Global entertainment and local celebration

Appropriations of the Idols TV programme in Dutch festivity culture

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Abstract

The entertainment show *Idols* has been without doubt one of the most popular TV programmes internationally in recent years. In the wake of this talent quest, local ‘Idols parties’ were organized throughout the Netherlands in 2003 and 2004. At schools, cafes, camping sites and clubrooms, parties were staged with names such as ‘Idols Night’ or ‘Gay Idols’. This article examines the meaning of these shows and what the phenomenon ultimately tells us about the relationship between television culture and popular culture. To this end, we attended eight *Idols* parties, conducting ethnographic fieldwork. We can conclude that the *Idols* parties are inspired to a great extent by the popular TV format, but at the same time the ritual character of the TV model is diluted to make room for a process of appropriation. The objective of each *Idols* party is to celebrate the group identity of their association, school or club.

Keywords

appropriation, celebration, entertainment, European ethnology, everyday life, fan cultures, festivity culture, Idols, singing, television

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*. Pupils were invited to sing live before their peers and crowds of parents. They could choose to imitate a well-known *Idols* finalist or 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 (Personal communication with A. van Veldhuizen, 16 February 2005).
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, when the show’s popularity had risen to great heights internationally. The *Idols* format – British in origin – was being produced and broadcast in over 10 countries, with titles such as *American Idol* and *Deutschland sucht den Superstar*. Ratings of the Dutch version were huge, 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.

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 by the format of the popular programme in content as well as name. At schools, cafes, 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*. These song contests are many and varied. For example, the Meppel Sport Club ran an *MSC Idols*, the gay club Het Bölke 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 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 article, 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 (and related fields such as cultural studies and fan studies), have focused attention on fan culture for some time, on the way in which audience groups develop an affection for certain media products, which is reflected then in their clothing and behaviour (e.g. Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998; Hill, 2002; Jenkins, 1992a). A feature of existing fan theory is its primary focus on the politico-economic dimension of fan culture. Thus a positive or a 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 (Hill, 2002). Hence the recent plea to abandon this normative fixation and to conduct more contextual, ethnographic research (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998).

European ethnologists have a long tradition of focusing on the everyday context of cultural forms, using ethnographic methods. In that sense, European ethnology is closely linked to the more well-known anthropology. But whereas this last discipline began from a fascination for non-western cultures, European ethnology has a longstanding
tradition in studying cultural forms in the western world, with parties and celebrations forming a well-established research subject. According to a recent ethnological text, it is at such events that a community gathers, marks its boundaries and presents itself to the outside world (Rooijakkers, 2000). Therefore, it would 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 to date, ethnologists too have ignored *Idols* parties as well as other parties based on TV models. As with folklore studies, its American counterpart, for the time being European ethnology appears 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 (Koven, 2003).

This study utilizes 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 late 2004 and early 2005. Although *Idols* parties are staged in other countries as well, this study only examined parties in the Netherlands. A semi-structured in-depth interview was held before each party with the key person, the organizer. 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, décor, type of prizes, performances and repertoire and 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?

The research results are presented as follows. First, we describe what the parties in the study borrowed from the TV *Idols*. Then we examine the extent to which the parties actually deviated from *Idols* and were appropriated within the context of local group cultures. Finally, we take a closer look at the commercial and power dimension of the parties – traditionally a thorny problem within media studies (see Figure 1).
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 teenybopper event, held in the relatively safe environment of a well-known dance academy. Chinese Idols, however, 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 the 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 ‘wild card’ rounds are held. And, as in the TV programme, Gay Idols was a national event and Chinese Idols a transnational one.
Clear elements of the television format are found in the structure. Most **Idols** parties are opened ritually 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 walk on stage one-by-one and give an a cappella rendition of the verse and chorus of a song. The judges then give their critical comments, eliminating some contestants and sending 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 is done on TV, overseen by a notary public. When the winner is finally announced, confetti fills the air. The finalist steps onto the stage and performs the winning song one more time to round off the evening.

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 **Idols**. They not only call themselves by the same names, but also carry the impersonation through into their clothing (a suit or gown), wigs and the words that 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’. Those who do not understand why the judges are so severe are smilingly referred to the judges' names – ‘Henkjan Smits’ or ‘Jerney Kaagman’, the harsh judges from the TV programme. Occasionally imitation of the **Idols** judges comes particularly close to reality. At an **Idols** show at the Minister Callschool, a primary school in the Dutch city of Naarden, held on 19 February 2005, the principal proudly presented the mystery guest: Henkjan Smits. The notorious **Idols** judge had been invited to come and play himself. Similarly, Marlies Schuitemaker (a notable **Idols** 2 finalist) was one of the judges of **Gay Idols** in Het Bölke and **Idols** contestant Mark van Eijck made a guest appearance during the final of **L'eidols**.

Striking similarities to the TV show are often found in the décor and 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; just like the
‘real’ *Idols* finalists, the ultimate winner will record a CD in a professional studio.

The TV format is closely copied to varying degrees 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 become literally a media event. Thus the preliminary rounds of the *Carnavalse Idols* in Vorstendonck are no longer performed live; instead, pre-recorded video footage is shown of preliminary rounds. As with the TV model, *Leidols* 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... This year, local TV is even coming to film the event. (Interview with carnival association De Pintvatters, 7 February 2005)

The imitation of *Idols* is not confined to the party’s content; the entire media hype surrounding the programme is copied also. In that sense, the *Idols* party could be described as a kind of mimesis, with the aim being as accurate a reproduction of the original as possible.

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 ‘aping’ the original (Melberg, 1995). Viewed from this perspective, *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.

However, such an interpretation ignores the complexity of the concept of mimesis. Mimesis emerges as a highly ambiguous phenomenon that has fascinated philosophers for centuries. The French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1972) has made a contribution to the discussion that is relevant for our purposes. Mimesis, according to Derrida, is not intended ultimately 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 and Wulf, 1995).
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 be the same no longer. 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, 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*.

Second, 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. 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) (see Figure 2).

Third, 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 directed usually at the co-presenters, Reinout Oerlemans and Tooske van Bruegem. Thus the *Idols Straatfeest Zwanenstraat* was presented by ‘Dooske and Breinould’ 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 example, Henkjan Smits was called Jan-Henk (Digitaal Vorstenbosch, 2004; Zwanenstraat, 2004). 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 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 the teenage audience. Comic acts such as 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). 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 in order to create an acceptable distance from the original. Parody and improvisation bring the show closer to the audience (see Rooijakkers, 2000). 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 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. (Interview with Laurens Jansen, Den Bosch, 29 October 2004)

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 (see Figure 3).

**Communitas**

European ethnology interprets festive occasions as celebrations with a ritual character: fixed, formalized 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

*Figure 3* The *Idols* parties’ presenters are often direct imitations of co-presenters Reinout Oerlemans and Tooske Breugem from the TV *Idols* (Photo: www.scoutingdiemen.nl, Diemen 2004. Reproduced with kind permission)
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’. The organizer of Gay Idols says that he does it mainly for the ‘guests’:

In that way you form a better bond with one another and with the club. For camaraderie. Of course it’s not just about taking, but also about giving . . . Above all else, it’s a freebie for people.8

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 club feeling tends to be somewhat overlooked these days. It’s becoming increasingly difficult for associations to find the right context . . . I think that the [Idols party] creates a feeling of togetherness. We do something completely different together . . . It’s about ‘us’, a club feeling. (Interview with Saco Velt, Leeuwarden, 22 January 2005)

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.9

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 illustrated clearly 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, Ruth Jacott and Dana International. Thus each *Idols* party presents songs that to some degree form part of, if not shape, the culture of the group. In this way, contestants and audience can identify with the songs and feel confirmed in their shared musical taste and group identity.

But the shift towards a group-related meaning can occur in other ways, for example 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 the 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’ (personal communication with Hans van Velde, 22 March 2005). Although similar acts do appear sometimes at other *Idols* parties – intended as a parody – transvestite and striptease acts form a structural and ‘serious’ element of *Gay Idols*. Through additions such as 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 et al., 1980) (see Figure 4).

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 official birthday celebration on 30 April, is a major festive occasion for the organizations in question, especially for sporting, student and neighbourhood associations. On this day they organize many other events, with the *Idols* party being just one part of a full programme. The festivities take many different forms and the *Idols* party runs alongside other TV take-offs and other song contests such as karaoke parties. 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* coincided with the 25th 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:

This pub has several festivities each year – Carnival, drinks at New Year and tonight it’s *Idols* . . . It’s become a fixed part of our calendar. It’s just part of it.  
(Interview with Laurens Jansen, 29 October 2004)
The story behind the development of *Oedels* illustrates this process of incorporation into an existing calendar of events:

"[Two years ago] the final of *Idols* coincided with Carnival. Well, Carnival really means a lot. But then we all sat together on the couch... And [watching *Idols*] did in fact form quite a bond. So why shouldn’t we just [organize] one ourselves? (Interview with De Pintvatters, Den Bosch, 7 February 2005)

The more frequently an event is held, the stronger the ritual significance. The manager of the *De Haverkist* cafe has been holding karaoke parties and song contests on an almost annual basis for 15 years. In earlier years these shows were named after two TV programmes from the late 1980s, *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. (Interview with Laurens Jansen, 29 October 2004)
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 romanticized 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 their rightful place in the world. Significantly, Jenkins’ *Textual Poachers* (1992a) 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, anti-capitalist counterculture 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).

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 (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998; Hill, 2002). Both aspects are indisputably present in the *Idols* shows. Although in the first instance each *Idols* party aims 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). The judges for *Idols in de Haverkist* were the cafe 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, at the same time it can 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, he was anticipating a maximum turnover of €2500. 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 employed also. Why then is such effort invested in organizing an Idols party? Both the owner of Het Bölke gay bar and the manager of De Haverkist cafe say that their only concern is to generate greater club solidarity. However, of course the organizers do 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. Rotterdam City Council, for example, sees Political Idols Rotterdam as an aid to ‘political consciousness-raising’. Not only does Political Idols Rotterdam supply new talent for local politics, it 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**

In mid-2005, when this study was drawing to a close, new Idols parties continued to be organized. However, a final search of the internet produced significantly fewer results than in the preceding months. 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. Of course this does not signify the end of song contests of this kind. If the organizers are to be believed, the schools, camping sites, associations and cafes in this study will continue to organize a song festival each year. But they will choose another theme to replace Idols, perhaps following another TV programme.

Now that the demise of the Idols party has probably begun, the question remains as to what this phenomenon was all about. This 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. Sometimes the imitation of the
TV *Idols* was carried to great lengths. At some shows, part of the show was literally turned into a media event, with the entire media hype surrounding the programme being copied as well. But this was no slavish mimesis. The party organizers had a very relaxed attitude to the TV original and 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 example, by introducing frivolous skits or switching the gender of the TV presenters. In this way, not only was the TV model 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 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. Prizes and special mystery guests were a further opportunity to link the event to the group’s values. 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 merged gradually 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 (e.g. Roodijakkers, 1996). This conclusion is relevant to the research fields of both European ethnology and media studies. For European ethnology, the mass media is highly relevant because it forms 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 – which can offer a valuable complement to the often more contemporary and theoretical discussions in media studies.
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Notes
1. Personal communication with A. van Veldhuizen conducted as part of the project ‘Television Culture and Folk Culture’. Transcripts for all the personal communications and interviews cited in this article are available on request from the lead author.
2. The average ratings for each episode were over 2 million. The 2005 Idols final was watched by no fewer than 4.7 million people and the 2004 final by 3.4 million. This gives the Idols finals the highest ratings ever for RTL Nederland (formerly Holland Media Group). In comparison, ‘only’ 3.3 million people watched the final of Big Brother-I in 1999. Figures from the Stichting Kijkonderzoek; see Stichting Kijkonderzoek (2003: 8) and Stichting Kijkonderzoek (2004: 8).
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.
4. According to chief organizer Hans van Velde, the name Gay Idols was later changed to Gay Stars when it emerged that the name Gay Idols had already been protected by Idols’ executive producer (personal communication, 22 March 2005). Nevertheless, events bearing both of these names have been included in the selection, partly because they contain countless other references to Idols.
5. Idols in de Haverkist in De Haverkist cafe, Den Bosch (20 October 2004); Idols Auditie during the Children’s Book Week, Den Bosch (51 October 2004); Gay Idols in the gay club, Het Bölke, Enschede (10 December 2004); Idols Night in the Saco Velt Dancing Academy, Leeuwarden (22 January 2005); Oedels in ‘t Pelleku clubhouse, Den Bosch (5 February 2005); Gay Idols in the gay club De Lollipop, Tilburg (25 January 2005); Chinese Idols in the Holland Casino, Amsterdam (9 February 2005); L’eidols in D’Oude Harmonie cafe, Leiden (1 April 2005).
6. For example, Deutschland sucht den Superstar is replayed repeatedly at German weddings (personal communication with Sophie Margarete Eilers, 9 November 2004).
7. With the exception of the organizer of Gay Idols at the gay bar De Lollipop, Tilburg (25 January 2005), who did not wish to take part in this study. See Emans (2002) for a description of the semi-structured, in-depth interview.
References


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