



Imitation, Contestation and Competition

Authentication Strategies in Media-Driven Society

Irene Stengs
Meertens Institute

To continue the conversation on Imitation, I would like to take up three interrelated issues raised by David Chidester (2010) in his 'Reflections on Imitation': 'mimetic rivalry', 'mimetic desire' and 'the creativity of imitation'. Chidester's reflections are particularly helpful in further exploring a domain where authenticity, imitation and popular culture interconnect in a specific way: mass media. As the empirical substrate for this exercise I want to return to the legacy of André Hazes (1951-2004), the 'out-of-the-ordinarily ordinary' Dutch singer, whose songs and appearance live on in a sing-along culture with strong mimetic and commemorative features. At their gatherings, Hazes' fans mimic their idol in an 'emotional con-habitual' (Söffner 2010: 96)

singing of his songs, by imitating his appearance (Hazes' blues-brother hat, black T-shirts, sunglasses) and ritualizing his habits (smoking cigarettes, drinking beers) (see Chidester 2010; Stengs 2009, 2010). Elaborating on authenticity and imitation in connection with the André Hazes devotion, Chidester argues that an understanding of imitation should acknowledge that mimetic participation ('mimetic sharing', Söffner 2010: 96-97) inescapably implies mimetic rivalry (Chidester 2010: 146). Indeed, although the fans' drive for participating in the collective performances stems from their 'unconditional love for André' and their wish that 'he will always be remembered', these motivations are not self-evident or neutral, but take place in, and are shaped by,

< Andre Hazes fans posing with Hazes' statue at the Albert Cuyp street market in Amsterdam (commemoration 23 September 2009). Photo by Irene Stengs.

a field of contestation and competition. The issue at stake in the contestation may be described as the authority over the true legacy of Hazes, the ownership of his authenticity so to say, with the fans and Hazes' family as rivaling parties. The competition takes place among the fans themselves, who challenge each other time and again to express their devotion in ever more creative or elaborate ways. Chidester's subdivision of Edward Brunner's four indicators of authenticity – mimetic credibility, accurate simulation, housing of original objects and authorization by legitimate authority – in two categories, one creating symbolic surplus, the other creating symbolic scarcity clarifies the different ways in which contestation and competition unfold (Chidester 2010: 145-146). Contestation is governed by scarcity; the creativity evoked by competition generates and thrives on abundance.

Hazes' heritage includes relics (primarily his ashes), songs, texts, recordings, footage and photographs, and, at least as important for his fans, his 'way of being'. Except for the ashes and Hazes' personal belongings, these heirlooms carry the potential of endless reproduction. Yet, Hazes' widow Rachel – the heiress of the 'original' Hazes material and hence the 'legitimate authority' (Chidester 2010: 146) – creates symbolic scarcity by prohibiting any other party to use Hazes material of which she owns the copyright. Within a year after Hazes' death, to mention one example, Rachel legally summoned the website *andrehazesfan* (originally established with Hazes' consent) to remove all copyright-protected Hazes photographs from the site (as well as his music). Copyright-protected material, then, entails authentic material that: a) is original and protected by law as a property, and b) is media-related. The general import of copyright is,

in my view, characteristic for a time in which the reproductive capacity of the media is regarded as one of the greatest threats to anything 'authentic'. Inevitably, such contestations are about money and power.

Although Rachel and fans share the ideal that 'André may live on forever', their means to establish this objective are very different. Rachel's access to and authority over the original Hazes products allow her to organize commemorative events with 'Hazes himself' being present. An example of such an event is the concert organised in commemoration of Hazes' day of birth in May 2008, titled 'In Concert together with Dré' (*Samen met Dré in Concert*). In the concert, opened by Hazes' singing teenage children, celebrated *levenslied* performers sang their favorite André Hazes songs 'in duet' with Hazes on screen, the audience joining them in a mass karaoke guided by the subtitles on the screen. The broadcast of the event, later also sold on DVD, featured regular close-ups of a proud Rachel. Rachel's exclusive access to the original Hazes material provides, in addition to money, media access. The present societal dichotomy in which people, objects and events 'in the media' are allocated a higher status and a higher degree of authenticity (as they are more 'real') than those 'not in the media' (Couldry 2003: 27, 48), has made celebrity status desirable. Since Rachel can only be in the media through events that are connected with Hazes, symbolic scarcity is her weapon in the struggle for media attention and societal importance.¹

The ordinary fans organize their own sing-along concerts to commemorate their idol on the anniversaries of his day of birth and day of death. In addition, they organize Hazes fan days, Hazes nights, Hazes meetings and other more modest events throughout the year.

Especially at the most important occasions, many fans participate in these events as Hazes look-alikes wearing hats, sunglasses and black clothing. Although Hazes' appearance provides a clear 'blue-print' for imitation,² the practice of imitation simultaneously evokes 'creative interventions' (Chidester 2010: 151). In a playful, sometimes almost carnivalesque atmosphere, the fans compete in 'originality,' and in abundance, as tokens of their devotion. With self-made Hazes attributes such as embroidered Hazes images, self-designed screen prints, cartoons, embellished belts, scarves, jewelry and, last but not least, Hazes tattoos, the Hazes fans create their own authentic Hazes materials. There is no apparent limit to this production of symbolic surplus.

Following René Girard's analysis of mimetic rivalry, 'mimetic desire' – a desiring for objects 'that are the objects of someone else's desire' – is the core of both contestation and competition (Chidester 2010: 146). Precisely this aspect of mimetic desire ensures that the abundance produced by creative imitation can never fully compensate the lack of access to scarce originals. In the Hazes case, this desire is the engine that keeps the parties moving in a game that is played out in the media. For the Hazes fans, the discontent comes to the fore in a quest for the remaining share of the singer's ashes,³ which Rachel reputedly had buried in a secret location. When the spot was eventually discovered (in May 2010), the widow sought to regain her control over Hazes' authenticity by having the urn removed and secretly reburied elsewhere.

E-mail: Irene.Stengs@meertens.knaw.nl

Notes

- 1 In Rojek terms, Rachel is a typical example of a 'celetoid': 'a media-generated, compressed, concentrated form of attributed celebrity,' celebrity without any special skill or talent (Rojek 2001: 18).
- 2 Hazes himself was the creative force behind the Hazes imitation practice, which started in 2002, the year he introduced his 'blues-brother outfit'. That year, at a concert in the Olympic Stadium in Amsterdam, 20,000 Hazes outfits were sold. Hazes, his wife and a few friends prepared these packages at home as the Hazes family wanted to keep the revenues for themselves (Haagsma 2005: 169-170, *De Telegraaf* 14/8/2002)
- 3 The larger part of Hazes' ashes has been disposed in a series of funeral rituals in 2005. For an analysis of the potential and impact of the combination of, what I call, 'serial disposal', celebrity culture and media, see Stengs (2009).

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Stengs, Irene

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