

SPECIAL SECTION

The Mediatization of Music in Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina: An Interview with Peter W. Schulze

Interview conducted by Candela Marini
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For this edition of Crolar 4 (2) on Sound and Dissonance: Music in Latin American Culture, Candela Marini interviewed Prof. Peter W. Schulze, Assistant Professor of Hispanic Studies at the University of Bremen. Prof. Schulze is currently working on a DFG-funded research project on Glocalising Modes of Modernity: Transnational and Cross-Media Interconnections in Latin American Film Musicals, dealing with tango, samba and ranchera music and their intermedia and intercultural interconnections. He has published various articles on the subject, most recently "Mexicanidad Meets Americanism: The Circulation of National Imaginaries and Generic Regimes between the Western and the Comedia Ranchera", in REBECA – Revista de Estudos de Cinema e Audiovisual, Ano 4, Ed 7, 2015, pp. 130-161 resp. pp. 162-194 for the Portuguese version.

His single-authored books are: Strategien kultureller Kannibalisierung: Postkoloniale Repräsentationen vom Modernismo

zum Cinema Novo (Transcript, 2015) and Transformation und Trance: Die Filme des Glauber Rocha als Arbeit am postkolonialen Gedächtnis (Gardez!, 2005). He is the editor of Transmediale Genre-Passagen. Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven (with I. Ritzer, Springer VS, 2015), Genre Hybridisation: Global Cinematic Flows (with I. Ritzer, Schüren, 2013), Novas Vozes: Zur brasilianischen Literatur im 21. Jahrhundert (with S. Klengel et al., Iberoamericana, 2013), Crossing Frontiers: Intercultural Perspectives on the Western (with I. Ritzer et al., Schüren, 2012), Glauber Rocha e as culturas na América Latina (with P. Schumann, TFM, 2011) and Junges Kino in Lateinamerika (edition text + kritik, 2010).

Music is an art and form of expression whose ties with technology, cultural industries and mass media are not only evident, but also ineludible. Your research puts forward this issue and

aims to analyze music production in the intersection with other cultural products and industries. How would you define the relation between music and media? How have they influenced each other's industries?

Since the very beginning of the formation of music industries in Latin America, music and media have been closely interconnected. Early phonographic recordings of Latin American music were of utmost importance not only for the transregional circulation of particular musical pieces but also for the actual formation and stabilization of music genres. – By the way, of course the latter phenomenon started before the mass mediatization of music, and it has to be understood as an ongoing process of “genrefication” (R. Altman), that is, not in the sense of a static condition, but rather in terms of a dialectics of repetition and variation. – To come back to the role of the phonograph and subsequent recording technologies: the incipient global recording industry also partly functioned as a vehicle of popular Latin American music on an international plane, often in synergy with concerts, but also with older media such as sheet music, resulting in the boost of certain music genres as well as musicians and composers. Take the example of the tango. Already in the early 20th century tango music spread internationally, for instance the songs played by the Chilean-Argentinean duo Los Gobbi. This was not only due to the concerts they successfully performed in Europe and in the Americas but also because of their prolific recordings,

made in different countries and distributed internationally. Tellingly, the duo was called Los Reyes del Gramofón, The Kings of Gramophone. The pronounced mediatization of music in the case of Los Gobbi was by no means an exception. And it was not limited to gramophone records. In fact, Latin American music – and music in general – was frequently taken up in different media such as film or radio, and subsequently on television, video and the Internet. These transmedia passages of music were often brought about by certain companies in order to create economic synergies and an aesthetic “surplus value” that could be employed in various media. In the case of Argentina, for instance, the media entrepreneur Max Glücksmann had many successful tango musicians and composers under contract and systematically capitalized on transmedia genre passages, especially between concerts, recordings, theatre, cinema and radio. Glücksmann was one of the pioneers of Latin American music and media industry and his practice of fostering transmedia synergies was paradigmatic. In fact, the entanglement between music and media in Latin America went on to increase, whereas global companies, mostly from the USA, soon dominated the market. Nonetheless, it was precisely Latin American music that served as one of the main “ingredients” for successful local media productions.

You explained that music was taken up by different media to guarantee the success of different cultural productions. This was indeed the case of cinema in

Mexico, Argentina and Brazil –three countries, which —with their ups and downs— have had a strong film industry. In the beginnings of sound film, it was very common to use already well-known figures of the music scene, just as Tango singers, to play the leading roles of big productions, and thus guarantee its commercial success. Reading the magazines and newspapers of the time, it was very common to find complaints on the lack of professional actors, and how the industry was not really fostering that kind of professionalization. In your opinion, what role has musical cinema played in the history of Latin American cinema? And how important has musical cinema been in Latin America?

With the advent of sound film, many national cinemas gave rise to film musicals based on popular music. In Latin America, musical cinema has been of utmost importance for the development of local film industries. In the early 1930s several film musical genres emerged, most prominently the cine tanguero in Argentina, the chanchada in Brazil and the comedia ranchera in Mexico. These musicals were among the most successful local genre films up until the 1950s. Tellingly, the first films with optical sound produced in Latin America were already based on music: In 1930 Eduardo Morera made 15 short musical films, in which Carlos Gardel, accompanied by different musicians, plays some of his hits, mainly tango songs. Even though the exhibition of these Argentinean short films was very limited, at the same time the first of a

number of feature musicals starring the singers José Mojica and Carlos Gardel were being produced by Fox and Paramount, films that were immensely successful and kicked off the development of Latin American film musicals as an actual genre. What has to be kept in mind, though, is that the cross-fertilization of cinema and music began well before the advent of sound film. Already in so-called “silent cinema”, films were usually accompanied by music, often by Latin American popular music. Subsequently, since the 1930s, Latin American music and musical cultures were widely disseminated through sound film, resulting in synergies between the music industry and the film industry. Although the film musical was the main genre substantially based on music until the late 1950s, other genres such as the biopic (about musicians) or concert films are as closely interconnected with popular Latin American music. Whereas the film musical ceased to be produced in large numbers in the 1960s and actually became a marginal genre, other music-based genres are still vibrant. Take the example of the biopic about musicians, a subgenre that has had a regular output in Latin America from the heyday of the film musical until today. Two films may exemplify this. In 1939 Alberto de Zavalía directed “La vida de Carlos Gardel” about the life of the recently deceased Gardel, embodied by Hugo del Carril, himself a main singer-actor tango star (who subsequently became a paramount film director). A more contemporary example, from 2006, is the Brazilian biopic “Noel – Poeta da Vila”, directed by Ricardo van Steen, about the life of the legendary

samba musician Noel Rosa. Currently, a flourishing of music films can be identified, giving evidence to the persistence of the interconnection between film and music. What is more, audiovisual productions “migrated” to other media, in which new musical genres have developed. In this regard, the video clip is a telling example due to the fact that it has undergone pronounced transmedia genre passages from experimental video productions through television formats like MTV to Internet platforms such as YouTube.

You are working now in the histories of tango, samba, and ranchera and their intersection with mass media. At first glance, these are genres that seem very different, but what do they have in common? Why did you choose those three genres and not others?

Indeed, both the musical structures and the cultural contexts of tango, samba and ranchera are very different. Nonetheless significant parallels and resemblances exist between these three genres that make them perfect objects for a comparative interdisciplinary analysis. Roughly in the same period of time, they all have obtained significant transregional dissemination via various forms of mediatization. Although belonging to very particular regions and cultures, the genres in question came to stand for the nation in Argentina, Brazil and Mexico, respectively. Complementary to these “national”, and even “nationalist” dimensions, tango, samba and ranchera productions also acquired “Pan Latin American” dimensions, both because

of their wide dissemination in Latin America and due to the conjunction and hybridization of these genres. Consequently, tango, samba and ranchera are highly significant objects of study for both the understanding of transnational and intercultural interconnections between the main media-producing nations in Latin America as well as for the understanding of national discourses in Argentina, Brazil and Mexico. What is more, amongst Latin American music genres tango, samba and ranchera have arguably undergone the most pronounced and complex transmedia genre passages between live performances and representations in media such as recordings, film and radio. Thus, they are exemplary objects for the study of cross-media interconnections of Latin American music in the first half of the 20th century, a field of research that has not yet been comprehensively explored. The comparative analysis of tango, samba and ranchera productions through their transnational, intercultural and cross-media interconnections will unveil an important sector of media history and popular culture in the Americas. As a study of media “glocalisation” in Latin America, it promises to give new insights into complex transnational exchange processes, both symbolic and in terms of media capital, including the role of the three genres for shaping imaginaries of the nation and negotiating modernity in Argentina, Brazil and Mexico.

The transnational and intercultural processes that you mention are often forgotten, since these are music genres

that have been fiercely taken up as national symbols of certain countries (Argentina and tango; Brazil and samba; Mexico and ranchera). How real are these national limits? What role have the state and nationalistic discourses played in the development of these styles? Being today products of global circulation, what impact has their exportation had?

Tango, samba and ranchera became national symbols in the 1920s and are still today closely associated with their countries of origin. As I have briefly mentioned, the genres in question represent cultural expressions stemming from certain regions that turned into signifiers of national identities. Namely, in the case of tango the Rio-de-la-Plata region, principally Buenos Aires, but also including the Uruguayan capital Montevideo; in the case of samba Rio de Janeiro with elements of popular Afro-Brazilian culture from Bahia; and in the case of ranchera the Mexican state of Jalisco. The respective regional cultural practices have been instrumentalized by government policies in order to homogenize national identities – most prominently in the case of Brazilian dictator Getúlio Vargas and his attempts of normalizing samba, or Juan Perón's censorship of lunfardo in tango. Nonetheless, such attempts only marginally influenced samba, tango and ranchera productions. Genres have to be understood as contested sites, and many different forces were involved in genre productions, with media capital having a particularly strong effect, aiming to address a large audience, including

“foreign” spectators, in order to achieve maximum profits. Therefore, on a textual level the genre productions do not so much aim for a closure of meaning, but rather for a range of meanings, allowing them to reach various audiences. This may be exemplified by a common trait of the three genres in question. Interestingly, they abide by ambivalent representational regimes that foreground exoticized regional folklore and are endowed with “postcolonial exotic” (G. Huggan), that is, they are subject to a global commodification of cultural difference. The self-exoticizing representation of cultural difference implies a nation-building function for domestic audiences and at the same time serves as a factor of product differentiation and marketability in Latin American media markets, strongly dominated by US-American productions. Contrary, or rather complementary to the nationalist instrumentalization of tango, samba and ranchera, transnational media flows inherent in these genre productions – in terms of capital, musicians, media personnel, etc. – contributed to the emergence of latinoamericanidad as a unifying “global geocultural identity” (A. Quijano) in the Americas and at the same time resulted in conflicts between national imaginaries. This is evident, for instance, in the combination of ranchera and tango music in Argentinian and Mexican films of the 1940s that often brought together main singer-actor stars of both genres, like Jorge Negrete and Libertad Lamarque or Tito Guízar and Amanda Ledesma. The ambivalent range of meanings as well as transnational and intercultural

dimensions are particularly pronounced in various Hollywood films that feature the music genres in question. That is, from the Spanish-language productions made in the late 1920s and early 1930s – including the films mentioned featuring José Mojica and Carlos Gardel – to US-American film musicals of the Good Neighbor policy era, most evidently in films starring the Brazilian “bombshell” Carmen Miranda that hybridize some of the most “typical” music genres and dances as well seemingly “folkloric” sceneries and garments. Very pronounced in such productions are the tensions between globalising processes and regional (invented) traditions.

Given the issues we have discussed here, it becomes clear that it is quite difficult— if not artificial—to talk about music in an isolated way. In your experience, what is the importance of studying music from a cultural perspective? What does the analysis of music offer that cannot be found in any other object of study? And what are the advantages of an interdisciplinary approach?

When focusing on the mediatization and the “migration” of music in different media, an interdisciplinary perspective is essential. Highly relevant for the analysis of trans-generic and cross-media interconnections of musical productions and their specific historical and cultural contexts are disciplines such as media studies, genre theory, star studies and performance theory, but also history, sociology – and of course musicology, especially the semiotics of music and ethnomusicology.

Depending on the focus other disciplinary skills might be required; for instance, when considering paramusical parameters such as lyrics, textual analysis and literary theory might be needed. Certainly the study of music in media, and especially cross-media relations, is a challenge, not only since various disciplinary competencies are required, but also because the interdisciplinary combination has to be safeguarded and adopted to the specific demands of the objects of research. In regard to Latin America, the advantage of such an approach is that it enables to reveal important sectors of popular culture and media history that are highly significant but have only been partially explored. Being arguably one of the most dynamic and complex fields of cultural production, transmedia passages of music offer fascinating insights into Latin American culture and history.