



TV SANDINO

ARTISTS SPACE

TV SANDINO

February 5–March 14, 1987

Organized by Annie Goldson and Carlos Pavam of Xchange TV

Video Program

Aqui En Esta Esquina (Here On This Corner), 30 minutes (excerpted), produced by Sistema Sandinista de Television, 1983 (Spanish with English subtitles).

Con Guerra o Sin Guerra (With or Without War), 20 minutes, produced by Martha Wallner and Miriam Loaisiga, 1987 (Spanish with English subtitles).

Golpes de la Corazon (Blows of the Heart), 30 minutes (excerpted), produced by Sistema Sandinista de Television, 1983 (Spanish with English subtitles).

La Virgen Que Suda (The Sweating Virgin), 15 minutes (excerpted), produced by Sistema Sandinista de Television, 1983 (Spanish with English subtitles).

Nieve (Snow), 20 minutes (excerpted), produced by the Ministry of the Interior, 1986 (Spanish with English subtitles).

Operacion Oro (Operation Gold), 20 minutes (excerpted), produced by the Ministry of the Interior, 1985 (Spanish with English subtitles).

plus a sampling of news programs, public service announcements and more.

Artists Space's Film and Video Programs have been supported, in part by grants from the New York State Council on the Arts.

ARTISTS SPACE activities are made possible by the National Endowment for the Arts, a Federal agency; New York State Council on the Arts; Institute of Museum Services; New York City Department of Cultural Affairs; Art Matters, Inc., Cowles Family Charitable Trust, Foundation for Contemporary Performance Arts, Inc., Jerome Foundation, Leonhardt Foundation, Betty Parsons Foundation, The Reed Foundation, Inc., Mark Rothko Foundation; the American Express Company, Consolidated Edison, Equitable Real Estate Group, Inc., EXXON, R.H. Macy Company, Mobil Foundation, Inc., Morgan Guaranty Trust of New York and Philip Morris, as well as numerous friends.



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ARTISTS SPACE

223 West Broadway
New York

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are very pleased that Artists Space is presenting *TV Sandino*, a selection of new videotapes from Nicaragua. This program offers a rare glimpse at the kind of programming being produced by a television system in its infancy. Artists Space has a longstanding commitment to new ideas, new forms of aesthetic experience and to present work which has few outlets due to its controversial content. *TV Sandino* challenges the viewer to come to grips with a set of sounds and images without the typical mediation of our own news and information sources.

We are very grateful to Annie Goldson and Carlos Pavam, who organized this program, for their tireless efforts to obtain the tapes, as well as to translate and subtitle them. Both Goldson and Pavam are part of Xchange TV, a coalition of media workers in the U.S., which distributes Nicaraguan television programming here as well as sending the work of North American videomakers to Nicaragua for distribution there. We also appreciate the efforts of Martha Wallner, also a member of Xchange TV, whose contacts in Managua and recent travels there have allowed us to present the most up-to-date material possible. Our thanks also go to Art Matters, Inc. whose generous support for Xchange TV has helped us all to realize this project. Artists Space also has received generous support from the New York State Council on the Arts which has allowed us to expand our video activities from sporadic occurrences to a year round program.

I am grateful to Michèle Mattelart and Joel Kovel, who have contributed essays to this publication. Their texts offer the viewer an entrance, or a variety of entrances to the tapes without insisting on being a definitive interpretation, handed down from the North. Joel Kovel is the author of several books including *White Racism* and *The Age of Desire*. He is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship for the study of radical spirituality and is currently working on a book about Nicaragua. Michèle Mattelart is a French communications theorist who lived in Chile for 13 years until the overthrow of Allende in 1973. She now lives in Paris and has written several books including *The Culture of Feminine Oppression* and *Women, Media and Crisis*, as well as having co-authored and co-edited numerous books with her husband, Armand Mattelart. Thanks are due to Berenice Reynaud for her translation of Mattelart's essay.

Finally, we want to extend our thanks to *Sistema Sandinista de Televisión* (SSTV) and the other producers of the tapes in this show who have worked under exasperating conditions to produce works that amaze us with their intelligence, subtlety and enthusiasm.

Susan Wyatt
Executive Director

INTRODUCTION

When a Mexican soap opera broadcast at prime time in Nicaragua drew attendance away from neighborhood meetings, some expressed criticism. One group, though, developed their own solution. They brought a TV to the meeting, watched it together, and then discussed what they liked and didn't like about it.

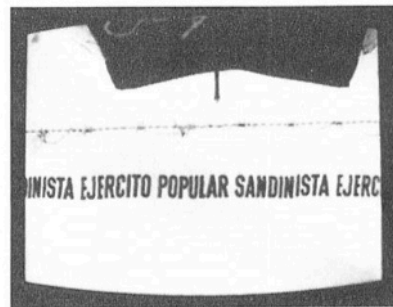
The same pragmatic, at times irreverent, attitude underscores much of the logic behind the programming on SSTV, Nicaragua's state controlled broadcasting system. Television was established by ABC and NBC in Nicaragua during the Somoza dictatorship, and during that time, 80% of the televised material was imported primarily from North America. Since the revolution, Nicaragua has developed its own healthy production industry despite the constraints and costs of the US-backed Contra war.

As is evident in the following programming, the forms of television are loosely based on mainstream TV genres. There is widespread recognition in the country that mass culture is a part of everyday life, it has determined what people perceive as "entertainment." The programming's content, however, differs. Behind the humor and its emphasis on participation, it addresses serious themes: the creation of a national culture (until now denied), an examination of machismo and violence, and an attempt to place the country's current conflict into a larger regional and global context.

Nicaragua has the frequent fate of being condemned as a Marxist dictatorship or over-idealized as a worker's paradise. It is not the USSR, Cuba, China, or Chile. It is Nicaragua. The constant reduction of Nicaragua to something else shows a refusal to accept that behind the struggle for self-determination in Nicaragua, there is the emergence of a new historical subject. And it being an audiovisual age, television plays an important role in this emergence.



Still from
Con Guerra o Sin Guerra
1987.



Still From
Con Guerra o Sin Guerra
1987.



Still from
Golpes de la Corazon
1983.

TV IN NICARAGUA: BETWEEN WAR AND SOLENTINAME'S COLORS
by Michèle Mattelart

A young girl in a purple skirt gracefully moves around, bare-footed, on the stage where, earlier, couples of children were enlaced in a dance contest. Rock's hip-swaying. *Milongas*. *Boleros*. Enter peasant musicians. They sing, with guitar accompaniment:

I give myself up to fighting
Viva, viva Sandino
Fly, fly little dove
Do not stop flying
And if you see Sandino
Tell him I'm on my way . . .

Adults are preparing to compete, dressed in everyday clothes. She wears pink trousers, an orange T-shirt. Her partner also has pink trousers on, with a sky-blue-T-shirt. A young woman wears army fatigues. They are going to dance a *corrido*. And the audience, from the town of Rivas, gives them an ovation. Among the prizes: quinine, Red Cross coupons . . . Painted on the backdrop, the title of the program: *Aquí En Esta Esquina* ("Here On This Corner"); it is produced and broadcast by the Sistema Sandinista de Television (SSTV) in Nicaragua.

Why does one feel like talking about color *right away*? Unusual sensation of freshness. The quality of the unexpected. Those pinks. Those oranges. Those blues. Simple state of the people and things, of the green palms and the sky captured by the camera, but also ethical and aesthetic choice: one is indeed tempted to see in this ingenuous presence of color, on the part of this makeshift television, with its limited technical resources, an effort of recognition and reappropriation of a value intimately connected to a people's imaginary in that part of the world. "To express the value of what is ours": Ernesto Cardenal, who is both a poet and the Culture Minister, voiced his concerns in his UNESCO address on the democratization of culture in Nicaragua, in April 1982. And it seems that, without even meaning to, television captures, with all its freshness, color as a quality of being; of the quotidian actions and feelings of simple people in this Central American country where they use hummingbird feathers and butterfly wings to weave revolutionary symbols in their songs and on their paintings. This renews, through associations and memories, the tradition of the naive paintings of the Solimentame community. This community, founded by Ernesto

Cardenal, became known abroad mostly for the work done by its peasant painters. During the revolutionary war, the community was scattered, its young members drafted into the armed struggle and reduced to ashes by Somoza's power.

Paradoxically, however, if an effect of color is created, it has a dialectical reason. Color entices us: we who are so clever at recognizing the latest strategies of our ultra-sophisticated televisions, in search of an ever-increasing *performativity*: we who know perfectly where color now stands within the technological calculations of advanced audiovisual media. Color, and more especially pastel color, has become the latest discovery in style, the latest artifice, the latest technical event, designed to lure the fickle gaze of the spectator, whose attention is teased by too many images, too many novelties.

While noticing the color of this television, or even its open lack of formalism, its slow, long, loose rhythm, completely foreign to the constraints of time and quick editing that we are used to, we should nevertheless avoid the trap of easy praise. We should take care not to interpret as an endeavor conscious of its own simplicity or as the intentional search for an alternative form of television, what the SSTV may possibly experience and criticize as the effect of the lack of means and professional know-how, the price to pay for the trials and errors of learning the new medium.

I did not see these programs in Managua; I saw them in Paris on a tape recorded by a group of U.S. independent videomakers that had worked in Nicaragua. I saw them thanks to a French video group that had at its disposal a video deck with the adequate format; an image of these networks of multipolar international solidarity that characterizes the technical help and assistance received by the Nicaraguan revolution.

The Sistema Sandinista de Television includes two channels: Channel 6, that belonged to Somoza and became public property shortly after



Still from
Aqui En Esta Esquina
1983.



Still From
Con Guerra o Sin Guerra
1987.



Still from
Con Guerra o Sin Guerra
1987.

the successful July 1979 mass uprising, and Channel 2, a corporation belonging to private stockholders, connected for the most part to the Somoza family, that was expropriated in August 1980, under the pressure of its staff.

Under the Somoza regime, 80% of the TV programs were imported from abroad (mainly USA and Mexico.) Local production was reduced to a few commercials, some news coverage, and sports. It was underdeveloped and concentrated in the big cities on the Southern Pacific coast where the financial resources were located: television bore all the marks of an extreme degree of dependency: scarcity of technical resources and very weak potential for original production.

The Sandinistas inherited this situation fraught with unresolved needs. To face it, they learned how to make the best of the financial and technological aids from southern and northern countries, from public institutions and private groups. To extend the network, they have relied on cheap transmitting equipment from Japan, adapted to their needs by the Mexican multi-corporation Televisa. Today, television is received in $\frac{2}{3}$ of the country. As for the TV sets, since none are manufactured there, private or semi-private corporations import Japanese monitors via the free-trade zone in Panama. The State has drawn up agreements with the Cuban electronic industry to import TV sets for the peasant cooperatives in the north of the country. In 1984, however, there were still only 200,000 TV sets in Nicaragua (for 3 million inhabitants), and more than half of them were located in Managua.

To train technicians and production staff, the SSTV has received the assistance (in Nicaragua and in foreign countries) of many European and Latin American television stations. Today, some 200 people are on staff. 37% of the programs are now locally produced: news, programs for children, and sports.

The programs are a dissimilar patchwork: American series still remain (the less "aggressive" have been chosen), as well as *telenovelas*: long melodramatic serials that take the viewer back to the traditional narrative memory at work in the entire Latin American cultural area. Left-wing parties have continuously indicted them for contributing to the alienation of the people. But the popular governments, whether in Allende's Chile or Sandino's Nicaragua, have had to come to terms with these immensely popular programs. At first, the Sandinistas chose to withdraw these serials. Confronted by the people's dissatisfaction, they restored them. Their political choice is now expressed in their selection within the continental production: they prefer the serials offered by a Columbian cultural channel to the Mexican *telenovellas*, which are considered the most powerful tear-jerkers.

A fact that might appear quite odd: it was the Nicaraguan Ministry of the Interior (originators of the famous weekly talk-show *Cara al Pueblo* ("Face the People")) in which government officials converse with the in-

habitants of a village or neighborhood) whose audiovisual department began one of the first experiments in the production of a narrative series: an unusual police story where the notions of repression, surveillance and security are problematized in relation to the national situation.

Thus, there is scarcely any fiction on television. Reality, however, sometimes lends itself, unbelievably, to becoming a screenplay. It is this reality which produces one of the "tableau" in this exhibition: *La Virgen que Suda* ("The Sweating Virgin"). An odd spectacle, inspired by a scabrous episode that, shortly beforehand, had revealed the latent tension existing in the relationship between a certain faction of the local Church and the Sandinista revolution. It is well-known that one of the radical novelties of the Nicaraguan revolution is the involvement of Christians in the name of their faith. It is also known that this faith plays an unprecedented role in the creation of a new consciousness and a new culture. This Christian involvement is disturbing to some.

Staged by one of the numerous theater groups that have invested their energies in the people's creative workshops, *La Virgen que Suda*, using the genre of the moralizing fable, brilliantly demystifies the imaginative delirium that, at a given moment, took hold of an extremist faction of the Church.

The cult of Mary is especially glamorous in Nicaragua's popular religious tradition. The "purissima" festival, that marks, on December 8, the culmination of the devotion to the Virgin, provides an opportunity for a display of intense fervor and creativity every year. The revolution did not repress this cult in any way. It made it even more meaningful. "The Sweating Virgin" literally describes the ludicrous stratagem invented by a few anonymous plotters to make trouble and divert the devotion to Mary at the profit of the counter-revolution. They drenched a life size plaster statue in water, stored it for a long time in a freezing chamber, and then exhibited it, sweating, on an altar! Then they hollered "Miracle!": the Virgin was displaying her sorrow at the communist threat in Nicaragua. . . . Once again, they resorted to brandishing the all-too-familiar fear, dear to all right-wing parties, as dear to the internal enemy as to the external aggressor.

The theater group's timely retort, both scathing and sprightly, showed that television takes part in the war.

Translated by Berenice Reynaud

WATCHING AQUI EN ESTA ESQUINA

by Joel Kovel

Sandinist Nicaragua may be, for its size, the most scrutinized society in history, yet people in the United States rarely get to see anything about it first hand. Instead, we rely by and large on the “mediated” knowledge offered by our press. Consider, for example, the *Los Angeles Times*, one of our better newspapers, known for its lengthy analytical articles, the thoroughness of which is owed to the necessity of having to find some text to offset hundreds of pages of advertisements. Chancing to browse through the *LA Times* before writing this, I arrived at length at the editorial pages, where my eye was caught by a piece titled, “The Deepening Morass.” The *LA Times* is definitely hostile to Ronald Reagan these days in the wake of the Iran-Contra revelations, and the editorial lit out after the President for having started the Contras going in the first place. Not bad, even quite far out for an American newspaper. But not too far out—for there, preceding the denunciation of Reagan, was the “balance” dear to the free press: the ritual denunciation of the Sandinistas.

“There are many grievances in revolutionary Nicaragua, frustrations that have led many patriotic Nicaraguans to abandon the hope that they once had in the popular revolution that overthrew the hated Somoza dictatorship in 1979. Ever since then the increasingly authoritarian nature of the new Nicaraguan government, controlled by the Sandinista militants who were the principal fighters in the rebellion that overthrew General Anastasio Somoza, has alienated many of its own citizens—Roman Catholics, business leaders, independent unionists and peasant farmers among them. Clearly there would be opposition to the Sandinistas even if the United States had not helped create the Contras.” (Los Angeles Times, Editorial Page, December 17, 1986)

Where have I read this before? Where, in the official and established world of the United States media, have I not read these cookie-cutter thoughts, prepackaged and programmed, and pounded a thousand times into our heads, until a certain image of Nicaraguan life has become established as real: a country relentlessly slipping behind the Iron Curtain, a country sclerosing into totalitarianism as a growing number of impotent dissidents stand by in anguish. We are to watch, horrified, as this small, sunny nation drifts helplessly away toward the frozen sea of Communism. Poor Nicaragua—another loss for Freedom.

Now turn to *Aqui En Esta Esquina* (Here On this Corner), a program for the ordinary Nicaraguan on the official and established, state-run, *Sistema*

Sandinista de Television, and what do we find? Funk. How diabolically clever of the communists to disguise their ruthlessness and authoritarianism behind this anarchistic facade. A tinny, cacophonous music greets us, reminding us more of Spike Jones than the Red Army Chorus. People sing about teaching, playing, fighting and learning, all *con calor* (with passion). There are drum majorettes—have the Sandinistas already taken over Brownsville, Texas, as the President warned? A woman fights to keep possession of what appears to be a baby bottle filled with some brown fluid, then loses it, and everybody laughs. What is going on here? Are these communists serious?

The “Corner” this time is Rivas, a medium-sized town near the Pacific about 80 kilometers south of Managua. A large emblem of the CDS (*Comite de Defensa del Sandinismo*), the letters bristling with guns, can be seen behind the emcees as they start the show. The CDS is an organization destined to offend the eye of the liberal from the North, since it forsakes the form of governance known as representation, in favor of the immediate participation of the people: it is as they say, a “mass organization,” a body with fewer checks and balances and out of the sphere of control of the propertied classes. It is against phenomena such as the CDS that the *Los Angeles Times* rails. What the CDS represents is the pure form of revolutionary democracy, manifest in one incarnation or another in every revolution since 1789. Ideologues of the industrialized “democracies” do not like this, less because it is subject to abuses—which it may be—than because they do not trust, indeed they fear, anything which smacks of the common people seizing control. This is experienced by the “democrat” as a rupture of the social universe, accompanied by dark fears of Jacobinism and revenge. The simple logo, “CDS,” then possesses this signification or rather, double signification of democracy conveyed by the notion of “popular power”: doubled according to one’s situation with



Still from
Aqui En Esta Esquina
1983.



Still from
Aqui En Esta Esquina
1983.



Still from
Aqui En Esta Esquina
1983.

respect to the great social divide between those who have and those who have not. In any event, it is the *people* of Rivas, a town of no consequence at all in the great world, who gather on the "Corner."

And struggle. The aura of combat established in the opening montage proves prophetic. The greater part of the show is given over to contest, beginning with the children's dances, passing through the quiz and ending with women's and men's arm wrestling. Are they practicing to repel the Yankee invasion?, to weed out dissidents? Perhaps. There are always multiple determinations to culture, and nothing in Nicaragua today can be understood in isolation from the counterrevolutionary war launched by the United States. But the first, deepest layer in Rivas is the *agon* described by Huizinga in his *Homo Ludens*—that elemental ritual contestation of traditional society, undoubtedly practiced by these people since before the Conquest. In the *agon*, the fundamentally conflicting elements of human existence imbue the social body with structure and give it shape. Each individual struggle is incorporated into the collective, negated by its ritualization (the rules of which are given by the whole), and absorbed into the collective subjectivity of the onlookers. Couple against couple, the solitary hero against his Fate, evoking the labors of Hercules, primitive contests of sheer strength and willpower: all are drawn out of the individual occurrence and communalized. What stands out the most about this revolutionary culture is how much it looks forward by looking backward.

Is this simply transhistorical, then, and taken out of time? No, nothing human is out of time. Or rather, the transhistorical is also historical. What is being expressed here on the "Corner" in Rivas is a voice: the transhistorical human capacity to speak out, to announce one's self. But a capacity is not an actuality; it can be lost, alienated, usurped in one way or another. Indeed, no one, and no group, can ever speak for itself in a world constituted by domination. Specifically, if the people—of Rivas, of Nicaragua—have their voice here, it is a voice which had been stifled and is now recovered. The Dictator, the master of the traditional *finca*, the *conquistadore*, driving his Indian labor on the *encomienda*—none of these had been disposed to allow the full public, celebratory ritualization of the *agon*, or for that matter, any free manifestation of autonomous culture by the conquered. For sound reason, since to do so would have gathered and concentrated a popular power at the disposal of the underclass, with results not too difficult to imagine.

And so, though the voice was never extinguished, it was throttled, badly, and for a long time. Every conquered people bears the signature of their oppression differently. I think it safe to say that Nicaraguans suffered a cultural devastation exceptional even amongst the generally oppressed and marginalized Central American peoples. I recall hearing Foreign Minister

Miguel D'Escoto say once that the fierce determination of his people to defend their sovereignty against United States imperialism stemmed from the fact that for decades they had been the most despised of all the region's nations, the one with the least dignity, the least pride and the least autonomy. It is the memory of this shame which animates the motto of Sandino and Sandinism: "*Patria Libre or Morir!*"

And its scar has been perceptible in the cultural sphere. In relative contrast to the people of El Salvador and Guatemala, who have been able to retain a firmer core of cultural identity (manifest, for instance, in handicraft), the Nicaraguans appear to have been torn open by their servitude. This is only a generalization, and can be contradicted by numerous concrete examples of resistance, for instance, the masked dancers of Monimbo, in Masaya, which mocked the Spanish conquerer. Still, as a relative statement, it holds true. The Nicaraguans had been turned into a people without confidence in their own power, and vulnerable to penetration by the conquerer. Observable in the level of artisanship, this flaccidity of culture was also manifest in the rituals of communality. The genius of Sandinism, whether practised by its namesake or the FSLN, has been to augment the drive for economic and political justice with the conscious appropriation of a historical identity. It was this stroke, principally ascribable within the FSLN to Carlos Fonseca, that gave and continues to give Nicaraguans the fortitude for their struggle. But we must not sentimentalize the nature of the cultural dialectic at the heart of the Sandinist revolution. The ambition was necessary and inspired. But what it has had to overcome is formidable: the ruins of a heritage, and a kind of gentle despair at ever being able to create an alternative free from the grip of the conquering Northerner.

All this is by way of saying that the voice cannot be recaptured in original form. That is now only a memory. To bring it back is to undertake a march through the topography established by the conquest. For the Nicaraguans to appropriate their culture cannot mean the outright rejection of generations of semicolonialism, a nihilistic gesture which would leave them empty-handed. It means rather the transformation of that heritage.

This landscape, or heritage, includes contemporary communications technology and its lingo. Hence the borrowing of idiom and genre from the mass culture of the North, in this case the modality of the TV game show, assimilation to which gives *Aqui En Esta Esquina* irony and a fine overtone of craziness. It seems that *Aqui En Esta Esquina* has mimicked what is arguably the most debased and frankly stupid spectacle offered by North American television. This is cultural dependency with a vengeance, and turned upside down.

Mass organization meets mass culture: two formations united about a single term and moving in opposite directions. The totalization of mass

culture: massification, the creation of “audiences” as a passive field to be plowed by capitalism, the inertia of the audience reduced to the level of spectator, and the omnipotence/omniscience of the emcee. In the Game Show, in mass culture as a whole, everything is engineered from the top down, even spontaneity or an occasionally touching demonstration of human weakness on the part of the show’s leadership. The cultural purposes of these shows are threefold: to give the individual loser (the norm according to the logic of capitalist society) a glimpse of success, viewed as a magical phenomenon raining down from the heaven of the network; to give a glimpse of community, of nice, clean, smiling and interesting people who happen to be just like everybody else, again courtesy of the network; and to instill reverence for the commodity, who is the real god looming over emcee and audience alike. In the Game Show, all the exams one had ever taken, the sum total of which, in reality, add up to a career behind a video display terminal, are suddenly concentrated, invested with mana, and made into a relay for becoming Queen for a Day.

There is no *agon* here. Of course there once was; everything had a starting point, and the same filiation exists for the Game Show as for *Aqui En Esta Esquina*. The conversion to the mass has, however, eliminated any content from the ritualized struggle. What remains is only a gesture. The totalization of mass culture, and its imposition of passivity on the audience (i.e., the “massification” itself), denies any incorporation of the individual struggle into the collectivity. The latter is simply ruled out in advance; and all cultural power is siphoned off to the corporate master.

Compare this to *Aqui En Esta Esquina*. Here the “mass,” previously constituted by semicolonialism and its effects on culture, is moving in the opposite direction, towards its constitution as a *people*. Critically, there is no structural distinction between those who make the show and those for whom it is made. In the arm-wrestling sequence, one camera wanders on stage in full view of the other, while one of the women combatants is recruited on the spur as a *testigo*, a witness, to the male arm-wrestling. The participant becomes an observer, and the observer, a participant. Moreover, the jovial emcee is truly a facilitator and not an emissary of an unseen totalizing power. Because of this, he is capable of conveying more warmth in one phrase than all the skillfully crafted hosts on North American TV can generate in a week of programming. The emcee’s craft as a facilitator is artless, and unencumbered by any omniscience, to say the least. Indeed, his errors are gross. (For example, he mixes up the female arm-wrestling winners, then painstakingly emphasizes which one of the male arm-wrestlers is which—“Herman . . . Martin . . . Herman . . . Martin . . . Herman . . . Martin”—only to get the winner wrong at the end again.) But none of this diminishes his sense of control over the proceedings, for the

simple reason that his authority is not based on domination. We see therefore something quite inconceivable in mass culture: an actual negotiation and dialogue between emcee and audience. When the *valiente*, Rudy, comes up with a date of 1978 (for the first incursion of the FSLN into Rivas), instead of 1979 which the emcee had expected, the latter asks him if he has any doubt about his answer. "*Ninguno duda,*" replies Rudy, whereupon the emcee turns the question over to the audience. After all, this is not "Trivial Pursuit," but the reclamation, indeed the making, of a people's history. As the emcee says, "I come to learn from you in Rivas." How extraordinary.



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