

FEA Y REBELDE

Fran Ilich

One spring afternoon, like many others, I decided it was time to abandon Mexico City because not much could be done given the current political situation. In fact, most of my colleagues and interlocutors had either already left, taking their projects to smaller cities and towns, or they were living the typical “double life”: working 8 hours at something they weren’t interested in to earn some money for projects they do find of interest. But that’s always seemed too high a price to pay and doesn’t really make any sense to me. You only live once and if you do that, instead of getting twice as much out of life, you cut it in half. That’s if we look at it realistically. If we take it a step further, one could say it is precisely that double life that makes certain liberties possible: the famous post-structuralist cracks where post-human cockroaches build their post-nuclear civilization. “Well, it makes perfect sense, Scully.” And then the days passed and I was just waiting for Shakira to come to the city before saying good-bye. And after her concert, a rumor spread through the streets of the city and through cyberspace: the Caribbean mega-diva was going to wrap up her 2-year “Oral Fixation Tour” at the Zócalo in Mexico City, the largest public square in the whole country, that is, in the public sphere. And that was it. I had to come up with a plan. I had two weeks until the day came and not even her official Web site confirmed the rumor. That’s how things work in Mexico City, though, and it’s very usual for that type of mass appeal performer to reach an agreement with the government to deduct taxes by offering a free concert at the end of their tour around the country.

Subcommander Marcos and the Zapatistas arrived at the Zócalo in 2001 and over 200,000 people were there, keeping them company. And less than a year ago, there were huge demonstrations about the presidential elections where two presidents were ratified: the official one and the legitimate one: Felipe Calderón Hinojosa and Andrés Manuel López Obrador. And now, it was time for Shakira, the girl who once and for all took Latin pop music to the hit parade on the World White Web. How many people could we expect? And I certainly was not going to miss the opportunity to see her again, especially performing on the city streets. So we cooked up a plan: if we were going to be there for two more weeks, we weren’t going to waste them: we launched an old idea: Adry la Fea (a free version of Betty la Fea (*Ugly Betty*) where we would touch on a non-physical type of ugliness) and then, playing with the words, we thought that if the Mexican version was called Lety la Fea or La fea Mas

Bella, we'd call it la Fea más Rebelde (the most rebellious ugly woman), but then we thought there could also be another one called La Rebelde más Fea (the ugliest rebellious woman). And then we thought it would be better to do 2 soap operas that would be published on youtube and that at some point, the plot lines would intersect. The whole "Fea" (Ugly) series started in Colombia and reached U.S. television as "Ugly Betty", thanks to Mexican actress, Salma Hayek. The second one started in Argentina as "Rebelde's Way" and reached Mexico as RBD. It was then exported to many other countries, including Brazil and Spain. And well, if these are the stories of today's society, the myths of the globalized post-industrial culture we live in, then we thought responding and disseminating free versions through a network like Youtube would be appropriate. Firstly, because of everything people say about Web 2.0, that the user is the content, and corporations provide the infrastructure. And secondly, because we've never believed that the Internet was a free, democratic, horizontal medium but rather a corporative social space. And yet, we were interested in playing with popular figures and myths to try to establish a dialogue. Adry la Fea is an unsuccessful actress who never does well at auditions. Tired of watching all the other actresses succeed, she decides to take her revenge on the society that won't let her play her part. How? By murdering Shakira at the closing concert of her Oral Fixation tour. And Rebelde is the story of a journalist on free media on the Internet, an activist in the Zapatista National Liberation Army's "Other Campaign" who spends her life at demonstrations, meetings with her collective, conversations with her friends where she encourages them to move their cause and their struggle forward in their private lives. In the end, she comes to the conclusion that it wouldn't be a bad idea to contact Shakira at her concert in the Zócalo and have her show some support for the Zapatista people. That's where the two stories come together.

Up to that point, the story was published daily on Youtube's social space, using key words such as RBD REBELDE SALMA HAYEK ZAPATISTA UGLY BETTY FEA DULCE MARIA SHAKIRA, which helped the clips from the soap operas to link up to those uploaded by fans of the official soap operas. Meanwhile, the rumors kept growing that Shakira was going to give a free concert in the city, and afterward, a few people thought that the videos revealed the plans of a few "crazy women" who wanted to kill Sony Records' mega-diva. One of the ideas we worked with inside the production, that we found pretty interesting, was the option people have of freely mixing Sony's divas' music, or, in general, big hits by transnational recording labels. Remixing them because let's say that's a more up-to-date way of making covers. And we saw precisely in the act of generating an inter-textual fiction with people who

are not only “celebrities” but are also real, where they just do what they always do, unaware of everything going on around them.

Another point is that these free versions of Fea y Rebelde (which, if we go back further in time, are reinterpretations of fairy tales like the danish “The Ugly Duckling” are not parodies. They just use one of the words from the soap operas as a leit motif, given that we were interested in developing concepts from an idiomatic standpoint: using key words on Web 2.0. And yet, with all that, on the day that Televisa celebrated the 50th anniversary of soap operas, we received a message from Youtube informing us that our clips had been blocked because, according to Televisa, we had infringed their copyright. It was like finding yourself involved with Ministry of Truth, as if they owned the dictionary published by the Spanish Royal Academy of Language and concepts like Fea (Ugly) and Rebelde (Rebel) could be considered intellectual property in the brave new world of the Internet. Fortunately, we were soon contacted by a lawyer from the Electronic Frontier Foundation, who advised us on the case, and who ended up telling us it was better to desist because the best outcome would be if we won and could then reestablish our files on the Youtube system but the worst case scenario would be getting sued by several corporations. Not only had we used those words and themes, and even sampled a few seconds of the Rebelde soundtrack for non-profit purposes, but we had also filmed a few excerpts of Shakira’s concert at the Zócalo in Mexico City. While we were not alone in doing so, and while the Zócalo is considered the largest plaza in the country (in all the Aztec grandiloquence, actually-- sometimes it’s called the largest plaza in the Americas and compared to Moscow’s Red Square), the fact was that the Government of the Federal District, headed by members of the Democratic Revolution Party (the electoral Left) had ceded the Zócalo to the entertainment company OCESA (Operadora de Centro de Espectáculos, S.A.) in some kind of commercial agreement and so they could also sue us. The only person who would not sue us, according to the Electronic Frontier Foundation, was Shakira. And curiously enough, so far, the only surviving episode of the 17 is the one that is exclusively about her, which also includes an incidental cameo out of focus where the zoom is as close as possible.

Since that time, we have received numerous proposals, some sent in good faith and others saying just about anything, for us to upload our videos onto other video services instead of Youtube. But as Mark Tribe so accurately noted, one of the things we considered important was to contrast the public and the private, the popular and

the corporative. Therefore, while we could have published our soap opera for Web 2.0 entirely on the independent cooperative server possibleworlds.org, it only made sense to do so as a site-specific intervention on Youtube: that leisure space where millions of people intersect each day, for the benefit of Google, Inc.'s investors.

Moral of the story: During Televisa's reign of terror, it was common knowledge that soap operas were the opiate of the Mexican people, that melodrama was used by the French to advance the causes of the Revolution by making common citizens into the main characters (see Victor Hugo and Les Miserables), and after the appearance of a second Mexican television company (TV Azteca), the contents of soap operas changed greatly: women no longer had to be self-sacrificing and even had a perfect right to take on younger lovers, which would have been unthinkable on Televisa: divorce (see Mirada de Mujer by Argos Producciones), and now with the arrival of the Internet, "anybody with a modem" (see fea y rebelde, possibleworlds.org) can make a soap opera and the genre is celebrating its fiftieth anniversary in Mexico, we are celebrating it with censorship, lawsuits, and silence, in the grand tradition of Televisa (see monica mayer, el universal: <http://www.el-universal.com.mx/columnas/67185.html>).