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## **The Workmanship of Risk, Reality TV Style: Bladesmithing and Craft Production within The History Channel's *Forged In Fire***

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Lee Barron has degrees from the University of Northumbria and the University of Sunderland and he currently teaches fashion branding, marketing and communication within the School of Design at Northumbria University. He researches and publishes on in the subjects of popular music, fashion, and celebrity, and he has published in journals such as *Fashion Theory*, *The Journal of Popular Culture*, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *NCultural Politics*, and *Celebrity Studies* and he has also published in a number of edited collections. He is the author of *Popular Culture in Social Theory* (Palgrave, 2013), *Celebrity Culture* (SAGE, 2015) and *Tattoo Culture: Theory and Contemporary Contexts* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).

## **The Workmanship of Risk, Reality TV Style: Bladesmithing and Craft Production within The History Channel's *Forged In Fire***

### **Abstract**

While recent years have seen a distinctive revival in the craft practice of blacksmithing and bladesmithing, and such craft production has also been represented within the genre of reality TV in the form of the History Channel's *Forged In Fire* series, which competitively pits bladesmiths, farriers, and blacksmiths against each other to produce knives and historically-based weapons. This article examines the cultural representation of this craft production representation to explore how David Pye's classic concept of the workmanship of risk is a key factor within the series, but that it is a factor that is re-articulated in an artificial way due to against-the-clock challenges instilled by the format of the series. Furthermore, the article explores the ways in which makers respond to such challenges to express Howard Risatti's conception of the expression of poiesis within their metalcraft work in a way that also flags Stuart Walker's appeal for traditional craft practices. As such, although a reality TV series, *Forged In Fire* nevertheless represents a potent representation of the craft production of bladed weapons and metalwork that consistently explores the technical nature of the craft and stresses the extent to which traditional skills such as bladesmithing and blacksmithing are being practiced in vibrant professional contemporary craft communities.

**Keywords:** Reality TV, bladesmithing, blacksmithing, metalwork, poiesis

"Unfortunately, your blade will not kill" (Doug Marcaida *Forged In Fire*).

Commenting upon the conflict between artisan and machine production, Peter Dormer identifies a long-standing assumption that 'ever-improving technologies replaces craft' (1997: 3), and it is a development that Glenn Adamson argues lies at the heart of the status of craft production within contemporary culture, as he states:

Craft's reputation is as something eternal ... In modern times, though, it seems

to be under constant assault. Its steady disappearance, in the face of the more powerful and efficient forms of production that we call “industry” is therefore to be understood as a tide of depersonalization. We must try to turn the clock back, to revive craft’s organic role in society, or at least slow the pace of its vanishing (2013: xiii).

However, there has been a palpable and sustained contemporary resurgence of traditional craft skill practices in recent years (McRaven 2005; Henley 2014; Kapur and Mittar 2014; Lambert 2015; Korn 2017), from coppersmithing, furniture making, sewing and stitching, and jewellery design, to dry stone walling and blacksmithing, to name but a few. With regard to blacksmithing, at the outset of *The Art of Blacksmithing*, Alex W. Bealer laments that, whilst once a ubiquitous presence in every village and town, the blacksmiths’ [Shop had all but disappeared, and that traditional metal crafting was a ‘subject for nostalgia, a legend, a lost art which has lost its place in the modern world’ (1984: 1). Thus, not only has the ‘lost art’ of such craft practice been professionally and artistically revived since the mid-1980s, craft practitioners have also now found distinctive expression within media forms. As Geoffrey Gowlland argues, the recent resurgence of interest in craft practices, and representations of such making approaches within YouTube in the form of ‘a diversity of how-to videos, ranging from the quite amateurish to the professional’ (2015: 267). In addition to this user-generated content, craft practitioners are also now present within professionally-produced popular media culture, and most notably within the populist genre dubbed reality television. While popular expressions of television-based craft typically cover artisan cooking and sewing/clothing manufacture, the craft of blacksmithing, and its specialist practice of bladesmithing, have also found televisual representation, principally within the

successful American reality TV series *Forged in Fire*.

Bladesmithing and its central craft processes and techniques, have found expression in other media productions. For example, the 1946 British Pathé film, *The Sword*, famously documented the crafting of the ceremonial sword presented to General Eisenhower, showcasing the craft work of the 84-year-old swordsmith, Tom Beasley of Wilkinsons, while from the early 2000s the WETA studio have produced documentaries that follow the work of the Master Swordsmith Peter Lyons and his production of authentic swords for Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* film trilogy. Nevertheless, *Forged In Fire* represents a sustained focus upon the key craft principles of bladesmithing. Broadcast by the History Channel from 2015, *Forged in Fire* is built upon the fundamental foundations of bladesmithing, and due to its relentless focus upon the manufacture of weapons that must pass a crucial 'Kill Test', it has been described as the 'Bake Off, only with battle axes' (Jonze 2016: 1).

This article will examine the modern representation of bladesmithing that is presented within *Forged in Fire*, and argue that for all of its dramatic visuals and content, it does articulate the skill of metalcraft that is deeply underpinned by the ethos of craft that is predicated upon intimately 'knowing how to make something' (Adamson 2007: 69). Furthermore, the article will argue that the craft practice reflects classic attributes of workmanship as articulated by commentators such as David Pye, with the article will critically apply, but also reevaluate in terms of the principles of quality and risk that Pye argued underpinned craft production. This is because, while the essence of craft is the crux of the series, the requirements of the reality TV format mean that there is a tension between craft skills and televisual entertainment, with an onus upon the 'violence' of metalcraft through *Forged In Fire*'s exclusive focus upon the making of pre-modern weaponry. Nevertheless, the article will stress the way that, although

adhering to reality TV strictures and weapons-fixed focus, *Forged In Fire* nevertheless illustrates the existence of a vibrant contemporary bladesmithing and blacksmithing craft community, and a potent and technical showcase of technical traditional craft skills.

### **From *Big Brother* to Televised Craft Production**

While it has historical antecedents (*Candid Camera*, *An American Family*, *Sylvania Waters* and *The Family*), the genre ultimately dubbed reality TV, a format that can be defined as 'pre-planned but mostly unscripted programming with non-professional actors in non-fictional scenarios' (Deery 2015: 3), was firmly established with the success of *Big Brother*, which initiated 'the introduction of fabricated competitive environments to reality TV' (Kavka 2012: 3). This series enclosed a number of contestants within a CCTV surveillance environment, and subjecting them to various tasks and challenges (Bignall 2005; Biressi and Nunn 2005) and argued to be stylistically 'located in border territories, between information and entertainment, documentary and drama' (Hill 2005: 2). Yet, for many commentators, the intrinsic appeal and distinctiveness of *Big Brother*, with its mixture of 'artificial entertainment and human reality' (Couldry 2003: 106), was that it specifically involved '*real people*' and so based upon presentation of 'the labour of self-performance as marketable product' (Kavka and Weber 2017: 4). In the wake of *Big Brother*'s global success, reality TV rapidly developed into a number of distinctive subgenres, from lifestyle shows/reality dramas, 'eccentric professions', and dating shows to game/competition challenges formats (Tsay-Vogel and Krakowiak 2016). Of the latter game/competition formats, while initially represented by shows such as *Survivor*, variants based upon

competitors with specific professional skill-sets emerged to prominence, such as *Top Chef*, a series that pitted talented chefs in direct competition against each other in the pursuit of a financial prize. However, the key aspect of the competitive nature of shows such as *Top Chef* was the contestants having to produce ‘complex, often excessive, cooking feats’, challenges that were critically appraised by a panel of judges as part of the ‘elimination’ challenge that would ultimately expel a participant from the series (Curnutt 2011: 1066) until producing final series champion. The success of this competitive format has subsequently generated a number of ‘craft-based’ reality shows that adhere to the *Top Chef* structure, such as *Masterchef*, *Project Runway*, *The Great British Bake Off*, *The Great British Sewing Bee*, and *Ink Master*.

Equally, *Forged In Fire* can be defined as a ‘competition’ or ‘game doc’ (Deery 2015) reality TV show. Although the structure differs in terms of being episodic rather than spanning an entire series, nevertheless the ‘contestants’ are professional bladesmiths, and the technical aspects of the craft, and the weapons that are created, are fully explained in detail to viewers to consistently articulate the core essence of the craft. As the series’ producer, Tim Healey states of the nature of the show, it very much reflects the key aspects of successful popular competition-based reality formats, as he states in terms of the inspiration behind it:

How could we do a cooking competition show without cooking? From working on shows like *American Pickers* or the team that does *Pawn Stars*, we know that every time a weapon or a bladed weapon is featured the ratings tick up a little bit. So it was kind of like a lightbulb moment that was like, ‘Yeah, let’s do a

cooking show where they make weapons from scratch (O'Keefe 2016 Decider.com)

However, the emphasis upon making weapons 'from scratch' means that, although influenced by notable reality TV exemplars, the primacy of craft lies at the heart of the series, as *Forged In Fire*

[Challenges} smiths from across the country to, in the first of three rounds, forge a sturdy, deadly knife under a strict time limit. Following rigorous testing and an elimination, the smiths must then create a suitable hilt for their knife. Finally, when only two smiths remain, they have a week to replicate a particular historical weapon that not only retains its edge and cuts clean, but is period-accurate. The winner of each episode walks away with \$10,000 (Kryah 2015: 1).

Given that *Forged In Fire* is broadcast on the History Channel, it is apt that the underlying skillset that brands the series, metalsmithing, is arguably one of humanity's oldest crafts (Chatwin 1995; Jørgensen 2012), originating initially in the Middle East, China, and India before becoming more widely geographically diffused into Europe and Japan. Moreover, the metals were forged by the figure of the smith, who 'wielded a hammer to re-fire and shape the hot plastic mass on the anvil' (Fisher 1963: 29). As Bealer argues, the traditional blacksmith's function, before the advent of such mechanized mass production 'was supplying the tools of civilization and war' (1984: 19). As such, this ancient, but enduring perception of blacksmithing is the ethos that characterises *Forged In Fire*, both in terms of the precise nature of the challenges set to the contestants, and the craft skills



that they must display in order to win the competition. This is because *Forged in Fire* does not simply test general metal smithing skills; it challenges them in direct relation to one of metal-forging's principal historical drivers: the forging of bladed weapons.

### ***Forged In Fire: Classic Skills and Risk-Induced Craft***

While the fundamental principles of blacksmithing are threaded throughout *Forged in Fire*, and all of the participants are full and part time practitioners, it is blade smithing that represents the show's specialised focus, and the crafting of bladed weapons lies at the heart of the history of blacksmithing, as Daryl Meier illustrates:

Blade smithing is an ancient craft. Knives, swords, hoes, axes, and other edged tools have been made from iron/steel for about 5000 years. Early smiths developed techniques to improve the quality of their products by forge welding a combination of hard brittle iron with soft tough iron. In time, they were able to produce "patterns" visible on the surface of the finished product by controlling the shape and placement of the different "irons" in the final assembly for a product, and by special forging techniques (2000: 231).

Fisher (1963) stresses that it was the military advantages of forged iron and then steel that hastened its proliferation within the ancient world, and which decisively improved methods of warfare. For example, the military prowess Rome was not only due to training and strategy expertise, but their production of steel weapons, and principally that of the sword, which displayed the finest examples of metal craftsmanship. This

tradition continued throughout the medieval period in the form of pattern welding and later the adoption of the 'Damascus' welding process, learned from European military campaigns in the Middle East (Tylecote 1992), with the result that such metalworking meant that 'iron warfare' was 'a bloody and horrible affair' (Keegan 1993: 297). With regard to *Forged in Fire*, given that it is produced by the History Channel, this factor of bygone bladed warfare is what lies at the forefront of the show, and the craft production that it presents because it combines iconic aspects of metal craft with the creation of weapons drawn from a range of historical eras. Consequently, the panel of judges within *Forged In Fire* reflect this combination, as they consist of J. Neilson, an American Bladesmith Society Master Bladesmith (replaced from Season 3 by Jason Knight, also an ABS bladesmith), David Lain Baker, a weapons re-creation expert, and Doug Marcaida, an edged weapons combat specialist and martial artist, who critically appraise and test the completed blades and final weapon.

For Garry Hogg, the 'dominant feature of every smithy...is the forge itself. It is the focal point, the living heart of the blacksmith's daily life' (1964: 31), as is the anvil, which is 'to the smith what the wheel is to the potter, the easel to the artist or the bench to the joiner or cabinetmaker' (1964: 40). Both items similarly visually lie at the heart of *Forged in Fire*, and a key aspect of the show is that each contestant is furnished with their own anvil and forge with which to complete the first two knife-making challenges that characterise each episode. Moreover, these items become central to the action, from the anvil serving as a 'platform' for the unveiling of the assigned billet of carbon steel to be used to create the blade for the first challenge, to the forge's central role within the blade manufacturing process.

In terms of participants, the competitors are practicing metalworkers, whether blacksmiths, bladesmiths, farriers, or knife-makers, the majority of which are male,

giving the series a distinctive tone, as Josephine Livingstone's evocative commentary on the ethos of the series suggests: 'Metal pounds metal and flames billow around the in-studio forge. Everything seems to glow red and radiate violence and masculinity' (2017: New Republic.com). Hence, *Forged In Fire*, with its exclusive focus upon the manufacture of weapons, could be argued to reflect traditional feminist views of masculinity that equates it fundamentally with the historical practice of waging warfare, and the immersion in the technologies of war (Hutchings 2008), and valorises the pre-civilisation process eras in which 'the use of weapons in combat was an everyday occurrence' (Elias 1982: 299). However, while Season One consisted entirely of male contestants, from Season Two more female bladesmiths have been consistently featured, and Kelly Vermeer Vella, 'a self-taught bladesmith with more than three decades experience working as a farrier' (Orebaugh 2016: 2), became the first woman to win *Forged In Fire* with her design of a falcate, a curved axe-like sword. Therefore, while masculinity is a visual presence within the series, it nevertheless reflects on the ways in which, while bladesmithing has been a predominantly male craft for much of its history, there are now an increasing number of women who make their living forging knives, blades, and re-creating weapons (O'Keefe 2016). Consequently, *Forged In Fire* demonstrates that there is a vibrant, professional community of metal craft practitioners working within contemporary America that is increasingly diverse in terms of gender, and which serves as a counterpoint to 'female-dominated type crafts, such as knitting, jewellery making and clothing production' (Holmes 20015: 479).

At one level, the contestants that appear on *Forged in Fire* consistently (and perhaps unsurprisingly) reflect the key aspects of Sennett's conception of craftsmanship as the 'intimate connection between hand and head' (2008: 9), and a practice that is based upon the production of intrinsically 'quality-driven work' (2008:

24). Moreover, the representation of blade making within the series also reflects many of the core aspects of David Pye's now-classic work, *The Nature and Art of Workmanship*, albeit, with some distinctive televisual modifications. In terms of the nature of craftsmanship, Pye states:

If I must ascribe a meaning to the word craftsmanship, I shall say as a first approximation that it means simply workmanship using any kind of technique or apparatus [in] which the quality of the result is not predetermined, but depends on the judgement, dexterity and care which the maker exercises as he works. The essential idea is that the quality of the result is continually at risk during the process of making (1968: 4).

With the consolidation and normalization of automated production, the workmanship of risk was/is naturally greatly reduced, but it remains within handicraft, and is key to the achievement of quality in the finished product, therefore, Pye argues that:

The goodness or badness of workmanship is judged by two different criteria: soundness and comeliness. Soundness implies the ability to transmit and resist forces as the designer intended; there must be no hidden flaws or weak places. Comeliness implies the ability to give that aesthetic expression which the designer intended, or to add to it (1968: 13).

In terms of design process, Peter Korn states that the 'actual design process consists of methodologies and practical skills for clarifying the brief, generating ideas, and then testing and refining those ideas with an economy of time and effort' (2017: 113-114). This evocation of craft-made objects is similarly stressed by Christopher Frayling, who emphasises that a key driver for the craftsman is the 'importance of controlling every aspect of the work they do, and having the *time* to control every aspect of the work they do' (2012: 80). This is a primary factor that Pye links specifically with the metal working smith, because 'their trade above all needs deftness and decision. 'Strike while the iron is hot' is a very apt proverb' (1968: 20). However, within *Forged In Fire*, because of the competitive and dramatic nature of the reality TV format, the makers do *not* have full control over their blade production, and nor do they have the 'economy of time', far from it. In Pye's view, there are three key ways in which the end achievement of the craftsman's labour may differ from the initial idea, and so constitute a failed, or compromised, piece of craft work. As he explains, it 'may do so because he intends that it shall, it may do so because he has not time to perfect the work, and finally it may do so because he has not enough knowledge, patience or dexterity to perfect it' (1968: 15). However, within *Forged In Fire*, the time restrictions, imposed as a key aspect of the reality TV experience, intensify these pressures, and serve to effectively establish a condition of 'craftsmanship against the clock'.

At the outset of *Forged in Fire* each of the initial four contestants is provided with an anvil and a bar of carbon steel, and, in round one, they have three hours to produce a knife, with only a ten minute 'design window' allowed for the planning process. In term of autonomy, the contestants have relative freedom over the style of blade and tang that they will make, but there are usually stipulations on blade length, and often at least one technical requirement (that the blade must have serrations or a

hamon line, for instance), with many contestants opting to produce Bowie, Seax, or Kukri-style blades in the opening round. As such, round one becomes a mixture of displaying the craft process, with constant straight-to-camera commentary by each contestant explaining their craft approach, and interpretative explanations being made by the judges, either endorsing craft choices, or pointing out errors and poor decisions that compromise the completed blade.

As the series has progressed, the time factor has been compromised with the addition of further initial challenges. So, while contestants were provided with a billet of carbon steel to forge their blade from, later episodes have included participants having to strip their metal from cars or suits of armour, harvest metal from rifles, or forge weld a number of small steel cubes into a billet, and *then* begin to construct their blade. Subsequently, the craft element of *Forged In Fire* is subjected to myriad practical pressures that make the craft process increasingly difficult for the makers to meet the challenge, but it of course provides a necessary degree of increased tension within the reality televisual scenario. Still, these pressures do also often enrich the craft tradition that underpins the series. For instance, while the studio (dubbed 'The Forge') contains all of the contemporary technologies that modern bladesmiths utilise (power hammers, band saws, grinders, drill presses), these are sometimes withdrawn from the contestants and replaced with traditional coal forges and forge blowers, technologies that increases onscreen tension, but which also showcases the historical blacksmithing culture of bladesmithing and the fundamental traditional craft aptitudes of the makers.

In terms of craft content and representational style, round one foregrounds the fundamentals of bladecrafting in term of forging techniques, blade construction and the heat-treating of steel, namely annealing, quenching, and tempering. With regard

to annealing, this is the symbolic and dramatic heart of *Forged In Fire*, in that it is the moment in which the steel is heated to a temperature that enables the metal to be shaped into a blade, which is then established through the quenching process (usually in oil). This is the crucial practical operation that enables the bladesmith to 'achieve the optimal grain structure inside the steel' and so harden the blade (Murray 2011: 70). The quenching moments, invariably depicted in dramatic slow motion and amidst great plumes of flame shooting out from the quenching bucket serve as a visual leitmotif, but they are also a crucial technical craft moment as any distortions and cracking due to overheating the metal will become manifest through the hardening process (Cain 2017). While some tempering occurs in round one, this process is what characterizes round two, where the surviving three contestants attach handles to their blades, and engage in necessary reheating to straighten any warping or minor cracks that the judges may have identified in their initial critical examination of the blades. Competitors also subject the blade to sustained processes of grinding to remove any scratches and to provide a polished finish to the blade and, of course, to grind the crucially lethal sharp edge into the blade. In the view of Jim Hrisoulas, the 'final grind is perhaps one of the most important cosmetic steps in the making of a blade, and should be done slowly and carefully' (2010: 59). This is an evident factor for the *Forged In Fire* contestants, but without the luxury of such time and deliberation. Within this round, the bladesmiths, in creating a blade that combines functionality with aesthetic visual appeal, illustrate the key elements of Pye's conception of workmanship in terms of craft products that strive to demonstrate competitive degrees of soundness and comeliness that will secure the contestant ultimate victory. Consequently, while alternative craft-related reality TV shows, such as those devoted to tattooing, frequently downplay the technical aspects of the craft practice to explore the inspirational stories

that motivate design choice, and stress the domestic relationships (and interpersonal conflicts) of the artists (Woodstock 2014), *Forged In Fire* alternatively stresses the *craft skills* and products of the participants, offering little biographical information. It is for this reason that online knife-making community forums such as *The Truth About Knives.com* have praised *Forged In Fire* precisely because it focuses squarely on the *work* produced by the participants rather than on their personalities.

### **Crafted to Kill**

While the aesthetic craft aspect of the finished blades are highlighted within the judges' evaluations, the crux of round two is the cutting effectiveness of the completed knife, as each blade must cut through a series of objects, from wooden dowels, to copper pipes, fire hoses, and leather boots. The cutting tests both showcase the craftsmanship of the completed blades, and serve as the basis for reality TV-themed 'drama', especially when Doug Marcaida performs the cutting trials with his stylistic martial arts flourishes, stressing not only the practical applications of the knife-edges to effectively cut, but crucially, the level of lethality that they possess. This is an imperative point because although *Forged In Fire* is centrally about bladesmithing, the products are categorised as weapons, not as blades per se. This element becomes far more explicit in round three, which pits the remaining two contestants against each other in crafting a historically accurate weapon that is to be manufactured in five days within their respective home forges, the products of are then subsequently subjected to 'rigorous and dynamic' tests.

The final challenge is presented in the form of visual montages of each contestant producing their take on the weapon brief (which have included weapons as



disparate as a war hammer, a crusader sword, a Pandat, a Naginata, a Boar Spear, a Cutlass, a Zulu Iklwa, a Cavalry Sabre, a Zweihänder, and a Viking sword). The weapon construction process shows the various design approaches that the final two bladesmiths take, and the challenges that they face in crafting the historical weapon. These range from weapons that are too large for their home forges (which must be heat treated in stages, stressing the skill of being able to recognise by sight key temperature colours), to warps, cracks, and the pressures of producing the technically complicated weapons to a professional standard in just five days. In terms of craft skills, the historically accurate nature of the weapons means that many of the challenges (especially the swords) demonstrate the key forging techniques that underpinned Middle Eastern and Western weapon crafting from the first and early-to-mid second millennium periods, such as Damascened blades and Anglo-Saxon and Viking-era pattern-welding (Underwood 1999; Ellis Davison 1998).

Following the completion of the challenge, the contestants return to the studio where their weapons are subjected to a series of rigorous physical tests, and while aesthetics, or what Pye calls 'comeliness', is a factor, it is ultimately the *performance* of the weapon that determines the winner. For example, racks of beef, whole pig carcasses, cow femurs, and wooden doors are hacked and sliced to determine the quality, functionality and soundness of the weapon, but also the degree to which the implement can inflict fatal bodily damage. This latter factor is illustrated most explicitly in the form of the ballistic dummy, a torso and head mannequin that is made from a synthetic gelatine that simulates human skin and tissue, with the addition of visible internal organs. Hence, Doug Marcaida's slashing and stabbing of the dummies serves to graphically demonstrate and simulate the destructive effects each contestant's weapon would have on a human body (visually enhanced with the

presence of synthetic 'blood' that spurts out of the dummies). The positive outcome of these tests is signed off by Marcaida's trademark "It will kill" evaluation, and a weapon that is not able to demonstrate this killing ability fails the challenge, and so balances the craft elements of the series with the sense of spectacle that is endemic to reality TV.

### ***Forged In Fire: Bladesmithing as Mediated Craft Poiesis***

Drawing upon Aristotelian concepts of *techne* (craft), *theoria* (to see), and *poiesis* (to make), Howard Risatti stresses that craft objects exemplify the hand as the extension of the rational mind, in that the maker utilises the 'rational hand'. As such, 'the quality of workmanship ... is directly dependent upon several factors: the degree of manual skill possessed by the hand, the worker's technical knowledge of how materials can be worked, and the standards of quality to which the worker is committed' (2007: 163). With reference to Pye, Risatti agrees that craftsmanship involves risk in terms of workmanship and making, but there is also a crucial dimension of conceptualization that goes beyond just complicated manual skill. This is because successful craft production also requires creative imagination in the execution of technical skill. As Risatti states, craftsmanship 'should be seen as existing within the realm of poiesis because technical skill and creative imagination come together in craftsmanship to bring the thing into being as a physical-conceptual entity' (2007: 168).

So, whereas Pye only sees craft production as either certainty of outcome or risk, Risatti, via the idea of poiesis, argues that craftsmanship is a constant interplay between thinking and making, visualizing and executing, and as such, it represents 'a profound act of creativity' (2007: 169). Within *Forged In Fire*, Risatti's view of

craftsmanship is a key defining factor as the briefs are not meticulously set out, and so both the blades and the finished historically based weapons align creative visualization with practical manual skills and abilities. However, the primacy of Pye's conception of workmanship is still evident due to the artificiality of the premise. *Forged In Fire* is not simply a platform for professional bladesmiths to demonstrate their craft for interested viewers: it is also a reality TV gameshow, and so the imposition of strict time limits means that creativity can lead to failure if not enough provision is left regarding what is a punishing time restriction. As one contestant within episode 7 of Season 3 stated, 'I'm rushing as I'm welding, because, you know, the clock's just, you know, ticking'.

Nonetheless, what makes *Forged In Fire* significant within the pantheon of competition-style reality TV shows is the precise primacy of professional craft that infuses the series. This is so because at its heart it is an effective showcase of craft skill as it is predicated upon the ability of professional makers to condense the process of blade construction within a strict time limit, but still design and construct a blade that is both functional and aesthetically appealing. Likewise, the technical components that underpin bladesmithing are an intrinsic component of the series. For example, both the bladesmiths and the judges provide continual commentary on their approach to the briefs, and the craft approaches that they elect to take. Furthermore, the series routinely communicates to the viewers the precise technical terms that are central to the craft of bladesmithing, terms that are defined for the viewer in a series of onscreen text boxes (including technical issues such as: cold shuts, peening, bolsters, annealing, and fullers). Therefore, the series does not neglect the craft nature of bladesmithing and the skill and knowledge that underpins it. In this sense, the essence of Risatti's concept of poiesis present within *Forged in Fire* also reflects a vibrant

practice of the traditional craft forms that Stuart Walker calls for within *Design For Life*: a mode of production that substitutes mass-production techniques for craft making that is imbued with the vital importance of ‘the human touch’, and which are based upon individual creative vision that results in ‘beautiful functional designs’ (2017: 162). Subsequently, notwithstanding its presence within a reality TV format, and the exuberantly injurious uses to which the blades and weapons are put, *Forged In Fire* exhibits a potent expression of the continuation (and increasingly vibrancy) of the traditional practices and continuities of traditional craft practices that Walker laments have faced grave challenges within mass production processes.

However, this is not to say that the ‘purity’ of the craft production and community ethos showcased within *Forged In Fire* has insured it from the critical charges that it merely represents a *Project Runway*-style competition TV format, and as such is simply another facile reality TV series, the genre that is typically dismissed as ‘a low-status cultural form, the ‘bottom feeder’ of the media world’ (Kavka and Weber 2017: 5). Indeed, for some, it illustrates the degree to which reality TV is increasingly mining a near-exhausted pool of professional skills that remain to be exploited for onscreen entertainment. As Tom Conroy caustically states in his review of *Forged In Fire*, in terms of conceptualising the series he imagines that ‘a panicky producer must have been looking around his house and thinking, “Interior design? Done. Furniture? Done. Paintings? Done. Cake? Done.” But then he must have opened a kitchen drawer and said, triumphantly, “Knives!” (2015: 1). But, irrespective of such critical evaluations, *Forged In Fire* has now progressed through multiple seasons, and, importantly, it has garnered praise from within bladesmithing and blacksmithing craft communities, principally because of its sustained and detailed focus upon the principles of craft production that underpin the practice. As Grace Horne, a British blacksmith who has

specialized in blade making for over 20 years, states of the show: '*Forged in Fire* is great. I think the programme introduces a whole new audience to the complexities and intricacies of working in steel.' In a similar vein, the blacksmith Joshua Burrell states that '*Forged in Fire* has shown people that bladesmithing and blacksmithing can be a viable career. It's a continuation of tradition and heritage' (Matthews, 2017 Mailonline.com).

With reference to media representations of craft, Gowlland asks: 'What kind of images are those that represent artisans at work? And why should audiences who are not themselves artisans be interested in these images of craft-making?' (2015: 267). One answer can be found in *Forged In Fire*, a television series that balances the visual 'drama' of TV craft production with a commitment to exploring the nature of the craft that lies at its heart: bladesmithing. In evaluating the essence of workmanship, Pye states that it 'is that which carries out or improves upon the intended design. Bad workmanship is what fails to do so and thwarts the design' (1968: 13). This, I argue, represents the essence of *Forged In Fire*, and the 'bad workmanship' featured within the series is often not related to the core craft skills exhibited by a contestant, but is instead attributed to the effects of risk-inducing time limits and the increasingly challenging metal-sourcing activities that are set by the producers. And of course, the occasional instances of craft artefacts that stubbornly 'fail to kill' also cannot be overlooked because this is still, after all, craft production reality TV style.

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