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Chapter 13

Gender Performance in *American Idol*, *Pop Idol* and *The X Factor*

Ruth Deller

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Introduction

This chapter looks at the way that gender and sexuality are performed and constructed within the series *Pop Idol* (2001-3) *American Idol* (2002-present) and the *X Factor* (2004-present). These shows were big hits in the UK and USA, propelling several acts to stardom, not least judge Simon Cowell, who features in all three. They offer the audience a chance to witness the creation of 'pop stars' by taking ordinary people and showing their transformations (Holmes, 2004) into celebrities. However, the process of star making at work in these shows offers strong discourses about what it means to be a man or a woman.

In this chapter I draw upon Judith Butler's (1990) ideas about gender as performative and Richard Dyer's (1978, 1986) discussions of 'star image' to explore the way these shows construct their stars via very tightly constructed codes of gender. I will particularly be looking at this in relation to the complicated relationship these shows have with gay men, and their presentation of women as heterosexual objects of desire.

Dyer argues that the media construction of stars asks us to think about what they are 'really' like (1986: 2). This is particularly so within *Idols* shows, as we are presented with a version of contestants that purports to be 'real' yet is clearly constrained by discursive practices, with the presentation of each performer clearly constructed to fit a

strong narrative and create a clear 'star image' (Dyer, 1979, Holmes, 2004: 149). Dyer argues that these 'Star images are always extensive, multimedia, intertextual' (Dyer, 1986: 3), certainly the case with the three shows featured in this chapter, where the narratives of performers extend from the shows themselves into coverage in newspapers and gossip columns. The role of this intertextuality in the construction of these performers forms a key part of my discussion.

Representations of 'maleness' and homosexuality

In this section, I argue that *American Idol*, *Pop Idol* and *The X Factor* have a complicated relationship with (male) homosexuality, drawing on the repertoires of 'gayness' (Dyer 1993: 19) yet, at the same time, treating male homosexuality as problematic; something to either be mocked or denied.

In January 2006, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) issued a statement accusing *American Idol*, and, in particular, judges Simon Cowell and Randy Jackson of homophobia. They cited Jackson asking a contestant if he was a girl and Cowell telling a contestant to 'wear a dress' as examples, and in a statement, spokesman Damon Ramine said: 'The real offense here was in the producer's decision to add insult to injury by turning a contestant's gender expression into the butt of a joke' (Associated Press, 2006). This is one of several occasions where the Cowell-fronted talent shows have been criticised for their attitude towards sexuality and gender.

A key component of *American Idol* was the banter between host Ryan Seacrest and Simon Cowell around Cowell's jokes about rumours that Seacrest is gay:

[after discussing fashion with contestant Melinda Doolittle]

Seacrest: Any advice on the heels, Simon?

Cowell: You should know Ryan

Seacrest: Stay out of my closet!

Cowell: Come out!

Seacrest: This is about the top twelve, OK, not your wishes.

(From: *American Idol*, 13 March 2007)

This banter is also present in the *X Factor*, where Cowell and presenter Dermot O'Leary frequently make 'humorous' allusions to judge Louis Walsh being gay. Although Walsh has never publicly discussed his sexuality, the show uses his presumed gayness as a frequent source of comedy, including a recurring storyline where each year a (usually middle-aged) female auditionee will have a 'crush' on Louis. The implication is that she is crazy for thinking Walsh is a suitable subject for her affections. The portrayal of Walsh's reaction to these contestants (horror) is contrasted with those who are shown to have a 'crush' on Cowell, and are rewarded for their choice of desirable object by being called 'sweetheart' or 'darling' and receiving a kiss on the cheek.

When Ellen DeGeneres was hired as a judge for the 2010 season of *American Idol*, *Entertainment Weekly* ran an interview with her and Cowell together where the issue of potential homophobia within the show was raised:

Cowell: Let me tell you something: We are the least racist, homophobic show in the world. What we do have, thank God, is a sense of humor. I hate political correctness. I wouldn't go into any show saying anything is off-limits...

DeGeneres: Well, I don't go by that rule, where there's no political correctness at all. If we lived in a world where there was no such thing as racism or homophobia, then obviously there would be no off-limits... At the same time, the stuff that Simon and Ryan do – none of that has ever been offensive to me. I'm more offended by people who make jokes about something sounding like an animal that's been caught in a lawn mower or whatever...

(From: 'This week's cover: 'American Idol' exclusive: The first interview with judges Ellen DeGeneres and Simon Cowell', *Entertainment Weekly*, 7 January 2010)

What is interesting about this extract is that Cowell only refutes homophobia by insisting they are not 'politically correct' and have 'a sense of humour'. This echoes comments he made on the Larry King show where, when asked about homophobia, he said 'Well, we're accused of everything, you know, anti-gay, anti-fat, anti this, anti that. I think we're just anti everything, you know... It's silly to start saying that you're after one particular group. We just make fun of everybody' (the Larry King Show, 17 March 2006). DeGeneres, whose hiring may, of course, have been deliberately staged to counter the accusations of homophobia, clearly seems more uncomfortable about homophobia within and surrounding the show, but makes light of it, claiming some references are inoffensive and that jokes at the expense of contestants who cannot sing are 'worse'.

The celebration of 'bad' acts DeGeneres mentions forms a key part of the construction of these shows - taken further by fan sites such as *Vote for the Worst*. This celebration evokes Sontag's depiction of 'camp' as 'a playful, aesthetically driven, ironic sensibility which aims to 'dethrone the serious' (Sontag, 1964, p.288). Sontag's account of camp has, however, been criticised by the likes of Dyer (1993) and Meyer (1994) for ignoring the connections between homosexuality and camp.

Pop music is particularly associated with a 'camp sensibility' and several authors, including Lemish (2007), Smith (1995) and Tobin (2007), have written about the relationship between gay men, 'camp' and popular music. The three Idols shows discussed in this chapter draw extensively on this relationship between pop music, 'camp' and (male) homosexuality. In *The X Factor*, attractive, muscular male dancers are often used to enhance performances on the *X Factor*, and costumes and staging reference 'camp' cultural texts such as *Glee* and *High School Musical*, particularly for

acts with presumed gay appeal. For example, drawing on 'camp' as playful and fun, pop duo Same Difference (2007) were given songs to perform that included S Club 7's 'Reach', Mariah Carey's 'All I Want for Christmas is You' and The Bee Gees' 'Tragedy' (also a hit in 1999 for pop group Steps), and their performances included flying and roller skates. Likewise, *American Idol*'s Megan Joy Corkrey (2008) performed The Jacksons' 'Rockin' Robin' with attendant 'caw caw' motions and noises.

Richard Dyer notes that 'There are signs of gayness, a repertoire of gestures, expressions, stances, clothing, and even environments that bespeak gayness, but these are cultural forms designed to show what the person's person alone does not show: that he or she is gay.' (Dyer, 1993: 19), and all three shows, particularly the *X Factor*, make good use of this repertoire to insinuate 'gayness' whilst rarely speaking of it explicitly.

The shows feature celebrities who are gay themselves, or, more often, gay 'icons'. Judges Paula Abdul, Sharon Osbourne, Cheryl Cole and Dannii Minogue all have a large gay male fanbase, whilst Louis Walsh, Nikki Chapman and Pete Waterman all have experience of managing pop acts with 'gay appeal'. Guest performers and 'judges' helpers'¹ have included the gay-friendly likes of Elton John, George Michael, Kylie Minogue, Lady GaGa and Sinitta.

Pop Idol and *X Factor* contestants make personal appearances at gay clubs (most famously London's G-A-Y) after their tenure on the shows, and contestants chosen for the live shows seem deliberately picked for their 'gay appeal', with a large reliance on bouncy, colourful pop groups, attractive young (occasionally shirtless) men

¹ The *X Factor*'s 'judges' houses' stage involves the judges, along with celebrity helpers, deciding which contestants will make live shows.

and, in *American Idol* and the 'overs' category² on *X Factor* particularly, female singers referred to as 'divas' - frequently associated with gay men (Lemish 2007).

However, the 'gay repertoire' used depends on the act and their presumed appeal. For example, pop groups in the *X Factor*, particularly those managed by Walsh, are more likely to have 'camp' performances than more 'credible' acts. In the 2006 series of the *X Factor*, boy band Eton Road's performances utilised overtly 'gay' signifiers. Dressed in waistcoats, sparkly shirts and trousers, with clearly styled hair, they performed iconic 'gay' songs such as The Scissor Sisters' 'I Don't Feel Like Dancing'.

In ABBA week (4 November 2006), when they performed 'Does Your Mother Know', Sharon Osbourne said: 'if anyone is going to pull off an ABBA track tonight, it's going to be Eton Road'. One of the band said: 'some of the other guys [contestants] are having a problem with the theme this week, but we love ABBA, so this is our week'. After giving a highly choreographed performance, Cowell remarked: 'Well, it was as camp as a row of tents, wasn't it? Let's face it, if Louis couldn't get ABBA night right, there's a problem, right? I mean Louis, you have a massive unfair advantage here', whilst Osbourne called it 'as camp as Christmas'.

During Eton Road's performances, the camera would cut to Cowell's face to show him looking horrified. After their 'I Don't Feel Like Dancing' (18 November 2006), which involved significant choreography (in a different, more overtly 'camp' style than the dancing of R'n'B boyband JLS in 2008), highly styled hair and outfits and falsetto vocals, Cowell remarked that they had: 'obviously been spending a lot of time

² The *X Factor* splits contestants into categories: 16-24s (split into 'boys' and 'girls' in 2007. 14 and 15-year olds were allowed to enter in 2007 and 2008. This category became 16-27s in 2010), groups, and over 25s (over 28s in 2010), usually referred to as 'overs'.

with Louis', prompting peals of laughter from the audience, in reference to the show's ongoing jokes about Walsh's sexuality. After Osbourne told Cowell the contestants had been sick that week, Cowell glanced at the band and retorted: 'Join the club. I feel sick'. Osbourne often called the group 'entertaining', whilst Walsh said they brought 'glitter and sparkle' to the competition.

Similar portrayals included Danny Noriega in *American Idol* (2008) and Diva Fever in *The X Factor* (2010). Noriega was a returning *American Idol* contestant from 2007, when flashbacks showed him wearing baggy casual clothing. In 2008, in contrast, he wore tight jeans and T-shirts and spoke in a 'camp' voice. He entered the audition room claiming that this time, he was 'being himself', to which Cowell replied 'I get that'. When he announced he'd be performing 'Proud Mary', Randy Jackson laughed and replied: 'Of Course'. Later in the contest (20 February 2008), Cowell declared his performance of 'Jailhouse Rock' 'grotesque', and when Noriega retorted, host Seacrest said: 'careful, he [Cowell] might double-snap you back'. As a link out of Noriega's section, Seacrest said 'kinda hot, colourful, grotesque. That's *American Idol*'.

During the 2010 *X Factor* auditions (19 September 2010), a segment of Walsh saying 'no' to auditionees was played, with Walsh shown in greyscale. Male duo Diva Fever (with attendant highly styled hair, tight T-shirts, skinny jeans and camp voices) were then introduced by The Village People's 'YMCA' on the soundtrack. When Walsh welcomed them onstage, he returned to full colour, the clear insinuation being that the camp (presumably gay) act was the one that would return him to his jolly self.

When they said they were going to sing 'Let it Be', Cowell, incredulously, said: 'Are you? OK, good luck', his intonation indicating his disdain at two overtly camp performers doing such a track. Cowell immediately stopped it and said he thought they

would be more ‘interesting’. Band member Craig asked if Manchester would like ‘more of a show’. In one of several such contrived situations in the 2010 series³, they were allowed to perform a more ‘suitable’ song. Backstage, the cameras cut to the group's friends backstage, and a ‘camp’ male friend squealing: ‘Oh God! They're gonna do it! Proud Mary!’ (as Randy Jackson would say: ‘Of course!’) as we cut back to band member Joe saying: ‘we're gonna give you a show!’ and the duo performed the none-more-stereotypical track.

As the camera cut to the judges, Louis Walsh was beaming, whilst Cowell was shown putting his head in his hands, then laughing. His comments that they were not the best singers, but were ‘fun, you know’ were delivered with his customary eye-rolls. Diva Fever's audition illustrates the way Cowell's television persona welcomes gay acts and audience members with one hand (it's good for ratings and phone votes, after all) while repelling them with the other, clearly signifying that he knows *other people* will like them, but he wants to distance *himself* from them.

Eton Road, Danny Noriega and Diva Fever were clearly unlikely to win their respective series, and so were allowed to participate, as long as they accept being joked about. However, when it comes to insinuations about potential winners' sexuality, Cowell's response is rather less warm – perhaps because of the fear that a male contestant's marketability (or, to use Dyer's terminology, his ‘star image’) will be affected. Fellow judge and manager Louis Walsh has spoken about how he would not have signed the late Boyzone singer Stephen Gately and Westlife singer Mark Feehily, who both had high-profile ‘coming-out’ moments, had he known that they were gay (Horan, 2008).

³ Contestants changing their song became a staple of the 2010 audition shows.

The portrayal of potential male winners on these shows is complicated, with the need to appeal to both gay male and female audiences. Richard Smith argues that male pop stars' clean-shavenness, hair styles and grooming can often make them 'appear' gay, yet also aids their appeal for a variety of audiences: 'Many of the artists may be straight, but their popularity rests on them being 'gay-acting, gay-looking'... Some see a gay man up there, others a gentle straight man. Some see a silly queen, others a perfect son. Some see an ideal lover, others a humpy stud' (Smith, 1995: 105). The idea of being able to market a singer (particularly a male singer) to a wide audience who may 'read' their appeal in different ways is crucial to the shows.

In the case of acts like *Pop Idol*'s Will Young and *X Factor*'s Joe McElderry, who manifest the appearance of gayness in the way Smith describes, their sexuality is played down in favour of emphasising their 'niceness', echoing Frith and McRobbie's claim that 'The teenybop idol's image is based on self-pity, vulnerability, and need. The image is of the young boy next door: sad, thoughtful, pretty and puppylike... What is needed is not so much someone to screw as a sensitive and sympathetic soulmate' (1978: 375).

However, when this appeal starts to cause press and audience speculation about a male contestant's sexuality, this begins to threaten the 'star image' constructed for them by the shows and there are attempts to control such speculation. *X Factor* contestants Austin Drage (2008) and Joe McElderry (2009), both were subjected to such speculation and publicly released statements and gave interviews declaring their heterosexuality (e.g. Robertson 2009). In Drage's case, the show itself made several overt references to him fancying female dancers and having a girlfriend. Although the show selectively talks about contestants' previous musical experiences, Drage's tenure in

boy band 5Boyz and his appearance on Channel 4 show *Boys Will Be Girls* (2006) - where he and three other former boy band members dressed as girls to try and 'pass' as a female group - were ignored altogether.

When footage of McElderry as a child was shown, including him singing Wham! songs, Cowell advised him to burn those old tapes. In spring 2010, McElderry came out as gay. He claimed not to have been lying in interviews where he had not disclosed this, stating he did not know his sexuality until his Twitter account was hacked and a message posted saying he was sick of 'living a lie' (Roberts 2010). Whilst a young man of nineteen (eighteen during the show) might be unsure of his sexuality, the public declarations of his 'straightness' immediately after his win suggest he may have been pressured to make those declarations - although McElderry has said that Cowell was supportive of his decision to 'come out'. McElderry's coming out led to a series of self-congratulatory articles and comments in the media with journalists and members of the public alike claiming it was 'no surprise', and that reading the 'cues' of gayness (Dyer 1993) in McElderry's performance and appearance had led them to reach that conclusion months earlier.

McElderry is the latest in a series of male performers who have come out some time after the end of the shows, most notably the winner of *Pop Idol* (2001), Will Young, and *American Idol* contestants Clay Aiken (2003) and Jim Verraros (2002). However, few contestants' homosexuality has been explicitly referenced during the broadcasting of any of the three shows.

During *American Idol* 2009, press and online discussions of eventual runner-up Adam Lambert referred to him as being gay and took delight in posting photos of him with men. The show itself did not refer explicitly to his sexuality, although judge Kara

DioGuardi later claimed on TV show *The View* that he 'was never in' [the closet]. In an early performance, Cowell dismissed him by saying 'I think you're theatrical and not current' (references to theatricality and liking musicals have often been used by Cowell in all three shows as put-downs to male contestants who seem 'flamboyant'). In a later show, Paula Abdul said to Lambert: 'Fortune rewards the brave and you're one of the bravest contestants I've ever witnessed. Ever'. Cowell replied: 'You what?' and Abdul repeated her statement. Although it is not explicit that 'brave' was in reference to Lambert's sexuality, it is possible, given Cowell's hostile reaction.

To reinforce their performance of heterosexual masculinity, during the live shows on all three series, male contestants singing songs originally sung by females usually 'gender-switch' the lyrics. This resulted in the *X Factor*'s Lloyd Daniels (2009), himself the subjects of several gay rumours in the press and online, changing the lyrics of Katy Perry's 'I Kissed a Girl' to 'I kissed a girl and I liked it, I hope her boyfriend don't mind it'⁴, changing the song's original intention in the process. In the same series, contestant Danyl Johnson, set up as a favourite by Cowell, gave an interview to the *News of the World* claiming to be bisexual. In the first live show, he changed the gender of the lyrics to '...And I am Telling You'⁵. Judge Dannii Minogue joked: 'If we are to believe everything we read in the papers, maybe you didn't need to change the gender reference in it'. Although Johnson smirked in response and said: 'I'm not ashamed', Cowell, with a shocked face, asked her to repeat her comments (in a similar manner to his exchange with Abdul over Lambert) and later told Minogue not to 'play those games' with Johnson.

⁴ Originally 'I kissed a girl and I liked it, hope my boyfriend don't mind it'.

⁵ 'Musical heroes week', 10 October 2009.

There were several audience complaints about Minogue's comments, claiming she had no right to refer to Johnson's sexuality on the show – despite the fact that heterosexual contestants' sexuality is routinely referred to and Johnson himself had spoken to the press. Minogue made public statements about how she and Johnson had been joking offstage about his comments to the papers, and apologised to him on air several times. More cynical commentators suggested Cowell masterminded the scenario to gain publicity for the show and drum up support for Johnson, who had received negative press for being a 'bully' (e.g. Wooton 2009).

Whilst the shows have a very complex, almost masochistic, relationship to male homosexuality, female homosexuality is conspicuous by its absence⁶. Compared to gay men, who are prominent within the pop world (albeit mostly restricted to 'theatrical' genres of music such as pop, disco and glam), there are few prominent lesbian pop singers. According to Stein, 'Because images of heterosexuality and, more specifically, female sexual accessibility, are central to pop music's appeal, out lesbians are generally not thought to be "crossover" material' (Stein, 1995: 416. See also O'Brien, 2002). Perhaps as a result of the limited marketability of lesbian performers, there have been no explicitly gay female contestants in the finals of the three shows, although Ellen DeGeneres was hired as a judge for *American Idol* 2010. Female artists do not always 'gender change' the lyrics to songs, presumably because there is no threat of them being perceived as gay, especially when their sexual allure for men is made explicit, which I will now discuss.

⁶ As on many shows of this ilk, with notable exceptions being Alex Parks, the winner of BBC One's *Fame Academy* (2003) and Kate Cook, a contestant in *Australian Idol* 2009.

Representations of female sexuality

As well as denying the expression of female sexuality through lesbianism, the shows have a complicated attitude towards womanhood in general, compounded by the star image created and perpetuated by the press surrounding the show. Women on these shows are positioned by heterosexuality and their desirability (or lack thereof) to men. Skeggs argues that, for women, 'Heterosexuality is institutionalized, reproduced in material practices, regulated and normalized through signification... women do not become heterosexual, rather, they are positioned by heterosexuality' (Skeggs, 1997: 135). The denial of female homosexuality by these shows and the discussion of women's appearance and desirability serve to reinforce this notion that to be a woman is to be heterosexual, and to be judged by your desirability for a man.

These ideas are normalised, in the manner Butler describes when she talks about gender construction as 'the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being' (Butler, 1990: 45), and presented as the acceptable and empowering way for women to present themselves – looking good is often deemed an acceptable compliment from judges, sometimes more than performing well.

McRobbie (2009) has written about what she terms the 'post-feminist masquerade', the idea that discourses of empowerment are used to perpetuate male hegemony through convincing a woman that 'looking good' or partaking in more 'traditional' behaviours are empowering choices she makes for herself. The shows continually reinforce this notion, most visibly through successful winners such as Kelly Clarkson and Alexandra Burke and judges like Kara DioGuardi and Cheryl Cole.

Cole, herself a former contestant on talent show *Popstars: The Rivals* (2002) neatly embodies the post-feminist masquerade these shows reinforce. From her earliest audition, she was described as ‘gorgeous’ by the show’s judges. Cole went on to become a member of Girls Aloud, the group created by the programme, and is now the face of cosmetics company L’Oreal⁷, whose slogan ‘Because we’re worth it’ replicates post-feminist notions of beauty as something ‘empowering’. Cole’s image has been carefully constructed intertextually through magazines, newspapers, pop videos and television. She is an ‘ordinary’ girl who has become a high earner and powerful within her career, as well as having a preoccupation with style.⁸ However, she is also deemed vulnerable, and media stories about her troubled marriage to footballer Ashley Cole and her suffering from malaria in 2010 are recirculated in the press and the *X Factor* as proof that her power is non-threatening, as she is still a ‘weak’ woman.

Female sexuality within the shows is presented very much in terms of women’s ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’. This is not to say that there isn’t a ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ present in the portrayal of male contestants – the likes of JLS and Shayne Ward (*X Factor*) were often encouraged to remove their tops. However, the idea that they could be attractive to women (and by extension, though this is never explicitly stated, to gay men) is often seen as something that embarrasses them. In addition to this, male acts such as Lee DeWyze (*American Idol*) and Journey South (*X Factor*) are encouraged to present themselves as ‘credible artists’ with guitars, a staple feature of all three series, but

⁷ Albeit via an oft-forgotten assault charge in 2003

⁸ Her style is also seen as giving her power, especially in relation to fellow judge Dannii Minogue. The two women are often portrayed in celebrity magazines and the press as being ‘style rivals’ with comparisons made weekly over who was the best dressed on the live shows.

something rarely encouraged in female performers (and not at all in the case of the *X Factor*).

Several women are constructed as non-sexual, particularly young working-class women who do not wear fashionable clothing and who have an 'attitude', such as The Stunners in the *X Factor* (30 August 2009), whose (average, rather than unpleasant) image was used for derogatory laughs, and Ablisa in 2010, whose members got into a fight (*The X Factor*, 4 September 2010). In the British press, such women are often referred to as 'Vicky Pollards' in reference to Matt Lucas's *Little Britain* character, who wears tracksuits, has children by several fathers and is unintelligent.

Other women's sexual desirability is intertextually constructed as problematic. *American Idol* contestant Frenchie Davis (2003) was disqualified from the contest at a late stage because of the emergence of topless photos of her when she was younger. Davis claims she informed producers of their existence at a much earlier stage of the competition than when she was ejected (Rocchio, 2007). In 2007, a similar story broke about contestant Antonella Barba, but Barba was not dismissed from the competition. Davis argues that this signified a racist attitude on behalf of the producers (Davis is black⁹). Producers claimed Barba was allowed to continue because she was not paid for the photos featuring her, unlike Davis.

During the 2010 *X Factor* series, contestant Chloe Victoria dressed in midriff revealing clothing, had tattoos (including one saying 'I am nasty', which the camera lingered on), and wore heavy make-up and fake eyelashes. She was the subject of tabloid stories claiming she worked as a prostitute called Chloe Mafia and earned

⁹ Although there is not room to expand on this further, several black female contestants, including Rachel Hylton (*X Factor* 2008) and Fantasia Barrino (*American Idol* 2004) have been portrayed as 'fallen women' either on the shows themselves or in press coverage.

herself the epithet ‘X Factor hooker’ and a number of headlines, emphasising her ‘wayward past’ (Latchem et al 2010, Payne 2010, Perrie 2010). 2009 *X Factor* girl group Kandy Rain (Azi Jegbefume, Vicky ‘Coco’ Lloyd, Khatereh Dovani, Chemmane Applewhaite) were revealed to have been former strippers and pole dancers (Blackburn, 2009). The press printed stories detailing the girls’ past and photos of them posing provocatively in underwear, running these stories in the weeks before their audition, so that a clear image of the group was already formed before they appeared onscreen. The show delighted in reproducing these newspaper images, whilst using the narrative arc of them being ‘reformed’ characters, wanting to be judged for their singing rather than their past.

In their opening audition (20 September 2009), Kandy Rain performed The Pussycat Dolls’ ‘Dontcha’ dressed in revealing leather clothing. Dannii Minogue said: ‘You girls are sexy, you do not need to dress as provocative as you are’, but told them their image was just right when, at the Boot Camp stage, their clothing was a little more casual, yet still somewhat revealing.

O’Leary: ‘Since appearing on the show, they’ve hit the headlines with revelations that they used to be strippers’¹⁰...

Jegbefume: ‘I think people need to stop concentrating on what we used to do and kind of think on well, these girls can sing’...

Walsh: ‘It’s gonna be hard to get girls to like them’.

¹⁰ During this segment, we are shown the following stories from ‘red-top’ tabloids: ‘X-Rated: New nude video could see pop hopefuls booted off show’, ‘Boob Factor’, ‘I’ve got XXX Factor’, ‘...wannabes are lap dancers’

Minogue: 'That's the biggest smile Simon's had on his face all day, but can he 'Kandy Rain' it in. I mean really seriously I mean the stories came out that you used to be pole dancing and all of that and you want us to listen to [you] but... there's certain things that just (pause) took my attention away from that..'

Cole: 'I totally totally agree. I mean this was, if I was your mentor, I would have brought you out demure, I would have had you show us what you can do as singers... you come out dressed a bit (pause) provocatively and that's the image you give off, it's as simple as that'.

Cowell: 'Well I'm gonna completely disagree with the girls... These girls [Minogue and Cole] were never gonna like you'.

(From: *X Factor*, 10 October 2009)

Several aspects of their Boot Camp sequence and opening performance (above) draw on key motifs from the show's treatment of women: 1) Women's sexuality is dangerous (Kandy Rain were 'punished' for their overt sexuality by being voted off in the first live show), 2) Cowell is a 'womanizer' whose heterosexuality is overt and who is allowed to ogle female contestants, and 3) Women need to be wary of other women, who will judge them unfavourably.

This last aspect is a key theme of all three shows. Tensions between judges Sharon Osbourne and Dannii Minogue were played up by the *X Factor*, and by Osbourne in several interviews. After Osbourne departed, the press tried to create rivalry between Minogue and Osbourne's replacement, Cheryl Cole. Similar rumours circulated about Paula Abdul and Kara DioGuardi on *American Idol*, whilst female viewers are assumed to be 'against' female contestants and unlikely to vote for them.

In *American Idol*'s 2009 season, contestant Katrina Darrell auditioned in a bikini (with the sound of Aqua's 'Barbie Girl' accompanying her audition footage). Much like Cole and Minogue with Kandy Rain, Kara DioGuardi was scathing about her appearance and tried to demonstrate how Darrell could be a better singer, whilst Cowell

played up to his persona by ‘eyeballing’ her. As she left the audition, DioGuardi remarked ‘next time, come naked’. Darrell was invited back to perform in the finale, in her bikini again. Part way through her song, DioGuardi appeared onstage, singing loudly to upstage Darrell, and opened her dress to reveal she, too, was wearing a bikini. Touted before the show for her songwriting credentials, DioGuardi ended up as a sexualised object, revealing her body; although this was morally acceptable within the confines of the show, as, unlike Darrell, she was doing it as a bet for charity.

As has already been stated, Simon Cowell is seen to visibly lust over contestants, in a way that the other judges do not. As Dyer claims, ‘we look at the world through ideas of male sexuality. Even when not looking *at* male sexuality, we are looking at the world within its terms of reference’ (Dyer, 1993: 89). Cowell is presented as the ‘alpha male’ of the shows, and therefore, despite a large number of female and gay male viewers, the audience is not treated to the other judges displaying their sexuality, except as a joke, such as Sharon Osbourne’s apparent lusting over eventual 2006 *X Factor* winner Shayne Ward, portrayed through exaggeration and comic gestures to make it clear that it her ‘sexual desire’ was merely another aspect of her hysterical persona.

Cowell regularly comments on female contestants’ appearance and makes suggestions about them improving their image, such as in *Pop Idol* (2001), when he informed Rosie Ribbons she was a pretty girl whose image needed work. In the 2008 series of the *X Factor*, he was frequently ‘intoxicated’ by Spanish contestant Ruth Lorenzo. When she sang in Spanish at Boot Camp, Cowell, flustered, turned to the other judges and said ‘that was sexy, right?’

Cowell: ‘Sorry, I couldn’t speak. You have a very powerful presence. And what I love about you, which is why I don’t think Louis gets you, is that you are a real woman’...

Walsh: 'What do you mean'?

Cowell: 'Well you wouldn't understand that'...

Walsh: 'I've got it! You fancy her'.

Cowell: 'Yeah I do, yeah'...

O'Leary: ... 'Simon fancies you! What about that'?

Lorenzo: 'I'm speechless'.

(*The X Factor*, 11 October 2008)

O'Leary [to Cowell]: 'What about the outfit, eh? Business from the waist down, party from the waist up'.

Cowell [flushed]: 'I like a feisty girl'.

(From: *X Factor* (?), 25 October 2008)

Lorenzo, one of the strongest singers in her series, received several comments about her figure (Fig. 5), which she responded to by laughing, although she had little other option unless she wished to cause controversy and offend Cowell. For female viewers, these sequences could also prove problematic, for, as Dolan states, it is not easy to align oneself with either the male spectator or the female object: 'If... male desire drives all narrative and objectifies women, the female spectator is placed in an untenable relationship to representation. If she identifies with the narrative's objectified, passive woman, she places herself in a masochistic position. If she identifies with the male hero, she becomes complicit in her own commodification' (Dolan, 1988/1998: 291). Lorenzo tried to present herself as a credible singer throughout the contest, and one who preferred rock music to other genres, yet was unable to escape the show's commodification of her as a 'sexy Senorita', or to be more blunt, the type of 'fuckable fantasy woman' pop is obsessed with creating (O'Brien, 2002: 238).

Conclusion

Butler argues that 'policing gender is sometimes used as a way of securing heterosexuality' (Butler, 1999: xii), and in all three series, gender and sexuality are indeed policed in ways that reinforce gender stereotyping and the dominance of heterosexuality. There is a contradictory attitude towards male homosexuality in these shows, illustrated by the way they draw upon the repertoire of gestures, signs and references that suggest acceptance of (male) gayness at the same time as the denials of contestants' sexuality and the homophobic jokes repel it.

Female sexuality is presented only in terms of its relationship to male sexuality. Female contestants are judged by their attractiveness (or otherwise) to men (and never their attractiveness to homosexual women). For a woman to display sexual desire means she's either 'vulgar' like Kandy Rain or Frenchie Davies or 'eccentric' and 'hysterical' like Sharon Osbourne.

Although these shows purport to be offering a platform for 'real' people, they are actually involved in the process of producing performers who conform to a series of stereotypical 'star image' categories (Dyer, 1979: 58-68). Through dress, performance style and discourse, heteronormative presentations of gender and sexuality are encouraged and reinforced in these shows, along with certain moral codes of behaviour. Those who flout these norms are punished, ridiculed, ignored, or else held up as the exception that proves the rule.

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