

## The Democratization of American Culture

by Nels Abrams

The American public has replaced the traditional model of elitist culture with a popular culture that allows greater participation. In the 1920's and 30's radio and film introduced culture to a national audience. Reality television, amateur performance shows, and interactive media have provided the next step by enlarging the national public's role from spectator to include performer and critic. And while there are concerns about how corporations are trying to control this process the final result is a more democratic culture.

In 1992 the cable television channel MTV aired the first "reality TV" show, *The Real World*. The concept was to eliminate professional actors and simply film the interactions among a group of people on a day-to-day basis. The radicalism of the show lies in its implicit challenge to the definitions of culture and entertainment. The traditional concept of culture as separate from daily life, as dignified by its distance from the mundane, has been reversed. In *The Real World* the act of living is presented as worthwhile entertainment. No professional actors or musicians are required to validate the experience; everyday people have taken the stage.

The phenomenon of the American public's appropriation of the stage is clearly demonstrated by the wildly popular *American Idol* television show. Originally aired in England as *Pop Idol*, in 2002 channel Fox debuted the show for an American audience. What makes *American Idol* such a force for the democratization of national culture is the amateur status of its performers and the voting protocol for deciding who wins each "round." Because each participant is an amateur, the distinction between performer and spectator has been blurred. The changes in cultural participation during the 1920's allowed more people to witness culture, but the actual

performances were still performed by a distant elite. Now the “common man” has asserted his right to perform as well. Further, the right to judge a performance in *American Idol* is claimed by the people at home, who vote by text-message.

The public’s role of critic in *American Idol* is augmented in the interactive media to allow a greater influence on the content of the program. During the presidential debates several questions were chosen from viewers at home. The evening news often quotes from incoming emails and occasionally shows home videos to cover a story. *Sportscenter* uses instant polls to gauge public opinion on nearly every issue of importance (important to the sports-community, at least). In each of these circumstances the authority of the experts now must recognize the opinion of the viewer. The combined effect of these efforts to include the public is an unprecedented level of participation in the national dialogue.

An argument could be made that the changes in media are superficial and that the producers of these shows feign public influence while actually pulling the strings behind the scenes. This critique is valid; the “strangers” on the *Real World* are not representative of the American public and interactive media is in part a strategy to increase viewers, not be controlled by them.

However, the example of *YouTube* ultimately overwhelms this criticism. *YouTube*’s unfiltered performer-viewer communication is not produced by a company. Far from being controlled by corporate interests, *YouTube*’s incredible popularity has demonstrated the immense commercial potential in participatory media and been an engine for the reorganizing of mainstream media to become more interactive.

During the last twenty years reality television, amateur performance shows, and interactive media have redefined culture and the national public’s role in cultural production. The new

popular culture created by these developments is fundamentally more democratic. While it is not clear at this point whether the mainstream media will control cultural production in the future or if they will become irrelevant in an era of increasingly direct cultural communication, it is certain that the trend towards greater participation will continue.