

Book reviews

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Globalisation and television formats

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At the time of writing this review John de Mol's television production company Talpa has just started airing its latest reality show *Utopia*. As was the case with *Big Brother* in 1999 and *The Voice of Holland* in 2010, Dutch television merely functions as a test market and showroom for international buyers. Only Dutch viewers seem to know or care that these programs originated in the Netherlands, as these shows are considered global television formats elsewhere and products of a transnational entertainment industry. If perceived as 'foreign' at all these shows are most likely recognised as American. Recently, after a successful test run on Dutch television, *The Voice* was bought by the US network NBC and subsequently has been adapted in 50 different nations on five continents including *The Voice Australia*, *The Voice Brasil*, *The Voice of China*, and *The Voice of Afghanistan* (unlike the comparable *Idol* franchise, there are no *The Voice* adaptations in Africa). Tellingly, in its initial press announcement, as an attempt to attract contestants, the Dutch production company implied that *The Voice of Holland* was an American format.

The question of national origin is raised by Silvio Waisbord in his 2004 essay 'McTV: '[c]ould we say that *Survivor/Expedition: Robinson* is unequivocally a Dutch show?' (p. 368).¹ His mistake reveals his answer and argument: this particular reality television format originated in Sweden rather than the Netherlands. Global television formats are designed to be easily adapted in other countries or regions and therefore have no nationally-specific characteristics. This makes the global television format an attractive topic to discuss globalisation along the lines of 'grobalisation' (a term coined by George Ritzer that never caught on) and 'glocalisation' (a term coined by Roland Robertson that did). Grobalisation emphasises the capitalist imperialistic character of globalisation, in which transnational conglomerates rationalise both the production and the consumption of culture in search of profit and economic growth, resulting in global homogeneity. Glocalisation, on the contrary, places most emphasis on how global culture is actively appropriated at

the local level, resulting in global heterogeneity.² Rather than favoring globalisation over glocalisation or vice versa, the study of global television formats shows that these are not contradicting positions but instead mutually reinforcing forces in the complex processes of globalisation.

Although no scholarly work has been done on *The Voice* there is ample literature on one of its main predecessors: the *Idol* franchise, which originated in 2001 in the UK as *Pop Idol*.³ Like *The Voice*, *Pop Idol* has been adapted in more than 40 countries and regions around the world, becoming one of the most popular and profitable global television formats. Although its global popularity may have been taken over by *The Voice*, the *Idol* franchise remains a fascinating case study with which to discuss globalisation, as three recently-published books demonstrate. *Global Television Formats: Understanding Television Across Borders* (London -New York: Routledge, 2012), edited by Tasha Oren and Sharon Shahaf, is a comprehensive collection of essays addressing the topic of global television formats from theoretical, historical, and transnational perspectives, including a four-essay section specifically focused on the *Idol* franchise. Katherine Meizel's *Idolized: Music, Media, and Identity in American Idol* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011) is a monograph on the US adaptation of the *Idol* format based on interviews with viewers and participants as well as close analyses of the television program and other media. *Adapting Idols: Authenticity, Identity and Performance in a Global Television Format* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), edited by Koos Zwaan and Joost de Bruin, is a volume that brings together fifteen case studies of *Idol* adaptations from a wide range of nations and regions in an attempt to break with the Anglo-American bias in the study of the franchise (as *Global Television Formats* also attempts to do). All three books address themes such as the question of 'authenticity' in relation to stars created by a reality television format and the (lack of) agency of the viewers in their ability to vote for their favourite pop idols, among others. My review will focus on the tension that exists between globalisation and glocalisation as well as the format's American character in spite of its UK origin.

The editors of *Global Television Formats* explain the inclusion of the section specifically devoted to the *Idol* franchise by arguing that the format is 'a particularly cogent example of how the "specific-within-the-universal" tension animates the global blockbuster format' (p. 13). All four essays address this tension in quite different ways. In his case study on *Indian Idol* in comparison to the Indian diasporic presence in *American Idol*, Bisarup Sen perceives the format as an 'engine of difference' in which 'traditional' ethnicity is challenged by new ethnic identities that the global format produces. The essay by Joost de Bruin (who is also co-editor of *Adapting Idols*) presents the intriguing case of *NZ Idol* which, unlike most *Idol* adaptations, is produced by New Zealand's public broadcaster. While most adaptations (broadcast by commercial television networks) aim for

maximum profit, the main goal of *NZ Idol* was to promote multiculturalism – a ‘nation-building’ strategy that may have resulted in a larger visibility of ethnic diversity on television but in the end, as De Bruin shows, failed to productively address the postcolonial questions that New Zealand faces. The essay by Martin Nkosi Ndlela shifts the focus to the African continent, highlighting the different ways in which nations and regions ‘localise’ the global format. While *Afrikaans Idol* is exceptional (among all *Idol* adaptations, not just the African ones) in its restrictive use of local music traditions and language other African adaptations such as *South African Idol* and *West African Idol* rely heavily on American pop culture. As Ndlela suggests, this can be explained by the format’s popularity among niche audiences of African cosmopolitans, which connects the program to global rather than local culture, as well as the aim of African media industries to be part of the global media economy.

The final *Idol* essay in *Global Television Formats* examines *American Idol* and its dominant role in global pop culture. As Erica Jean Bochanty-Aguero argues, *American Idol* is ‘not just an “American” singing competition’ but ‘presents a multi-faceted notion of “Americanness” ... [through] a self-conscious attempt ... to locate, place and “re-center” itself within a non-U.S. global TV franchise and a complex global mediascape’ (p. 261). *American Idol* is the most profitable adaptation of the *Idol* franchise as well as the most widely distributed outside its domestic territory, broadcast in more than 130 countries. Bochanty-Aguero shows how *American Idol* can maintain its status as ‘the original’ by examining the display of explicit Americanness on the show (including its overtly patriotic stance during the war in Iraq), the positioning of Western pop culture as the standard of comparison in the 2003 *World Idol* competition, the way other *Idol* adaptations are ‘othered’ in the spin-off program *American Idol Presents: The World’s Worst Auditions*, and finally the show’s self-posturing as a global philanthropist with the charity television spectacle *American Idol Gives Back*. The strength of Bochanty-Aguero’s argument lies in that she reveals how American cultural dominance is not just taken for granted but instead actively and self-consciously reclaimed again and again through the show’s repositioning against other *Idol* adaptations.

Katherine Meizel’s monograph *Idolized* also focuses on the way *American Idol* emphasises its American character. She quotes the show’s co-creator Simon Cowell revealing that he ‘tried to sell [the format] initially as the great American Dream ... which is somebody who could be a cocktail waitress one minute, within sixteen weeks could become the most famous person in America’ (p. 81). Although she does not explicitly mention Richard Dyer, Meizel builds on his notion of the ‘success myth of stardom’ which is rooted in the American Dream. Rather than sheer products of the culture industry, pop idols need to be recognised for their individual talent, combining ordinariness (they are just like us) with extraordinari-

ness (they have a special talent just waiting to be discovered). At the auditions held in different cities across the country candidates can win a 'Golden Ticket' to Hollywood where the *American Idol* live shows are broadcast, reinforcing the idea of 'Hollywood as the locus of the American Dream, as the site where that Dream becomes reality (or, at least, reality [television] programming)' (p. 134). The 'Americanness' of *American Idol* – and by extension, many international *Idol* adaptations – is thus based on the way the format 'explores and exploits' (p. 82) the meritocratic ideals of the American Dream as the basis of pop stardom. Moreover, Meizel addresses an aspect that is often forgotten in discussions on globalisation. Processes of glocalisation also take place within the US, as Meizel shows almost as an afterthought in the book's epilogue on how the 2010 *American Idol* finalist Crystal Bowersox embodied local pride and a sense of belonging in her home state Ohio.

The promotional text on the back cover of *Adapting Idols* promises that the volume 'illustrates that even though the same television format is used in countries all over the globe, practices of adaptation can still result in the creation of unique local cultural products'. This suggests an overly optimistic celebration of glocalisation, but fortunately the essays in the book do not fall into this marketing trap. The case studies examine the complexity of globalisation by focusing on how the *Idol* format enables the discussion of local and national issues – not so much by showcasing 'unique local cultural products' but by addressing them through the format's pop-cultural conventions. The essay by Václav Štětka, for example, discusses how the notion of Czech national identity was questioned by the 'ethnic' Roma cultural identity of Vlasta Horváth, winner of the second season of *Czech Search for a Superstar*. As Štětka shows, to the general audience the *Idol* winner became 'a perfectly "normal" Czech' as the format made 'it easier for the audience to identify with Horváth as a superstar' rather than a Roma minority, by 'standardizing him during the course of the contest into the form of a generic pop-culture celebrity, which he, after his victory, truly became' (p. 92). In a similar manner the case of Nevena Tconeva, winner of the first season of Bulgaria's *Music Idol*, discussed by Plamena Kourtova, foregrounds how 'a polarizing cultural discourse of a nation trying to define itself in terms of its Oriental heritage and European membership' (p. 107) is embodied and enunciated by Tconeva's 'Balkanized' performance of 'I Will Always Love You' (as made famous by Whitney Houston). In both cases the conventions of the global television format are used productively – not just to copy a Western 'original' but to renegotiate national identities. However, whereas in the Czech example cultural diversity is glossed over by the generic conventions of global pop culture, in the Bulgarian example cultural diversity is rendered visible by partially breaking with these conventions.

That national identity is not the only possible cultural distinction between international *Idol* adaptations is shown by Pia Majbritt Jensen, who compares the Danish *Idols* to *Australian Idol*. The two adaptations differ in production value, which is based on the institutional media context. *Idols* in Denmark was produced by the relatively small commercial channel TV3, targeting a niche audience of youngsters, whereas *Australian Idol* was broadcast by Channel 10, one of the main commercial networks. As a result, the Danish *Idols* became a low-budget cult show in stark contrast to the high-budget entertainment spectacle of *Australian Idol*, which was targeted at a mainstream audience. Quite surprisingly, the editors argue that Jensen's contribution goes 'somewhat against the overall argument of this book' (p. 5). However, her argument actually fits the book's main focus on how differences in local context (be it national, regional, institutional, or political) have an impact on how a global television format is adapted. Regional identity is discussed in Jinna Tay's case study of *Asian Idol*, arguing that the show failed to present 'a cohesive "Asian" whole' (p. 65) as national and linguistic boundaries continued to divide its audience. Tess Conner's essay on *Nigerian Idol*, on the contrary, shows how a nationally-based show can reach a broad audience at three levels: nationally, pan-regionally (12 countries on the African continent), and transnationally (diasporic audiences in the UK and US). The complicated relationship between the regional and the national becomes apparent in the case study by Mary Ghattas which examines the third season of the pan-Arab *Idol* adaptation *Superstar*, broadcast by the Lebanon-based Future Television channel which was founded by the Future Movement political party of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. During the first two seasons the show promoted a pan-Arab identity rather than a national one. However, one year before the third season Hariri was assassinated, prompting the channel to use *Superstar* as a political vehicle to actively preserve 'our Lebanese identity' (p. 131).

Perhaps the most intriguing development in the adaptation of global television formats is shown by the example of China, as discussed in the essay by Jeroen de Kloet and Stefan Landsberger. As the authors point out, at the time of writing there was no authorised adaptation of the *Idol* format but only an imitation called *Super Girl* which premiered in 2005, attracting an audience of 400 million viewers (an astonishing amount, at least from a Western perspective) and differing most notably from its Western counterparts in its exclusion of male contestants. By now (after the publication of *Adapting Idols*), authorised adaptations of *The Voice* and *Idol* are broadcast on Chinese television: *The Voice of China* premiered on the Zhejiang Television channel in 2012 and *Chinese Idol* on the Shanghai Dragon TV channel in 2013. As De Kloet and Landsberger argue, 'Super Girl is not only about a country opening up to the West, but also about a world that unfolds itself into and onto China ... driven by the desire to become part of a country with an alleged

prosperous future' (p. 135). The unprecedented popularity of *Super Girls* reveals how the Chinese mediascape is changing and directly challenging the Communist government to respond through regulations and censorship. However, although the authors recognise the empowering and democratising potential of pop culture they refrain from presenting too optimistic of a perspective, concluding that perceiving *Super Girls* as 'a platform for social change seems both naively utopian and simply inadequate' (p. 145).

Taken together the three books – *Global Television Formats, Idolized*, and *Adapting Idols* – present a wide range of fascinating case studies, thereby showing not only the relevance of studying global television formats to grasp the complex processes of globalisation but also the richness of the material in spite of the format's rather superficial and generic character. None of the books fall back upon an unproductive division between either a pessimistic perspective of the *Idol* format as culturally imperialistic globalisation or an optimistic cultural appropriation perspective of globalisation. Instead, these studies reveal the often contradictory complexities of 21st century globalisation in which questions of national and regional cultural identity, politics, and American dominance in global pop culture remain significant. Similar to global audiences eagerly awaiting their next pop idol, we can only look forward to more of such inspiring research.

Notes

1. Waisboard 2004.
2. Ritzer 2004; Robertson 1992. See also Kooijman 2013, pp. 13-15.
3. Fairchild 2008; Holmes 2004; Jenkins 2006; Wheelock Stahl 2004, pp. 212-232.

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Soundscapes, sound clash

Nessa Johnston

The ‘sonic turn’ in media and cultural studies of recent years has been manifested by a snowballing of publications in the last decade, consolidating sound’s status as a legitimate area of enquiry. The introduction to *Sound Clash: Listening to American Studies* (edited by Kara Keeling and Josh Kun; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012) points out that this ‘increase in scholarly attention to sonic phenomena is ... perhaps attributable to more recent, turn of the twenty-first century innovations in audio technology and new media practices’ (p. 3) – in other words, online digital platforms for the production and consumption of audiovisual media have allowed unprecedented access to previously ephemeral and inaccessible sonic artifacts. The frustration regarding sound expressed by the architect Rudolph Markgraf in 1911 – that ‘sound has no existence, shape or form, it must be made new all the time, it slumbers until it is awaken[ed], and after it ceases its place of being it is unknown’ – is less of a problem in the digital era. Indeed, *Sound Clash* is accompanied by an online resource which helpfully allows audio, visual, and audiovisual texts cited in some of the articles to be viewed or listened to by the reader.

The disciplinary boundaries of this book and also *Soundscapes of the Urban Past: Staged Sound as Mediated Cultural Heritage*, edited by Karin Bijsterveld (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2013), stretch far beyond that of film sound studies (or more accurately the study of sound and moving image media), which addresses the multimodal peculiarities of moving image media’s ‘auditory dimension’ and works very much within the shadow of Michel Chion’s groundbreaking yet occasionally frustratingly poetic writings.² Both books are pitched as part of the wider field of sound studies with a conceptual framework that moves beyond media studies to take sound-centred approaches to the study of past history, past and contemporary sonic environments, the interrogation of social and cultural formations, as well as