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A Media Event for Multistars

During the three hour long award ceremony of the MTV Video Music Awards 2004 a number of celebrities appeared on stage, to make a musical performance, present an artist or hand out an award. The stars popular at the VMA are characterized by their flexibility and commercial potential. My paper examines the stories of stars and commercialization today in relation to previous writings on stardom, how intersectionalities of gender, class and ethnicity influences these stories and the intermediality of stars moving between genres. The VMA, a segmented media event, is used as an example.

The MTV Video Music Awards (VMA) 2004 was held in Miami on the 29th of August. The award ceremony hands out awards to artists that during the past year made the “The best pop video” or “The best dance video”, the list of awards is long. The broadcasting time of the award ceremony is dominated by performances of artists from the music industry and other celebrities such as actors, models, comedians, athletes and more. There are celebrities presenting the nominees and handing out the awards, there are also stage shows by artists, interviews behind the stage or from the red carpet, happenings and “unexpected” events. The gala is planned, marketed and broadcasted by MTV, a part of the Viacom broadcasting company. The nominees for the awards are selected by a jury chosen by MTV.¹ In the music business different award ceremonies fill a range of purposes, as a means for artists to be seen and photographed, perform a new song, make and preserve contacts in the business and market records and other products. A lucky few of the artists present at the ceremony also receive an award and thereby get even more time in the spotlight. The VMA is one of the more spectacular award ceremonies in the music business and is broadcasted to millions of households all over the globe. The gala is also much discussed in other media before and after it takes place. Although the VMA is North American and there are separate MTV galas like Latin Music Awards and Europe Music Awards, but the VMA is the biggest of these award ceremonies and there is an interest for the VMA outside of the US. After the opening of the

¹ The nominees are selected by MTV, the voting is done by the viewers but you can only vote for the nominated artists. The “viewers choice award” is the exception, you can vote for any artist. The “best video of the year” is the most prestigious award and voted for by MTV staff only.

VMA 2004 by Jennifer Lopez and the first musical performance the VMA's animated introduction is screened. The introduction presents the award shows performers and resembles the pretexts of a soap opera. 53 artists and groups about to perform are presented with photographs and names in alphabetic order during less than two minutes. The celebrities are from different areas of the entertainment industry and from this moment on the VMA is increasingly celebrity centric. Analyzing the VMA is therefore to analyze stars and the stories of stars presented by the largest musical TV-station worldwide today. The narratives in the VMA are largely carried out by celebrities, starstories are what MTV breeds off. Nets of relations between the celebrities, both commercial and private, are central for the award show. You might even say that these hidden agendas are as important as the music and intertwined with it.

A segmented media event

The VMA is a collage of different media technologies and the change of technologies and the accelerating spreading and speed of the media today is connected to the way consumer culture today is blurring boundaries between music, television, fashion and other genres. There is a whole website dedicated to "the making of the VMA", there are separate TV-shows interviewing the artists at their arrival on the red carpet, special features on the winners, reruns of all the previous VMAs, a live concert outside the location of the award show and reports in magazines. The VMA is represented as something very special, a one time event.

A media event is a broadcasting that differs from the flow of programs televised every night (Daniel Dayan & Elihu Katz, 1992/1994: 5). It is not a part of the routine but rather an interruption of the routine in which the audience meets something special. A media event is monopolistic, like a royal wedding or the Olympic Games, because it interrupts the normal broadcasting in all, or almost all channels. The media event is monopolistic for a majority of the public in certain parts of the world, because it is obvious that the Olympic Games attract different amounts of audiences in different parts of the world, it is also obvious that all of the people in the world do not have access to the same channels (or even a TV). A media event is transmitted live and it is organized outside the media by organizers within the establishment that represent consensual opinions.

According to this definition by Dayan & Katz the VMA differs from a media event because it is not monopolistic or organized outside the media. But the award show can be described as a

segmented media event. In a segment of the audience, mainly young people interested in popular music, it is an event that signifies a break in the flow of everyday TV. Inside the realm of music business and music television it is also monopolistic and on MTV there is talk of little else than the VMA in the weeks before and after the event. The VMA is a *segmented* media event produced by the same company that is broadcasting. These are the two major differences from Dayan & Katz's definition of a media event. I would argue that the fact that it is made by the media and broadcasted by the media in some ways makes it even more of a media event. Every aspect of the VMA is about the media. According to Dayan & Katz the media always takes part in constructing the media event through the selection and broadcasting process. In the segmented media event of the VMA this construction is not just present in the selection and broadcasting, the media is also the source of the event.

Stars and MTV

The concept of a star is connected to a notion of magic, charisma and authority (Richard Dyer 1991). The values embodied by the representation of a star will give success to the performer if these values are important to understanding and coping with contemporary life. Thus the values stars embody are usually perceived as important or areas for a struggle of meaning like the combination of danger and sexuality in the femme fatale figure (Karma Waltonen 2004). According to Richard Dyer (1991) the criteria for a good performance in the entertainment business has shifted from whether the performance is done well to whether it is truthful, and done by an authentic star. The codes of authenticity are changing and therefore given at certain points in time. It is possible to identify markers of authenticity creating meanings and the stories of stars. Such markers are found in the way stars represent themselves, visually in the way they look, morally in the way they relate to other people on stage and in private and commercially in the career choices they make. The markers of authenticity are thus necessary to become a star but as we are about to see in the example of the VMA contradicting markers of authenticity are at work at the same time. As a star you construct a story of authenticity involving every aspect of your life, some stars like Madonna does this by wanting to keep her private life away from the cameras and performs a story of "the private star".² Others display every aspect of their life. The audiences meeting the stars may very well contest some of the stars values and claims of authenticity and at the same time embrace other stars with different markers. What is perceived as authentic and truthful is ever changing and the representation

² Greta Garbo is the historical perfect "private star". Not telling can be as intriguing as telling, or even more so.

of artists as complete concepts, not only when they are performing but all the time, is the work of authenticity. Linda Lister (2001) argues that there are three types of big female stars in music today and she refers to them as three different diva types. They are all based on the classic diva prototype of the mid 20th century exemplified by Lister as Maria Callas. But in popular music today there is a variety of stars categorised by in vocal divas exemplified by Whitney Houston, inventive pop divas exemplified by Madonna and singer/songwriter divas exemplified by Jewel. Lister addresses but underestimates the importance of the divas private lives and their beauty while focusing on their different talents. Although her way of structuring female music stars today is a useful starting point I will argue that she overlooks some of the most significant developments in the last ten years, the multitalents and the emphasis on the private.

MTV has often been theorized about (Carol Vernallis 2004) as a postmodern media form based on fragmentation and has been made a symbol of a new generation, fast moving, superficial and ever changing. But MTV is not as different from other TV-stations as one might think. When we take a closer look at the tableau we discover news, soaps, annual events like the VMA and even wild-life shows on MTV today. Examples of star narratives from the VMA are therefore related to programs televised by other stations as well as to the rest of MTV's tableau. The early history of MTV is described by E. Ann Kaplan in *Rocking Around the Clock* (1987) and a comparison with what we see in the VMA today uncovers a process of change in the TV-station. In the early 80s there were no black artists, or latino artists, at all on MTV and Michael Jackson's "Thriller" was the first video by a black artist ever shown by MTV in 1984 (Kaplan 1987: 24). MTV was accused of racism and of favoring white artists throughout the 80s but changing the representations was a slow process that speeded up in the late 80s and early 90s. The situation at the VMA in 2004 seems to be the opposite, there is an Afro-American dominance among the performers. The discussion in Kaplan's work is much concerned with rock music and rock videos, a category that seems less important today when rock is not the dominating music genre on MTV. The amount of hip hop, rap and R & B shown on MTV today is on the increase and has been so since the early 90s. Rock music is also predominantly a white tradition, although from the start rock was copying black traditions of blues and rhythm and blues. Hip hop, rap and R&B on the other hand has always been mainly black traditions and is today also to some extent carried out by

latino artists and a few white artists.³ Thus the move away from rock on MTV has meant a move away from white artists.⁴ The change in the artists included makes the VMA something completely different today than in the 80s. Three white male rock bands perform a song each, in a row, during the VMA and that is the only performance of rock during the gala. Eight hip hop, rap and R & B acts appear and most of the artists in these acts are black men.

The multistars of the VMA

In the media coverage after and during the VMA a small number of celebrities got a lot of the attention. Standing out in the group frequently photographed and interviewed were a group of black men from the hip hop/rap/R&B scene and four white female celebrities. I will take a closer look at these two main types of starstories performed at the VMA. That is to say there were of course other types of star representations present but I will analyze the two types given a lot of space in the discussion after the VMA. But let us first note that all of the stars from these two groups discussed below are processes of intermediality, their work cross boundaries between different media and genres. Today the biggest stars in the music industry are not only famous for their music and private lives, they also design clothes, sell perfume and make up, have their own TV-shows, their own record companies, make movies, have their own brand of champagne or vodka, go into politics and much more. The star working in many areas will be referred to as a “multistar” and is an example of processes of both commerce and authenticity. Although stars have been acting, singing and dancing at the same time throughout the 20th century this is now a growing trend. The spread of music over the Internet and the economic problems this has caused for the music industry is possibly related to the multistars as well as the growing number of media channels available today. Not all stars at the VMA are multistars but our two main groups are, and they create two very different profiles.

The white female multistar popular in the VMA is represented by four women; Jessica Simpson, Paris Hilton and Mary-Kate & Ashley Olsen. They have all had their own TV-shows and they were all headlining the US tabloids for different developments in their personal lives in 2004, such as eating disorders, drugs, parties, boyfriends and home videotapes. They all performed at the VMA, Simpson with a song and the others as presenters

³ R&B is different from the old rhythm and blues tradition.

⁴ This must not be overemphasized. There are still rock and white artists on MTV. But in the period 81 – 84 there were *only* white rock artists (Kaplan 1987).

of the nominees. Another similarity between Simpson, Hilton and the Olsens is that neither of these artists is represented as having a specialty.⁵ But they are artists in more than one field, and very successful, talked about and they make a lot of money. Neither of them are represented in the media, before, during and after the VMA, as if they have any special talent in the traditional way such as singing, dancing or acting. When they are presented it seems as if being Jessica, Paris or Mary-Kate & Ashley is enough.

Simpson is a bit different than the others in this aspect because she performs a song and is thereby closer to the representation of a traditional vocal diva (Lister 2001). But in the media coverage of Simpson nobody seems to be interested in her singing. All these women embody stardom and are of course not without talent, because it takes talented businesswomen to market themselves this successfully. Simpson is a singer boosting her career by making her own reality-soap *Newlyweds* with her husband Nick Lachey, she has published a book and is pursuing a career in the movies. Paris Hilton is the heiress of the Hilton hotels empire, initially famous for being rich she has been modeling, done minor roles in movies and made three reality-soaps about herself and her friend Nicole Ritchie. Now Hilton is planning her singing career. Mary-Kate & Ashley Olsen have been sitcom TV stars since they were babies in *Full House* and now they have their own brand of clothing, their own TV show and they are making their own movies, for TV and theaters. The four women are all stars in many genres, not represented as exceptionally talented in any of them but still with successful careers. In this sense they are all multistars.

Our four female multistars featured in the VMA are all young, white, American middle or upper class and heterosexual, they have all had boyfriends and Simpson is married. In this aspect they fit into a classic diva pattern described by Lister (2001) but without the same total focus of one special field or talent that signifies the traditional diva. Simpson has got a focus on the voice, Hilton is funny and always up to something and the Olsens are writing some of their own material for sitcoms and movies. But Lister's way of conceptualizing the diva, however useful, does not really apply to these stars. The focus in the representations of our four multistars is on their *private lives* and their persons. Divas are generally scandalous and have publicly discussed private lives but Simpson, Hilton and the Olsens are different from the divas discussed by Lister by being famous for their private lives. The whole person and

⁵ Jessica Simpson's debut album was quite successful, you might argue, but since then her career has been about her personal life, her reality TV show, her book and not primarily about her music.

the markers of authenticity of the star is a brand, this is also why it is possible for the stars to produce diverse products. The person is important not the talent or the product. Looking good in pictures and being represented as the perfect products with life style merchandise to purchase for the spectators are therefore also qualities that pinpoint our multistars. The whiteness of these four young females is not to be ignored; as men are usually not perceived as gendered whites are usually not perceived as being ethnic. The representations of Jessica Simpson, Paris Hilton and Mary-Kate & Ashley Olsen are related to well known stereotypes (Stuart Hall 1997) of middle or upper class white women as fragile, sensitive, beautiful, untouchable, on the verge of a breakdown and dependent on men. These stereotypes are also found in movie stars like Judy Garland (Dyer 1991) and Greta Garbo – the list is long.

Comparing Simpson's performance at the VMA to that of fellow singer Alicia Keys, representing the "funky" women of the black working class, Simpson is being lowered down from the ceiling in a white swing shaped like a circle decorated with flowers, she is sitting motionless singing a ballad before walking to the stage to stand motionless and sing another ballad. Keys is introduced with her piano and then continues to dance and clap her hands behind a synthesizer performing an up-tempo song backed up by Stevie Wonder and Lenny Kravitz. Simpson is dressed in strict black while Keys is wearing a red more casual top combined with pants and huge 70s sunglasses. The very different performances by the two singers create them as different stereotypes. In comparison to Simpson Keys is exoticized for her class and ethnicity (ibid. and Marita Sturken & Lisa Cartwright, 2001: 93). In the construction of Simpson and the other young white female stars the aspect of their talent is not in focus but Keys' talent is definitely in focus as she is presented as a musical genius playing several instruments and writing her own music. The rhythmic and sexualized notion of the black female makes her a very different type of star than Simpson and the other white females. Keys is not presented as a multistar and she is not in focus at the VMA. Her representation also relates to a completely different stereotype than Simpson, Hilton and the Olsens.

The white female multistar is the first type of star, out of two, receiving most of the attention around the VMA. When compared to a singer like Alicia Keys who is represented as talented, rhythmic and creative, writing her own music and focusing on the music, our four multistars seem puzzling. Why are they famous at all? They do have something to base their stardom on but their main talent is to be a star and to brand themselves as stars. This is done with their

private lives, their looks, their class and their color which all together creates an image. They also fit into a recognizable historical pattern of white divas that still is reproduced, desired and adored.

The spectacular lives and beautiful faces of our white female stars are contrasted by the other group of celebrities given a lot of attention in and around the VMA. These men are even more photographed and televised than the white women discussed above and they represent a large percentage of the musical performances at the award ceremony. The men from the hip hop/rap/R&B scene preferably have got gun scars on their faces. The representation and accessories of these stars creates them in sharp contrast to the female stars discussed above, so does their gender, ethnicity and social background. The underprivileged social background is something they also strive to enhance, because being from the “hood” of the “projects”, with crime and less fortunate economic circumstances, is a part of the image. For some of these stars the “background” is inseparable from the image they need in order to be a believable star in this genre. These two types of stars, the white middle/upper class multistar and the black working class male hip hop/rap/R&B star, makes one ask: could anybody be a star? The response to this question is definitely “no” if the starting point is the VMA. Here stardom is a narrow concept, but it is not one-dimensional. There obviously is more than one way to be a big star, there is at least two. During the VMA some of the male artists present where much represented in the camera shots of the audience and on stage and in the magazines after the award show. Rapper Jay Z, R&B singer Usher, Lil Jon and the East Side Boyz, Fat Joe and Terror Squad and P Diddy with his sidekick Mase. The dominance of a genre that I will here refer to as bling-bling hip hop/rap/R&B is obvious in the performances at the VMA.⁶ Others (for example Angela McRobbie 1999) have witnessed the mainstreaming of hip hop/rap/R&B in the 90s, but it is not any type of hip hop/rap/R&B that is making it into the charts today, the highly political music is not successful. It is a certain gangster and New Jack Swing inspired version of the genres that is dominating the charts with nice melody hooks from R&B traditions, funky beats by master producers such as The Neptunes or Timbaland & Magoo with lyrics on money, crime, sex, party, love and success. This genre transcends the boundaries between hip hop, rap and R&B. The songs often mix influences from hip hop, rap and R&B with dancehall, reggaeton and bahia funk making a fast moving dynamic style of music. In the music industry this form of music is referred to as being a bling-bling era or

⁶ The term bling-bling is originally Jamaican slang for diamonds and shiny jewelry adopted by Afro-American rappers (www.urbandictionary.com).

period of hip hop/rap/R&B.⁷ This successful genre that I call bling-bling is best recognized by the colorful music videos and the excessive consumerism. The bling-bling men popular at the VMA are multistars like the white female artists. P Diddy has got a TV-show, a publishing company, he produces, raps, involves himself in politics and is famous for court trials and girlfriends as well. The bling-bling men at least have a street wear label and a record label, like Jay Z and Lil Jon. They are also famous for the conflicts, called beefs, between them. Two artists particularly known for beefs were not present at the VMA; Ja Rule and 50 Cent, but almost all of them are known to insult each others in interviews and song lyrics.

Labeling stars and music genres is always difficult in the fast moving music industry, where names and labels change quickly, but still I can not come up with a better way to define the cultural formation overlapping the different musical genres of hip hop, rap and R&B today than the term bling-bling.⁸ Bling-bling culture has been growing more diverse and million selling during the past couple of years and has often been accused of depriving the youth, objectifying women and celebrating drugs and crime. This critique from right wing politicians, some feminists and music journalists alike, has been structured in a way much similar to the way the popular music genre of jazz, today considered to be highbrow culture, was criticized for standardization and devaluation by the Frankfurt school (Theodor Adorno, 1941 and Keith Negus, 1997). Comparing bling-bling to jazz uncovers many similarities, obviously bling-bling's musical roots are to be found in jazz, but even more importantly jazz was performed by black working class men, and a few women, in the 30s, like bling-bling is today, and was highly popular. Xenophobia and exoticism are present in the debates on both jazz and bling-bling, and so is the regime of "good taste".

The tradition of seeing certain cultural forms or media forms as harmful, sending out ideological messages, has been present in media studies for a long time. The turn towards the audience in Cultural Studies in the late 70s with the intention to understand instead of condemn the audience of popular media has challenged this perspective (Sturken & Cartwright). Another way to analyze the popular cultures of the working class has been seeing them as means to resist hegemonic power and these mechanisms are central in some hip hop

⁷ One example is in an interview with rapper Fabolous at www.vibe.com where the rapper is described as emerging "at the height of the bling-bling era of hip hop". In this sense bling-bling according to Vibe is a period, a sub genre of hip hop that will probably change and go away.

⁸ Soul or nu soul could also be included, that is soul produced today, but the difference between nu soul and R&B is difficult to map. There is of course nu soul, R&B, hip hop and rap operating outside the logics of bling-bling. These artists tend not to make the top 10.

and rap from the 80s best exemplified by the group Public Enemy. The discussion about hip hop and rap culture as cultural resistance has been too optimistic, especially in the last couple of years with the growing commercial popularity of bling-bling culture.⁹ There are scholars negotiating between the positions of popular culture as resistance or harmful claiming bling-bling music to be both liberating and restraining for its users (for example Rana A. Emerson 2002). I analyze the bling-bling stars represented at the VMA by artists such as; Lil Jon, Terror Squad, Jay Z, P Diddy and Mase from this negotiating perspective. Bling-bling is a scene dominated by black men, but there are exceptions from this rule and one of these exceptions is the hip hop act Terror Squad, with both latino and black members and also a female member, Remy Martin.¹⁰ During Terror Squad's performance Remy Martin is rapping and dancing with the guys, but she is also wearing a short tight dress while all the others are weary baggy street wear. The balance between belonging to the culture and still being very different is significant for the women in bling-bling culture, especially amongst the rappers, but there are examples of female rappers accepted as one of the guys in the way they represent themselves, on example is Da Brat.

The production and marketing of the VMA makes the ceremony a media event for a *certain* audience. The dichotomy between production and consumption is challenged in the event. The bling-bling performers are consuming openly but also using this consumption to appropriate luxury products (Sturken & Cartwright: 59, 260) like cognac and Chanel usually being signifiers of European middle/upper class. The style promoted by mainly the bling-bling performers is a bricolage (ibid.: 64) of these luxury items and sports clothing, sneakers and other things belonging to the black and latino working class. Though the same mechanisms of bricolage as recognized in punk in the 70s are at work in bling-bling, the resistance against mainstream society is *not* central in bling-bling; the consumerism is about wanting to consume. The most important quality you need to be a star in the bling-bling music scene is to successfully walk the tightrope between being sponsored and commercial and "keeping it real". It is important to be authentic as a black, male gangster from the projects and if you are female being sexy might be enough. Rumors about middle class background are not good for your career, going to court is and being shot is even better.¹¹ Still these male bling-bling stars at the VMA are making loads of money and they display their wealth. The

⁹ This discussion is often forgetting about R&B and sometimes forgetting about women altogether.

¹⁰ She has named herself after a brand of cognac and is often called Remy or Remy Ma.

¹¹ Proven by stories from the lives of Tupac, Biggie, P Diddy and 50 Cent, just to mention a few.

artists are being sponsored by big companies, our founding big companies of their own and their lives are far from the projects they (allegedly) grew up in but they nurture the image of being the same person as always, just with more money. They belong to another class now, but they still keep their background with them and stay “true” by not forgetting the hardship of their friends and family, the black and latino working class. As stardom operates through codes of authenticity stars are dependent on the realness of the construction of themselves in the media and constructing realness is often done by displaying the star’s private life. The markers of authenticity differ depending on the type of star being constructed, the four white female multistars use a different set of markers than the bling-bling stars. For the male bling-bling stars the codes consist of the combination of manifested wealth and references to the previous hardship of growing up black/latino and working class. One signifier for the background is the group of black/latino men following the star around, adding authenticity to the background of the star by being childhood friends from the same rough neighborhoods. The “friends” witness the truth of the star’s childhood stories. In the same way the jewelry and the cars bring authenticity to the newfound wealth of the stars. The black/latino working class masculinity is also enhanced by the female dancers in small clothes present on stage, and the adoring women in the audience. The masculinity is one of the aspects of being a believable black/latino working class man and the need to be masculine creates difficulties for the female artists in the genre, especially those wanting to rap.

The two types of big stars at the VMA 2004 are two very special types of stars, of course there are other types as well but they were not at the centre of attention. To make a believable starstory you will need to fill the shoes of a real black bling-bling man, like Lil Jon, or a white female diva, like Jessica Simpson. The extreme dichotomies between these two categories of stars are significant for the VMA 2004, their representation of class/gender/ethnicity are very different. The crossing of genres in the entertainment business is what unites them, both P Diddy and Jessica Simpson have their own reality show on TV.

Authenticity and intersectionality

From the example of the VMA the notion of authenticity as important for stardom is confirmed. The dominance of stars and foremost the dominance of the multistars is the most striking process in the narrative of the VMA and I see this not as an isolated event but rather as a trend in entertainment business. The emphasis in media studies the last couple of years on what is referred to as “new media” and to explain change as driven by technology is not a

perspective I agree with. Instead I believe that media channels are constantly changing and the difference between stars today and in the early 20th century is not the TV, they had magazines and movies for making stars (Dyer 1991), the difference is the constant crossing of genres and the infinite number of media channels available for stars. The economic decline of the music industry, or at least the fear and discussion of economic decline, is also important for the move to multistardom and change in who can be a star, the explanation is not to be found in just one factor.

Finally I want to comment on the intersections of class/gender/ethnicity/sexuality of the two types of multistars discussed above. While the white female multistars construct a classical concept of white heterosexual femininity the bling-bling men represent artists that could not be superstars on MTV or make this kind of money twenty years ago. The two different starstories constructed by these groups of artists are therefore both known stereotypes and new patterns. The representations of bling-bling men and their intersections of class/gender/ethnicity/sexuality are stereotypical but their wealth and stardom is not. Popular culture is always moving and the changes are related to society and power. This is reason enough to have a closer look on stars today, a project I will continue working on in my dissertation.

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