

Chapter 15

Our own Idols. Appropriations of popular television in Dutch festivity culture

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Introduction

The 2004 annual theatrical evening at the Gertrudisschool – a primary school in the Dutch city of Utrecht - had as its theme the popular TV show *Idols*.¹ Pupils were invited to sing live before their peers and the crowds of parents. They could choose to imitate a well-known *Idols* finalist or to come up with their own choice of song. As in *Idols*, the performances were introduced by a male and a female presenter, and judged by a panel of judges. Even the intervening advertising breaks were not forgotten: the singing was interspersed with skits in which pupils acted out current TV adverts. At the end of the evening, a winner – not an ‘Idol’ but a ‘school idol’ – was announced.²

The festivities at the Gertrudisschool were considered a great success by those involved. The timing was perfect: the event was held shortly after the final of the second *Idols* season. Ratings of the Dutch version were very high, with *Idols* featuring in countless columns, interviews and talk shows. The ins and outs of the programme were the subject of many a lively discussion in staff rooms, canteens and pubs.

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² Personal correspondence with A. van Veldhuizen (16/02/2005).

The show at the Gertrudisschool was not an isolated incident: since the first season of *Idols*, local Idols parties have been held at numerous locations, clearly inspired – in content as well as name – by the format of the popular programme. At schools, cafés, camping sites and clubrooms, dozens – if not hundreds – of song contests have been held in recent years under names such as *Our Own Idols* or *Idols Night*.³ These song contests are many and varied. For instance, the Meppel Sport Club ran an *MSC Idols*, the gay club Het Bólke held a *Gay Idols* in collaboration with the newspaper *Gay Krant*, and carnival association De Pintvatters from Oeteldonk organized an *Oedels*.

These festive imitations of the TV programme have tended to be overlooked by both academics and the press. This is surprising, not only because the TV model produced a real media hype, but also because the Idols party itself is an intriguing phenomenon. Apparently, festive song contests inspired by popular TV programmes are being organized on a regular basis. In this chapter, we examine the significance of these Idols parties, and what this phenomenon ultimately tells us about the relationship between TV culture and popular culture.

Two disciplines – media studies and European ethnology – offer a key to answering these questions. Media studies, have for some time focused attention on fan culture, on the way in which audience groups develop an affection for certain media products, which is then reflected in their clothing and behaviour (e.g. Jenkins 1992a; Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998; Hills 2002). A feature of existing fan theory is its primary focus on the politico-economic dimension of fan culture. Thus a positive or a

³ A six-hour trawl of the internet generated 102 different Idols parties – song contests that, in terms of name and format, were clearly inspired by the format of the TV show.

negative ‘separate status’ is often ascribed to fan communities, with no heed to the way in which fan behaviour ties in with existing behaviours in the cultural practice of everyday life (Hills 2002). Hence the plea to abandon this normative fixation and to conduct more contextual, ethnographic research (Abercrombie 1998: 159-179). Recently, attention has shifted from fan cultures to the study of what is called ‘participatory practices’ in a ‘convergent culture’ (Jenkins, 2006). Unfortunately, most of these studies tend to focus on *online* practices, still largely ignoring the spatial, material dimension of everyday media use.

European ethnology has a long-standing tradition in studying cultural forms in the Western world, with parties and celebrations forming a well-established research subject. It would therefore appear logical for the phenomenon of Idols parties to be an attractive subject of study, a clear example of new forms of festivity culture. And yet, ethnologists too have to date ignored Idols parties, as well as other parties based on TV models. Like folklore studies, its American counterpart, European ethnology appears for the time being to have adopted a wait-and-see approach to the role of modern media in contemporary culture. The scant research that has been conducted in this area is confined largely to collecting narrative similarities between traditional folklore and contemporary cinema (e.g. Koven 2003).

This study utilises theories from both European ethnology and media studies to analyse the phenomenon of the Idols party. To this end, we attended eight different Idols parties in the Netherlands in late 2004 and early 2005.⁴ A semi-structured in-depth

⁴ *Idols in de Haverkist* in De Haverkist café in Den Bosch (20/10/04); *Idols Auditie* during the Children’s book week in Den Bosch (31/10/04); *Gay Idols* in gay club Het Bölke in Enschede (10/12/04); *Idols Night* in Saco Velt dancing academy in Leeuwarden (22/01/05); *Oedels* in ‘t Pelleku clubhouse in Den Bosch (05/02/05); *Gay Idols* in gay club

interview was held before each party with the key person, the organizer.⁵ Interviews followed a fixed pattern. To begin with, several general questions were asked about the background of the organization, the costs involved and the social profile of the participants and the anticipated audience. Also important were the other kinds of events organized, and how they related to the Idols party. The conversation then turned to *Idols* itself. What did the organizer actually think of the TV programme? Which elements from the programme were consciously incorporated into or omitted from the party? Each interview ended with more in-depth questions, in which the focus lay primarily on the meaning of the party. What were the organizer's interests in the party, what made the time and costs incurred worthwhile? What did the party mean to the broader group culture of participants and audience?

Participant observation was used during the show itself. Here the focus was the ritual structure of the party, the décor, the type of prizes, the performances and repertoire, and the background of the judges, audience and participants. Of paramount importance, of course, was a comparison with *Idols*. Which familiar elements (images, sounds, symbols) were borrowed from the TV programme, and what meaning did they acquire in their new context?

Mimesis

At first glance the eight Idols parties in this study appear to have little in common. The *Idols Night* in Leeuwarden was a real teeny bopper event, held in the relatively safe

De Lollipop in Tilburg (23/01/05); *Chinese Idols* in Holland Casino in Amsterdam (09/02/05); *L'eidols* in d'oude Harmonie café in Leiden (01/04/05).

⁵ With the exception of the organizer of *Gay Idols* at the gay bar De Lollipop in Tilburg (23/01/05), who did not wish to take part in this study.

environment of a well-known dance academy. *Chinese Idols*, on the other hand, had a predominantly Chinese audience and was held in one of the largest casinos in the Netherlands. The contrast is almost as great between the Brabant *Oedels* – a real carnival event – and *Gay Idols* at gay club Het Bölke in Enschede. Thus there would seem to be no such thing as a ‘standard’ Idols party.

Nevertheless, the parties do have one key element in common: all eight were inspired to a greater or lesser degree by the format of the TV *Idols*. Parallels with the popular entertainment show are not confined to the name; they filter through into other aspects of the party as well. To begin with, the format is the same everywhere: each Idols party involves a festive song contest, one or two presenters, and a group of voluntary participants who display their singing talents before an audience and critical judges. Sometimes preliminary rounds and wildcard rounds are held as well. And as in the TV programme, *Gay Idols* was even a national event, and *Chinese Idols* a transnational one.

Clear elements of the television format are found in the structure too. Most Idols parties are ritually opened with the familiar *Idols* tune. The moment the music resounds through the room and the presenter comes onto the stage, all conversation ceases as the audience settles down for the show. As on *Idols*, the contestants come on stage one by one and give an *a capella* rendition of the verse and chorus of a song. The judges then give their critical comments, sending some contestants away and others on to the following round. The remaining contestants compete with one another once again. At *L’eidols* (The Leiden *Idols* show), the audience voted by texting, as on TV – overseen by a notary public. When the winner is finally announced, confetti fills the air. The

finalist steps onto the stage and – to round off the evening – performs the winning song one more time.

Sometimes, the format of the TV programme is so strictly adhered to that even the intervening commercial breaks are not forgotten. Between performances, short skits are performed of well-known TV commercials, such as beer or soft drink adverts. The commercial breaks, so typical of commercial entertainment in 2005, are not interpreted as an interruption but rather as a structural part of *Idols* and thus also of the Idols parties.

In addition, the shows' presenters are often direct imitations of co-presenters Reinout Oerlemans and Tooske Breugem from the Dutch *Idols*. They not only call themselves by the same names, but carry the impersonation through into their clothing (a suit or gown), wigs and the words they use. They introduce the contestants and, where necessary, reassure them. The same applies to the judges. Although not true of every Idols party, there are usually three judges, who – as in the TV programme – make harshly critical comments, mentioning the same criteria of singing, charisma and the 'X factor'.

Striking similarities to the TV show are also often found in the décor and in the contestants' performances. During the *Idols Night* at the Saco Velt dancing academy, contestants had to stand on a white dot, against a dark blue background with a huge *Idols* logo. Many contestants wore stickers with ID numbers, as on TV, and consciously opted to imitate a well-known *Idols* finalist. During their performance, they were surrounded by a 'camera crew'. At the larger-scale Idols parties, the performances are actually filmed and played on large video screens. A genuine 'recording contract'

awaits the best contestant at the end of the evening: the ultimate winner will record a CD in a professional studio.

To varying degrees, the TV format is closely copied at the Idols parties, not only in terms of structure, format and décor but also with regard to how the presenters, judges and contestants interpret their roles. This imitation is sometimes taken to great lengths. At some parties, part of the show has literally become a media event. Thus the preliminary rounds of the *Carnavalse Idols* in Vorstendonck are no longer performed live; instead, prerecorded video footage is shown of preliminary rounds. Like the TV model, *L'aidols* has its own website, complete with photos and video recordings of the preliminary rounds. Also significant is the way in which some Idols parties are presented to the outside world. One of the *Oedels* organizers had this to say:

We've handled the PR well, in a short period of time, which we've simply taken over from television. You're bombarded with it, and that's what we've tried to do here. We have plastered the whole of Oeteldonk with stickers and posters. [...] It's in all the notices, the paper, the list of carnival events. [...] On the day itself, we were on local radio as well.⁶

The imitation of *Idols* is not confined to the party's content; the entire media hype surrounding the programme is also copied, including its commercial and multimedia character (Kjus 2009). In that sense, the Idols party could be described as a kind of mimesis, with the aim being as accurate as possible a reproduction of the original.

It is tempting to attach a cultural critical significance to this mimetic character of Idols parties. Although mimesis is not an unambiguous concept, and has been interpreted very differently by art historians, philosophers, pedagogues and literary theorists, it tends to have a very negative connotation. Mimesis is associated with loss of authenticity. Mimesis and imitation are regarded as being 'unoriginal', 'false', or

⁶ Interview with carnival association De Pintvatters (Den Bosch, 07/02/05).

‘aping’ the original (Melberg 1995). Viewed from this perspective of mimesis, Idols parties could be dismissed as non-authentic, artificial clones of television culture, as a contaminated and degenerate form of a once original, ‘authentic’ folk culture.

Such an interpretation, however, ignores the complexity of the concept of mimesis. Mimesis emerges as a highly ambiguous phenomenon that has fascinated philosophers for centuries. Recently the French philosopher Derrida has made a contribution to the discussion that is relevant for our purposes. Mimesis, according to Derrida, is ultimately not intended to copy an original, but to create a difference from the original. Through imitation, a world of illusion is created in which existing images are appropriated and can acquire new meanings (Gebauer & Wulf 1995). Essential to this approach is the relationship between the copy and the original. From a more ‘classic’ view on mimesis, the relationship was a linear one: the copy came after the original (Melberg 1995). For Derrida it is a cycle. Because the copy generates a new meaning, the original will no longer be the same. In other words, by imitating something, while at the same time adding or changing an element, the original image can be distorted or even eroded. This process is most evident in forms of parody. In a parody, certain elements are consciously exaggerated in order to produce a comic effect *at the expense of* the original.

Parody

The Idols parties do not emerge as meek, unquestioning examples of mimesis. First of all, the performances are not complete and faithful imitations. Although the *Idols* name and logo are copied, they are then substantially adapted for the party’s own purposes.

The name of the association or school is added, and photos of *Idols* contestants are

replaced with photos of members or pupils. This may seem a minor detail, but the implications should not be underestimated. For example, a fundamental shift in effect and meaning occurs if the word 'Drag' is added, as is the case with *Drag Idols*.

Secondly, we observe in practice a certain intertextual, eclectic use. The Idols parties copy elements from *Idols*, but also from other TV programmes or from outside the mass media. The organizers of the Idols parties adopt a very relaxed approach to the TV original and where possible make use of other models as well. In other words, they are classic examples of what media studies calls bricolage: the fusing of elements from different media products into a personal 'patchwork' (Fiske 1989).

Thirdly, the imitation in the Idols parties is regularly transformed into parody. Although elements of parody are already present in the TV *Idols*, parody is of central importance to the Idols parties. The parody is usually directed at the co-presenters, Reinout Oerlemans and Tooske van Bruegem. Thus the *Idols Straatfeest Zwanenstraat* was presented by 'Dooske and Breinoald', and the *Carnavalse Idols* by 'dumb blonde Dooske'. Reinout was played with remarkable frequency by a woman and Tooske by a man, preferably complete with wig, stuffed bra and buck teeth. But the judges are often the target too. In the same *Carnavalse Idols*, for instance, the judge Henkjan (Smits) was called Jan-Henk.⁷ Both the Reinout/Tooske gender switch and the verbal inversion of Henkjan/Jan-Henk are variations on the parody theme of the upside-down world.

The parody becomes more systematic when the programme as a whole is ridiculed. Comic acts are an essential part of the Idols parties: the more serious performances are interspersed with acts that are deliberately frivolous. Thus the *Idols*

⁷ Citations from www.zwanenstraat.nl en www.vorstenbosch-info.nl/nieuws2004.htm respectively [downloaded on 21/03/05].

Night at the Saco Velt dancing academy featured two comic acts. The first involved two boys dressed in rags performing an off-key variation of a famous radio hit. The second consisted of a group of girls wearing farm-workers' overalls and clogs singing a local hit in dialect; halfway during their act they switched to a make-believe striptease. The act ended with the girls baring plastic artificial breasts, to the great hilarity of course of the teenage audience. Comic acts like these present the other performances – and hence the evening as a whole – in a different light.

The comic acts are a type of symbolic inversion: the symbolic order of *Idols* is momentarily completely overturned (Babcock 1978; Zijderveld 1985). These acts are aimed at ridiculing the themes central to this TV format: stardom, fame, and individual succes (Holmes 2004, Zwaan & Ter Bogt 2010, but see: Meizel 2009). On the one hand, this inversion serves the ritual structure. The comic acts show how it *shouldn't* be done, thereby indirectly confirming the abilities of the other contestants. It also acknowledges the power of the original TV model: by parodying a well-known programme, they hope to ride on the coat-tails of the popularity of the original. On the other hand, this symbolic inversion serves to deflate, if not discredit, the serious, ritual character of the television model (Reijnders, Rooijackers & Van Zoonen, 2007). Parody and improvisation create an acceptable distance from the original, thereby bringing the show closer to the audience. Some organizers are quite aware of this effect. Thus the organizer of *Idols in de Haverkist* says:

Sometimes things got a bit too serious here [at De Haverkist]. Just like in the TV programme, it got really serious. The prizes, whether someone won or not, really started to matter... We've pretty much put a stop to that. It just wasn't so enjoyable any more. It became almost real, just a copy! [...] Sometimes things just shouldn't be right, or perfect...

Precisely because TV culture is so perfect. [...] There's less perfection, but more atmosphere and spontaneity.⁸

Humour, satire and irony bring the show to life and engender solidarity. In line with Derrida, producing a 'bad' copy seems to create more new meanings and heighten the level of authenticity. This brings us to the essence of Idols parties – their function and meaning for those involved.

Communitas

European ethnology interprets festive occasions as celebrations with a ritual character: fixed, formalised practices are carried out with a communicative significance, often aimed at commemorating or celebrating certain shared values. It is on such occasions that a community comes together, marks its boundaries and presents itself to the outside world. The ultimate goal of each party is to experience a feeling of 'communitas' – a temporary utopian state of community spirit. With a successful event, this feeling can be all-encompassing, with social hierarchies seemingly vanishing for a moment (Rooijakkers 2000).

The Idols parties also strive for this 'communitas' experience. When asked about the party's meaning and objective, organizers usually refer to 'a sense of belonging to a group'. Saco Velt, dancing academy director, also refers to the party's significance for 'club solidarity':

It gives everyone in the academy a very strong sense of solidarity with the club. That's very important of course, that we have a club where we do things together. [...] I think that the

⁸ Interview with Laurens Jansen and Gerrie (Den Bosch, 29/10/04).

[Idols party] creates a feeling of togetherness. We do something completely different together. [...] It's about 'us', a club feeling.⁹

The organizer of *Chinese Idols* has a similar view of the Idols party, but prefers to speak of a 'good meeting point':

Chinese people come from all over the Netherlands. And by holding such events and preliminary rounds... Well, everyone's busy, and yet they still manage to come together for a while.¹⁰

Idols parties fulfil a vital unifying function for the different groups. Those involved use the party as a means of meeting and celebrating their identity as a group. This celebration of identity can occur at different levels, ranging from sexual identity (*Gay Idols*), regional identity (*L'eidols*) and club identity (*MSC Idols*) to ethnic identity (*Chinese Idols*). To that end, elements from the *Idols* format are combined or supplemented with certain group-related codes.

This shift toward a more group-related significance is clearly illustrated in the repertoire. In the TV *Idols*, we tend to hear mainly English-language pop songs from the mainstream charts, so that all viewers will recognize the songs. At Idols parties, however, the audience encounters a completely different repertoire. That of *Oedels*, for example, consists solely of carnival classics. At *L'eidols* – a party that attracts primarily young working people – contestants sing mainly Dutch-language tear-jerkers. Only Chinese pop songs are performed at *Chinese Idols*, while the programmes of *Drag Idols* and *Gay Idols* are filled with songs by Whitney Houston and Dana International. Thus each Idols party presents songs that to some degree form part of, if not shape, the culture of the group.

⁹ Interview with Saco Velt (Leeuwarden, 22/01/05).

¹⁰ Interview by telephone with Kevin Chau (09/02/05).

But the shift toward a group-related meaning can occur in other ways too. For instance, by means of special prizes. The main prize in *Drag Idols* was not a recording contract, but a voucher from *Gay Toys*, the sponsor. The winner also received a make-up course. Here the prizes are clearly linked to group values of the transvestite subculture. At *Gay Idols*, this shift is taken further through the introduction of a special mystery guest: no episode of *Gay Idols* goes by without a fiery performance by a professional striptease artist, a transvestite act or another act ‘displaying the talents of the colourful gay community’.¹¹ Although similar acts do sometimes appear at other Idols parties – intended as parody - transvestite and striptease acts form a structural and ‘serious’ element of *Gay Idols*. Through additions like these, the organizers seek to give the party more of their own familiar character. After all, drag shows are a well-known phenomenon within gay party culture (Phillips, Shapiro & Joseph 1980).

Most Idols parties are held in spring, which is not surprising when we look at the TV *Idols*. The official finals of *Idols* took place in March (2003) and May (2004), making this the time when the entire *Idols* hype reaches its ‘natural’ climax. Yet this does not explain everything. Part of the explanation lies with the groups themselves. *Koninginnedag*, the Queen’s Birthday celebration on 30 April, is a major festive occasion for the organizations in question, especially for sporting, student and neighbourhood associations. On that day they organize many other events, with the Idols party being just one part of a full day’s programme. Schools also tend to hold their parties in spring, toward the end of the school year. The same applies to *Chinese Idols*. It is no coincidence that this event takes place during the opening of the Chinese New Year, one of the main dates on the Chinese calendar. And the final of *Gay Idols*

¹¹ Personal correspondence with Hans van Velde (22/03/2005).

coincided with the twenty-fifth anniversary of the gay newspaper, *Gay Krant*, in April 2005. Thus the Idols parties do not intrude upon the activities of these groups, but tie in well with other events in their calendar. The Idols parties are encapsulated, as it were, in existing programmes of activities.

The more frequently an event is held, the stronger the ritual significance. The manager of *De Haverkist* café has been holding karaoke parties and song contests on an almost annual basis for fifteen years. In earlier years these shows were called after two TV programmes from the late eighties, the ‘Playbackshow’ and ‘Soundmixshow’, but declining interest among the participants obliged him to change the name this year:

It’s a bit of a generation thing: every eight years people disappear from the pub, and then the young people come. They don’t know the Soundmixshow, because they weren’t born yet. They’ve all grown up with Idols. [...] So then we thought... let’s give it a different twist. [...] In fact we’ve changed very little. We did add the white dot and so on. But it all boils down to the same thing.¹²

It is now called *Idols in de Haverkist*, but the *Idols* logo in fact conceals a long tradition of annual song contests. Interestingly, it is always TV talent shows popular at the time that are the reference points for these contests. By hooking into the popularity of a current TV programme, the party offers a link to a world that is familiar to the audience.

Power and commerce

Fan communities have long been romanticised within media studies. Fans were seen as the ultimate active consumers. By actively appropriating popular culture, they were committing an act of resistance against the capitalist ‘power block’ (Fiske 1989). It was invariably the powerless underdogs who, with the aid of guerrilla techniques, demanded

¹² Interview with Laurens Jansen and Gerrie (Den Bosch, 29/10/04).

their rightful place in the world. Significantly, Jenkins' *Textual poachers* (1992) focused only on politically correct examples of appropriation, such as that of *Star Trek* by homosexuals and of *Beauty and the Beast* by women. Thus the banner of an undifferentiated, anticapitalist counter-culture was thrust into the hands of the fan community. Such authors are also deeply distrustful of commercial initiatives within the fan community, presenting them as a threat to the authenticity of fan culture (e.g. Jenkins 1992b: 230-231).

Different authors have challenged this glorification of fan culture, focusing on power relationships within the fan community and the inherent commercial dimension of many fan cultures (Hills 2002: 27-64). Both aspects are indisputably present in the Idols shows. Although each Idols party aims in the first instance to create a certain festive unit, involving all those present, at the same time a degree of order and hierarchy is created within that community. Each Idols party ultimately produces a winner, a 'School idol' or a 'Drag Idol', who to varying degrees is lauded by the organization and who undergoes an elevation in status. The backgrounds of the judges are also significant. The judges are almost invariably white, adult males with a special social status within the particular group. Thus the *Oedels* judges were an editor of a regional newspaper and the Minister for Youth Affairs (an honorary position within the carnival world). Judges for *Idols in de Haverkist* were the café manager and a popular regular customer. In other words, the group cultures into which *Idols* is appropriated have existing power structures and conflicts of interest. This is not a neo-Marxist struggle between consumers and the 'power block', but rather local patterns of power in the everyday life of the consumer. It follows from this that although the imitation of a

television programme might function as a form of appropriation, it can at the same time serve prevailing power interests at the level of group culture.

Idols parties often involve a degree of financial interest, due to the organizer's position within the existing group hierarchy. This is not always immediately apparent. Entry, for example, is usually free. According to the organizer of *Gay Idols*, the club just manages to 'break even' on Idols night; he doesn't do it 'for the money'. And according to the organizer of *Idols in de Haverkist*, 'no money's being made here today'. With costs at around 2000 euros, he was anticipating a maximum turnover of 2500 euros. Most Idols parties have a much smaller budget, and organizers have to use their own ingenuity in attracting sponsorship from local businesses. Good turns or other forms of local reciprocity are also employed. Why then is such effort invested in organizing an Idols party? Both the owner of Het Bólke gay bar and the manager of De Haverkist café say that their only concern is to generate greater club solidarity. However, the organizers do of course benefit directly from such a party. They are trying to link the notion of group culture to the commercial interests of their own organization, in this case the creation of a close-knit clientele.

Sometimes the interests are of an ideological rather than a financial nature. The Rotterdam City Council, for instance, sees *Political Idols Rotterdam* as an aid to 'political consciousness-raising'. *Political Idols Rotterdam* not only supplies new talent for local politics, but is intended first and foremost to bring council policy 'to the attention of citizens'. The class party at the Gertrudisschool in Utrecht, with which we began, was also more than just entertainment and relaxation. The principal had a proper pedagogical objective in mind: the popular *Idols* phenomenon tied in very neatly with a series of music lessons and tuition in set building.

Conclusion

Upon writing this chapter, new Idols parties were still being organized. However, a final search of the internet in the fall of 2010 produced significantly fewer results than in the preceding years. Perhaps this is due to the declining popularity of the TV programme. Because *Idols* is attracting less interest, it has less value as a model. This does not of course signify the end of song contests of this kind. If the organizers are to be believed, the schools, camping sites, associations and cafés in this study will continue to organize a song festival each year. But they will choose another theme to replace *Idols*, perhaps another TV programme. Comparable, new programmes such as *The Voice of Holland*, currently popular in the Netherlands, might become the next blueprint.

Now that the demise of Idols party has probably begun, the question remains as to what this phenomenon was all about. The study has shown that the TV programme functioned not just as a point of departure for the Idols parties. Much more was borrowed than simply the name. The shows adhered closely to the entire ritual structure of the TV format, not only in terms of structure, format and décor but also with regard to how the presenters, judges and contestants interpreted their roles. Through this imitation of a well-known TV programme, those present were able to experience a connection with a wider, familiar world. Organizers took full advantage of the popularity of the TV model. In that sense, the Idols parties can be seen as a form of mimesis.

But this was no slavish mimesis. The party organizers had a very relaxed attitude to the TV original, and also made frequent use of other models, from TV and elsewhere, giving rise to a bricolage of ritual elements. In addition, mimesis emerged as

more than a simple reflection of the original. By copying something, a world of illusion is created with possibilities for appropriation and the assigning of alternative meanings. As with distorting mirrors in a hall of mirrors, ironical mimesis provides opportunities for parodying the original. The codes of the programme were turned on their heads, for instance by introducing frivolous skits or by switching the gender of the TV presenters. In this way, the TV model was not only imitated but also discredited. This ironical mimesis served to tone down – if not ridicule – the ritual character of the TV original. It established an acceptable distance from the original, allowing room for the group's own identity.

The aim of each Idols party was in fact to generate a feeling of *communitas*. Those involved used the shows to gather together to celebrate the identity of their association, school or club. This was achieved by combining elements from the *Idols* format with existing group-related codes of behaviours – for example, by introducing their own repertoire, with which participants and the audience could identify and feel confirmed in their shared musical taste. In this way, the Idols party was included in the broader repertoire and calendar of events of the groups in question.

What general conclusions can we then arrive at regarding the significance of television culture? The study of Idols parties has revealed that the copying of TV programmes has become part of existing festival rituals, and – more generally – that elements from television culture have gradually merged with other customs, behaviours and cultural forms from everyday life. The question presents itself as to whether this fusion of media culture and everyday life is a recent phenomenon, typical of our 'postmodern' age, or whether the process began much earlier, for example when the printed media began to exert its influence in the early modern period. This conclusion is

relevant to the research fields of both European ethnology and media studies. For European ethnology, the mass media are highly relevant because they form such a vital part of everyday life. It is therefore surprising that, until now, little attention has been paid to an ethnological approach to media culture. It is precisely such an approach, involving fieldwork and the placing of specific cultural practices into a broader developmental perspective – such as the appropriation of TV culture within local group cultures and festive traditions - that can offer a valuable complement to the often more contemporary and theoretical discussions in media studies.

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Appendix: figures



Figure 1: Although the *Idols* name and logo are copied, they are then substantially adapted for the party's own purposes. (photo collage: Gerard Hooft, www.dewizard.nl, Deventer 2004)



Figure 2: Parody, satire and humour bring the show closer to the audience. (photo: Stijn Reijnders, Den Bosch 2005)



The Idols parties' presenters are often direct imitations of the official co-presenters.

(photo: www.scoutingdiemen.nl, Diemen 2004)



No episode of *Gay Idols* goes by without a fiery performance by a professional striptease artist, a transvestite act or another act ‘displaying the talents of the colourful gay community’. (photo: Stijn Reijnders, Enschede 2005)