

How to Be a Well-groomed Russian: Cultural Citizenship in the Television/New Media Interface

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Abstract: Every morning on Russia's Channel One, the makeover programme *Fashion Verdict* offers candidates and audiences sartorial advice appropriate to a middle-class sensibility. The show sets out to transform so-called dowdy candidates in ill-fitting clothes into style icons. The transformation helps each candidate find her 'true self', 'empowerment' and other such coveted end-goals. The show is an exercise in governmentality through which viewers' conduct as well-groomed citizens can be influenced. On the programme's official message board, however, viewers also participate in the articulation of the show's cultural ideals, specifically those of femininity and individuality, and work on making the show's prescriptions correspond to reality as they understand it. Thus, the makeover enterprise is a multi-platform text where online audiences not only consume but also become co-arbiters of the sartorial discourse, making their engagement with the show's prescriptions an exercise in cultural citizenship.

Keywords: reality television, internet, modes of reception, cultural citizenship

Makeover television is aspirational television that addresses viewers as consumers and encourages them to tend to their bodies with the attention appropriate to a middle-class sensibility. Broadcast on Channel One [Pervyi Kanal], *Fashion Verdict* [Modnyi Prigoovor] is one of the most popular Russian makeover shows and its aim is to help the uninitiated attain refined sophistication and a fashion sense that is conducive to their personal and professional ambitions. The audience at home is inscribed in this text by virtue of the candidates being from the very same viewing public; candidates, therefore, are not celebrities. Additionally, the hosts make sure to address all comments about fashion culture to the camera so that the living room audience is left in no doubt that they are to benefit from this sartorial wisdom. The audience then has the opportunity to go online and further deconstruct and re-articulate this fashion philosophy in Channel One's official web forum for the show.

Shows that offer lifestyle makeovers with unsubtle missives on what constitutes the good life require for their success that audiences reconsider what is possible and desirable in their real lives. In other words, reality television is ‘notoriously dialogic’ as it depends on audience interpretations to acquire meaning and relevance (Gray 2008, 268). In the digital age, the Russian audience’s negotiation of televisual epistemes of reality/fiction takes place in online communities where audiences take it upon themselves to co-produce the meaning of shows through the sharing of their readings. While audiences have always actively interpreted media texts by making links between what they watch and their own individual cultural repertoires, the internet enhances this semiotic process of meaning-making. This is done by providing legitimate spaces for the sharing of such readings in special forums set up specifically for that purpose. The interactive technologies of the internet have blurred the boundaries between television programme production and consumption, making the new televisual text a multi-platform text (Jermyn and Holmes 2006).

This paper intends to explore the *Fashion Verdict* audience through the prism of viewers’ comments on the official message board of the channel.¹ The show seeks to discipline audience conduct by condemning shabby dressing, promoting consumption and encouraging viewers to aspire to appropriate sartorial goals. However, the presence of the official forum means there are multiple semiotic sites for the cultural text of the show to be interpreted and re-produced. This paper examines online posts not as unmediated reflections of what many viewers ‘really think’ (as this cannot be ascertained only from comments on the board), but rather they are studied as performatives meant for the show’s hosts, through which these viewers construct their public selves as critical viewers capable of decoding the text and invulnerable to the media’s ideological machinations. This digital practice renders *Fashion Verdict* a multiplatform text and a site of tension between competing visions of what it means to be a well-groomed Russian.

The fashion tribunal and its new media interface

The aim of *Fashion Verdict* is to guide candidates and the home audience in the art of fashion consumption, that is, to instruct them on how to dress responsibly and stylishly. The makeover show is an exercise in governmentality or disciplining public conduct at a distance (Gibbings and Taylor 2010).² It seeks to shape audience desires, tastes, values and aspirations. Consumption is key to this agenda as the individual’s body becomes a site for transformation and a means to take control of his or her life. Although *Fashion Verdict* is open to both men and women, it is predominantly women who both participate in and watch the show.³ Each *Fashion Verdict* episode usually begins with an account of a candidate’s life-story, which focuses on the personal challenges and trials that resulted in the participant’s neglect of her physical appearance. While western makeover shows such as ‘What Not To

¹ Although part of a globally popular televisual trend, this makeover show is locally conceived and produced, and not a Russian version of an international television franchise.

² Gibbings and Taylor use ‘governmentality’ in their analysis of British makeover show *What Not To Wear*; this Foucauldian phrase suggests that contemporary political power is wielded not through direct oppression or control but through ‘governing at a distance’, through the institutions of culture.

³ Hereafter, the article will use the feminine pronouns ‘she’ and ‘her’ (instead of he/she or his/her) to refer to participants, since women dominate the pool of makeover candidates.

Wear' conceal the didactic function through an informal, at least seemingly freewheeling, egalitarian interaction between tastemakers and candidates, *Fashion Verdict*, set up as a public tribunal, is formal and pedantic.

Figure 1. Dressed in the stylists' choice of clothes, a candidate presents herself to the fashion jury.



Source: <http://www.tv1.ru/> (accessed 10 June 2010).

As illustrated in Figure 1, the spatial politics of the show also suggests the authoritative position that the hosts/tastemakers ascribe to themselves while judging the participant, who does not share the elevated podium. In every episode, candidates are literally 'accused' of poor taste and of being negligent about their attire, and are advised to dress in a manner that will bring them personal empowerment, well-being and professional success. The show's hosts, three fashion gurus, initially have a candidate select her own wardrobe which the studio audience observes and rates. The fashion opinion-makers give it a 'thumbs-up' or 'thumbs-down' or a combination of both, and cite various reasons for why it is not an appropriate choice. The candidate then places herself in the hands of the stylists and submits to a makeover, consisting of a new hairstyle, new clothes and (we are told) a new disposition. The studio audience then rates the candidate's own choice of wardrobe/appearance and compares it to that of the stylists; more often than not, the studio audience chooses the stylists' ideas over the candidate's, who leaves with her new clothes, apparently pleased. It ends with before/after shots (Figure 2) that are central to conveying how effective a transformation has been.

Figure 2. This screengrab shows the candidate before and after her makeover.



Source: <http://www.1tv.ru/prj/moda/vypusk/4555> (accessed 15 June 2010)

The tastemakers' 'diktat' prevails on the show but the platform for the show's performance extends well beyond the televised episode. The show holds out the promise of close engagement with the public, tapping into widespread fears, ideas and sympathies in order to shape these in turn. The audience, the subject of this governmentality, does participate in this discursive enterprise. Nowhere is this participation more explicit than in the web forum. Online viewers are media-citizens whose engagement with the show is buttressed by the interactive potential of the official message board. Channel One's official forum (see Figure 3) has 70,000 registered members and its discussion threads for *Fashion Verdict* and its other shows enhances the image of the show's producers and hosts as accessible, and allows for viewers to interact with the programme and feel they have a say in the shape it takes. Although there are many internet forums that allow viewers to share readings of *Fashion Verdict*, the official forum is of interest because here the producers' direct embrace of the audience highlights the potential of television's interactivity. This paper is an analysis of approximately 4,500 posts on the official message board. This *Fashion Verdict* forum does not have multiple threads but one single, continuous thread running into several hundred pages for the discussion of all episodes (see Figure 4). After each episode, the first viewer online sets the agenda for the discussion to ensue, but the exchanges subsequently meander between topics. The absence of threads within threads means the debate is without thematic parameters.

Figure 3. A screengrab of the Channel One web forum shows discussion threads for several programmes, including *Fashion Verdict*.

Название темы	Ответов	Автор	Просмотров	Последнее сообщение
Важные темы				
ВАЖНО: <i>Влюбная передача</i>	613	"Fire Fly"	38 388	12.6.2010, 3:21 Посл. сообщение: <i>Надя</i>
ВАЖНО: <i>Нелюбимая передача</i>	909	ВAG	58 285	11.6.2010, 14:03 Посл. сообщение: <i>Ренета</i>
ВАЖНО: <i>Минута славы 4</i>	553	Алтер Науру	38 949	18.5.2010, 7:43 Посл. сообщение: <i>уял7</i>
ВАЖНО: <i>Участники!</i> Набор участников в проект Первого канала	0	Алтер Науру	1 296	8.3.2010, 19:33 Посл. сообщение: <i>Алтер Науру</i>
Темы форума				
<i>Счастье есть!</i> С Еленой Чекаловой	620	MC Film	38 026	Сегодня, 13:39 Посл. сообщение: <i>Вябала</i>
<i>Лидовое посещение</i> Шоу Александра Жулина	65	Алтер Науру	1 328	Сегодня, 13:25 Посл. сообщение: <i>Алеушка</i>
<i>Праздничные концерты</i> на Первом канале	101	vic	8 801	Сегодня, 13:13 Посл. сообщение: <i>Михайког</i>
<i>Пока Все Дома</i>	163	"Никола Степа"	26 063	Сегодня, 8:40 Посл. сообщение: <i>Нера</i>
<i>Детективы</i>	199	Турболет	35 428	Сегодня, 8:03 Посл. сообщение: <i>Алеушка</i>
<i>Модный приговор</i>	5 946	Колочка	331 045	Вчера, 7:35 Посл. сообщение: <i>Добрый Экс</i>
<i>Хочу знать</i> С Виктором Цирковцом	52	Алтер Науру	6 585	Вчера, 0:38 Посл. сообщение: <i>Мерседес</i>
<i>Большая разница</i>	896	Nishaa	77 565	Вчера, 0:27 Посл. сообщение: <i>Мерседес</i>
<i>Малахов</i>	682	avodion	91 693	Вчера, 0:24 Посл. сообщение: <i>Мерседес</i>
<i>Соперники нации</i>	508	Алтер Науру	23 850	11.6.2010, 15:14 Посл. сообщение: <i>Мерседес</i>
<i>Рубик Всмогущий</i> Юмористическое интервью-шоу	198	MC Film	17 287	10.6.2010, 22:06 Посл. сообщение: <i>Мерседес</i>
<i>Прометей-экскурсион</i> Часть 2	280	Алтер Науру	17 452	10.6.2010, 14:46 Посл. сообщение: <i>Вожан</i>

Source: <http://forum.1tv.ru/index.php?> (accessed 15 June 2010).

Figure 4. A screengrab of the Fashion Verdict thread that runs into more than 200 pages.

Сообщение #5941
11.6.2010, 13:01
Лично на меня Арчи Швартов проводит впечатление много подает. Но, к сожалению, не делится, что она имеет передачу "под рукой", просто, видимо, она не знает или не хочет делиться рецептами для изготовления раскрасочности лица камеры.

Сообщение #5942
11.6.2010, 13:15
Мне все интересно, какие впечатления выданы в вечерних передачах хотя бы пробыли на зрителя, спортивного программы устрою? Я не знаю время работы программы, но все знает, что показывает ей устрою, так почему бы не выбрать соответствующий туалет без лишних потерь, флиблэ и обилием украшения? Вспомню, по всей известности, законно (даже между 1920-ми годами самим образом и прической). Ужасно ему не хватает и все будет ок. Скорее всего передачу, перебранные волосы и поведут перед камерой передачу и поведут в камеру волос. А вот "контрастные" (различные выходы) подделками. Как можно избежать в этом возрасте говорить "ты стала старее"? Нужно говорить "ты стала элегантнее", если уже очень хочется подчеркнуть совершенные черты и возраст.

Сообщение #5943
11.6.2010, 13:41
Я править (давать и получать, не могу), у меня даже только! @ Превидна мне в целом нравится мостовик на не что. И в восторге от Зелькины, за ней лично почти все восторгом. Нравится Васильев и Зайцев, которого я бы с начала года видела нагу до всего. Но вот последнее же больше проводить в состоянии роли своего мостовика, деловыми, которые (как бы подделками) умнее и назвать не надо назвать не могу. Событиями проблемой правилось. Сплетства, покая, лучше всего является именно аватарские IT.
Да мне тоже "убила" ретина дожди! "Ты стала старее" @ Работает только и элегантно. Старая она выглядит, когда волосы сильнее мостовика, мостовика.

Source: <http://forum.1tv.ru/index.php?showtopic=69637&st=5920> (accessed 12 June 2010).

The message board has hundreds of posts directly addressed to the show’s hosts in the hope that they will read them or that the messages will be conveyed to the powers-that-be. On occasion the website hosts an online conference open to viewers. Its promise of interactivity, however, is undone by its format. Viewers have to send in queries in advance, and the

host who appears in the online video conference pre-selects the queries he/she will answer.⁴ Neither is there direct engagement with viewers in the conference, nor is the message board ever referred to during televised episodes. The forum's members are unaware of the real impact of their participation online, yet its proximity to the show's producers and the channel renders this site more appealing than other web forums for *Fashion Verdict*. The viewers/users' agency, whatever its real impact, is enabled by the digital environment, demystifies the role of television's tastemakers and mitigates the didactic function of television.

This convergence between television and new media has resulted in the mainstreaming of fandom, where larger audience communities now use the internet daily to engage with television (Pullen 2000). Online audience forums are not always fan sites but 'communities of practice' that emerge at the intersection of old and new media. Like all audience forums, these have their own rules of engagement. Channel One's forum demands that no political, national or religious issues be discussed in the forum. It demands that posts are respectful not only to other posters but also to the Russian language, with a special request that semantic rules be obeyed.⁵ There is no quest for a commonality of views here; the forum is interesting to its members for its plurality of positions. Unlike fan communities associated with major films, cult television series and works of literature, these spaces are not used for the writing of fan-fiction and making of fan videos but are purely discussion boards. The level of investment each member makes varies greatly and not everyone who participates here is necessarily a fan of the show. These viewers/users do not display traditional fannish behaviour but get together with others to critique, deconstruct the show and perform for one another. The forum becomes a place for an ironic mode of engagement. Many who post like to share their critical, tongue-in-cheek comments about the show, rather than engage in adulation of its hosts or participants. This means that the spectrum of opinions about the reality show is wide-ranging, as the reader will see in subsequently discussed illustrations. When posters argue that they are not in the forum to assuage the egos of the editors and producers but to share their reflections, they effectively convey the predominant tone and mode of engagement.

Contrary to the negative construction of the reality TV audience as 'unthinking voyeurs, unwitting dupes of commercialist broadcasters [or] in danger of mistaking reality TV programmes for "reality"' (Hight 2001; qtd. in Holmes and Jermyn 2004, 216), the *Fashion Verdict* audience in the official forum is keen to show itself as conscious of the ploys and strategies of the television and marketing industries. When a discussion about the show's authenticity ensues, one member writes: 'In reality this is trash. Just done for ratings...it would be boring if the show had ordinary candidates with no exciting histories to spice up their makeover agendas; it is after all entertainment' (f. 26.9.2007).⁶ This sceptical tenor is common to most messages in the forum, indicating that audience posts are performatives meant to showcase how savvy they are in decoding the media text. Members convey routinely that

⁴ This format of a web conference whose interactive potential is never fully realized mirrors Putin's own web conferences, where he responds to pre-selected questions instead of participating in a freewheeling, if managed, discussion.

⁵ Russian fan communities insist on good grammar, civil language and meaningful posts, and do not encourage the celebrated and irreverent *padonskii iazyk* (the internet jargon that constitutes a counter-culture opposed to conventional linguistic norms).

⁶ The full usernames of posters will not be used for reasons of privacy.

they know the show is staged, although they may differ in opinion about the extent to which it is staged. Every clue in an episode that suggests that it is a scripted performance has the sceptics emerge and write self-confident posts about how they knew all along that it was stage-managed. Others post that they know it is scripted and would rather the show's organizers did not pretend that the candidates were real people with real problems. The appearance, on occasion, of the show's makeover candidates to share with others in the forum the experience of being a candidate also hurts the show's claims to being about 'reality'. These visitors to the forum are barraged with questions about the authenticity of the show. One candidate writes that the show is really about allowing the taste ideologues to have their say but she nevertheless found it a useful exercise. Then the excited discovery that a participant looked familiar because she had been on another reality show leads to a cynical exchange:

K: I feel cheated now (31.7.2009).

m: clearly, you just have to get yourself to Ostankino and wander from studio to studio to appear on TV (3.8.2009).

The audience's mocking, ironic stance with regard to the show's production does not preclude self-reflexivity; viewers also use the show's text to reflect on reality off-screen as it is or as it should be. Research on reality television audiences has demonstrated that viewers know something is mediated and performed, and yet are willing to extrapolate larger message from the show (Hill 2007). Audiences step in and out of the mediated world; they appreciate that the show is artifice to some extent, but nevertheless take the trouble to consider its claims to being about real life. In the digital forum, the viewers' narratives and that of the show converge in a common social space. This partly ironic, partly identificatory mode of engagement is typical of online audience forums, while simultaneously reflecting television's own straddling of illusory and real worlds. Such self-reflexivity suggests that a show's prescriptive ideas may acquire other textual layers when viewers begin to relate them to their everyday experiences. This dialogue the audience has with the text results in a spectrum of positions, varying from 'against the grain' readings to more conformist interpretations.

The culture of aspiration

Fashion Verdict, like other reality shows, seeks to transform personal appearance to conform to middle-class tastes, while only superficially considering social factors that produce a disparity of lifestyles. Both on-air and off-air, the show's hosts have routinely emphasized the need for Russia to have a show that instructs on sartorial matters, given its history of modest, understated fashion which stressed the 'natural' look. The show is unabashedly about disseminates symbolic and cultural capital to the uninitiated. In an interview about how the show has shaped the Russian sense of dress outside the metropolises Vyacheslav Zaitsev, Russian couturier and currently the main host of the show, states: 'Simple people of various ages, professions and regional backgrounds now have the feeling that they can join in the practice of high art' (Zaitsev 2009). One woman participant 'accused' of looking shabby is described as having a Soviet upbringing because she thinks beauty is about being smart and confronting challenges head-on, and not about dressing stylishly (Fashion Verdict [FV] 5 February 2008).

In light of this legacy, the cultural intermediaries of *Fashion Verdict* see their role as critical in instructing the unfashionable on how to dress in a style that is 'not funny, awkward, scattered, but harmonious and befitting the times' (FV 5 February 2008). The message is clear. Deviant dressers (Gibbins and Taylor 2010) must learn to 'harmonize' their styles and must acquire the skills to do so by watching and participating in this programme.

The similarities between such projects and the civilizing mission of *kul'turnost'* are striking (their presumptions and vocabularies correspond); however, the attributes, scale and boundaries of consumption are decidedly different in the neo-liberal present. Where Soviet *kul'turnost'* always stressed moderation and eschewed bourgeois excess, *Fashion Verdict* has no qualms about treating audiences primarily as consumers.⁷ One of the hosts, Arina Sharapova, pleads in one episode: 'Do not neglect to replenish your wardrobe routinely. Only then will you not risk being left behind by the vagaries of fashion. At least buy yourself one thing every month' (FV 31 March 2008). Despite regular disclaimers that one need not spend a fortune to look good, hosts routinely 'accuse' candidates of wearing 'mass-market clothing' (*shirpotreb*), a tendency they believe must be kept in check. Like makeover shows elsewhere, consumption is seen as the key to improving the quality of a candidate's life. The audience is never told how much the new wardrobe actually costs, but everyone is expected to aspire to it.

Research has shown that a substantial section of audiences for reality television in the west accept that shows teach them about lifestyle choices, even if they are aware of these being scripted entertainment programmes (Hill 2007; Michelle 2009). And, indeed, the message of the show that style and taste can be imparted or acquired and that such an endeavour is essential for an individual's well-being is unchallenged in the forum; viewers do see the programme's uses for those with less cultural capital. Posters dispense free advice about online stores where those outside the large cities can go about acquiring the appropriate wardrobe. A candidate from a small town who gets to take home the stylists' choice of clothes prompts this comment: 'When someone like her, who lives in a province with limited means and resources, can close the gap between the reality of her lifestyle and what she aspires to, even if briefly, you realize the value of the show' (T 30.10.2007). Online viewers concur that corporeal makeover is conducive to a woman's psychological well-being, and even wish the show would dwell more on the life-stories of the candidate instead of treating the transformation superficially.

This convergence of positions notwithstanding, what the candidate's transformation must involve and what its boundaries must be is further articulated in the online community. For viewers/users, discussing this involves inscribing the self into the televisual discourse of cultural consumerism. The televisual text has always been an open text, open to the semiotic productivity of its viewers. But it is particularly open in the age of the digital forum. In these online spaces, as viewers do identity work and articulate what it means to be a well-groomed Russian, they take the original text, deconstruct and then reassemble it, weaving in their personal, 'everyday' narratives. The viewers consider themselves co-arbiters of fashion with the show's hosts (for whom they have varying regard), and use the forum to disseminate their

⁷ The parallels between *kul'turnost'* and the neo-liberal mediated civilizing mission deserve a more thorough comparative analysis than the parameters of this article can accommodate.

own fashion advice for the candidate and for others in need of such mediation. Online viewers' posts are performatives that construct their identities as authoritative voices, knowing about fashion and style yet keeping these commensurate with everyday realities that the show disregards. One of the more confrontational posts reads: 'Women's consciousness is being manipulated by the fashion industry and we should beware of losing grip on reality' (S 23.4.2008). Significantly, although the producers use a studio audience to convey an impression of public sanction and approval, the audience at home is just as sceptical of that group of viewers. When on one occasion the stylists' choice of clothes is particularly incomprehensible, online posters are just as perplexed by the studio audience's standing ovation (G.14.4.2010). To them the studio audience on many occasions is the reality television equivalent of the embedded war correspondent, complicit and incapable of being critical unlike the audience at a distance. The audience online, on the other hand, ascribes to itself the role of a shrewd observer that can see reason and sift the real from the staged. Once in the forum, viewers take the show's core sartorial prescriptions and deconstruct its main discursive devices, particularly that of femininity and individuality.

Rearticulating femininity

Fashion Verdict's discourse of the sartorial Russian is usually played out on a woman's body. The show's hosts call for women to be proud of their femininity. In Russia, this championing of femininity is—on some level—a political assertion, juxtaposed against feminism. To many Russians, feminism sounds eerily similar to the Soviet shibboleth of gender equality which meant women bore greater burdens, having to work outside the home and yet fulfil their societal role of reproduction and motherhood. To them, feminism is also a radical politics that is anti-chivalry and anti-men (Sperling 1999, 68-70). Online viewers are no different. 'Feminism doesn't mean the American version of aggressiveness and protest, but a defence of the rights of women. There's a big difference!' (G. 28.8.2007). Although Russian posters here define this as oppositional to western feminism, in reality feminism in the west has also lost its earlier radical political associations in mainstream mediated culture. In the west, televisual makeovers are a post-feminist text where the women's liberation issue has shifted away from questions of power and domination and is linked instead to consumption and aspiration (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2006; Heyes 2007). *Fashion Verdict* reflects these shifts. Its narrative elides the femininity/feminism binary by insisting that women who work at looking feminine, can feel empowered. Feminist Larissa Lissytukina stated that what is to a westerner a sexist stereotype is for the Russian woman 'a return to individuality and to the forcibly wrested feminine "I"' (Lissytukina 1993; qtd. in Bartlett 2006, 187). Likewise, to the hosts of the show and the viewers online, femininity is something women can take pride in and enhance, in the name of exercising their right to do with their bodies what they will. The vocabulary of the woman candidate's makeover borrows from the political; practically every episode tells the audience that a woman is entitled to look feminine, to take pride in her sexuality, and be confident of her body.

What this 'femininity' really means, however, is further deconstructed and reassembled by members of the forum. Viewers find that stylists on the show often succumb to a western aesthetic of modern femininity. On such occasions, the position of tastemakers as the authori-

tative voice is not sacrosanct. Forum members are none too pleased with the scissor-happy stylists who insist that a woman wears her hair in a closely cropped fashion. The members who post in the forum voice instead another vision of what it means to look like a woman: 'Can't believe what they did to the candidate's hair today. They made her a clone – this is how all the young people wear their hair...long hair is feminine, and the mark of a real woman. This is subjective but it is certainly a view held by a majority of people here' (S. 14.11.2009). Another forum member thinks one makeover candidate is now 'indistinguishable from her husband and son' and 'no longer feminine' (bv 28.1.2010). Viewers counter the show's narrative of stylish femininity with one they consider more gender-appropriate: 'Like men look good in the military outfit, in khaki, women have always had the skirt, the simple white blouse, which in my humble opinion is very beautiful. Why women abandoned this for men's clothes like trousers and boots, I will never know' (S. 23.4.2008). These articulations of what femininity means to them are closely imbricated in articulations of national identity. Viewers in this forum discuss how Russian women know what it means to look like women unlike their western counterparts who seem to want to efface their feminine selves by dressing like men, in some 'distorted' belief that this gives them parity with others. 'Foreigners are always surprised at how feminine our women are. That's how it should be – why are their women forever in those trousers and sneakers, dreadful hair, pale unmade up faces. Does their society think looking like a normal woman is provocative and unbecoming?' (E. 4.9.2007). Most posters perceive and discuss the western feminine aesthetic as though it were a monolith, rather than the highly differentiated spectrum of positions that it actually constitutes.

Members' own views on how women must dress are also multiple and many are opposed to the show's penchant for markers of emphatic femininity that they consider far from pragmatic. For instance, comments in the forum counter the show's obsessive emphasis on being skinny: 'An attractive, young woman with a wonderful smile....why the big fuss about her weight?' (Ch. 26.11.2008) and 'an open smile is more important than a soulless, starved body' (G 26.11.2008) are some of the comments that argue for a more forgiving aesthetic. Post after post calls the hosts' attention to the vagaries of daily life. Indeed the show pays little heed to social disparities or everyday inconveniences. Impractical choices by stylists remind viewers that makeover television could use a dose of reality. The main point of contention for the web audience is that hosts insist that candidates wear stilettos, with absolute disregard for physical health. Mocking posts follow an episode where the show's stylists insist that 'family life is like a podium – a woman must always be dressed as though in a parade, on display' and therefore on high heels! One person writes in the forum: 'Once again, the ubiquitous high-heels. [The hosts] say flats appear only in the health section of a magazine. But what's wrong with that? Is health unfashionable?' (P. 27.7.2009). And conversations read like the one below:

V: I have often expressed my despair that Evelina [ed: Evelina Khromchenko, one of the three hosts] insists on putting every candidate on high-heels, and has even said that discomfort is necessary to look beautiful. I doubt this very much! (14.2.2009)

B: yes, especially when this is her advice to a pregnant woman. I doubt that doctors will approve of her asking someone who is pregnant to run on stilletoes (19.2.2009)

Recommendations of symbols of emphatic and impractical femininity are thus reframed in terms more realistic and commensurate with the vicissitudes of life for the 'average woman'. The small video clip about her personal trials and tribulation that precedes the televised makeover gives the illusion that the producers consider the candidate's real habitus; yet the makeover does not take into account what her routine and resources might accommodate. However, clearly, viewers in this forum do not accept this uncritically. Their posts about how women 'really live' are meant to communicate to the show's producers that not everyone has the time or money to engage in the work of looking well-groomed all the time. In one episode, the host goes so far as to state that viewers must be dressed at home as they would when they go out and advises audiences to resist the urge to lounge around in sweatpants (FV 13 July 2009). The disciplining of physical appearance thus transitions seamlessly into a governing of the domestic space and personal time. The forum debates display a mocking disregard of this regime of discipline that is inherent to such sartorial ideals and reflective of the show's cultural snobbery. One viewer writes: 'Didn't it strike you, that constantly walking around in a dress is simply inconvenient?' (Ch. 23.4.2008) In the forum, fashion must be comfortable, pragmatic and cognizant of context. The sceptical post of one viewer reads thus: 'who would wear an evening gown to the bakery? only someone who's had no time to change out of her outfit would do this. The bakery is the most democratic place when it comes to attire – it doesn't matter what you wear, they'll still sell you bread' (P. 14.7.2009).⁸ The stage-managed, prescriptive world of *Fashion Verdict* is clearly at a distance from real life. The online forum to these posters is then the reality check that the show needs; new media users act to mediate the simulated reality of an old medium.

Reframing individuality

As each candidate sashays down a ramp transformed by the stylists into a fashion icon, the hosts applaud that her 'inner personality' has now found new, stylish expression. Like other makeover shows, the transformation is meant to be about more than just style; it is also about effectively conveying a candidate's individuality. Inherent to the market-driven discourse of neoliberalism, as manifest in such reality shows, is the political imperative that is individualism. The resulting paradox of normalizing consumer behaviour, yet asserting that individuality can be wrested through customization is resolved in the makeover discourse. On the one hand, the rhetoric of *Fashion Verdict* emphatically insists on conformity to norms and a harmonization of styles. Think of Sharapova's recommendation of monthly retail therapy so the media citizen is not left lagging behind new fashion trends. And remember Zaitsev's reasoning that *Fashion Verdict* is necessary for inefficient dressers to harmonize their styles, lest they constitute an awkward jarring note. Yet, this outward conformism is also said to enable

⁸ In the film *Diamond Arm* [Brilliantovaia ruka], Nonna Mordukova's character says, 'Our people don't hire a taxi to go to the baker's'. Her comment is a caustic observation about the few who enjoyed an ill-gotten wealth and the vast swathes that had few such privileges in the Soviet Union. This post's similarity to this iconic line in *Diamond Arm* is striking, especially in its articulation of the bakery as an everyday, popular cultural space that does not discriminate on the basis of wealth. Despite the similarity, however, the discussion on the board was quite literally about what to wear when going about everyday chores, and thus, also about what to wear to the bakery.

the assertion of the authentic and distinctive inner self. In a recent episode, a candidate is accused of dressing vulgarly although her identity is far from vulgar (FV 4 March 2010); she is not an effective dresser because what she wears tells us little about her. In other instances, candidates are said to have lost sight of who they are and the makeover is then their voyage of self-discovery. One candidate's relative who signed her up for the makeover says: 'Natalia is smart and fun-loving. But she needs help finding her true self' (FV 15 June 2009). And, indeed, in the aftermath of a makeover the candidate's radiant glow is attributed to her locating and artfully showcasing her distinctive individual persona in her new clothes. Usually, unsurprisingly, each beneficiary of the makeover agrees with this contention.

For most in the web forum, however, the end result of the show is the presentation of a homogenous plastic stereotype, a woman with bleached blond hair in the inevitable skirt, 'condemned' to wearing stilettos. For these posters, the show fails to preserve the person's individuality and turns each candidate into a prototype common within the public realm. Each candidate's transformation, effected by those with expertise, results in an 'erasure of habitus' (Philips 2005, 224). A commodification of taste and style prescribed by the stylists effaces each candidate's repertoire of experiences, world-views and preferences. One viewer refers to the transformation of a perfectly normal looking woman into a so-called icon as the 'clipping of an angel's wings' (f. 9.10.2007). The show's tendency to sideline a candidate's personal background, tastes and desires is routinely criticized by online viewers. Consider the following conversation:

G: I don't like that the hosts forget about the life of the candidate, how she lives. When a candidate doesn't express concrete opinions and a view of life, display set habits and interests, the stylists go a little berserk with her. (7.11.2007).

Zh: Yes, I agree. such episodes make me wonder if we can trust the stylists or indeed any of the many firms that offer instant formulas for makeovers. (7.11.2007)

In the forum the importance of exercising your tastes and not following the dictates of the latest fashion is seen as a virtue. Posts assert that personal tastes are more conducive to contentment, implying that the latter is a deeply subjective quality that cannot be realized through external norms and prescriptive fashion alone. For instance one viewer states: 'I used to have long hair. Enjoyed it. Felt like a woman. Now I have a very modern hair-do. But it doesn't make me happy' (Zh. 25.10.2007).

Moreover, for many forum members, the mission to uncover each candidate's individual authenticity is undermined by the fact that it is most often a man who is the agent of the transformation or its intended audience. Candidates' husbands believe their wives' makeover will stabilize a rocky marriage or family members insist a makeover will help the woman in question find a spouse. Although *Fashion Verdict's* hosts insist that every makeover empowers the woman in question, empowerment is thus defined as a self-confident femininity that is essential for the well-being of the family unit and a more fulfilling marital life. Pearls of wisdom follow in each episode: 'the best way to keep your husband's attention is to become a coquettish beauty' (FV 28 December 2009) and 'only a confident and elegant woman can hold on to a husband' (FV 14 January 2010). One single mother with six children similarly gets told that her dowdy and uptight appearance puts men off (FV 10 September 2008). The

forum erupts after each such episode. 'It's beginning to get on my nerves. Can a woman not simply live?? By herself? Without a husband?? ... I'm not saying men are not necessary. They just don't have to be husbands. There is another reason to give us a makeover on FV: we aspire to work'. (B. 10.9.2008). Yet another post reads thus: 'My favourite theme – women's emancipation! Cannot say this enough...that a woman who dedicates herself to her family, putting their interests above her own always loses out as an individual. (K. 10.6.2009). Thus, the more vocal viewers online emphasize a woman's right to do with her body what she will, to emphasize her individual style and to exercise personal tastes in her own interests rather than for the male gaze.

While this assertion might at first glance seem like an oppositional or radical reading in the face of a homogenizing culture of consumption, it would serve us well to note that this very mantra of personal dreams and individual choice is still a part of the cultural discourse of makeover shows like *Fashion Verdict* (just as much as it might be linked to a post-Soviet desire to reject the aesthetics of the uniform collective). The idea that a makeover on the show reinforces individual authenticity is one that is upheld by the hosts; viewers on the official message board simply disagree on what that authenticity might constitute or dispute whether the tastemakers have unearthed it on television. Moreover, while they mock the show's hosts for their impractical style choices or the perpetuation of plastic stereotypes, none argues with the basic premise of the show that disciplining our bodies and 'acquiring taste and style' is vital for the betterment of their lives. Many posts routinely blame candidates for neglecting their physical appearance and not participating in a continuous beauty regime. While the tenor of the forum is reflexive and ironic, suggesting distance from the show's ideology, it does not preclude these viewers' own judgmental remarks on the candidate's appearance. Implying that physical appearance is the prism for one's character, a viewer writes: 'It's amusing when women begin to justify their scruffy appearance by insisting they are good people. How do we know they are and how are we supposed to find out?' (M.18.9.2007). The audience thus has a complex relationship with the gendered text of makeover television, endorsing its basic premise only to rearticulate its terms of engagement.

Television, new media and cultural citizenship

This complex engagement with popular culture and active use of new media for the purpose forces us to revisit pessimistic positions on the politics of contemporary Russian culture. Influential sociologist Boris Dubin states, for instance, that Russians are not a nation (in its classical sense) but a television viewership, whose political role is reduced to that of being passive consumers (Dubin 2006). Yet, when audiences come online and use the digital space to articulate their identities, tastes and their repositories of ideas they *are* being political (even if not engaged with politics with a capital 'P'). The consumer and citizen are not necessarily mutually exclusive categories but roles that have merged in contemporary culture. Cultural citizenship has been defined 'as the process of bonding and community building, and reflection on that bonding, that is implied in par taking of the text-related practices of reading, consuming, celebrating, and criticizing offered in the realm of (popular) culture' (Hermes 10). We are cultural citizens when we do identity work in the realm of everyday practices with relation to mediated culture. This form of engagement does not act as a substi-

tute for political citizenship, but is one of the many modes through which we lay stake to being part of a national-cultural collective and through which we articulate what it means to be part of that collective. Others have also argued that citizens and fan/audience communities show many similarities; both emerge as a result of performance, seek information about their interest, talk and discuss, try to convince others, and have an emotional investment that keeps them committed (van Zoonen 2004).

In the web forum a public is constituted when the online viewership (in the form of a peer-to-peer or P2P network) bonds in order to perform their engagement with a media text. They negotiate, share and re-articulate popular mediated texts that produce and perpetuate cultural norms and values. *Fashion Verdict* seeks to govern media citizens' appearances and is a producer of sartorial ideology, intent on making its symbolic and cultural capital accessible to all. Like other reality shows elsewhere, it is a site for bridging the gap between the 'knowledge class and ordinary people' (Hartley 1996: 58-59). However, now enabled by the digital environment, the viewing public is both consumer and co-producer of that text. The many sites around the show expand its semiotic universes as viewer/users inscribe their personal narratives onto the marketed cultural discourse of the consumer-citizen. While audiences display their awareness of the strategies of the media and consumer industry and re-articulate the terms of the makeover's discursive enterprise, their participation is not oppositional. After all, viewers' assertions of personal taste, individuality and their agreement that governing appearance is vital to personal and social well-being flows from and feeds into the ideological underpinnings of consumer culture.

Therefore, the term 'citizen' is useful because it implies participation in the politics of culture without presupposing conformism or confrontation. On the message board, viewers' exercise of their agency (limited as it may be by the structures of power within which it operates) is a form of cultural citizenship that seeks to pitch in, use pop culture to help articulate, modify and remediate what it means to be a member of a cultural collective. It is a form of agency that both reinforces the idea that we must constantly work and improve upon our appearance, yet interrogates the terms of such self-improvement enterprises. The *Fashion Verdict* forum on Runet then is a digital interface for a politics of a different kind, a lifestyle politics, where makeover television's disciplining agenda for consumers is matched by the exercise of a sartorial citizenship on the part of an actively engaged web audience.

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