

The Magicians of Evil – Part the First

In 2002, while on a reconnaissance trip for future sites, I stumbled across the city of Los Angeles.

I say “stumbled”, for I was oblivious to its very peculiar charms until then. My tolerance for smog-ridden post-industrial wasteland cities is slight and I felt like I had seen enough to last a life-time. This from a self-confessed country boy, despite my liking for *comme des garçons* shoes and perfume thanks, having already been mugged by bouncers working at the Alligator Lounge on Pico in 1995, I had seen enough.

This time I was treated to the other Los Angeles, the leafy green tropical spread, interspersed with large slabs of concrete, glass, and steel. I swam in a pool nestled beneath the Getty Center under a warm California sun. I watched beggars and the homeless from the safety of my chauffeur-driven limousine with the same detached indifference as the rest of my peers. I watched a missile blast up from Vandenburg Airbase and out into space with the same feeling of amazed dread and awe as any patriotic American, moved by the enormity of the civilization. I watched the Academy Awards broadcast in house in the Hollywood Hills previously owned by drunken bemusement. The city was resplendent in its very own glow, part inversion layer carbon monoxide, the setting sun, celebrity ego machine, Hollywood fantasia, mixed up with the pacific ocean, arid desert in every direction, metaphorical and allegorical.

Fascism is a sly and elusive demon – whereas once we could see it and name it for what it is, now we have the obscuring screen of television. This attempts to hide the apparatus that has festooned itself around us, a large technological parasite, the top of the order, the smouldering mass of contemporary fascism. Hidden within every reality show, police drama, comedy, music video, and Fox/CNN/ABC news report, is an underlying and never stated *premis apriori*:

“We will prevail, we will smash you”.

I was dumb with fear.

Nothing really prepares one for the advent of reality television, not even the preceding 40 years of prangster content could compare to the constant stream of game show exotica that we may have grown accustomed to.

Perhaps *Candid Camera* was the first and ultimate in the televised “real” experience. This attempt at representing the real to an essentially captive audience metamorphosed into the dating games and masterminds of the nineteen seventies, through to the wheel of fortunes and other intellectualised forms of televised entertainment that prepared the ground upon which we now stand.

While New Zealanders might like to claim *Popstars* as “their own” invention, *American Idol* is the nadir of such sophistications. The real moment has been finally eliminated and the pre-moment has been fully realised. There is present within *American Idol* a perpetual rollercoaster ride through selected and abridged moments of American pop music history, audio and video.



Top: Michael Morley, *Kill Your Idols*, DVD, colour, sound, 36 minutes, 2002; **centre** and **bottom:** stills from *American Idol*.

There is a nauseating and inevitable rush towards celebrity that makes the show one of the best examples of the excesses of television culture that we have had the right to observe.

If the branding of the franchise is not suspicious enough with the *American Graffiti* style logo, the drawn out presentation of the balloted decisions made, the enforced sense of sentimentality, a post 9-11 mirror upon which we can reflect. All of this assists in the creation of a well-deserved if ill-conceived cloak of collective warmth. We truly are one global family, and, if not, we are certainly made to feel as though we are missing that warm embrace of cultural homogeneity.

The only thing that comes marginally close in effect would have to be Australian television's *Big Brother*. Celebrity is maintained by filming a group of people, in the most intricate way, doing nothing. This nothingness is then garnished with the magic of television to present the spectacle of celebrity and attendant activity. This very violence of the quotidian. I acknowledge now that it is but content meant to bolster the downtime between the advertising sections. Content can be hard to generate convincingly within a vacuum.

American Idol's most obvious covert thesis was one that has stood the test of time, at least since the development of popular music. Mediocrity sells, and a conservative approach to ideas about sound and its role within society, are obviated in favour of a *staus quo*. The *AI* contestants represent any pop music star in embryonic form, before the big break and therefore identifiable by the audience as personal and real. This is conveniently illustrated by the deployment of "fans" within the audience. These fans are of course the mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, uncles and aunts, nieces and nephews, grandpas and grandmas. With conveniently hand scrawled banners of paper and felt pen, the cheering fans are invariably identified as such within pop-up titles edited beforehand by careful producers.

Big Brother's coup de grace is of course the final eviction, building up through its brilliantly dull weekly evictions. Like any other sport, but the audience get to decide the final outcome. At last a very real and working example of democracy in action. *American Idol* possesses such a routine with its judges' reports and audience voting facilities. Paula Abdul is spectacular as 1980s pop star reinvented, within the context of twenty-first century simulated cultural experience, as caring and sensitive mother of the nation. The two male judges performed a see-sawing, good-cop/bad-cop, schtick that made the programme that little bit more creepy than expected.

American Idol does possess at its core a strange and slightly similar effect. Again the sign is democracy and this idea that we are part of something that might be identified within this concept.

At one point within a shot to wannabe American idols, lined up and fine-tuning their routine for the onlookers, film crews, friends, and family, a young Latino woman is defiant in her wish for the experience to be known as "Ammeerican Idol" and not the white Anglo-American variant. This was where it became obvious that a whole section of the gathered population were about to be ruled out.

Within Clement Greenberg's 1939 essay, "The Avant-garde and Kitsch," the most eloquent definition of kitsch is extolled, one which does really still hold true today, and perhaps even more so considering our experience of the global community at the beginning

of another new century.

Greenberg's discussion concerning the 1930s American cultural experience and its relationship to the political institutions of the time seems all too easy to transpose within the experience that we have now. The images of George W. Bush in flight suit aboard a vessel dedicated to killing people and spreading terror seem as normal as Stalin waving from the balcony of Lenin's Tomb during May Day military parades. The difference is that now we get to see it televised and experienced as near to first hand as you can get. This immediacy appears as the most dysfunctional of all of the promises of contemporary media.

American Idol maintains itself as the pinnacle of this franchise. Where localised efforts attempt to ghettoise popular culture within a parochial context, *American Idol* makes the viewers everywhere feel as part of the American people, revelling in their joys, identifying with their disappointments.

Strangely, despite the evidence of *World Idol*, this appeared out of the blue without consultation with territories that had not even held their first *Idol* competitions, New Zealand famously falling into this category.

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