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Fame Factory: Performing Gender and Sexuality in Talent Reality Television

By Hillevi Ganetz

Abstract

This article discusses how gender and sexuality are performed in a highly feminised cultural symbolic context. The object of study is a reality show where the contestants compete in mainstream popular music. *Fame Factory* is a Swedish talent-hunt television series with many similarities to *Pop Idol*. The audience may follow the struggle of the young artists off stage in the 'Fame School' in addition to seeing and voting on their feats on stage. In the Fame School they learn to sing, perform and dance, but also to perform masculinity, femininity and sexuality, even if this is not explicit. Through an analysis of some key episodes of this reality show, the article discusses how gender and sexuality are produced and reproduced within this music television context. It is shown how the performances rest on highly traditional conceptions of these categories, but there are also certain transgressions, especially concerning sexuality, which undermine hegemonic structures.

Keywords: Talent reality television, popular music, performance, masculinity, femininity, sexuality

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Introduction

During the past decade, reality television has attracted attention from media research, in particular game-docs and docu-soaps (Andrejevic 2004, Holmes & Jeremyn 2004, Murray & Ouellette 2004). Some studies have dealt with aspects of production and form (Kilborn 2003), others have focused on the reception of the programmes (Hill 2005). But very little has hitherto been written specifically about the talent reality subgenre, in particular programmes with musical talent in focus, where conventions from popular music and reality television are merged.

Pop Stars, *Star Academy* and *Idols* are talent reality television series with a focus on music. The genre is today in many world regions the most successful reality television genre. Audience figures indicate that television audiences have become less interested in reality television game-docs such as *Big Brother*, where people become famous by just being themselves. The most successful genre of today instead present people developing their talents: the interest in the personalities of the participants has been supplemented with an interest in their skills.

Star Academy was first broadcasted in France in October 2001. It was an instant success. The *Star Academy* concept belongs to the production company Gestmusic, a Spanish branch of Endemol. There are many versions of the *Star Academy* show, each of more than 50 countries in which it has been shown having its own slight variations, but the basic concept is always the same. Contestants live in a boarding-school called 'The Academy', which is managed by a director, and various teachers coach them in various artistic disciplines. The participants are filmed with fly on the wall cameras throughout the day and night (an idea taken from another of Endemol's major reality shows, *Big Brother*). Once a week, some of the contestants have to perform in a prime time show, where they sing the song they have prepared during the previous week, as well as recapping their trials and tribulations at The Academy from the past week. Based on the judges' verdicts and viewer voting, the weakest contestant is eliminated. The eventual winner is awarded a record deal, or similar prize.

The Swedish version of *Star Academy* is called *Fame Factory* and follows in broad outline the same concept. It was broadcast by a commercial television channel (TV3) from 2002 to 2005, when it was driven out of business by *Idols* in another channel.

The main difference compared to *Idols* is that the audience of *Fame Factory* is allowed to watch the young artists in the Fame School. There they learn to sing, produce music and dance, but they also implicitly learn to perform masculinity, femininity and sexuality. This learning process is not restricted to the school itself but related to existing cultural and social discourses on gender and sexuality. Hence, *Fame Factory* should not be seen as being a special deviant case but a highly typical example, since it reveals general current trends in culture and society concerning gender and sexuality.

Methodology

In *Fame Factory* different media are merged together in an intermedial process producing gender performances. This process has three levels: first a subjective level comprising the individual actors, second a social level that involves media organisations and last a cultural level of genres and symbolic forms, which is the main focus of this article. All of them are mutually connected: though operating by partly different logics, they are indissolubly intertwined in the process of doing gender.

The genre of reality television reflects the modern media user who does not conceive different media technologies as specific or separated from ordinary daily life. The reality genre is a highly intermedial phenomenon in which different media intersect, such as TV, Internet, (mobile) phones, the press and sound recordings. In this article *Fame Factory* is analysed as consisting of four kinds of media in interaction with each other. First, television and the talent reality text itself, consisting of 67 episodes from the 2003 season, broadcast on the British-based Swedish satellite channel TV3, Monday to Thursday, with a weekly final each Sunday. This year, 17 young artists competed: 10 male and 7 female. Second, the evening paper *Aftonbladet* which comments the episodes in its articles. Third, the Internet where the audience discusses the series in chat. Four, the CDs presenting recordings of the *Fame Factory* artists.

All 67 episodes from season 2003 have been analysed with a particular focus on sequences where gender and sexuality are explicitly thematised. All articles published in the evening paper *Aftonbladet* during the season have been collected and analysed in the same way. I also followed an independent chat site with many participants on the Internet (www.alltomtv.se), where viewers commented the series. A further source was the official information site for the program, owned by the channel TV3. Finally I obtained all the four CDs from the same season.

Theoretical Framework

'To consider performance is to study how we represent ourselves and repeat those representations within everyday life, working on the assumption that culture is unthinkable without performance' as Erin Striff (2003: 1) so nicely puts it.

A performance requires an audience – even when people only watch themselves. In the process of 'performing gender' everybody is socially dependent on other human beings, as well as culturally dependent on current and historically developed ideas about what femininity and masculinity is. Those we interact with judge our gender performance and determine if we are 'doing gender' properly. Our 'audience' can approve of our presentation of gender, but can also dissociate from it in various ways.

Judith Butler's idea of gender as performative has strongly influenced gender-oriented performance studies in recent decades. The dimension of Butler's theory

that is used here is rather basic, but nonetheless important to an understanding of how gender is produced and reproduced in *Fame Factory*. In the terminology of Butler (1990), gender (which sexuality is inextricably linked with) is performative: it is staged in our daily lives and daily practices like a performance. Rather than defining who we intrinsically are, gender is what we are doing at specific occasions. The concept of performativity captures the fact that being is a dynamic process of becoming through performative acts, i.e. by doing. Hence, concepts such as performance must here not be read as saying that the artists (or others involved in the TV show) are playing roles different from who they 'really' are, but should rather be understood in relation to the theory of performativity as a necessary aspect of all social life. Gender performances are repetitions in an ongoing social and cultural process, which people – including pop artists – cannot step into and out of at will.

Gender is performed and constructed in situated interactions, and this performance is always contextualised by institutionalised norms and habits that restrict the actual outcome of each such performance. Queer theorists have often focused on how dominant dichotomies are destabilised by hybrid crossings and transgressing acts that move outside the boundaries upheld by dominant discourses, for instance when female bodies perform masculine identities (Halberstam 1998). However, in mainstream TV formats such as *Fame Factory*, the gender order is far more strictly dichotomised. In this programme discourse, all participants are immediately and univocally classified as either male or female, and there is never even any hint at a possibility that they could openly acknowledge a performance of the 'opposite' gender identity. Sometimes, male performances are said to have 'feminine' traits (or the other way around), but this is consistently judged as a deviance or a fault. It could have been different in another genre, but not a single example of crossdressing or drag exists in my material. The consistent structuring of the gender discourse in *Fame Factory* makes it reasonable to also structure my analysis along the same lines, following the binary gender division to which its format strictly adheres, though being attentive to any elements of disturbance or inner contradiction within dominant gender order.

In this article gender and sexuality are seen as performances and the main question here is to discuss how these categories are performed in a highly feminised cultural discourse – a televised talent-reality show where the contestants compete with their voices, within the broad genre of mainstream pop.

As many popular musicologists have noted, rock and pop are gender-marked categories (Frith & McRobbie 1978/1990, McClary 1991, Whiteley 1997). Pop and rock are opposites in a dichotomy where the positive pole is rock-authenticity-masculinity and the negative pole is pop-inauthenticity-femininity. Or, as Norma Coates (1997: 52) states: "Real men aren't pop, and women, real or otherwise, don't rock." In Western culture, pop is understood as a feminised cultural discourse.

But even if men are not pop and women do not rock, according to dominant popular music discourses, there are in actual music practice many examples of men in pop music and women who rock, though a certain gender bias exists in practice too. However, it is necessary to distinguish between the numbers of male and female musicians and pop as a signifying cultural practice. The number of active men can be large in pop, but it does not keep musicians, fans and audiences, as members of an interpretative community, from perceiving the discourse of pop as more feminine than rock.

The artists in *Fame Factory* are all vocalists. The voice is the only instrument that women are believed to practise naturally better than men (Bayton 1998: 12ff). Women's singing is contrasted with the acquired skills of playing an instrument; it is seen as a kind of direct female emotional expression, rather than a set of refined techniques. This aspect both confirms and reinforces the long-standing association of women with the body and nature, which runs through Western culture and contrasts with the image of men as those who master nature through technology (Bayton 1998: 13).

In this sense, both *Fame Factory* and *Idols* can be interpreted as feminized cultural texts. Two elements in Western culture traditionally regarded as signs of femininity characterize the programmes: the mainstream pop music genre itself and the voice. There is also a third element that has to be mentioned – the audience. Both *Idols* and *Fame Factory* have a predominantly female audience. Twice as many women as men watch the shows: women between 25 and 39 years of age form the biggest audience group (contrary to common belief, not women between 15 and 24). The contestants depend on the female audience for their success or failure as the TV audience has the power to choose a winner in the last, definitive finale. And it is the viewers who reward the contestants by voting for the person who develops best. As one among the few who has written about *Pop Idol*, Simon Frith (2007: 11) argues that the performances given there are examples of what he calls a secondary performance: 'a 'pretend' performance that has something to do with a 'real' one'. A secondary performance always evokes the original performance. Hence, the pleasure associated with authenticity (which distinguishes a primary performance), is not so central to the experience of a secondary performance. Instead the quality judgement of the performance is essential. This, stresses Frith (ibid.), 'means that the audience is in a way detached from the performance, observing it as a performance rather than being drawn into it or imaginatively and emotionally becoming a part of it'. It is an on-stage performance, firmly placed within the genre framework of the televised media text.

The audiences of talent realities are invited to judge who, through hard work, comes closest to a 'real' musical performance. Since musical performances are always gendered, this also involves judging how well the competitors are copying or imitating gender. According to Judith Butler, it is not possible to repeat anything exactly the same every time, potentially leading to large or small displace-

ments in the gender performance. Are there any such displacements in *Fame Factory*?

Performing Masculinity

In Western culture, as well as in popular music and especially rock, hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995) is the ideal masculinity that all other masculinities must relate to and whose characteristics consist of an athletic body, whiteness, heterosexuality, virility, careerism, independence and self-confidence. In the feminised discourse of *Fame Factory* the male artist must find a way of relating to hegemonic masculinity. How do the male artists perform masculinity in this context?

Men do not Dance, they Work in the Studio and Play Guitar

The ways in which hegemonic masculinity is represented in *Fame Factory* must be interpreted in relation to the gendered production of meaning that impregnates both popular music and television. These representations are examples of what I call *gender routines* (Ganetz 2004), that is, habitual, unreflected and iterated mediated accounts of masculinity and femininity, which are repeated so often that they become naturalised. Gender routines are not the result of a conspiracy; they are maintained by both women and men in media production. They are 'invisible' in that they do not, for example, contain sensationally sexist images – which are of course easily detected – but based on habitual and unreflected repetitions of culturally and socially produced ideas about masculinity and femininity.

The notion of gender routine is derived from Judith Butler's idea that gender identity is created through iteration of a gender role according to the heterosexual hegemony or discourse (Butler 1993: 122, 232). The notion of gender routine is here used to capture the characteristic way in which media genres represent gender in a standardised and unreflected way. It is also an attempt to introduce a concept that captures the process of doing gender, in contrast to a more static concept like gender stereotype. Gender routines are regulated performances that *produce* stereotypes.

Gender routines can also be found in *Fame Factory*. It is striking that the male contestants, unlike the females, are so often depicted with a guitar and in the studio, where they master technology. Bayton (1998: 26) has pointed out that technical positions mostly are held by men in the music industry. This is true for *Fame Factory*, where the gender routine is repeated in an unreflective way, representing the male contestants as belonging to a gender that masters technology, while the female contestants are doing something else – chatting, reading or sleeping.

Bayton has also pointed out that in rock music the electric guitar is the emblematic symbol of masculinity (Bayton 1997). To play an instrument, and especially the guitar, is something that men do best, while the key female instrument is the

voice, the only instrument that women are believed to practise naturally better than men. When the male *Fame Factory* contestants practice songs, they prefer to simultaneously play the guitar. When they sit in the studio, they play the guitar. Even when they walk around in the Fame School they have guitars in their hands. The conventional representations of masculinity and femininity are faithfully reproduced in a gender routine.

Both guitars and the studio equipment are male coded artefacts that symbolically serve to destabilise the otherwise feminine discourse of this genre. It is also striking that the male contestants do not dance, unlike the female contestants. Most of the male artists have a very restricted presentation of the body: they just stand still and sing or walk back and forth. The male 'dance' represented in *Fame Factory* is completely in line with white, traditional, hegemonic masculinity. As Callison (2007) among others has noted: Western white men do not dance, and if they do, they are suspected of homosexuality.

So even if hegemonic masculinity is destabilised by the fact that the instrument that is mainly used by the male artists in the show is the voice, it is at the same time restabilised by the representations of motionless men, playing the guitar and mastering technology. This can be interpreted as a vindication of masculinity, a weight that prevents the scale to tip over in favour of femininity.

The Weeping Man

Judging from the previous account it is perhaps easy to believe that the male contestants are represented as performing a traditional, hegemonic masculinity. But it is more complicated than that. There are also scenes like the following that can be interpreted as an alternative male position, i.e. 'The New Man' (cf. Chapman 1988, Mort 1996) who disturbs the dominant gender order.

The Fame students are having a master class with their singing teacher. The contestant Peter tries to sing a very sentimental love song that reminds him of his little son and bursts into tears. He is unable to sing, but he tries again and again without succeeding. After a while all the other students have tears in their eyes. The singing teacher urges him to sit down and he does so, sobbing, saying ironically about himself 'Oh macho-man'. The scene is remarkably long, 5 minutes and 30 seconds, which is very much in the series. In a to-camera moment after the scene Peter explains: 'I didn't believe this about myself. And the macho-league cried too, it didn't make things easier.'

Peter is not the only crying man in *Fame Factory* – all the male participants weep at least once. A crying, emotional man is regarded as 'feminine': In an interview a viewer commented (Edin 2006: 68): 'I first thought it was, say, ten gay men in *Fame Factory*, but then it appeared that half of them had girlfriends, but they cried all the time, some of them cried and cried, and I thought "he must be gay, and he and he"…'

Peter's tears can be interpreted as if the modern, masculine stereotype (Mosse 1996) is undermined, so that there is greater scope today for more 'feminine' masculinities.[1] Should the weeping-scene be interpreted in this perspective or is it about something else?

The relatively long time given to Peter's weeping indicates its importance to the producers. The reason is hardly to show a new, alternative masculinity, but rather a strong expression of feelings. This is of central interest in the reality genre. It is expressions like anger, jealousy, love, sorrow and envy that are emphasized in the editing, not everyday doings, which are judged too boring to be shown on television. In addition, a strong expression of emotions also creates the sense of authenticity that is so central to this genre: 'this is real, this is true' (Hill 2005, Andrejevic 2004).

However, strong feelings are valued differently depending on the sex of the person shedding the tears. The contestants in *Fame Factory* illustrate these different values when they discuss how the audience perceive weeping. In one episode the singing teacher wonders why the boys are more popular among the audience than the girls. Peter answers, 'in a programme like this you can see a softer side of the guys. We are all weeping, even the macho Per, bohoo'. Peter does not mention the girls, who weep as much as the boys. In fact, nobody comments on their tears at all, either in the series, in the press or on the Internet. It is therefore significant that Peter, in the quotation above, is talking about the tears of the 'macho-league' but not the tears of the girls. The reason is the cultural constructions of femininity and masculinity. It is 'normal' for women to cry; it is something women often do because they are weaker than men. Men crying are interpreted in another way: men's tears are seen as signs of strength, they dare to show authentic feelings. Men are encouraged when they burst into tears; women are criticized. I will return to this representation of the female artists as weak and passive in the discussion about femininity.

Hence, it is crucial to remain critical of the idea that men crying in public are signs of a weakening of the hegemonic masculinity. In the context of *Fame Factory* the weeping scene confirms the male contestants' already strong position as their tears paradoxically are interpreted as strength. It is also important to analyse the tears in relation to the whole text of *Fame Factory* where male emotions are acceptable up to a limit – when it becomes a sign of weakness. Or as one of the central figures in *Fame Factory*, the record company boss Bert Karlsson, says to the contestant Dennis on account of that he had tears in his eyes when Karlsson criticised the song he has chosen: 'Damn, you were weak when I criticised you. You can't be like the chicks, crack up when it gets a little bit tough.' To show weakness in connection with a failure is something a man should not do.

The weeping scene must also be analysed in relation to the text that represents women as not mastering technology and the instruments, where they are constantly criticised for not trying hard enough and where women are depicted as a collec-

tive and men as individuals (see below). Finally, is it necessary to analyse the weeping scene in relation to the reality television genre where strong expressions of feelings are central and emphasised in the editing process.

All this does not mean that there is no ideological impact at all of showing men crying on television. There is after all a subversive potential in the image of weeping men. This potential lies in male tears as a challenge to heteronormativity, to use Judith Butler's term. Tears make the sexual identity of men uncertain, as is clear from the viewer quotation above. A crying man is seen as a feminine and potentially non-heterosexual man, whereas a crying woman is perceived as a 'normal', heterosexual woman.

Performing Femininity

Catherine Waggoner (2004) analyses the game-doc *Survivor* and notes that the camera fetishizes the female body. In her study of a reality game-doc production (similar to *Survivor*), psychologist Laura Brown (2005) points out that the sexualisation and feminisation of the female contestants are executed in the production process, especially in the editing.

However, the female contestants in the talent reality *Fame Factory* are not sexualised in the same explicit way as in those game-docs. Certainly, the viewers can follow the young artists into their bedrooms in the morning, but the pictures show them under their bedclothes with untidy hair, heavy with sleep, not sensual at all. These pictures mediate an image of the life at Fame School as hard and demanding, rather than as glamorous. The morning scenes are not characterised by a sexualized camera gaze, but an intimate one. They give an impression of authentic life that is so central for reality television, showing the young artists 'as they really are', behind the stage (cf. Kilborn 2003).

This difference between how contestants are presented in game-docs and talent realities can be explained by different genre conventions: the focus of *Fame Factory*, like the *Star Academy* format on the whole, is not on intrigues, parties or sexual activities between the contestants, but on the process of becoming a popular music artist. But why have these conventions appeared? The explanation must be sought in the commercial strategies that impregnate mainstream popular music. Stahl (2004: 218) points out that in *American Idol* the production focuses on the contestants as moral individuals, 'emphasizing their family values, church and volunteer activities, devotion to friends, school, and community'. Based on interviews with Dutch A&Rs, Zwaan et al. (2006) note that 'in the Netherlands so-called "star behaviour" is not appreciated, a musician should be "ordinary"; "nice" and they should "act normal"'. In short: mainstream popular music artists do not make commercial success if they are apprehended as mean, sexually dissolute or provocative, but only if they seem 'nice'. But, interestingly enough, 'nice' means different things, depending on the gender of the artists – at least in *Fame Factory*.

When the pupils have lessons at the Fame School they are dressed in casual clothes – the young women in jeans and a top, the young men in jeans and a shirt. When they perform in the weekly finals they are dressed up, mostly in glittering and bright clothes. But they do not wear 'sexy' outfits, a more conventional but party-like style is preferred.

Neither the female nor the male contestants are sexualised – on-stage or off-stage – in *Fame Factory*. Instead the young women are homogenised in a way that is of disadvantage for the girls. The femininity performed in *Fame Factory* is remarkably one-dimensional and fulfils all demands of a traditional, passive and respectable femininity.

Respectability is central for the normative type of femininity that dominates Western culture and society. Whereas Mosse (1996) describes how the modern, masculine stereotype developed, Skeggs (1997) depicts the growth of the modern, feminine stereotype, in which respectability is a central concept. Today respectability is a (middle class) norm that all women must adhere to, irrespective of class, colour or sexuality. In Skeggs' interviews with working-class women the fine-meshed net of respectability becomes visible. To be respectable includes being heterosexually passive and oriented towards marriage and family. Also, ways of dressing, talking, eating, training and education, as well as patterns of taste and cultural consumption separate a non-respectable woman from a respectable one.

Because of this narrow norm of femininity the female students form a strikingly homogeneous group. They look like each other and are treated as a collective. They learn that they cannot wear glasses, that they must be slim and that it is important to look good. Nobody stands out or diverges from the respectable standard of femininity. There are no examples of such provocative femininities as tomboys, butches or tarts, and their performances on stage is in line with this: they are not sexy, wild, cocksure or even 'sweet' – the femininity they stage is a controlled and balanced heterosexual femininity.

The female participants also sound like each other. With minor variations all of them have the same type of voice: a nasal and at the same time smooth voice, located in the higher registers and with a distinct vibrato. They often mention Celine Dion as a favourite artist.

In contrast, the male contestants form a heterogeneous group. They are represented more as individuals than as a collective. There is the charming next-door guy, the serious indie-pop guy, the boy-band member, the Robbie Williams copy, the truck driving Country and Western singer and the rock rebel. And they may sing badly, which the female contestants cannot. A *Fame Factory* fan comments on this phenomenon in a chat: 'As in society "outside" *Fame Factory*, higher demands are made on girls. Guys can get away with a bad voice. "We" (the media, the music industry, the audience) demand that girls' singing must be perfect, without any direct peculiarities. And when girls adjust to the prevailing situation, they are not chosen, often with the words "mediocre" or "no character"'.

It is a grim irony that women are first forced to confirm to a narrow norm, and then criticised for being conventional and unoriginal. Whereas the female contestants only are allowed to perform a respectable femininity, the male contestants have a broad spectrum of masculinities to perform, from hegemonic masculinity to the new softer and emotional man, the so-called metrosexual new man, with certain gay traits.

How can these differences between the many male performance positions and the few female ones be explained? The sociologist Ann Kroon (2007) discusses transsexualism as a source through which we can analyse the basic blueprints of the socio-cultural gender and sexual logic, patterns that might otherwise not be so easily discerned. She analyses psychiatric texts on transsexualism and how they assert (among other things) that it is easier for women to be accepted as men after a 'sex-change' than the other way round. It is easier for male transsexuals, or ex-females, to 'pass' as men, than for female transsexuals, or ex-males, to pass as women. Kroon gives the example of a woman who became pregnant under ongoing hormonal treatment to become a man. Although she was pregnant in the ninth month she was accepted as a (fat) man because she had a beard. In contrast, men who become female, are disclosed very quickly: if there is the slightest slip in their gender performance, they don't pass as women. Kroon emphasises that the explanation is not that (former) women are more skilled in performing masculinity than men in performing femininity, but rather that masculinity is a social and cultural norm. A man is always seen as a man as long as there is at least one 'male' sign, but a woman is not seen as a woman if she is exhibiting just one specific male-only sign.

Kroon thus asserts that masculinity, contrary to common beliefs, is a broader, more flexible category than femininity, because of masculinity's privileged position as a norm. Femininity is fixed in roughly two positions: the sexually active, masculine lesbian woman or the sexually passive heterosexual feminine woman, or in other words – the respectable woman. The consequence here for the performance on stage is that a man, to a certain extent, can play with femininity, as long as it is clear that he is a man (exhibiting at least one 'male' sign), whereas a woman's play with masculinity is much more restricted and narrow (since a woman is not seen as a woman if she exhibits one single concrete male-only sign). Or, to put it in other words, a male artist who plays with what is culturally seen as femininity is acceptable, while a female artist playing with what is culturally seen as masculinity (for example an active sexuality) is not. I want to underline that this concerns the particular genres that I am analysing here – talent-reality television and mainstream pop music – but that it might also apply to other genres.

One example of how the narrow norm of femininity 'works' is how Mia, one of the female contestants, is seen by her colleagues in the programme and by the fans on the Internet. Mia is a tall, long-haired, blond girl, with a fantastic voice. She is open and talkative and seems to have more confidence than the other girls in the

show. Throughout the season it is an unceasing subject of discussion – in the programme and among the fans – why the female artists are voted out all the time. A couple of explanations are suggested: the most common being that the girls do not try hard enough, i.e. they have themselves to blame.

Both the female and the male contestants reflect on the problem. The future winner Anders says that the explanation is that the guys are more active, they take more chances than the girls. The only one who does not excuse herself for being there is Mia, says Anders, who is sort of a 'real man'. Mia is among the few women who are furthest behind in the competition, but her 'masculinity' evokes rumours on the net that she actually is a man. In Mia's impersonation of femininity, gender is exposed as inconsistent, as performative. But her queer performance is too disturbing, too abjective. Order must be restored and the guilty must be punished by identified as 'abnormal'.

The example of Mia is an illustration of how limited the feminine performance is and it supports Kroon's (2007) thesis: a man is always seen as a man if he exhibits at least one male sign, but a woman is not seen as a woman if she exhibits one male sign. The dilemma seems to be insoluble. If the female contestants perform a 'normal' femininity, i.e. being passive, they are criticized for their passivity and voted out. If, on the other hand, they diverge from 'normal' femininity, i.e. by being active, they are suspected of not being 'real' women – and voted out.

Performing Sexuality

'Gender norms operate by requiring the embodiment of certain ideals of femininity and masculinity, ones that are almost always related to the idealisation of the heterosexual bond', says Judith Butler (1993, p. 231) As shown above, this is also true for *Fame Factory*. However, there are also exceptional performances that displace the signification of gender, and these displacements are related to sexuality.

There was a noticeable interest among the viewers of *Fame Factory* and the media about the contestants' sexual activities and orientations. Already in the beginning of the season, before it was clear who the lucky students would be, an evening paper published a scoop: 'Barbados [a popular dance band] Mathias new boyfriend will compete in Fame Factory tonight.' The boyfriend, Johan, was admitted to the Fame School and picked out to compete in the first weekly final of *Fame Factory*. He was interviewed behind the scene, in the green room, and the reporter suddenly asked if Johan was chosen because he had gone to bed with the right people (Johan's boyfriend was one of the last season's most successful contestants). Johan gets very confused and embarrassed and the scene is painful to watch. This can be read in discussions on the Internet, where fans in detail discussed if the question was admissible or not. Some contributions were homopho-

bic and malicious, but the majority dissociated themselves from the clumsy reporter, not from Johan.

Later, the same evening paper published an article where the contestant Dajana came out as bisexual. Soon after, the same paper published another article where readers could find a list of names of all the *Fame Factory*-contestants with another sexuality than heterosexuality. The evening paper also published an article where *Fame Factory* was said to hold the 'Television record in sex'. Two heterosexual guys were said to have been caught in the act in the same bed. A 'source' confirmed the rumour and related, 'I know two guys who had sex with each other, despite the fact that they are neither openly bi- nor homosexual.' This led to speculations on the Internet and different name proposals were discussed.

Edin (2005: 68) notes that many of her female interviewees who watch reality series was interested in whom of the participants might be homo- or heterosexual. One of her informants was especially interested in one of the female contestants: 'Dajana, that she is a lesbian, I could not believe that. My boyfriend thought that she was really gorgeous, and I 'shit, what are you saying' and then it occurred that she was a lesbian'.

The curiosity of and the discussions about 'who is what' was maintained not only by the producers (as in the example above about Johan) but also in the evening press and in chats between the viewers. In an intermedial process, all the different media – television, press and the Internet – contributed to circulating rumours about who was having sex with whom and in what way. This focus on sex seems to be a failure in view of the fact that *Fame Factory* was thought to be a reality show focusing music and talent. But in another perspective, focusing the cultural and mediated representations of homosexuality, *Fame Factory* can be seen as a step forward.

In a historical perspective the most common representation of homosexuals in (American) television has been – no representation at all. The reason for this absence has been both moral and economic: as late as 1990 advertisers withdrew (under pressure from homophobic organisations) from the American drama series *Thirtysomething.* If homosexuals were depicted at all, they were depicted stereotypically: from the unhappy and wicked homosexual women and men in early Hollywood films, to the television reality series *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy (Fab 5)* where the five fabulous men have been interpreted as fulfilling the cliché about appearance fixated gay men (Meyer & Kelley 2004). The situation was similar in countries like Sweden.

For a long time homosexuals were thought to represent a third sex (Hekma 1996). Both male and female homosexuals were considered to possess 'too much' of the other sex. Heterosexual men and women were considered masculine men and feminine women, whereas 'those other' men and women were feminine men and masculine women. This classical idea about homosexuals as a third sex has today given way to the idea that homosexuals are simply people who desire peo-

ple of the same sex as themselves. But the older notion about 'the third sex' is still present. The feminine man and the masculine woman are still prospering as cultural stereotypes. It is after these stereotypes still many heterosexuals orient themselves in their understanding of homosexuals, even today.

In this perspective, the performances of sexuality in *Fame Factory* transgress the conventional homosexual stereotypes, of the feminine man and the masculine woman. Established norms are undermined in *Fame Factory*: the bisexual woman does not match the image of the masculine woman, as she is 'really gorgeous' from a heterosexual man's point of view. There are heterosexual men crying, which confuses the viewers in their attempts to find out who is what. As mentioned earlier, crying in public is something women and feminine i.e. gay men do. But in *Fame Factory* all the men cry and still they have girlfriends. This trait destabilises the norm that heterosexual men do not cry and that only homosexual men display (feminine) expressions of feelings publicly. There are also rumours that heterosexual men have had sex with each other, which destabilises the idea that people are either hetero- or homosexual. This is a challenge against heteronormativity and the sharp boundary between 'us' and 'them'.

Why are these boundaries transgressed in *Fame Factory*, when there are many other TV-programmes where this is not the case? One possible answer might be that the music genre itself destabilises heteronormativity and makes possible representations of different sexualities in the series. The destabilisation of heterosexuality is facilitated by the fact that the music genre that dominates *Fame Factory* is mainstream pop, a genre which is not built around any specific gender or sexuality, as is for example the case with cock-rock, where the heterosexual man is the preferred subject (Frith & McRobbie 1978/1990). The address of mainstream pop is 'everyone', irrespective of gender and sexuality, but also of age, class and ethnicity. The address is more limited in other, more subcultural-oriented music genres. In politically radical rock, punk or rap music, for instance, the lyrics establish a distinct 'we' and 'them' (Ganetz 1997: 211). This 'we' is often delimited to the fans and 'them' to the parental generation or other groups distinguished in terms of class, music taste or political views. Mainstream pop instead establishes an individual 'me' and 'you', addressed to everybody and intentionally including all listeners in a shared community. This open address has its background in the genre's commercial purpose which is to sell as many CDs as possible. This counteracts any tendency to establish a 'we' and 'them' or discriminate against any identified 'others'. At least, mainstream pop avoids alienating consumer groups with enough purchasing power, which those possessing 'pink money' have today. In order to sell records one has to charm (almost) everyone, irrespective of whether the members of the audience have the same sex as the artist or not. This opens up for potentially transgressive sexual identifications, not as elements of any nonconformist HBTQ subculture, but rather as a side effect of reaching out to everybody.

Finally…

Fame Factory is a reality television series where viewers follow a number of young, upcoming artists in a number of episodes, from the opening auditions to the big final at the end of each season. The demands that the gender performance makes on the individual are difficult to escape since they are a constant repetition, an ongoing cultural and social process which it is impossible to get off or on at will. In the context of *Fame Factory* there is almost no room for the parodies or exceeding of norms that Butler (1990) claims as necessary for the displacement of meaning and a gradual change of the content of gender identities.

The genre of talent reality television in itself seems to imply a destabilisation of a hegemonic masculinity, as it can be seen as a feminised, popular music discourse. Within this discourse representations of gender instability are present, as for example weeping men and the 'real man' Mia. At the same time the destabilising elements are naturalised by traditional representations of masculinity and femininity, as for example motionless men, men who play the guitar and men who master technology. Masculinity is reproduced as the norm, while femininity is the exception. The male contestants are represented as individuals, while the female artists are represented as a group where their individual characteristics disappear. Femininity is restricted to the respectable woman, while masculinity includes a lot of performance positions.

In the end of the series traditional, conform conceptions of gender stand firm, not at least in form of a male winner. This can be interpreted in the light of West & Zimmerman's already classic article (1987) in which they conclude that the need for social acceptance of gender performances leads to conformity. Rather than performing the 'wrong' masculinity or femininity in the eyes of the audience, most people – including artists – choose the secure way before an uncertain one. A successful gender performance affords status and acceptance; an unsuccessful one results in embarrassment and humiliation (West & Zimmerman 1987).

Incidents such as scenes with weeping men should therefore be regarded with suspicion. It is not certain that all depictions of emotional men are signs of a new sort of man, or a victory of feminism – at least this may not be the only possible interpretation. As many commentators note the survival of hegemonic masculinity depends on the incorporation of critiques of it (MacKinnon 2003). According to this line of thinking hegemonic masculinity is even able to survive feminised discourses such as *Fame Factory*. Talent reality television shows may not destabilise hegemonic popular music discourses, but enable masculinity to go on maintaining a hegemonic position by incorporating certain aspects of femininity.

However, there is one dimension where the ground is shaking and cracking – sexuality. Certain performances of sexuality exceed both hetero- and homosexual

stereotypes: heteronormativity is challenged through representations that do not follow the norm. Today it seems possible to perform different types of sexualities and masculinities in talent reality television, but not different femininities.

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Notes

[1] Already the ancient Greeks thought that it was a man's duty to show strength of mind and keep calm when he was struck by sorrow. The Romantic period was more ambivalent about male tears, but in general they were thought of as signs of authenticity, of strong, genuine feelings (Ekenstam 2003). It was with the development of the modern, masculine stereotype (Mosse 1996) that male tears became almost taboo, especially in public. The polarisation between male and female became stronger under this period and due to this tears (among other things) became an almost exclusive female emotional expression.

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