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The X Factor and reality television: beyond good and evil

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Abstract

Despite huge popularity and lasting cultural impact, reality television shows such as The X Factor, *a British music competition that started screening in 2004, are seen by many as a cultural nadir. However, in this article I argue that, while reading reality TV as an index of an increasingly superficial, market-based culture makes a great deal of sense, it doesn't tell the whole story. Using the particular music-based dramas of* The X Factor *as a case study, I explore ways in which this show and populist reality television in general might be seen to embody both the predicaments and potential pressure points of contemporary neoliberal culture.*

Introduction: reality TV aesthetics

British musical talent show *The X Factor* seems to me to represent the best and the worst of neoliberal capitalist culture. Its musically framed admixture of richly unpredictable drama and rancid demagoguery amounts to a potentially very valuable staging of what is nevertheless a clearly compromised, market-corrupted commons. Yet how might this value be realised? Are viewers of the show simply being hoodwinked by reality TV demagoguery or might something else be going on? I dig into these questions with relish in what follows – as fan, as hater and maybe even occasionally as objective cultural critic.

I spend what sometimes seems like half my life watching reality television. It's a fuzzy term but it basically describes shows that see celebrity or civilian non-actors placed into a variety of unscripted situations. The spectrum of reality television broadly goes from lifestyle shows such as *Keeping up with the Kardashians* (2007–), *Made in Chelsea* (2011–) and *The Real Housewives* (2006–) to the competition-based formats of *Survivor* (2000–), *Susunu! Denpa Shōnen* (1998–2002) and *Big Brother* (1997–) and talent show franchises like *The X Factor* (2004–), *Got Talent* (2006–) and *Idol* (2001–). Although technically around since the dawn of current affairs programming, the more recent reality aesthetic I'm addressing here – described by John Corner as 'postdocumentary' – really got going in the late-1990s. This followed precedents such as *Up*, which has tracked the lives of 14 British people since 1964, and soapier American shows like *The Real World* (1992–) and *Cops* (1989–). Recent reality formats have tended to emerge in Anglophone contexts but are franchised around the world. This makes reality TV both a global phenomenon and, for some, a global problem.

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Reality television indeed has cultural pariah status. For many it's the lowest of the low. Yet it doesn't deserve this reputation. Even though the supposed cheapness of both the conceits and participants of reality TV often elicits a powerful sense of *Schadenfreude* in an audience grown cynical as a result of what they see as scurrilous burlesquing, reality TV can just as easily act as a powerful staging ground for identification and drama. It's true that reality television candies its contents in a way that, say, a Bergman film never would. However, the sugar rushes of its pop surfaces are merely one (important) element of a rich aesthetic tapestry where unpredictability and complexity are at least as common as boilerplate moralising and stale narrative arcs.

One of the most interesting features of reality television is indeed its 'unexpectedness', to borrow a phrase from Beverley Skeggs. Audience and performer reactions cannot be predicted ahead of time, no matter how preformatted the setup. In the same spirit, Genevieve Valentine hones in on the curious mix of predictability and surprise that defines the form. Valentine mentions 'the formulas that lurk behind reality television', such as 'the carefully crafted conflicts' and 'the obvious ADR' (additional dialogue recording, a tool that allows after-the-fact manipulation of storylines). However, Valentine goes on to stress that

> if the formula was totally predictable, reality TV wouldn't have the ongoing audience reach that it has. What keeps us watching is the potential: Past all the polish, the editing, and the understood conventions of the genre, there's still a sense that something genuine – something spontaneous, unpredictable, true – has to be lurking underneath. (Valentine 2015)

Elaborating on this idea of unpredictability, Skeggs even makes the point alongside Helen Wood that, in its 'emphasis upon affect and reaction over any determined meaning' reality television could be said to deal more in 'intervention' than 'representation', to emphasise active social theatre over dramatic predictability (Skeggs and Wood 2012, p. 11). *The X Factor*'s particular base in emotionally exaggerated and necessarily unpredictable musical performance places it directly and intensely in this 'active' dramatic camp.

Reality television as a medium therefore balances formula – from the manipulated conflicts and storylines alluded to by Valentine to the stock characters and arcs that populate most reality shows – with emotional and dramatic unexpectedness. In watching reality TV we feel reassured by people acting in predictable ways and excited when they don't. Familiarity and unpredictability are equally important to the form. This is especially so in a music reality show such as *The X Factor*.

Such weirdly sincere fakery is a feature not a bug for post-postmodern audiences attuned to 'faction' of this sort. Constructed or not, reality TV is experienced as (post-) authentic drama. It feels real. For many viewers, in fact, it's felt to give more of a sense of how people really think or behave than conventional TV drama. In her 2011 study of *American Idol*, Katherine Meizel (2011, p. x) writes of the US-based music show's 'indefinably genuine character'. As Randall Rose and Stacy Wood argued when discussing the 'authenticity' of the form in 2005, 'consumers of reality television revel in the ironic mixture of the factitious and the spontaneous'. This produces what they call, after Baudrillard, a 'culture of the factitious' where 'the subjective experience of reality involves the complex interaction of message and audience' (Rose and Wood 2005, p. 286). This jumble of the 'real' and the 'signified' pervades mediatised post-postmodernity, nowhere more so than in reality television. For all its fancy bells and sugary whistles, reality TV deals in

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fundamentals: the self-as-(constructed)-narrative and the self-in-(factitious)-society. It tells relatable and exciting, predictable and unpredictable stories about people making decisions within ordinary or extraordinary situations.

The X Factor

The X Factor was created in 2004 by Simon Cowell and partners, following Cowell's experience as a judge on *Pop Idol* (2001–2003) and *American Idol* (a show that would eventually run from 2002 to 2016). Cowell's production company, SYCO, created the *Got Talent* format in 2005. As with other competition-based talent shows, contestants compete here across a mixture of preliminary, televised and live rounds to win a recording deal. Public voting decides the outcome of the live rounds and the eventual winner, although judges pick the winner of the Sunday night sing-off between the two contestants with the lowest tally of votes. Yet however much this might suggest that the public is in control of the show's narrative, typical reality TV manipulation is in fact rampant. Nevertheless the participatory, interventionist component of the show is vital to its appeal.

Although bearing direct comparison with non-British shows such as *American Idol* (something I'll explore below), *The X Factor* draws on a peculiarly British tradition of end-of-the-pier, pantomimic family entertainment. We can see this DNA likewise in its sister show *Britain's Got Talent* – in which Simon Cowell once identified 'something very British and eccentric' (Armstrong and Skinitis 2016) – and then trace it back through Saturday night television shows such as *Noel Edmonds' House Party* (1991–1999), *Blind Date* (1985–2003) and, most especially, the long-running radio and then TV talent show *Opportunity Knocks* (1949–1990). Both *The X Factor* and *Britain's Got Talent* share many features with the latter, from public voting to live performance to audience participation, although *Got Talent*'s variety show character echoes the format of *Knocks* most closely. *The X Factor*, for its part, regularly plays up the family friendly silliness and comedy we see in all of these earlier shows. This can be seen throughout the run of each series (as anyone who has witnessed host Dermot O'Leary's choreographed entrances to live shows over the years could attest). However, it is particularly evident in the early televised audition rounds, when 'joke' contestants are allowed to progress, either to serve as an object of ridicule or to amuse the audience in a light-hearted way. The presentation in these respects is far from subtle.

Yet *The X Factor* doesn't just play on this light entertainment tradition. It adds to these family-friendly elements a taste for pop modernism (however watered down) inherited from British chart show *Top of the Pops* (1964–2006), along with an overwrought sense of melodrama and spectacle we could perhaps trace to American television. (The pop modernist element, where the show wants to position itself at the pop vanguard, is very much a double-edged sword. It ensured that, for a few years at least, *The X Factor* enjoyed cultural relevance far exceeding that of *Got Talent* and yet at the same time shortened its shelf-life such that *Talent*'s popularity has ended up far outlasting that of *The X Factor*.) In any case, this patchwork of influences and music-televisual styles, crossing from eccentric British family entertainment to pop modernism to overwrought spectacle, marks *The X Factor* out both from the *Got Talent* series and likewise from the distinctively American jingoistic

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posturing of *American Idol* (although *The X Factor* is far from immune to its own brand of jingoism).

All of these various factors make *The X Factor* the perfect example of reality show spectacle. It aggressively satisfies audience hunger for predictable and unpredictable factional narratives in its focus on amateur performers' stories, its public votes and its jumble of pre-set narrative tropes and unpredictable elements. It does this with particular rapacity. Both in the original UK incarnation and international derivations, *The X Factor* preys on people taught by the system to dream big. It sells them stories of opulence and reward that could only ever be exceptional. It does this merely to secure their votes, their viewership and perhaps their involvement.

However, as with my general complication of reality television above, I'd argue that there's much more to *The X Factor* than this. Aside from the native unexpectedness of reality television, its narratives are often conveyed through music and musical performance, which necessarily destabilise interpretative certainty (something I explore in the next section). The particularly weighty personal stakes of high-reward talent shows, and the intensity of the collective gaze of its huge participatory audience, are further enhancements. All of this combines in *The X Factor* to produce occasionally frustrating, occasionally compelling television drama. Like popular musicals, repertory operas and blockbuster films, *The X Factor* risks saying things in large and often simple ways. It does this so that, when it hits, it hits big. It walks a tightrope between yawning, frustrating bluntness and bewildering and compelling beauty such that its vectors of both potential success and failure are exponential.

Finally, the nature of *The X Factor*'s predictable and unpredictable drama is revealing of various twenty-first century political and cultural tensions. Precarity and debt have become characteristic features of contemporary life. Those affected by this state of affairs are being seduced and compelled into the 'affective labour' of constant updates on social media, driven by an entrepreneurial mind set where the self must constantly be worked upon, presented and sold, usually for meagre financial gain. This affective digital economy pervades twenty-first century life, such that we spend much of our time either as consumers or as producers within the spectacular digital web. The public, as a result of all this, are now being configured less as citizens in a Habermasian bourgeois public sphere and more as consumers defined collectively by the neoliberal market. Shows like *The X Factor* play a significant role in this. The televisual and musical aesthetics of *The X Factor* and the particular brand of participatory consumption it trades in can tell us much about these reigning ideologies of the post-social contract, post-internet era.

X Culture: populism, popularity and politics

In 2009 and 2010 *The X Factor* hit peak popularity in the UK. Audiences averaged in the region of 11–12 million. In 2010, the seventh series' finale peaked at 19.4 million and averaged 17.2 million viewers, following the previous year's 19.1 million and 15.5 million. About 10 million votes were cast for the 2009 finale and 16 million across 2010's live shows. The 2009/2010 peak in viewership and participation followed a year-on-year rise in popularity, incidentally; the 2008 finale averaged out at 13.2 million viewers, 2007's at 11.6 million and on back to the 2004 first season finale's 8.1 million.

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Britain's Got Talent likewise dominated the airwaves at the time. In addition to his UK prominence in 2010, head judge and executive producer Cowell was nine years into a judging stint on the stratospherically popular *American Idol*. The years 2009 to 2010 were therefore not only peak *The X Factor* but also peak Cowell.

Tranced out with success and hopped up on hubris, Cowell appeared on the BBC's current affairs programme *Newsnight* on 14 December 2009. Cowell's conversation with Kirsty Wark ranged widely over topics such as the international spread of *The X Factor*. It ventured into surreal and chilling territory, though, when Wark asked Cowell about the possibility of applying the participatory principles of *The X Factor* to politics. Replying in the affirmative, Cowell offered some chilling speculations:

> What I'm always interested in is what the public think about certain issues. I think there could be some kind of referendum-type TV show where you can speak on both sides and then open it up to the public to get an instant poll as to how they feel on hot topics . . . I'm more interested in hearing what the public say actually than politicians. (BBC 2009)

Talent show populism, here at its twenty-first century British peak – 2010 was followed by a steady decline in viewership for *The X Factor*, although a seven-day consolidated audience of 9.85 million for the 2014 finale and 8 million votes cast in the 2015 finale spoke to continuing popular appeal – threatened to transform into political populism of the lowest order. We don't have to be Frankfurterian cultural critics to recognise the drawbacks of this. Yet while Cowell's referendum-type show never came to pass, his success nevertheless made him a figure of great influence. A spokesman for British Prime Minister Gordon Brown said in response to Cowell's views on improving democracy that 'Mr. Cowell and others would be encouraged to offer ideas' (BBC 2009). Even more surreal, though, were late-2010 reports that the coalition government was trying to mimic the popular appeal and participatory model of *The X Factor*. An article in the 27 December edition of *The Guardian* suggested that 'The government is to follow the lead of *The X Factor* television programme and allow the public to decide on legislation to be put before MPs' (Wintour 2010).

Politicians were clearly attuned at this time to the success reality shows were having in engaging the public, and they seemed especially keen to learn from shows such as *The X Factor*'s configuration of an active social body through public voting. Politicians' use of social media as tools of promotion – like their appeals to theatrical spectacle in TV debates and other media appearances, or those proposals to use internet polling as legislative bellwether – can be seen as attempts in this vein to make politics (or just themselves) seem more relevant to people's lives. If it was good enough for reality television it was good enough for politics.

British culture had in fact been leading towards this merging of 'reality' and reality for a while. Stephen Coleman is just one of many to have examined the relationship between reality shows and democratic politics. Coleman points to the way in which in the early years of the twenty-first century *Big Brother* could be seen in Britain as 'a counterfactual democratic process' where 'conspicuous absences within contemporary political culture are played out', from an emphasis on pleasure and accessibility to the presence of visible action/consequence relationships in terms of public participation in voting (Coleman 2006, p. 8). Coleman suggests that, more and more, the political class of the 2000s was trying to harness this cod-democratic consumerist reality TV model to their own ends. The most flagrant illustration of

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this is still probably MP George Galloway's infamous 2005 appearance on *Celebrity Big Brother*, in which the firebrand leftist dressed in a leotard and imitated a fellow contestant's pet cat.

This bonding of participatory television with participatory politics, a process long-in-the-works but ripe by 2010, represents a symptomatic cringe towards the imperatives of the market. Faith in the market as legislator, and faith in the public *as* marketised consumers, go hand-in-creepy-hand. If people are happy to 'vote with their feet' as consumers of reality televisions, then why not treat politics as an aestheticised marketplace? Consumer choice in the form of reality votes would be leveraged under this model to generate a democratic social body made up of supposedly engaged citizen-consumers. However, there's a slippage of levels here – from market populist *culture* to New Economy market populist *politics* – that is swept under the rug by politicians keen to Cowellise political discourse, to remake it in the image of the consumer marketplace. Consumer freedom is not the same as political freedom. Participating in a marketplace is not the same thing as participating in a democratic political process, since one roots consumer desire where the other supposedly has citizenry (even if, as Coleman suggests, certain tools *might* be drawn from reality television in order to communicate better with the public). In its muddying of these waters *The X Factor* has served as a 'bad' model of freedom and public participation.

The overlapping of the populist participatory elements of *The X Factor* with mainstream politics is merely one example of the political character of the show. An individualising philosophy of self-improvement through work and competition runs throughout *The X Factor* as it does a lot of reality TV. As Skeggs argues, this is a form built on class-based personal transformation in a context where 'cultural practices traditionally associated with the middle class', such as 'self-responsibility', have become the norm. Skeggs writes:

> The individualisation thesis proposed by Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens suggests that in a post-industrial society the individual is now compelled to make her/himself the centre of her/his own life plan and conduct. Self-responsibility and self-management thus become key features of the 'new' reflexive self. 'Reality' television which foregrounds the display of self-performance … offered us the perfect site for exploring self-making, self-legitimation and the supposed demise of class. (Skeggs 2009, p. 628)

Writing elsewhere with Helen Wood, Skeggs further referenced this neoliberal individualisation in describing the 'technology of governmentality' favoured by theorists of reality television, 'where the emphasis upon spectacular selfhood' often diverts 'attention away from the structural conditions in which anyone can freely perform "being themselves"' (Skeggs and Wood 2012, p. 3). Responsibility in this model is therefore desocialised, and performative values of classed and competitive self-presentation prized above all.

This individualising value system, which maps onto the neoliberal ideology of privatised entrepreneurialism, unregulated competition and accumulation as described by a theorist like David Harvey (2005), is expressed in two main ways on *The X Factor*. The first is in broad brush strokes. This is a show in which (mostly) individuals compete against each other to present and through this to improve their lives largely in terms of fame, success and money. The second is on a more granular level. Many judges' comments emphasise the importance of competing with fellow contestants and of bootstrapping through hard work. As Cowell had it in the semi-

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final of the 2014 series, 'don't like the people you're standing next to … it's a competition; like them afterwards'. Or as US *The X Factor* act Fifth Harmony put it in the video to their 2015 track 'Boss': 'dreams don't work unless you do'. Meanwhile contestants' journeys are perennially framed as narratives of asocial disadvantage to be ameliorated through performative work. This is in keeping with other reality shows. As Alison Hearn has suggested of US lifestyle show *The Hills*, 'the labour of the on-air participants involves modelling how to live a perpetually productive life inside the social factory by becoming a "branded self"' (Hearn 2010, p. 61). Meizel (2011, p. 2), for her part, talks about the 'equation of identity with brand' on *American Idol*. Bombastic video announcements of the commercial credentials of *The X Factor* live episode guests see the show further revelling in stark capitalist terms. From top to bottom, *The X Factor* is shot through with squalid values of neoliberal individualism, capitalist realism and grand demagogic obviousness. These values are blended, at least in terms of the explicit political message imparted by the show, into a shit sandwich of brute pungency.

These are some of the ways that the populism of *The X Factor* crosses over with politics. Its participatory model embodies a social collectivity defined by the marketplace that politicians try to draw on and even mimic. Its own political philosophy, writ large in the format of the show and grainy in its values, anchors this collectivity in an atomising neoliberal framework of individualised productivity and classed self-presentation. These various slippages of register and values between mass entertainment and market politics are emblematic of the slipperiness of what we might describe as 'X Culture', the broader political-cultural context of demagogic market populism that underpins and decisively inform *The X Factor.* However, that's not the whole story.

The X Factor: the highlights show

2001–2003: pre-history (and parallel music reality developments)

Conditions were ripe at the end of the twentieth century for the flowering of reality television about to take place. The replacement of the supposed 'real' with signs of reality in the mediatised hyperreality described by Jean Baudrillard and Paul Virilio seemed to be reaching a climax. Society was increasingly coming to know itself through screens: televisual, computational or otherwise. This contributed to the postmodern 'culture of the factitious' mentioned earlier, where the fabric of life mutated into mixes of signs and signifieds, facts and fictions, and where reality and mass mediated experience became functionally indistinguishable. Were our lives a reality show or did they just feel like one?

As I alluded to above, around this time various music talent shows emerged in either the *Popstars* (2001) or the *Idol* (cf. *Pop Idol*, 2001–2002) format, the first of these focusing on bands and the second solo artists. Simon Fuller's *Idol* was franchised first to Poland and then to tens of other locations. Most notably, *American Idol* began to screen in June 2002 with Cowell on the judging panel. Cowell's decision to leave *Pop Idol* in late-2003 to start his own show brings our story up to date. *American Idol* and *The X Factor* share more than just Cowell, however. For example, Katherine Meizel points out throughout *Idolized* that publicly staged trade-offs between pre-packaged narrative arcs and subtly aestheticised nuance are at the

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core of *Idol* (2011). Each show also serves as a platform for the branded performance of identities struggling between poles of individuation and homogeneity. As Meizel points out in this regard in the case of *Idol*, this gives Americans 'a chance to see themselves (literally or figuratively) on television' as well as offering them 'a reduced, commodified, and easily saleable account of their identities' (Meizel 2011, p. 4). Finally, both shows obviously place mass-mediated music firmly into the central narrative of cultural politics in the twenty-first century. These same things could be said about international versions of each franchise, local variations and details notwithstanding.

The X Factor can therefore be seen as part of a much broader family of music reality shows operating at *and* as the heart of marketised, individualised neoliberal capitalist culture. Yet it also differentiates itself from preceding and parallel shows in a few important ways, in addition to the distinctively British televisual aesthetics I described earlier. Its wide range of categories and judge roles are the most obvious difference when compared with the *Idol* and later *Voice* (2010–) franchises, with 'Overs' (usually over-25s), Groups and, from Season 4, Boys and Girls now competing against each other under the auspices of judges acting not only as adjudicators but also as mentors. However, much in the format is identical to other shows. Early taped audition rounds lead to themed live shows decided largely by public vote, as we've seen. The visual language is generically drab, static and uninventive, reducing the complexity of many of the performances to bland spectacle – though this improves to some degree in later *The X Factor* series. Judges likewise are typically useless in terms of constructive critical feedback. Mark Lawson had it basically right when he said in *The Guardian* in 2009 that *The X Factor* judge feedback tends to move 'from ritualistic rudery to equally formulaic praise in sentences that seem always to begin with the words "do you know what?"' *The X Factor* generally talks down the nuance of contestant performances and audience reactions.

This reductionist criticality mirrors the reductive narrative arcs and, indeed, the limited set of character and 'journey' types that *The X Factor* shares with preceding and parallel shows. For example, in the first *Popstars* Darius's over-exaggerated performance of 'Baby One More Time' generated a particular kind of camp infamy. This infamy, where a performer's weird extravagance challenged boundaries between good and bad, would appear again and again in *The X Factor* with contestants like Jedward, the Irish twins from 2009 renowned for their cartoon ridiculousness, and Wagner, the cabaret-lounge purveyor of Daliesque spectacle from 2010. Darius would also come to be emblematic of another key trope of music reality shows in his third-placed participation on the first *Pop Idol*: the returning contestant, a conceit with inbuilt narrative redemption. This would come to fruition on *The X Factor* with singers like Monica Michael (2015), Alexandra Burke (2008) and Paul Akister (2014). Other common tropes across all these shows include non-winning contestants having more commercial success than winners, the sustaining of success beyond the show and flash-in-the-pan acts that hit big and then disappear.

Finally, to focus on the relationship between *The X Factor* and preceding shows, an important tension can be read into all of the earlier examples that would come to define and even haunt *The X Factor*: a push-and-pull between pan-generational appeal and market novelty. Tom Ewing has made the argument, following Kat Stevens, that the non-threatening, ballad-dominated music of a group like the Cowell-bossed Westlife (who had their first hit in 1999) intersected directly with the widening availability of cut-price CDs in the mass market. This intersection produced a form that Stevens called

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'mum-pop'. This is a useful term when thinking about *The X Factor*, although I'll use 'panpop' to better capture its broad appeal. In this vein Westlife were a group, according to Ewing, that were 'designed to build a pan-generation romantic coalition, and tap an audience lost to pop'. In this they can be seen as a pre-echo of *The X Factor*, almost 'like a chrysalis stage for something yet vaster' (all Ewing 2010).

Westlife, like other Cowell acts, such as Robson and Jerome, worked in a space that *The X Factor* was to make its own with audience-courting, panpop-making contestants such as G4 and Verity Keays in the first series, Rhydian Roberts in the fourth, Joe McElderry in the sixth, Mary Byrne in the seventh and Nicholas MacDonald and Sam Bailey in the tenth. Yet even as *The X Factor* returns to this well again and again it gets pulled constantly towards 'relevance'. Its first few series played out this tension. Soft-focus crooners like Verity were offset by rockers like Tabby, or modishly attired vocal groups such as 4 Tune. The pull to relevance is particularly strong from the fifth series on, that run seeing the introduction of a younger judge (Cheryl Cole). Subsequent series included the participation of contestants like Cher Lloyd, who could gesture towards contemporary pop in a way that would have been impossible for someone like Rhydian. The panpop/relevance dichotomy embodies something crucial about the show: it's a capitalist enterprise to its core. As such it needs to innovate *and* maintain its consumer base. The heart of *The X Factor* therefore lies both in older panpop and in frantic pushing beyond this to new audiences and new money. *The X Factor* is a vampire as well as a mummy. It will stop at nothing to get what it wants and what it wants is everything.

2004–2008: the early years of The X Factor

Those bottom-line neoliberal values of work, competition and success I described earlier can be seen all over *The X Factor* in its early series. The very first episode opens with a barrage of sounds and images that plug us directly into coded reality formula. *Carmina Burana*'s 'O Fortuna', the cheapest possible way to sound expensive, skulks loudly through a sequence that does all sorts of heavy lifting in terms of establishing authority and audience. Over images of huge eager crowds host Kate Thornton intones: 'Welcome to the X Factor, the UK's biggest ever talent search. A record breaking 50,000 people have applied'. The judges, 'three of the world's most powerful music moguls', travel to auditions on private planes and helicopters and have their achievements trumpeted loudly, from Cowell's '35 number ones' and Louis Walsh's supposed status as the 'King of Irish pop' to Sharon Osbourne's 'fortune of over £100 million'. This kind of grand emphasis on competition and marketplace success was also evident in the small print of the show in these early years. An incident in episode three of the first series summed things up in this regard. A contestant, Samantha, was ridiculed for her weight by all three judges and replied humbly that she was willing to change in order to succeed. Cowell chillingly and tellingly remarked in response: 'D'you know, I'm gonna say yes for the simple reason I'd like to see what this girl is willing to do'.

The panpop/relevance dichotomy was also evident from the get-go. Two of the most prominent contestants on the first series, Steve Brookstein and G4 – who respectively offered bland sandpaper soul and grating 'operatic' crossover – fell squarely in the panpop demographic. Despite their success on the show these

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contestants were treated with anxiety. Although his eventual victory made for great reality TV redemption, the judges worried about Brookstein's relevance from his very first audition. On one level they were proved right: Brookstein sank without trace soon after his first single. G4 did a little better but were no help in making the show appear relevant. By the second series, the lesson had been learned. Shayne Ward, a much 'cooler' contestant, was heavily pushed by producers, and eventually won. Ward went on to more sustained chart success than Brookstein, although even there the double-edged sword of pop relevance and market fickleness meant he wasn't able to maintain much beyond a second album. This left the market-defined *The X Factor* with something of a crisis. If it couldn't make stars, what was the point?

The third series solved this problem. Although following the preformatted templates of the first two years, with panpop contestants like the peaceable MacDonald Brothers and approachable cheeky chappie Ray Quinn playing off others whose backstories pulled the strings of the ever-growing audience, the emergence of Leona Lewis was a boon. Lewis's wide, panpop/relevance traversing appeal was based in a relatable biography and credible singing, where a gossamer head voice, a delicacy of tone and phrasing and a subtle sense of control combined in powerful performances of warhorses like 'I Will Always Love You' and 'Summertime'. Lewis's success after the show, with a chart-topping album in the UK and the US and a single, 'Bleeding Love', that went to number one in over 30 countries, gave *The X Factor* a vital shot in the arm in terms of its power to create stars for the capitalist marketplace. The perception that it could do this was and is crucial to its ability to construct stories with stakes within the reality television framework as well as being vital authentication of its capitalist bona fides.

This success faltered in the dull fourth series of 2007, but 2008 contestants such as winner Alexandra Burke, boyband JLS and eventual West End star Diana Vickers all extended the commercial impact of the show amidst Lewis's greatest chart successes. Perhaps more importantly, someone like Burke gave performances in which rote reality show narrative tension was transformed into powerful, deep-time moments of concentrated focus and release. These moments embody the granular factional nuance I spoke about above. Burke's 'Saving All My Love' audition, for example – framed as part of a redemption arc in the context of her failure to get through to live shows in 2005 – was controlled, shaded and, emotionally, deeply affecting. A series of strong performances throughout the series, from a fizzy 'Candyman' to a potently emotive 'Without You', maintained audience investment in the grain of what Burke was doing. An explosive duet with Beyoncé on 'Listen' in the live final – perhaps the single greatest moment in the show's history – ultimately qualified, climaxed and settled Burke's narrative arc, and indeed the arc of the whole fifth series.

Here as elsewhere musical detail, high stakes and reality narratives coalesced into a moment of great collective drama. Of course, if you don't buy in to this kind of chart pop in the first place – let alone in to reality television as one of the most powerful artistic formats of our time – it would be difficult to recognise this nuance. Taste is filtered through genre in the first instance, after all. However, for audiences attuned to the ongoing drama of each series, and the grainy nuance of the deep-time narrative of contestants' efforts, these performances have served as powerful release, whether we think of Joe McElderry's brilliantly modulated 'Don't Let the Sun Go Down on Me' in 2009 or of Sam

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Bailey and Nicole Sherzinger's barnstorming 'And I'm Telling You' in 2013. These musical moments embody a socially mediated catharsis whose drama is magnified by the intensity of the collective gaze of the audience, the high talent show stakes and the unexpected nuances of contestants' rising-and-falling, toing-and-froing performances.

2009–2011: The Peak Years

As I've said, 2009 and 2010 saw *The X Factor* in its imperialist pomp. Sweet-voiced Joe McElderry's victory in 2009 was one of the musical highpoints of the show. Comedy/camp contestants such as Jedward became huge audience *causes célèbres*, undermining the show's meagre credibility by exposing some of the consequences of its demagogic valorisation of corruptible public opinion. The 2010 seventh series, meanwhile, saw a commercial peak in terms of viewership and post-show success. The latter came largely courtesy of third-placed One Direction, an act that had already caused an unprecedented amount of audience hysteria during the series. One Direction eventually became the most successful act in the history of *The X Factor* as well as one of the most successful in popular music full stop, with four number one albums in America, billions of YouTube views and Spotify plays, number one singles across the world and the biggest selling album of 2013.

One Direction are emblematic of *The X Factor* in many ways. A construction within a construction, the band were put together following Boot Camp (an intermediary stage of the competition between auditions and the live shows). This kind of brazen producorial intervention would become common in later series, as seen for example in the following year's similarly constructed victors Little Mix. It's the perfect material for reality TV: producer-controlled and created drama with inbuilt narrative stakes. It also relates to practices that go back right to the first series, where acts were frequently asked to split up and audition separately, as for example with Diamente in episode two. Meanwhile One Direction's performances on the show quickly became formulaic – the sturdiest singer, Liam, would start, Harry would get a verse, Zayn a high flourish, Niall a line or two and Louis's mic would tend to be turned off – as has been typical for groups. Finally, Liam Payne's presence meant that One Direction also slotted into a second of the show's familiar narrative tropes, that of the returning contestant. A babyish Payne had made it as far as Judges' Houses (the final round before live shows) in 2008.

The X Factor knew it was on to something with One Direction. The members shared a pleasing visual aesthetic, were around the same age and even seemingly around the same height. Judge reaction to each of the group's live performances picked up on their visual integration and appeal to the audience to the cost of attention on other elements. 'Viva La Vida' in Week 1 of the live shows, for instance, amounted to a horrorshow of missed cues, bloated rhythms, floppy tuning and desultory vocal harmonising. Yet the judges handed the group almost universal praise, with Louis Walsh making his familiar claim (for once accurately) that 'you could be the next big boyband', Danni Minogue saying 'that was a perfect pop band performance' and Simon claiming 'it was brilliant'. This dissonance between the shonky details of One Direction performances and the ecstatic reception they'd receive from judges would continue right up until the final. The visuals and personalities almost always took precedence, as seen for instance in shaky but well-received

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performances of songs like 'Help' and 'Total Eclipse of the Heart'. The show had a plan for the obviously charismatic and appealing group and it would gerrymander as much as it could in making it happen.

The treatment of One Direction on *The X Factor* reveals clearly its audience-facing, market-worshipping, narrative-preformatting character. This character is evident in many aspects of the show. The many cases of apparent producer intervention in results likewise signals populist manipulation. Such interventions could potentially be seen with Jedward and Olly Murs in 2009, where, for the first time that series, the judges didn't let the sing-off go to a deadlock (which would have seen Olly Murs, a favourite, be eliminated). This suggested to conspiracy theorists that the judges were aware of the voting tallies when making their sing-off decisions. And it can be seen with Mary Byrne and Cher Lloyd in the semi-final of 2010, where a sing-off was held unexpectedly apparently to ensure that Lloyd would be put through over Byrne. The preformatting, populist character is also seen more simply in the way that contestants are framed in certain ways according to prevailing arcs.

Despite all the show's commercial success at this time, these middle years foreshadow the Frankenstein's monster of tacked-on and hacked-off parts it would become. Simon Cowell left the judging panel after the 2010 seventh series to lead the new US version. Viewership started to tail off in 2011 with public hostility to the programme, already significant in Leavisite or Adornian quarters, ramping up. Like the Titanic it was thought that *The X Factor* couldn't fail – but the Titanic sank.

2012–2016: The Titanic Years

The story of *The X Factor* from 2012 or so on is one of diminishing commercial returns and a desperate set of rear-guard actions designed to compensate. Reports started appearing in newspapers such as *The Daily Mail* making fun of viewership losses to Saturday night competitor *Strictly Come Dancing*. The format would be re-jigged so that, for instance, the 'small room' auditions of earlier series returned from 2013 and then went away again in 2015, only to return in 2016. Acts with existing management deals could audition from 2012 on; in 2015 some acts, such as Mason Noise, had already made headway in the industry. Simon Cowell returned as judge in 2014 following the demise of the US *The X Factor*. 2015 hosts Caroline Flack and Olly Murs were unceremoniously sacked and former host Dermot O'Leary returned after some acrimony in 2016. Finally the infamous 'six-chair' challenge, where each judge's remaining 12 acts performed in front of a braying audience for one of six onstage chairs, was introduced from 2013. This was the most brutal illustration of the show's populist demagoguery. Already-high drama became overwrought with this challenge from the unexpectedness of moment-to-moment reactions and the sheer brutality of the spectacle. Once the six chairs were taken, a successful performance meant that someone had to vacate a chair live onstage. This produces unimaginably high stakes, filling each performance with tension and *Grand Guignol* horror. Reality TV's propensity towards pronounced affect and overblown stakes within the theatre of neoliberal self-fashioning had reached some kind of horrible pinnacle.

Despite what *The X Factor*'s falling viewership and constantly re-jigging format might suggest, these 'Titanic' years represent a musical and dramatic peak. The 2015 group of contestants, for example, was arguably the strongest yet, with fully developed artists like Sean Miley Moore and younger powerhouses such as eventual

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winner Louisa Johnson leading an impressive spread of competent and exciting acts. Meanwhile James Arthur, 2012 victor, could be seen as the most gifted and challenging contestant in the show's history. Going full tilt to the relevant end of the panpop/relevance dichotomy, Arthur's rasping, grasping voice conveyed shocking emotion. Like his writerly reinventions of songs and his fairly fluid rapping, Arthur's voice screamed 'authenticity' without being anything like as boring as that suggests. In fact, Arthur cracked open the sometimes mawkish world of *The X Factor* with a kind of pain that was unique. The fact that Arthur came heavily prepackaged within a rags-to-riches narrative, where foster care, bedsits and parental strife all propped up a familiar tale of hardship and resolve, did much to sell this pain. Yet it seems to me that it's the musical performances that really mattered.

Out of many throat-tearing efforts, from 'Falling' and 'Hometown Glory' to his return in 2013 with 'Recovery', it was probably Week 2's 'No More Drama' where Arthur hit a peak. Beginning with a sob in the high reaches of his range, Arthur moved forward with careful weightings out of soft head voice, momentary swells of intensity and light and shade and then climactic, explosive yells that rent and slashed. Arthur committed fully to the theatre and ache of his performance, imbuing the song with a degree of emotional discomfort unprecedented even in Mary J Blige's original.

In its power and unpredictability this performance completely disassembled the show's producer machinations and Saturday night trivialities. As I've been arguing, reality television's dual postmodern emphasis on formula and unexpectedness in the context of high stakes drama produces nuanced television. This nuance is magnified through musical performance. Performances like Arthur's 'No More Drama' bring all this together, with audience investment in the backstory and arc of a specific contestant, its cumulative buy-in to the particular episode and its unfolding sense of the series narrative in general getting ramped up and cadenced all at the same time. This guy can do that? I can't believe what I'm hearing. I'm taken out of myself. As seen in the overwhelming audience reception – and, for once, judge reactions that did more than talk down the nuance of the performance – Arthur's 'No More Drama' acted in this spirit as an especially powerful but not untypical emotional flashpoint and narrative qualifier.

Arthur's grand drama was matched the following year by power ballad singer par excellence Sam Bailey. In many ways Bailey can be seen as the return of *The X Factor* repressed, her superior panpop styling reversing back to earlier times – Bailey was the first winner from the 'Overs' category since Steve Brookstein in 2004. Although a different proposition to Arthur, Bailey's story – middle aged prison guard whose dreams had gone unfulfilled – was presented in similarly reductive terms. Critical reaction was likewise uniformly vague. A piercing and storied 'My Heart Will Go On', for example, invited bland comparisons to the original singer as well as to a Disney princess ('You are Great Britain's Celine Dion honey!').

However, the musical grain and therefore narrative specificity of Bailey's performances presented a very different story. Her 'Power of Love', 'Edge of Glory' and 'If I Were a Boy' were all masterclasses in impassioned but measured singing that attended equally to the curve of musical rises-and-falls as to the small melodic detail or lyrical felicity. Bailey's ardent, controlled audition with Beyoncé's 'Listen', complete with heavily trumpeted redemption arc of the thwarted prison worker/mother/(supposedly) dowdy singer finally making her mark created a moment of easy audience identification. Yet, as with Arthur and others, what actually unfolded was a bottom-dropping-out-of-the-world moment of deep-time suspension. The producer-

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imposed arc made sense but more was in play. This sound, that feeling, all of it unlocked a cavern of emotion for an audience busy investing their own complicated stories into Bailey's catharsis. Despite the hooey presentation, the audience's sense of personal and collective identification in moments like this is enigmatic and complex. All reality television has this power, although music-based shows especially so. Whether these moments could ever lead to anything beyond consolatory collective catharsis is a complicated question. However, surely they're worth something.

Conclusion: the tragedies and triumphs of the (neoliberal) commons

Most left-leaning political theorists of the twenty-first century speak to the commons or collectivity in one sense or another, as I just did. Hardt and Negri (2009) suggest that the commons, produced biopolitically in cultural and economic terrains, lies at the heart of contemporary politics. Jodi Dean (2012) and many others see in the project of communism (or in Nick Dyer-Witheford's adapted term, 'commonism') a valuable horizon beyond capitalism. Jeremy Gilbert (2013) describes the importance and pervasiveness of what he calls 'common ground' within an 'age of individualism'. Jürgen Habermas (1991) famously historicised the bourgeois public sphere, where freedom of discussion and the will of the people supposedly dominated, describing its capitalist roots and transformation in the face of twentieth century mass culture. These are merely cherry-picked examples from a whole theoretical corpus.

The X Factor is an embodiment of the contemporary commons. Not only this, but as Tim Wall has suggested, '[t]he experience of watching the show provides us with the cultural material we can use to ask ourselves important questions about the role that music plays in our lives, and how our senses of solidarity and humanity could serve us and our culture'. Yes, the 'X culture' that the show reflects and contributes to is constructed largely from market metrics, mediated consumer desire and populist commercial art: as Wall goes on to say (his observations resonating with my own), *The X Factor* conveys 'a carefully constructed ideological set of messages about how people prosper in our society', messages that are largely tied to market-driven fame and stardom (Wall 2013, p. 23). However, this culture also unleashes or fails to absorb all sorts of collective energies and political tensions that might go against the grain of demagogic populism. *The X Factor*, for its part, contributes to the neoliberal marketplace, yet it also provides a shared language, platform and an intense collective gaze that might add up to something like solidarity. Could we bring class consciousness and collectivism together with a consumerist entity such as *The X Factor*? Could we weaponise its active, agential audience or that of still dominant reality shows such as *Britain's Got Talent*? It would be very difficult. It might in fact make more sense to see the collective social body of *The X Factor* as an example of manufactured mass consent and the show as an ideological state apparatus in the Althusserian vein. However, it might be just as accurate not so much to speak of manufactured consent as to see the show as a social arena within which we are free, under the constraints of marketplace politics, to act, get bored or attend to nuance as we see fit.

Either way, it's clear that some of the only remnants of common culture we have reside in shows like *The X Factor*. Its whole trajectory sees different publics being courted, whether we think of the grandstanding at the beginning of the very first series, the participatory crucible of the peak years or the later, desperate attempts

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to rescue and even stage a public in the 'fifth judge' app and six-chair braying. I'd argue that this reveals the show's truest form as both market actor and collective social circuitry. Marketised ideas of the public and experiences of the collective are central to its being.

These political arguments, in which *The X Factor* embodies the neoliberal commons and therefore serves as a mass-mediated stage on which political actions take place, are inseparable from my more concrete aesthetic ideas about the powerful social narratives of reality TV and grainy musical nuances of *The X Factor*. The political context is fudgier than the reality television one, to be sure, but the two are connected nonetheless. *The X Factor* gains in dramatic complexity from its underlying collective circuitry just as its dramatic nuance contributes to its political potential. Returning to the questions posed in my first paragraph, I'd make the claim in this sort of spirit and in closing that much can be gained from *The X Factor* and other reality shows like it, particularly other music reality shows. At its best it provides powerful and unpredictable reality TV drama formed out of a participatory collective public. In giving voices to marginalised groups, such as the working class, and appealing to an audience that skews disproportionately towards queer and female viewers, the show might also be seen to contribute positively to representational cultural politics. Finally, in delineating the neoliberal commons *The X Factor* provides a clear illustration of the ground on which we all operate. As such, as well as supporting the status quo, providing nuanced musical drama and being a lot of fun, *The X Factor* might help us think about how to contest that territory.

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