

The Ecstasy of Alienation: MTV, Media Landscapes, and the Struggle over the Geography of Cultural Production

Clayton Rosati

This paper attempts to reconcile recent discourse on the deterritorialization of culture through communications technology, and the so-called “wasted legacy” of landscape studies, by investigating a media landscape: MTV Studios in Times Square, NY. While the expansion of mass media penetration internationally has in many ways “freed” forms of cultural expression from their geographic confines, it has simultaneously consolidated and enclosed those places where such expressions are produced. Contrary to most studies of media culture, which often emphasize the consumption of texts and symbols or the impact of such images on particular places, this paper shows the production of media culture as a fundamentally geographic struggle, revolving around the production of particular landscapes and how those landscapes are in turn productive. Using MTV’s, “Total Request Live,” as a case study, the paper draws on ethnographic observations of the show’s production and semi-structured interviews of its creative staff to present media as a field of struggle over the geography of cultural production. This research reveals how the structural tension between public expansion and private consolidation manifests everyday, as hundreds and often thousands of teens gather outside of MTV’s Mid-Town Studio to jockey for a brief chance to occupy one such space of cultural production, or at very least to catch a glimpse of a celebrity. The New York Police Department and private security guards regulate the enclosure and thus, authority of this media landscape. This paper explains the relationship between this struggle and its representation in broadcast. It is the tense geography between the places of cultural production and consumption that allows media such as television to be a potent force in contemporary political economy.