

Shrink Rap: Idol Worship

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Like Godzilla, the TV show "American Idol" crushes everything in its path. Now in its sixth season, the program is averaging 33.5 million viewers per episode - even more than last year. This improvement in numbers from season to season is unprecedented in television ratings. "Idol" is wiping away the competition to the point that the big three networks are afraid to put anything decent up against it, knowing they just can't compete with its amazing popularity. Jeff Zucker, chief executive of NBC Universal, went so far as to proclaim, "Idol" is the most impactful show in the history of television." You mean, more impactful than "The Mickey Mouse Club" was way back when TV began? Than "Have Gun, Will Travel" or "The Sopranos?" What's made this talent show such a mega-hit?

The initial crowd pleaser and most hilarious segment is the audition process, during which young people routinely make public spectacles of themselves. The nationwide search for those who make the first cut and go to Hollywood brings out everyone who ever thought he or she could sing. The cruel joke unfolds - the judges and viewers know the score but these poor souls are the last to get hit with the cluestick. Even those who suspect they are not talented still cling to their two minutes of TV exposure. Their embarrassment is never as strong as their hope and exhibitionism. After all, they've seen others plucked from obscurity and turned into celebrities. Why shouldn't it happen to them?

The show successfully champions and reinforces the Hollywood worship of youth and the dream of instant fame and success. Why work hard for a decade perfecting your talent when all you need is a bit of luck and the thumbs up from Simon, Paula, the Dog Pound, and the viewers?

This desire for instant success is consonant with the mentality of Generation Y'ers, who reject their Boomer parents' belief that you have to work your way slowly up the ladder before you're entitled to the fruits at the top of the tree. Gen Y'ers want to pluck it from the top, and they want it now - without struggle and without waiting. Start an Internet company and you can be bought out and get rich in a couple of years. If one corporation won't pay you the big bucks (and a signing bonus) coming out of college, hold out until you find one that will.

Another reason "Idol" resonates with its primary target group of Gen Y'ers is the interactive power they command by text messaging with immediate feedback for their favorites - vote today, results tomorrow. For the first digital generation, texting is compatible with the fast technospace of their lives.

Speaking of voting, what's not to like about a format that showcases democracy in all its splendor? It's so very red, white and blue that the viewers determine the winners - not the so-called "experts." (As we used to chant, "Power to the people!") The underdog always has a chance when popular sympathy is valued more than talent. (Just ask Jennifer Hudson.)

Lastly, the show is huge because we relish witnessing the improvement from week to week of the finalists. We watch them get their teeth straightened, wardrobes upgraded and voices trained. We journey with them from unpolished amateurs to budding "idols." We choose and then root for our favorites, offering our own critique of their performances. And we chuckle at the biting repartee of the three stooges who provide feedback. But they get the last laugh, striking while the idol is hot and becoming richer than they ever imagined.

"Idol" is proof that Andy Warhol was right when he said that someday everyone would get 15 minutes of fame. And YouTube will provide that 15 minutes via video upload for all the rest of us who are too old to worship idols.