YouTube: transnational fandom and Mexican divas

ABSTRACT
YouTube is a rich source of fan material representing transnational film stars. The videos created by fans have multiple functions, including a celebration of their idols, an engagement with a transnational audience, and a space in which they can create and project a packaged self. The results are the development of a form that draws on the techniques and images of classical film, mixed with the duration and aesthetics of the modern music video. Using interviews with YouTubers, this article analyses the YouTube videos of María Félix and Dolores del Río as transnational star texts.

KEYWORDS
María Félix
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Maria Félix and Dolores del Río’s presence on YouTube is significant, not just because they are stars whose careers reached their peak in the golden age of Mexican and Hollywood cinema – a distant past for most of the creators of content (YouTubers) – but also because of what can be learnt about the construction of these stars’ personas from the videos that are uploaded.1 YouTube’s strengths and limitations lie in such details as the capacity of the technology to connect individuals across geographic boundaries, users’ abilities and imagination, access to original source material, and those restrictions imposed by the site itself on memory space (which has meant that the videos are developing their own stylistic markers). These features make YouTube

1. I will not be engaging in the growing literature surrounding star studies due to lack of space. Good starting points are Butler (1991) and Dyer (2004).
Since the Google takeover, copyright restrictions have been tightening, but they are still subject to some debate and clarification. There is leniency from some copyright holders, who, for example, treat the site as a space for promotion of their material and therefore free publicity.

YOUTUBE: SEARCHING THROUGH THE CRAP FOR THE GEMS

Chad Hurley, Jarved Karim and Steve Chen founded YouTube, in May 2005, as an online space for video sharing. Although ostensibly a US-identified company, from its founding in California with its current headquarters located there, it has become a space for video-sharing accessed by more than 90 million people around the world. YouTube’s slogan ‘Broadcast Yourself’ is built on the idea, according to Hurley, that ‘everyone in the back of his [sic] mind, wants to be a star’ (Garfield 2006); this new, self-made YouTube star is not presented as a glamorous individual by Wired magazine’s Bob Garfield. He offers a far from flattering portrait of the stereotypical YouTube user in his explanation for its success,

that guesswork [as to why YouTube is successful] begins in a very special, very poignant, and potentially lucrative place: the hitherto futile aspirations of the everyman to break out of his [sic] lonely anonymous life of quiet desperation, to step in front of the whole world and be somebody, dude.

(Garfield 2006, original emphasis)

Garfield emphasizes the importance YouTube has in the projection of a self. Although there are many videos on YouTube of ordinary individuals capturing themselves or others on their camera/phone/computer, there are also many more videos of others, in particular, famous others. YouTube is a space in which you can build a profile through your alter ego. You can have your own fan base and be a star in your own sitting room. For Richard Grusin, YouTube has the facility to provide a form of virtual sensory tourism, ‘which allows us to extend our senses beyond the range of our body’s geographic environment, introducing us to people and places, sights and sounds that we would not otherwise have the opportunity to perceive’ (Grusin 2009: 61). The self that is broadcast is not always the embodied self, it is often a projection of an individual’s likes, desires and ability to manipulate and sample (or use completely with limited copyright restriction) imagery, music and/or sound.

Garfield prosaically places the attraction and success of YouTube away from the self that is being broadcast and onto the audience. For him, it is an ‘overgrown fan site’ in which ‘[t]hird millennium humanity has demonstrated an interest in sifting through millions of pieces of crap produced by total strangers to discover a few gems’ (Garfield 2006). That is what I intend to do in this article in order to explore the interstices of selves, national and transnational, that are projected onto YouTube.

Garfield uses the term ‘fan’ in the loosest sense to refer to individuals who have an interest in a famous person. ‘Fan’ can be a useful term to refer to those who have a specialist interest in certain individuals. But the personal profiles of YouTubers reveal that the content on their pages does not demonstrate a single-minded approach. Some are interested in both male and female film stars, performers and soap opera stars, others are interested in transnational...
stars, and others have a variety of videos with an emphasis on putting images to music rather than just privileging the image. Therefore, since the term ‘fan’ is non-specific and problematic, I shall use it with caution to refer to the creators of star content.

Henry Jenkins describes fans as ‘textual poachers’ who ‘get to keep what they take and use their plundered goods as the foundations for the construction of an alternative community’ (Jenkins 1992: 223). Therefore, although the individual is important in fan theory, so too is the sense of belonging to a group. YouTube, with its emphasis on community, is an important forum for connecting with others, building a transnational audience and getting feedback on the videos produced, which often borrow seamlessly from other cultures. It is possible to look at the origin of the viewers who comment on YouTube videos: they too come from a wide range of locations and age groups. YouTube has become a forum where transnational fans can consume as well as create.

Jenkins emphasizes the creativity evident in what fans generate, but also stresses that fans are operating within a closed system ‘which draw[s] on the artistic traditions of the fan community’ (Jenkins 1992: 233). For Jenkins, ‘fan aesthetic centers on the selection, inflection, juxtaposition, and recirculation of ready-made images and discourses’ (Jenkins 1992: 223–4). Here Jenkins is analysing ‘vidding’, the practice of making fan texts using VHS tapes, and although he is writing before the advent of YouTube, what he has to say has relevance in this discussion. The fans making videos for YouTube are operating within a similar aesthetic loop to those Jenkins considers, but with a wider platform than the earlier ‘vidders’. They have the opportunity to broadcast their videos to a transnational audience using sources, cultural referents and musical choices that go beyond what was done in earlier fora, which used analogue technology (such as VCRs) and had to appeal to a local fan base only accessible through word of mouth or community gatherings. YouTube can be an opportunity to re-circulate star images to a new audience, positioning them within familiar aesthetic parameters, or to resituate them by integrating them into a new intercultural flow. Star images can be local or transnational, and simultaneously express the personal and the public experience of the star performances, but they are still playing within an existing discursive practice.

Time limitation is one of the issues that affects how star texts are created on YouTube. Videos can never be greater than 1GB in size and no longer than ten minutes. This has created a generic commonality between many of the videos. A star’s entire life and/or career, with the multiple images that this entails (both from film and extra-filmic sources (TV, photography, portraiture etc.)), must be reduced to a maximum of ten minutes and therefore requires visual shorthand. The danger with this short time period is that a star’s most representative roles and stock characters are employed. Thereby, there is a possibility that the images deployed create a specific set of imagery that could fossilize the star text. The star could be reduced to a limited compendium of visual clichés set to music. However, while that is a distinct possibility, what appears to happen in the often-geeky world of YouTube fan videos is a quest for originality. There may be some repetition of imagery, but the videos are edited in a different way each time, using a montage of distinct photographs, videos and publicity shots. In addition, while the music and/or sound deployed may have similarities, the juxtaposition of sound and images is never identical, as I shall consider later in this article.

Interestingly, with a few exceptions where more than one song is used or an original track is created, the majority of videos last around three minutes,
which is the duration of the average pop song. This length of time conforms to that of an MTV music video, which was, in turn, originally determined by technology. While it would be easy to conclude, then, that MTV is the primary influence on the style of video created, this would not complete the picture. For the majority of YouTubers, they are a post (post)-MTV generation, for whom the music video is part of a multimedia landscape identifiable as part of a transnational youth culture but also adapted to local particularities. Not only has the English language version of MTV proved popular throughout the world, through versions in other languages such as MTV Latinoamérica, it deliberately spreads its reach outwards and is obviously influential in the videos created by these fans; theirs is a multi-platform generation, accessing communities, entertainment and information via the web, phones, TV, MP3 players, game consoles and so on. An individual can have a specialist interest and a high profile within one space and be a mere lurker in another. Within the purview of the privileged, media-savvy, transnational YouTuber is a variety of new technologies and multiple terms of reference. This is demonstrated in the sophistication and broad terms of reference employed by the YouTubers. Many of the videos online are edited clips, sometimes with dialogue and a backing track; others are slideshows, also with music. Music is common to all of the videos under consideration in this article: therefore, I shall also be considering its significance.

I have chosen a representative sampling of videos featuring the film stars María Félix and Dolores del Río, two of the best-known Mexican film actresses of the twentieth century. For the purposes of this article I am interested in user-generated creative content rather than the many videos that are segments of interviews, films or television programmes. After surveying the videos I contacted several of their creators, many of whom were delighted to respond, eager to speak about their methods and motivations. Many of these creators put up multiple videos, which resulted in a relatively small sampling. This is in line with the ‘90:9:1 rule’, where ‘90 percent of online audiences never interact, nine percent interact only occasionally, and one percent do most interacting’ (Snickars and Vanderau 2009: 12). Adopting my own moniker, but explaining my purpose, through YouTube, I emailed the YouTubers. Five responded. Of these, one was a Spaniard, one Russian and the rest were Mexican. The broad sweep of commentaries they receive on their work from viewers around the world demonstrates how YouTube has enabled a transnational fan base to broadcast itself and reach out across borders to other fans. I asked six simple questions in English or Spanish, as appropriate:

1. Why did you pick these images?
2. What attracts you to [star name]?
3. Why did you choose the songs and who are they by?
4. What is interesting about the other stars you pick?
5. What technology did you use to make the videos?
6. Is [star name] popular in [country]?

Some of the questions were designed to elicit and verify specific information (songs, technology), while others were subjective and were intended to discover why certain choices were made and how the fans perceive the star in their local context. Most of these creators provide the country of origin and further demographic details, such as age, on their profile page. The responses
were helpful in understanding the decisions that were made in the creation and editing of the pieces, and in their understanding of how their work fit into a national context. From the aesthetic choices made I shall consider how these videos can be considered transnational. I shall first give a brief introduction to the stars and then consider their representation on YouTube.

**MEXICAN DIVAS: MARÍA FÉLIX AND DOLORES DEL RÍO**

María Félix’s presence on screen was but a small part of her public image. She maintained a consistent presence in the national imaginary, not simply for the films she acted in, but also for the other public personas she performed. She lived her life constantly in the limelight, subject to the (complicit) gaze of the paparazzi and gossip sheets – particularly in Argentina, France and Mexico. Her private life was the subject of much interest and was complicated and varied.

Born in 1914, Félix’s film career spanned from 1942 with *El peñon de las animas/The Rock of Souls* (Miguel Zacarías) and ended with *La Generala/The General* (Juan Ibáñez) in 1966. Her breakthrough film was her third, an adaptation of Romulo Gallegos’s novel *Doña Bárbara* (Fernando de Fuentes and Miguel M. Delgado) in 1943. As a result, she was nicknamed ‘la Doña’ throughout the rest of her career. Her transnational fan base was developed through the popularity and distribution of her Mexican films abroad, and also through those which were shot in France, Spain, Argentina and Italy between 1948 and 1959.

According to Paco Ignacio Taibo I, her arrival on screen was well timed: Mexican cinema was in need of a strong woman who could challenge traditional values and preconceptions. In contrast, he describes Dolores del Río as ‘la mexicana que había aceptado, por patriotismo, abandonar Hollywood’ (‘the Mexican who had accepted, out of patriotism, to leave Hollywood’) (Taibo I 2004: 16). Del Río was born in 1904, moving to Hollywood in 1925. Her first starring role was in *Pals First* (Edwin Carewe, 1926), a film that has since been lost. According to Joanne Hershfield, over the course of her Hollywood career del Río embodied an exotic other, playing roles that demanded a ‘cross-dressing masquerade’ (Hershfield 2000: 46). In other words, they required her to act in roles outside of her own actual national identity. These ranged from Spanish gypsy, Polynesian islander, and Native American, to name but a few of her Hollywood roles. While she could embody these racial others on film, ‘her light skin, European features, upper-class role, and star text that recognized her as beautiful by US standards appeased the American public’ (Hershfield 2000: 34). Thereby, her star status was maintained as the acceptable face of Latin America. Del Río’s transnational stardom, as it is reflected through the YouTube videos, is based on early Hollywood films which emphasize her glamour.

Del Río left Hollywood in 1942, and returned to Mexico where she acted in *Flor Silvestre/Wild Flower* (Emilio Fernández, 1943). Her role in this film would typify her image in Mexico. In this and many other films she would act as an indigenous woman or peasant, continuing to appeal as an exotic other, this time an internal one, against her public persona as a modern, ‘fashionable’, ‘cosmopolitan’ woman who moved in elevated and artistic circles (Hershfield 2000: 58). These films have not had the same appeal for YouTubers, and there are few clips or images taken from her Mexican films.

Del Río and Félix only worked together once in *La Cucuracha/The Soldiers of Pancho Villa* (Ismael Rodríguez, 1958), which was a box office failure. It was the most expensive film made at the time, largely as a result of the cost of the stars, and was aimed at capitalizing on the supposed rivalry that existed.
between the two women that had been ‘institutionalised by the Mexican public in the press’ (Hershfield 2000: 68). Irrespective of whether this tension was real or invented, the star personae of the two women differed. While Félix’s star text was defined by the beautiful but evil and aggressive female characters she played, in contrast, del Río ‘was always the malleable, eternally suffering woman’ (Hershfield 2000: 69). Félix had more control over her star text which ‘was initially formed within economics and aesthetics of the Mexican film industry’ (Hershfield 2000: 53) and augmented by her performances in international films, whereas ‘del Río had to be remanufactured’ on her return from Hollywood (Hershfield 2000: 54). Also, del Río was a Hollywood star whose star text was modern and glamorous, yet her roles were racist and puerile and later, in Mexico, passive and traditional. In contrast, Félix was equally modern in public, with her lavish, controversial lifestyle, and on film she performed in many roles in which she was an assertive, domineering and dangerous woman: an image with which she has become synonymous in Mexican cinema of this era (see, for example, Tierney 2007).

Del Río died in 1983, and Félix in 2002. Félix made her last film in 1971, and del Río’s last screen appearance was The Children of Sanchez (Hal Bartlett) in 1978, having made 63 films in total, against Félix’s 47. However, although del Río was an ‘institution’ in Monsiváis’ words, she has been given significantly less attention online (Monsiváis 2004: 42). As of 2 September 2009, there are 503 videos on YouTube of del Río or with her name in the title, while there are 2,340 with Félix in the title. It appears that the reasons for this lie in their respective sex appeal: Félix cultivated a public persona as a desirable sexual woman and many of her film roles emphasize this, whereas, after her return to Mexico, del Río became synonymous with acquiescent, self-sacrificing female roles and a clean-cut public image. Of the 38 videos under their combined names, some are trailers or videos related to La Cucuracha and others are slide shows with music. It is important to note that while many videos with their names attached have content related to the stars, there are others of drag queens performing as the stars posted by Mexican and US users, as well as videos with more tenuous links (see, for example, adiosbrave2007 and manram79).³

**CONTENT: MUSIC, VIDEO, POWERPOINT**

Some of the content, particularly under Félix’s name, are short edited pieces taken from local and international television broadcasts posted by and for a transnational fan base. While these videos provide invaluable content and useful archival research, I shall not be considering them here. What I shall examine are edited videos created by YouTubers, due to their originality and because they are made specifically by fans as a way of communicating with others around the globe.

There are different stylistic commonalities in the videos. One frequent type of video is a slide show of still images, some are screenshots, but they are mostly taken from publicity material, press clippings, book covers, or portraits accompanied by music. In many respects the videos resemble PowerPoint presentations; indeed many of the creators describe them as such. The level of sophistication of these videos depends on several factors including: the timing and style of transitions, the ability to sync the image with the rhythms and beat of the music, the blend of still and moving images, the originality and variety of these, and the resolution of the images.
An example of one of these slide shows is entitled ‘Dolores del Río’ by a young Russian woman, gatabella. This video is made up of a rich variety of images from del Río’s Hollywood days set against two rock tracks. Using Windows Movie Maker and OneTrueMedia, she utilizes different wipes and fades, thus varying the transitions. However, while her content is original and of high quality, her editing is rudimentary. The tracks are both in 4/4 beat and she maintains the visual cut to the beat: in the edit the slavish following of an identical beat takes care and attention, but results in a repetitive style which becomes monotonous viewing. However, her use of music is interesting in that she uses European rock tracks making a link between del Río, the silent screen actor, and the contemporary young self that gatabella is broadcasting.

Although not necessarily intended as music videos, the music does determine the pace and style of the editing. Music acts to frame the video and often is a decider of the duration. There are exceptions to this where a second piece of music is used (for example by gatabella), or where the music is remixed specifically for the images. This slide show approach is not limited to Mexican film stars – a quick look at YouTube shows that Hollywood film stars from the golden age also get a similar treatment.

Underneath all videos YouTube invites viewers to both rate the video and ‘post a text comment’, which many users do. These comments are a crucial element in the reception and dissemination of the videos, and are an opportunity for the user to form part of a transnational community dialogue by reading or posting their responses. The viewers’ comments here draw favourable comparisons with some of the other videos that use pop or rock music.

The choice of music is an interesting feature of these slide shows. The music varies from the more obvious to the curious. The song ‘María Bonita’ (Beautiful Maria) often accompanies Félix videos. It is a song written for Félix by Agustín Lara, which was a major hit throughout Latin America on its release. There are different versions of the song accompanying videos on YouTube: performances by Mariachi bands, Placido Domingo and Pedro Vargas, amongst others. The merits of these are avidly discussed in the discussion threads after the videos.

Music is a useful tool to create national or transnational connections for viewers and creators. The choices of the different versions of ‘María Bonita’ are all by Mexicans, where the connection between Félix and the song is potent and culturally grounded. Interestingly, Mexican YouTubers may vary between using this song to using others; however, of the hundreds of videos created, no non-Mexican has used ‘María Bonita’. In contrast, the song ‘Ramona’, from the eponymous 1928 film sung by del Río, is from a Hollywood film and therefore part of transnational culture, and is used by both Mexicans and non-Mexicans. Other choices of tracks that accompany videos of both del Río and Félix are a heavy rock mix by a Mexican, a track by the Colombian Latino star Juanes, ‘La única’ (‘The Only One’); ‘Flamenco’ by the Russian group ‘Bi-2’; and two rock songs by an Ukrainian group Okean Elzy. The use of these tracks suggests a degree of assimilation by the creators of the videos’ star text into their own cultural referents and time; this personal connection with the choice of music is made explicit in a response by the Spanish YouTuber, alquezar63, in his video, ‘George Harrison: Dark Sweet Lady (A Tribute to María Félix)’: La canción de George Harrison [‘Dark Sweet Lady’] me gusta mucho desde que se publicó, en 1978...George es uno de mis músicos predilectos.
Cuando me aficioné a María Félix recientemente, asocié su imagen con la canción de Harrison supongo que porque Olivia Arias es mexicana, como la Doña y porque la belleza de la música le iba bien a la belleza del rostro de la actriz. [I have liked George Harrison’s song since it was released in 1978…George is one of my favourite musicians. When I recently became interested in María Félix I associated her image with Harrison’s song, I suppose because Olivia Arias is Mexican like the Doña, and because the beauty of the music suits the beauty of the actress’ face.]

(alquezar63, 28 July 2008)

Through the use of Harrison’s song, alquezar63 can make links between Félix and the music based on his own preferences. For him, her star text is not culturally determined, as it is for many of the Mexican YouTubers. Interestingly, he knows Félix primarily from her Spanish films, whereas the Mexican YouTuber, eliudhernandez notes the difficulty in accessing her European films. Therefore, despite the transnational nature of YouTube, the performances of the screen stars that YouTubers know and can access can vary according to location.

The decision to use ‘María Bonita’, just as with the use of original recordings of ‘Ramona’, evokes a nostalgic past. A useful comparison can be made with the orchestral arrangement of ‘Perhaps, Perhaps, Perhaps’, a song most associated with Doris Day (a hit in 1964), by a UK YouTuber in his celebration of the golden age of Hollywood, ‘Movie Legends – Dolores del Río’. This track situates the images not just within a nostalgic distant time, but also firmly in a particular place (the US).

‘María Bonita’, written by Lara on honeymoon with Félix, recalls the autobiographical detail of their tempestuous and high profile relationship, which is associated with much gossip and anecdotes repeated in comments by users on YouTube. Also, the lyrics, with their reference to Mexican locations, link Félix with Mexico, most specifically Acapulco: whereas ‘Ramona’, with its scratchy sound, does not specifically recall del Río’s life story but rather early US sound films. ‘Ramona’ is most often used in association with images taken directly from the film or still images from del Río’s early films. An example of this is ‘Dolores del Río “Ramona” Vals’ by retroarcaicorex. His is a slide show of still images, screen shots and publicity material with the accompanying ‘Ramona’ track sung by del Río taken from an original recording. This Mexican student has also compiled several clips from black and white and colour films starring both del Río and Félix for other videos. He has explained his musical choices: ‘Yo utilizo la música que escojo, para mis videos, por la época antigua. Me gusta la música de los años 20s a los 60s, es realmente muy hermosa’ (‘I chose the music that I do for my videos because of the olden times [they evoke]. I like the music from the 20s to the 60s, it’s really very beautiful’) (retroarcaicorex, 30 July 2008). The range of time periods alluded to in his response (1920s–1960s) suggests a very broad and generalized past where YouTubers often utilize music anachronistically to evoke a somewhat distant past era rather than an accurate historical time.

In the videos with contemporary music that I have mentioned earlier, the music is rarely commented upon. However, the versions of ‘María Bonita’ are subject to much debate. For example, in a video entitled ‘María Félix – María Bonita – Pedro Vargas – México – Jorge Negrete’, by a 27 year old Mexican who identifies herself as pueblapuebla, there is a long discussion thread (132 posts as of 10 September 2009) from places as diverse as Spain, the US, Mexico, Peru, Venezuela, the Turks and Caicos Islands

8. Arias was Harrison’s wife.
10. This song was originally published as ‘Quizás, quizás, quizás’ by the Cuban songwriter Osvaldo Farrés in 1947.
and Brazil. This discussion centres on Félix’s star credentials, who is singing on the video (Pedro Vargas throughout), and why Jorge Negrete is mentioned since he does not sing. It then shifts into a specialist discussion about whether Negrete ever did record and release the song (he did not), and whether he did sing it on film. Evidently, the viewers’ knowledge is no substitute for archival research; however, they do have interesting insights and are a source of curious popular gossip about the stars. These discussions reflect the value placed on this song and its easy fit with the viewers’ knowledge of music of this era. Fan knowledge and identification with a star can be linked to national identity, with some claiming ownership over a star. But, YouTube acts as an excellent forum for others to challenge ownership and reclaim the star for a transnational public.

This relationship between viewers’ reactions and the style of music used is important to consider in the light of an insightful discussion by Debra A. Castillo on short films made for the Internet. For her, films taken out of their traditional viewing context of cinema and television, available to access to a specialized and highly fragmented viewership, and easily switched off, mean that the most experimental films are challenging for the spectators, which means that they are more likely to switch off (Castillo 2007: 35). It may well be that online video is pushing out the boundaries in ways that I will consider later, but the more commonplace examples reinforce, and even mythicize ideas of classic cinema. Films and stars are codified and rarefied in specific modes, which, in turn, develop their own form of mythology and deification.

A YouTuber may take a familiar scene, but it will be taken out of its original context and set alongside other new images, moving or still. Jeseden, a 20 year old law student from Mexico explained his reasons for creating his video of Félix, ‘algunos incluyen solamente fotografías, y otros videos, respecto a las fotografías, por que sale espléndida y capturando diferentes facetas de ella; respecto a los clips, por que capturan momentos fuertes, representativos de las películas o de su persona’ (‘some include only photographs, and others videos. I use the photographs because she is splendid in them and they capture different facets of her; as for the clips, they capture strong moments which represent the films or her personality’) (jeseden, 28 July 2008). This YouTuber, who chose to accompany one of his videos with heavy rock, has created a personal re-visioning of Félix through a unique montage of music and images. Explaining his choice of music, Jeseden states, ‘son diferentes estilos según el concepto del video, canciones mexicanas, por ser mexicana, de estilo gótico o épico por tener un aire mistico y por su estampa imponente, boleros, diferentes canciones le acomodan’ (‘they are different styles depending on the concept of the video: Mexican songs, as she is Mexican, gothic or epic tracks, as they have a mystical air and leave an impressive mark, boleros, different songs suit’) (jeseden, 28 July 2008). Although he attests to being an amateur, like most YouTubers, there is a sophisticated sense of creating a distinct mood in his videos. In ‘Maria Felix [sic] Diva de Divas’ his mix of clips from films combined with heavy rock creates an ‘epic’ mood, which contrasts with his own playful, light-hearted montage ‘Maria Felix [sic] Sexy’ with the retro pop track by Christina Aguilera. This last track, as evidenced in the accompanying video available on YouTube, takes the tune of The Andrews Sisters’ ‘Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy’, a 1940s wartime hit, and re-writes the lyrics. This choice of music evokes the past and gives it a modern twist with contemporary risqué lyrics, and is an interesting parallel with what is done
by the YouTubers on the videos considered here. The creators of the videos borrow from the past for the content yet create something new through this cross-generational transnational bricolage of musical and visual choices.

Another reason for the constant freshness of the star text is the heterogeneity and quite random nature of YouTube. This means that the user’s favourite video may change, as may the other related videos that appear on the page. Watch your favourite video again and you will get new recommendations. Type in ‘María Félix’ or ‘Dolores del Río’ and a new set of films, or older ones in a new order, will appear. It is a dynamic space. Since videos are not ordered in a generic way, any videos that include either star’s name in the title can appear; for example, this means that under Dolores del Río, alongside political campaign videos for María Dolores del Río municipal president of Hermosillo, Sonora, there are also videos about del Río the film star; clips from her films and trailers; short videos of the streets named after her; a video of someone claiming to be her son captured walking around Rodeo Drive in Los Angeles, and so forth. It is this heterogeneity that gives an expansive and ever-expanding biography of the stars. The videos are a source of seemingly inexhaustible detail about the actors, in direct interplay with a lively international community of viewers, some fans, others just casually interested, and others still who have just come upon the videos in the complex interplay of connections that can lead from one video to another. Therefore, while some videos give a conservative and delimited construction of the fan image, the relationship between this video and the multiple other texts on YouTube provide a more complicated transnational life narrative.

As evidenced from the discussion threads, audience is an integral element on YouTube. Castillo discusses spectatorship in online video content as being particular to this medium. She emphasizes the solitary individual enterprise involved in the reception of online videos (Castillo 2007: 42). On YouTube, popular videos are highlighted; you can see a selection of videos that are being viewed by users alongside others that are promoted, and YouTube’s interface enables its users to share what they have put up or have recently viewed. In addition, your channel page, irrespective of whether you are a creator or consumer of content, lets you put up favourites and build a profile as a viewer. Unlike the isolated viewer that Castillo imagines other short film-makers, on other fora, conceive of when they are creating, YouTube builds on an idea of community and sharing. The implicit suggestion is that you are not alone watching this film; there are others who have shared it and with whom you can discuss the video and related issues. YouTube is about you: broadcasting yourself, getting online and engaging with all these other selves. That the content may be of very good quality is secondary to this engagement with your own and others’ star images. The YouTuber thus can become a star, with his/her own audience through the online persona that is created on YouTube. In addition, if you have a favourite star and feel that your geographic location sets you apart from other fans, you can create a transnational community of viewers with whom you communicate online.

An outstanding example of the creative potential of video uploaded onto YouTube is entitled ‘Une Very Stylish Fille’. It opens with an extract taken from a television interview with Félix, in which she states in her unique style,

El momento ha llegado, será fugaz, pero tendrá, según espero, además de alegría un toque de eternidad, de esa misteriosa eternidad que
parecen tener aquellas películas en las que ustedes como sus padres y abuelos todavía ven y en las que yo, siendo la que soy, la que fui, y la que seré todavía actuo. [The moment has arrived, it will be fleeting, but will, I hope, as well as happiness have a touch of eternity, that mysterious eternity that those films seem to have. Those films which you, like your parents and grandparents, still watch, and in which I, being who I am, and who I was, and I who I will be still act in.]

(eliudhernandez, 30 August 2006)

This quotation emphasizes time in an interesting way. The transitory ‘momento’ (moment) and ‘fugaz’ (fleeting) are followed closely by ‘eternidad’ (eternity). This is a recognition of the transience of the moving image and of star fame, yet a grandiose positioning of herself within a historical continuum. She is addressing a young viewer, who will not have known her when the films were initially released, but draws attention to the fact that their parents and grandparents did, and these films, which are often considered to be cultural ephemera, are granted a classical status and significance. After her introductory speech, the music fades in and there are a series of edited clips from films and still images, manipulated and with special effects, in time to the beat. According to the YouTuber who created it, eliudhernandez, ‘[e]legí estas imagenes por que según Yo [sic] representa mucho de lo que es la Doña además me hubiera gustado poner más imágenes pero no tenía las películas especialmente las que hizo en Europa’ (‘I chose those images because in My [sic] opinion they represent who the Doña is, also I would have liked to put in more images but I didn’t have the films, especially those she made in Europe’) (eliudhernandez, 28 July 2008). In film criticism Félix is synonymous with films of the Revolution in which she has played cross-dressing roles as a combatant of different ranks. As epic love stories set against a dramatic nationalist historical moment, her gender-blending performances have inspired harsh criticism (see, for example, Ayala Blanco 1974: 84–5). However, eliudhernandez has used a wider range of images from Doña Bárbara, from which she earned the title ‘la Doña’, to the aforementioned films of the Revolution and more urban dramas such as Reportaje (Emilio Fernández, 1953). Curiously, this edited video provides a more balanced overview of Félix’s career than most film criticism.

Edited using Final Cut Pro, eliudhernandez is a video editor using his professional skills to create a polished summary of Félix’s screen appearances on Mexican film. He explains his motivation for making videos of Félix and of other stars: ‘las otras estrellas de mis videos se me hacen interesantes porque aportaron mucho al cine mexicano, me parece que transmiten mucho sentirimiento en sus actuaciones y le hice video para que las nuevas generaciones las valoren’ (‘the other stars in my videos are interesting to me because of their contribution to Mexican cinema. I think that they transmit a lot of feeling in their performances and I made videos [of their performances] so that future generations will value them’) (eliudhernandez, 28 July 2008). Like other YouTubers he is using new technology to draw attention to stars of old films and television series, with the aim of bringing them to a new generation. Therefore, in line with Castillo, there is a strong awareness of a viewership and a responsibility towards the stars he is representing. The videos he has created are also intentionally intertextual, not stand-alone art pieces: the expressed aim is to draw the viewer’s attention elsewhere to the stars’ films elsewhere.

As I have already mentioned, music has a complex and shifting role in the videos subject to the choices made and the relationship it has to the
images. Eliudhernandez explains his choice of music, “María Félix una vez dijo que ella tenía un estilo que gustaba...y la musica [sic] tiene la palabra “stylish” además de que es una musica [sic] muy bonita y atemporal como lo es Ella’ [sic] (‘María Félix once said that she had a style that appealed ... and the music has the word “stylish” in it as well as being a beautiful and timeless piece, like She is [sic]’) (eliudhernandez, 28 July 2008). He is drawing on a rich range of transnational cultural referents. The track is ‘Une Very Stylish Fille’ by French house DJ and producer Dimitri from Paris.13 It uses a sample of dialogue between Audrey Hepburn and George Peppard from Breakfast at Tiffany’s (Blake Edwards, 1961) against a bossa nova beat. ‘Dimitri from Paris’ has been a creator of mixes for a variety of catwalk performances for Paris fashion houses and the mix is not only upbeat, but is a witty commentary on the male gaze. In the sample used for the track, Hepburn asks, ‘How do I look?’, to which Peppard replies, ‘Very good’. The original video for the song, also available on YouTube, has a nostalgic 1950s’ feel, and features a model posing for a photographer. Her jerky movements, return of the gaze and the kitschy feel of the video challenge the conventional male gaze. This is also the strength of the edited clips in eliudhernandez’s video. It is my contention that it is Félix’s challenging return of the gaze that makes her characters strong and this is how she has built her star text as a powerful woman. As frequently the films she has acted in are conventional melodramas, what differs is her performance of the gaze. This, as well as the self-consciously ironic track used for this video, which samples the ‘How do I look?’ thereby draws attention to the act of looking that breaks down the voyeurism of the gaze. This is an example of how, as Castillo has written, the new online spaces and use of video self-consciously reference other older media and their techniques. Thereby, while some YouTubers may reinforce conventional forms of representation, others challenge the classical codes of cinema.

CONCLUSION

In the YouTube videos the star text functions as a ‘loose shaping device’: a key characteristic of the MTV style where ‘the narrative is seen as a series of set pieces that each embody a dramatic arc of their own’ (Dancyger 2007: 196). This is most vividly evocative in the videos edited from film and TV clips. MTV is readily accessible and reflects the dominance of US aesthetics on popular culture. Joost Broeren sees YouTube videos as having a ‘mode of attractional display’ that draws from ‘the tradition of the music video, the movie trailer, the television advertisement’ (Broeren 2009: 159). For Broeren, their length and how they are edited to music is influenced by this tradition. However, where the fan is from may determine the choice of song, but skill, not nationality, appears to influence aesthetics.

In the videos, YouTubers are giving a brief synopsis of what the star means for them, thereby making the text both biographical and autobiographical. In a statement that celebrates both stars and their significance for Mexico, RetroArcaicoRex states that ‘Dolores del Río es considerada como una de las actrices más importantes en México, junto con María Félix. Ellas dos, son consideradas divas del cine mexicano y ninguna otra actriz podrá reemplazarlas. Las extrañamos mucho’ (‘Dolores del Río, alongside María Félix, is considered to be one of the most important actresses in Mexico. They are considered to be divas of Mexican cinema and no other actresses can replace them. We miss them a lot’) (retroarcaico, 30 July 2008). In common with reasons given by

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13. This track can be found on his Sacrebleu (1996) album.
other YouTubers for creating the videos, this is an expression of loss: nostalgia for an idealized past time and a desire to recreate the stars for a present day audience. The videos are also constructed using local and international referents; they make musical choices that sometimes evoke specific past times and spaces or at others are transnational cultural products with a contemporary feel. YouTube has opened up a new forum available for the uploading of manipulated and edited images; this allows the creators and audience to share their personal perspective of a star image in a community-based platform, thereby allowing for a new cross-cultural dialogue and the (re)creation of multiple innovative star texts.

YouTube acts as a new and dynamic source (and resource) for the constructed star image: it is a space which lays claim to the creation of stars, through the performances and self-promotional possibilities it enables. As well as the production of stars, there is also potential for the creation of new star texts. On YouTube, stars from the golden age of Hollywood and Mexican cinema are reinvented for the twenty-first century. Fans can represent their versions of stars from a bygone era, and through the discourse of the star text represent a self that is tied into this star image. The YouTubers take control of an aspect of the star image and reconstruct it according, not just to the availability of images, but also their own desires, gaze and perceived audience reception.

In the studio era from which both María Félix and Dolores del Río emerged, the stars themselves, and their management, controlled their own star texts. This control has now shifted to individuals all over the world who want to recreate and reproduce these star texts by uploading videos with diverse content: although the number of individual images are multiple, they are limited, as both stars are dead and no new ones can be produced. However, how these images are edited and reproduced using distinct soundtracks means that endless possible new versions of the star text can be created. YouTube is a considerable source of information on stars and their fans, as well as a compelling site to examine the interplay between the stars’ images and their reincarnations on YouTube as deployed in a transnational space.

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