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Invisible Culture

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All Together Now! Publics and Participation in *American Idol*

by Simon Cowell
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On the front cover of issue 702 of *Entertainment Weekly*, eclipsing the coverlines “James Gandolfini Speaks” and “Hollywood’s Weirdest Star,” are the images of eight (mostly) young, (mostly) smiling people.¹ The composition of each picture is the same – a close crop of the subject’s face against a light-blue background. The photographs are configured in a square, which, together with the contrived poses of the individuals, effects a visual conceit, whereby each person, in an inter-imaginary moment, gazes beyond the limits of her or his photographic frame at another party. These figures, in their, albeit fictional, scopical agency, trouble their position as photographic subjects to be looked at as they themselves look beyond the limits of their own representation. In looking (and, of course, smiling) at each other, they suggest a participation in a kind of community. In case our knowledge of popular (televisual) culture isn’t sufficient enough for us to get the reference here, the headline resolves any ambiguity: “The American Idol Bunch.” The montage parodies the title-sequence graphics of the 1970s sitcom *The Brady Bunch*, performing a substitution of the all-American family with the “family” of contenders in the 2003 series of *American Idol*, the ratings-busting talent television show.² The subversion of the original text operates on the level of difference, for the images of sameness that the Bradys offer us, with their neat division along gender lines – mother and daughters on one side of the screen, father and sons on the other (not forgetting, of course, Alice, the domestic “help,” in the centre, as if the linchpin of the group)³ – is replaced by the seemingly random arrangement of racially diverse women’s and men’s faces. Biological relativity (or, rather, its fiction) is displaced by a set of merit-based relations. These people are all different, but they share the same ability to sing well, or, rather, the same desire to be nominated America’s best vocalist.

The *Entertainment Weekly* article on *American Idol* forms part of a large body of metatexts in circulation – websites, electronic newsletters, television and magazine

interviews – that underpin, and, in part, constitute the popularity of the show itself.⁴ I choose to examine this magazine cover in particular as it raises key questions about the operations of a cultural project like *American Idol* in relation to identity and difference. The foregrounding of diversity that the piece effects through its use of irony (aren't they just one big, happy family?) emphasizes the marked cultural difference that exists between the competitors. But in competing to become the titular figure, they are each engaged in a process of difference-effacing abstraction. They strive to become the embodiment of (or to elide the difference between themselves and) the abstract notion of the idol. As the empty square in the centre of the composite of contestants, the identity of the American Idol is represented precisely as a lack of identity. It is an absence predicated on the future presence of the one who is to become it, to occupy it, to fill the lack. On one level, it would appear, the programme functions as a fetish-object that will stand in for that which is marked as missing, an absence upon which the show itself relies.

In the analysis that follows, I shall examine the relation of identity to the notions of embodiment and abstraction in the context of the television talent show, and think through how this, in turn, relates to questions of performance and performativity. As, arguably, an exemplary popular form, drawing its cast of characters, as it does, from that contested notion of the “general public,” *American Idol* and its ilk also invite an enquiry into issues of participation, democracy and the public sphere. In the last few years, television schedules in the United States and in Britain have seen a renaissance of the talent contest. But what is to be made of the reappearance of this familiar genre and its, if we are to believe the ratings, renewed popularity? What is at stake, ideologically speaking, in these kinds of shows, both in terms of involvement and spectatorship? Within the limits of this paper, I shall focus on the *American Idol* series, as it provides, I feel, the most productive ground for an elaboration of my concerns. Originally devised by music producer Simon Fuller, the rights of this British show (called *Pop Idol* in the UK) were sold to the Fox Broadcasting Company in the US. At the time of writing, the American version of the programme is in its second (2003) season. The series' name change is, I would argue, of significance. In the context of other talent programmes, such as *All American Girl* (ABC) and *America's Most Talented Kid* (NBC), the substitution of “Pop” with “American” in the show's transatlantic passage suggests its conscious involvement in the popular discourse of national identity. I would like to return to this issue later in my discussion.

“They may feel like family now, but one of them has got to go.” *American Idol* host Ryan Seacrest's opening remarks to the April 1, 2003, broadcast of the show mobilize once more the ironic figure of the family-with-a-difference. The (questionable) closeness of the contestants, which belies the traditional rules of competition that work against the display of affect on the part of the competitors, is attended here by the suggestion of a familial intimacy between contestants and

spectators. The participants' weekly appearance on television over the course of several months, through its insistent repetition, works to produce an affective relationship between us and them. We care about them, or are supposed to care about them, even while we are aware of the fictional aspect of this construct. Moreover, if they are "family," we are the chief care-providers. In informing us that "one of them has got to go," the show interpellates the viewer into a discourse of care and responsibility, for it is we who are charged with the task of sacrificing one of the group every week in order to preserve its unity. Fail to respond to this call (literally, by not making a call to the show to cast your vote) and you run the risk of being branded a bad parent. I am less interested here in whether or not we should care, but, rather, in how the programme works on a discursive level to create the *imperative* to care. Seacrest's invocation of the image of family, and the tension between it and the impending departure of one of its members, is illustrative of the operations of the *American Idol* format. The sense of propinquity produced by repeated viewing of the programme is disrupted by the continual reappearance of the same cast, each time minus one contestant. Like the series images of a Warhol screenprint, the show is based on reiteration, a repetition of the same, but with difference.⁵ The pleasure of repetition (if we are to believe Freud), and of viewing repetition (that is, the serial pleasure that characterizes popular culture to such a large extent), is complicated by the intrusion of difference in the form of absence.⁶ A contender on the previous week's show is no longer there. What her or his absence does contribute to, however, is the movement towards the final presence of the American Idol, a making positive of its identity through a filling of the lack that it represents.

The reiterative process of *American Idol* begins with a series of large-scale auditions, held across the US. The reference to nation in the show's title mobilizes the notion of the democratic process. Everyone has the right to participate. But this is a democracy informed by meritocracy. Access to the performative space of the contest is countered by mechanisms of selection (operatively embodied by the panel of judges), which work according to the criterion of individual ability. *American Idol* dramatizes, in a sense, the popular narrative of the American dream, the idea that anyone can make it. Or rather, anyone can attempt to make it, but only the best will. And the promised reward is great: the status of idol, no less. For what is on offer in a show like *American Idol* is spectacularization. Those who compete do so to acquire visibility. Moving from cultural obscurity into the highly scopic arena of the competition, the participants move towards the spectacular position of idol. One speaks (or, in this case, sings) in order to be seen. An examination of the show's title sequence bears out its investment in the spectacle. Computer-generated motion graphics show a colossal, super-human figure, microphone in hand, towering over recognizable structures from the American landscape, such as the Statue of Liberty and the Seattle Space Needle. A ring of spotlights illuminate the seemingly androgynous body of the idol, which seems less

incarnate than made of a fluid, mercurial substance. Cameras flash about the figure, casting even more light onto its form. Its scale, emphasized by its urban context, recalls the cinematic image of King Kong. Like the exotic creature brought to America for display, the idol is pure spectacle. The bi-planes that circulate around Kong are replaced here by other objects – guitars, mics, and cameras – the props that denote musical success and stardom. Later in the sequence, the idol figure changes to take on an identifiably female form. The suggestion of breasts, the length of hair and general body mass all work to signify a somatic difference. Allowing myself another filmic reference here, the transformed body on screen echoes the gendered cyborg of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, with its technological-organic ambiguity and feminine coding. But what are we to make of this transformation? What is the relation here of idol to gender? These questions are complicated further by the subsequent reversal of the figure's feminization. The idol returns at the end of the titles to its original shape, which, previously represented as androgynous, is now, through its difference from the secondary feminine form, marked as masculine. The sortie into the formal terrain of the female, only to retreat from it, would suggest the status of the feminine here as derivation. What the opening sequence does, then, is, on the one hand, to reinscribe the notion that the (ideal) idol is genderless – an abstract figure that does not exclude on the basis of gender any individual who seeks to attain, or rather embody, it – yet simultaneously, and insidiously, to effect a gender hierarchy of inclusion in the game. The true idol can really only be a man. A woman will only ever be a bad copy. Of course, this is not to say that women can't win talent shows. The winner of *American Idol's* first season, Kelly Clarkson, demonstrates that they obviously can (and should). My point is that the programme works, at least in its image-making, against its own belief that talent transcends cultural identity, against the idea that it is concerned not with embodiment, but with disincorporation, with the abstraction and analysis of ability (that is, the ability to sing), without reference to gender (and, indeed, race or class).

In order to think further the relation of abstraction and embodiment to the ideas of participation and democracy, I would like to introduce here the work of Michael Warner on publics and their constitution, and, by extension, Jürgen Habermas's development of the history of the public sphere. In his essay "The Mass Public and the Mass Subject," Warner writes:

As the subjects of publicity – its hearers, speakers, viewers, and doers – we have a different relation to ourselves, a different affect, from that which we have in other contexts. No matter what particularities of culture, race, gender, or class we bring to bear on public discourse, the moment of apprehending something as public is one in which we imagine, if imperfectly, indifference to those particularities, to ourselves. We adopt the attitude of the public

subject, marking to ourselves its nonidentity with ourselves.⁷

Warner describes here the ideological fiction of personal abstraction that underpins the notion of being part of a public, of speaking as one of its members. His argument draws on Habermas's genealogy and analysis of the bourgeois public sphere, that rational-critical discourse of the 18th and 19th centuries in Western Europe that ostensibly challenged state authority and domination through its reasoned rhetoric of social parity. Participation in the public sphere required a "bracketing" of one's personal status, an effacement of difference through self-abstraction. The notions of common interest and truth were guaranteed, as it were, by the divestment by private individuals coming to the discursive space of the public sphere of their positive identity.⁸ In the words of Warner,

In the bourgeois public sphere [. . .] a principle of negativity was axiomatic: the validity of what you say in public bears a negative relation to your person. What you say will carry force not because of who you are but despite who you are. Implicit in this principle is a utopian universality that would allow people to transcend the given realities of their bodies and their status.⁹

Warner goes on to argue that the fiction of personal abstraction is itself "a major source of domination, for the ability to abstract oneself in public discussion has always been an unequally available resource."¹⁰ While Habermas identifies access for all as one of the irreducible stakes of the public sphere's effective operation, and, indeed, existence,¹¹ Warner quite rightly points out that the subject that could master the rhetorics of disincorporation was that whose identity was culturally unmarked – the white, male, literate property-owner.¹² In fairness, despite his tendency to idealize the bourgeois public sphere, Habermas, acknowledges the exclusions it both effected and disavowed (in terms of gender and, in particular, class) and the way in which it effaced its own domination. In the development of the public sphere, "the interest of class, via critical public debate, could assume the appearance of the general interest [. . .]"¹³

In his essay "Publics and Counterpublics," Warner foregrounds the way in which a public is constituted through interpellation. "A public is a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself [. . .] It exists *by virtue of being addressed*."¹⁴ In other words, to speak publicly, one is first spoken to. For Warner, the address of public speech is both personal and impersonal, that is, it is an address to us and an address to strangers. He writes, "The benefit in this practice is that it gives a general social relevance to private thought and life. Our subjectivity is understood as having resonance with others, and immediately so."¹⁵ In its continual address to "America" to participate by calling in to the show, to

respond discursively, *American Idol* relies precisely, and, perhaps, more consciously than other televisual texts, on this notion of the personal and the impersonal. The pleasure of being part of a mass viewing public constituted by a programme that lends that public the illusion of agency comes from the idea that one's making of a discursive mark (casting one's phone vote) is only meaningful in the context of the response of others, or "strangers" as Warner would call them. Responding to the address made to the abstract notion of "America", the subject acknowledges that the address exceeds itself, is intended for others as well as itself, but takes pleasure in knowing that one is part of a public, in whose participation, through the "democratic" system of voting, one can contribute to "real" and immediate effects on one's television screen. There is also an identifiable pleasure in the abstraction, that is to say, the ability to articulate one's pleasure or displeasure with embodied individuals (the contestants) anonymously and without any returning consequences.

In contradistinction to *American Idol's* viewing public, the programme's contestants form a public on view, where, it would seem, embodiment displaces abstraction. They have responded to the call to participate by coming into discourse, by speaking as subjects (that is, by appearing at auditions and singing). In doing so, they enter the hypervisible public arena of the television show. As I suggested earlier, its spectacular space is discursively subtended. As a singing contest, the show shows speech in action. Without the insistent circulation of discourse, there would be little spectacle. If a public, as Warner argues, is a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself, the discourse of address in the show's call to participate is doubly organizational. It creates two spaces. That of the abstract viewing public, through the imperative to phone in, and that of the highly publicized bodies on view, through the invitation to take part as a contestant. The two spaces are also themselves mutually constitutive. The discursive production of the latter (the song), in turn, precipitates a discursive response from the former (the vote), while the former's participation determines which contestants will continue to participate in the spectacle by remaining on the show (who will continue to speak). In abstracting one of the "family" from the spectacle each week, the disembodied viewing public, mobilized through its own interpellative abstraction as "America", works against embodiment, absents one of the privileged spectacular bodies from the scene. The subject in question returns to the non-specificity of the "general public."

The publics that I am suggesting are brought into being by a participatory television programme like *American Idol* certainly differ from the model of the bourgeois public sphere that Habermas is offering in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, particularly in terms of embodiment and abstraction. For Habermas, the entry into public discourse requires, as I have already mentioned, a transcendence of corporeal and cultural identity. *American Idol* would seem be

informed by the desire to see bodies and their marked cultural differences. But, as I have also suggested, the premise of the show, in its continual reiteration to identify who will *become* the idol, would seem to demand a self-fashioning on the part of the contestants that involves a certain abstraction, an effacement of difference, in coming to occupy the position of the abstract figure of idol. It could be argued that the public discursive space of (spectacular) embodied individuals (involved, perhaps contradictorily, in a visible self-abstraction), I see as characteristic of *American Idol* evinces the dissolution of the bourgeois public sphere that Habermas traces (and, to a certain extent, laments) and the concomitant rise of mass culture. Habermas writes, “the sphere generated by the mass media has taken on the traits of a secondary realm of intimacy.”¹⁶ As Craig Calhoun puts it,

We experience radio, film, and television communication with an immediacy far greater than that characteristic of the printed word. One of the effects of this on public discourse is that “bracketing” personal attributes and concentrating on the rational-critical argument becomes more difficult.¹⁷

Warner also identifies the insistence of bodies in the public discourse of mass culture:

At present, the mass-cultural public sphere continually offers its subject an array of body images. In earlier varieties of the public sphere, it was important that images of the body not figure centrally in public discourse [. . .] But now public body images are everywhere on display, in virtually all media contexts. Where printed public discourse formerly relied on a rhetoric of abstract disembodiment, visual media, including print, now display bodies for a range of purposes: admiration, identification, appropriation, scandal, and so on.¹⁸

For Warner, contemporary publicity and visibility are closely related. Participation in a public is often a visible participation. Conversely, being seen is to be part of a privileged public, that is, to be publicized. Yet how does this relate to the notion of the discursively constituted, non-spectacular, abstract public, that is, in the context of my discussion, to the mass viewing public? As spectators who, themselves, go unseen, does the audience of a show like *American Idol* represent a lesser public? Or does the audience have primacy, insofar as it allows a visible publicity to exist through its being seen? Does looking from the point of abstraction at embodiment necessarily take the form of a desirous identification and in doing so privilege the spectacular bodies upon which it gazes? Needless to say, the relation between

embodiment and abstraction in the workings of the mass-cultural public sphere is complex. Warner argues that this complexity was always there, that in the utopic imperative of self-abstraction the bourgeois public sphere chose to “turn a blind eye to its privileged bodies.”¹⁹ In other words, public bodies in mass culture represent the return of the repressed.

Such has been the success of *American Idol* in terms of ratings that Rupert Murdoch, the Australian media owner who counts the Fox Broadcasting Company among his many international business concerns, has been able to offset a recent 25 per cent drop in income at the UK newspaper division (which includes the *Times*, the *Sunday Times*, the *Sun* and the *News of the World*) of his company, News Corporation.²⁰ Over ten million viewers regularly watch the US show. It is my contention that repeated viewing is itself encouraged by the repetitious aspect of the show. The reiterative performance of the contestants, returning each week to sing once again for America, produces the effect of intimacy, of the kind Habermas describes. If, as Judith Butler argues in her theory of performativity, subjectivity is cast as an effect of a discursive performance, it is these series of reiterated effects that we come to know in our intimate relations with America’s on-screen “family.”²¹ We know them as televisual subjects, idols-in-the-becoming, rather than as subjects with an ontological priority. The performative quality of subjectivity in the context of *American Idol* is summed up quite neatly by the winner of the show’s first season, Kelly Clarkson: “I’m here because people voted for me.”²² It is through the repetition of the performance, watched and affirmed by a participating, viewing public, that Clarkson becomes the embodiment of the idol. Her identity as Kelly Clarkson, American Idol, is the result of a long, insistent process of reiteration. Yet in creating, through its repetitive workings, subjects-who-would-be-idol, the show effects, to a certain degree, a disavowal of the marked cultural identities of its players. It seems to hold in a kind of tension the embodied difference of its participants and their abstraction, a requirement for idol candidacy. As I have discussed, the discursive space of the programme is also a highly spectacular one. As they sing on stage, the contestants are highly visible. The panel of three judges sit at the front of the studio audience, sharing their perspective. Each performer is, therefore, singularly on display. But the contestants’ difference, “humorously” foregrounded on the cover of *Entertainment Weekly*, is written over, in part, by the repetition of the discursive performance. Abstraction from self works through the endless cover versions of songs that the contestants are compelled to deliver. With virtually no original music in the show, the voice performing is always a performance of another’s voice. Through their citation, the subjects are cast as copies of a prior performance. The fact that the competitors are required each week to sing songs from a particular genre (country this week, disco the next) is a further suggestion of the fetishization of sameness, of abstraction through copy, at work here, which runs counter to the programme’s simultaneous desire to fix its subject-participants in a publicity of visible

embodiment.

Perhaps one of the most eventful moments in the 2003 series of *American Idol* was the unexpected departure of Frenchie, a contestant who, in the early rounds of the show, was considered a favourite. She was dropped from the programme when its producers discovered that she had, at some stage in her past, posed for a pornographic website. The Save Frenchie! campaign group claim, in her defence, that she needed the money to pay for her college education.²³ Interestingly, the group highlights how the show has retroactively erased the singer's textual presence by removing all mention of her from its own website.²⁴ The *American Idol* narrative is now distinctly Frenchie-free. The disavowal of Frenchie's participation illustrates, I believe, the programme's troubled relationship with bodies. If it strives, on one level, to produce abstraction and to obscure differential identity, Frenchie's spectacularization of herself threatens this process. She exceeds the limits of embodiment that the programme sets through a hypervisible display of her own naked body. It seems fitting then that the punishment for such a transgression should be a complete abstraction – her swift removal from the televisual text. Similarly, another of the series' contenders, Corey Clark, was asked to leave the show when it was revealed that he had a criminal record for physical assault. Once again, the extra-textual action of his body meant a disruption of his abstracted embodiment within the show. It would seem that *American Idol's* visible public is a highly policed one.

I find it surprising that a show like *American Idol*, which, ostensibly, performs a simple rehabilitation of the old talent-show format, has had such popular effects, as evinced not only by its viewing figures, but also by the proliferation of discourse (including this paper) on it. Yet it is, I believe, the fantasy of a participatory democracy, in which the programme traffics, that makes it so seductive for so many. The show's explicit reference to national identity, not only in its title, but also in its title sequence (the towering idol figure is shown walking triumphantly through a field of American flags) and in its regular, direct address to "America", resonate strongly with the current geopolitical climate. As the US engages in questionable military conflict abroad in the name of freedom, the need for the fiction of a stronger and more effective democracy at home, to which all citizens have access, becomes greater. *American Idol* dramatizes the workings of this democracy on screen. It is, however, just that – a dramatization, a representation. Calhoun, outlining Habermas's take on the negative effects of mass culture, writes:

[T]he public sphere was turned into a sham semblance. The key tendency was to replace the shared critical activity of public discourse by a more passive culture consumption on the one hand and an apolitical sociability on the other.²⁵

Habermas himself argues that, “the world fashioned by the mass media is a public sphere in appearance only.”²⁶ I would like to bring these comments to bear on *American Idol* and suggest that the show, while making an address to publicity and bringing individuals into its spectacular realm to participate in a public discourse, only *appears* to function democratically. In its veiling of differential identity that belies its spectacularization, and in its insistence on reiteration and copy, it attempts to reinscribe its participants as consumers of culture, rather than affording them a productive agency. The (critical) voice of the American (Idol) is a long way from being heard.

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1. See *Entertainment Weekly* no. 702, 28 March 2003. ↑
2. *American Idol* was first broadcast in 2002. It is, at the time of writing, in its second season. ↑
3. There was, of course, a major element of difference within the Brady family. Both father and sons, and mother and daughters were single-parent families until they came together to form the eponymous group. While they did not all share the same DNA, the two sides of the family mirrored each other, rather unnervingly, in terms of their gender-specific sameness (men only produce other men and women other women) and their relative ages. ↑
4. With parodies on *Saturday Night Live* and one-liners on *Will and Grace*, to name but a few instances, it would seem *American Idol* has become the popular cultural reference of the moment. ↑
5. It is the difference within the repetition, I would argue, that works against the notion of banality. The series' desire to repeat, but never in quite the same way, maintains it at the level of the event (although I do not wish to totalize viewers' responses to the show and suggest that the programme is of universal interest). ↑
6. The notion of repetition as pleasurable is one that I borrow from Freud. In his analysis of children's play, within the context of his psychoanalytic theorizing of pleasure (and unpleasure), he writes, “Novelty is always the condition of enjoyment. But children will never tire of asking an adult to repeat a game

that he has shown them or played with them, till he is too exhausted to go on. And if a child has been told a nice story, he will insist on hearing it over and over again, rather than a new one; and he will remorselessly stipulate that the repetition shall be an identical one and will correct any alterations of which the narrator may be guilty – though they may actually have been made in the hope of gaining fresh approval. None of this contradicts the pleasure principle: repetition, the re-experiencing of something identical, is clearly in itself a source of pleasure.” (My emphasis) See Sigmund Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” in *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Pyschoanalysis* (London: Penguin Books, 1991) 307. ↑

7. Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002) 160. ↑
8. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1991) 36. ↑
9. Warner, 165. ↑
10. Warner, 165. ↑
11. “However exclusive the public sphere might be in any given instance, it could never close itself off entirely and become consolidated as a clique; for it always understood and found itself immersed within a more inclusive public of all private people,” Habermas, 37; and “A public sphere from which specific groups would be *eo ipso* excluded was less than merely incomplete; it was not a public sphere at all,” Habermas, 85. ↑
12. Warner, 165-167. ↑
13. Habermas, 88. ↑
14. Warner, 67. ↑
15. Warner, 77. ↑
16. Habermas, 172. ↑
17. Craig Calhoun, “Introduction: Habermas and the Public Sphere” in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Craig Calhoun, ed. (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: MIT Press, 1992) 24. ↑
18. Warner, 169. ↑
19. Warner, 183. ↑
20. Chris Tryhorn, “American Idol lifts News Corp Profits” in the *Guardian*, 13 May 2003. ↑
21. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*

(New York and London: Routledge, 1990) 143. ↑

22. In an interview with Oprah Winfrey on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*; 13 May 2003. ↑

23. See <www.savefrenchie.com>. ↑

24. See <www.idolonfox.com>. ↑

25. Calhoun, 23. ↑

26. Habermas, 171. ↑

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