

Media Pandering: The Good, the Bad, ...and the Inclusive?

“Renegotiating Excess, Pushing Beyond the Numbers: Latin@s and the Problem - or Opportunity? - of Media ‘Pandering’”

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I find this topic intriguing, as it brings into the foreground timeworn trends that have shaped Latin@ representation in U.S. media, while opening up the possibility for new lines of interpretation and practice in four domains of ethnic representation: 1) access to positions of creative power and public visibility (representation in the industry), 2) textual representation (characterization, dialogue, plot outcomes and longevity, recognizable inscription in the *mise-en-scène*), 3) attentiveness to the Latin@ audience (respect, familiarity, recognition, specificity, and empowerment), and 4) the effects of sociopolitical mobilization on media responsiveness in English-, as compared to Spanish-language television.

Doubtless, we are witnessing yet another wave of pandering to Latin@s, mostly on English-language (EL) television. Teams of Latin@ writers have been hired to work on original primetime series, prominent Latina actresses (Eva Longoria, Sofia Vergara, América Ferrera, Kate del Castillo have all been cast in mainstream, family oriented programming), and, according to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS), 41% of its new Class of 2016 is composed of “people of color,” with nearly 60 new members of Hispanic or Latin@ origin. With a few exceptions (such as *Ugly Betty*, a decade ago), the longevity of the new shows has been limited, and the industry remains mostly “risk averse” where ethnic representation is concerned.

Pandering, or the effort to appeal to a sought-after audience - and, in this case, a growing professional cadre, and a vocal community - that has been mis- or underrepresented, need not be confined to commercial media, and it takes various forms. I would like to think that, when it’s not reluctant or half-hearted, it could involve more than developing culturally-sensitive, demographically-targeted marketing campaigns. Most recently, it has been motivated by a surge in ethnic market attractiveness, geodemographic shifts - Latin@ population growth in middle and southeastern U.S., and community activism for greater media responsiveness to issues that matter to a diverse U.S.

Does pandering actually open the door to increased creative control and substantive input by Latin@ talent? How does “market-driven” pandering differ from pandering mandated or encouraged by state policy (I’m thinking of programming initiatives channeled through the CPB as a result of the 1967 Public Broadcasting Act, the 1978 “A Formula for Change,” and two decades later, the “Latino Consortium RFP” process)? How is pandering on EL TV different in precision and audience address from what happens on EL public radio? Is pandering an institutionalized form of “excess” or, an attempt to sublimate it? What meaningful role have Spanish-Language media, as an increasingly visible and competitive pressure front, played in EL media pandering?

AN ENCOURAGING MOVE, BUT PROCEED WITH CAUTION:

If pandering can lead to inclusiveness, then what does that mean? When we consider access to the media industry, it’s important to distinguish between “assimilation” and equity in representation, with assimilation ultimately being the less desirable (and patronizing) option, as it suggests conformity to Anglo-American archetypes (Charles Ramírez Berg), and curtails the possibility of cultural affirmation.

There has been resistance to assimilation on both sides of the demographic fence, in the front office and on the lot, and today, as before, Latin@ talent find themselves coping with the “terms of inclusion,” meaning containment, demotion, exoticization, short-lived screen appearances in exchange for screen access. Does pandering leave off where complexity and contradictions begin, i.e., at the fringes of fertile ground for creative decision-making by Latin@ writers, directors, and actors? Isn’t pandering a symptom of ongoing inequities and deficits in Latin@ representation, rather than a cure?

THE IMPACT OF TRANSNATIONAL GENRES AND FORMATS: A paradigm shift happened around a decade ago, when the transnational and transcultural viability of the telenovela became front-page news of U.S. trade and mainstream news publications. Both the genre and specific formats were adopted by EL networks in the effort to breathe new life and ethnic audience appeal into prime-time drama. A hybrid between the sitcom and dramatic show (crime drama, family drama) emerged, suggesting a structural transformation in the direction of latinization. Some, like *Ugly Betty* and *Jane the Virgin*, had legs. Others, like Eva Longoria’s just cancelled Telenovela, have suffered the ephemerality of previous EL Latin@-oriented shows: they have suffered from a limited platform, a perceived lack of “authenticity,” or, most commonly, the disadvantageous time slots.

SUSTAINABILITY?

Historically, pandering as a “mode of inclusion” has not laid a solid foundation for progressive inclusion and enfranchisement. The industry has flirted with Latin@ characters and audiences, only to “move on.” Yet there is an expanding, captive audience segment, 16-30, that prefers EL or bilingual to monolingual Spanish tv, that embraces multiple screen viewing and that is gender savvy and queer curious or identified, ethnic affirmative, and in constructive dialogue with non-Spanish speaking youth of color. Even if change on ELTV has been motivated by the efforts of SLTV to capture this very same demographic, here is a rare opportunity to capitalize on the sociocultural interstitiality and media fluency of the Latin@ now generation.

We are in a post-broadcast era, when digital modes of engagement may, for some viewers, be supplanting original transmission and sustained viewing in importance. Even if panderos programs end up being appropriated towards quite different ends by the “panderees,” that is no substitute for media advocacy, only advocacy can help ensure that proposals become projects, that more Latin@s get hired, that the promises attached to Latin@ oriented projects are kept.