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Abstract

This article provides a close reading of the Israeli version of the *Idol* format. Using the concept “cultural oxymora,” contradictions that serve to negotiate meanings, the analysis examines the case through six lenses: pluralism (stressing the institutionalized pluralism by auditioning in Israeli and Jewish communities outside the country), performance (songs that are associated with the Jewish State’s bereavement rituals while adding a counterhegemonic vocal presentation), patriotism (nationalism and the military in the transnational format), periphery (exposing its ethnic richness while using stereotypes), participation (manufacturing consumers’ “democratic” election), and promotion (national media event of coronation with ordinary characteristics). The conclusions suggest that cultural oxymora may explain the appeal of reality TV since they support a complex inclusive interpretation of the shows that maintain a dialogue between neo-Marxist readings, emphasizing a critical view on the show’s commercial-hegemonic structure, on one hand, and reception-centered readings, stressing audiences’ gratifications and pleasures, on the other.

Keywords

reality TV, idol, glocalization, popular culture, political economy

Introduction

On March 2011, the promos for the ninth season of *A Star Is Born*—the Israeli version of the *Idol*—presented the show host and judges wearing army uniforms in a military base in the desert, performing a song from Israel’s early statehood years, in a nostalgic clip to the era. This year, besides the regular auditions, the crew searched for the next

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Israeli “Idol” in Air Force, Navy, and Ground Forces bases. The presence of the military is not an atypical occurrence in the Israeli show, as the theme arose in each of its seasons since the first one in 2003.

This article provides a close reading of the Israeli version of the *Idol* in order to offer a better understanding of the successful transnational format appeal, meanings, and readings, while stressing the uniqueness of the particular case study. The analysis critically observes “six P’s lenses”: the question of *pluralism* among the contestants, their *performance*, the role of *patriotism* in the show, the image of the *periphery*, the *participation* of the audience, and the build-up of the *promotion* from one episode to the next. These foci are examined through the concept of “cultural oxymora”: inherent conceptual contradictions on a face value that serves to negotiate and balance different meanings manufactured by reality TV shows, in general, and the *Idol* series in particular. Among the cultural oxymora are the institutionalized pluralism (the selection of participants who reflect different backgrounds); mainstream songs with counterhegemonic performances (the tension between the content and cultural heritage of the songs and their interpretation/vocal presentation); a patriotic-nationalistic narrative within a global context (in Israel: related to the military service); a stereotypical/unique Cinderella story (conventional images from the periphery while presenting its human face); consumers’ “democratic” election (viewers as voters negotiating between participation and commercialism); and ordinary swift coronation (crowning of an idol in a ritual without the traditional aura of charisma).

The conclusions suggest that cultural oxymora may increase and explain part of the appeal of reality TV since they support a complex inclusive interpretation of the show. Such an interpretation would maintain a dialogue between neo-Marxist readings, on the one hand, and reception-centered readings on the other. It would negotiate and bridge, rather than counter and exclude, a critical view of its commercial-hegemonic structure and the gratifications and pleasures of the audiences.

Reality Shows: Production, Text, and Audiences

In the past decade, the genre of “reality shows” has become the most popular on prime-time television. As a result, this genre also became one of the contested topics in television studies, drawing many faces of the phenomenon from various theoretical aspects and diverse perspectives of production, text, and audiences (e.g., Hill 2000, 2005; Holmes and Jermyn 2004; Deery 2004; Murray and Ouellette 2004; Andrejevic 2004; Kraidy 2005, 2006; Aslama and Pantti 2006; Essany 2008; Jenkins 2006). The question of why people watch reality shows has received several answers—mainly, but not solely, from audience-oriented research stressing psychological aspects and within the theoretical framework of “uses and gratifications” (Nabi et al. 2003; Reiss and Wiltz 2004; Frisby 2003; Hill 2005; Holmes 2004a). This article seeks to contribute to those answers by offering cultural oxymora as the Archimedean point for deconstructing the varied components of reality TV and understanding their appeal.

In spite of the fact that reality shows differ from one another, they share some basic characteristics that cluster them under the same umbrella term of “reality shows”:

1. The participants are portraying themselves: Although many of these shows employ celebrities in different roles (e.g., talent judges), and in some cases celebrities are the main characters; most of the participants in these shows are “ordinary people” (i.e., not professional actors or figures who were already famous before the show).
2. The dialogues and (some of) the events captured on camera are not scripted; that is, actions and reactions are spontaneous (Kilborn 1994). Nevertheless, the “rules” of the show are dictated by the production team, and in the final product, any given hour of an aired episode is the result of dozens, or even hundreds of hours, of the well-edited raw materials. The question of “authenticity” in television is complex and has an important significance in a genre that is labeled “reality,” and thus reflects the tensions between controlled, artificial, and planned products and spontaneous, sincere, and authentic ones (Holmes and Jermyn 2004). On the extreme hand, the reservations regarding authenticity might indicate that the label “reality” is an empty one, a trade mark invented for the sake of marketing and public relations of capitalistic media systems, or even a hyperrealist simulacra production (Baudrillard 1981 [1994]) in the “desert of the real” (Zizek 2002).

The spectrum of subgenres of reality shows is diverse and has received scholarly attention in order to classify and critically evaluate it (Hill 2005; Nabi 2007; Nabi et al. 2006).

These subgenre manifestations include the veteran “candid camera” programs started in the United States in 1948 (Clissold 2004), which evolved into the surveillance format, such as the *Big Brother*, spying after the infidelities of spouses and lovers in *Cheaters*, or, from another angle, airing recordings from security cameras. Other such subgenres highlights the routines of rescue teams (e.g., *Cops*), and developed from the documentaries of “common people” (e.g., the British *Seven Up!* series or *An American Family*, aired on US PBS in 1973) into shows filming individuals or families in need of help (e.g., *Super Nanny* or makeover shows), journeying into intimate situations like romantic meetings (e.g., *The Bachelorette*) or individuals in extreme situations (e.g., *Survivor* or the *Fear Factor*) and those combined with quiz shows/game shows of the 1950a and 1960s, developed into spectacles (e.g., *The Amazing Race*). Still other subgenres are televised contests of beauty (e.g., *Top Model*) or artistic skill (singing, dancing, etc.), which sprouted one of the most popular formats of reality: the *Idol* series, which became successful in dozens of countries, languages, and cultures.

Although all the above shows differ in format and content, they are habitually grouped by content: game shows, makeovers, dating-based competitions, etc. For the sake of our discussion, we can offer a classification of the reality TV series into three

categories emerged from the conventional division in cultural studies between production, text, and audiences.

1. *Producers/Participants shows or autarkies shows* (e.g., *Survivor*, *The Bachelorette*, *Master Chef*, *The Next Top Model*), in which the producers and the participants, chosen by the producers, are the main engine in eliminations and promoting the show. Although the public play some role in the show (e.g., “saving” certain contestants from elimination), this role is not the most dominant. Few of these shows are conducted in a self-contained “Pocket World” (Brenton and Cohen 2003, 51).
2. *Text shows or footage shows* (e.g., *Cops*), based on a more passive role of the production, mainly editing footage collected by surveillance/candid cameras or by the producers escorting professionals in their routine (mostly emergency teams).
3. *The audience shows or interactive shows* (e.g., *Idol* series and other talent shows), in which the audience plays a significant role in eliminations, and so in promoting the show from one episode to another (Holmes 2004a). Moreover, these shows are broadcast live in front of a studio audience that reacts and interacts with the live show. For them and for a home audience, appeals for active participation are made by the contestants, host, and production (Jenkins 2006).

The foregoing categories point at the uniqueness of talent shows as an illuminating example of the interactive show. Thus, the multifocal analysis of Israeli *Idol* will seek to understand its appeal to an active audience, reflected in high ratings, sending text messages, and actions—from blog writing to participating in off-screen public activities (door-to-door, gatherings)—for contestants.

A Brief History of the Israeli Idol

A Star Is Born is the Israeli equivalent of the British *Pop Idol* and U.S. *American Idol*, which was an enormous success among audiences. Thus, for example, the opening episode of the ninth season (April 2011) placed first on weekly ratings, with a 33.1 percent score. The national talent contest has a particular history and origins. Although it resembles other *Idol* TV series, it is not a formal franchise production, duplicating the main features of the show (a singing contest in two stages: audition and studio performance) without using the trademark “idol” in its title. In 2002, Israel TV Channel 2, the most popular TV channel in Israel, aired the show *We Won't Stop Singing*, a quiz show in which celebrities and “common” people had to demonstrate proficiency in and familiarity with the nation’s cultural heritage by identifying famous Israeli songs from the past and then performing them. The name of the show was taken from a well-known tune from the 1970s, the gist of whose lyrics is that even in hard times (high inflation, external political pressures, the closing of USSR emigration to Israel),

“we” will not stop singing, because the song reflects unity under shared misfortunes. In the second season of the show, besides the quiz, the producers added to the show groups of young singers that sang famous Hebrew songs. The audience eliminated the less popular ones until the finale. This season was called *We Won't Stop Singing—A Star Is Born*, and in the final episode a nineteen-year-old woman soldier, who was from an obscure little town in southern Israel, and who had come to her first audition dressed in her army uniform, was crowned as the first “idol.” In 2004, Channel 2 finally dropped the quiz-show format to start the first full-fledged talent show, the official second season of *A Star Is Born* (in Hebrew, *Kokhav Nolad*), in which, after a very close race, the “underdog” (a young border policeman about to finish his compulsory army service) was pronounced the winner.

Alongside the famous Israeli music industry experts who serve as judges, three prominent figures are associated with the show since its first steps (2002): the host of the show, Zvika Hadar, a well-known actor and comedian who also serves as one of the judges at the audition stage; the director, Yoav Tzavir, of Teddy Production (the producers of the show); and Eran Mittelman, a pianist who accompanies the candidates during auditions and conducts the band during studio performances. It is important to note that the show is broadcast on prime time on the commercial Channel 2, which is the most popular TV channel in Israel (the other two nationwide TV channels are the public Channel 1, and the commercial Channel 10). The program thus receives high ratings and is the “talk of the town” on Israeli streets. The company that airs the show also owns one of Israel’s most popular websites and uses it to promote the show, and connect it to active social media pages (e.g., Facebook). *A Star Is Born* is a success in Israel also after the broadcast season, as many of the show finalists (i.e., not only the winners) are best-selling performing artists. One example of finalists’ national status is the fact that in the past six years (2005-2010), three of the finalists were selected to represent Israel at the Eurovision song contest. The name of the show became famous (or infamous, depending on one’s point of view) as a “star academy” and a shortcut to glory. The show won several television awards in Israel and it is considered the most successful entertainment show in the country, both in terms of ratings and number of seasons. In the following pages, the article will examine the structure, contents, and contexts of the show, with the aim to determine the source of its power and appeal, and so contribute to the understanding of the successful transnational genre and format.

The Interactive Reality Show Between Six Cultural Oxymora

1. The Pluralism Oxymoron: Institutionalized Pluralism

The uniqueness of the reality show genre lies in the fact that it is based on “real” people. That is, for the subjects involved, the contest is not a central part of their lives; rather they live regular lives until the moment they become famous (or “almost famous”) characters in a reality show. Herein resides the underlying democratic potential of reality

shows: The use of anonymous characters from different social classes, races, genders, ages, and geographical locations to variegate television culture (Murray and Ouellette 2004).

Nevertheless, this pluralism is institutionalized because a production staff conducts initial rounds of candidate selection. These auditions usually guarantee a representative variety of contestants; for example, in such a manner the twenty contestants are selected from among tens of thousands of candidates who appeared at the auditions for the show.

As in other national versions, in the Israeli case the “pluralism” begins at the auditions stage of the show: the five music industry professionals who serve as judges travel “all over the country” to hold auditions in search for the next idol. One of the unique elements of the Israeli show is the span of the search; the team travels abroad to places where many Israelis (and ex-Israelis) can be encountered: the United States (New York, Los Angeles), India, and South America (favorite destinations for young backpackers after finishing military service). They even try to unearth the next star among people who plan to immigrate to Israel (e.g., in France and Russia), with the assistance and cooperation of the Jewish Agency—a semi-governmental organization responsible for immigration and immigrant absorption. This kind of a search, besides its “patriotic” connotation (see later), bolsters the concept of pluralism, since everyone is entitled to audition and the show invests efforts in reaching all possible candidates. Moreover, the search around the globe raises questions regarding identity and nationality (Who is an Israeli? Who can be an Israeli star?), as well as identity and the relationship between the nation—represented by its most successful TV show—and the citizens (you may leave the country but the country will never leave you).

During the auditions stage, the production, judges, and host repeatedly mention the candidates’ place of origin, ask them about the place they live in and treat them as representatives of their hometown. Throughout the studio performances, and especially in the “grand finale” episode, the production emphasizes the contestants’ hometowns and background, airing footage of interviews with other city-compatriots, and even visits the contestants’ homes to taste traditional dishes made by the new stars’ families. Thus, again, the production has control over the selection of contestants and the “focus” they receive, and discipline their performance.

Institutionalized pluralism is one of the characteristic components of the postmodern era (Bauman 1992). Reality shows seek to provide it with a stage. The very fact that the contestants in the shows are people who had until then led “normal lives” and who only recently entered the world of television studios, is what enables them to be “popular heroes,” or protagonists with whom it is easy for viewers to identify, as the lack of the more traditional “aura” of famous figures narrows the gap between the viewer and the character on the television screen.

Furthermore, behind the general guy-next-door/common-person proximity, the viewers may feel close to the contestants based on more specific characteristics, such as geographic, class, gender, or ethnic origin affinity. The contestants, for their part, need the viewers’ support in order to survive in the game and they refer to their

multilayered identity: “I call on the people of the south to support me,” “I know that Jerusalem is behind me,” etc. Institutionalized pluralism has economic importance, because the program succeeds in creating affinity with different and varied audiences and, in so doing, increases exposure to the program and the commercials broadcast on it (Jenkins 2006).

However, it is important to note that the mere existence of the institutionalized pluralism oxymoron does not mean that a presentable diversity is shown on prime time. Very often, this variety can be considered as a hegemonic tool of neoliberal ideology (Kraszewski 2004; Elias, Jamal and Soker 2009).

2. The Performance Oxymoron: Mainstream Songs with Counterhegemonic Performances

This oxymoron is based on the tension between the hegemonic content and cultural heritage of the songs and their interpretation/vocal presentation that represents, in many cases, the diction and intonation that are identified with the less privileged classes/sectors of society. Thus, only few songs performed in the show are original, while most of them are established in the hegemonic music industry. Moreover, some of the successful songs are rooted in the cultural heritage of the nation, identified with past singers (“music legends”) or with the history of the country, placing them in the mainstream cultural “toolkit” (Swidler 1986). In the Israeli case, a salient example of the mainstreaming/“normalizing” role of the songs is when contestants choose to perform songs that present the Zionist narrative and enshrine values of heroism, comradeship, and bereavement add as Israel’s history and cultural heritage. The meeting between these songs and the “other”—new immigrants, residents of the periphery, Palestinian-Arab citizens of Israel—connects the minorities to hegemonic values of the society. For example, Niso Simantov, a contestant from a small town and the son of immigrants from the Caucasus, decided to perform songs that are a significant part of the Zionist narrative, such as the song “A Walk to Caesarea,” which is the most popular song aired on the radio during the Holocaust Memorial Day (Neiger, Zandberg, and Meyers, forthcoming). Unlike the classical version of the song, Simantov presented it in a Mediterranean spirit, adding vocal trills. Another prominent example is the Arab-Israeli contestant Miriam Tukan, who performed mainstream Hebrew music. One of her songs was “The Road to the Village,” identified with Rivka Zohar (the lead singer of the Israeli Navy band in the 1960s), which includes the verse “I don’t know what happened / how I lost the blessed way / how I lost the way to the village / the way back.” This song, performed with an Arab accent and a Middle Eastern melody, on mainstream prime time, implied an unequivocal allusion to the Palestinians who could not leave their villages during the 1948 war (which the Palestinians refer to as *Naqba*—literally, catastrophe—and Israelis call War of Independence). Other songs performed by Tukan were a poem written by Israel’s “national poet,” Haim Nachman Bialik, “Take Me under Your Wing” and the song associated with Holocaust Memorial Day, “For a Human Being Is a Tree of the Field,” combining it with motifs from Arab music. That

is, many mainstream songs are presented with a new melody or with additional Middle-Eastern trills that create a hybrid product. Another Arab-Israeli contestant was Hiba Batchish (from the eighth season) who, in her first audition, sang two songs: one in Arabic (by the legendary Lebanese singer Fairuz) and the other an antimilitaristic song, identified with the memory of Israel's fallen soldiers. During her studio performance, she sang a duet with another contestant who was labeled from the start as a tough security man, performing the song "Protect the World, Child" (because we, the adults, cannot) half in Hebrew and half in Arabic.

These songs represent the national dominant narrative, but may also give ethnic minority performers a sense of belonging to the collective, and appealing for inclusion as an integral part of the dominant collective. Furthermore, starting with the third season of the show, the Israeli producers included in each season two "special" episodes devoted to a prominent mainstream Israeli singer to ensure the presence and central role of dominant culture in the show, reflecting the cultural canon, but at the same time, reconstituting and consolidating it.

Thus, to succeed, contestants in many cases must perform a well-known, easily remembered, melodic song that should not arouse debate among viewers and serves to reinforce national myths and the values of consumer capitalism. Nonetheless, they bring their idiosyncratic cultural background to this performance and can use the song's heritage as a resource for their own place in the show and in society.

3. The Periphery Oxymoron: A Stereotypical/Unique Cinderella Story

This oxymoron is constructed on two levels: the personal and the collective level. Consequently, it is a composite of two tensions: (1) between a new human-interest story and a repeated/schematic one and (2) between a conventional image of the periphery/ethnic group and one that reveals its human face, diversity, and cultural richness. The mechanism of reality shows succeeds, in many cases, in maintaining both tensions in the process that transforms "common" people into celebrities (Holmes 2004b).

On the first season of the Israeli show, the winner of the competition was Ninette Tayeb, a nineteen-year-old female soldier from a traditional family, originally from Morocco and Tunisia, who lived on very limited resources in a small town in the south of the country; the other two finalists also came from small towns on the periphery. In fact, in all eight seasons of the show, the winners represented the Israeli "other." The rhetoric and construction of the character of Tayeb demonstrated to viewers who identified with her that their support for "their" candidate throughout the program is what made her "unprecedented achievement" possible—as repetitively published in the media after her coronation.

The image of contestants like Tayeb is constructed by sending a crew to visit their homes and families. Such footage emphasizes that their victory would not be just a personal one but the victory of a whole town. Thus, producers develop characters in a manner that matches the image of the peripheral cities in Israel (Avraham 2002): small towns mean large families that immigrated to Israel from Arab countries, are orthodox or

conservative, hang portraits of venerated rabbis on the wall, and cook ethnic-traditional food. On one hand, this story can be read as a caricature of the “other,” the opposite of the liberal/secular/sophisticated socio-economic-cultural center. On the other hand, albeit somewhat stereotypical, it confers on the periphery prime-time heroes, exposure, and legitimacy for their values and lifestyle. Thus, even though many contestants from the periphery share “the same” story, once and over again the program depicts each story as unique and each candidate as an individual person.

The “Cinderella” narrative is related to the illusion of democratic participation: reality shows not only endow viewers with the capacity to have influence and preserve close parasocial interaction with contestants (Cohen 1997), but also promise them that their participation in the television experiment will make a “real” impact on the life of the winner.

This explanation demonstrates how the economic structure is integrated with ideological infrastructure. Viewers not only identify with the selection method and with the narrative of their favorite contestants, they also become habitual users of the advanced technology driven by economic mechanisms. Thus, beyond affinity with characters, there is also a system of interrelations with consumer products that have positive images and provide thrills to the ideal consumer (Bauman 1998).

The image of the periphery may serve as evidence that viewers have the capability to have an influence because contestants who might be considered to be sociologically weak or unprivileged succeed in winning the contest. Victory can be considered “proof” of the transformative power of television and its potential for redemption (powers that—as proposed by Wood and Skeggs (2004)—should be critically observed as they reformulate categories such as class and gender rather than eliminate them).

4. The Patriotism Oxymoron: A Nationalistic-Patriotic Narrative in the Global Show

As mentioned in the introduction: the promo for the ninth season of *A Star Is Born* (2011), filmed in army bases with all four judges in army uniforms and announcing that the show would look for the next idol “in sea, air and land” may serve as an illuminating example of the presence of national content in the global format.

The format of *Idol* shows is one of the most successful transnational TV formulas, with more than forty local/regional versions (spin-offs of the British *Pop Idol*). Many of these shows celebrate youth and beauty in a commercialized, neoliberal Western-global context, one that prepares the “idol” to be consumed and idolized. At the same time, as *local* adaptations they promote nation and nationalism, sometimes in their more conservative versions: local language, heritage, and tradition and even local landscapes, regions, and cities.

One of the interesting values promoted in the Israeli version is militarism and a patriotic sentiment for the state. Contestants with military background receive special attention. On the ninth session of “A Star is Born” (2011) one of the season top-ten contestants was Ron Weinreich, who competed in a wheelchair as he, as an Israel’s

Defense Forces' tank commander, was seriously injured during the 2006 war in Lebanon. Obviously, his personal life story, medical and mental recoveries were in the spotlight, to accompany the reactions for his musical performances. On the eighth session of the show (2010), one of the most popular contestants was Idan Amedi, a sergeant at the IDF, whom the production presented as the "tough soldier." His activities as a vigorous commander received many comments from show judges and on internet talkbacks. Although many music critics concurred that his vocal performance was less impressive than that of other contestants, he was declared a runner-up. His case was similar to that of several other contestants from previous seasons: for example, Tayeb wore an army uniform in her first audition, and the winner of the second season was a border policeman still in compulsory military service. Not surprisingly, their "rough diamond" soldier charm beat the more professional singers of the finale. Another striking example is the scandal in public discourse that developed after the "revelation" that the fourth season winner, Jacko Eisenberg, had not served in the army and his "unpatriotic" quotations appeared in the media (Livio 2008). This scandal was associated with the fifth season; blogs and internet sites called to boycott one of the finalists because she had not fulfilled her army duties. Eisenberg himself had to leave Israel after many city mayors and politicians called for a boycott of his performances. It is important to note that the scandal started after the coronation of the *Idol*. During the season, the audience had been exposed to the fact that Eisenberg's father had been recognized as a "war casualty" in the Gulf War (1991)—being one of the few Israelis who died (from a heart attack) when an Iraqi Scud missile hit the building next to Eisenberg's house. Moreover, Eisenberg won this nationalistically charged season during the 2006 Lebanon war. Several episodes, including a guest performance of the Police Orchestra, were held "off competition," just to cheer up and identify with Israelis under fire.

5. The Participation Oxymoron: Consumers' "Democratic" Elections

"You have the power to protect your candidate"—declared the host—"Don't stop me tomorrow in the street and ask me how is it possible that your candidate is out of the competition. Vote for her or him. Your vote can make the difference." This plea aired during the fourth season of *A Star Is Born*, but echoed others like it that were repeated during episodes of every season. The audience are called to fulfill their "democratic duty" and respond enthusiastically.

In the opening paragraph of their book *Media and the Restyling of Politics*, Corner and Pels (2003) point at the "voting paradox": the withdrawal, apathy, and cynicism in ordinary elections while one can witness growing "enthusiasm to vote for wannabe celebrities on reality shows." In the *Idol* show, viewers become "couch judges" at the early stages of the competition, after show judges have selected eighteen to twenty-two final contestants ("the session team"). In practice, reality shows translate political elections in democratic societies to a *democratic television game*, a practice that shifts the democratic system from the parliamentary political arena to the entertainment domain. As such, a variation of the phrase "Your vote can be the one that changes the fate of your favorite

candidate” can be heard in every episode of the show and the contestants stare directly at the camera asking for public support. Yet these “elections” have patrons, and they are not about promoting the noble democratic idea of “participation” but that of “capitalism.” In Israel, during the first seasons, the main sponsors of the show were Coca-Cola and the cellular phone company Cellcom, while the main studio stage and the scenery decoration were designed to match the latter’s purple-star logo.

The reality genre functions within the boundaries of the social superstructure of liberal democracy but with a difference: until the show’s finale, the main interest of the viewers is not to elect their candidate but rather to shield him or her from elimination, while the final episode of the show is constructed as a horse race–style democratic election. The meaning of a program characterized by a clear and quick ending can be understood by comparing the differences between the television dialectic and the social-political dialectic: Reality shows offer viewers a clear-cut, happy end; furthermore, one of the secrets of their success is that they tell viewers that their involvement will influence the ending of the show. Accordingly, the programs present a reality in which the synthesis begins and ends in one broadcasting season, and every episode drives viewers forward toward the grand finale.

In contrast, Israeli society is witnessing the citizens’ apathy and lack of trust toward the political system that represents them, a phenomenon demonstrated by the continuous decline in voting rates generally and local elections particularly (Israeli Institute of Democracy 2008). This trend has characterized most western democracies for the past several decades, and media plays an important role in this “spiral of cynicism” (Cappella and Jamieson 1997). The researchers claim that it is customary to link a decline in voting to a decline in public commitment, affinity, and cooperation as well as satisfaction with the conventional system of the political establishment.

Thus, television allows citizens to think about reality with an immediate dialectical ending in which they can have a say and see immediate results. This act is in opposition to the real-life experience in the political sphere and this is what is so powerful about reality shows. The reality show constitutes “an illusion of a democratic system” calling for active participation. In the Israeli case, this also involves municipalities and mayors, which inflate local patriotism (for the candidates from their constituencies) and even post billboards supporting “their” candidates along main roads, as they understand that the show is an opportunity to revive favorable coverage for the city. From a critical point of view, the voting method cannot be considered democratic, since viewers are required to pay on large corporations that produce the show and advertise on it only then to be given the right to vote. That is, the sponsors exploit loyalty to the show to increase the affinity to their brands (Jenkins 2006). At the reality ballot box viewers are consumers before they are citizens and, metaphorically, they need to proffer their credit card before showing their identity card. Still, TV creates the oxymoron of consumers’ democratic participation. Evidence for this can be found first in the direct profits of the advertisers; for example, in the 2004 final episode alone of the Israeli show *A Star Is Born*, more than a million text messages were reportedly sent (Israel’s population is approximately seven million). Second, indirect profits were earned by Coca-Cola,

which offered its website as the site for voting. A clear sign of parasocial interaction and involvement of the audience is the enormous number of actions in the virtual sphere (internet talkbacks, posting in social media), or even in real life, for example, a fan demonstration (2004) outside “idol” production studios after allegations of fraud and mistakes in measuring results at the end of the second season.

6. *The Promotion Oxymoron: The Ordinary Swift Coronation*

In 1977, Israel’s socialist workers party lost elections for the first time since the establishment of the State. The TV anchor who announced the event dramatically proclaimed “Ladies and gentlemen—a turnabout!” This phrase, which since became an idiom in the Israeli political discourse, was used by the *A Star Is Born* host seconds before he announced the winner of the second season. However, unlike the first dramatic turnabout, which was the culmination of long-drawn-out processes that had been brewing for years in Israeli society, here the transformation from ordinary to star status was as swift as the coronation itself.

On one hand, the production constructs the idol profile as an ordinary, authentic representative of the periphery, but, on the other hand, it needs to build his or her image as special and gifted to condense the transformative process in a short season. The peak is the final episode that presents the idol’s history in a short clip that summarizes his or her “unique performances” besides highlighting his or her family and ethnic background, place of origin, and social position.

As media events (Katz and Dayan 1992), these shows communicate a commitment to watch them, as they represent importance for society and culture (Katz and Liebes 2007). Thus, a prima facie contradiction exists between this element and the charismatic aura of the coronation (especially in the finale) which resembles the formal crowning of royals or well-established public figures and the swift coronation of a “common person celebrity.”

In Israel, as in other countries, several days before the finale a digital stopwatch appeared in a corner of the screen of Channel 2 to count down the minutes left until the grand finale. Conjectures about the songs that would be sung by the contestants appeared in different media. Interviews with members of the entertainment industry were broadcast and each offered their guess as to who would be the next idol. The public discourse surrounding the promotion of the contestants from one episode to the next successfully combines the three categories (or scripts) for media events suggested by Katz and Dayan: contests, conquests, and coronations. Thus, they become three dimensions of the “finale” rather than falling under a single category: Who will win the contest? Will the contestant (often from a poor socioeconomic background) triumph and conquest? How will the coronation be manifest (with the legitimacy of national and media authorities)?

Given that the democratic system has been handed off to the entertainment domain, and that contestants and viewers are transformed to become consumer products, the producers of the show need to demonstrate to the viewing public that its involvement in the development of the plot is not for naught. The closed ending of reality shows

and their ability to offer viewers a swift resolution in each episode are components that have been part of this genre throughout its evolution.

Examining each program separately and breaking down the shows into their constituent parts finds that each program applies the principle of coronation—especially the live broadcast shows: the presentation of protagonists, summarizing their role in the show and (short) history up to the crowning; the casting of authority from above (the professional show judges) and from the bottom (“the people’s choice”). Nevertheless, the “ordinary” in the life history and current lifestyle of the protagonists of reality TV coronations is stressed in order to reinforce the Cinderella narrative: stories on misery and poor backgrounds. In the Israeli case, the life stories of many contestants are connected with immigration or poverty, where “only music saves the day.” Moreover, unlike actual coronations, we do not know the name of the new queen/king in advance—one of the protagonists with whom we have only a short parasocial relationship—and just few minutes pass between the announcement and the winner until winding of the show. Thus, although coronations are related to institutionalized and formal rites of passage (such as royal traditions, award ceremonies, and presidential inaugurations) the shows maintain the balance between the “formal coronation” and its swift and ordinary character.

Conclusions

On May 2009, nearly hundred million votes were counted in the final duel between Kris Allen and Adam Lambert on the concluding episode of the eighth season of *American Idol*, marking a new record in the *Idol* series history. That same month the YouTube clips of the audition of Susan Boyle—a forty-seven-year-old anonymous singer from a small village in Scotland—on *Britain’s Got Talent* were viewed more than a hundred million times. Although the popularity of the genre has already received scholarly attention, the conclusions of this article wish to contribute to previous studies by suggesting that the cultural oxymora—some echo on the abovementioned examples—are part of the fascination of reality TV as they bridge—rather than divide—hegemonic-dominant meanings (some recognized by the active viewers) and the pleasure of the audience reflected in their viewing patterns and responses to the shows.

On a neo-Marxist level, a critical perspective on reality TV reveals the important role of the program producers and advertisers in the construction of sociocultural, economic, and political meanings that support the foundations of hegemony and nationalism, constructing an illusion of free choice and democracy, while, actually, the viewers are required to become consumers, the contestants are tools, and the representations of the periphery and the less privileged are manipulated for more ratings and sponsors. On the level of reception, a critical perspective seeks to understand in hegemonic texts and enjoys in the diversity of its representations (e.g., Radway 1984; Ang 1996).

This article claims that reality TV maintains a yin–yang polysemy that, besides hegemonic messages, also calls for enjoyment, attachment and a pluralism that may produce reflexivity (Cloud 2010). Future investigations of the genre may use the

concept of cultural oxymora, taking into account both similarities and differences to this case study, in order to examine how reality TV shows manufacture a complex interpretation that complete and negotiate—rather than contradict—the double-faced meanings and readings embedded in the shows.

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Bio

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