Fabricating the Absolute Fake - revised edition

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“Dear wonderful, beautiful Europe. I know we’ve had our disagreements in the past, but I’m here to tell you, I have never stopped loving you, Europe.” These words are spoken by President George W. Bush on January 26, 2005, at a special press conference in the Netherlands, broadcast on the television comedy show Kopspijkers (VARA, 1995-2005). Then Bush starts to sing: “Maybe I didn’t treat you, quite as good as I should have. Maybe I didn’t love you, quite as much as I could have. I’m so sorry about Abu Ghraib, and Kyoto I should have signed. But you were always on my mind, Europe, you were always on my mind.” Obviously, this is not the real President Bush singing, but a parody, performed by the Dutch comedian Thomas van Luyn. Sung in American English with a slight country twinge and subtitled in Dutch for the viewers at home, Bush’s rendition of the Elvis Presley classic “Always on My Mind” plays with the stereotype of American ignorance versus European intellectualism. Admitting that he has never cared much for “those little countries you live in, with your museums and those books you read,” President Bush delivers a melodramatic plea, with vocal harmonies provided by his bodyguards, asking Europe to “give me one more chance to get you on my side.” The parody works not only because American pop culture is used to satirize American international politics, but also because of the (easily overlooked) factor that the Dutch viewers must be familiar with American pop culture. Knowing the original version of “Always on My Mind,” or recognizing its genre conventions, is crucial for getting the joke.

“America is the original version of modernity,” writes Jean Baudrillard in America, adding: “We [in Europe] are the dubbed or subtitled version.” His use of dubbing and subtitling as metaphor is striking, as the cultural appropriation of “America” in European pop cultures is most explicitly visible in audiovisual media such as film, television, and internet. In this chapter, I will use Dutch pop culture as a starting point to examine how such appropriation takes place.
“America” is omnipresent in Dutch pop culture, not only through the consumption of products that are actually made in the USA, but also through the production of pop-cultural artifacts such as movies, television programs, and music videos that are made in the Netherlands and seem to imitate American pop culture. Even in times of renewed European anti-Americanism, American pop culture continues to be popular, functioning as the “original” to which the local “national” pop culture is compared. How should we perceive these “American” but “made in Holland” artifacts? Are they merely imitations, the one more successful than the other, or have we instead made the American audiovisual language and genre conventions our own to such an extent that we can take the comparison with the American original for granted? “We are always the last link in these chains of mediation, the final recipients of messages from America,” suggests Rob Kroes. “In that position we are never purely and only passive, gradually losing our Dutchness while becoming even more American. We make room for ‘America’ in a context of meaning and significance that is ours.”2 It is within this context of meaning and significance that I want to explore how “we” redefine “America” through the appropriation of the American original in Dutch pop culture.

To address these questions, I will use the concept of “the American I never was,” borrowed from Chris Keulemans, the concept of the absolute fake, as coined by Umberto Eco, and the concept of karaoke Americanism, as coined by Thomas Elsaesser. These concepts can help to discuss Americanized Dutch pop culture as a form of hyper-Americanness without having to fall back upon too essentialist notions of what should be considered American or Dutch, thereby leaving room for more ambivalent and overlapping identities. Subsequently, I will apply these concepts to four different case studies of Dutch celebrities: singer Lee Towers, media personalities Adam Curry and Patricia Paay, actress Katja Schuurman, and Moroccan-Dutch rapper Ali B. Together, these four examples of “Americans they never were” show different ways in which American pop culture has been translated within a Dutch pop-cultural context.

Hyper-Americanness and Karaoke Americanism

Immediately after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, “we were all Americans,” as suggested by the famous headline of the French newspaper *Le Monde.*3 At the political level, this transatlantic solidarity between Europe and the USA proved to be a short-lived sentiment, as soon it was challenged by the unilateral stance of the Bush administration – with its War on Terror and the subsequent war in Iraq – resulting in a revival of European anti-Americanism.
As Rob Kroes has pointed out, such anti-Americanism is not new, but rooted in two long European traditions. On the one hand, there is a European anti-Americanism which despises the alleged shallowness of American pop culture, but admires the “prowess, idealism, and optimism” of American politics, whereas on the other, there is a European anti-Americanism which “rejects an American political creed that, for all its missionary zeal, is perceived as imperialist and oppressive, while it admires American culture, from its highbrow to its pop varieties.”4 Politically, Europeans might no longer be Americans, but culturally “we” remain, to use the concept of Chris Keulemans, “Americans we never were,” living within a society that is permeated with American pop culture. As Europeans, we have grown up with Walt Disney, Hollywood, Coca-Cola, and American television programs, and we recognize these pop-cultural artifacts as belonging both to “America” as well as to our own culture in which we have lived all our lives.

The ambivalent position of political anti-Americanism combined with a very personal investment in American pop culture was the focus of the art exhibition This is America: Visions on the American Dream, held by the Centraal Museum Utrecht in 2006. The exhibition takes as its starting point that “we all carry the American Dream within us, yet, similar to this dreamed America, we also cannot break loose from the America that we despise.”5 By bringing together artwork by contemporary international artists, ranging from Candice Breitz and Aernout Mik to Tom Sachs and the Guerrilla Girls, with American photorealistic paintings from the 1960s and 1970s, the exhibition emphasizes how images of American consumerist culture have become iconic representations of an imagined America around the world. In addition to these works, the exhibition includes a book with autobiographical perspectives on the American Dream written by Dutch writers, journalists, and scholars. These essays show how, in spite of possible objections to the politics of the nation-state USA, most authors remain personally connected to the pop culture of their imagined America. The essay by Joost Zwagerman, for example, argues that the America of one’s youth cannot be disassociated from the contemporary one, as there remains a strong familiarity with America, one which is rooted in American pop culture, and, regardless of the great distance, is not “virtual or imaginary,” but “intensely sensual and passionate,” inviting us to identify ourselves as being “American.”6

With his multimedia project The American I Never Was, Chris Keulemans shows how American pop culture, and specifically film (West Side Story, Taxi Driver), pop music (James Brown, Bruce Springsteen, USA for Africa), and pop-cultural icons (Batman and Robin, Muhammad Ali), has shaped his life and colored his memories.7 Although born in the Netherlands, Keulemans grew
up in different international places, including Tunisia, Iraq, and Indonesia, and more importantly, attended international American elementary schools where he was taught to be “a little American patriot, ready for Junior High.” However, instead of “returning” to New Jersey, the American state that had become his imagined home (although he had never actually been there), Keulemans returned to the Netherlands, where, eventually, he became more critical of the nation-state USA: “I was raised with the stereotypical, unabashed, happy and heroic image that the USA could export of itself with impunity until 1968. After that I learned, like my whole generation, the darker sides of America: from Iran gate to the Gulf War, from the permanent segregation to the omnipresent commercialization. Still, I never completely lost touch with that little boy’s paradise.” Once, as part of his project, Keulemans finally does visit New Jersey, his imaginary home, it proves to be an ambivalent experience. On the one hand, he recognizes “home” from all the images embedded in his memory, yet, on the other, the confrontation with the “real” New Jersey, especially when he attends a local 9/11 memorial, makes Keulemans realize he is not an American after all.

Even though Chris Keulemans uses “the American I never was” to express his own personal experience, the concept can be applied more generally to look at the way Dutch people have grown up with American pop culture, incorporating “America” within their everyday lives, histories, and memories. Indeed, as Rob Kroes points out: “Generation upon generation of Europeans, growing up after the war, can all tell their own story of a mythical America as they constructed it, drawing on American advertisements, songs, film, and so on.” In this sense, we are all Americans we never were, experiencing American pop culture as both foreign and local. The distinction between what is American and what is Dutch has become blurred and seemingly irrelevant.

To grasp this blurred Dutch American pop culture, I need to go beyond the rigid dichotomies that traditionally mark the divide between America and Europe, including – but not limited to – American shallowness versus European depth, American artificiality versus European authenticity, American populism versus European intellectualism, and American lack of history versus European sense of history. In *European Cinema*, Thomas Elsaesser recognizes a similar distinction in the relation between European cinemas and Hollywood. Rightfully arguing that we should move beyond such dichotomies, Elsaesser identifies them to show how the divide between Europe and Hollywood continues to be applied:

Europe stands for art, and the US for pop; Europe for high culture, America for mass entertainment; Europe for artisanal craft, America for industrial mass production; Europe for state (subsidy), Hollywood for
Although seemingly antagonistic, the two poles of this rigid distinction actually complement each other, being two sides of the same coin. As Thomas Elsaesser shows, European national cinemas develop not so much in opposition to, but in relation with Hollywood, “existing in a space set up like a hall of mirrors, in which recognition, imaginary identity and mis-cognition enjoy equal status, creating value out of pure difference.”\textsuperscript{12} Applied to pop culture in general, the distinction between a highbrow Europe versus a lowbrow America, defined in opposition to each other, sustains the cultural industries on both sides of the Atlantic.

How this divide works is shown by the way both American and Dutch film critics review the Dutch film \textit{Antonia} (Marleen Gorris, 1995), internationally released as \textit{Antonia’s Line}, which celebrates female independency with a story of four generations of women living in a small Dutch village. American film critics tend to perceive \textit{Antonia} as a European art film. The \textit{Boston Review}, for example, recognizes \textit{Antonia} as “Mozartian in its beauty – so artfully made that we are carried along by the surprising flow of the narrative without being forced to recognize the intellectual daring and craft of the filmmaker.”\textsuperscript{13} Dutch film critics, on the contrary, and writing after the film has won the Academy Award in the best foreign language film category, accuse \textit{Antonia}’s director Marleen Gorris of having made a Hollywood movie. In his article “Why Americans love \textit{Antonia},” Hans Kroon suggests that Americans love the escapism which \textit{Antonia} provides, as its simplistic and folkloric portrayal of life in an imaginary countryside enables its spectators to find temporary relief away from their own hectic existence. Tom Ronse sees the American popularity as proof of \textit{Antonia}’s American shallowness, claiming that its one-dimensional character makes the film “ready to eat, easily digestible.” According to Ab van Ieperen, \textit{Antonia} is a Dutch feminist version of the American pioneer western, including its convention of letting the plot prevail over character development.\textsuperscript{14} Regardless of whether or not these film critics, both the American and the Dutch ones, are correct in their judgments, they all reinforce the traditional distinction between America and Europe. However, they also reveal its limitations, as \textit{Antonia} embodies, on the American side, European depth, and, on the Dutch side, American shallowness.
This traditional Europe versus America divide is further undermined by the “American” pop culture produced in Europe. Throughout the twentieth century, Europeans often have denounced American pop culture as empty and shallow, as superficial and artificial. However, simultaneously, Europeans have denounced European expressions of pop culture – particularly pop music and commercial “feel good” cinema – as weak imitations of the American “real thing.” The result is a peculiar reversal. Although American pop culture continues to be perceived as artificial, when discussing European commercial pop culture, the American artificiality suddenly becomes American authenticity. As discussed in chapter one, the perception of American pop culture as being authentic is based on its initial role as a rebellious form of expression for European youth subcultures, which recognized that it was not empty and shallow, but open to new meanings and liberating values.15 Winfried Fluck suggests that “even the most conventional and maligned symbols of American consumer culture such as Coca-Cola or McDonald’s bear a connotation of informality that can still be experienced as liberating by young people in many parts of the world.”16 The attractiveness of American pop culture and the recognition of its authenticity are today no longer limited to youth subcultures (although new forms of American popular culture, like hip-hop, may still function in this way), but tend to be widely accepted among different generations. Especially when compared to Dutch pop-cultural artifacts, American pop culture has become the authentic standard.

To understand how a pop culture that traditionally had been perceived as shallow and artificial can become a sign of authenticity, it is helpful to use the concept of hyperreality. Based on their travels in the USA, Umberto Eco and Jean Baudrillard both have used hyperreality to describe how they have experienced “America.” Yet, these two European intellectuals use hyperreality in significantly different ways. Eco, in his Travels in Hyperreality, focuses on how American culture consists of perfect copies of original cultural artifacts. Citing Disneyland and Las Vegas as well as the full-scale copy of the Oval Office in the LBJ Library and the copy of the Manhattan Purchase Act (in English rather than in its original Dutch) at the Museum of the City of New York, Eco shows that these artifacts are not merely copies, but are even more perfect than the originals. “To speak of things that one wants to connote as real, these things must seem real. The ‘completely real’ becomes identified with the ‘completely fake.’ Absolute unreality is offered as real presence.” It is this search for “reality” – or better, as Eco recalls the Coca-Cola slogan, “the real thing” – that makes American popular culture hyperreal. According to Eco, “the American imagination demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake.”17 The absolute fake is not merely an imitation, but a hyperbole.
of the original, more “real” and “authentic” than the original. Umberto Eco’s hyperreality differs significantly from Baudrillard’s, as Eco’s still refers to an original, while Baudrillard perceives the hyperreal America as living “in perpetual simulation, in a perpetual present of signs.” In Baudrillard’s America, as discussed in chapter three, the original no longer exists, as it is already a copy of a copy, a simulacrum, just another sign in an endless chain of signs that only refer to each other.

Rob Kroes rightly points out that both Eco’s and Baudrillard’s notion of American hyperreality remains quintessentially European. Whereas, on the one hand, Europeans tend to perceive American culture as “empty” (thus shallow, superficial, lacking the historical and artistic depth that allegedly constitutes traditional European culture), on the other, the “emptiness” of America enables Europeans to fill up this space with their own images of America, an imagined America, often using the images provided by American pop culture. In this way, America functions as a mirror image of Europe, as an empty screen on which such “liberating” concepts as lack of history and lack of significance can be projected. Yet, the concept of hyperreality proves useful when discussing the Americanization of Dutch pop culture and the appropriation of American pop-cultural signs in Dutch pop-cultural production. Eco’s hyperreality may turn out to be the most effective, as it still recognizes the “original” – in this case the American pop-cultural artifacts that, as hyperreality, are perceived by the Dutch public as “the real thing.” Dutch pop-cultural artifacts that imitate American pop culture, on the contrary, are easily recognized as “fakes.” To paraphrase Eco, “the Dutch imagination demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake” through presenting a hyperreal imitation of American pop culture. I use the term “hyper-Americanness” to describe this Dutch absolute fake, which is, after all, a hyperreal copy of an American original that, in its turn, is also a hyperreal copy. Hyper-Americanness is so “American” that Dutch people may recognize it as “really American,” while Americans may not recognize it as “American” at all. Again, an ironic twist of argument is the result, as now Europe signifies artificiality, while America is its authentic original. By naming America the “original version of modernity,” even Jean Baudrillard had to admit that in this case an original copy does exist. “We merely imitate them, parody them with a fifty-year time lag, and we are not even successful at that.”

Yet, the perception of Dutch pop-cultural artifacts as absolute fakes, rather than mere imitations or parodies, makes room for interpretations that rely less on the question of whether or not the dubbed or subtitled version is a successful copy of the American “original” one. Instead, the focus shifts to how American pop culture – its genre conventions and audiovisual
language – can function as an international lingua franca in the shaping of national or other cultural identities. By recognizing the hyper-American character of the absolute fake, its explicit Americanness can be analyzed as part of a larger pop-cultural discourse, without getting trapped in the Europe versus America divide. Moreover, by approaching Dutch pop culture in this way, both sides of the Americanization debate – emphasizing either its being a form of cultural imperialism or instead a form of cultural appropriation – can be acknowledged, as well as the ambiguity between anti-Americanism and a personal investment in American pop culture. A similar approach is suggested by Thomas Elsaesser, who defines what I call hyper-Americanness as a discourse of karaoke Americanism. As Elsaesser explains, “besides the discourse of anti-Americanism and of counter-Americanism, we may have to find the terms of another discourse: let me call it, … the discourse of karaoke-Americanism – that doubly coded space of identity as overlap and deferral, as compliment and camouflage.”

To explore this notion of hyper-Americanness in Dutch pop culture further, I will apply the concepts of the absolute fake and karaoke Americanism to four specific examples of Dutch stardom. As discussed in chapter one, American stars can be viewed as ideological ambassadors of American pop culture, embodying many different and often contradictory values. Building on Richard Dyer’s notion that the star myth is heavily invested in the American Dream, I want to explore how Dutch celebrities fit within such an American-inspired star myth. The focus on stars rather than (only) on specific films, television programs, or music videos has the advantage of recognizing the values of Americanness that the star myth embodies. The four case studies of Dutch stardom – Lee Towers, Adam Curry and Patricia Paay, Katja Schuurman, and Ali B – are all related to American pop culture, albeit each in a different way. By approaching them as Americans they never were, as examples of hyper-American absolute fakes performing karaoke Americanism, I am able to analyze how these Dutch stars appropriate the signs, genre conventions, and audiovisual language of American pop culture in their performances and in the construction of their star images. Without suggesting that these particular stars present the only way in which American pop culture has been appropri-
ated in the Netherlands, or that they are representative of the whole of Dutch pop culture, these four case studies of Dutch “Americans they never were” do present telling examples of pop-cultural appropriation.

**Lee Towers: Living the American Dream**

The ultimate American he never was in Dutch pop culture is undoubtedly singer Lee Towers, whose stage name in itself is a reference to American pop culture. The Dutch National Pop Institute describes him as “the Dutch cross between Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett, and Elvis Presley in his Las Vegas years.”23 Always dressed in a black tuxedo and black tie, and holding a golden microphone, Lee Towers has appropriated the American image of the Las Vegas crooner as an easily recognizable trademark. His repertoire consists primarily of cover versions of American show tunes and evergreens, including “You’ll Never Walk Alone,” “I Can See Clearly Now,” and “New York, New York.” In the 1980s, Towers became widely credited for being an “un-Dutch” performer with an international style and grandeur, being the first national pop artist to perform in large stadiums like the Rotterdam Ahoy, which previously had hosted only international stars. In 1995, Towers received the Graceland Award from the Estate of Elvis Presley (and the honor to call himself “one of the King’s men”) for his album *Lee Towers Sings Elvis* (1994). When, in 2002, former President Bill Clinton visited Rotterdam, the hometown of the Holland-America Line, Lee Towers performed especially for him, singing Neil Diamond’s “America,” a song celebrating America as the “sweet land of liberty” for immigrants coming from all over the world. In spite of not being an American immigrant himself, Lee Towers has made the American rhetoric his own to such an extent that his praise of America as the Beacon of Freedom and Democracy almost naturally befits his star image.

Lee Towers is a significant example of Americanization, not only because his imitation is so explicit that it becomes almost like a parody, a pastiche, but also because his star myth is based on American iconography, and the American Dream in particular. In his biography entitled “Why he believed in his dream,” published on his official website, Towers is described as the “Rotterdam realist who fulfilled his American Dream.”24 His American Dream is a rags-to riches story of “the singing crane operator” Leen Huyzer who becomes the famous star Lee Towers. The website makes an explicit distinction between “the star” and Leen Huyzer, “the man behind Lee Towers … [who] has remained an ordinary human being,” reinforcing the notion that his hyper-Americanness is an imitative performance. When, on March 25, 2002, he is the celebrity guest

**Americans We Never Were**

103
on the Dutch television talk show *Kevin Masters Starring Tom Rhodes* (Yorin, 2001-2003), Lee Towers exclaims that he is living his own American Dream right here in the Netherlands. That Towers makes his exclamation on *Kevin Masters* is fitting, as this talk show can also be perceived as hyper-American. Hosted by the American stand-up comedian Tom Rhodes and his side-kick E-Life, a Dutch black hip-hop artist, *Kevin Masters* can best be described as an – almost literal – imitation of the *Late Show with David Letterman* (CBS, 1993–present). Although both the audience and the celebrity guests are Dutch, the whole show is done in American English, with Dutch subtitles for the viewers at home. The show’s premise is based on the interaction between American and Dutch culture, playing with the stereotypes of both. Its imitative character is emphasized by the talk show’s title: Kevin Masters is not a real-life person, but a fictional American talk show host being performed by an American comedian. But it is Lee Towers who makes the show’s hyper-Americanness most visible, appearing to be more “American” than its host. As Tom Rhodes later recalled: “Lee learned how to speak English from Elvis Presley. This guy is who Elvis should have been. ‘I believe in my dreams,’ he said that about three times. ‘How did this happen for me? I believe in my dreams, Tommy.’ I’m like sitting there talking to Elvis, man.”

More than merely imitating American pop culture, however, Lee Towers translates his hyper-Americanness into a local and national idiom. His live shows may be “American,” Towers remains the “Rotterdam realist” who lives his Dutch American Dream. As his nickname “the singing crane operator” emphasizes, his star image is strongly rooted in Rotterdam working-class culture, exemplified by his identification with the Rotterdam harbor and the local soccer club Feyenoord, for which he recorded the club song “Mijn Feyenoord” (1997). Lee Towers starred in a 1999 television commercial for the local brand of Van Nelle coffee, sipping coffee on a tugboat in the Rotterdam harbor. On his album *My Port of Rotterdam* (2003), he pays tribute to Rotterdam with American classics like Tina Turner’s “The Best” and Otis Redding’s “(Sittin’ on) The Dock of the Bay,” as well as with original songs, including the album’s title track and “Rotterdam Is the City.” In his bombastic Las Vegas style, Towers sings, with a strong American English accent, “I’ve seen the land of good old Uncle Sam, … but to tell the truth, no matter where I am, wherever I roam, my home sweet home is Rotterdam.” In this manner, Lee Towers does not merely imitate but appropriates American pop culture, in a hyper-American form, to express his local identity.

That the hyper-Americanness of Towers is translated not only into a local but a national idiom as well is shown by his performance of “One Moment in Time,” originally recorded by African-American pop diva Whitney Houston
for the 1988 Olympic games. Lee Towers sang his rendition of the song at his final “Legendary Gala of the Year” in the Rotterdam Ahoy’ stadium in October 2000. As the music starts, Towers gives a speech in Dutch: “Not that long ago, we were glued to our television screens during the Olympic games. We watched our heroes win gold medals. We were crying with pride as the Dutch flag was raised. We are such a tiny country. An absolute all-time record for Holland.” Lee Towers is referring to the 2000 Olympic games in Sydney, where the Dutch athletes won a relatively large number of medals. He continues to talk about how great “our heroes” are and how long it takes to prepare for such an event. Then Towers shifts into English, stating: “At that moment in time, you got it.”

During his subsequent bombastic performance of “One Moment in Time,” a large screen behind him on stage shows images of the Dutch athletes, alternated with images of the Dutch flag. The combination of American pop music, sports, and patriotism makes this Towers performance very similar to the annual Super Bowl performances of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” albeit without the presence of the military. Yet, while the Super Bowl celebrates the “greatest nation in the world,” Towers used the genre conventions and audiovisual language of American pop culture to celebrate the extraordinary achievement of “our tiny country,” thereby effectively translating the generic American original into a specifically Dutch national context.

Five years later, Lee Towers gives another performance which combines American pop culture with Dutch patriotism, this time connecting the Dutch national soccer team to the Dutch royal family, both of which are symbolized by the national and royal color orange, explaining why Dutch patriotism is often referred to as the “orange sentiment.” During the national television broadcast to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of Queen Beatrix as the reigning monarch of the Netherlands (TROS, 30 April 2005), Towers performs “You’ll Never Walk Alone,” surrounded by a group of young children dressed in the orange uniform of the Dutch national soccer team. The song, which was a hit single for Towers back in 1976, is originally from the American Rodgers & Hammerstein musical Carousel (1948), but, as television host Ivo Niehe reminds the viewers, is now best known as, rather paradoxically, “the international soccer national anthem.” While Lee Towers is giving his trademark Las Vegas style performance, the camera zooms in on individual audience members, waving their arms to the beat of the music, including Crown Prince Willem Alexander and his wife Princess Máxima. In one sweeping performance, Lee Towers connects the love for the national sports team to an uncontested support of the Dutch monarchy, using American pop culture to join the audience in a collective orange sentiment, an unbridled expression of Dutch patriotism. Thus, Lee Towers can use the same American conventions
and rhetoric to praise “America” in front of former President Bill Clinton, to express his local identification with the city of Rotterdam, and to celebrate Dutch patriotism in front of Queen Beatrix, all based on his being an embodiment of the American Dream in the Netherlands.

**Adam Curry and Patricia Paay: The Glamour of America**

One evening in early 2003, on the Dutch talk show *Barend & Van Dorp* (RTL4, 1990-2005), two wars are being discussed. The main discussion is focused on the pending war in Iraq. Should the Dutch politicians support or oppose the American military intervention? Subsequently, the second topic is introduced as the “War of the Divas.” The only female guest, Connie Breukhoven, a former pop singer better known as Vanessa, has been invited to express her heartfelt discontent about the reality television show *Adam’s Family* (SBS6, 2003), based on the daily life of former MTV veejay Adam Curry and singer Patricia Paay (who, like Vanessa, is often referred to as a “diva” – hence the topic’s title). According to Vanessa, the main problem of *Adam’s Family*, in addition to being an absolute bore, is its fakeness. Not only are Paay’s hair extensions fake, but also the way Curry and Paay talk, a peculiar mixture of Dutch and American English. The talk show’s juxtaposition of these two very different “wars” is striking, revealing how easily television can make a connection between the seriousness of international warfare and something trivial like hair extensions and fake accents. Eventually both discussions focus on American dominance, in international politics as well as in Dutch pop culture. Supporting the war in Iraq means giving into the pressures of the USA, the talk show’s hosts suggest, while Adam Curry and Patricia Paay are pretentious fakes because they act American rather than Dutch.

In the pilot episode of *Adam’s Family* (SBS6, 28 December 2002), Adam Curry and Patricia Paay are sitting on the couch watching the *Top of the Pops Awards* on television. Seeing the young British pop stars perform makes Paay remark that stardom surely has changed over the years. “There isn’t a difference anymore between an ordinary person and a star,” she tells Curry in Dutch. “In the old days, you didn’t become a star unless you were really special, different than the others.” Paay is referring to the 1970s and 1980s, when she herself was a Dutch pop star, with hit singles such as the disco song “Who’s that Lady with My Man” (1976), the ballad “Tomorrow” (1982) from the Broadway musical *Annie*, and, with the Star Sisters, “Stars on 45 Proudly Presents” (1983), a medley of songs made famous by the Andrew Sisters. As radio deejay and television host, Adam Curry also has a background in pop stardom, both in the Nether-
lands, where, in the 1980s, he hosted the pop music television show *Countdown* (Veronica), and, subsequently, in the USA as veejay on MTV. Born in the USA but raised in the Netherlands, Curry quite easily fits in his role of being a “real” American, which was reconfirmed, at least for Dutch viewers, by his cameo appearance in the Madonna documentary *Truth or Dare* (Alek Keshishian, 1991). For Patricia Paay, being the American she never was contributes to the authentication of her star myth, her being a “real” star.

Throughout her singing career, Patricia Paay has made explicit references to American pop culture in her songs and in the way she presented herself as a pop singer. The compact disc *Patricia Paay: Good for Gold* (1996) contains all the hit singles Paay released during the 1970s and 1980s, many being cover versions of American pop songs, ranging from a disco rendition of Walt Disney’s “Someday My Prince Will Come” to Neil Sedaka’s “Solitaire.” However, *Good for Gold* also contains original songs, some co-composed by Paay, which closely follow the American pop conventions. In one of the self-composed songs, called “Take Me Back to Denver,” Patricia Paay sings that she wants to go back to Colorado, “the place where I was born.” In “The Best Friend I Know,” a duet with her sister Yvonne Keeley, Paay recalls how they used to create a “fantasy world” based on Hollywood movies, pretending that her sister was Clark Gable and she was Marilyn Monroe. Patricia Paay reinforces the Monroe connection by releasing the single “A Tribute to Marilyn Monroe” (1984) and by posing nude for the Dutch edition of *Playboy* magazine three times (September 1984, November 1986, and May 1996), including one cover shot reminiscent of the first American *Playboy* featuring Monroe in 1953. Paay’s album *Time of My Life* (1995) consists of her renditions of Hollywood movie themes, including the title track, the theme of *Dirty Dancing* (Emile Ardolino, 1987), sung in duet with the American television star David Hasselhoff from *Baywatch* (NBC, 1989–1999). With her pop repertoire, her overall presentation as a sexy starlet, and, arguably, her marriage to MTV veejay Adam Curry, Patricia Paay recreates a fantasy world of American stardom in the Netherlands, tapping into the American star myth.

When, in 1987, Adam Curry and Patricia Paay migrate to the USA, their American Dream materializes. In an interview with the Dutch edition of *Playboy* magazine, Paay explains that living in the USA offers them the opportunity to fulfill their ambitions, while in the Netherlands their potential was curtailed by a prevailing attitude of Dutch parochialism. “I love America and I have always known that I would end up here, one way or another.” From the perspective of the Dutch audience, however, Curry and Paay’s American life remains a fantasy world, an imagined America of glamour and luxury. The Dutch tabloids report stories about their New York jet-set life and their socializing with
American stars such as Madonna, Cher, and Jon Bon Jovi. Adam Curry’s career move from MTV veejay to internet entrepreneur is described by the tabloids as a classic American Dream narrative, the self-made man who became a millionaire. Even the birth of their “love child” Christina in September 1990, featured on the covers of all Dutch tabloids, is presented as a glamorous American experience, as their baby is reported to have been delivered under anesthetic by Caesarean section in an expensive private hospital, with classical music playing in the background. By portraying the couple as examples of how the rich and famous live, the Dutch tabloids made Adam Curry and Patricia Paay into embodiments of American glamour. For example, the Dutch glossy magazine *Avant Garde* (October 1995) devotes its cover story to “Patricia Paay’s American Dream: A House Full of Love with Adam and Christina,” showing Paay in a seven-page photo spread, shot by Dutch photographer Govert de Roos, posing in and around “her American dream house,” located in New Jersey, a half-hour drive away from New York City. One photo shows Patricia Paay next to her kidney-shaped swimming pool, which, as the byline reads, is an exact replica of Elvis Presley’s original one at Graceland. Another photo shows Paay leaning against the hood of her luxurious Lincoln limousine (with the license plate reading “CURRY 1”) in the streets of Manhattan, while her private chauffeur stands nearby. Whereas Lee Towers translates his American Dream into an identity that encompasses the local and the national, the glamorous fantasy world of Adam Curry and Patricia Paay remains an explicit American experience, reinforced by their living in the USA.

That their American Dream is not confined to the geographical boundaries of the USA, however, becomes clear when, after twelve years, Adam Curry and Patricia Paay return to Europe. Like *Avant Garde*, the Dutch glossy magazine *Beau Monde* (27 July 2001) presents a seven-page photo spread, again shot by Govert de Roos, featuring “glamour queen” Patricia Paay posing in haute couture dresses in and around her luxurious mansion. Although the mansion is located in Belgium rather than the USA, the depicted glamorous lifestyle is identical to the one in *Avant Garde*. As Paay makes clear in the accompanying interview, she intends to bring American glamour to the Netherlands, using the association with her imagined America to promote her La Paay cosmetic line. “Americans are very happy people,” Patricia Paay explains. “Always positive, always complimentary. That is no act, that’s the way they are. They are less realistic. Dutch people are so down-to-earth. Americans believe in dreams and they love fantasy.” Rather than including the American glamour within her definition of being Dutch, Paay uses her position of the American she never was as a quality that makes her stand out and thus exceptional within Dutch pop culture.
Perhaps it is this implicit claim of being exceptional that prompted Vanessa to denounce Curry and Paay’s reality television series as a fake. True or not, the same American fantasy world that Adam Curry and Patricia Paay have showcased throughout their careers also forms the basis of Adams Family. Although its title refers to the American television series The Addams Family (ABC, 1964-1966) and the later film version (Barry Sonnenfeld, 1991), Adam’s Family is inspired by the American reality television series The Osbournes (MTV, 2002–2005), which follows the daily life of hard rock star Ozzy Osbourne’s “dysfunctional family” (Ozzy and his wife Sharon, daughter Kelly, and son Jack) in Los Angeles. Edited according to the conventions of the situation comedy, The Osbournes presents “real life” in a fictionalized form, thereby blurring the lines between actual living persons and the fictional characters they portray. Similar to The Osbournes, Adam’s Family provides a behind-the-scenes look at the way celebrities live their everyday lives as members of a family, facing the same problems that ordinary families do. Instead of performing as famous stars, Adam Curry and Patricia Paay play the role of husband and wife, as parents of teenage daughter Christina. In this way, an illusion of reality is created through the suggestion that the viewers get a glimpse of the “real” person behind the façade of the famous star. Such a perspective is supported by Paay, who, in an interview promoting Adam’s Family, announced that “I believe the time is right for the people in the Netherlands to come to know the real Patricia Paay, as obviously at home I’m not the glamorous diva.” However, conform to Richard Dyer’s stars theory, the “real” Patricia Paay as shown on television is actually part of her star image, which reconfirms rather than exposes the construction of the star myth.

Whereas other Dutch celebrity reality shows such as Patty’s Posse (Yorin, 2003–2004) and De Bauers (RTL4, 2003, 2007) emphasize the ordinariness of celebrity life, thereby downplaying the importance of glamour, Adam’s Family showcases the lifestyle of the rich and famous. Living in their luxurious Belgian mansion dubbed Curry’s Castle, Adam Curry and Patricia Paay are shown driving their expensive sports cars, preparing lavish dinner parties, flying in their private helicopter, and going on holiday to the Bahamas. As the show’s grand finale, also featured on the covers of all Dutch tabloids, Curry and Paay renew their wedding vows with a romantic ceremony set in a small Italian village, which, as one of the tabloids notes, is “such an American thing to do.” The show’s hyper-American character is enhanced by the use of classic American pop songs as soundtrack, including “Happy Together” by the Turtles as the show’s opening tune, Aretha Franklin’s “(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman” when Paay is shown doing her make-up, and the theme of the television series Dynasty (ABC, 1981-1989), underscoring the establishing
shots of Curry’s Castle. By showing the glamorous lifestyle that Dutch viewers will recognize from Hollywood and television series like *Dynasty*, *Adam’s Family* reconfirms the American fantasy world that Adam Curry and Patricia Paay have come to personify.

Their fairytale life takes a dramatic turn when, in spring 2009, Curry leaves Paay for a younger woman and moves to Los Angeles. Paay returns to the Netherlands where she is one of the celebrity judges on the television shows *Holland’s Got Talent* (SBS/RTL4, 2008–present) and *Popstars* (SBS6, 2008–2010). Most notably, at sixty years old, she again poses nude in the Dutch *Playboy* (December 2009). Far more telling, however, is the ten-page “Dutch Delight” photo shoot of Paay, together with her twenty-year-old daughter Christina, for a special issue of the lifestyle magazine *Glossy* (April 2011). The special issue’s theme is “I [heart] NL” (in the shape of the famous “I Love NY” logo, meaning “I love the Netherlands”) and focuses on the lack of glamour in the Netherlands, particularly in comparison to American celebrity culture. Paay and Christina, who are also pictured on the magazine’s cover, are recognized for their “un-Dutch” glamour as well as their Dutch down-to-earthness.32 Quite paradoxically, the magazine celebrates Dutch glamour by emphasizing its absence through Patricia Paay’s “American” presence.

**Costa! and Katja: Embodying Pop Culture**

The Dutch teenage romantic comedy *Costa!* (Johan Nijenhuis, 2001) takes place in Spain, telling the story of a group of Dutch youth who work at Costa, a trendy discothèque that primarily caters to Dutch teenage tourists. When MTV’s annual dance contest comes to town, the youngsters are determined to win, desperate to beat their rivals, the dancers of the discothèque Empire. Although the majority of the film’s dialogue is in Dutch, in one scene the Scandinavian discothèque owner Ian, sitting in his wheelchair, gives a motivational speech in English to his young employees, ending with two rhetorical questions: “Do you wanna hold on to the dream? Do you wanna work hard to keep it alive?” At first glance Ian’s foreign nationality seems rather arbitrary and unnecessary, as all the other characters are Dutch and speak Dutch. Moreover, the part is played by a Dutch actor (Victor Löw) who speaks an unidentifiable English with a heavy Dutch accent. The only reason for his foreign nationality seems to be the content of his motivational speech: the discothèque owner is encouraging his young employees to believe in the dream of meritocracy, so they can escape their working-class backgrounds by working hard to make their dreams come true as winners of the MTV dance contest. Obviously, the
message of the American Dream is better expressed in English, as a literal Dutch translation loses its connotations, or “just doesn’t sound right.” To justify his delivering these remarks in English rather than Dutch, Ian has to be a foreigner, enabling him to evoke the rhetoric of the American Dream, even if he speaks English with a heavy, fake accent.

_Costa!_ is only one of many Dutch commercial films that appropriate the genre conventions and audiovisual language of Hollywood. Some of these films are explicitly targeted at an international mainstream audience, such as _Do Not Disturb_ (1999) and _Down aka The Shaft_ (2001), both directed by Dick Maas and starring Hollywood actors like William Hurt and Naomi Watts, and the films by Roel Reiné, _The Delivery_ (1999) and _Adrenaline_ (2003). As Thomas Elsaesser points out, only a few European films have “the budgets, stars and production values even to try to reach an international mainstream audience,” concluding that “often enough these films fail in their aim, not least because they have to disguise themselves to look and sound as if they were American.” That the abovementioned films by Dick Maas and Roel Reiné proved to be commercial and critical failures may be explained by the plausible factor that their disguises as “real” American movies are obvious to such an extent that the films become less convincing to audiences and critics alike. The Dutch self-acclaimed “feel good” movies like _Costa!_, on the contrary, are targeted at a national and often younger audience and tend to be commercially successful, including romantic comedies like _Phileine Zegt Sorry_ (Robert Jan Westdijk, 2003) and _Het Schnitzelparadijs_ (Martin Koolhoven, 2005), teenage comedies such as _All Stars_ (Jean van de Velde, 1997) and _Shouf Shouf Habibi!_ (Albert ter Heerdt, 2004), and action films such as _Lek_ (Jean van de Velde, 2000) and _Vet Hard_ (Tim Oliehoek, 2005). Even though these films also rely heavily on the often clichéd genre conventions of Hollywood cinema, they do not disguise themselves as American, but instead explicitly emphasize their national or local character, thereby often using actors from national television who are well known by the larger Dutch audience. In this way, these films appropriate Hollywood within their own national context, rather than being mere imitations of the American original.

Although also referring to popular American films like _West Side Story_ (Jerome Robbins and Robert Wise, 1961) and _Grease_ (Randal Kleiser, 1978), _Costa!_ is most of all an updated Dutch version of _Dirty Dancing_ (Emile Ardolino, 1987), the latter being the romantic story of a young shy teenage girl, played by Jennifer Grey, who, while on holiday, experiences her sexual awakening and becomes a confident woman after competing in a dance contest with her hunky lower-class dance instructor, played by Patrick Swayze. In _Costa!_, the young shy teenage girl Janet, played by former soap opera actress Georgina
Verbaan, is on holiday in Spain, where she meets Rens (Daan Schuurmans), the leader of the Costa dancers. Similar to the plot of *Dirty Dancing*, their romance blossoms when Rens’s regular dance partner cannot perform and is replaced by Janet, who transforms into a wonderful dancer. Particularly the scene in which Rens, who, like Patrick Swayze’s character, teaches Janet the dance’s choreography in the water at a desolated beach is almost identical to the *Dirty Dancing* original. Conform to the genre convention of the happy ending, Rens and Janet win the MTV dance contest. However, *Costa!* does differ from *Dirty Dancing* in one significant aspect. While the role of the former dance partner Penny in *Dirty Dancing* is of minor importance, the role of Frida, the sexy young woman who is replaced by Janet, is played by the film’s biggest star, Katja Schuurman. Simply known as Katja, her star appeal is emphasized by her recording of the movie’s main love theme, “Lover or Friend,” which became a big hit on the Dutch pop charts. One could even argue that it is Katja’s star image which connects *Costa!* to the Hollywood star myth, albeit one which is implicitly rather than explicitly American.

Similar to most young stars of the Dutch “feel good” cinema, Katja initially started out as a television actress, being one of the most popular characters on the first Dutch daily soap *Goede Tijden, Slechte Tijden* (“Good Times, Bad Times,” RTL4, 1990–present), in which she played from 1995 to 1999. Her credibility as “serious” actress increased when she appeared in the low-budget film *No Planes, No Trains* (Jos Stelling, 1999). Since the film’s director had no clue who she was, he was surprised to see that Katja was treated as a true movie star. Although she only played a minor role, the film’s distributor Warner Brothers promoted *No Planes, No Trains* by emphasizing the star image of Katja. Moreover, interviews with Katja were only granted if the magazine would feature the new movie star on its cover, prompting the Dutch film magazine *de Filmkrant* to note that, while beyond the borders of the Dutch small towns no one actually knew her, Warner Brothers was letting Katja “play Hollywood in Holland” anyway. In other words, Katja “plays” the Hollywood starlet she never was, using the star myth traditionally associated with the American Dream. Throughout her acting career in both television and film, Katja has toyed with her sexy starlet image. Like many other Dutch female celebrities, including Patricia Paay, she has posed nude in the Dutch *Playboy* (September 2002). However, rather than posing as her personal self, Katja poses as Thera, the nightclub dancer she portrays in the Dutch film *Oesters van Nam Kee* (Pollo de Pimentel, 2002). In contrast, Katja plays “herself” in the fictional reality television series *BNN Family* (BNN, 2003), a parody of *Adam’s Family* and *Patty’s Posse*. In this way, the boundaries between the “real” Katja and Katja the Hollywood starlet she never was are continuously crossed.
This blurred distinction between the “real” Katja and her star image as projected in Dutch pop culture is the starting point of the Dutch low-budget film *Interview* (Theo van Gogh, 2003). In *Interview*, Katja plays the soap actress Katja who is being interviewed at home in her Amsterdam apartment by the political correspondent of a Dutch quality newspaper, Pierre Peters, a role played by the renowned stage actor Pierre Bokma. The casting of the most popular starlet in combination with a serious actor is reminiscent of the classic Hollywood film *The Prince and the Showgirl* (Laurence Olivier, 1957), starring Laurence Olivier and Marilyn Monroe, a connection which is emphasized by a large picture of Monroe hanging in Katja’s apartment. The suggestion that Katja is playing “herself” is enhanced by the fact that the film has been shot in the apartment of the “real” Katja and by references to her “real” life, including the ring tone of her cell phone which, ringing several times during the film, plays the tune of *Goede Tijden, Slechte Tijden*. At the same time, however, Katja is also presented as a fictional character, made clear by the fictional Katja being blond, conform to the stereotype of the dumb blonde starlet, rather than having the manes of dark curly hair which have become a trademark of the “real” Katja. Moreover, in one scene Katja is watching herself on television, the daily episode of her soap, in which she is crying hysterically. The fictional soap scene is overacted to such an extent that it becomes a parody, not only poking fun at the melodrama of soap, but also emphasizing that Katja is giving a performance. In this way, the film suggests that, similar to the fictional Katja in the fictional soap, the film’s fictional Katja is performing the act of being a stereotypical soap actress by portraying Katja as an overindulgent, coke-snorting, man-seducing starlet, thereby mocking the way the Dutch tabloids tend to present the “real” Katja in their gossip stories.

With the contrast between the serious newspaper correspondent and the frivolous soap actress, *Interview* presents a clash between highbrow and lowbrow culture. Pierre embodies highbrow culture, being masculine, mature, arrogant, yet boring, focused on serious issues such as warfare and politics. Katja, on the contrary, embodies lowbrow pop culture, being feminine, young, exciting, yet less naïve than she appears at first sight, focused on frivolous issues such as entertainment and gossip. Perhaps most important, through Katja pop culture is presented as a sex bomb, dangerously seductive and hard to resist. The contrast between highbrow and lowbrow culture echoes the rigid dichotomies which make up the Europe versus America divide, as discussed earlier in this chapter. In this way, Katja could be perceived as signifying American pop culture, whereas, in such a comparison, Pierre would signify European intellectualism. However, in *Interview*, pop culture is never explicitly connected to Americanness, with the exception of the Marilyn Monroe picture in
Katja’s apartment. As the Hollywood starlet she never was, Katja embodies pop culture, regardless of whether or not her star myth is still associated with the American Dream.

That the star image of Katja (and other Dutch stars) does not travel easily across geographical boundaries becomes apparent with the American remake of *Interview* (Steve Buscemi, 2007). While the role of Pierre is played by the film’s American director Steve Buscemi, Katja has been replaced by the Hollywood actress Sienna Miller, who, unlike Katja, does not play “herself” but a character named Katya, thereby losing the play with reality and fiction which is such a significant element of the Dutch version. The “real” Katja does make a cameo appearance in the American film as “the lady in the limo,” showing that, outside of the national context, Dutch Hollywood starlets they never were remain anonymous. Five years earlier, Katja made a one-second cameo appearance in the Hollywood film *The Rules of Attraction* (Roger Avary, 2002), based on the novel by Bret Easton Ellis, as “a Dutch television actress” drinking absinthe in an Amsterdam bar with one of the film’s characters. In the Dutch comedy *Shouf Shouf Habibi!* (Albert ter Heerdt, 2004), also discussed in chapter five, one of the Moroccan-Dutch characters tells his friends that he wants to marry a virgin who is as beautiful and sexy as Katja. In the film’s international edition, the English subtitles translate his comments as “Horny as J-Lo, but a virgin.” For the implied international viewers, Katja has been translated as the American star Jennifer Lopez. They both embody the sexy starlet, yet J-Lo’s star image travels globally, whereas Katja continues to “play Hollywood in Holland,” appropriating the star myth within a limited national context.

**Ali B: In the Dutch Ghetto**

“President, stupid fucking moron / now listen, a child must go to school / through rebellion I reach my goal / I use a mike, you a gun / boom pow, just shoot me down / in your nightmares you will see me again / I will not leave you alone / … motherfucker.”

These words, in Dutch, are rapped by the Moroccan-Dutch hip-hop artist Ali B, featured in the music video “Fok de Macht” (2005) by the Dutch rap duo the Opposites. Like the song’s title, which translates as “fuck the power,” the performance is inspired by classic African-American rap songs like N.W.A.’s “Fuck tha Police” (1988) and Public Enemy’s “Fight the Power” (1989). In this way, Ali B appropriates not only the rhetoric and audio-visual language of African-American rap, but also its provocative message of rebelling against the authorities and protesting against racism, police brutality, and poverty in the American urban ghettos. However, Ali B is not rapping
about the social-economic conditions in his home country the Netherlands. Featured in the Dutch MTV’s *Rap Around the World* documentary series, “Fok de Macht” is a protest against the practice of child labor in Ecuador. In fact, the song is part of a political awareness campaign by the charity foundation Plan Nederland, formerly known as the Dutch chapter of Foster Parents Plan. Thus, quite peculiarly, the Moroccan-Dutch Ali B, as the African-American rapper he never was, uses oppositional African-American pop culture to criticize the politics of a South American country, with a rap song commissioned by a Dutch charity organization.37

Ever since his first hit single in 2004, Ali B has become the most popular and commercially successful hip-hop artist of the Netherlands. Not only does he succeed on the pop charts, he is also spokesperson for several charities, appears in television commercials, and is the first Dutch rapper to have his own statue in the Amsterdam Madame Tussauds wax museum. His reputation of representing “the voice of the street” is reconfirmed on October 26, 2006, when he verbally challenges the Dutch Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende on the talk show *Pauw & Witteman* (VARA, 2006-present). Yet simultaneously, Ali B is included within the Dutch national discourse, as shown in August 2007 with the announcement by the Amsterdam Rijksmuseum that Ali B will be featured in its exhibition on heroes, commemorating the four-hundredth birthday of the Dutch sea admiral Michiel de Ruyter. Being the first Moroccan-Dutch star in Dutch pop culture, Ali B is often read as a success story of ethnic integration, which can be perceived as a star myth, prompting the question of how American pop culture, and in particular African-American hip-hop, helps to construct Ali B’s star image.

Although his full name is Ali Bouali, Ali B uses only the first initial of his last name to mimic, as explained on his website, “the way in which the Dutch media refer to Moroccan criminals.”38 By doing so, Ali B challenges the connotation of the negative media depiction, as “Ali B” now no longer immediately evokes the negative image of Moroccan-Dutch youth as potential criminals (or worse, as potential terrorists), but rather the positive image of a successful rapper. Yet, the connotation of a life of crime remains, and thus “Ali B” also implies authenticity and street credibility, which is part of the image that he presents with his *Ali B vertelt het leven van de straat* album and theater show (2004), an assumingly autobiographical account of Moroccan-Dutch youth street life. Heavily inspired by the imagery of African-American “gangsta” rap, Ali B takes on the persona of the tough and streetwise rapper, or “thugmarokkaan” (“thug Moroccan”), as he identifies himself. This street image is enhanced by the pictures on his first album cover and its promotional material. Ali B is pictured in a gloomy urban landscape, which seems closer to the American urban ghetto
as featured in African-American ‘hood films and hip-hop music videos than Ali B’s relatively mundane Dutch hometown Almere. However, in addition to boasting about his being an authentic gangsta, Ali B raps about being refused entrance to a local disco because he is Moroccan, a common practice of discrimination that has become a recurring theme in Dutch pop culture. Moreover, Ali B addresses his newfound popularity as Moroccan-Dutch hip-hop star, receiving the attention of white Dutch women who previously avoided him because they assumed he was a criminal. By doing so, Ali B translates the image of the African-American hip-hop gangsta into a specific local context, using its rebellious rhetoric to express his anger about occurrences of structural racism in Dutch society.

That Ali B can be perceived as the African-American rapper he never was becomes clear with the song “Ghetto” which he and his cousin Yes-R recorded with the African-American rapper Akon. Peculiarly subtitled “the international mix” (the song was only released in the Netherlands), this version consists of Akon’s original American one with overdubs by Ali B and Yes-R in Dutch. In the original version, Akon raps about the hard life in American ghettos. Akon’s original music video makes a connection between ghetto life in a black inner city in New Jersey, a white trash trailer park in New Mexico, and the Native American Navajo Nation reservation in Arizona, thereby explicitly suggesting that the hardship of ghetto life is not an African-American experience, but rather a social-economic condition shared by a diverse group of underprivileged Americans. The Dutch version of the music video adds images of ghetto life in Amsterdam Zuidoost (South-East), also known as the Bijlmer. Recognizing that such a comparison may seem a bit farfetched, Ali B raps: “Look, I don’t want to say that the Bijlmer is like New York / but a lot of people treat it as if it were a village / where nothing ever happens while the apartment buildings are occupied by junks on crack / you are fooling yourself.” By translating Akon’s ghetto to the Dutch situation, Ali B suggests that there is an international similarity and potential solidarity not only among the underprivileged in the USA and the Netherlands, but also among the different ethnic groups living in the ghetto of the Amsterdam Bijlmer. Tellingly, it is the image of ghetto life as represented by American pop culture, in African-American ‘hood films and hip-hop music videos, through which such solidarity is expressed; this is thus rooted in an imagined America, rather than the USA.

In interviews, Ali B stresses his social and economic success, being a role model for other Moroccan-Dutch teenagers, while simultaneously maintaining his “ghetto” background: “I’ve always kept to the straight and narrow and never was a hanger-on. I’m really proud of that. The boys in the neighborhood accepted me for who I was. A lot of my friends weren’t so lucky. One is doing
time for murder, another for burglary, and some are still hanging around on the streets and delivering pizzas." Again, the image of the American urban ghetto is evoked, although in a local version, with the stereotypical image of the Moroccan-Dutch teenage boy on a moped delivering pizzas replacing the stereotypical image of the African-American drug dealer. Moreover, in some interviews, Ali B’s success story is told using the rhetoric of the American Dream, yet without making its Americanness explicit. For example, in the special “Dutch Dream” issue of LINDA. (February 2005), a glossy magazine based on the media personality of Linda de Mol, Ali B is featured as one of the “ethnic” Dutch celebrities who are being showcased as examples of successful integration. As will be discussed in chapter five, LINDA. appropriates the connotations of the American Dream to present these success stories of non-white stars, suggesting that Dutch multiculturalism has not failed. Conform to the American rhetoric of self-reliance and meritocracy, Ali B is portrayed by LINDA. magazine as a proud, hardworking, and determined individual, who hopes that his peers will follow his example.

His increasing mainstream popularity, however, has challenged the street credibility of Ali B’s image as a thug Moroccan rapper. Especially his 2005 duet with the popular white Dutch singer Marco Borsato “Wat Zou Je Doen” (“What Would You Do”), recorded for the charity organization War Child and, in that same year, his widely publicized encounter with Queen Beatrix, with whom he did the hip-hop handshake before hugging her, have made Ali B susceptible to criticism of tokenism, suggesting that Ali B has become the “pet Moroccan” of the white Dutch establishment. In the popular media, such criticism of tokenism tends to be explained as a conflict between being an “authentic” rapper or a “sellout,” suggesting that commercial success endangers hip-hop authenticity. In her essay on Dutch hip-hop, Mir Wermuth confirms that in the Dutch hip-hop subculture, “there is a tendency to stick to the dichotomy of commercial versus anticommercial.” However, another explanation might be the incompatibility of the image of the thug Moroccan rapper with the image of being a commercially successful rapper, revealing a significant difference between the star myths of African-American rappers and those of their Dutch counterparts. The African-American role models of Ali B, such as rapper 50 Cent, can sustain their image as ghetto gangsta while simultaneously embodying the rags-to-riches star myth of the American Dream, as is exemplified by 50 Cent’s film Get Rich or Die Tryin’ (Jim Sheridan, 2005), loosely based on his “real” life, in which he plays a drug dealer in the ghetto who succeeds in becoming a major hip-hop star. In stark contrast, to become accepted as a rapper who enjoys mainstream success, Ali B has to distance himself from his reputation as thug Moroccan rapper, an image that remains connected to the negative media rep-
presentation of Moroccan-Dutch youth as potential criminals. Decriminalizing his image by emphasizing a “softer” image of the huggable pop star enables Ali B to be embraced by the white Dutch establishment, ranging from Queen Beatrix to Linda de Mol, as an embodiment of the Dutch Dream success story.

Conclusion: The Real Thing

“This is really cool, the Universal logo. … When I saw that I thought ‘wow, a real movie.’ … It’s the best part of the film.” These are comments, originally in Dutch, made by the actors of the Dutch hit comedy Het Schnitzelparadijs (2005), who, together with its director Martin Koolhoven, give frame-by-frame commentary on the DVD edition of the film. Before the movie actually starts, the screen shows the revolving globe of the Universal film studio, which stops at the moment the American continent is on front, with “Universal” stamped in big letters on the screen. Although undoubtedly meant to be funny, the comments bring to the foreground two important elements of Dutch pop culture which is based on the American example of Hollywood. First, American pop culture is often perceived as being “universal,” an audiovisual language that can be globally interpreted and appropriated. Second, American pop culture can function as a sign which can provide authentication. Het Schnitzelparadijs may not have been shot in the “real” Hollywood, yet the Universal trademark provides the association with Hollywood and thereby makes the hit comedy a “real” movie.

Similar to the way the Universal trademark provides Het Schnitzelparadijs with a suggestion of authenticity, the hyper-Americanness of the four examples of Americans they never were – Lee Towers, Adam Curry and Patricia Paay, Katja Schuurman, and Ali B – makes them just like “the real thing.” Each of them appropriates similar elements of American pop culture, but with different aims and different results. With his bombastic performances, Lee Towers as the Las Vegas crooner he never was uses the rhetoric of the American Dream to express both his local identity, rooted in the working-class culture of Rotterdam, and his national identity, based on a rather patriotic and traditional interpretation of Dutchness. Adam Curry and Patricia Paay, on the contrary, appropriate American pop culture not to express a local or national identity, but instead to present themselves as living examples of a fantasy world of the rich and famous, in which hyper-Americanness signifies the glamour traditionally associated with Hollywood. Being the Hollywood starlet she never was, Katja Schuurman embodies pop culture, translating the American star myth within a specific national context by “playing Hollywood in Holland.” Yet, in
contrast to Lee Towers, Adam Curry, and Patricia Paay, the star myth of Katja is no longer explicitly American. Finally, the Moroccan-Dutch rapper Ali B uses the genre conventions and audiovisual language of African-American hip-hop and gangsta rap to comment not only on Dutch multiculturalism, but also on international politics, suggesting that African-American hip-hop can result in international solidarity among different ethnic groups which find themselves in similar social-economic conditions. However, Ali B is trapped between the image of being a thug Moroccan and the image of being a commercially successful star accepted by mainstream white society. In spite of their differences, these four case studies share the appropriation of American pop culture to express their specific local and national identity by performing karaoke Americanism as Americans they never were.

By perceiving them as absolute fakes, I am not suggesting that Lee Towers, Adam Curry and Patricia Paay, Katja Schuurman, and Ali B are fake Americans. It is neither my intention to judge whether or not they succeed in presenting a convincing imitation of American pop culture, nor to claim that Dutch pop culture has been taken over by American pop culture or that we are all becoming global Americans. On the contrary, subtitled or dubbed, karaoke Americanism enables Dutch artists in pop music, film, and television to form and express their cultural identity by appropriating American pop culture within a local and national context. Moreover, I am interested instead in those moments when it no longer seems obvious to question why American pop culture is being imitated. The metaphor of karaoke Americanism enables a perception that goes beyond imitation, as karaoke implies an active performance of mimicking and mockery, based on the clichéd conventions of pop culture, yet also paying tribute to the original in a specific local or national manner. In this way, American pop culture proves to be a source of signs that provides us with a lingua franca to create our own “America,” which is not an identical copy, but an appropriation, often expressed with a heavy, “fake” accent. However, it is the space where the imitation is slightly off, where the copy becomes a hyperbole of the original, an example of hyper-Americanness, which enables the creation of new meanings. As a form of active cultural appropriation, American pop culture is neither merely a form of American cultural imperialism, nor merely a liberating source of agency. Instead, the signs provided by American pop culture are part of our own pop culture as we live it day by day, and while we still may recognize them as “American,” or ascribe more meaning to them because we view them as being “American,” they remain “Dutch” at the same time.