

## **“It’s Do or Die”: Cultural Labor, Competitive Reality TV, and the Reproduction of Neoliberal Capitalism**

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This article argues that creative competition reality television, a distinct genre within the reality TV format, reproduces capitalist hegemony by naturalizing neoliberal values, the myth of meritocracy, and the precarity of cultural labor. Drawing from a case study of Amazon Studios’ 2020 fashion design competition *Making the Cut*, I examine the pedagogical role of creative competition shows as they shape the labor conditions of the cultural workforce.

*Keywords:* creative competition reality television, cultural labor, attention economy, neoliberal capitalism, meritocracy, Marxist critique, Making the Cut, Amazon Studios

In a hotel bar decked out in gold drapery and hanging chandeliers, a group of hopeful fashion designers gather to begin their journey as reality show contestants. This is the first episode of Amazon Studios’ unscripted series *Making the Cut* (2020), hosted and coproduced by *Project Runway* veterans Heidi Klum and Tim Gunn. Gunn lauds the designers’ credentials—“We scoured the world to find you”—and Klum warns them not to rest on their laurels, because “you will never know what’s coming next. Ever” (Romany, 2020d, 02:12–02:30). They tout the brand-building mentorship the winning contestant will receive, and the “unprecedented opportunity” that person will have to design a collection of clothing to be sold worldwide on Amazon (Romany, 2020d, 02:55). Gunn imitates a drumroll, and Klum drops the bombshell: The winner will receive \$1 million. The competitors variously scream, clap, gasp, or bury their heads in their hands. The camera cuts to an interview with Will, one of the hopefuls: “It’s a million f— dollars. Can I say f—? It is a million f— dollars!” (Romany, 2020d, 03:27). The next shot returns to the group’s reaction, and contestant Megan raises both hands in the air in disbelief. In voiceover, she says: “I am so hungry for this” (Romany, 2020d, 03:36).

The size of *Making the Cut*’s payout may dwarf some other reality competitions, but the narrative is familiar: A group of cultural workers who are struggling to succeed in their creative industry are handpicked to compete for a prize that could launch their careers. But there is only one prize, and to get it, the contestants will have to fight through a series of challenges that eliminate them, one by one, until only the winner remains. Numerous scholars have critiqued the proliferation of reality television as a format that circumvents writers’ and actors’ unions and exploits the labor of both on-screen participants and at-home audiences (e.g., Andrejevic, 2011; Jost, 2011; Patterson, 2015; Winant, 2014), and have identified its

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structure as a reflection of neoliberal values (e.g., Andrejevic, 2002; Chaput, 2011; Grazian, 2010). This article explores the reality television format through a qualitative textual analysis of *Making the Cut*—an example of the creative competition genre, in which participation is both a form and representation of labor—and connects this analysis to discourses on cultural work in the attention economy. This article will demonstrate that reality television functions pedagogically, shaping the labor conditions of the cultural workforce, and that the distinctive genre of creative competition reality television reproduces capitalist hegemony by naturalizing neoliberal values, the myth of meritocracy, and the precarity of cultural labor.

### **Neoliberalism, Cultural Labor, and the Attention Economy**

The values and practices of neoliberal capitalism shape labor and living conditions worldwide. Neoliberalism is an ideology of free market rule, pursued through policies of deregulation and privatization, which gained wide adherence in the 1970s. Neoliberal ideology represents a distinctive shift from post-World War II “embedded liberalism,” a “‘class compromise’ between capital and labour” (Harvey, 2007, p. 10), in which the state participated in regulatory and social welfare efforts. In contrast, neoliberalism is a “new social order” (Duménil & Lévy, 2005, p. 9), in which market exchange functions as “an ethic in itself” (Harvey, 2007, p. 3) and market freedom is conflated with, and presumed to engender, individual freedom (Harvey, 2007). Neoliberalism displaces responsibility for social well-being onto the self-interested invisible hand of the market, and functions primarily to perpetuate itself rather than to serve any communal good. Saad-Filho and Johnston (2005) connect neoliberalism to imperialism and globalization, arguing that neoliberalism “has evolved to protect capital(ism) and to reduce the power of labour . . . [and has] led to a significant worldwide shift in power relations away from the majority” (p. 3). The neoliberal doctrine of free trade and privatization benefits the wealthy and privileged, who enjoy structural advantages that give them a competitive edge. In short, neoliberal capitalism is an exploitative system that “drain[s] the resources of the periphery toward the centre” (Duménil & Lévy, 2005, p. 10).

In Marxist thought, exploitation comes from capital’s appropriation of the surplus value created by workers (Fuchs, 2014). Though Marxist concepts of alienation and exploitation were developed in the context of the industrial age, they remain relevant in the era of digital labor; in the information age, the line between labor and leisure is increasingly blurred, and forms of digital labor, such as tweeting about a brand or voting for one’s favorite reality show contestant, may not be recognized as labor at all, even though they create value and generate profit. The recognition of exploitation in this apparently voluntary work “is complicated by the fact that some online activities carry with them their own intrinsic rewards, such as a sense of community or creative expression” (Andrejevic et al., 2014, p. 1097). The owners of the digital platforms that are sustained by this obfuscated form of labor might argue that such rewards represent a form of payment in kind, and therefore are not exploitative. However, Andrejevic and colleagues (2014) disagree. Intrinsic to exploitation, they argue, is alienation: The “transform[ation of] our own activity (or at least an important part of it) back upon ourselves in unrecognizable form, serving interests and imperatives that are not our own” (p. 1091). In other words, alienation occurs when one is estranged from one’s own work, and exploitation occurs when one’s work is appropriated to serve someone else’s ends.

Alienation is less visible in cultural labor—defined by Cohen (2016) as “the work that goes into producing media, culture, and communication” (p. 36)—than in other forms of work. The work of painters,

writers, musicians, crafters, chefs, designers, and other artists requires creative and personal investment; thus, it is counterintuitive to imagine them as estranged from the work they produce. Nonetheless, cultural workers remain embedded in capitalist structures of domination. In an environment of increasing anxieties about labor automation and job loss, "forms of cultural work that depend on unique faces, voices, skill sets, and expressive styles underwrite strong claims for a worker's irreplaceability and increased control over her working conditions" (Stahl, 2012, p. 60). Yet employment in the cultural industries is increasingly precarious; material conditions for workers continue to decline as industry conditions constrain seemingly autonomous freelance or independent workers (Cohen, 2016). Far from escaping alienation, Stahl (2012) argues that cultural workers

are positioned more or less precisely at the "point of alienation," where law, liberal philosophy, and social convention enable employers to separate employees from the valuable goods (material, intellectual, and emotional) they produce in the course of their work, as well as from control over their own labor. (p. 24)

Thus, the individual worker is alienated from even the most personal cultural work, because they do not control the key means of production: The platforms and distribution channels through which the cultural work captures the audience, the scarce and in-demand resource of the attention economy.

Attention—the new market scarcity (Citton, 2014/2017)—is the object of individualistic neoliberal competition, and only those who fight their way to the top are lauded as deserving. Citton (2014/2017) calls attention "the hegemonic form of capitalism" (p. 45) and enumerates its four tenets: an ontology of visibility, a vital need for notoriety, the principle of valorization through attention, and profit from opportunist visibility. The centrality of audience attention to the creative arts market is not a recent phenomenon, but its importance is amplified in the information age. Not only the identity of the artist but also the very notion of what constitutes "art" is popularly constructed through discourses of attention. Bourdieu (1992/1996) emphasizes the artist's reliance on nonartists—merchants, distributors, and "taste makers"—for what he calls the "consecration" of a work of art (p. 137). In the age of digital distribution and of widespread access to visibility platforms such as YouTube or social media, libertarian-utopian perspectives see the democratization of consecration; with artists free to upload their work and consumers free to choose among the array of goods, the logic of the neoliberal market economy should exalt only the most meritorious work. Yet this account ignores the structural inequalities that are literally coded into digital distribution systems (Lessig, 2006) as well as the market pressures that continue to affect cultural workers (Cohen, 2016; Stahl, 2012).

The attention economy necessitates a rethinking of the means of production at the level of the product. The means of production is not only the singer's voice or the recording studio but also the music streaming service; it is not only the fashion designer's sewing machine or the garment factory but also the Instagram post and the online storefront. In short, in the attention economy, the product is not only the commodity produced but also the attentional connection between commodity and consumer. These structures have always been in place—visibility and distribution are essential in any market economy—but their importance is magnified when capitalism functions on a global scale at instantaneous speeds.

### Reality Television and Neoliberal Labor

Reality television is intimately connected to the attention economy. Though it is often discussed as a genre, reality TV is more properly defined as a condition of labor; it is not the show's content, but its mode of production that places it in the reality television category. Reality television originated on MTV as a way to perpetuate the network's model of raking in advertising profit by relying on attention-seekers—first recording artists or labels, and then reality show participants—to provide content for free or cheap (Wu, 2016). In contrast to the actors employed by scripted shows, “performers in these low-budget affairs were largely paid in attention. That carried the hope of a more lasting celebrity and the opportunities that come with it” (Wu, 2016, p. 244). Thus, even the earliest forms of reality television were trading in promises of future returns on participants' dual investments of material and affective labor.

Competition shows are a winning formula for reality television producers because drama and narrative are easily manufactured in the competitive format (Wu, 2016). Simultaneously, these shows highlight the creative arts they showcase, increasing the visibility and marketability of these art forms. Greater attention is presented as a boon for the industry, which in turn is presented as a benefit for the cultural laborers within that industry. As Bourdieu (1992/1996) explained, “It is the growth of the market of potential readers that, in allowing the development of the press and the novel, permits the multiplication of the small jobs available for them” (p. 127); in other words, if an art form like glass blowing gains increased attention through the Netflix reality competition *Blown Away*, that attention should result in a wider market for blown glass, and thus in more employment opportunities for glass blowers. While this view may sit well with the liberal-utopianist, it ignores the systems-level exploitation perpetuated by this mode of labor.

Entertainment media play a key role in systems-level exploitation because they distribute representations of neoliberal labor to working populations. In conversation with Andrejevic and associates (2014), Ouellette asks, “How do populations ‘learn to labor’ in a global economy that values creativity, flexibility, precarity, and immateriality? What role does our changing digital media culture play?” (p. 1102). Media representations, and specifically competitive reality television, are one answer. Reality TV competitions are both a form and a representation of labor, and although gamified, those farthest on the work end of the work–play spectrum present themselves as legitimate means of entry into the creative business they represent. As these shows become less like talent shows and more like extended job interviews, the line between entertainment and employment is blurred. Modes of labor have far-reaching influence, because “work is ‘not just an economic practice’; it is also fundamentally a process of subjectification to the norms of what [Kathi Weeks] calls ‘The Work Society’” (Andrejevic et al., 2014, p. 1102). Ultimately, while savvy audiences may scoff at the suggestion that “reality” television bears any resemblance to reality, the labor practices perpetuated and promoted by these shows continue to reshape work in the era of neoliberal capitalism.

#### “It’s Like I’m Getting a Piece of You”: Case Study of Amazon’s *Making the Cut*

The 2020 fashion design competition *Making the Cut*, produced and distributed by Amazon, exemplifies the creative competition genre, its exploitation of participants through the appropriation of surplus value, and its disciplining of the cultural workforce. Much scholarly work on reality television treats

this mode of production as a genre, mixing analysis of formats as disparate as makeover shows, docu-soaps, and dating games all under the umbrella of reality TV (e.g., Allen & Mendick, 2013; Barton, 2009; Egbert & Belcher, 2012). While these formats do share some tropes and characteristics due to their unscripted production, each is distinctive and necessitates analysis in its own right. *Making the Cut* is an example of what I call the creative competition show—a format in which a group of contestants create an artistic product that is judged by experts, who then determine which contestant is eliminated in each episode. Creative competition shows are distinct from noncompetitive reality shows, such as *Cops* or *Jersey Shore*, and they also differ in meaningful ways from non-labor-oriented or non-career-oriented competition shows, such as dating game *The Bachelor* or wilderness competition *Survivor*. Dating and wilderness survival could be construed as life skills, but they are not employment related, and therefore these types of competition are not connected to the conditions of the neoliberal economy in the same way as explicitly career-focused competitions. Creative competition shows are also distinct from career-focused competitions that do not feature cultural work, such as *The Apprentice*. While such shows certainly contribute to the naturalization of neoliberal labor practices, the mixture of precarity and attraction of cultural labor produces a uniquely high-stakes environment in the creative competition genre.

*Making the Cut*, which premiered on Amazon Prime Video on March 27, 2020, features model Heidi Klum and design professor Tim Gunn reprising their roles as host and mentor from previous fashion competition *Project Runway* (premiered 2004), but on *Making the Cut*, they are producers as well. The presence and budget of Amazon loom large throughout the competition, which explicitly seeks entrepreneurial skills in its winner. All of the contestants already have careers in professional fashion design, but are seeking opportunities to advance in the highly competitive fashion industry. Attention is key; Klum frequently exhorts contestants to design garments that “cut through the noise” (Romany, 2020b, 02:09), or, in other words, grab attention in a saturated market. The contestants are conscious of the “exposure” afforded by their participation on the show, though the unprecedented million-dollar prize package takes center stage.

The dynamics of creative competition reality television include the following: a zero-sum, winner-takes-all structure; a large prize package for the single winner, often including explicitly career-building elements, such as an industry mentorship; and a system of judgment that is ostensibly meritocratic. However, the supposedly meritocratic framework is typically undermined by huge prizes, gamified structures, manufactured drama, unqualified celebrity judges, and underlying privilege, such as the resources necessary to be cast on the show. These shows exist on a spectrum, and the intensity of the naturalization of neoliberal capitalism increases as the show more explicitly connects to a career path. Shows that approach the career-oriented end of the spectrum feature larger prizes that more explicitly connect to gainful employment, contestants who have or want careers in the industry, the language of competition and career success, and the cultivation of an intense, dramatic mood. At the other end of the spectrum, hobby-oriented creative competition shows feature smaller prizes that are not connected to professional careers, contestants who work in other industries, the language of fun, and a lighthearted mood. *Making the Cut* is an explicitly career-oriented show, and as such, is entangled with neoliberal labor practices both in its structure and in its ideology.

The ideological work of career-oriented creative competition reality TV shows is no less than the reproduction of neoliberal capitalism. Such shows are well-suited to this work because competition is at the heart of neoliberal thought. As Milton Friedman, one of the founding voices of neoliberal theory, wrote in 1951, "In place of the nineteenth century understanding that laissez-faire is the means to achieve [the goal of individual freedom], neoliberalism proposes that it is *competition* that will lead the way" (as cited in Peck, 2010, p. 3, emphasis in original). Yet the supposedly free (and, by implication, fair) competition espoused by neoliberal capitalism is belied by structural interventions on its behalf. As Saad-Filho and Johnston (2005) explain,

Under the ideological veil of non-intervention, neoliberalism involves extensive and invasive interventions in every area of social life. It imposes a specific form of social and economic regulation based on the prominence of finance, international elite integration, subordination of the poor in every country and universal compliance with US interests. (p. 4)

Creative competition reality TV shows replicate this neoliberal obfuscation when they hide structures of privilege and power beneath the rhetoric of meritocratic judgment and fair competition. This sleight of hand, performed over countless episodes in an ever-proliferating number of series, is one example of the "economic, political and social changes" that neoliberalism "breeds . . . creating the material basis for its own perpetuation and crushing the resistances against its reproduction" (Saad-Filho & Johnston, 2005, p. 5). Furthermore, because Prime Video, Amazon's distribution platform, is available "in more than 200 countries and territories around the globe" (Amazon, 2021, "About Prime Video"), *Making the Cut* carries its neoliberal ideology far beyond the United States. Unlike reality formats that are localized to cater to the values of particular cultures, such as *MasterChef's* iterations in Denmark and Sweden (Hill, 2019), *Making the Cut* is presented worldwide in its original, hypercompetitive form, thus magnifying its pedagogical potential.

### ***Making the Cut* and the Myth of Meritocracy**

At the heart of neoliberal ideology is the myth of meritocracy. Determining who wins and who loses—or more importantly, who deserves to win or lose, and why—is a political act, but in the framework of neoliberal capitalism, this political calculus is often rebranded as a self-regulating system of individual merit: a "meritocracy." The idea of advancement based on merit and desert predates neoliberalism, with historical examples as far back as imperial China's civil service examinations, and was shaped by 19th century repudiations of aristocracy in Western Europe and the United States (Littler, 2018); in the latter half of the 20th century, however, meritocratic rhetoric has become "a key ideological term in the reproduction of neoliberal culture" (Littler, 2018, p. 2). An argument could be made that the ideal of prescriptive meritocracy, the sense that rewards *should* be based on individual merit, is a legitimate justice principle stemming from a desire for equity (Son Hing et al., 2011), but creative competition shows like *Making the Cut* present themselves instead as a descriptive meritocracy, a place where rewards *are*, in actuality, distributed based on individual merit. This presents two basic ideological problems: First, what is "merit," and second, how (and by whom) is merit determined? While some creative competition shows do articulate their judging criteria, the application of those criteria is subjective and depends entirely on the judges. This is especially problematic when the judging team includes celebrities with questionable expertise, figures seemingly brought on for cross-promotion deals who have no notable authority in the art form under scrutiny. Yet, to maintain the semblance

of meritocratic judgment, these celebrities are given equal power to determine contestants' future on the program, and thus the material gains that they could receive.

In *Making the Cut*, the judging team includes Heidi Klum, model and executive producer of the show; supermodel Naomi Campbell; fashion designer Joseph Altuzarra; reality TV star and fashion designer Nicole Richie; fashion blogger Chiara Ferragni; and fashion editor Carine Roitfeld. While the show avoids the *Project Runway* formula of one-episode guest judges with little fashion experience (mostly actors promoting their contemporaneous projects), *Making the Cut's* judging team shifts abruptly midseason, when original judges Roitfeld and Richie are replaced by Ferragni. Richie rejoins the team for the final two episodes, but Roitfeld does not. In the crucial final episodes, significant consideration is also given to the opinion of Amazon executives. In keeping with the show's explicit focus on the business of fashion and the marketability of the contestants' designs, the final episode includes a pitch challenge in which the contestants present their brands to Christine Beauchamp, the president of Amazon Fashion. As in many creative competition shows, judging criteria are never made explicit, and decisions about who stays and who goes are made subjectively by the judging team. The inconsistency of *Making the Cut's* judging team and the lack of transparency around its judging criteria are not in keeping with meritocratic ideals.

The large prize packages conferred on winners also undermine creative competition shows' claims of meritocracy. The larger the prize, the more stress the participants are under, and this stress can interfere with their work on the show. For Vaillancourt Rosenau (2003), an overemphasis on winning is a feature of destructive, not constructive, competition. A constructive competition is one in which (1) the end goal (winning) is not so important as to generate anxiety that impairs competitors' performance, (2) the rules of the competition and path to winning are fair and clear, (3) competitors receive feedback that allows them to know their relative standing, and (4) all competitors are motivated to put in their best effort because they believe they have a reasonable chance to win (Vaillancourt Rosenau, 2003). A competition that lacks these four attributes is, instead, destructive, and cannot be meritocratic because the competitive framework interferes with contestants' performance, making it impossible for them to demonstrate the full extent of their merit. As creative competition shows offer increasingly lavish prize packages, their high-stakes mode of competition "no longer signifies 'running together'" as in the original Latin root of the word; "rather it means defining the other as an object or enemy who has to be destroyed" (Weiskopf & Mark-Ungericht, 2000, p. 195). This shift toward increasingly cutthroat competition is linked to the rise of neoliberal economic structures (Weiskopf & Mark-Ungericht, 2000), yet paradoxically undermines the meritocratic ideal to which neoliberalism pretends.

*Making the Cut* features an enormous prize relative to other reality competition shows: \$1 million for the winner, presented as an "investment" in their brand, as well as an industry mentorship and "the opportunity" to sell a collection of clothes exclusively on Amazon. This explicitly career-focused prize package firmly situates *Making the Cut* at the labor-oriented end of the work-play spectrum. The scale of the prize package also marks *Making the Cut* as a destructive competition (Vaillancourt Rosenau, 2003) and undermines its claims to meritocracy, claims made explicit by Klum after a double elimination in Episode 4: "If someone doesn't deserve to be here, then they won't. We really are trying to find the best of the best" (Romany, 2020c, 49:10). The competition is foregrounded by exhortations for contestants to "fight" for what they want, to demonstrate their "fire" and "grit" and thereby prove, in Klum's words, that they "deserve" to remain on-

screen. This virtue signaling is part of neoliberal ideology, which champions hard work as the path to economic and personal success, and is commonly exhibited on creative competition shows. Those who do not excel in the gamified, fast-paced competition, viewers are told, just did not want it enough.

Nonetheless, *Making the Cut* and other creative competition shows cultivate the appearance of meritocracy, and in so doing they downplay or render invisible the underlying systems of inequality on which they rely. Key among the criticisms of meritocratic ideology is its obfuscation of privilege (Khan & Jerolmack, 2013; Littler, 2018; McNamee & Miller, 2009). In the first place, all contestants appearing on the show have to meet the standards set by casting directors. The process can be time-consuming and expensive (Chaput, 2011), and the criteria for success include more than just skill in the particular cultural work that will be done on the show. Wu (2016) recalls *The Real World*, MTV's early reality television entry, and its need to "conjure up drama" among participants, which proved difficult when those participants were "reasonable, thoughtful people. . . . So as the show went on, it came to depend on casting more inherently ridiculous or difficult people who could be guaranteed to stir up trouble in the house" (p. 243). Although competition was introduced in reality television to provide dramatic structure, creative competition shows still rely on eclectic casts whose personalities will drive the producers' narrative. Chaput (2011) explains that "producers look for someone comfortable disclosing personal information and willing to reflect on and adapt to difference" (p. 9) because this capacity for change feeds the narrative of self-improvement. Beyond their artistic skill, participants must be able to mold themselves in line with the requirements of the neoliberal workforce.

Beneath the casting process lies a more fundamental form of privilege that meritocratic narratives obscure: the resources necessary to cultivate artistic skills in the first place. Only those who already possess the benchmark skills will be able to compete on the show, and developing those skills often requires access to specific tools and materials, as well as years of practice and training. Like other creative competition shows, *Making the Cut* features background segments extolling contestants' perseverance in the face of hardship. In Episode 3, for example, contestant Troy reveals that he teaches at Parsons School of Design—the same college where mentor Tim Gunn was a faculty member for more than two decades—yet he still lives in "the projects" of Harlem and struggles to make ends meet (Romany, 2020b, 08:05). *Making the Cut* never interrogates the underlying power relations or structural inequalities that contribute to Troy's struggle. Instead, the rhetoric of "grit," "passion," and "fire" constructs his perseverance as an innate talent, nurtured by the moral virtue of hard work—until he is eliminated.

The rhetoric of meritocracy benefits those who enjoy structural advantages while denigrating the disadvantaged as lazy and undeserving. Using reality singing competition *American Idol* as an example, Stahl (2012) explicitly connects the obfuscation of privilege with the neoliberal withdrawal of the social safety net: "Unpreparedness, in the *Idol* perspective, is a lifestyle choice, not a structural problem; neither *American Idol* nor the shrinking welfare state is there to assist the unprepared" (p. 57). Despite Littler's (2018) conclusion that "meritocracy as a social system is therefore a structural impossibility, and, as a cultural discourse, it is a damaging fiction" (p. 217), creative competition shows continue to trade in its ideology. A destructive competition, built on structures of inequality and profit, that pretends to be meritocratic is simply "saying meritocracy and doing privilege" (Khan & Jerolmack, 2013, p. 13), and thus legitimizing the hierarchies that undergird neoliberal capitalism.



### **"You're Always Selling Yourself": Reproducing Neoliberal Hegemony**

Creative competition shows naturalize neoliberal hegemony through their construction of authority, reproduction of the myth of meritocracy, and promulgation of self-improvement narratives. In the neoliberal capitalist system, individual achievement and personal responsibility are valorized, and hierarchical class systems are legitimated by the ideological association of economic success with individual merit. Creative competition shows like *Making the Cut* contribute to this system by providing a ready stock of narratives that model and celebrate the construction of and movement through hierarchies; their plots feature "arguments for the importance of grooming oneself and competing for, obtaining, and keeping desirable forms of remunerative work—and moving up to still-more-desirable forms" (Stahl, 2012, p. 41). Within these plots, characters are key, and it is incumbent on individual contestants to distinguish themselves, garnering the "symbolic capital" of attention (Bourdieu, 1992/1996, p. 148) from judges and audiences alike.

The ultimate prize of creative competition shows and the ultimate goal of the neoliberal worker is to move to the top of the hierarchical ladder, and creative competition shows dramatize this movement through narratives of self-improvement. Ouellette and Hay (2008) have explored the narratives constructed within the makeover genre of reality television, noting their pedagogical function. In creative competition shows, the same structures are in play: Contestants are expected to learn and grow, and both confessional interviews and speeches before the judges are presented as evidence of transformation. Chaput (2011) argues that

the cultural value of reality television stems less from its aesthetic or ideological content than from the life practices it inspires. Reality TV constitutes individuals as projects to be enhanced, updated, and redirected toward the increasingly digital spaces of social networking, shopping, entertainment, and education. (p. 10)

Those who engage with reality television are not only conditioned as consumers, but also as workers. These self-improvement narratives function as pedagogy for both social life and neoliberal labor practices, in which bootstrapping self-reliance is valorized and expected.

In *Making the Cut*, the theme of self-improvement figures heavily into the outcome of the competition. The final two episodes, which determine the winner, emphasize the personal and professional growth of the designers. In Episode 9, final-two contestants Esther and Jonny both discuss their time in the competition in confessional interviews. Esther, an established designer who always works in black, has resisted the judges' advice to add more color to her design palette throughout the season. In her confessional interview, Esther claims that the judges' critiques have changed her work, pushing her toward adding more "accessible" looks to her creative collection: "This is the best sign for me that I need to build on commercial looks to really make a good business," she says (Romany, 2020e, 42:29). In her final collection, however, she sticks to black and white fabrics. Jonny, on the other hand, is much more effusive about the evolution of his work. "I'm a totally changed designer. Totally changed man. I feel on fire," he tells the camera (Romany, 2020e, 12:12). Whereas Esther talks about learning to support the creative design she loves by selling more mass-market fashion, Jonny frames his transformation as a personal journey of self-discovery. His early designs, he explains, relied on hard leather materials because they were constructed as metaphorical shields, but "I've learned a lot in this competition about shedding some of the armor" (Romany, 2020e, 22:18). His final collection, he says,

"represents my transition into a more evolved designer" (Romany, 2020e, 21:52), demonstrating the personal improvement that he has undergone over the course of the competition. Ultimately Jonny, the contestant who demonstrated the most dramatic personal transformation and who most closely followed the judges' prescriptions for success, is named the winner of *Making the Cut*. The pedagogical function of the competition is thus emphasized and reinscribed through the conferral of rewards on the contestant who presented himself as the best student.

These narratives of self-improvement are not unique to *Making the Cut*. Citing Andrejevic (2004), Chaput (2011) points out that representations of the pedagogical experience within reality shows are constructed as overwhelmingly positive: "Notably, contestants in all forms of reality TV programming describe their experience in exclamations such as 'unbelievable,' 'priceless,' and 'like nothing else' because, for them, it is 'life changing'" (p. 9). Though their presentation on screen is highly managed, these self-improvement narratives can indeed have material effects, shaping not only the social norms of their viewers, but also the cultural industries represented on-screen and the workers who labor in them. Ouellette and Hay (2008) consider reality television within an analytic of government, deploying a Foucauldian lens that "emphasizes television as a resource for acquiring and coordinating the techniques for mastering various aspects of one's life" (p. 12). Ouellette and Hay focus on makeover shows, but reality competitions are perhaps an even better example: The judge "functions like a boss doing an 'annual review,' assessing an employee's strengths and weaknesses and deciding whether to grant a worker a promotion or to show him or her the door" (Hendershot, 2009, as cited in Stahl, 2012, p. 49). Competitors like Jonny who remake themselves to comply with and excel within the conditions of the game (set within and based on neoliberal ideology) are rewarded with advancement, which means they continue to reap attentional rewards; the ultimate winner, who receives material rewards, is the person who has aligned themselves most successfully with the show's expectations. Thus, creative competition shows instill both participants and viewers with the values of individual self-improvement that underlie neoliberal labor practices.

### **Working for Free: Exploitation in *Making the Cut***

Creative competition shows instantiate new modes of labor exploitation beyond those seen in other genres of reality television. In general, shows produced under the conditions of reality television rely both on unpaid or underpaid on-screen participants and unpaid audience labor to generate their "double production of surplus value" (Chaput, 2011, p. 14). Because key players in both the production and the promotion of the show are not paid for their work, the show will generate increased profit for its owners. Fuchs (2016) sees this outsourcing of work to unpaid laborers as akin to the extension of the working day, a way for capitalists to maximize profits at the expense of labor, while Citton (2014/2017) calls free labor "a desire of labor immanent to late capitalism, and late capitalism is the field that both sustains free labor and exhausts it" (p. 65). As MTV producers learned, this cost-cutting business model can keep content producers competitive in an increasingly saturated media market (Wu, 2016); profitability is one key reason for the proliferation of reality television.

While *Making the Cut*'s million-dollar prize sounds like an enormous investment in the contestants, it is not without returns, which come in the form of surplus value produced on the show and appropriated by Amazon. In creative competition shows, additional modes of exploitation promise new sources of profit at the expense of on-screen participants. For the production company, any success enjoyed by the winner of the

show can be connected to the creative competition experience, becoming a source of promotion and profit for the show. More directly, the production company benefits from any artistic goods created on the show as part of the competition's structure. These products may be integrated into the entertainment value of the format by virtue of their exclusive exhibition within the show, or they may be (re)produced as valuable or saleable commodities in their own right and sold or traded for a profit. In each episode of *Making the Cut*, designers are tasked with creating both a "runway" look that pushes the boundaries of fashion and an "accessible" look that caters to a commercial audience. The winning accessible look from each episode is produced and sold online, exclusively by Amazon. This arrangement is presented as a prize for the designers: They gain worldwide exposure, and their designs will be produced for and worn by real people. These mini-prizes lead up to the final prize package, which includes an agreement between the winner and Amazon to design and sell an exclusive collection.

On the show, the contestants are eager for the opportunity to have their clothes sold online. In Episode 4, contestant Will pronounces that "there are no words to describe what a platform like Amazon could do for an emerging designer" (Romany, 2020c, 18:30). What is left unspoken is what the contestants can do for Amazon. While the sale of the ultimate winner's collection is arguably transactional, with a million-dollar payment in return for exclusive rights to the designs, no such compensation is offered to the weekly challenge winners; there is no mention of profit-sharing or royalties from the sale of challenge winners' designs. Like the producers of *The Real World*, who found that they could generate profitable television content while compensating their stars mostly with exposure (Wu, 2016), Amazon has created a formula by which workers both design and market new products for their platform essentially for free. The surplus value created by the contestants remains the exclusive property of Amazon.

It should be noted that although Amazon is the largest beneficiary of free labor on *Making the Cut*, the contestants themselves also participate in a system of labor exploitation. The creative competition genre is a profitable formula because one contestant wins the prize and the rest leave with nothing but the exposure generated by their appearance on the show; the labor of all participants is exploited by the producers, who need only compensate one of the contestants, but the labor of the nonwinners is also exploited by the winner, who could not be constructed as such without the free labor of the nonwinners. *Making the Cut* adds one more level of exploitation with the addition of seamstresses. For most of the challenges, the contestants are provided with overnight helpers who will sew garments according to the instructions the contestants provide. Thus, the visible success of the contestants is made possible by the literally invisible, explicitly feminized labor of the seamstresses, who work through the night to complete what one contestant in Episode 8 calls "all the hard, tedious work" that goes into producing runway-ready clothing (Romany, 2020a, 12:08). Until the final episodes of the season, the contestants do not even come face to face with the laborers who make their garments possible. The addition of seamstresses to the fashion competition format is presented as an element of industry realism, since working fashion designers often do not sew the clothes they design, but this does not make it less problematic. The work of the seamstresses only highlights the structures of domination and exploitation that underpin the neoliberal economy and belie the myth of meritocracy.

While the labor of *Making the Cut's* seamstresses is explicitly gendered, reality television contestants' labor as a whole is implicitly linked to gendered power dynamics. Aside from practicing their art form, creative competition show participants perform myriad forms of immaterial, affective labor, from self-branding (Hearn,

2010) to emotion management and "soft skills" (Patterson, 2015, p. 284) to the performance of authenticity (Hirdman, 2011) and ordinariness (Curnutt, 2011). McRobbie (2010) connects the centrality of these types of emotional labor to the "feminisation of work" (p. 62) in the post-Fordist era, and particularly with labor in creative industries, and insists that analyses of immaterial labor must consider its gendered dynamics. Reality TV shows require these "soft skills" not only as a prerequisite for casting but also to succeed in the show's competitive framework, as exemplified by Jonny Cota's successful performance of personal transformation on *Making the Cut*. Andrejevic (2011) characterizes successful reality television performance as "feminiz[ed] labor" (p. 26), connecting the affective labor required to unwaged domestic work that has historically been performed by women, and McRobbie (2010) links women's participation in "flexible" work to the precarity of cultural labor and the "permanently transitional job market" of creative work (p. 73). Regardless of their gender identities, contestants on creative competition reality television shows are subject to this gender-inflected exploitation of affective labor, in which "time and effort spent building social relations are simultaneously captured by capital" (Andrejevic, 2011, p. 28). For neoliberal subjects, immaterial labor is both a personal responsibility and a prerequisite for material success.

The tropes and techniques common to the creative competition genre reflect labor and productivity trends in the neoliberal capitalist economy. On creative competition shows, contestants are pushed to do more with less. Extreme time constraints are commonplace, as are challenges that force contestants to use uncommon materials, unappetizing ingredients, or unfamiliar techniques as they create their products. These tropes manufacture drama in the guise of either stimulating contestants' creativity or weeding out those who lack the "drive," "fire," or "grit" to succeed, painting a meritocratic veneer over strategies centered squarely on capturing and holding audience attention. But these tropes also serve a pedagogical, disciplinary function, conditioning contestants and audiences alike to the demands of the neoliberal workforce. On *Making the Cut*, the clearest example of this comes in Episode 4, when after a disappointing judging the contestants are given seven hours (with no seamstress assistance) to create runway garments out of scraps from previous episodes. The challenge is delivered in sober tones by Gunn, the show's mentor figure, who warns the contestants that the judges need to see "intense fire in your belly" (Romany, 2020c, 04:00) if they are going to "invest" in the contestants' brands (Romany, 2020c, 02:08). The limited time to produce work and the belief that workers can do more under pressure are symptomatic of the neoliberal capitalist workplace, especially for low-wage jobs. Cohen (2016) points out that pressuring workers to do more in less time really means extracting more surplus value with less labor cost, a practice that has been adopted by many American companies, particularly Amazon itself. Amazon's business practices micromanage their warehouse workers' time, pushing them to the point of exhaustion and injury in the name of profit (Guendelsberger, 2019). Is it any wonder that a show that Amazon produces and distributes, where contestants' products are marketed and sold for the company's profit, would discipline its audiences to work more in exchange for less?

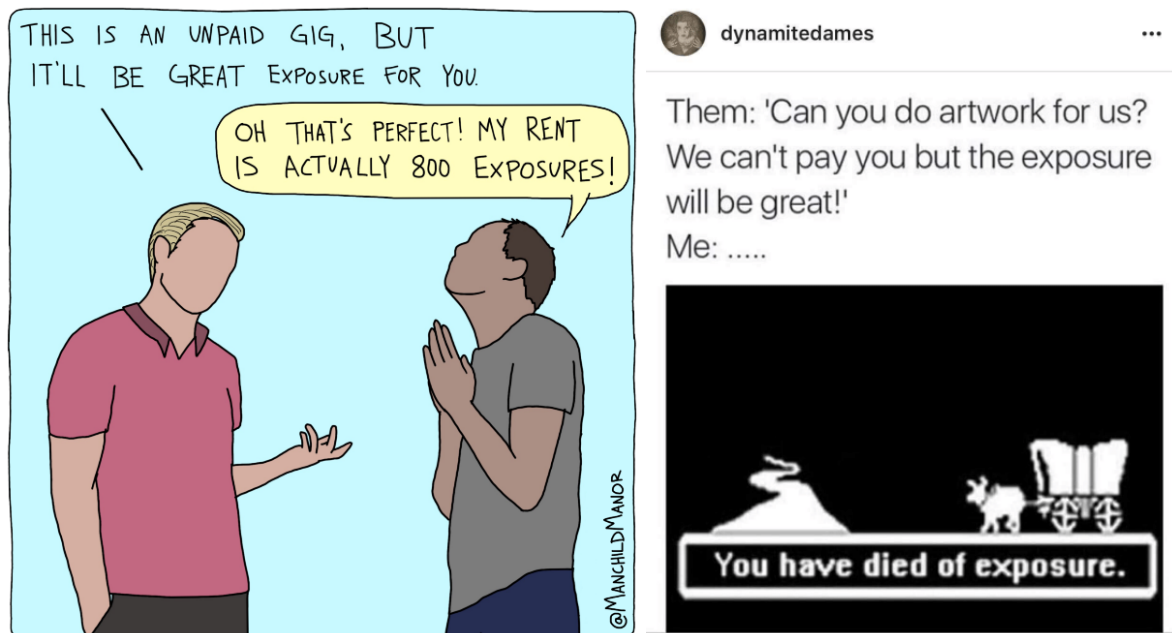
### **Conclusion: "If I Don't Deliver, I'm Going Home"**

Amazon's *Making the Cut* is a clear example of the creative competition genre of reality television. As an explicitly labor-focused competition, *Making the Cut* presents a pedagogical blueprint for cultural workers, instilling the neoliberal values of self-improvement, submission to authority, and belief in the myth of meritocracy in competitors and audiences alike. The cultural technology of television "governmentalizes by presenting individuals and populations as objects of assessment and intervention, and by soliciting their

participation in the cultivation of particular habits, ethics, behaviors, and skills" (Ouellette & Hay, 2008, p. 13). In creative competition shows, where both the cultural work performed and the prizes offered are increasingly linked to employment, the object of this cultivation is to shape the cultural workforce in the neoliberal mold. Chaput (2011) reiterates that "audiences constitute themselves as workers and consumers of neoliberal capital through their participation in reality television and its attendant practices" (p. 2). The pedagogical function of the creative competition format presents a narrative of success after which aspiring cultural workers should fashion themselves, but this narrative reaches beyond the workers themselves, working to shape the expectations of both employers and the public.

*Making the Cut* exploits cultural workers and trades in the currency of attention. The labor of appearing in creative competition shows is attractive not only because it is playful and gamified or because of the fantastic prizes offered to the ultimate winner but also because of the participation prize that every contestant receives: exposure, the currency of the attention economy. Recalling Citton's (2014/2017) principles of the attention economy, creative competition shows feed all four: the ontology of visibility, the vital need for notoriety, the principle of valorization through attention, and profit from opportunist visibility. While participants in all genres of reality shows may hope to gain celebrity status from their appearance and therefore perform their on-screen labor for little or no remuneration (Wu, 2016), cultural workers are particularly embedded in structures of attention because "the work of art, like religious goods or services, amulets or various sacraments, receives value only from collective belief as collective misrecognition, collectively produced and reproduced" (Bourdieu, 1992/1996, p. 172). In other words, workers who produce art are reliant on the attention of audiences to invest their works with symbolic value, and therefore they are reliant on distribution platforms, such as television or social media, to capture and hold that attention.

Performing uncompensated labor in a reality competition is presented as a prize in and of itself because it affords the contestants attention and exposure, but this system naturalizes the precarity of cultural labor. In the popular discourse of cultural work, the inadequacy of exposure as compensation for labor is highlighted by numerous anecdotes, comics, and memes that circulate within the community (see Figure 1). Yet on creative competition shows, eliminated contestants repeat a common refrain of thanking the judges for the opportunity to compete for attention and perform their labor outside of an employer benefit system. Certainly, this narrative is packaged and promoted by the show's editors and producers, showcasing the contestants' gratitude to the system, and perhaps some of these exclamations were prompted by the producers themselves. Still, the power of hegemony should not be discounted. Cultural workers are simultaneously aware of the exploitative systems that encourage them to work for free while also being materially constrained by those systems. Their willingness to perform on camera without compensation and their gratitude for the opportunity to do so can and do coexist with recognition of their exploited position. This is not false consciousness or cognitive dissonance; it is a means of survival in the neoliberal economy.



**Figure 1. Comic and meme highlighting exploitative labor norms in cultural work. Left to right: "Freelance exposure" (Thavirat, n.d.); "You have died of exposure" (dynamitedames, n.d.).**

This article has demonstrated that the creative competition genre, which is distinct from other examples of the reality television mode of production, perpetuates neoliberalism by disciplining cultural workers to accept conditions of employment and employment-seeking that consolidate profit in the hands of corporate employers and offload risk onto the workers. Such shows undermine the power of cultural workers by normalizing a competitive, hierarchical, winner-take-all environment in which working for free is the price of admission. Meritocratic ideology, key to sustaining the hierarchies of the neoliberal economy, is the window dressing that conceals systems of inequality and exploitation, and the payment of contestants in "exposure" naturalizes the precarity of cultural labor. Media systems and representations of labor play a pedagogical role in this ideological work, training viewers and participants alike to accept the demands of neoliberal capitalism. As Fuchs (2016) explains, capitalist systems and media systems are interdependent:

In order to reproduce its existence, capitalism has to present itself as the best possible (or only possible) system and makes use of the media in order to try to keep this message (in all its differentiated forms) hegemonic. . . . The goal is that human thoughts and actions do not go beyond capitalism, do not question and revolt against this system and thereby play the role of instruments for the perpetuation of capitalism. (p. 530)

In particular, the reality television mode of production, which "merges worker, commodity, and consumer into an ecology of constantly intertwined production and consumption" (Chaput, 2011, p. 10), serves the goals of capital at the expense of labor. Cultural workers, whose labor is discursively devalued as "playbour"

(Fuchs, 2016, p. 580) or "passionate labor" (Postigo, 2009, as cited in Andrejevic et al., 2014, p. 1097) are already caught in a system where employers and the public assume that the labor of love is sufficient compensation for the work that they do, undermining these workers' struggles for fair wages and stable working conditions.

Creative competition shows bring attention to cultural industries, and with it the potential to instill increased symbolic value in cultural work through audience consecration. But that attention is instilled not just in the work that is done, but also in the conditions of labor that normalize working for free, aggressively competing with fellow workers, and being judged by capricious rules laid down by constructed authorities. The meritocratic ideals espoused by neoliberalism are never realized, and invoking rhetoric of fairness and just deserts only serves to obfuscate the workings of privilege that concentrate power and wealth in the hands of the elite. The creative competition genre thus perpetuates neoliberal hegemony, and contributes to the very precarity that drives contestants to participate on-screen.

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