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'YO QUIERO MI MTV!'

Making music television for Latin America

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HIS STUDY CONSIDERS THE TRANSNATIONALIZATION of music television, focusing on the introduction of MTV: Music Television in Latin America. As part of a new transnational media order in Latin America, MTV Latino raises old questions about the political economy of music television and its impact on Latin American popular music as well as the cultural identity of Latin American youth. However, it is also important to consider new communication technologies and emerging transnational networks within the context of globalization (Morley and Robins, 1995) and to theorize music television in relation to the process of trans-culturalization and hybridization (Lull, 1995). Only with such a dual focus can we begin to address what implications the diffusion of what Columbian-born MTV Latino producer Raul Estupinan calls 'a new language, an MTV language' may have for Latin American popular music and everyday life (quoted in Lorente, 1994).

Yo Quiero Mi MTV!

MTV Latino, a 24-hour, Spanish-language network, was launched on October 1, 1993. The cable service is owned by MTV Networks, a division of the entertainment conglomerate Viacom International Inc. The network's programming is produced by Post Edge, a production and satellite-signal distribution company. When it was launched, MTV Latino was MTV Networks' fourth global affiliate, joining MTV Europe (launched 1987), MTV Brazil (1990), MTV Asia (1991; relaunched 1995), and MTV Japan (1992). More recently, MTV Networks has launched MTV Mandarin (1995) and MTV India (1996). The worldwide audience for MTV Networks is currently estimated to be about 265.8 million households in 75 territories on five continents. At its launch, MTV Latinos estimated audience was 2.3 million households in 21 'territories'; by June 1996, the network claimed to reach

6.9 million households. Such estimates, provided by MTV Latino, do not merely reflect the size of the actual audience; they are part of the production of the audience commodity that is sold to advertisers of global brands. The estimated audience for MTV Latino is very small compared to MTV US, which is in over 62.6 million households, and MTV Europe, which is available in 53.6 million households. Nonetheless, MTV Latino quickly established itself. By October 1994, MTV Latino was reported to be the number one cable network in South America (Faiola, 1994).

Putting the 'Pan-Latin' concept into practice

MTV Latino is building on the 'pan-European' concept developed for MTV Europe. In the case of MTV Europe, where the relationship between music television and transnational advertising was first developed, one major problem was 'that European youth is not a homogeneous entity, and [MTV's] aim must therefore be to combine global marketing with targeting regional consumers' (Surmer, 1993: 52). The largest pan-European advertisers (Coca-Cola, Levi-Strauss, etc.) turned to rock 'n' roll as an 'international language' in order to overcome linguistic and cultural 'barriers.' In this way, advertisers began to pursue the European youth audience, and to use music television to constitute pop audiences as a group whose 'lifestyle' was expressed through rock sounds, stars, and styles (Frith, 1993).

In the European testing ground for MTV-as-world network, MTV executives were concerned about possible accusations of 'cultural imperialism'; thus, MTV's international operating maxim became 'Think globally, locally.' According to William Roedy, London-based president of MTV Networks' international operations, MTV Europe was 80 percent American or British music when it began; but by 1995, when the network began to turn a profit, Roedy would claim the programming was 80 percent 'local European.' As Roedy sums up the operating logic: 'it's not like McDonald's or one-size-fits all. Really, it's the antithesis of homogeneity' (quoted in Whitefield, 1995). MTV Latino represents an extension of this global strategy into the Latin American context.

MTV Latino, like its other global affiliates, aims to appeal to viewers from 12 to 34. The network clearly seeks to address and construct its young Latin American viewers as consumers. As Friend (1994) elaborates: 'they want Levis jeans and they want Reebok sneakers. They want the global brands that are big and it sort of gives

the teen culture its own identity. But teens tend to look to America to set the trends, and we are sort of the voice of the MTV generation, of the teen genera-

tion.' In this statement, the locus of cultural identity appears to be completely circumscribed by global marketing interests. Whatever geographical or historical differences there may be between geographically dispersed Latin youth, 'there are things the audience shares in terms of their concerns and feelings that link them to a generation' (Levinson quoted in Silver, 1993). MTV Networks' search for Latin youth, as a transnational segment, thus involves the effort to define the sociocultural mentality of this 'generation', to give them a 'voice', and to help define their desires and sense of well-being or satisfaction through an international

discourse through and about musical and nonmusical consumer goods (Leiss, Kline, and Jhally, 1990).

Programming a transnational music television network to fulfill these commercial ambitions entails a strategy of 'localization.' As Tom Hunter explains:

While we have a huge advantage of a common language, the diversity within the territories we're talking about — I mean, just in South America, there are so many differences, and then you throw in Central American countries and the Caribbean countries, and the US Hispanic market, and you have a huge, wide range of experiences and tastes and appeals. Putting all that together is one of our greatest challenges, but it's not a matter of finding the lowest common denominator. If you're gonna do that, then you really could do only one MTV for the whole world. We think that localization is everything.

(quoted in Rodriguez, 1993)

How, then, does MTV Latino try to establish a presence in, and be a part of, local Latin American culture? We can begin to address this question by examining how the network reaches into the local through its production programming practices. These include segments shot on location from South Beach, Miami; a daily viewer request program (*ConeXion MTV*), during which excerpts from viewers' letters are read, specials taped in Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, Venezuela, and Uruguay; or programs devoted exclusively to videos by lesser known acts that are popular in a particular country. In music programming, the playlists of local rock radio stations in Latin America are continually reviewed. In music videos, a local sense may be expressed by iconographic elements that signify particular cities or landscapes. In nonmusic programming, *Aufera* (Outside) and *Semana Rock* (Rock Week) highlight Latin American places or newsworthy events. *Playa MTV* — a series being developed to present the best beaches in Latin America — presents these places in Latin America as sites of international tourism and leisure. As the network 'regionalizes' its programming, there are plans to develop more programming devoted to local contests, events, and specials (e.g. *Ski MTV*).

At the same time, the meaning of 'local' is not without boundaries that limit MTV Latino's menu of music videos. Since the majority of the network's current viewers are in Mexico and Argentina, more attention is paid to local music tastes and markets in these countries. As far as local popular music in Miami is concerned, the most common complaint is that MTV Latino's selection of Latin music video clips excludes one of the most popular, and local musics of all — salsa — even though salsa music videos are available.

Programming the 'Latin American' feel

One of the obvious ways in which MTV Latino constructs an imaginary 'Latin America' is by employing Spanish-speaking VJs. The original VJs were 25-year-old Alfredo Lewin, from Santiago, Chile, 24-year-old Ruth Infarmato, from Buenos Aires, Argentina, and 27-year-old Conzalo Morales, from Mexico. Cuban American Daisy Fuentes hosts *Top 20 MTV*, as well as cohosting MTV US programs such as *Beach MTV* and *Rock N' Jock*, making her the only VJ who appears on both networks.

A sign on one of the MTV Latino sets reads: 'Spanish Spoken Here. Se Habla Espanol'. MTV Latino VJs are not required to change the inflection of their native dialects, although there is an effort to avoid idioms that could be confusing or obscure in other parts of Latin America. The VJs use Spanish to introduce videos; however, when speaking to Anglo guests, they use English, and Spanish subtitles are added, since a large percentage of MTV Latino's viewers are assumed to speak English.

While Latin music videos are interspersed throughout the music programming schedule, the network's Latin music feel is most strongly expressed in shows such as *In Situ*, a one-hour program of 'all the Latin music that you can hear for,' and *Raisionica*, a twice-weekly half-hour program devoted to rock en espanol. The promotional spot for *In Situ* announces that this particular program is MTV Latino's answer to the dilemma of traditional and modern sounds of Latin music. During *In Situ*, Latin music that may not go into 'heavy rotation' will appear, including the occasional salsa or merengue music video.

MTV Latino's playlist would be familiar to North American viewers of MTV US, but it is not a replication of the MTV US playlist. Gabriel Baptiste, Director of Music Programming, reports that 45—50 percent of the playlist is influenced by US charts, 25 percent is influenced by European charts, and 25 percent is influenced by releases in Latin American markets (Baptiste, 1994). The network's musical emphasis is on rock, Anglo-American and Western European performers, 'superstars' such as Bon Jovi, Madonna, and Aerosmith, or international stars such as Green Day, Red Hot Chili Peppers, or Ace of Base. As for the predominance of Anglo performers, Baptiste (1994) explains:

I think the one thing that there's perhaps a misconception about is that it would be a lot more Spanish than it is, but the problem that we have is that the international stuff—the Guns N'Roses, Nirvana — is the glue that holds the whole region together. There's a common denominator there in terms of rock radio. They're playing those artists. The thing that has not spread from one place to another are the artists from any one particular country. Like Argentina, the artists have traditionally not gotten a lot of play in Mexico, and vice versa.

Salsa and merengue, while immensely popular forms of Latin music, are regarded as incompatible with MTV Latino's core sound. As Baptiste (1994) explains:

The problem is that it clashes with what tends to be the unifying factor there, which is Nirvana and Guns N' Roses and Ace of Base . . . Aerosmith, for example. I mean . . . you can't go from an Aerosmith, which is really the center of the channel, to merengue or salsa, and expect not to have a train wreck.

Similarly, there is very little Afro-Caribbean presence in the music programming, even though music videos by UB40 and Big Mountain are presented, as well as Bob or Ziggy Marley. According to Baptiste, MTV Latino would 'play more reggae 'but the videos are so atrocious' and 'they're not the center of attention of powerful, top-rated radio stations' (1994).

In light of these exclusions, it appears that particular Latin musicians and singers are getting heavy rotation and beginning to typify MTV Latino's vision of pan-Latin popular music. These are groups like Mano Negra (which first gained international exposure through MTV Europe), Los Fabulosos Cadillacs, Los Pericos, and Soda Stereo from Argentina; La Les, Los Tres, and Lucybell Chile; Los Caifanes, Cafe Tacuba, and Mana from Mexico; Los Aterciopelados from or Heroes del Silencio and Marta Sanchez from Spain. Most of these groups and performers are on major record labels. Baptiste also observes that bands like Paralamas from Brazil are very big in Argentina so that 'if you take somebody from outside the region, you have a better chance of making them work across borders than somebody who's inside the region' (Baptiste, 1994). So while MTV Latino may give US, UK, or western European-based performers the ability to penetrate Latin American music markets, it also offers Latin performers some capacity to penetrate into the everyday life of young Latin Americans.

It is not possible for me to offer textual or ethnomusicological analysis of Latin music video clips here, but based upon my viewing of programming from June 1994 to April 1996, I can offer a few observations. The vast majority of Latin music videos feature male performers and all-male bands. Videos featuring female performers and singers (e.g. Alejandra Guzman, Cecilia Toussant, Claudia Puyot, Marta Sanchez, Soraya) are directed by men. As one might expect, love and male—female relationships are a standard theme; it is also evident that some music videos employ the codes and conventions for representing women as part of an adolescent male 'dreamworld' (see Jhally, 1995). There is a range of m oods, themes, and styles, but there is a tendency towards performance-centered choreography, intercut with a pastiche of images that emphasize the central performer. The visual style may range from social realism to romanticism to surrealism or parody. While many Latin videos feature urban settings, some have featured performers in nature settings, intercutting shots of performers with panoramic shots of the landscape.

A more detailed analysis of the Latin music video texts remains to be done; it does appear, however, that some directors who have adopted the visual aesthetic of MTV have not had their creativity stultified. Nor does it mean that music videos featuring Latin rock stars cannot serve as a vehicle for popular memory, an expression of social consciousness, or as a means of organizing popular pleasures and/or desires. Indeed, the rapid editing rhythm may inhibit preferred decoding of the stream of visual images, thereby privileging music, noise, and co-motion over linear narrativization and closure. As Walter Benjamin, reflecting on the Dadaist quality of motion pictures, wrote: 'The spectator's process of association in view of these images is indeed interrupted by their constant, sudden change (Benjamin, 1969: 238). Latin rhythms and styles thus provide a sonorous counterpoint to, and foundation for, this fragmented flow of images.

Beyond the refrain

For all of the ambiguities and contradictions that appear in implementing a strategy of 'localization,' it appears that MTV Latino serves mainly as a vehicle for promoting US, UK, and western European international rock music, and as a one-way vector

of transnational advertising campaigns. From the perspective of US political economy, it has been argued that MTV Networks' near-monopoly on music television and its programming emphasis may 'intensify the one way flow of music and popular culture from these Western nations to other countries, eclipsing and marginalizing indigenous music' (Banks, 1995: 43). Banks concludes that 'MTV's programming is permeated by a relentless commercialism that attempts to nurture international youth culture based on ideals of consumerism . . . contributing to an erosion of indigenous culture, values, traditions' (ibid.: 49). In this refrain, MTV Latino does not appear to articulate with anything other than consumer culture and consciousness. The new language of MTV, even if it speaks or sings in the native tongue, is regarded as the same old imperializing one, producing a convergence of international musical taste that marginalizes Latin music, or standardizes rock *en español* as a segment within a homogeneous international style of popular music.

One could easily extend this general argument by drawing upon Attali's (1992) historical analysis of the production of Western music, and contend that MTV is an extension of the recording technologies that made the mass production and consumption of musical commodities possible. In the 'age of repetition', MTV operates as a televisual model for replication — 'the mold within which reproduction and repetition take shape' (Attali, 1985: 118). As a form of musical reproduction and repetition, MTV Latino functions as a mode of accommodating Latin popular music to the control of Warner, Sony, MCA, BMC, EMI, and Polygram (see Burnett, 1996). In this general argument, the molding of music to musicians according to the logic of commodification and ideological normalization results in a homogenized, Euro-Americanized popular music culture, even though the profits from these performers now flow to the US, Japanese, West German, Dutch, or British stockholders. Along with the loss of musical variety, the commodification of musical desires and pleasure results in silence, for people only 'hear the noises of commodities into which their imaginary is collectively channeled, where their dreams of sociality and transcendence dwell' (Attali, 1985: 122).

It is undeniable that MTV Latino represents and reproduces a popular music culture that no longer means what *cultura popular* means in Spanish or Portuguese, which is the 'culture of the people' (Lull, 1995: 72). At the same time, the inadequacies of the cultural imperialism thesis (see Tomlinson, 1991) with reference to popular music (see Laing, 1986; Goodwin and Gore, 1990; Robinson, Buck, and Cuthbert, 1991) have become apparent. It seems to me, therefore, that the question of MTV Latino's cultural effectivity must move beyond the cultural imperialism refrain, with its tendency towards reductionism, ethnocentrism, and fatalism. For in this refrain, all cultural flow between the transnational corporation and the national are one-way and any history of cultural mixing is either disregarded or only regarded as a form of desecration or deformation of some authentic, indigenous musical form. Recent work on world music reveals just how problematic such a standpoint on authenticity has become (see Davies, 1993; Barrett, 1996; Erimann, 1996); in the de- and reterritorialization of musical styles and genres composing popular music today, there is no singular moment of authenticity in terms of sound, instrumentation, or lyrics (Davies, 1993).

In the Latin American context, the cultural imperialism refrain ignores the historical specificity of the constitution of the 'popular' and the complex, and

ambiguous relationship between popular classes and mass culture. To use Martin-Barbero's words: 'Mass culture does not occupy a single position in a system of social classes, but simultaneously embraces heterogeneous practices and products' (1993a: 19). Historically, popular cultures in Latin America have had an 'interpenetrative relationship' with mass culture, so the space of the popular is one of dispersed sites, rather than a homogenous space of European, bourgeois hegemony, or US capitalist hegemony. As Rowe and Schelling also observe: 'Almost all cultures in Latin America are now mediated to some extent by the city, both in the sense of the massification of social phenomenon and of the communication technologies which make it possible' (1991: 97). So within an internationalizing, neoliberal Latin American political context, the Latin urban popular is a complex site of hybridization and deterritorialization in which cultural forms can be 'separated from existing practices,' and recombined 'with new forms in new practices,' and can be translated (i.e. travel) from one location to another. So while MTV Networks' expansion beyond the US has been read as a 'symptom of an expanding American media world order' (Goodwin, 1992: 179), from the perspective of the continuous history of transculturation, it becomes problematic to describe the cultural impact of MTV Latino only in terms of a national discourse of imposition and assumed acculturation to US consumer culture. This disregards the process of 'massification' as well

as Latin forms of social modernity. Notwithstanding the economic facts of the Latin American geoeconomy, it becomes problematic to see the effects of one-way flow of Anglo-Euro-American popular music as a displacement or degradation of indigenous Latin music when rock *en español*, a tradition invented in the 1960s in response to imported American rock 'n' roll, is an indigenized form of popular music.

The cultural effectivity of MTV Latino will remain an open question until the dynamics of MTV Latino's uses and interpretations are clarified. Beyond the mediacentric framework of reception analysis, Martin-Barbero calls our attention to the places of 'mediation,' such as everyday family life, 'where the social materialization and the cultural expression of television are delimited and configured' (Martin-Barbero, 1993b: 215). In this approach, the daily life of the family is seen as a primary place of transactions with television and a space of negotiations with, and resignifications of, Latin televisual genres. So in contrast to the *telenovela* and its melodramatic emphasis upon kinship identity, we may assume that MTV Latino will draw its young viewers into the international world of rock music and its less

familial, youth-cultural repertoire of objects, practices, and messages.

Indications are that MTV Latino programming appears to extend the movement of homogenization that already exists within the Latin American radio and recording industry, a movement that began over three decades ago (Rowe and Schelling, 1991). Today, each Latin American country's popular music charts may be read as featuring the 'same, top 20 artists,' and thus, a 'common musical ground' (Saralegui, 1994). But this does not mean that MTV Latino's selection of Latin popular music is uniform in musical motifs, styles, rhythms, and preferred genres. To the contrary, as Martin-Barbero writes, the 'standardization of products and the uniformization of gestures require a constant struggle against entropy and a periodic renovation of patterns of differentiation' (1993a: 19).

Rock *en español* is clearly an evolving hybrid cultural form of expression. As Gonzalez (1994) notes, a new generation of musicians, responding to Anglo-

American rock and inspired by such international superstars as Bob Marley, have been re-creating the sound of Latin popular music. Fashioned in their own image, this new music is 'worldly but rooted in local tradition. It takes its attitude from rock 'n' roll but its sound from a neighborhood party. It comes MTV-friendly but speaks the language of home. And it is finding a surprisingly large, avid audience' (Gonzalez, 1994). As part of Latin American 'mass' culture, rock *en español* is a remix of the foreign and the national, made by young musicians who are not only bilingual but bicultural (Gonzalez, 1996).

Latin American musicians have been working on this remix for some time, however. 'For 30 years, two generations of musicians and audiences in Latin America have been reinventing rock, mixing Delta blues and Chuck Berry with corridos and zambas, mimicking high-tech means with low-tech imagination, inventing their own dances out of old family photos, Hollywood movies and MTV clips' (Gonzalez, 1996). Rising, and sometimes falling, local rock *en español* scenes also have their own geohistorical specificity. For example, in response to the sounds of imported Anglo-US and UK-based rock, two types of new music appeared in Chile. Imitations of Anglo rock were sung in English for middle-class consumption, while rock national or rock *subterráneo* was sung in Spanish and produced in the urban periphery (Rowe and Schelling, 1991: 121).

From the perspective of Latin musicians, it is important to note, as Robinson, Buck, and Cuthbert (1991) have pointed out, that imitation is only the first stage of reaction to the dominance of Anglo-American rock (e.g. English covers of Chuck Berry and Little Richard, or Spanish remakes of Presley songs). Their research shows that a variety of factors lead musicians to pass from the stage of imitation to the stage to indigenization, writing and recording original material in Spanish in a way that preserves traditional musical styles. During this stage, imported music is not just a format for repetition; rather, 'sound and textual motifs are resemantized in terms of the local' (Rowe and Schelling, 1991: 121). This new form of popular music first emerged in the 1970s in Argentina with figures such as Charly García, and in Mexico in the 1980s with bands such as Caifanes, Maldita Vecindad, and Café Tacuba. In Argentina, there was a greater receptivity to native rock following the Falklands War with Britain in 1981 that led to bands such as Los Divididos and Los Fabulosos Cadillacs to become established (Moore, 1994).

Transculturalization, writes Lull, 'produces cultural hybrids — the fusing of cultural forms' that are 'popular almost by definition' (1995: 155). For example, the Mexican band Los Caifanes released its first album in 1981; their hit single 'La Negra Tomasa' was an update of Cuban *cumbia* music. Today, they blend ska, rock 'n' roll, and Mexican folk rhythms. Another band, Café Tacuba, mixes influences as diverse as classic Mexican boleros, *norteno*, ska, punk, and others. So the term rock *en español* refers to many sounds; it fails to characterize and to classify the vastly heterogeneous popular music of Latin American recording artists. For example, contrast Dominican singer-songwriter Juan Luis Guerra, who has reinvented merengue and *bachata* by using jazz harmonies and borrowings from South African choral singing, with Fito Páez, a band that could only be from Buenos Aires with their allusions to the Beatles and nuevo-tango. Rock *en español*, like American rock 'n' roll seen from a multicultural perspective, is a hybrid form of music that may be more dialogic than derivative (see Lipsitz, 1994).

While much of this music may never enter MTV Latino's list, the network does open up a new and important space for those who are successful in getting 'heavy rotation.' As musicians continue to work on the Latin and extend their praxis to the making of music videos, they gain access to an important means of representing the 'rock and roll apparatus' (Grossberg, 1984) and are able to achieve a kind of affectivity they could not otherwise have. The practice of making music videos is an aesthetic, expressive practice of translating the infinite possibilities of mutating, hybrid sounds into images that travel across time and space. Los Fabulosos Cadillacs, Los Caifanes, Charly Garcia, El Tri, Los Tres, Cafe Tacuba, Soda Stereo, and Illya Kuryaki y los Valderramas exemplify the mix of transcultural sounds and visions that are crossing ethnic, cultural, and national boundaries to create a cartography of Latin popular taste.