

An Analysis of Identity Construction In *One Direction: This Is Us* (2013)

The film *One Direction: This Is Us* (2013) was released in August 2013 and directed by Morgan Spurlock. From the film's title alone, expectations for the film are clearly set: what the audience are about to see is being presented as a genuine and truthful representation of the band. This makes the film a useful case study for discussions surrounding image construction: exploring how it is constructed and negotiated by the author, audience and media, each as active participants within the process (Ahonen 2007, pp.123–4). Tied in with the pre-established expectations of the film's title are notions of authenticity and identity that are rooted in the band's formation; rise to fame through the TV show *The X Factor* and their subsequent success. Goodwin (1992, p.103) has argued that the creation of character identities for pop stars, created outside of musical performance alone, is a vital part of the listener's identification with a pop star, as well being central to the industry's understanding and monetisation of public taste. He goes on to suggest that the presentation of these constructions share more in common with the cultural constructions of advertising, where fiction is presented as mimetic reflection, rather than drama (as pure self-conscious fiction) or documentary (as simple mimetic reflection). It is interesting then to note at the outset, that the intention of the film, *One Direction: This Is Us* (2013) is to be presented as the mimetic reflection of the documentary format, when in fact, with its origination coming from the industry construction that is responsible for the promotion of the band, it actually shares greater commonality with advertising.

The film opens with voice overs of each band member discussing their childhood experiences and ambitions, accompanied by images of faded childhood photographs that appear on screen. As the voice overs continue, each member starts to turn their own story towards their singing credentials. As the visuals build in intensity they start to incorporate images of a stadium show being prepared. Building in the background, we hear dramatic music accompanying the growing sounds of adoring female screaming fans. The scene builds to a dramatic climax where we finally see the 5 boys all



Fig.1: The dramatic climax of the opening sequence and it's subsequent comical breakdown

standing together facing the camera. At the the height of dramatic tension, out of the blue, Louis reaches over and slaps Niall in the face (shown in fig.1): the music cuts, and the boys break in to laughter and the dramatic tension is broken. We cut to the band performing at the O2 arena to an audience of excited and adoring fans. These opening few minutes are reflective of the narrative themes to follow, and so it is worth unpacking each element further.

Firstly, in opening with childhood memories, there is an establishing of a key element of the band's core identity which is returned to frequently throughout the film: they are just like us. A key place where this identity is established is in the band's formation on the TV show *The X Factor* which becomes the subject of the film's narrative between 9:47–14:33. "You see these people that audition for the show and they come from the same sort of background as you... they just come from... normal working class families" explains band member Zayn Malik. In describing his experiences, Malik is affirming of one of the key aspects of these types of reality TV programmes that has been documented by Holmes (2005, p.156) in her work on the TV show *Pop Idol*: "The emphasis on the ordinariness of the contestants contributes to a deliberate blurring of boundaries between contestant and viewer and as a result, a potential invocation of the audience's own aspirations (or fantasies) of success and stardom." Tied in to the idea of "ordinariness" is the idea that Dyer (1998, p.42) describes as the "success myth". This idea is founded on the notion that

“American society is sufficiently open for anyone to get to the top, regardless of rank”¹. As Holmes (2005, p.157) and Stahl (2002, p.308) have both documented, this sense of “ordinariness” is important in creating a sense of “authenticity”, where by, as Leach describes of the Spice Girls, there is an ability “to speak as the audience and with the audience”, there by creating a “second person” type authenticity (Moore 2002, p.220). In the interviews with fans (15:19–15:54) that follow, we find evidence of this type of authentication: “When I am sad they are there for me” says one fan; “They’re just genuine guys” says another; “they sing our feelings” explains another. There is a clear sense of Moore’s (2002, p.220) “authenticity of experience” which forms a connection between the band and their fans. This connection also seems inextricably linked with their rise to fame on *The X Factor*. “They make us believe that anything is possible if we believe in ourselves” says one fan, in a clear demonstration of Meizel’s (2009, p.486) observations of “great ambition” being a source of inspiration for the fans of contestants on the TV show *American Idol*.

Returning to the established narratives in the films opening montage, we come now to the idea of playfulness that breaks the opening scene’s dramatic tension. At a number of points in the film, we see the band members engage in many of the processes we have come associate with pop stardom, yet at each stage, there is a subversion of these processes. For example, as we watch

¹ One of the results of the construction of the band’s identity through “ordinariness” is that it provides a site of negotiation with the notion of the bestowment of fame. Holmes (2005, pp.167–8) cites the work of Italian sociologist Francesesco Alberoni in drawing an analogy between “the star system” and the political arena, where the media, though construction of public visibility, proposes candidates for “election” by an audience, “the electors”, who then determines their degree of success. No where is this clearer than in the reality TV formats of shows like *The X Factor* through which One Direction were formed. Throughout the film we find reoccurring references to the band’s gratefulness to the fans, who they consider to be responsible for both placing them in their position of pop stardom and sustaining their longevity in that position. In an interview with Simon Cowell, the band’s mentor whilst on the TV show and head of the Band’s record label, he is very clear in attributing the band’s success, both on the show and afterwards, to the determination and dedication of a loyal, and growing fan base. “The fans made it their mission that One Direction were going to become the biggest band in the world” (14:40) he explains. Together with his earlier description of the process of putting the boys together in to the band after they had failed to succeed in the solo auditions, we see a clear real-life example of the process of proposal and election that Alberoni describes. This leads us to recognise that the audience’s bestowment of fame and their election of the band is a key element to the band’s identity. Whilst Holmes (2004) has observed that TV shows like *The X Factor* provide evidence of the “ways in which the two claims-to-fame stories continue to jostle for cultural legitimacy” as negotiation between notions of the mythic, gifted self and notions of the “success myth” take place, in the film *One Direction: This Is Us* we see a emphasis placed upon the discourse of “ordinariness”, ‘lucky breaks’, ‘specialness’ and ‘hard work’” (Holmes 2004) to create a clear connection with the latter.

the band take part in “choreography” (06:30–07:50, shown in fig.2), we see them play and mess about: “It’s a bit of a free for all” chuckles the band’s choreographer as he attempts to direct the band, who run around with little notice being given to his directions. “From the start we were always very vocal,” explains band member Louis Tomlinson, “we couldn’t follow the boy band stereotypes: choreographed danced routines and everything’s the same”. With this explanation, we start to understand the purpose of their subversion of conventions. Like the Monkees before them, the band are being presented as a “bunch of spontaneous, silly, footloose, ‘natural’ musicians who do funny things and make rock and roll music too” (Stahl 2002, p.320) and as Goodwin (1992, p. 108) notes, the portrayal of band members as a group of friends, having fun, can be a critical point of identification for an audience². As Stahl (2002, p.326) goes on to explain, “the producers of The Monkees were so convinced of the value of the band members as participants in the production process that they structured the production of the television show in such a way that the band members were relied upon for conceptual and even productive collaboration in content.” In a similar way, we see in the process of “choreography” for One Direction’s live show, that the choreographer is not prescriptively assigning the band routines to perform, but rather, allowing the band members to contribute, often through their own personal humour and group dynamics, to the production of the show. This serves to further the audience’s identification in them as an “authentic youth cultural expression” (Stahl 2002, p.319) and to reinforce their authenticity established through their sense of ordinariness.

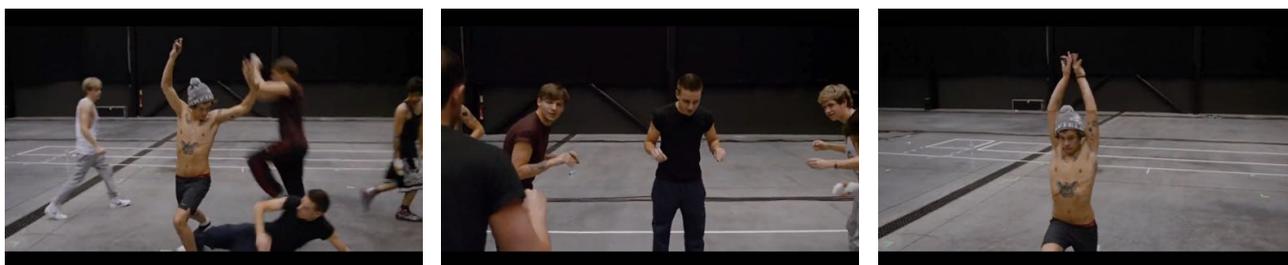


Fig.2: “Choreography” session

² This focus on the band’s friendship and sense of “having fun together” is reinforced at numerous points in the film. One place where this is explicitly discussed is between 12:30–12:54. Here the band talk about the importance they placed upon becoming friends before they became colleagues.

Following the initial opening scene of the film, we enter a montage (4:57–6:08) of press and media clips cut together with other footage that document the band’s popularity and success. “One Direction is taking over the music world one country at a time” one journalist states in the voice over. “One Direction are number one in more than 35 countries” says another. “Even the Beatles³ have never achieved such Transatlantic success so early in their careers” says a BBC news reader. “It’s not just unusual, it’s unprecedented” says Radio One DJ Scott Mills. It is interesting to note that, as Ahonen (2007, p.121; p.141) has observed, the “mediated image” presented by the media can, in some cases work to strengthen the “presented image” that the artist, along with their “promotional machinery”, presents to the public. In other cases, where there is disparity between these two images, the audience must create their own “compiled author image” by weighing the veracity of each image they are presented with. The intention in this example is clear: by presenting only those media clips which support One Direction’s “presented image”, the audience are expected to build a “compiled author image” that is based exclusively on this “presented image” and reinforced by the “mediated images” of the media.

In two particular sequences the audience is encouraged to focus on the individual identities of the band members. The first sequence (53:10–57:15) gives us a glimpse of each band member’s own unique personality and characteristics and there is also a focus on how each member’s own idiosyncrasies feeds in to the group’s dynamics and relationships. Holmes (2005, p.159) has observed that the serialised process of reality TV leaves the audience with a greater sense of “knowing the star as a real person”. It is interesting then that during the second sequence (1:06:12–1:11:14) where each member returns home that band member Harry says, “you meet a lot of people who see a media perception of you and it’s just nice coming and spending a bit of time with the people who know me.” It’s impossible to escape here how the chosen film format of

³ At a number points in the film there are references made to the Beatles and comparisons drawn between the two bands: “it’s akin to Beatlemania” states Mike Williams, the editor of NME. This connection creates a type of “musical retroism” (Klinkmann 2007, pp.20–1) that seems to be an “anachronic retrology” that, rather than suggesting any “specific, style-defining influences”, simply works within “a more fluid... notion of cultural and aesthetic remembering” to enact a “collective memory of sorts” and suggest a connection to an idealised past.

the apparently mimetically reflective documentary leads us to suppose that, by documenting the band returning to the people who truly know them, we the audience are also being allowed to see the “real them”.

One of the criticisms of reality television is that it produces stars who are “‘well known’ simply for their ‘well-knownness’” (Daniel Boorstin cited in Holmes 2005, p.148). One way we see this criticism negated in the film is with the continual interspersing of live performance footage (shown in fig.3) between the interview and documentary content. This continual refocusing of the audience’s attention on the band’s abilities to sing and perform live serve as a persistent reminder of a perceived worthiness of their position. Whilst we see a connection to the band’s work ethic and innate natural singing abilities, the main focus of the band’s fulfilment of “stardoms” expectations of extraordinariness seem to be fulfilled in the films focus on their extraordinary achievements, and so could arguably play in to Boorstin’s criticisms. Holmes (2005, p.158) has cited the work of Gamson in arguing that programmes like *Pop Idol* walk “a tenuous line in seeking to reconcile a conception of stardom as ‘bestowed,’ ‘pre-destined,’ and based on a ‘indefinable internal quality of the self’ with the discourses of labour, production, and commercial enterprise”. We see these discourses carefully negotiated by the film at various points, where on one hand there is a heavy focus towards the band’s sense of fun, there is also attention drawn to the work and effort required to achieve their success⁴. A surprising exposition of these negotiations comes from one of the security team as he describes his role: “People might look at it and say, ‘this is not very



Fig.3: Images of performance footage

⁴ This is evidenced during one sequence (1:18:56–1:19:54) where band member Niall says, “recording this third album has been extremely hard... we’ve been waking up in the morning and going straight to the studio and then going to the arena and doing a show, and then going straight back to the studio after the show... so it’s been really tough for us this time.”

professional with all the clown acting and jumping and fighting and that kind of stuff.' But that's just part and parcel of what One Direction is" (58:16– 58:27). Wrapped up in this statement is an understanding of the apparent paradox of the amount of effort and work required to make something feel so effortless and fun.

In the penultimate sequence of the film, the band are preparing for their biggest show to date: a performance to 65,000 people in Mexico City. As part of this build up, through a montage of interview footage, the band reflect on the status as pop stars. They attribute their success and status, not to any single factor or condition, but to a melting pot of reasons: "When I think about how lucky we are to be in this position..." says Liam; "One of the best things about all of this is that I have made four new best friends" say Louis; "We're all there for each other and that's why it works" say Harry; "The fans completely changed our lives" he explains; "It's important that we let the fans know that this is a teamwork between us and them" says Louis; "We don't take it too seriously and that's the main sort of thing that we all live by and that's what keeps us, you know, as us" says Liam (1:36:45–1:37:14). Tied in with these statements are the melange of factors that have helped to construct the band's identity as pop stars: their identity and authenticity that is founded in their ordinariness and their rise to fame through the TV show *The X Factor*; their extraordinary global success as a measure of their worthiness and as evidence of the truthfulness of the "myth of success"; their focus on a fun expression of youth culture which serves as a key point of identification for their audience and the exposition of the "complex questions" that reality TV's focus on the ordinary person has raised about our approach to conceptualising constructions of fame (Holmes 2005, p.149). In conclusion, we can return to Meizel's (2009) study of *American Idol* and the format's celebration of contestants who, whilst they may meet some of the technical expectations of the show, fail to meet other social or technical requirements placed upon them, but find success regardless. We can speculate then, whether part of One Direction's appeal and success is an extension of this phenomena due, in part at least, to their failure to meet some of the technical and social expectations associated with boy bands. As band member Louis Tomlinson

expresses so pointedly, even if intended humorously, "It would just be amazing to be remembered like... One Direction, they just had fun... they were just normal guys but terrible, terrible dancers" (1:13:06).

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Video:

ONE DIRECTION: THIS IS US (EXTENDED FAN EDITION), 2013 [Film]. Directed by M. SPURLOCK. UK: 1D3D Ltd; Columbia Pictures; Sony Pictures Entertainment