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New Formations of Stardom Roundtable

Reality television has produced a long line of television stars who are also “experts” in areas such as cosmetic surgery, hairstyling, fitness, and fashion. This includes contestants on shows such as *Project Runway*, hosts of shows such as *What Not to Wear*, and stars of documentary-style shows such as *Dr. 90210* and *Workout*. Stardom and expertise work together to bolster each other. Supposed expertise increases stardom and stardom increases claims of expertise. This star-expertise is televisually constructed with little evidence provided. For example, Dr. Rey, the namesake of *Dr. 90210*, is not a board-certified cosmetic surgeon, despite television hailing him as one in contexts ranging from his show to appearances on *The Today Show* to commentary during red carpet events. It is not that these stars are not or should not be considered experts, but instead that stardom is creating experts. The act of appearing on television performing the role of an expert in a supposedly “real” setting renders one both expert and star, creating a unique confluence of aspects of stardom.

Stars are often defined as those who are such an object of public fascination that their off-screen lives begin to surpass their acting ability in importance. In a way this applies to reality television, since acting ability is supposedly of no importance. These stars are defined as non-actors. Despite the staged and rehearsed nature of reality television, it cultivates an aesthetic of the un-staged, and becomes defined by the inclusion of non-actors. Dr. Rey destabilizes this notion slightly, by noting that he had his Screen Actor’s Guild card long before his medical license. But his “previous” career as an actor is not discussed within the show. With expert-

oriented reality television shows, such as home-makeover, fashion and home design, and beauty reality shows, I argue that their personas not only surpass their acting ability in importance, but more importantly surpass their credentials and expertise in importance.

Those on makeover shows have committed some sin of appearance, which requires the intervention of star experts. Their expertise often stems from presumed training in hair, makeup, nutrition, exercise, or style, although their credentials are rarely stated. For example, on TLC's *What Not to Wear*, hosts Stacey London and Clinton Kelly never have any sort of credentials stated to present them as authorities on fashion. The official website of the show provides some, although limited, background information. They have both, in fact, worked at several fashion magazines, but this information is not provided on the show. Similarly, Nick Arrojo and single-named Carmindy, the respective hairstylist and makeup artist of the show, never have their credentials stated either. Therefore, seeking out the credentials and expertise of these star-experts is a fan activity, requiring research, diligence, and piecing together disjointed bits of information. Dr. Rey is often discussed on plastic surgery message boards, with women arguing for and against his legitimacy as a plastic surgeon based on their research of his credentials and the appeal of his star persona.

On the *What Not to Wear* website, one of the most important credentials stated is the celebrities the individual cast members have beautified. The beauty of the various other stars functions as evidence of the beauty workers' expertise, and therefore bolsters the stardom of the beauty worker. In this way, celebrity is infectious and carries with it a presumed expertise, simply by being a star.

Credentials are often stated of medical staff such as cosmetic surgeons, such as on *Extreme Makeover*. However, the credentials are brief and vague, clearly not as important in

showing expertise as stardom. The fact that they are on TV performing cosmetic procedures and looking attractive appears to render them authorities on the subject. This helps to illustrate how television itself is an authority on beauty. Stardom is obtained by appearing on TV in a beautiful fashion which corresponds to the ideals appearing on other televisual bodies. Apparently, a televisual homogeneity (looking like other accepted television stars) lends authority and stardom.