

From Opacity to Transparency: Operación Triunfo and New Trends in Spanish Music Industry

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Introduction

Spain is a country with high consumer television indexes. The television media audience exceeds that of radio by more than 50% and twice as much as that of the written press. To this statistic we can add that some internal sources from the major recording companies, calculate that almost 30% the proportion of record buyers that show choice of what they buy are directly influenced by television. Therefore, the following question is obvious: In which advertising slots do promotions that decide the consumption of recording products appear? There are two possible responses to this question: one that could have been given before the month of November 2001, the other, that which would be given after this date, when the program *Operación Triunfo* achieved renown on the Spanish television screens.

Before the end of 2001, the disencounter between the television programming and music was almost total: the programs dedicated to classical music or folk music were always aired during absolutely marginal fringe time slots, such as early morning hours on holidays and late night on working days. Pop likewise took up a minimum

time slot, generally in programs that played hit lists from sister radio stations. At the end of the eighties there were various attempts on the part of public and private television channels to secure a program dedicated to pop-rock music. The attempts inevitably failed after continually moving them around the programming schedule during impossible time slots, low viewership being blamed for said failure.

Logically, the music existed on television: the music industry was not going to leave 31 million spectators and potential buyers by the wayside. But it was not found looking for it on monographic or specialty programs but in other formats. For example, in the form of live performances by diverse groups that were promoting their latest single (including it's corresponding playback) in "magazines" and daily talk shows. Or in production series themselves that, following the imported model of Ally McBeel, ended the action of each scene in a bar where, in some way covered up, you see and hear the musical group that was the flavor of the month (*Al Salir de clase, Policías...*). Other programs counted on live music played by their own band, but in that case the musicians served to emphasize moments or gags of the program, and did not resort to promotional hits (*El Club de la comedia, Caiga quien caiga...*). The opening and

closing curtains of the programs, the theme songs and program sections, in addition to advertisements, made up the remainder of the music television slots. This last niche, advertisements, had been for years the principal conduit for promoting new hits or for oldies relaunched in the market. From not so subtle marketing ploys such as “tonight’s film is sponsored by the latest disc from X”, to sophisticated promotions in which a mobile telephone, car or shopping center use theme music that will be associated with the product for a long time. It should be mentioned that, in Spain, yearly compilation discs of the songs from advertisements always enjoy success in sales.

However, it was evident that the industry was not taking advantage of a magnificent promotional showcase when they only used brief appearances in commercials. That was the situation when public television TV1 broke with established practices by airing the program *Operación Triunfo*.

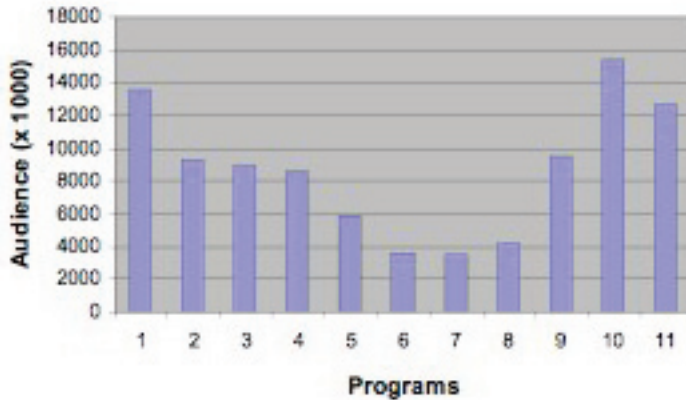
OT: What is it and how does it work?

A casting-audition was held in the summer of summer of 2001 in various parts of Spain in order to select 16 young people who would participate in a television music contest. A total of 3,900 candidates presented themselves for inspection but the TV1 concept did not attract any interest, even to the point that they could not convince any important record companies to market the

merchandise that had been foreseen for the program. The program started at the end of October. The dynamic was simple and to some extent inspired by the format of *Gran Hermano (Big Brother)*: the 16 candidates attended an exclusive academy, built on an immense television set, where they received daily classes of singing, acting, dance, etc. Everyday TV2, the public television channel with the lowest number of viewers, aired a half hour prerecorded broadcast of their training. The weekly activities were focused on preparing a live show in which each contestant had to defend his or her assigned song and show everything they had learned during the week in the Academy. The following Monday, the show was broadcast live (this time in Prime Time and on TV1) and the performances of each were evaluated by a jury of experts (record company representatives, managers, booking agents, etc.) and by their instructors from the Academy in front of a live studio audience. Afterwards they incorporated the votes of home viewers that would end up deciding between the two candidates that were nominated to leave the Academy.

The Premiere was broadcast on the 29th of October, without much media or social repercussion. However, over a few months, the program audience steadily increased and began to be considered a new media phenomenon. Without showing gratuitous scenes-the Academy cameras only showed the lessons and some group scenes, such as meal times, showing the daily

Most Viewed Programs in Spain 2001 - 2002



- 1.- Football UEFA Championship Final (penalties)..... 68,8
- 2.- Big Brother 2
- 3.- New year's bells
- 4.- Football UEFA Cup Final
- 5.- Cuéntame (soap opera)
- 6.- OT January 10th
- 7.- President Aznar interview
- 8.- Telediario (News) January 21th
- 9.- OT January 28th
- 10.- OT Final February 11th... 74,7
- 11.- Eurovision Contest may 25th

effort in training and promoting a sense of fair play and the solidarity of the participants at all times -, the program's audience swelled quickly and spectacularly. After Christmas, the show had already become a mass media phenomenon, helped along by the critiques – positive and positive – in the written press, the continuous references on other television programs – every channel broadcast fragments of the Monday show or of the daily training – and as a debate topic on numerous radio talk shows.

It is not necessary to give quantitative details. It is enough to say that this progression climaxed on the 11th of February, when the live broadcast of the final show, in which the contestant winner would be decided, breaking all Spanish share records, reaching 15 million spectators and claiming 75% of the market.

The impact on television was unmistakable, and the social repercussions could still be measured months later when the second promotion of the contest was announced for the 2002-2003 season and the almost 4,000 candidates of the first year became more than 80,000 aspirants. But what repercussions did the program have on the Spanish music scene and, above all, the live and recording music industry?

Changing the Rules of the Game

From the beginning of the program, the songs presented live on the OT shows were recorded during the week and were compiled on a compact disc and put up for sale just one week later. The program reached an agreement with a small record company – Vale Music

Best Selling Records in Spain 2002*

Total Year 2002	March 2002
1. David Bisbal: Corazón latino	1. OT Singles Gala 12
2. <i>Álex Ubago: ¿Qué pides tú?</i>	2. OT Singles Gala 11
3. Bustamante: David Bustamante	3. OT Singles Gala 10
4. <i>Café Quijano: La taberna del Buda</i>	5. <i>OT Álbum</i>
5. Manu Tenorio: Manu Tenorio	6. Shakira: Servicio de lavandería
6. OT II: La fuerza de la vida	7. <i>OT Singles Gala 9</i>
7. Rosa: Rosa	8. Amaral: Estrella de mar
8. Chenoa: Chenoa	9. <i>OT Singles Gala 8</i>
9. Shakira: Servicio de lavandería	10. Café Quijano: La taberna del Buda
10. UPA: UPA Dance	11. Estopa: Destrangis

* Italics on the records related to the program

– which was specialized at the time in compilation and re-editions that had a very small catalogue of artists. None of the big recording companies were interested in the product potential, nor was the record label owned of Televisión Española itself. The discs were sold at a very modest price (one third of the cost of a new release) and the marketing was done almost exclusively on the daily reviews and on various occasions during the Monday show. The sales outlets were not restricted to the routine ones for compact discs but were also distributed in supermarkets, train stations, kiosks, etc. Between the marketing (which was free for the record company since it was done through public television) and the warm reception of the program, the sales rocketed to almost completely dominate the compact disc best selling lists.

In addition to this, in 2002, the Spanish recording industry in general was in serious crisis that they attributed to, among other factors, the tremendous impact of piracy. The illegal sales of compact discs in Spain were estimated at around 25 million copies in comparison to the 70 million that were declared legally by the recording companies. Some of the reasons adduced by assorted individuals involved are the permissiveness of the police, a society that did not consider this fraudulent practice a serious crime, and the high cost of CDs.

The OT phenomenon also affected the industry organized around live concerts. Starting in the 80s, professional pop singers were deprived of their main source of income in the form of live performances: compact disc sales, copy write fees, and television appearances had become

their main income. In 2002, as compact disc sales diminished in favor of the OT factory products, the live concert market was equally affected and the majority of artists saw the number of live performances enormously reduced for that summer, which was the main concert season. It was estimated that the take for the winners of the contest was equal to that of renowned artist with long careers in the Spanish music industry (Joaquín Sabina, Manu Chao, etc.). They arrived on the scene and did not contribute a new repertoire (the contest was always based on covers), nor did they have experience ... and they were practically cornering the entire music market. The traditional music industry was enduring its worst moment and OT had become a parallel industry: 18.2 million euros in profit for publicity, 4.8 million euros for MSN and SMS for Televisión Española, 36 million euros (just from the collective CDs) for the small recording company Vale Music, who edited the compact discs for the program, more than 220 million visits to the contest web page... reaching finally an estimated total of 65 million euros profit for the endeavor.

Keys to success of Operación Triunfo

A brief review of the keys to success of this musical macro-operation, media and publicity, brings us to two basic areas for analyses: one, the innovative production and distribution strategies and two, the mechanism used for the creation of the new idols.

Production and Distribution Strategy

The industry innovations contributed by the OT work formula and its tremendous effectiveness – we believe in some cases to be the result of chance more than planning – can be summed up in three aspects:

a) The increase in the speed of production.

Due to the structure of the program and the necessity to cover new contents weekly, the preparation, recording, and postproduction sessions of each disc were accelerated in an unprecedented manner. The discs were produced quickly and with small numbers of copies that ran out almost every week (the recording company doing the editing dedicating practically all of its activity to OT products). The recorded songs were classics or popular themes, already known by the public, and did not need much time to be assimilated. All of this, together with the exhaustive propaganda that the program – already with a large audience – did for the next product, enabled the discs to be edited and distributed quickly, and in some cases, ran out in just a few days. The OT products, in reality, functioned as singles, which were part of a unique macro-product that appeared week after week at the top of the charts. The product was composed of various singers and songs but with one image. The disc was not bought for this

or that song, a single from this or that singer, but as the “latest *Operación Triunfo* disc”.

b) Reduced Prices.

The disproportionate price of CDs is one of the main reasons for the consumption of discs illegally copied and sold on the streets and in cafes. Since the explosion of the CD format into the market, replacing the vinyl LP, the consumer knows that the costs of production are much lower with the new format. But far from having the impact of dropping the prices, the cost of CDs has increased, exceeding the psychological barrier of 18€ for a new release. When a successful new release, such as the OT product, is sold for 6€, it causes damage that promotes its sale and causes the rejection of other new releases – at times less wanted – that are displayed beside it for a price three times more than what they are paying for the latest disc from their OT idols. Obviously, the almost nonexistent investment in promotion that Vale Music has to make is also part of the game and constitutes unfair rivalry that the consumer is not always able to value.

c) Access to new consumers.

We still do not have a detailed study of the OT product consumer profile, but it's easy to deduce that this phenomenon has converted a sector of the public,

one that was composed not of habitual buyers, into consistent consumers. The universal and indiscriminate publicity from Prime Time television, the fact that they are products suitable for the public (the OT songs became common even in child day care centers), the variety of styles, personalities, voices and repertoires that were offered on the same disc, and the popularity of the chosen songs, expanded the base of potential buyers. This new shopper was now able to partake because they did not have to go to the shops to buy the discs but could find them in the supermarket, kiosk, or train station.

The creation of new idols

One of the most surprising things about the OT phenomenon was the manner in which the industry approached the construction *ex novo* of a pop idol. This is a fact as old as the music industry, but generally rejected by the public as a sign of lack of artistic authenticity. Here we are attending the creation, live, of new idols: the spectator is present for the daily training, the advice from the professionals how to sing the theme and present it to the public in the most convincing way possible... Summing up, they expose us to the complete process of the creation of an artist, bare and without hiding any facet of the construction: the artist is not anymore that which needs to express him or herself through the medium of music, but that which brings to

us those songs which we like in the most convincing manner. And the fact is, far from causing a public scandal, the public was moved and fascinated.

Listed here are some keys to understand why:

a) Anyone can become an artist.

What the public saw was how a completely unknown young boy or girl over the weeks, and in many cases without exceptional talent, becomes a successful singer. The feeling that there is a process, that an artist is not born but created, turned it into something that is hypothetically, within anyone's reach. We could call it "the neighbor next door" effect: it could be any one of us or one of our neighbors. Empathy works.

b) Honesty in the process.

Nobody feels defrauded (it is not a new case like Milli Vanilli): here the process of creation is the starting point. The sincerity with which it is shown, along with the extolment effort (relatively short, since we are talking about only a few months of training) and the praise of the personal triumph, served to win over the affection of the public.

c) Tension resolved well between personalities and adaptation to the market.

From the very first day at the Academy, the participants

are encouraged to show their personality in the performance, to make theirs the song that they will perform in the next show. This gives them certain license to project a performance differentiated from those of their colleagues. At the same time, the teachers refine their stage personality and the students are asked to adapt their personal style to the taste of the public: they have to learn to adapt themselves to all the styles that could appear in the market. This does not provoke rejection because the creation of singers for the public is the recognized and accepted starting point by everybody.

d) Range of options.

The gradual work of refining the individual options and the simultaneous stimulation to progress on one's path and the personal sensitivity, results in each of the candidates define a different performance. From the prototype of Latino singers, such as Ricky Martin or Cheyenne, to the soul-woman to flamenco-like ballad singers, such as Alejandro Sanz, the variety of options covers a wide of range of tastes. It is unlikely that you do not like some of them and there is always a song by your favorite one on each disc. If you like more than one: the CD only costs 6€ and you have all of them together.

e) Popular songs and suitable for everyone.

The repertoire assigned weekly to each participant,

and that will later be a part of the compilation disc, is a very popular repertoire and suitable for everyone: pop songs, boleros, ballads and some flamenco-like themes. They are almost always themes easily sung and the majority in Spanish. Everybody understands the lyrics and anybody can hum along with the disc.

f) Complicity in the decisions.

One of the great decisions of the contest has been to risk the encouragement of competition amongst the participants without causing unhealthy rivalry. The solidarity, the “good times”, and the collaboration in the learning were fed by the creation of different duets and trios for each show. In this “positive atmosphere” the public was made an accomplice because they had the final decision to determine to which of the two candidates nominated for expulsion from the Academy by the “experts” was given a second chance. As opposed to negative mechanisms of programs like *Gran Hermano*, in which the public decides who will be expelled from the house, the public of OT had to cast positive votes: with their votes they support one of the candidates to continue on the program, the one who would become THEIR candidate, THEIR idol.

Some suggestions to reflect on the OT phenomenon

The data presented up to this point constitutes only

a first approach “in the heat of the moment” about a television program that has abruptly changed the rules of the Spanish music market. Once more editions of the program have been aired and we can measure the real combined impact, we will be able to analyze in more detail its influence and repercussions. In order to do this we propose to consider some theoretical tools like the reflection proposed by Goffman (1974) about the *back region*, the phenomenon of Operación Triunfo offers us an obvious opportunity of artistic “voyeurism”. The day to day of the Academy, the training of its participants, the exhibition of their feelings, insecurities and personal triumphs shown up close, make us participants of the *back stage*. Those parts of the creation of the idol that the industry does not normally give us access to, are shown to us by the Academy without holding back. Without being directly part of this reduced group of candidates for success, we feel participants of their experiences and achievements. In fact, we are part of their success in a similar way as when our soccer team wins: our support, our presence in front of the screen makes them what they are. We have been with them all through the process: we have had access to the *back region*, the sight of which is usually prohibited. Evidently this process has turned the *back region* into a front region, creating a trick of mirrors that we should incorporate into our sociological analysis of the artistic process in the future.

On the other hand, we must not forget that Operación Triunfo is not only a musical phenomenon. It is well known that in our society, news, politics, and wars are no longer only issues to get information about but they constitute mass media events in and of themselves. Being a privileged medium of communication for the masses, the television has created a new format called OT that the viewer and the music consumer accept as *rule of media genres*.

In the same way, in the framework of the studies of popular music and its inquiries into the difficult issue of authenticity, Grossberg (1993) gives us another of the keys that we could consider in a deeper study of the keys of OT. The new affective logic of the “authentic inauthenticity” that affirms with all we know about the music market- and that OT has put in front of the average viewer- “the only possible claim to authenticity is derived from the knowledge and admission of your inauthenticity” (Grossberg, 1993, 206). The creators, the participants and the spectators of Operación Triunfo have reached a tacit agreement about the acceptance of the rules of the game. They have given shape to the maximum inauthenticity of the musical expression –as it is denounced by the Spanish musicians wronged by the success of the program and the new rivalry- and have made it its favorite option: the “most authentic” expression for their taste and choice. But this sensation of “authenticity” has an immediate limit: after the original sensation, loss of the “innocence” of the first edition, the reception by the public for the next promotions

of the Academy was hurt. In the second (2002-2003) and third (in progress) staging of the program, the selected candidates showed a much more professional attitude, conscious of the cameras and of the repercussions of their gestures and expressions. They were neither so believable nor so likeable anymore.

Another issue related to the authenticity is the model that OT is proposing with the return of the figure of the *crooner or melodic singer*. We get further away from the singer-author model, to displace the authenticity of the proposal for the way the singer is able to turn a song into HIS song, as much as he is able to bestow on it his own personality and style. The public – the industry? – is not looking for original authors: they want good performers. And in this progress they encourage the soloist, opposed to the format of the band that has predominated in the two previous decades in the local market.

If the encouragement of the soloist will work again as a main risk for the record company; if the success of the program “Operación Triunfo” will normalize the presence of music programs on Spanish television or how the production techniques of OT will help to reconfigure a music industry in full crisis, are questions that we leave, for the moment, on the table. A comparative study of the different national and regional versions of these types of programs, nowadays present on many European and North American televisions, might orientate us in the future to find an answer.

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