

# 'I hope you're enjoying your party': MTV in wartorn Bosnia

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*'Where are you from?'*  
*'Yugoslavia.'*  
*'Is there any such country?'*  
*'No, but it's still where I come from.'*<sup>1</sup>

1 Quotation taken from Zdenko Lesjak (ed.), *Children of Atlantis* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 1995), back cover.

In 1995, a Benetton shop opened in Sarajevo. Many people were astounded by this event. In a divided town where everything is grey from ashes and red from blood, who needs the 'united colours'? Although this question stems from a genuine concern for people who have no means to buy food, let alone fashion, it is, none the less, inappropriate. As a matter of fact, it might even be taken as an insult by a Sarajevan.

The concern of this paper is to explain why good intentions can sometimes be misread. After four years of war reports from the front line, the main signifiers of the Bosnian tragedy became precisely 'grey' or 'red'. Sights of death and destruction formed popular sentiment towards the crisis. In an article in *The Guardian* in January 1996 about how media reporting had distorted British teenagers' views of the conflict, this was a typical comment: 'Their clothes . . . are probably from corpses or from charities' and 'most people live in small shacks made from scraps of metal and other things they can find'.<sup>2</sup> The reaction to this attitude was summed up in the words of a girl from Sarajevo: 'They're just showing that we are so poor and pitiful, and they are so good. They don't need to tell us that they are sorry, and that we are living in a war. We know everything about us.'

2 Shaun Waterman, 'Between the lines', *Guardian Education*, 16 January 1996, p. 5.

4 Phrase taken from Brian Hansen's speech to the Marketing Conference at the Royal College of Art, 15 September 1995. He is President and Creative Director of MTV Networks for Europe.

5 Ibid.

6 Charlotte Brunsdon and John Morley, *Everyday Television: Nationwide* (London: British Film Institute, 1978), p. 49.

7 John Morley, *The Sex between Programmes: Continuity* (London: Corgi, 1961), pp. 1, 2, 20.

They need to tell us what's happening in the world and about their lives.<sup>3</sup>

This paper attempts to clarify this misunderstanding by focusing on a neglected side of the conflict. A case-study of MTV in Bosnia helps highlight the problem of entertainment in war. At the same time, it raises questions about contemporary popular culture which are often ignored.

In order to establish the link between MTV and the conflict in Bosnia and understand its significance, it is necessary to examine the overall policy of MTV Europe. In doing so, there are two main aspects to consider: the youth market and its pan-European potential.

4 Phrase taken from Brent Hansen's speech to the Youth Marketing Conference (YCRM), the Royal College of Art, London, 15 September 1995. Hansen is President and Creative Director, MTV Networks for Europe.

5 *ibid.*

6 Charlotte Brunsdon and David Morley, *Everyday Television: Nationwide* (London: British Film Institute, 1978), p. 43.

7 John Morley, *The Spaces between Programmes: TV Continuity* (London: Comedia, 1981), pp. 1, 2, 21.

#### The youth market: 'nothing is constant except change'<sup>4</sup>

MTV's approach to youth was the key to its success. It was designed as television for a lifestyle which acknowledged the changing trends that young people followed. As Brent Hansen points out: 'We believe the most important aspect of MTV Europe is the dynamic environment which we create. More than the programmes, more than the video clips, it is the channel as a whole which has become a barometer of popular culture.'<sup>5</sup>

To understand MTV as a cultural phenomenon is to understand its specific mode of address. Central to the production of its discourse are two main strategies. Firstly, to set everything into MTV's context. Secondly, to develop an ambiguous outlook in order to maximize appeal. MTV 'has its own take on the topic . . . it does not simply transmit items, it constructs itself as a very specific kind of discourse'.<sup>6</sup> The channel invested a considerable amount of creative effort and money into legitimizing what appear to be peripheral to the experience of watching television: continuity sequences. With the emergence of MTV, these went from being essentially ephemera right into the spotlight. MTV maximized their potential in structuring 'the relationship with the audience to maximum self-advantage, employing particular formal conventions composed to avoid discomforting, puzzling or otherwise alienating an audience which had been made familiar with a certain set of codes, a naturalized system of practices and house styles'.<sup>7</sup>

MTV's idents and trailers have their own metatextual mode of operation which compose MTV's self-conscious and self-reflexive discourse. They are designed to be experienced as an indispensable part of the channel creating a context for other programme items to fit into, be these a music video, a 'substantial' show or an advertisement. However, rather than a series of separate items, MTV is experienced as an 'environment'. Through sequences, a fashionable image of the MTV audience is narcissistically offered as a desirable point of

14 Jason Toynbee, 'MTV and the making of the European fan base', given at the European Routes Conference, Liverpool Institute of Popular Music, 19-21 March 1994.

15 Kalman, speaking at the ACRM Conference.

16 Hansen, interview with the author.

17 Bundson and Morley, *Everyday Television: Nationwide* p. 80.

18 Toynbee, 'MTV and the making of the European fan'.

Europe the Anglo-American axis in rock is pulled apart by the effacement of English as a transatlantic signifier. Rather, it becomes a universal language of youth and music.<sup>14</sup>

With regard to cultural variations, the only way MTV Europe can function as a transnational television is by acknowledging differences. The question is, how do we deal with diversity? There are two methods, as Tibor Kalman observes: 'Here's one sure-fire method. It's done a great job in Sarajevo and it will do a great job in Rwanda, and it will keep going. Another popular method is just to sell them stuff, to smother the differences and to make people drink our stuff and wear our sweaters . . .'. However, here he makes the distinction between simply selling and selling 'with education', which implies a specific kind of marketing: 'It's about celebrating the differences between people and putting something back into the world . . . it's about nurturing the differences, about creating understanding and education about the differences, different cultures and different ideas . . .'.<sup>15</sup> In sum, it is about accepting different consumption cultures. MTV Europe generates this kind of thinking. It was conceived and developed as a 'celebration of diversities'.

MTV is constantly emphasizing the message: 'We're as local as you are and as international as you are'.<sup>16</sup> In order to explain this, MTV can be depicted by analogy with the British television news programme *Nationwide*. Within both programmes' discourses, 'the concept of the nation is not presented as a monolithic entity, immediately embracing us all – rather the unity of the nation is constructed out of the sum of our regional differences and variations'.<sup>17</sup> Thus, MTV's Europe is a combination of gaps and synergies; its constituents are equally European in their difference.

However, to define Europe as a relational entity is not sufficient. In order to account for the distinctive properties of the constructed European nation, there is a need to call upon a structure of opposition. In this case, it is the USA. As Toynbee argues: 'What is needed and what MTV supplies, is a sense of pan-European identity to replace the American symbolism in the rock imaginary'. This pan-European identity is visible through similarities between young Europeans. They are fluent in 'panglossian' English, they have a similar lifestyle and taste in music and clothes. They also share a common concern with European issues. Bosnia is the most extreme case where tragedy brought the audience together in common European filiation: 'something must be done here'.<sup>18</sup>

Despite the similarities, there is still variation in the appreciation of the channel: a diversity of celebration. The reaction to MTV significantly depends on the national context of consumption. My aim is to examine how the war in Bosnia affected the reception of MTV there.

In order to understand what MTV represents in wartorn Bosnia, it is necessary to reflect upon the period before the war. There are many reasons for the success of MTV in eastern Europe. Although of crucial importance, audience research and, consequently, a calculated approach towards the youth market were not the only parameters of MTV's success in most of the continent.

Firstly, it is essential to look at the context of production. The idea of MTV Europe was born at a particular time in history, the late 1980s, a time very favourable for ideas of European unification. For youth culture, the prospect of no boundaries not only meant more employment opportunities but also the end of the era of intolerance. The Berlin wall had fallen and the East–West dichotomy was a nightmare of the past. Furthermore, satellite and cable television were increasingly available, offering television with no frontiers.

Secondly, there were local factors dictating MTV's success in each territory: the strength of national feeling and the choice of programmes available on terrestrial television. In the countries where it was broadcast, neither was strong enough to resist MTV's conquest. In addition, in eastern Europe, there was a third contributory cause: 'how recently a territory tuned in'. By the time eastern youth gained access, westerners were already accustomed to MTV's image. In the East, where this was new, the reaction was hysterical. This type of television had never been seen before.

Furthermore, MTV was a sign of emancipation. It was free direct access to 'the West'. For the first time, eastern Europeans could be in tune with the latest music, fashion trends and information from the outside world. More importantly, thanks to MTV, not only were they able to follow trends, they too became members of the MTV community of fans. They were equal, at least symbolically – their consumer power could not actually match that of a western teenager. This, clearly, is another problem, but, nevertheless, with MTV came the first sense of freedom. As a matter of fact, MTV did not change the political system, but at a time of major changes it was the first available source of popular culture without communist censorship.

Although it was not part of the eastern bloc, the reaction in former Yugoslavia to MTV was similar. However, with the start of the war, MTV in Bosnia gained a whole new meaning. Mass destruction, previously unknown, changed popular perception of the channel. MTV became something different both for the young Bosnians watching it in the war zones, and for MTV itself, now being broadcast into an environment of buildings collapsing in fire.

Once, it was a simple desire to be trendy. In Bosnia today, the will to be part of MTV has turned into a desperate wish not to be left behind. Within a short period, MTV became what young people once had and

19 *Interview with the author*

had now so suddenly lost. Yet to admit the loss would have been more devastating than the reality. Instead, Bosnians still think of themselves as members of the MTV community. 'In the country torn by war . . . MTV represents other people. It represents, kind of, people who should be mindful of what's going on in their situation.'<sup>19</sup> 'Other people' is MTV's community of European fans. Only now, this community is shaken by the sight of a major European tragedy.

As for MTV, it was confronted with the tension between its marketing imperative and a sense of moral responsibility. On the one hand, MTV invested heavily in making itself a forum for issues outside pop trivia. On the other, it constructed its Europe as a 'celebration of diversities'. Consequently, in order to live up to its image, it simply could not ignore the Bosnian 'local' issue.

20 *ibid.*

Nevertheless, the crisis went beyond the scope of any entertainment channel. The matter had to be subtly expressed. As Brent Hansen rightly points out: 'That has to be somehow said there, without going into some kind of emotional overkill. . . . We're never going to stop the war, but we'll keep people mindful of that.'<sup>20</sup>

One could argue that in the context of Sarajevo reporting, the third strand of MTV's 'double image' is challenged. In any situation other than war, MTV's 'playful' as opposed to 'serious' discourse is acceptable. However, this is a more delicate matter than music censorship or Slash's tattoo. As a matter of fact, the 'playful' is replaced with the 'not so playful', while the 'serious' is 'much too serious'. Either way, the war had to be confronted. In order to face its responsibility, MTV took on the role of war reporter, which was not the channel's standard practice. This entailed a change in the mode of address. In its Bosnian reports, MTV still respected its 'double image' rules. However, its usual game of opposites was replaced by a concern to be 'mindful without emotional overkill'. This, in turn, was achieved by using two televisual techniques: real documentary was mixed with the MTV style.

The documentary-type footage fulfilled the 'mindful' part. Witnessing horrifying war scenes, viewers felt impelled to do something. These were combined with scenes of everyday life in the extraordinary environment of Sarajevo. The thought of people living in such atrocious conditions should have left viewers feeling upset. However, instead of pessimism, the image aroused hope. This is where the contribution of the MTV style is visible. Stereotypical war footage was edited into brief cut sequences, like any other feature on MTV. Sometimes, music beats were added to it. Otherwise, images simply spoke for themselves, with no music or voiceover. Furthermore, in the choice of items to avoid 'emotional overkill', the Sarajevo mise-en-scene itself became the documentary context. In the search for other than news-type footage, the situation on the ground led the camera. And here it found life. There were children playing, and singing the latest hits. There were young people going to

nightclubs. The environment was that of a war, but people themselves were very much alive.

The message became: 'there is still life in Sarajevo'. The spirit of the city is not killed. This was the important message which came across. Framed and linked into MTV's own environment, the message was encoded with a privileged reading. The interpretation of the items was full of optimism. This was partly due to the meta-language – it was, indeed, MTV's intention to show a cheerful war report. However, it was also a painful truth. War is two faced. Despite death, the immediate association which we take for granted when we watch the news, there is also life. And MTV's reports from Sarajevo were a celebration of life rather than footage of death. Instead of a news documentary, the 'Sarajevo Special' was presented as a version of an MTV 'rockumentary'. It was almost like a video.

There are two conclusions to be drawn here. Firstly, the alternative coverage of the war has its relevance for popular music. As Toynbee argues, Sarajevo can be seen as a rich mise-en-scene for rock narratives. In a reading of the Sarajevo reports as video clips: 'Sarajevo, however momentarily, constitutes a new site in the rock imaginary'. What we are seeing is possibly the prototype for a new rock imaginary, one which is unequivocally European, where the tension between the dream of a united continent is at risk of the nightmare of fragmentation and barbarousness. The cold war never provided symbolic material because it always remained a 'threat' or 'fantasy' of annihilation. However, in the case of the former Yugoslavia: 'European politics has a new materiality. Armed conflict, and its other – the possibility of reconstruction, now provide rock culture with a truly grandiloquent European reference for the first time.'<sup>21</sup>

Secondly, perhaps by pure coincidence, MTV succeeded in showing the neglected side of the war: people smiling and dancing. When life prevails over death, then the concern about Benetton's intentions becomes irrelevant. What matters is the gesture: to open a shop in Sarajevo. It might be in a war zone, but there are still people living in this town. If the majority cannot afford the items, the shop, none the less, gives them faith in a better future. Benetton is the first sign of stability and the slow return to normality. As the lone voice among British teenagers asks: 'Why shouldn't they want the same things as us?'<sup>22</sup>

What now remains is to try to explain why MTV coverage is important for young Bosnians living in a war zone, and why they pin as much hope on satellite links transmitted by MTV as on any charitable organization on the ground?

For many young Bosnians, MTV is an emotional refuge. It does not have any propaganda or nationalistic message in its statements. It does

21 Toynbee, 'MTV and the making of the European fan'

22 Waterman, 'Between the lines'

23 Hansen, interview with author

24 Lawrence Grossberg, 'Toynbee, MTV and the making of the European fan'

25 MTV, news report (1994)

26 Toynbee, 'MTV and the making of the European fan'

not put up national flags. As Hansen explains: 'We still talk to people in Sarajevo and they know we're out there. We try to bring it up as often as possible, without trying to score any kind of ethical points on our behalf. 'Cause, it's kind of powerless, but, to a degree, we are attached. We are reality. To a lot of them, we are more reality than CNN.'<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Hansen, interview with the author.

When the voice of young Bosnians comes through MTV in live links, it is a chance for them to speak their mind. During the links, they take part in the MTV experience as equals. They watch the same programmes, listen to the same music and have the same haircuts. However, at the same time, they do not want other viewers to forget that young Bosnians only watch television when they have electricity. In their environment, banal things, which are normally taken for granted, are luxuries.

People in Bosnia are trying to make sense of everyday life. In times of senseless human tragedy and suffering, spiritual pleasures assume the same importance as biological needs. In this town, Lawrence Grossberg's 'rock culture organizes the mattering maps by which everyday life becomes navigable and hence liveable'<sup>24</sup> takes on a particular significance. Where human life has no more value, to live it as decently as possible becomes crucial. Thus, listening to music is as vital as eating, because, in Bosnian conditions, neither of those activities are normally fulfilled. There is no difference between keeping the physical body and the mind alive. This is best illustrated by the words of a young man from Mostar: 'Normal life is cinema. Normal life is a rock concert. Normal life is bread.'<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Lawrence Grossberg, quoted in Toynebe, 'MTV and the making of the European war'

<sup>25</sup> MTV news report, 29 April, 1995

In Sarajevo, the will to make the quotidien liveable has a literal resonance: 'Rock culture organizes the minutiae of day to day survival'.<sup>26</sup> Regardless of circumstances, wherever there is life, life itself is a priority. The will to be alive has the same meaning anywhere. For every human being it implies love, hate, having fun, going to school, and so on. Perhaps, in war circumstances, the wish to enjoy every moment is even greater because death is so much closer. This is why in Bosnia it is not unusual to see a Guns 'N' Roses T-shirt on a youngster's tomb.

<sup>26</sup> Toynebe, 'MTV and the making of the European war'

MTV exposed what could be characterized as the issue of 'sameness' which was lost in other news reports. At least, with regard to young people, there is no difference between them and the rest of Europe's youth. Footage of hungry and exhausted people, marching with bags containing all their belongings, is indeed one shocking side of the war. Having been forced to move, these people have lost their material possessions, but not their dignity. They are still individuals, although they are referred to collectively as refugees. This, for many, is hard to accept. When called a refugee in a camp, a young man replied: 'Fuck you, my name is Goran!'. Even if living conditions have changed, the majority of people have not. Girls are still beautiful. They wear makeup and like Bon Jovi, but somehow that seems to get

forgotten. This is not the kind of reality we see on the news, yet it exists.

However, on MTV this 'other' side prevails. Bosnians have their Miss Bosnia Contest. They even prepared for the Eurovision Song Contest. When possible, they continued to film their favourite comedy series. Humour is another means of survival. They are members of the 'civilized' Europe, although some people chose to follow the path of primitive destruction. Young Bosnians reach for MTV to show how 'normal' they are. Despite the war, they still wish to be in touch with the latest music or fashion. MTV is the dose of escapism necessary to live through the sad reality. It is food for the soul.

'I hope you're enjoying your party' are the words of a musician that ended the MTV satellite link with Sarajevo. They sum up the way MTV constructed Europe and how the Bosnians saw themselves within it.

Firstly, by saying 'your' party, the musician referred to all the viewers as portrayed by MTV: a bunch of young people who like to watch the channel because they share a similar taste in music, fashion and humour, and an interest in other more 'serious' issues. At the same time, they also have their national heroes and jokes which do not necessarily translate into other cultures. Nevertheless, they are all, the Bosnians included, equally European in their similarities and differences.

Yet Bosnians are only formally members of that community because their right to party, to freely do as they please, has been taken away. As Hansen remarks, '... while some watch MTV in a café in Amsterdam, this is a different scene, here. This is a life and death issue.'<sup>27</sup> Aware of this, the Bosnian musician consciously excluded himself from the party. He refused to accept the idea of a united Europe, in this case symbolized by MTV, only in terms of a party.

Europe is about sharing fun but also about sharing tragedy. There can be no Europe without all its members. If the special Bosnian report is simply one more feature, rather than a plea for help, then this musician would simply be grateful to the audience for listening, and then let them go back to their 'party' in which he has no wish to participate. On the other hand, if this programme will keep people mindful of the situation, then there is a chance of a better future. One can believe that more concrete help will be available once the fighting is over. The potential of a united Europe is still a dream that can come true after the nightmare.

The case of MTV in Bosnia raises questions about the role of popular culture in our society.

Firstly, MTV is not only an aesthetic issue. An analysis of its visual

27 Hansen interview with the author

28 Goodwin, p. 63

29 Douglas Keir, 'London Report'

discourse, no matter how attractive it is, does not fully account for the channel's properties. This can be explained by using the already mentioned example of the double image: the playful and the serious. MTV is often considered within the scope of entertainment and show-business excitement. This is an undeniable fact. However, the dominance of the playful in the approach fails to recognize the complexity of the phenomenon. One can acquire a proper understanding only if incorporating the other side as well.

Andrew Goodwin argues that the regular attempts on MTV to address sociopolitical topics articulate a point of view: 'The complicated factor here is the transformation, in the 1980s, of rock's counter-cultural ideology into a discourse that combines traditional notions of social responsibility and philanthropic concern'.<sup>28</sup> In short, despite their atypical mode of expression in comparison with traditional news reports, MTV's news features are none the less engaged. They function as a cultural symptom of rock's new centrality.

This duality has to be taken into account to realize the full potential of MTV. Kellner rightly points out that: 'media texts are neither merely vehicles of dominant ideology, nor pure and innocent entertainment. Rather they are complex artefacts that embody social and political discourses whose analysis and interpretations require methods of reading and critique that articulate their embeddedness in the political economy, social relations, and the political environment within which they are produced, circulated and received.'<sup>29</sup> And, furthermore, the gap between the 'serious' (traditional news) and 'entertainment' (MTV) is narrowing. This is true in the USA and is also visible in Europe. On the one hand, information programmes are increasingly incorporating trivial reports. For example, the break up of the British group Take That or the marriage and divorce of Michael Jackson, and similar items of pop gossip, now feature in television news bulletins. Some news networks, such as 'London Tonight', even have show-business correspondents. Moreover, characteristics attributed to channels like MTV are now being adopted by programmes which are considered informative: good-looking and glamorous newsreaders, humorous comments and chat among the presenters in the studio, friendly rapport with the viewer, and so on. On the other hand, MTV itself covers issues such as war, elections, racism and human rights.

Two conclusions may be drawn from this. Firstly, what is playful is not necessarily harmless. For example, in the former Yugoslavia the nationalist parties won the elections, and there is no question that going to the polls is 'serious'. However, a vote in itself was not sufficient for the new nationalism. People also needed to comply with certain rules. This meant emphasizing differences. Where people had lived in harmony for a long time, forgotten national signifiers from the past suddenly became indispensable. Thus, among the Serb

<sup>28</sup> Goodwin, *Fata distracted*, p. 33.

<sup>29</sup> Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 4.

community, there was an increased interest in 'gusle' music. Among the Muslims, many women started to cover themselves. Both gusle and veils existed before, but they were not so obviously used. They were either part of folklore or special ceremonies. The young urban generation neither listened to gusle nor wore veils. But now it was through playful signifiers, such as music or fashion, that harmful statements were made. We are all aware how far this stressing of differences went in the former Yugoslavia. At the same time, for young people who refused to hate and fight, MTV became a means to express their disagreement. They, too, used music and fashion as a way of rejecting discrimination.

Secondly, the potential impact of the coverage of serious issues on MTV should not be neglected. For example, Clinton's electoral campaign on MTV US encouraged a considerable number of young people to express their opinions by exercising their democratic rights. In France, listeners to the commercial radio station NRJ came out on the streets to support its campaign against a governmental decision regarding private licences: they succeeded in keeping NRJ on air.<sup>30</sup> In eastern Germany, the rock industry became the key site for the management of cultural change.<sup>31</sup> In the last Russian elections, politicians involved western rock stars in their campaigns, using performances to boost their image. Alternatively, it is politicians who move out of their usual context. For example, in the UK, the leader of the Labour Party, Tony Blair, is regularly seen at ceremonies such as the 'Q Awards' or the 'Brits 1996'. At the latter event he even presented an award – a task traditionally performed by pop celebrities.

Finally, MTV's support of the Bosnian cause went beyond media coverage anyway. MTV is part of 'War Child', the charity raising money for a music conservatory in Mostar. The aim is to heal war trauma with music therapy. Perhaps, apart from contributing towards knowledge, this paper can also tempt scholars to take interest in an academic lifeline for Bosnia.<sup>32</sup>

I wish to thank my friend Brent for his time, my sponsor Dave Murray for his comments and Simon for editing this article. I am also grateful for my Department's material support for my attendance at the Screen Studies Conference 1995 especially Valerie, Wil and Dave Mc

30 See Raymond Kuhn, *Media in France* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 101–4.

31 See Peter Wicke and John Shepard, 'The cabaret is dead: rock culture as state enterprise – the official organization of rock in East Germany', in Tony Bennett, Simon Frith, Lawrence Grossberg, John Shepard and Graeme Turner (eds), *Rock and Popular Music* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 25–36.

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1 Julio Garcia Espinosa, *Una imperfección del Salvador de la Tierra*, p. 29.  
2 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

interested in a subject which was often outside their own discipline and which is still full of contradictions, challenges and good humoured provocation.

This was only my second IASPM conference, and the first, I think, to be so closely associated with another international affair: *Screen's* own annual conference, which this year obligingly focused on issues of performance and music. Consequently, the first day of the IASPM conference overlapped with the last day of *Screen's*, but the potential dominance of the visual was neatly avoided by an authoritative start by the keynote speakers, Claudia Gorbman and Philip Tagg. Gorbman compellingly outlined the materiality of music as part of the cinematic experience, and Tagg demonstrated that popular music needs, perhaps, to rein in some of its creative chaos to enable colleagues to speak – if not in one voice, at least to each other – in ways that develop rather than undermine each other's methodologies. Later in the morning, a session concentrating on the reception of video and MTV in different geographical and political contexts – particularly Lida Hujic's paper on the reception of MTV in Bosnia – suggested that situation as well as conversation is also important for the fullest understanding of how popular music makes meaning. In the afternoon, the nostalgia deconstructed by a session examining how popular music is used in television drama was rapidly superseded by the last session of the day. Here, I am afraid, the pleasures of visual, and contemporary, hysteria did begin to usurp the musical focus and critical detachment, as an ethnography of 'Take That' fans allowed some members of the audience (principally, me) to indulge in observations that were parochial, and perhaps not strictly academic.

Suitably chastised by a punitive hangover on the Monday (a party at King Tut's Wah Wah Hut may have had something to do with this), I was more sensible as the critical heavyweights of British popular music studies, Paul Oliver and Richard Middleton, delivered

papers that demonstrated the critical breadth and historical depth of the subject.

Middleton's paper used repetition as a central theme around which he presented a wide range of cultural theory, from Kant to Adorno, as well as Bakhtin and Kristeva. Using this theoretical armoury, it seemed to me (in a crude revision) that he was suggesting a critical movement which was sensitive to time, both within history and as an intrinsic part of popular music, might be one way to unearth this music's wider-reaching implications within social life (a thesis taken up and developed by Georgie Born in the closing plenary). In contrast to this, Oliver's paper concentrated on the historical, and presented a fascinating case-study concerning the reliability of recordings as the proper material of study. As an example, he demonstrated that early recordings of some blues music were not in fact effective renderings of the actual 'event' of the music as it had been experienced by the original audience. Significantly, his paper demonstrated that a contemporary concern with the tangibility of the authentic 'critical object' has a resonance that stretches back, as well as forward, into the debates surrounding the development of digital technology, and the virtual phenomenology of the rave. These concerns were neatly elaborated by Sarah Thornton, later in the day, as she provided a historical account of the range of competing authenticities that surround the gig, different recordings and 'events' supported by recorded music, and their varying significance for different audiences.

Tuesday promised a day of 'Performing Policy and Practice', and revealed itself to be, unsurprisingly, a day in which politics came to the fore. Jan Fairley's keynote speech demonstrated through an examination of the performances of a Chilean group (Inti-Illumani) how politics *in* performance for a local audience can become transformed into the performance *of* politics for an international audience, as the hierarchies of stardom and the monolingual ignorance of an overwhelmingly