CHAPTER THREE

SINGAPORE IDOL: CONSUMING NATION AND DEMOCRACY

The Singapore Idol competition, a national televised pop singing contest based on the Pop Idol format (in fact, franchise) originating from the UK, is a spectacular example of the global culture industry at work. This chapter will begin by locating the popularity of the first season of Singapore Idol in 2004 within the genre of ‘reality television’ and then explaining specifically the commercial advantages of producing a show such as Singapore Idol, including the positive spin-offs for the rest of the culture industry and indeed the capitalist economy itself. The chapter will then discuss how the first season of Singapore Idol performed ideological work by reflecting and thereby reinforcing dominant ideas about meritocracy, democracy, the nation, multiracialism, and the stereotypes that inform Singaporeans’ everyday understanding of their society. As light entertainment, the show relied on and reproduced infantilized audiences that yearned for formulaic cultural products to provide an escape into fantasy, present an illusion of democratic efficacy, simulate nationhood, and insert into mundane lives dramatic moments of moral crisis and injustice destined every week to be the dominant topic of everyday conversation. Finally, the chapter will consider moments and opportunities for ideological resistance and negotiation, concluding that this first season of Singapore Idol was the most vivid contemporary example of a product of the culture industry in one-dimensional Singapore.

Reality Television and the Pop Idol Format

Singapore Idol belongs to the ‘post-documentary’ reality television genre, developed in many ways as a response to the looming worldwide economic crisis in the broadcast television industry, which started to face increased competition from other media around the turn of the millennium. Reality television programs usually claim to record actual events (rather than scripted ones) which feature the
lives and endeavors of ordinary people (rather than professional actors) put into situations and environments that are extraordinary, outrageous, exotic, or defined by artificial rules for acting, interacting, and competing. Even though the programs need to be skillfully designed by producers and shrewdly edited to sustain audience interest, they are nevertheless relatively inexpensive to produce, their advertising opportunities are substantial, and their mass appeal potentially enormous.

June Deery, a scholar of popular media, explains why reality television has been so lucrative: Large profits can be earned mainly because production costs are low. Reality television creates an unusual labor situation in which participants line up in the thousands in an attempt to work for free, or for very little, with only a slim chance of a substantial monetary reward. (Deery 2004, 3)

Even if the prize money is US$1 million, as it is in the *Survivor* series, this, Deery observes, is “what the network recoups in about 1 minute of advertising.” Reality television also dispenses with the cost of paying professional writers and actors, bypassing them for non-unionized and more easily exploitable creative labor. The producers, as sociologist Bernard Beck observes, only have to think up an inventive “variety of grotesque tests and challenges imposed on zealous competitors in contests that involve the greatest aspirations of contemporary life: marriage, prosperity, and fame” (Beck 2004, 35). In the meantime, reality television participants, eager to claim their moments of fame or the minute possibility of winning the top prize, agree (in fact, compete against thousands of others) to work for free. This is the most blatant example of the culture industry exploiting its laborers, even humiliating them to make top-rated shows that bring lucrative profits mainly from advertising.

Deery concludes that producing reality television is a low-risk investment and, if the format succeeds, a rich source of short-term profits (Deery 2004, 3). As such programs are an “international product designed to be easily translated from one culture to another,” reality television formats, once perfected, can be exported to and adopted in another country without further creative treatment; in fact, they self-consciously retain and foreground their distinctive reality format as a profitable brand (Deery 2004, 4). As media and culture scholar Alison Hearn puts it,