser contestant: ‘I am definitely a different person. I really like what I see now. And I like what I see inside and out. I’ve never been so confident in my life.’
Host: ‘Well I think you give hope to many people, and you’ve done an amazing thing so well done.’

Reality television makeover programmes present themselves as being able to make ordinary people famous and give them the opportunity to do ‘amazing thing[s]’. However, some commentators argue that they operate instead by selecting participants and staging situations that are already at some distance from ordinary life or the ‘normal’ (Bondebjerg, 2002). One such example is the reality television show The Biggest Loser. This show, and the meanings around fat, body image and selfhood critical to the subjects produced on it, is the focus of this chapter. As we will argue, the show generates new forms of the ‘normal’ self: specifically, a self preoccupied with, and unapologetically in search of, admiration and renown through weight loss and related goals of health and beauty. We ask: How does The Biggest Loser enact contemporary understandings of vanity through its deployment of the ‘makeover’ and values of self-improvement? More broadly: How does makeover television reconfigure the relationship between self, other, the proper reflexive subject and vanity? To what extent and in what ways does neoliberalism’s ideal of the reflexive self mitigate the anxieties about narcissism often evident in commentary on the show and its ilk? We consider these questions through an analysis of the most recent Australian programme, contextualising our observations against a discussion of media coverage of
the US and Australian shows, and the burgeoning critical literature on reality and makeover shows (Heller, 2007; Lancioni, 2009; Weber and Spigel, 2009). We also consider audience response to the show using material drawn from our interview-based research project on women’s approaches to health, weight and nutritional care. We are particularly interested in how, in the context of broader public health and media discourses on the risks of obesity, women respond to the show’s imperative to remake the self through extreme weight loss.

_The Biggest Loser_ offers a unique site in which to examine the processes by which subjects, both participants and viewers, are invited to ‘remake’ themselves through reality TV. In conducting our examination we consider how the show’s participants talk about their experiences, and how their statements are represented, particularly those that convey their hopes, desires and emotion. We examine the processes of self-transformation involved in individual weight loss, and the meanings attributed to them. In contemporary Western societies, attending to the body through weight management is a moral responsibility. We argue that through its depiction of extreme weight loss, the demands it places on its contestants, and the corporeal changes it celebrates so publicly, the show remakes subjects, creating new good vanities of the self as self-love, self-care, pride and self-esteem. Informing our analysis is the fact that the term ‘vanity’ is never explicitly raised by contestants, in coverage of the show, or even by critics. This is a notable absence given that the show demands intense focus on the self and celebrates a sense of inflated self-regard through radical bodily modification. As we explore in Chapter 5, negative attributions of vanity and narcissism as excessive self-regard dominate discussions of the blogosphere and social networking sites. Critics of blogging and social networking, like some critics of cosmetic surgery makeover culture, argue that they give rise to wholly negative forms of transformation through an extreme and superficial focus on the self. The absence of accusations of ‘vanity’ in discussions of _The Biggest Loser_ reminds us of the term’s slippery and shifting meanings across cultural sites and forms of self-production, as illustrated throughout this volume. In this chapter, we are interested particularly in how a powerful anti-fat ethic mitigates accusations of vanity in the context of _The Biggest Loser_ makeover, just as new good vanities of the self are engendered through this very public mode of corporeal self-transformation.

The ideals of selfhood _The Biggest Loser_ deploys operate widely across the reality television makeover genre (Heller, 2007; Sender and Sullivan, 2008; Weber, 2009; Weber and Tice, 2009). As with cosmetic surgery