

5. Diversity versus Homogenisation

THE BATTLE BETWEEN CITIZENS AND CONSUMERS

The Homogenisation Thesis

Marketing of cool is often dismissed in social studies literature as one-dimensional, a mere tactic used to exploit and homogenise the youth market, thought to be the most amenable to treating the idea of identity (defined as nationality and culture) as a fashion accessory. In *No Logo*, Naomi Klein said 'Standing triumphant at the centre of the global teen phenomenon is MTV... and the more viewers there are to absorb MTV's vision of a tribe of culture-swapping global teen nomads, the more homogenous a market its advertisers have in which to sell their products.'⁴¹ Klein's view is widespread. Brilliant in many ways (hats off to the way it exposes child labour), *No Logo* falters on a couple of counts. First, by the time MTV 'stood triumphant' it was already a sell-out. To criticise a corporation at this stage for doing what they are in the business of doing, no matter how altruistic the intention, is facile. Another common oversight of Klein's is her use of quantitative data (primarily aimed at advertisers) to support the cultural homogenisation claim. For advertisers, this type of research shows that MTV viewers are more likely to purchase their product than non-viewers. In this respect, it is indeed true that the purchase patterns of Mars Bars are getting more homogenised, but to confuse economic motivation with a cultural effect is also facile: it does not work like that. First, when MTV began its global conquest, the idea of a global market was not a given. National habits were engrained. Second, what made MTV successful initially was that it responded to – and even anticipated – the need for a new kind of identity politics. Rather than homogenising cultures, MTV actually fostered diversity.

In her book *Branded*, Alissa Quart goes even further to show how market research involving young people can be a deceitful method, where marketers cultivate fake friendships with young people in order to monitor them. As a marketer, this allegation makes me defensive, because any bona fide market research involving adolescents is done under a strict code of conduct and permission is required from a parent or guardian. Participants in that kind of research know it is for marketing purposes and they get paid. In fact, if you happen to invite young people to participate in a project for a cool brand, you usually get a very positive response. Unless there is parental consent, the marketer

cannot proceed – *Branded* does not take that into account...

[...]

MTV's Celebration of Diversity

In contrast, MTV captured the sense of optimism reigning over Europe in a meaningful way for its niche audience. MTV Europe is the closest that we ever got to a single European identity since the birth of this idea in the Middle Ages, because for the first time in history, technology enabled the construction of an imagined pan-European community. Like the EC's 'Unity in Diversity', MTV used the slogan 'Celebration of Diversity' but, unlike the EC's model that flattened diversity, MTV achieved a sense of unity on the channel that no political initiative ever did. MTV's state-of-oneness was soundtracked by rock 'n' roll, which had genuine international appeal. MTV's was an identity constructed, above all, around common logos and a common taste in music. As the essence of hip is to be seen to be hip in constantly new ways, it was, for a while, cool to be European – and MTV reinforced this.

There is no denying that celebrating European diversity was the commercial flavour of the moment, but it was nevertheless a vision that was implicitly and unambiguously cosmopolitan in orientation. It was not about anti-Americanism. It was not about seeing cultures as 'other', but about being open to one another. It was about curiosity. It was about facilitating engagement among Europeans and all those other dudes within MTV's satellite footprint – all equal in the eyes of MTV – by de-territorialising the creation of communities and promoting multicultural collations. Every aspect of MTV had a European undertone: European VJs with odd accents, regular features from all across Europe, The European Top Twenty ('the one and only European chart show') and MTV News and film reviews. All were united as part of MTV's European rock 'n' roll fraternity. As such, perhaps even more by accident than by brilliant planning, MTV offered a totally egalitarian vision of European life.

Nowhere did MTV's fervent advocacy of European identity appear more strongly than on MTV's *Most Wanted*. Hosted by Ray Cokes every weeknight between 1992 and 1995, this show was beamed simultaneously across some 38 countries to around 60 million viewers. This was one of the first ZOO TV-style programmes to introduce what was to later become conventional in television production: frantic camera-work, the host fooling around with the

crew, outlandish studio décor and outrageous competitions where viewers could join the fun by calling in. To win an MTV goody bag, the challenges set were clearly parodying traditional television quiz shows. Juvenile behaviour was de rigueur. Questions were intentionally dumb. Buzzers made barnyard animal noises. Rules about winning and losing were not respected. I remember reading an academic analysis of *Most Wanted*, which deconstructed its every element to provide a rigorous intellectual interpretation of how Ray coped with the tension between public access and professional control. The reality was far simpler. Most of the jokes were conceived in the local pub or Ray's living room, often under the influence of, let's say, an assortment of creative stimuli.

The community around MTV's *Most Wanted* grew organically from a call-in request show into MTV's flagship programme. Ray's profile rose proportionally. He became a big star across Europe and the exception to MTV's rule of promoting the brand rather than the cult of the personality. Ray's success lasted for as long as the European idea drove the network. His relationship with MTV would come to an end following a controversial incident during a live MTV broadcast from Germany in 1996. It was just as well. A happily united Europe had ceased to make sense a long time before. Commercially, MTV was feeling the pressure of the music station VIVA in Germany, its most lucrative market. MTV would have localised its network sooner, if only the technology had allowed it. Ideologically, the spectre of the conflict in the former Yugoslavia had tainted this ideal with blood. As for Ray, he moved to Paris to reinvent his TV career in France. The last I heard, he was in Berlin. Whatever his next move, Ray will forever be fondly remembered as the guy who fooled around every night on MTV with his crew and his adoring European fans while pioneering an innovative style of journalism that inspired a whole new generation of broadcasters.

Citizenship TV: War and Rock 'n' Roll

There was also a serious side to MTV's overarching stylised life. In his analysis of the development years of MTV USA, Professor Andrew Goodwin reclaimed this angle.⁵⁰ Parody-based humour, unlike pastiche, actually makes a point, he rightly observed. At times, MTV was even more explicit about its opinion on this subject. It felt it was responsible, socially conscious, vaguely liberal and vastly ignored for its contributions in this arena. The same can be said about MTV in Europe. Among the multiple means by which a sense of belonging to MTV's community was fashioned, the station had moments when it fostered a sense

of citizenship. MTV regularly promoted awareness of issues and causes including racism, AIDS and ecology. Occasionally it tackled politics. The point is that citizenship was only one facet of identity and it was no longer the privileged one. What MTV did in this respect was quite groundbreaking. Essentially, politics was packaged like anything else on MTV. This meant that it used its innovative, fast-paced editing, underlined with an ironic tone, to address a cause. This treatment even extended to traditional politics, which had never been attempted before. This language spoke to viewers more effectively than any political rhetoric...