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# “Entertaining” the Notion of Change: The Transformative Power of Performance in Argentine Pop

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*All music can be used to create meaning and identity, but music born in a repressive political environment, in which freedom is lacking, changes the dynamic and actually facilitates that creation of meaning. This article explores some practices of protest related to pop music under dictatorship, specifically the Argentine military dictatorship of 1976-83, and what happens once their raison d'être, the repressive regime, is removed. We examine pre- and post-dictatorship music styles in recent Argentine pop: rock in the 1970s-80s and the current cumbia villera culture, in order to shed light on the relative roles of politics, economy and culture in the creation of pop music identity. Timothy Wilson is Assistant Professor of Spanish literature at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. He is known for his work on Argentine rock music and dictatorship, and his research interests are in the areas of government-sponsored terror and popular cultures of resistance. Mara Favoretto is a Lecturer in Hispanic Studies at the University of Melbourne, Australia. She specialises in contemporary popular music and cultural expressions of resistance in Latin American society.*

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*Young people come to the music looking for a way to communicate with other human beings, in the middle of a society where it seems the only meeting places that are tolerated are stadiums and concert halls.*

-Claudio Kleiman, editor

*I believe that in the concerts there are two artists: the audience and the musician. Fifty per cent each.*

-Jorge, rock fan

*The message? The ‘message’ is just the fact that this is even happening.*

-Charly García, musician

Because of its immediacy and accessibility all over the world, the performance of live popular music serves as a medium for the creation of community, the formation of individual identity and, to greater or lesser degrees, the communication and negotiation of contested ideas. Particularly in regards to young people, the positioning of the subject in relation to peer group and authority vis-à-vis pop music has been well documented. Popular music, for Richard Middleton, offers listeners ways to identities they yearn for.<sup>1</sup> Grossberg has studied how an individual uses pop music to mark a territorial identity in the otherwise crushingly homogeneous landscape of suburbia.<sup>2</sup> Frith has described pop music as a market commodity that listeners can nevertheless appropriate to create their own meaning and identity.<sup>3</sup> Connell and Gibson explain how “music remains an important cultural sphere in which identities are affirmed, challenged, taken apart and reconstructed,”<sup>4</sup> and Mitchell studies music as a “vehicle through which local identity is reworked.”<sup>5</sup> However, most of this work has been done on the pop music scene of the English-speaking world, where freedom of expression is not normally limited, and where the main force shaping production is market pressure. The dynamic is quite different in the case of authoritarian regimes with state controlled media and open repression.

Peter Wicke, in his work on rock in the former German Democratic Republic in East Germany, and Anna Szemere, through her work in Hungary, have analysed the effect of overt political power upon the interactive dynamics of music practices, and on the creation of meaning. As stated above, pop music is often used by youth as part of an identity of rebelliousness, though this association is made very unevenly and to varying degrees by its many listeners. But Wicke and Szemere argue that since the predominant constraint on such popular music in the Eastern Bloc was the open coercive power of the government rather than the subtle control of the music industry, as a result the music became widely and consciously associated with political significance. Furthermore, they argue that musicians often evaded censors by using double meanings to impart their critical message. Listeners, meanwhile, became “eager to read and hear texts in what may be called the ‘political mode.’”<sup>6</sup> There are many such examples of pop music becoming pointedly and concretely politicised under repressive regimes, such as the St. Petersburg “Rock Club” in the former Soviet Union, or pop music in the Peoples’ Republic of China.<sup>7</sup>

Many of these are now cases of *formerly* authoritarian regimes, and in those countries that today enjoy democracy and freedom of expression, the dynamics of popular music have changed in very interesting ways. This article examines some practices of protest related to pop music, and what happens once their *raison d’être*, the repressive regime, is removed. Specifically, musicians and their fans from Argentina have in the last two decades faced enormous social and economic transformations as they left behind a repressive regime of state-sponsored censorship and persecution (1976-1983), and moved to a democracy with an aggressively free-market economy. The pop music culture that had evolved in dialectical relationship to the regime used the shared performative space of live concerts as a platform for resistance, as a forum for public dialogue and as a basis for the creation of identity. However, although the *rock nacional*

genre enjoyed great popularity and eventually became a generally recognised medium of mainstream discourse in Argentina, this unique status could not survive the fall of the dictatorship and the loss of its relatively easy political target.

Though another genre—apparently quite different—has arisen recently in what is seemingly a totally different environment, there are a number of surprising parallels. In contrast to the earlier rock adherents, the *cumbia villera* musicians and fans of today enjoy much greater freedom than youth a generation ago: there is freedom to gather, speak and protest in public. At the same time, many young Argentines suffer in a different way: rather than being excluded from public life due to repression, many youths suffer deeply from effects of the neo-liberal economic reforms of the last decade. Particularly the poorest from slums at the edges of Buenos Aires still face abuses that parallel in many ways the desperate situation of Argentines during the dictatorship. Ironically though, the earlier music grew in opposition to what was clearly an inhumane and repressive regime and there was no question as to the justness of its cause; the new youth living in democracy can only protest against the much more abstract and less sexy concept of economic hardship. Nevertheless, *cumbia villera* also creates live performative resistance spaces, albeit with some important differences.

Both of these genres will be examined in terms of their differences, caused by the regime change and its consequences, but also in terms of their many surprising parallels, including the unusual role of censorship in their origins. These parallels and other characteristics of the pre- and post-dictatorship music styles shed light on the relative roles of politics, economy and culture in the creation of pop music phenomena.

The first case is Argentina's *rock nacional* genre, whose performance became a locus of community and posed a serious challenge to the brutal military government's attempted control of national culture between 1976 and 1982. By now many people are familiar with the concept of Argentina's "disappeared" and with the staggering statistics surrounding them—in just a few years, thirty thousand people in Argentina were spirited away, tortured, and secretly killed and disposed of. What is less well-known is that the violence was in no way the random brutality of some out-of-control despot, but rather was very carefully planned as part of a long-term project.<sup>8</sup> The military regime that called itself "The Process of National Reorganization" wanted to effect an "extreme makeover" of the nation, to reach a level of control that included the mind itself. This "Process" (*El Proceso*) used terror as a tool to prepare the soil of Argentine society, in order to sow the seeds of a new ideology further to the right. However, the vast majority of people swept up in raids were not leftist terrorists but ordinary people who were simply seen as representing values contrary to those of the military rulers.<sup>9</sup> Most of them were ordinary young people, since 81% of the "disappeared" were in their teens or twenties.<sup>10</sup> This targeting of youth was a deliberate tactic on the part of the regime, part of a plan to re-educate the young in order to re-make Argentine society.

As junta leader General Videla said in his first of many addresses to the nation, “The aim of the *Proceso* is the profound transformation of consciousness.”<sup>11</sup> One of the first steps in this process was a re-imagining and public reshaping of youth identity. In the bombardment of public communiqués from the junta, the image of the “suspect youth” was carefully cultivated.<sup>12</sup> These pronouncements described how young people were initiated into rock music—portrayed as a secret society celebrating drugs and free love with ritual clothing and music—and then inevitably ended up in the guerrilla forces.<sup>13</sup> This association of youth with subversion assured that the so-called “war against subversion” would essentially be a war on youth. In this war, young people were “disappeared”—literally and figuratively—from the national scene. In many different areas of public discourse it was as if they had been proclaimed to not exist. “Even in ads you saw absolutely no young people. Only older people and very young children who were smiling, well groomed, and of course completely obedient.”<sup>14</sup> In addition to this figurative disappearance, of course, was the literal physical disappearance of teenagers and twenty-somethings into a network of more than 300 concentration camps and secret torture centres.

This official negation of youth identities was of course quite effective. Yet to a certain extent, it also achieved the contrary effect, in that it encouraged young people into a position of resistance, where and when it was possible. All public meeting was expressly prohibited during these years; even school clubs, church groups and Boy Scouts were disbanded and many of their members disappeared. Yet due to an unlikely series of events, many live music concerts were allowed, and during these years attendance at concerts reached new heights. Indeed, statistics indicate that concert halls developed a new function as counter-cultural meeting places, representing a reorganisation of social space and youth practices. As will be shown, in live concerts during this era, interactive performances by artists and fans alike often led to stunning displays of spontaneous collaborative resistance. Though the draconian measures of the regime sought to eliminate youth culture, the medium of music allowed for intimate communication between its participants, and live performances often led to unexpected and exciting results. In a very real way, these convocations allowed youth to break the prohibition on public meeting, elude the censorship of the expression of anti-government sentiment, and escape the attempted suppression of youth identity and counterculture.

It is true that expressions of youth identity through pop music are common, and as stated, it is not uncommon for a pop genre to take on political meaning under a repressive regime such as in the former Soviet Bloc. Even so, the concerts of *rock nacional* at its height are somewhat unique, in that they owed their very existence to an unlikely combination of circumstances. The planners of the Argentine *Proceso* had learned lessons from watching the heavy-handed experiment attempted by the Chileans three years earlier, and knew they would have to be much more subtle in order to be successful. In Chile, the violent repression was very public, an intentional strategy to terrify and pacify Chileans. In the days following that coup, 13,500 civilians were openly rounded up in trucks and imprisoned in the two main soccer stadiums in Santiago, where many were tortured and summarily executed. The Chilean military made no effort to

hide these arrests: on the contrary, high-profile detainees such as singers and politicians especially were held up as warning examples to Chileans. Famously, the popular folk singer and activist Victor Jara was abused and then machine-gunned in front of his fans in the stadium where he had so often performed.

This public intimidation had an unwelcome side-effect for the Chilean regime. Pinochet's cruel campaign caused an international outrage, and led to calls in Europe and North America for trade sanctions. When the time came to plan their own social experiment, Videla and the other leaders of the Argentine *Proceso* were thus keenly aware of the dangers of bad publicity, and were determined to avoid it. Instead of a public round-up, they chose the lower-profile method of spreading terror using less sensational repression tactics, and always ensuring deniability. This meant, however, that high-profile celebrity targets would have to be handled carefully. It also meant that rather than eliminating all civil rights in a blanket fashion, small token examples would be allowed, as a cover, for the regime to hold up as proof of its "tolerance."

In order to achieve this, starting in 1977 with the creation of a special board overseeing censorship, teams of professionals made sophisticated studies of Argentine cultural production, in which they measured not only content but also the "impact" different works might have on society, and then made recommendations to the authorities.<sup>15</sup> Not everything that the committees found subversive was necessarily banned; something found to have a low "impact capacity" would be allowed. Thus, while books or LPs, which had a large distribution and reached a wide audience were heavily censored, ironically, due to the "Impact Theory," some live events such as the leftist theatre *Teatro Abierto* which reached many fewer people were not closed. Such cases were considered a necessary evil that allowed the regime to escape international condemnation. Furthermore, by avoiding the complete shutdown of the cultural machinery of the media, the military authorities could appropriate them for the dissemination of their own ideological message.

The result of this combination of policies meant that on one hand, celebrities such as music stars might be censored, jailed or intimidated, but were not "disappeared" or murdered. On the other hand, many live cultural performances were not banned outright, though artists and particularly the attendees were harassed severely by the police. Paradoxically, in a society in which church youth groups and Boy Scout troops were not allowed to meet, and the punishment for speaking out against the government was quite literally death, rock concerts were allowed to continue. It is not surprising that concert attendance during the period surged, as performances became a meeting place for youth who had been negated by the official media and literally "disappeared" by the regime. This new use is clearly and consciously—though circumspectly—reported in editorials in rock magazines of the time, such as the following: "It was as if *Luna Park* [concert hall] were a meeting hall, rather than a place to see this or that band. 'It's us, we're here' seemed to say the twelve or fourteen thousand people (sic) who filled the place."<sup>16</sup> More than just "meeting hall," perhaps a more adequate description would be "safe house": many other

accounts of the time describe the sense of urgency which characterised the gatherings. Says one fan, remembering the time:

Going to a concert was like a necessity. We didn't miss a single one. There was this tremendous need to be together, to participate in something, but at the same time to feel safe.<sup>17</sup>

As all musicians know, music is not simply performed by musicians and received by the audience; in live venues, performance is in no way unidirectional—it is a relationship. This relationship may have been heightened in the urgency of the *Proceso*-era concerts. Artists and fans were often arrested after a concert, and most had friends or relatives among the “disappeared.” They lived in an atmosphere of palpable fear that only magnified their relief at being together, and intensified a bond between them. *Rock nacional* musician and icon Luis Alberto Spinetta recounts one first-hand experience:

I remember once, in 1977, when I was picked up by the cops for no reason. So I'm in the cell, and I see on the wall, written with God knows what, the words to one of my own songs: “Cementerio club.” It was the most sinister irony that fate ever handed to me. I cried. Most of all for the kid who wrote it, whom I'll never know.<sup>18</sup>

When a fan appropriates the words written by a musician—either to write on a wall, or to sing along in concert, for example—the artist becomes the listener, and creates his/her own meaning in the new context. Communication between artist and listener is thus never simple, nor is the boundary between the roles ever truly distinct. In a fan magazine of the time, listener Jorge states unequivocally his feelings about the collaborative authorship of *rock nacional*: “I believe that in the concerts there are two artists: the audience and the musician. Fifty per cent each.”<sup>19</sup>

Thus, with such intense feelings of ownership of the music came the thousands of young people to the rock convocations. To grasp the importance of these events, one needs to bear in mind that as the genre grew, *rock nacional* concerts were drawing ever-larger crowds. Like many Latin American countries, half of Argentina's population resides in its capital city, Buenos Aires, and it is without a doubt the cultural capital as well. Most of the main concerts inevitably take place there, at Obras or Luna Park concert halls (capacity of 4700 and 8000, respectively), or at a stadium for the larger events. Toward the end of the regime in the early 1980s, stadium shows were massive: the band Serú Girán had more than 60,000 people at its concert at the “La Rural” Convention Centre in December 1980. Seventy thousand people attended the “Festival de la Solidaridad” on the “Obras Sanitarias” hockey field in May 1982 to see León Gieco, Luis Alberto Spinetta, Charly García and many others. Clearly, the rock events, which originally were allowed because of their low “impact capacity,” had outgrown the DPG board's expectations. Eventually the highly visible events thwarted the generals' desire for a low profile and deniability, and were beyond the regime's control.

Not only was the number of attendees impressive, but the atmosphere of resistance among them is reported to have been extremely concentrated. One of the most famous musicians, Charly Garcia, states:

the audience and the artists had a very contestatory attitude, a very strong resistance to the ideological penetration. [...] I think... *Rock nacional* was a focal point of resistance.<sup>20</sup>

Though it is easy to make such a facile generalisation, in reality, the way in which fans engage with music is in fact much more complex. Though some listeners might consider lyrics in their entirety, more commonly, fans focus on one or two repeated lines, often taken out of context, which can lead to new meanings entirely. For example, in one part of the song “Confesiones de invierno,” the musical narrator describes how he was once unjustly jailed without cause, and explains “I got the bail money from a friend, but the bruises were a present from the officer.”<sup>21</sup> Though this depiction of police brutality is a small part of the story and not the main point of the song, in video and audio recordings of concerts of the time, this one line (“las heridas son del oficial...”) receives an astounding ovation by the audience.<sup>22</sup> For example, in the ‘rockumentary’ *Adios Sui Generis*, the cheering that accompanied the line lasts almost two minutes, interrupting the song, and causing the artists apparently to nearly abandon it, though they eventually finish the song.<sup>23</sup> Clearly, many fans found what Simon Frith would call a “pleasure of identification” in the lines describing a beating by the police—a dubious pleasure, to be sure.<sup>24</sup>

However, a fragment of lyrics taken out of context can also become associated with a new meaning, such as a line from the “La grasa de las capitales.” The song’s lyrics condemn superficial society, concluding with the repeated line “we won’t put up with it anymore.”<sup>25</sup> In some concerts however, when the audience sang along, the defiant way this line was shouted (“¡no se banca más!”) indicates that it had been attached to a new referent, that perhaps feelings of hostility toward the military government were being channeled through this reappropriated line. As a concert report from 1980 describes, “Today Charly García had forty thousand voices shouting ‘We won’t put up with it anymore’ live on national television...”<sup>26</sup>

This case exemplifies not only the complex manner in which a text interpellates the listener and the process of negotiation of meaning, but it also serves to underscore the role of the “listener” in the musical event. Put another way, things are happening in the concert that are not necessarily “in the music.” In this sense, the listeners are as much performers as the musicians, in that both are social actors in a cultural ritual. Such events are a deconstruction of the boundary between those on the stage and those gathered around it, with the result that there is a new focus on the performance which is co-created by the artist and the audience together.

This focus on interaction deprives the musical text of the artist, and recognises the authorship of the attending public in their role as questioners of the regime’s imposed status quo: the public in mass concerts were literally as

much participants as the musicians themselves. One very active sort of performance on the part of listeners can be seen in the “soccer” chants that sometimes overtook an entire stadium. These chants were originally a part of the audience participation in soccer matches, but became popular in concerts as well, and came to express increasingly overt criticism of the government. One common chant early on was “[e]l que no salta es un militar,” (anyone who doesn’t jump is a military man) which provoked the curious spectacle of the whole stadium jumping in unison upon their seats.<sup>27</sup> However, as time went on, the chant “el que no salta es un militar” was gradually replaced by another: “[s]e va a acabar, se va a acabar la dictadura militar.” (It’s going to end, it’s going to end, the dictatorship is going to end.) Such a phenomenon actually converted bemused musicians into a sort of audience, that could only watch and interpret. This case reaches its most dramatic point when at later concerts the favourite chant became: “[p]aredón, paredón, a todos los milicos que vendieron la nación” (firing squad to all those military men who sold out our nation).

An article in a fan magazine of the time gives a description of one concert in *Obras* stadium that summarises well the culmination of such negotiated meaning. At some point, fans began chanting “¡[s]e va a acabar, la dictadura militar!” and then “[l]os desaparecidos, ¡que digan dónde están!” (the disappeared—tell us where they are!) Singer Charly García, who had to stop singing due to the chanting of the audience, danced to the rhythm of the chant for a while, then responded,

Sing, sing... you want to sing that? Great, sing it. But no one’s going to answer you. So we’re going to go on with the music. But: those who are disappearing now soon won’t disappear anymore. And let me tell you: what we’ve got now will soon have to disappear.

As the crowd gave him a standing ovation, he continued: “You can have faith in that.”<sup>28</sup> This anecdote is a clear example of the level of spontaneous collaborative resistance that developed in such communal events. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that although people were being “disappeared” for even attending a union meeting, here a significant number of those present participated in an openly political dialogue with the musician. Yet, it should be noted, though he made a very bold statement in front of thousands of people, García’s language is not explicit, but carefully circumspect: he names no names, referring to the regime as “lo que está ahora” (what we’ve got now).

As such accounts illustrate, clearly rock culture did become a “focal point of resistance,” as Charly Garcia suggests, and did serve as a weapon of resistance to the “ideological penetration” with which the regime sought to nullify youth identity. Live interactive performances were a source of alternative identity to replace the one that had been stolen by the regime. The Process of National Reorganisation wielded terror as a weapon in an attempt to re-create Argentine culture. Argentine pop artists, however, together in performative conversation with their audiences, were able to resist.



After 1982 the *Proceso* dictatorship came to an end and democracy returned, ushering in a new era—though it has not been as rosy as many had hoped. Public life had previously been dominated by paranoia and the habit of looking over one’s shoulder, and Argentines dreamed of a democracy that would bring new freedoms and greater opportunity. However, especially for many youth, it seems that a crippling fear of the military government has simply been replaced by the helplessness that has resulted from a crushing economic crisis combined with a stubborn lack of respect for human rights on the part of some authorities.

The generation that followed the dictatorship had far fewer economic opportunities than their parents had, due to austerity measures and other neoliberal economic policies put in place by the newly democratic Argentine government. The new economists under Carlos Menem imposed the standard neoliberal policy package, which included tax cuts and reductions in government spending, elimination of tariffs and other barriers to free trade, reduction of labour regulations, and mass sell-offs of publicly owned utilities. Many economists argue that neoliberalism usually brings about strong economic inequality, and this has certainly been the case in Argentina.

During the 1990s, many young people lacked access to university studies and found it increasingly difficult to get a job. It was not easy for young people to achieve the financial stability of their parents. In the last decade, the collapse of the economic system in Argentina and the financial crisis of 2001 have caused a brutal devaluation and concentration of resources in fewer hands. Thousands of residents of the outlying provinces of Argentina have moved to the capital city and its surrounding areas searching for employment opportunities. Now in greater numbers than ever, individuals are moving into the slums of Buenos Aires known as *villas*, looking for a chance for survival. Because of these migratory trends, the greater Buenos Aires area is currently the biggest urban concentration in Argentina, the second largest in South America and the third largest in Latin America (after Mexico City and São Paulo). As of 2005, 27% of Argentinians were unemployed, and the unemployment rate for people between 18 and 20 years old was an astonishing 40%. Of the few young people who are employed, 7 out of 10 are paid under the table and thus lack benefits and earn extremely low wages. Three and half million young Argentines live in the slums in Buenos Aires, and one and a half million of them are destitute.<sup>29</sup> Since shantytowns are called *villas* in Argentina, the people who inhabit them are known as *villeros*, and they are often the invisible citizens of the city, whose lives of quiet desperation go mostly unnoticed by mainstream society.

Compounding the difficulty of survival where there are simply no jobs to be found is the factor of discrimination towards the *villeros*. For the disproportionately unemployed and socially marginalised youth of the *villas*, life on the periphery of Argentine society feels like they too have been “disappeared,” like young people a generation earlier. Darker skin and a socially stigmatised dialect identify those recently arrived from the margins of Argentina as “suspect youth” as well, and mark them for victimisation by the more advantaged—possibly including the police. Kessler, in his study about instability

in Buenos Aires points out that a person simply having the appearance of a *villero* often is grounds enough for police to arrest him on *averiguación de antecedentes*—that is, hold him for twelve hours for a criminal background check.<sup>30</sup> This abuse is grimmer than it may sound: despite the return to democracy, Argentina still faces issues of violation of human rights, and the overwhelming majority of victims are *villeros*. As documented by the human rights watch group CORREPI (*Coordinadora Contra la Represión Policial e Institucional*), between 2005 and 2008 there were 1062 “accidental” deaths at the hands of police in police stations, more than one person per day.<sup>31</sup> More than 90% of the deceased were *villeros*.<sup>32</sup> According to Verdú, in the shantytowns and *villas*, it seems that cases of police brutality and wanton shootings by police are part of everyday life.<sup>33</sup>

This group of young Argentines lives a precarious existence between two worlds: on one hand they are invisible, made “un-persons” by mainstream society; and on the other, they suffer from an excess of unwanted “attention” from the police. This relegation to the margins of society, while at the same time being the centre of police action, is an odd echo of the situation of young people who were powerless, yet persecuted, in the 1970s and 1980s. Not surprisingly, this group too has turned to a form of collaborative public performance as a means of resistance. For many who live in the misery of the *villas*, a musical genre known as *cumbia villera* becomes an outlet for expression, and even a “weapon” for resistance. James Scott first posited theories about “weapons of the weak” and the “hidden transcripts” that underlie many local acts of resistance to domination.<sup>34</sup> Pennycook also points out that from poaching, squatting and desertion to gossip, rumour, carnival, social myth and dissident subcultures, the arts of resistance are often hidden and subversive.<sup>35</sup> These “weapons of the weak,” for Canagarajah, are “strategies by which the marginalised detach themselves from the ideologies of the powerful...and gain some measure of control over their lives in an oppressive situation.”<sup>36</sup>

*Cumbia villera* music is, like *rock nacional* before it, the centre of an emerging youth identity that challenges the legitimacy of the dominant discourse. However, the main target of its criticism is not the overt power of a repressive military, but the more subtle forces of the free market system. Moreover, there is not a conscious plan to “disappear” youth, but merely an “invisible hand” that puts them at the mercy of social or physical oppression. Also like *rock nacional*, *cumbia villera* performances provide a place for these young people to express their discontent, just as rock concerts did years before. However, in the 1970s-1980s the source of discontent was a very concrete form of oppression, and thus an easy target for criticism; the fact of young peoples’ appearance at a concert was an act of protest. In contrast, the current cause of dissatisfaction is the economic depression and resulting malaise, a much more abstract and diffuse phenomenon that is difficult to target and villainise. In today’s environment, mere collaborative defiance is not enough: *cumbia villera* concertgoers “actively detach themselves from the ideologies of the powerful” through transgressively graphic behaviours in the shared performative space of live concerts.<sup>37</sup>

In Argentina the popularity of the *cumbia* genre overlapped somewhat with that of *rock nacional*, though they were not exactly parallel; one could say that while rock was waning, the new tropical *cumbia* was waxing. This is completely logical since in a very real way, *rock nacional* owed its success to the pressure of the military; once it was removed, the new pressure of the sudden free market policies gave rise instead to a new genre. *Cumbia* originated among descendants of slaves in Colombia, and the word *Cumbia* is derived from the African "cumbe" meaning festivity or party. The genre underwent transculturation in various South American countries, but gradually developed into a new autochthonous genre in Argentine slums. *Cumbia villera* (literally, "slum party") began to gain popularity in the 1990s, coinciding with Menem's neo-liberal austerity measures. As Connell and Gibson explain, "Transnational cultural products, in whatever direction they appear to be traveling, do not simply replace local ones, but are refashioned and given new meaning."<sup>38</sup> In this case, it would appear that the new cultural product is involved dialectically with the current economic depression of Argentina, just as *rock nacional* grew in dialogue with military repression. Thus, the new *cumbia* takes on tough issues that face the lowest classes, but does it by ridiculing, exaggerating and inverting them, in an antagonistic manner. Many *villero* singers portray police as cruel and criminal.<sup>39</sup> Like some *gangsta rap*, early *reggae* and *narcocorridos*, *cumbia villera* lyrics invert the good guy / bad guy cliché to describe the exploits of outlaw heroes.

The mode of transgression in *cumbia villera* is based on songs that talk about crime, sex, drugs and alcohol with extreme realism, and employs very coarse language and extremely graphic depictions of sexual acts. When describing hip-hop, Alistair Pennycook says that:

In its local street-based manifestations, it remains a weapon of the weak, a form of local subversion, a series of transgressive acts that disrupt forms of domination. In doing so it opens up the possibilities to refashion identities and languages; it puts language on display as a form of social action.<sup>40</sup>

To borrow Pennycook's observation on hip-hop, which may be applied to describe similar use of language transgression; by "performing language and identity transgressively," *cumbia villera* "performatively creates new identities."<sup>41</sup> Because of the thematic content of the songs in *cumbia villera*, descriptions of criminals, drug use and sexual degradation form a sort of neo-naturalism akin to the literary movement of the 19th century. Whereas many of those turn-of-the-century works were written by the elite and project a negative image of the masses, the neo-naturalist excesses of *cumbia villera* are a product of the lower class itself. Their depictions of the degradation inherent in life on the streets are a self-affirmation, a recognition of those individuals who manage to survive it. At the same time, those depictions are a strong criticism of the forces of society that lead to the abasement of the *villeros*. This has been read by the authorities as a "defense of crime and drugs." Spataro explains that the authorities considered that this kind of popular music would encourage people to commit more crimes and constituted one of the major causes of the growing

instability in the city.<sup>42</sup>

As a result, in 2001, pop music in Argentina again came under the hand of censorship. The COMFER (Argentine organisation for media control) published guidelines to regulate the broadcasting of those songs that had reference to drugs, alcohol and crime. It is interesting to note that these regulations again, as in the *Proceso* era, only affected mediated performance, since recorded music and broadcasting have the largest impact, reaching the most people. This decision is in a way an eerie echo of the “Impact Theory” developed by the military censors in the 1970s/1980s regarding *rock nacional*. This time too, the censorship has had an effect on the organisation of social space and on youth practices. As censorship did not affect live performances, the main outlet of *cumbia villera* has thus been displaced to the shared public space known as *bailantas* (dance halls). Ironically, as during the *Proceso*, the very act of censorship in a way created a new outlet for public performance. It is in these live interactions that the most transgressive behaviours occur.

Held normally every weekend in numerous small neighbourhood concert halls and clubs, *bailantas* feature musicians on a stage that sing and dance, while the audience participates along with them. Because of this audience participation, these live events are as much dance party as concert, and the attendees are as much actors as audience. Because music is key to the creation of national and ethnic identity, attending a concert and actively participating in it articulates a way of inserting oneself into society. *Bailanta* venues are resistance spaces that allow people from the *villas* to share their feelings and stories, and create a sense of belonging. In these meetings, *villeros* claim a role and space in society, ironically, by distancing themselves from it, by contrasting themselves to the mainstream, and identifying with the underclass. For example, Pablo Lescano, known as the “father” of *cumbia villera* and leader of *Damas Gratis*, one of the most popular bands, starts all his shows by chanting “*las manos de todos los negros arriba*” (“everyone put your hands in the air”—the “*negros*” is not a reference to race, but a mostly playful self-epithet applied to those of the lower classes). During every *cumbia villera* performance, singers invite the audience to raise their hands and dance with their hands in the air. They do so by saying things such as “*las manos arriba de todos los cumbieros*” (all *cumbia* fans raise your hands); “*el que no salta es un cheto*” (anyone who doesn’t jump is a snob). These and other similar utterances mark participants as belonging to an alternative group opposed to the “official” one.

In live performances, the ritual of inviting the audience to raise their hands is a constant.<sup>43</sup> It represents a kind of pact between audience and performers, a symbolic bond for temporal power and resistance. An example that illustrates this bond may be given by Lescano’s words, inviting the audience to participate: “hey, I don’t say ‘hands up’ like a cop; I say ‘raise your hands’ and mind you, it is *not* the same thing.” This intervention by the leader of the band leads to applause and cheers on the part of the audience. As explained previously, years earlier in live *rock nacional* shows, chants such as the powerful “*el que no salta es un militar*” (anyone who doesn’t jump is a military man), allowed youth to challenge the regime by openly criticising the military in public.

This tradition continues in the *cumbia villera bailanta* shows; this time, however, the enemies (military authorities) have been replaced by the new enemy: the police. Part of the ritual of live shows of *Damas Gratis* is to hear Lescano say: “*el que no salta es policía*” (anyone who doesn’t jump is a cop).<sup>44</sup> These calls to the audience to mock the police are reflected in the lyrics as well, as police forces are ridiculed in amusing songs. One example of this is the line “*cuando vos estás patrullando yo me como a tu mujer*” (“while you are patrolling I’m here having oral sex with your wife”) in the song “*Poliguampa*” by *Pibes Chorros*.

These *villero* attacks on authority exemplify their identification with the underclass and a rejection of those more privileged, as other musical genres do, but more specifically, they mark a clearly antagonistic relationship with the police, whom the *villeros* have chosen as a flesh and blood stand in for the more abstract economic repression that is the genre’s real dialectical partner. Many parallels have been painted between adherents of this genre and those of *rock nacional*, yet the most poignant is the fact that, like youth of a generation earlier, they are also unwilling participants in a war. Whereas the military and many precinct police carried out a “dirty war” against youth culture in the 1970s, judging by the astounding statistics quoted earlier, many police continue that work as they fight a “class war” against the *villeros*.

Since the return of democracy, Argentines are now free to express their protest in various ways. The broadly media-covered “*cacerolazos*” in which middle class citizens banged their pots and pans in a sign of protest in front of the banks in 2001, and the picket protests that have been taking place almost daily in the country are just some examples. It is clear that among all of these, *cumbia villera* is the preferred means of expression for marginalised youth. However, interestingly, their music is beginning to become more widely used: more often, chanted slogans at protests are following the rhythm and tunes of *cumbia villera*. To provide a very clear example, in November 2009, at a protest in front of the Congress building in Buenos Aires, a group of young middle class people could be seen dancing and singing to the following improvised *cumbia villera*:

I’m a protester, all my life I’m going to fight / we won’t stop until  
the Presidential Palace or we die / Beatings, rubber bullets, federal  
cops or city guys / I don’t give a damn, I’ve got enough balls to get  
by.

(Señores soy piquetero, toda la vida voy a luchar /  
seguimos cortando rutas y a la Rosada vamos a llegar /  
Palos, balas de goma, la bonaerense, la federal / a mi no  
me importa nada, me sobran huevos para aguantar.)

On this occasion in front of the Congress, the contagious and inviting beat and rhythm of the song were so successful that many of those present started to join the young people, singing and dancing along with them. Just as *rock nacional* was once a marginal pop genre that became associated with protest by a majority of the population, *cumbia villera* also seems to be making a transition in popular

perception from entertainment to a tool of resistance.

As Chris Kennet expresses it:

just as the environmental possibilities for experiencing music have expanded over time, so has the range of uses to which we put such music (...) listening to music with different purposes and with different intensity, will affect the analytical meanings which may arise from the experience.<sup>45</sup>

This article has taken as its starting point the well-established idea that all music (or other cultural products) can be used to create meaning and identity, but that a repressive political environment in which freedoms are lacking changes the dynamic and actually facilitates that creation of meaning. With that dynamic in mind, we undertook the examination of one of the many now *formerly* authoritarian regimes in order to determine what the effects are on the dynamics of popular music when one of its most formative influences—the fear and violence of repression—is removed as a factor.

The *Proceso* dictatorship tried to re-educate an entire generation of Argentine youth, and the people affected by these policies had to make radical changes in their lives; they acquired survival strategies in order to cope. Self-censorship was the norm, looking over one's shoulder before speaking was ingrained habit, and the result was that young people turned to live performance events as a space for protest when other avenues were cut off. Though there has been a return to democracy and free speech, in Argentina young people are still choosing to express resistance in the milieu of music, as they did during the repression when they feared for their lives. Of all the things the *Proceso* tried to instill in youth, perhaps the lesson best learned was how to find the cracks in the government's vigilance; it is precisely in these interstices where marginalised young people have found ways to resist together.

Beyond the fact that a group of young people is still choosing a similar method of protest as the generation before it, we have also drawn a number of parallels between the pre- and post- dictatorship music styles. Some of the similarities can frankly be chalked up to near universal truths and thus discarded: young people rebel, young people listen to pop music and identify with it, young people protest. Obviously, they will also choose a cultural product with which they identify. Nevertheless, a form of public protest that is so acute, and so acutely *self-aware* is unusual outside of the authoritarian regimes that usually spawn them. The simplest answer would be that both *rock nacional* and *cumbia villera* are phenomena that met or meet a social need: more than genres, they are performance events that allow young people to create identity where it has been denied to them or taken away from them. The *Proceso* regime sought to “disappear” young people and make them un-persons; the harsh and far-reaching government-imposed neo-liberal economic policies in Argentina today are having a similar effect on a marginalised group that was already fragile, the *villeros*. But that still does not explain the intensity of the live experience

associated with *cumbia villera*, nor the self-consciousness of resistance reported so widely.

The missing factor is censorship. Acute social need exists in countless harsh social and economic situations around the world, but the general resulting tendency is simply to complain about it. What most authoritarian regimes do well is to create hardship, and to simultaneously attempt to silence any negative public response about it. In short, the equation is not surprising: when governments create suffering, and try to stifle the response, for example through censorship, the complaining becomes protest, and protest will find a voice. When no protest is possible, it will still come out in some way, as with the famous “Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo” in Argentina. In the midst of the severest repression of the *Proceso*, a group of mothers whose children had been “disappeared” still found a way to protest. They gathered every Thursday and walked—*silently*— in a circle in the square in front of the presidential palace. This is a kind of action that is collaborative and performative, and speaks volumes in silence.

David Bracket describes the varied aspects of authorship in popular song, the multiplicity of authorial voices within a same text, borrowing Barthes’ idea that a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination, and the various levels of interpretation a same song may allow for.<sup>46</sup> Clearly, regarding the two genres under examination here, the attendees have a strong authorial role in the public performance of both. However, that voice can take many forms, and some make no sound at all; sometimes simply “showing up” amounts to protest. In a 1981 interview with the leading Argentine rock magazine of the time, *Expreso Imaginario*, rock star Charly García said:

Charly: People are looking for a kind of message, they need energy and encouragement. And in our lyrics we denounce things, and do everything we can so that people come out [of the concerts] with their eyes opened. But they don’t need a message that tells them exactly what to do.

Interviewer: So what’s the message?

Charly: The message? The ‘message’ is just the fact that this is even happening.<sup>47</sup>

His reply—just as applicable to *cumbia villera* now as it was to *rock nacional* then—seems to confirm Niklas Luhman’s idea that “the informational content of an artwork must be generated in the course of its formation.”<sup>48</sup> But more than that, this collaborative performance, while it uses the music as a vehicle, is really greater than the music; it is a manifestation of popular will in response to marginalisation and accompanying censorship. That combination can take place in dictatorship, or outside of it.

- <sup>1</sup> Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music* (Milton Keynes, Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1990), 249.
- <sup>2</sup> Lawrence Grossberg, *Dancing in Spite of Myself* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 91.
- <sup>3</sup> Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), 34.
- <sup>4</sup> Chris Gibson and John Connell, "Music and Tourism : On the Road Again," *Aspects of Tourism* ; 19. (Clevedon: Channel View Publications, 2005), 117.
- <sup>5</sup> Tony Mitchell, "Aboriginal Hip-Hop: A Modern Day Corroboree," (2006), <http://www.localnoise.net.au/site-directory/papers/aboriginal-hip-hop-a-modern-day-corroboree/>.
- <sup>6</sup> Anna Szemere, "The Politics of Marginality: A Rock Music Subculture in Socialist Hungary in the Early 1980s," in *Rockin' the Boat: Mass Music and Mass Movements*, Reebee Garofalo, ed. (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 113.
- <sup>7</sup> Tim and Paul Friedlander Brace, "Rock and Roll on the New Long March: Popular Music, Cultural Identity, and Political Opposition in the People's Republic of China," in *Rockin' the Boat: Mass Music and Mass Movements*, Reebee Garofalo, ed. (Boston: South End P, 1992), 89.
- <sup>8</sup> Timothy Wilson, "Argentina's Proceso: Societal Reform through Premeditated Terror," in *The Development of Institutions of Human Rights: A Comparative Study*, Lilian Barria and Steven Roper, eds. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 18.
- <sup>9</sup> Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007), 106.
- <sup>10</sup> Patricia Marchak, *God's Assassins: State Terrorism in Argentina in the 1970s* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999), 155.
- <sup>11</sup> Marguerite Feitlowitz, *A Lexicon of Terror: Argentina and the Legacies of Torture* (New York: Oxford U P, 1998), 19.
- <sup>12</sup> Pablo Vila, "Argentina's Rock Nacional: The Struggle for Meaning," *Latin American Music Review* 10, no. 1 (1989): 14.
- <sup>13</sup> ———, "Rock Nacional and Dictatorship in Argentina," *Popular music* 6, no. 2 (1987): 133.
- <sup>14</sup> Guillermo O'Donnell, "Democracia En La Argentina: Micro Y Macro," in *"Proceso," Crisis Y Transición Democrática*, Oscar Oszlak, ed. (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1984), 28.
- <sup>15</sup> Mara Favoretto, 2007. Personal Interview with Hernán Invernizzi and Judith Gociol in Buenos Aires, 26 November 2007.
- <sup>16</sup> Jorge Pistocchi, "Entrevista Con Charly Garcia," *Expreso Imaginario* 1981, 37.
- <sup>17</sup> Pablo Vila, "Rock Nacional, Crónicas De La Resistencia Juvenil," in *Los Nuevos Movimientos Sociales*, Elizabeth Jelín, ed. (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1985), 103.
- <sup>18</sup> qtd. in Pablo Vila, "El Rock Nacional: Género Musical Y Construcción De La Identidad Juvenil En Argentina," in *Cultura Y Pospolítica: El Debate Sobre La Modernidad En América Latina*, Néstor García Canclini, ed. (México: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1995), 256.
- <sup>19</sup> Vila, "Rock Nacional and Dictatorship in Argentina," 147.
- <sup>20</sup> ———, "El Rock Nacional: Género Musical Y Construcción De La Identidad Juvenil En Argentina," 261.
- <sup>21</sup> Sui Generis, *Confesiones De Invierno* (Buenos Aires: Talent-Microfón, 1973).
- <sup>22</sup> When Charly sings "las heridas son del oficial," the crowd goes wild <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eZ3htXzQbto&feature=related>
- <sup>23</sup> Bebe Kamin, "Adios Sui Generis (Film Documentary of the Sept. 5, 1975 Concert in Luna Park)," Argentina 1975.
- <sup>24</sup> Simon Frith, "Towards and Aesthetic of Popular Music," in *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance and Reception*, Richard Leppert and Susan McClary, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 140.
- <sup>25</sup> Serú-Girán, *La Grasa De Las Capitales* (Buenos Aires: Sazam-Music Hall, 1979).
- <sup>26</sup> "Rebelde: El Rock Argentino En Los Años '70," *Dos Potencias* (2003).
- <sup>27</sup> Vila, "Rock Nacional and Dictatorship in Argentina," 139.
- <sup>28</sup> "Rebelde: El Rock Argentino En Los Años '70."
- <sup>29</sup> Hugo Presman, "Historias De Vida: Los Pibes Chorros. Víctor "Frente" Vital," *Investigaciones Rodolfo Walsh* (2006).



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- <sup>30</sup> Gabriel Kessler, *El Sentimiento De Inseguridad. Sociología Del Temor Al Delito* (Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI Editores, 2009), 122.
- <sup>31</sup> María del Carmen Verdú, *Represión En Democracia. De La "Primavera Alfonsinista" Al "Gobierno De Los Derechos Humanos"* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Herramienta, 2009), 201.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid, 23.
- <sup>33</sup> Ibid, 22.
- <sup>34</sup> James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990).
- <sup>35</sup> Alastair Pennycook, *Global Englishes and Transcultural Flows* (London ; New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis, 2007), 75.
- <sup>36</sup> S. Canarajah, "Negotiating Ideologies through English: Strategies from Periphery," in ed. T. Ricento, *Ideology, Politics and Language Policies: Focus on English* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2000), 122.
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>38</sup> John Connell and Chris Gibson, *Sound Tracks : Popular Music, Identity, and Place*, Critical Geographies (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 193.
- <sup>39</sup> For example, Víctor "Frente" Vital was a *villero* who acted as the Robin Hood of the villa, stealing for the poor. He became famous after stealing a truck fully loaded with dairy products and handling yoghurt to the children in his neighbourhood. He was killed in a shoot out with the local police, after raising his hands and yelling surrender.
- <sup>40</sup> Pennycook, *Global Englishes and Transcultural Flows*, 76.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid, 76.
- <sup>42</sup> Carolina Spataro, "Vagos, Drogadictos, Delinquentes Y Machistas: La Cumbia Villera, El Estado Y Los Medios De Comunicación," in *Emergencia: Cultura, Música Y Política*, Luis Sanjuro y Mariano Ugarte, eds. (Buenos Aires: Ediciones del Centro Cultural de la Cooperación Floreal Gorini, 2008), 136-37.
- <sup>43</sup> In this video, for example, the ritual of the hands seems to be the main bond between artist and audience. Pablo Lescano continuously invites the audience to raise their hands:  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q6E1aEj-qlE>
- <sup>44</sup> This can be observed at 0:50.  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=33Jf2gHsCbs&feature=related>.
- <sup>45</sup> Chris Kennet, "Is Anybody Listening?," in *Analyzing Popular Music*, Allan Moore, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 196-97.
- <sup>46</sup> David Bracket, *Interpreting Popular Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 15.
- <sup>47</sup> Jorge Pistocchi, "Entrevista Con Charly Garcia," 26.
- <sup>48</sup> Niklas Luhmann, *Art as a Social System* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 105.