

## **From the *Piazza* to the Screen Observations on the Spread of YouTube and its Use among the Madonna dell'Arco *Battenti* in Naples**

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Questo articolo si propone di analizzare l'utilizzo di YouTube all'interno tra i battenti della Madonna dell'Arco, a Napoli. Nell'ambito di questo culto tradizionale, attraverso la musica (canti di questua e musica per banda) vengono veicolate istanze legate all'orizzonte simbolico devozionale, ma anche a elementi identitari di marca strettamente locale: domini simbolici mediante i quali si dispiegano strategie di legittimazione dei gruppi di battenti come mediatori rituali all'interno dei quartieri di riferimento. In questo contesto, la presenza di YouTube ha avuto l'effetto di accentuare alcune dinamiche già esistenti – in particolare quelle derivanti dalle strategie di imitazione e di distinzione tra gruppi differenti – e i processi di cambiamento che ne derivano. Tra questi, risultano rilevanti le innovazioni che investono gli aspetti musicali del rito, le quali tendono ora a imporsi molto più rapidamente. In particolare, nell'articolo vengono discusse alcune importanti innovazioni nella musica per banda, e l'introduzione in ambito rituale della canzone neomelodica.

In this paper I analyze some of the effects of the recent spread of YouTube among the battenti devoted to the cult of the Madonna dell'Arco, in Naples. The music performed during the battenti's rites (devotional songs and brass band music) is linked to devotional and identity symbolic horizons, whose manipulation is used by different groups of devotees to legitimize themselves as ritual mediators representing their local neighbourhood. One of the most relevant effects deriving from the spread of YouTube can be recognized in the exaltation of some already existent social dynamics, connected to imitation and distinction strategies. As a result of the spread of YouTube, changes in the musical phenomena connected to the rites – one of the effects of the mentioned strategies – are now happening faster than in the past, leading to radical innovations in brass band music, and to the introduction of new musical genres, such as the neomelodica pop song.

### Some preliminary comments

ONE Sunday morning, in January 2012, I left home very early to go for the first time to a *questua* round of the *battenti* of the Madonna dell'Arco, in Naples.<sup>1</sup> The *questua* had been organized by an association based in the Montecalvario area – one of the so-called *Quartieri Spagnoli* (Spanish Quarters). I had been given permission to attend and film the proceedings with my camera by some *battenti* I had previously met, and to whom I had roughly explained the gist of my research. However, when I got to the association's premises, I realised that most of the attendees – about twenty people, including children between the ages of five and ten – did not know the reason for my filming the *questua*. I was ready to explain the nature of my work, once more, braced for the misunderstandings that had already happened in the past when I first approached devotees, who at first glance often took me either for a journalist or an undetermined television man. However, I had not foreseen the question that a group of children – dressed in the ritual *battenti* robe and busy doing the *questua* – began to insistently ask me, enthralled by my camera: «What are you going to do with these videos? Are you going to put them on YouTube?» My negative answer – mostly given for the benefit of the adults listening to this conversation to reassure them of my correctness – seemed to greatly disappoint the children. This did not however deter them from giving me some suggestions as to how to title the videos, in case I would later upload them to the website, so that they could be found by looking up the association's name.

What may seem an apparently unremarkable anecdote is indicative of an extremely widespread phenomenon among the *battenti*. As I realised that very same day, while browsing on YouTube –the children's suggestions in mind– *battenti* frequently use the site to upload self-produced clips where they document their ritual activities. For them, YouTube is one of the main channels for sharing documents, created and arranged following articulated and complex choices. Such a practice, which is now an integral part of the relational and interactional processes of devotee groups, needs to be further researched to reach a better understanding of the whole picture.

Over the last twenty-five years, there has been a significant development in anthropological studies and reflections around the broad theme of the so-called online-ethnography,<sup>2</sup> resulting from the greater recognition of Internet's growing influence (or better, of the channels marking the Internet's different hypermedia)<sup>3</sup>in shaping new communication modalities and

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<sup>1</sup> For a short introduction to the cult of Madonna dell'Arco and to the ritual activities enacted by the devotees called *battenti*, cf. paragraph 2.

<sup>2</sup> Among the most relevant contributions in defining the concept of 'online ethnography', or 'virtual ethnography' I shall mention here are SHIELDS 1996, HINE 1999, *Virtual Culture* 1997, MILLER - SLATER 2001, ORTNER 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Lange defines 'Hypermedia' as media transmitting «digitally encoded information that is realised in text, graphics, sound and film» (LANGE 2001, p. 132).

interpersonal relationships. Scholars' interest has shifted – within the vast and extremely heterogeneous settings that took shape within the growing spread of Internet technologies – towards the so-called online communities or virtual communities (e.g. RHEINGOLD 1993; NEGROPONTE 1995) – where communities are constituted by individuals joining specific interactive environments such as forums and chat rooms.

The field of virtual communities has been an important research area specifically in Ethnomusicology ever since the early Noughties to such an extent that some scholars created the virtual ethnomusicology syntagm (LYSLOFF 2003, 234) and started probing features of so-called virtual fieldwork in Ethnomusicology (COOLEY - MEIZEL - SYED 2008). It is not possible here to summarize a list of musical ethnographies about the so-called virtual communities. I shall briefly mention just a few, such as the one by René Lysloff about electroacoustic music composers and listeners who belong to the 'Mod scene' community (LYSLOFF 2003), or Kiri Miller's work on videogame users and specifically on the *Grand Theft Auto* online community (MILLER 2007), and Timothy Cooley's research on the users of the American reality show *American Idol*'s forum (MEIZEL 2006; COOLEY - MEIZEL - SYED 2008, pp. 92-97).

The outlining of a virtual field where ethnographers perform virtual research has had two main academic outcomes. On the one hand, many scholars have become interested in contexts whose main point is the total discontinuity with the group and social dynamics existing outside of the Internet (such as the virtual communities founded on the members' shared interest in specific themes; these communities are generally characterized by a total lack of face-to-face interaction as members live far away from each other, and often have nothing else in common). On the other hand, it has led to the development of numerous studies on the impact caused, or being caused by the spread of the new modalities of Internet information in contexts which were previously the object of scientific studies. In particular, much research has been carried out on the use of Internet instruments by diasporic communities, mainly to establish a social network among distant groups and to rethink cultural elements from an identity perspective (see: *Native on the Net* 2006; LOZADA 1998; MORTON 1999; Wood 2008).

These studies are a rather large and articulated corpus of works which deal with very different cases. Nevertheless, they are unable to give more than some general help to those attempting a study, such as the one I introduced previously, for two main reasons: firstly, because of the specific traits that set YouTube apart from other web-based interactional devices, and secondly, because of methodological matters.

As for the first point, despite the extensive use of YouTube as an instrument to share videos, there are as yet very few dedicated studies. The time-span covering the start of YouTube's massive popularity (between 2006 and 2008) is still too short to turn what soon showed as a strong interest into scientific production. Very little ethnomusicological research has been

conducted on this subject yet: it is worth remembering Catherine Falk's study on Hmong diasporic communities' production of identity symbols, through the release of videos featuring performances of traditional *qeej* music on YouTube (2013), and the work of Eun-Young Jung on the impact that YouTube use has had in facilitating the recent development of a Korean-American pop scene in the USA (2014). Arguably, the specificities that distinguish YouTube from other means of communication on the Internet are only now beginning to be investigated.

As for the second point – even though many scholars have highlighted the limits of 'virtual fieldwork', pointing out the fact that it can only be considered a complete research instrument when it deals with contexts where the actors do not share any interaction outside of the Internet's virtual places, and how in other cases the same virtual interactions have to be put in far more complex local contexts to allow further exploration through participant observation (SHIELDS 1996, p. 3, MILLER - SLATER 2000, p. 5) – there is a prevalent approach among the aforementioned studies to regard 'online ethnography' as a type of research which is in substantial discontinuity with field research performed according to established methodologies: more specifically, few studies have been made of the certain functions held by Internet interactions in contexts where they run parallel to other established interaction modalities without substituting them.

Contexts tied to mainly oral procedures and dynamics, such as that of Madonna dell'Arco, can be suffused with new interactive modalities which are made possible by YouTube: in this case, the questions connected with carrying out ethnographic research increase. Most of these questions truly make full sense when, as in this case, the object of the research is not the virtual field of web interactions, but rather, the focus is on the whole of the local social dynamics in which such modalities come into play, allowing scholars to understand changing characteristics and processes: Which local actors' needs and strategies are answered by the spread of such practices? What changes do they reflect, and which could they induce? And again, on a functional level, what are the elements of continuity and discontinuity that determine the relations between long used practices dependent on orality and the actors' physical proximity and the new interactions mediated by YouTube?

The answers to these questions lie in the innumerable specificities that mark single contexts. However, within this preliminary assessment we must not omit an important point – relevant not only for Italy but also elsewhere – which may seem banal but must be considered before examining Neapolitan *battenti*: although YouTube use in itself is an innovative practice, it must be regarded as the last in a series of decades-long processes that have led to the emergence of secondary orality – after Ignazio Macchiarella's use in a musical context of a concept developed by Walter J. Ong (2012, p. 11) – where this term means a mode of knowledge transmission characterised by the presence, next to proper oral sources, of those that come through the mediation of

recording devices (MACCHIARELLA 2012, pp. 2-3). As I said earlier, this is a long-term process originating in the Seventies, through the dissemination of recordings made by and for local actors with diverse equipment and for various purposes (homemade audio-visual media taped for personal collections; records released for small local labels). The production and distribution of documents in progressively more accessible storage media (vinyl, cassettes, VHS and later CDs and DVDs) has led in time to the stockpiling (in private homes or public meeting places) of various-sized collections, and occasionally of actual ‘archives’. This is not a surprising phenomenon: it is part of a wider and well-known use of photographic, sonic, and audio-visual documents gathered to build and organize spaces of individual and collective memory. As has recently and often been singled out, (cf. MACCHIARELLA 2009, GIURIATI 2011, p. 76, LUTZU 2015, p. 39) it contributed, when practices related to orality kept their own functionality (or acquired new ones), to the development of new procedures in musical discourses and practices: in many cases, the use of recordings has not gained strictly normative functions leading to the standardisation of repertoires and performing styles, but on the contrary, it has provided useful elements in the enriching of a space which is still strongly negotiable and intrinsically subject to variability.

As for Madonna dell’Arco devotees, I have been able to ascertain that most of them have varying-sized DVD and VHS collections of amateur films documenting public rituals performed in different periods, dating back to the Eighties. The existence of these documents testifies the spread, in past decades, of consolidated practices: such practices – and the related habit of deeming audio-visuals as instruments for documenting significant events and building individual and collective ‘memory archives’ – need to be considered when evaluating the spread of YouTube, since they represent an immediate precedent.

And yet, YouTube interaction modalities introduce numerous specificities which distinguish them from previous models. As is widely known, YouTube is a platform which allows anybody, without restrictions, to upload and share videos that can be available indefinitely, unless the original uploader removes them. Even though there are checking procedures put in place by the site’s administrators to take inappropriate content offline, this only happens in cases which are largely foreign to the context under scrutiny. Therefore, in the *battenti*’s case, YouTube is effectively an instrument managed by local actors, its structural lack of hierarchical devices resulting in the absence of inclusion-exclusion dynamics – a partial link to this facet being the disordered and transitory quality that characterises the repertoires of documents available. When uploading a clip, there are two main criteria which make it searchable. The first is the title itself, which makes the clip show up on the search result list in a position coherent to the words inserted during the research itself and to the number of views (the most viewed videos appear at the top of the list); it could also be associated to other clips and suggested in a list located on the

side of the screen that can be consulted whilst the requested video is playing. The second is the insertion of a playlist associated to the title, which can be found through appropriate searches by other viewers. Therefore, the skills and strategies employed by users to browse the website – choosing keywords and relevant filters and selecting pertinent results – are essential in determining the actual documents' usability on YouTube.

Compared to the small private 'archives' I previously mentioned, whose limited and easily searchable content is the result of accumulation processes which are still relatively slow, YouTube provides users with constantly updated and barely classifiable repertoires. The immediate usability of new items uploaded to the website allows their spread in a very short time, significantly quickening information transmission, and affecting, as we shall see, mutation processes in musical practices. This is not the result of predictable given processes: rather, it is the outcome, as I stated above, of the practices regulating video use. The choices made by users partly result from the algorithms determining the composition of search result lists or from videos appearing on the side of the screen (e.g. the aforementioned criteria that favours those most viewed); and yet they are also largely brought about by elements that are nothing to do with the site's structure. The devotees' criteria for choosing which words to use during a search and which videos to watch rely on previous knowledge, expectations, and orientations that can be understood only when put in the context of relation and strategy sets that largely exceed the restricted Internet environment. How can users find their way when evaluating the messy repertoire available? Which factors determine their preferences? What aims does the actual video viewing have? Other questions have to be taken into account if we move from video viewing to examining video production: What needs motivate actors to produce specific audio-visual documents and make them public? What kind of use do they imagine for such documents? What criteria do they follow when choosing the words to identify them?

During my research, the main instrument I employed to find answers to these questions was direct observation of local actors' behaviours, along with close scrutiny of the YouTube documents available on the website: the examination of their involvement with YouTube became an instance of participant observation, as did the joint browsing of videos which became a specific type of interview. As to the first point, specific interaction modalities (production and video viewing) between local actors and an instrument such as YouTube cannot be evaluated by merely considering the tests carried out with no observation of its actual use. If YouTube use is a practice consolidated in people's ordinary lives, here it bears a tight relation of mutual influence with other practices derived from actors' face-to-face interactions. The observation of their YouTube browsing could shed light on strategies and trends which might not otherwise be identified. The interviews I carried out, which revolved around joint YouTube browsing with the informants, allowed

me to further investigate specific subjects I proposed, following conversational threads developed by the informants themselves with the help of the extensive corpus of videos available: I would propose a theme, leaving my interlocutors free to discuss it in whatever way they preferred and letting them turn to clips, so as to allow the emerging of stories, opinions, rankings or emic categories linked to specific audio-visual documents. Getting back to the themes dealt with in the first part of this section, the impossibility of clearly separating a virtual field of investigation has become pivotal when considering research methodologies, long before the actual observation of phenomena. Much of what is reported in the following paragraphs derives from the choice to consider research into new practices such as YouTube use as an integral part of ethnographic research, which must be combined with direct and prolonged interactions with the local actors.

### **The cult and the rituals**

The Madonna dell'Arco cult is one of the most popular among Southern Italy's local Marian cults, counting 150,000 devotees<sup>4</sup> almost exclusively located in towns around Naples and in the city itself. Originating in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and possibly based on pre-Christian customs, the cult is founded on faith in the Madonna's ability to perform miracles and dispense favours to Her devotees. Her primary manifestation is a 15<sup>th</sup> century icon preserved in the Sanctuary of Madonna dell'Arco in Sant'Anastasia (a town close to Vesuvius, 17 kilometres from Naples).<sup>5</sup> Fully ascribable to Marian and saints' cults, the relation between the devotee and the supernatural being – in this case the Madonna – is established through the formulation of a vow, aimed at soliciting divine intervention or indeed vow acknowledgment. The formulation of the vow – an act binding the devotee to maintain long-standing symbolic ties with the Madonna – is followed by the fulfilling of ritual obligations that may take extremely articulated forms: first among these is the pilgrimage to the Sant'Anastasia Sanctuary on Easter Monday (or *lunedì in albis*, according to popular local terminology), which is the Madonna dell'Arco Holy Day.

Among the most articulated forms of votive obligation is the process whereby a devotee acquires the status of *battente*: *battenti* or *fujenti* define themselves as devotees who, by vow, not only make an annual pilgrimage to the Sanctuary, but who in wintertime – from Epiphany to the Sunday in the week after Easter, called *Ottava di Pasqua* or *Ottavario* – take part in an articulated and complex cycle of public and collective ritual activities. As we

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<sup>4</sup> This figure is drawn from the register of the Madonna Dell'Arco's Sanctuary, reporting attendees on Easter Monday 1998 (*La Madonna dell'arco* 1998, p. 16).

<sup>5</sup> Several scholars have published studies on the history of this cult: some are redolent of a thinly-veiled confessional approach (BRONZINI 2000, D'ANTONIO 1979); others, like Tentori (1979) and De Simone, Rossi and Russo (1979) give interesting, if not fully concordant, readings about the cult's origins and development from the 15<sup>th</sup> century onwards from a historical-anthropological viewpoint.

shall see, a complex articulation of musical practices hold a relevant role in the ritual system characterising the *battenti's* actions to such an extent that, as several informants told me, the rituals could not take place without music.<sup>6</sup> The *battenti's* devotion is characterised by a symbolic system and ritual practices which clearly display its rural, folk origins: it is widely spread amongst people belonging to lower social strata and retains many autonomous traits which oppose it to the liturgical praxes established by the Second Vatican Council. In fact, it is shaped by cognitive and ethical schemes that show elements of continuity with what scholars, such as Luigi Maria Lombardi Satriani, Annabella Rossi, Lello Mazzacane, Roberto De Simone and, more recently, Giovanni Vacca, have identified as the common traits identifying folk religion in Southern Italy.<sup>7</sup> I refer to low social strata as a wide category including parts of the lower-middle class, the working class, and the under-class of urban Naples and its hinterland. Although it cannot be filed into a uniform social class after the usual Marxian categories, such a wide entity is nonetheless characterised in Naples by a certain vagueness about its inner borders and the substantial sharing of most cultural references and connected social networks.

The *battenti's* ritual system is characterised by public and collective activities performed by different associations, and its substantial self-referentiality has often created acrimony between the *battenti* and the ecclesial authorities – primarily the bishops of the Dioceses involved and the Order of Preachers, which is responsible for the Sanctuary's guardianship. The activities are organised according to an organic programme allowing the individuation of a yearly ritual cycle and can be distinguished into three different types:

1. public *questue* (begging activities) promoted by the association and performed by small groups of *battenti* who walk long distances within the association's area, soliciting offerings from residents;
2. the *funzioni* (religious functions), complex public rituals consisting in the association's homage to an icon of the Madonna dell'Arco – or more rarely of a saint – usually located in a public or semi-public place;<sup>8</sup>
3. the collective pilgrimage to the Sanctuary of Madonna dell'Arco on Easter Monday. The polarisation between the places where the ritual practices are enacted – the local area for *questuas* and *funzioni*, and the Sanctuary for the pilgrimage – has been examined by Stefano De Matteis, who identified a dichotomy between the proper place, the

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<sup>6</sup> The *battenti* who live in the countryside around Nola are a partial exception to this: strictly local variants of the rites practiced in these areas contain a much lower degree of musical practices.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. De SIMONE - ROSSI 1977, LOMBARDI SATRIANI 1968a, LOMBARDI SATRIANI 1968b, *Madonne, pellegrini e santi* 2000, MAZZACANE 1985, ROSSI 1986, VACCA 2004.

<sup>8</sup> A semi-public place is a formally private place such as a courtyard, which, nevertheless, can be accessed by the public, especially on specific occurrences.



quarter, in which rituals pre-eminently assume the role of displaying and somehow symbolically explaining the relation between the *battenti* and the communities of reference, and the sacred place, the Sanctuary, in which pilgrims collectively find themselves in a position of liminality<sup>9</sup> which separates them both from contexts which characterise their ordinary life and from all those who are not *battenti* (DE MATTEIS 2011, pp. 35-37). Beyond this somewhat excessive schematism inherent to the opposition of the two phases within the whole cycle, ritual activities that take place in the associations' quarters of origin are certainly invested with symbolic elements that can be read in devotional terms and, at the same time, regarded as markers of *battenti*'s relations, both internal and external to their group.

Locally known as *'a cerca*, the *questua* is generally held every Sunday starting from Epiphany, or, occasionally from Sant'Antonio Abate's Day on 17 January. It features a small group of *battenti* and is characterised by its low degree of formality. Conversely, the *funzione* – the rite which I shall analyse at length in this paragraph – is enacted many times during the weeks leading up to the Easter Monday pilgrimage, and devotees consider it akin to a religious function, hence its name. Compared to the *questua*, the *funzione* introduces a much higher degree of elaboration and formalization, as well as the inclusion of what is usually a large number of *battenti* – from thirty to over one hundred attendees; moreover, the rite includes the presence of an audience, whose number and indirect participation – through incitation and other forms of support of the *battenti*'s actions – play a role in the other actors' appraisal of the rite's success.

As I mentioned earlier, the *funzione* consists of a tribute or a greeting made by the *battenti* to an icon, usually depicting the Madonna dell'Arco but occasionally other saints. The *squadra* – the name given by the *battenti* to the team enacting the *funzione* – makes its way to where the rite is to be held and splits into different groups, who stand in line facing the icon. At the centre of each group, there is a male *battente* called the *portabandiera* (banner-carrier) who carries a banner (called *bandiera*), whose pole is carried vertically resting in a carrier at his groin; at his side, up to twelve *battenti*, usually women, arrange themselves in a symmetrical line, staying close together by putting their arms around each other's hips.<sup>10</sup> Not only groups participate in the rite:

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<sup>9</sup> Liminality is a cornerstone of classical analysis on rites of passage, as theorised by Arnold Van Gennep (1909). It has been employed more recently, specifically in reference to pilgrimage ritual typologies, by Victor Turner (TURNER 1969, TURNER 1977, TURNER - TURNER 1978). Liminality is characterised by its being a situation dominated by ambiguity, a social 'limbo' clearly distinguished from the orderly and regulated social life which precedes and follows it. The guidelines for ordinary social and cultural life are suspended and substituted by experiences and behaviour which have mysterious, unusual, extraordinary qualities (*Dizionario di antropologia* 1997, p. 417).

<sup>10</sup> A fairly rigid grouping according to age class determines the position held at the beginning of the *funzione*: the children front the parade, followed by teenagers, young adults (approximately between the age of twenty and thirty) and then mature adults. Gender differences are highlighted

there are often individual *portabandiera*, and the whole team is always accompanied by an ensemble similar to a small brass band, whose members usually include up to five tenor saxophones (occasionally with one or two altos), one to five trumpets, cymbals, snares, and a bass drum.

The *funzione* starts when the band begins to play: the groups parade in an orderly succession – which reflects the association’s internal hierarchies<sup>11</sup> – so that each can perform their salute, and then they move to the side to give space to the following group; once the salutes are over, all the teams regroup at the centre of the ritual space in reverse order, perform a second salute, and then return to the position they held at the start of the *funzione*. The whole sequence is then repeated several times according to different situations, which extends the ritual’s temporal dimension from its usual 20 minutes up to even ninety minutes or more. The salutes and the preceding parade are codified in peculiar ‘choreutic modules’ – individual or collective stereotypical movements – which are performed with the fundamental tempo reference of the band’s beat. Although during my research I was able to single out about fifty different choreutic modules – relative to the parade or to the salute – most of them are the combination of different types of coordinated steps and the vertical or lateral oscillating motions which the *portabandiera* makes with his *bandiera*. The salute, in all its forms, sees the *portabandiera*, using the sheath attached to his waist for leverage, raising and lowering his *bandiera* one or more times in vertical oscillating movements in proximity to the Madonna’s icon. The band’s backing gives a rhythmic reference to the choreutic modules accompanied by the beat and has a strong structural function within the *funzione*, particularly in its metric-rhythmic features: the rhythmic patterns adopted during the rite are an essentially invariant element, far more than the repertoire performed.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, the *funzione* has a further moment, which according to many devotees and *battenti* is one of the ritual’s most meaningful and enthralling practices, namely, the performance of monodic devotional chants. This may precede or follow the salutes and requires both *battenti* and the band to interrupt their other activities. Even though the repertoire performed on such

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through the division of ritual actions and spatial positioning; women have an ancillary, subordinate role, while men perform the most important duties.

<sup>11</sup> The *portabandiera* performs the first salutes, followed by the *bandiera madre* and the *stendardo* – the association’s most important banners, usually carried by older *battenti* – and the *tosello*, an artefact of varying dimensions (the base of the biggest ones can be as much as seven metres long and five metres wide) carried on the shoulders of a variable number of devotees.

<sup>12</sup> The first phase of the *funzione*, which the *battenti* call *primo saluto* (first salute) – or, less frequently, *benedizione* (blessing) – is characterised by the adoption of a rhythm based on a 6/8 meter, replaced later by a 3/4 rhythm. This phase, during which the tempo and the *battenti*’s coordinated movements are rather slow (50-75 bpm), usually lasts about fifteen minutes and finishes when, after performing the salute twice, the *battenti* go back to their initial position. It is followed by a second phase, called *secondo saluto* (second salute) or simply *saluto*: this part is characterised by the band’s performance of a march in 2/4, stressed by a much fast beat (140-160 bpm), and by the consequent overemphasizing of choreutic modules, which are performed much more quickly and in a lively manner.

occasions includes several chants, the most performed is a *questua* recall – called *voce d’a cerca* (begging voice) by the *battenti*, which refers more generally to the practice of chanting during the *funzione*. Such a practice is called *dare la voce* (literally to lend voice). The *questua* recall for the Madonna dell’Arco can be traced back to a wide typology of callings and, more generally, to the *canti a distesa* known for centuries in the Vesuvius area and around Naples.<sup>13</sup> Within the *funzione* framework, the *voce*, although it retains its original recall function in *questua* rounds, is perceived mainly as a prayer, a way to «give vent to one’s emotions» – to use the *battenti*’s words – and at the same time as an individual and collective expression of devotion, performed in the name of the whole association. The performance of the *voce* is therefore a practice that expresses and incites a strong emotional commitment both on the part of the singer and the audience.

### **YouTube-related practices among the *battenti***

I have described the workings of the *funzione* in great detail because the videos that the *battenti* upload to YouTube mostly document this particular ritual activity: it is possible to gauge the spread of this phenomenon by considering that entering *funzioni Madonna dell’Arco 2013* on the website returns 3990 results<sup>14</sup>, of which seventy-eight received more than one thousand views and five more than ten thousand. This phenomenon raises several questions, some of which I introduced earlier in more general terms: What kind of need are local actors fulfilling by using YouTube in such a manner? What kind of use do uploaders imagine for the videos and can it be considered proper viewing? And most of all, how does such a new practice fit into the cult’s system and influence its dynamics and balances?

To answer these questions it is necessary to look at the social context surrounding the *battenti*’s devotion and its adjoining practices. The cult of Madonna dell’Arco is very popular among Naples’ lower social strata: in particular, almost all *battenti* come from a wide social group which includes parts of the lower middle class, the working class, and the urban underclass. Particularly relevant to Neapolitan society is the great reciprocal permeability of low social strata, which is subject to an endemic job shortage making it difficult to distinguish the working class from the underclass. The anthropologist Italo Pardo uses the term *popolino* to describe these two as a single group sharing the same social and cultural references (PARDO 1996, p. 2). The existence of dense social networks – a particularly effective phenomenon which does not involve only those belonging to low social strata – has led

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<sup>13</sup> These are orally transmitted chants with no fixed tempo, based on a six sound non-tempered scale. As regards to major scale sounds the greatest diversion can be found in the fourth grade, which could be approximately defined as augmented.

<sup>14</sup> This figure is subject to significant changes according to the time when it was recorded, due to the constant variability in the presence or removal of videos. This number is the result of research carried out on 2 March 2014.

Thomas Belmonte (1979, pp. 137-144) to identify and describe the outline of proper neighbourhood communities, characterised by strong internal bonds that substantially bar the outside. Of the two, it is far easier to agree with Pardo's analysis, since he refutes the 'neighbourhood community' model – deemed as being too unbalanced towards uncommunicative traits that are quite incompatible with an urban context, such as that of Naples and its hinterland – and, instead, views Neapolitan society as crossed by social webs where members of a family, neighbours, and friends prevail over strangers (PARDO 1996, pp. 83-103). The strong correlation between kinship and neighbourhood social networks results in the actors being involved in positioning dynamics, which are often unstable and constantly changing; on the other hand, these selfsame actors are forced to assess their standing in relation to the city's and the province's macro-context, following identity schemes that tie them to a micro-locality – understood as the quarter of origin or even only a part of it – and through this to specific groups.

These elements are clearly reflected in the social structure of *battenti* associations, whose cult affiliation is regulated by dynamics that lean almost entirely upon social networks active in the association's quarter of origin. The association is then placed at the centre of a much bigger relational web, making it easier for *battenti* to identify strongly with specific local groups of varied size. A strong bond can be ascertained between the association and these relational webs; in a way, the whole association may be considered as a part of the symbolic capital<sup>15</sup> of one or more familial or neighbourhood groups. The whole ritual system enacted by the *battenti* is consequent to a great symbolic and economic investment, carried out not only by this group, but also by more extended groups of local devotees, who support the association by making quite often substantial donations or by contributing to the purchase of banners and other objects used in the rituals.

Such premises make it clearer that in the *battenti*'s public rituals, and most of all in the *funzioni*, along with all the devotional aspects, there is a coexistence of multiple elements that symbolically refer to what Stefano De Matteis (2011, pp. 31-47) defines as group representation, both in the restricted sense of a *battenti* group enacting the ritual, and in the wider sense of devotee groups who refer to such scheming. Playful and aesthetic elements are fully present in the *funzione*'s ritual system to such an extent that the ritual develops like a show carrying a codified image of the *battenti* team and, through this, of all the groups addressed by the team. In this case, codified image means the incorporation of traits – which the actors deem coherent with a satisfying representation of the group's positive qualities – within the ritual's formal schemes. If the team's spatial positioning and role division codify social hierarchies and the group's value orientation,<sup>16</sup> then these

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<sup>15</sup> I use the concept of 'symbolic capital' after Pierre Bourdieu's (1974) definition.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. notes 10, 11.

elements constitute just a part of all the significant traits by which such coding takes place. Despite references to structures and forms of consolidated tradition, these elements – which, as we shall see, include musical practices related to the ritual in a significant way – are easily subject to variations, the result of reworking and complex aesthetic and symbolic choices. Therefore, the *funzione* is simultaneously a ritual practice and a creative and spectacular act, through which the group stages an articulated representation of its ability to act, of its cohesion and articulation and, finally, of its economic power (this last element becomes obvious when one considers the full range of related objects - banners, statues, or costumes); the markedly festive character that the ritual subsumes is thus not reputed to contradict penitential aspects marking the ritual cycle: according to several informants, the preparation of a good *funzione* and the introduction of innovative elements is both a sign of respect towards the devotee community participating in the ritual and also a sign of devotion which would be lacking without the appropriate care and attention.

For the *battenti*, the act of comparing their ritual activities to those of other associations acquires great relevance in such a context, especially if these associations are based in a neighbouring area or even in the same quarter, and also if they are very well known. The reciprocal attention that association members pay to each other can be traced back to social dynamics which are not exclusive to the devotional environment and involve larger groups to which the associations relate. Due to these characteristics, the *funzione* is a symbolic practice through which the association's identity is negotiated and strengthened. This is why the majority of *battenti* pay great attention to other associations' ritual activities, searching for news about them and attending their *funzioni* whenever possible. The actual enactment of the ritual occasionally makes it easier for such meetings to take place: over the last two decades the habit of reuniting various associations – in some cases more than ten – to celebrate a single association's event<sup>17</sup> or an important occurrence with a *funzione* in honour of the hosting association has progressively spread. On such instances, *funzioni* may last several hours and become particularly elaborate. The hosting association, which has the privilege of enacting the last and longest *funzione* of the day, often employs such occurrences to introduce variations and innovations to the ritual.

When I started to investigate YouTube use related to the uploading of clips documenting the *funzioni*, I quickly discovered that four of the five associations I worked with more regularly, had a small group of two or three *battenti* whose duty was to film and upload the proceedings. I then realised that other associations with which I had a more indirect relation consistently resorted to such a practice, and I could always find a clip of the *funzione* I had

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<sup>17</sup> There are many opportunities for the enactment of such celebrations. A few examples may include the anniversary of an association's foundation, or the inauguration of a new location or banner.

attended by simply searching for the association's name on the website. After becoming aware of the spread of this phenomenon, I realised that one of the most relevant outcomes to investigate would be whether a prevalent kind of usage for videos uploaded to the website actually exists. Specific questions about the composition of the videos' primary audience or about the people who were deemed likely to watch them allowed me to infer that local actors have a prevailing orientation:

- all informants, without exception, answered that the videos' primary audience is made up of members of the association who may want to watch the *funzione* again or watch it for the first time if they had been absent, as well as devotees from the local area and members of the brass band;
- about a third of the interviewees added *battenti* belonging to other associations and all the devotees from Madonna dell'Arco to the potential audience;
- none of the informants imagined any other possible audience categories – some of the people interviewed added that they were certain that nobody outside of Naples could have any interest in the videos, since the Madonna dell'Arco devotion is barely known or appreciated elsewhere.

The interviews clearly show an important element: the people whom the *battenti* believe to be interested in the videos coincide substantially with those who are usually involved – as performers or spectators – in public rituals: firstly, the *battenti* belonging to the association, the musicians, and their related devotional community and, secondly, other associations and their related communities. Moreover, the fact that the expected audience may be constituted of individuals with a prior knowledge not only of the cult of Madonna dell'Arco but also of details related to the associations' ritual activities can also be deduced by a glance at the titles of the videos: they do not necessarily contain references indicating a Madonna dell'Arco devotional ritual, but, rather, they almost invariably give information on the association's name, the place, and the occasion for the ritual's enactment.

From what has been said so far, it can be deduced that YouTube use has not yet led *battenti* to enlarge the community of their potential audience to include people outside of the groups perceived as being traditionally interested and involved: in short, although it cannot be fully established whether the imagined viewing may truly happen, the virtual community involved in the phenomenon coincides with the real community of Madonna dell'Arco devotees. Then, if we consider YouTube use as a new practice involving an existing local community already characterised by dense and stratified interaction, we should analyse online interaction, as I stated earlier, not as a detached system, but as something which is in relation to the preceding context and to dynamics delineated at the start of this paragraph. In the following pages, through the examples given by two specific ethnographic

cases I shall illustrate how the relationship between YouTube-mediated interactions and the other interaction dynamics that characterise the *battenti's* public rituals substantially configures a functional continuity, making YouTube use an extension of already enacted practices; at the same time, I shall highlight how certain long-term processes, which in the past led to relevant changes in the shape and structure of the ritual (and of all related musical phenomena), have been significantly accelerated and intensified thanks to the recent spread of YouTube. The *battenti's* ritual system is not homogenous, but rather, it is characterised by significant internal variability: the *funzione's* formal characters, the *battenti's* positioning and actions, the brass band members and the repertoire performed may partially differ from one area to another – even within Naples – or even from one association to another. This margin of variability can partly be ascribed to differences belonging to specific neighbourhoods. Nevertheless, such differences, some of which are the result of recent innovations, often derive from a process of selection and exaggeration of traits, which act as markers of strictly local identities that are the outcome of actors' choices. Moreover, such markers often do not refer to identities linked to a specific neighbourhood – that is to the whole quarter – but to single associations and their related groups of devotees. These dynamics, which in certain cases have clearly led to changes in the ritual's structure, at least over the last three decades, are the result of distinction strategies enacted by single associations as a consequence of continued reciprocal comparisons between them. The second consequence of interactions between different associations - which might seem to contradict the progressive differentiation among local variations of the ritual but actually complements it - is the increasing spread of innovations –initially tried out by just one neighbourhood or, even more often, by a single association – as a result of processes of mutual imitation. In short, the associations' continued reworking of ritual practices comes about through a double strategy which we may consider as marked by genuine competition, partly leading to the continuous increase of varying elements, and then to the progressive spread of innovations, deemed more effective by different associations until they become part of tradition.

One of the most relevant contemporary and rapidly spreading innovations among associations is the adoption in different forms of repertoires, stylistic traits, and changes to the components of the brass band, inspired by the *musica dei Gigli*. *Gigli* music as it is known in Naples, refers to the eponymous celebration – the oldest and most popular of which takes place yearly in Nola – where brass bands coordinate all the actions needed by the groups of people, known as *paranze*, who carry the imposing machines called *Gigli* on their shoulders. One of the reasons why these celebrations have enjoyed increasing popularity and vitality in the last few decades, and their spread to towns where they had not been practiced before, lies in the peculiar musical style which backs the transportation of the *Giglio*. During the celebration, brass bands,

among other things, offer what may be described as a *calembour* of extremely heterogeneous repertoire compositions sequenced together without breaks; dance tracks, jingles, and cartoon theme tunes are all played on this occasion, along with a marked tendency to employ different performance styles (pop elements and features coming from different sections of Afro-American music, including jazz) which the local actors define as *stile giglistico* (the Gigli style).<sup>18</sup>

*Gli Angeli* – better known as *Mezzafila* after the vice president's surname – is one of the most popular associations to have introduced elements, which can be traced back to *Gigli* music, into the *funzioni*. The association is located in the Pendino quarter, next to Piazza Mercato. Both the *capo battente* (*battente* leader) and the *capo tosello* (*tosello* leader),<sup>19</sup> who have been collaborating for more than three decades with the same brass band, confirm that they have gradually varied the ritual so as to make it different each year, progressively adding new 'choreographies' (their definition of choreutic modules) «to make their *funzione* ever nicer». With a team totalling over one hundred members, of whom about sixty are *portabandiera*, *Mezzafila* is renowned for indeed being one of the associations that enacts some of the most complex and articulated *funzioni* in Naples, as well as having a highly valued brass band. Over the last few years, the association's *battenti* have expanded the first section of the ritual, adding a completely new part which is quite different from the traditional structure described in the previous paragraph: before the first salute is performed, the whole association parades around the ritual ground, following schemes which vary each time, accompanied by a rather heterogeneous programme which the *maestro di banda* (bandleader) Stefano Salvatore<sup>20</sup>, who like the other musicians comes from Bruscianno, says he has also played at the local *festa dei Gigli*. This repertoire – which may include a march made up of the main themes from the *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie soundtrack, arrangements of jazz songs like Dizzy Gillespie's *A night in Tunisia* or compositions written especially for the *festa dei Gigli* often played with samba rhythms – is markedly different from the one that usually accompanies the first salute, which is generally a selection of slow religious hymns:<sup>21</sup> the faster beat and rhythmic patterns employed here allow the adoption of completely different choreutic modules and steps, so

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<sup>18</sup> For more information on the music of Gigli celebrations, and particularly that of Nola, see GIURATI 2007.

<sup>19</sup> These terms refer respectively to the person charged with coordinating and conducting the *battenti* during the *funzione* and to the person with the same role but only for the *battenti* carrying the *tosello* (see note 11). They usually plan all aspects of the ritual together, including the music, which is agreed beforehand with the band.

<sup>20</sup> *Battenti* give the informal title of *maestro di banda* to those who act as intermediaries between the association and the musicians, agreeing on the work assigned and guaranteeing its quality; thus, the title is not necessarily attributed to the most skilled musician or to the person who arranges the songs and coordinates the performance, although often these figures coincide.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. note 11.



that, according to the *capo battente*, the music «invigorates the *battenti*, especially those carrying the *tosello*,<sup>22</sup> and gives them more energy to continue their endeavours for hours».

Mezzafila is also one of those associations that upload videos to YouTube with the highest frequency and continuity: a search for *funzione Mezzafila* may return more than one hundred results, among which there are many, even recent ones, which have received more than 4,000 views. The *capo battente* and the *capo tosello* say that the choice of employing YouTube is due to the pressing requests coming from the neighbourhood's devotees – a neighbourhood where 'many love the association' – and also to the need to show everybody 'some of the most beautiful *funzioni* in Naples', which bestows fame and respect on the association. Indeed, when I browsed YouTube with *battenti* from other associations and asked them to show me instances of particularly complex *funzioni*, I realised that they often chose Mezzafila videos. Although my interlocutors did not necessarily accept that the Mezzafila's innovations were appropriate – indeed, they were often rejected and labelled as ways of turning the ritual into a 'show' deprived of its proper devotional traits – almost all of them admitted that many devotees certainly *did* find them fascinating, and that some associations were trying to imitate them after watching the videos on YouTube, which helps to increase the association's visibility thanks to their constant availability.

As a matter of fact, I realised that some of the *battenti* belonging to one of the five associations I worked with more frequently – the Maria Santissima dell'Arco association based in via Divisione Siena, in the Cavalleggeri d'Aosta area on the western outskirts of the city – employed videos available on YouTube to suggest new music for their musicians to play and to teach new choreutic modules to other *battenti*.<sup>23</sup> This was confirmed by a twenty-three year old *battente* involved in the organization of the *funzioni*:

«We already knew the Mezzafila association, we knew that they were doing great *funzioni* because we attended some...but, through their videos on the Internet, they have become very popular, especially among the young and generally in this quarter. That's why we've added new songs: we have to do something which the young people of this quarter will enjoy, to attract them to devotion, to the Madonna [...] We have seen many *funzioni* on YouTube and we've picked songs for the band to play; we showed the maestro some videos on a cell phone and [the musicians] were ready to play them on the next available occasion [...] It's easier with videos on YouTube, you just have to watch them and remember where things are, you show them to everybody, to the boys [the *battenti*] and to the musicians...some *tosello* steps can be

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. note 10.

<sup>23</sup> The *battenti* I interviewed showed me the following videos as an example of the ones they were referring to: *Mezzafila 2013 Somma Vesuviana Ottavario 1/5* (<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6iFmuaaF54I>>) and *Mezzafila 2013 Lunedì In Albis Sant'Eligio 1/3* (<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A861rtpQhZY>>).

performed only with those songs, like the *mezzopasso*,<sup>24</sup> and we need to show everybody how it is done»<sup>25</sup> (E.D., interview, 6 March, 2013, Naples).

In the case of the Mezzafila association, YouTube is recognised by the videos' creators and viewers as a medium that confers more effectiveness to interaction modalities with other associations and devotee communities:

- from the point of view of those making and uploading the videos, their large online presence is in itself an act that affirms their ritual activity and their relevance in the neighbourhoods' or the city's social landscape; indeed, it is no accident that many associations with a strong presence on YouTube are the ones who are already well known for the particular care they lend to ritual activities;<sup>26</sup>
- from the viewers' point of view, video viewing is mainly consequent to a previous knowledge of the associations and their *funzioni*; video viewing is as important as attending rites – at times it even becomes a partial substitute – and it essentially works as a helping aid in selecting and learning new features to incorporate into their practices.

To sum up, YouTube use is part of the interaction activity between associations and shows substantial continuity in the role that its actors assign to it (which is not surprising, considering how important public visibility is in the *battenti's* ritual activity); instead, the specificity of the medium plays a relevant role in widening and quickening the information flow, thereby accelerating the process of spreading innovation.

Although in the case of Mezzafila, such features have not produced significant consequences – since the innovations they have introduced have caused conflicting, rather than unifying reactions amongst the associations – in other cases such as those I shall discuss in the following pages, the spread of elements via YouTube, which is generally accepted in spite of its strongly innovative nature, may lead to their quick assimilation by a large part of the actors involved and result in sudden and wide changes in the ritual's form

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<sup>24</sup> The *mezzopasso* is a coordinated step employed during the transportation of the *Gigli*: the *mezzopasso's* peculiarity is the sudden alternation of short steps advancing and moving back, which ends the shoulder-carried machine with a particular gait, defined as 'rocking' or 'staggering'.

<sup>25</sup> «Noi, l'associazione Mezzafila la conoscevamo già, sapevamo che facevano delle belle funzioni perché ne abbiamo anche vista qualcuna... dato che ci sono i video su internet, però, adesso piace molto, soprattutto ai giovani, anche nel quartiere. È per questo che abbiamo messo queste nuove canzoni: perché noi dobbiamo fare una cosa che piace ai giovani del quartiere, per avvicinarli alla devozione, alla Madonna. [...] Abbiamo visto molte funzioni su YouTube e abbiamo scelto delle canzoni da far suonare alla banda; facevamo vedere i video al maestro col telefonino e quelli, la volta dopo, portavano la canzone. [...] Con i video su YouTube è più facile, perché tu ti vedi tutti i video e poi basta che ti ricordi dove stanno le cose, li fai vedere a tutti, ai ragazzi [i battenti] e ai musicisti ... ci sono dei passi che si possono fare col tosello solo con quelle canzoni, come il *mezzopasso* e bisogna far vedere a tutti come si fa».

<sup>26</sup> These are usually extremely large associations, which are very popular in their neighbourhood of residence and which have significant economic funds at their disposal: apart from the aforementioned Mezzafila, among these associations we find, for example, the Pescatori di Margellina association and the Maria Santissima dell'Arco association based in Seconda Traversa Mercato, Ercolano.

throughout the area where devotion is active. These are processes which, as we shall see, can be realised in as short a period as a year, and which, until recently, needed more than a decade to fully come into being.

In 2008, a *battente* from a widely known association, Pino Santoro, a former professional singer, wrote a song in the local pop *neomelodico* (neomelodic) style<sup>27</sup> as an *ex-voto* for favours received. In agreement with the president of this extremely popular association, based in the Seconda Traversa Mercato in Ercolano, he performed a song called *Sta passann' 'a Maronn'* during a *funzione*, in one of those moments usually destined for the performance of the *voce di questua*,<sup>28</sup> with the accompaniment of an instrumental MIDI backing played through the audio system. In the next few days, the association's *battenti* uploaded a video to YouTube where the song was played to a backdrop of pictures taken during the *funzione* along with other images related to the lyrics, in a textual chain akin to that of a video clip.<sup>29</sup> The video immediately got a very high number of views and the following year Santoro was called by many associations to perform the song at their *funzioni*, thus starting what would become a lucrative activity which keeps him busy in the pre-Easter period, when he often takes part in as many as eighty *funzioni*. Moreover, since 2009 at least ten other singers have been active on the scene. Some have been performing Santoro's compositions – who, in the meantime, has written six other songs – while others have been writing their own. Santoro's success has helped the massive spread of this phenomenon to such an extent that while I was carrying out my research (2012 and 2013) the most important events which I attended – the *funzioni* on Palm Sunday, Easter Day and Easter Monday – generally included the performance of a *neomelodico* singer. In short, in just two years, the *neomelodica* song became a 'functional equivalent' of the old *voci di questua*, occasionally replacing them altogether.

Some reasonable hypotheses may be formulated on the reasons for the quick inclusion of such an enormously innovative element in the ritual. Although it would be worth exploring them in detail, I shall briefly mention the most important here: if, purely on the musical side, no element of contact with other practices characterising the ritual can be discerned, we are obliged to turn to the process of symbol production which has allowed such practices to become part of the ritual system. To build his public image, Santoro has ably drawn from two different symbolic domains of reference: he is both a *battente* and a singer. As a *battente*, he wrote his first song as an explicit *ex-voto* and his lyrics feature precise references to the ritual and even stereotypi-

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<sup>27</sup> The *canzone neomelodica* is a local genre of heavily pop-oriented songs, which feature lyrics in the Neapolitan dialect. In Naples there are several hundreds of *Neomelodici* singers currently active, some of whom are very popular locally, while others have achieved national fame. An extensive ethnography on this topic was recently published by PINE (2012); cf. also AIELLO 1997 and RAVVEDUTO 2007.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. paragraph 2.

<sup>29</sup> The video, still available on YouTube, is entitled *Madonna dell'arco 2008 traversa mercato serenata alla Madonna* (<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xxePAzZmidY>>).

cal *voce* elements: these aspects guarantee that his performances belong to the ritual environment. As regards this, I should like to highlight how the functional equivalence between the *voce* and Santoro songs may essentially derive from their being an expression of devotion as well as an ex-voto. The fact that he is a *neomelodico* singer lends his persona the aura of the ‘artist’ (as he defines himself), which is his self-defined ability to interpret and express his and others’ emotions, an element which is particularly well-suited to a moment of the ritual when, as we have seen, there is much emphasis on empathic elements and individual and collective expression of emotions linked to devotion.

The specific role played by YouTube in the process of incorporating the new practice within the ritual system has to be found in some specific elements which have made such a process quicker and more pervasive; among these, we have to mention the specificity of ‘amateur videos-video clips’, whose effectiveness is rated very highly by many *battenti*. Here, the visual textual component acquires a particularly important role: although it is clearly of an *amateur* nature, it constitutes a medium favouring the mixing of different codes and expressional and symbolic systems. Suitably revised and appropriated by local actors, the technique of juxtaposing sequences of images to a song becomes a particularly effective medium through which the new musical practice can be integrated into the ritual, emphasising and, literally, illustrating the state of emotional participation which the song produces among the devotees, similar to what happens during the performance of the *voce*; by freely associating images that belong to a shared knowledge (of wars and disasters), it also highlights its inherent quality of a sung prayer. An operation such as this would not be possible in the absence of something like YouTube, a mainly horizontal medium that allows the easy sharing of audio-visual products realised with scant means which, despite the appropriation of expressive codes coming from Western popular culture, are then adapted to particular sensibilities and specific meaning landscapes. Perhaps even more relevant is the role of the consent indicator or, more simply, of feedback, which comes in the number of views and, most of all, by the rapid increase in videos documenting Santoro’s *funzioni* performances the following year; a particularly relevant element in a context in which reciprocal scrutiny among different groups is, as we have seen, very high.

### Conclusions

In this essay I have not tried to exhaustively describe processes happening in the examined ethnographic context as being consequent to YouTube spread: not only would such an attempt require a specific monograph, but it would also need many more years of dedicated research. Moreover, such processes are the result of changes in daily practices: they are thus still very recent and probably have yet to show long-term effects, so much so that the hypotheses and considerations extolled here may – at least partly – have to be reviewed

again in just a few years, to say nothing of the described phenomena, which are potentially subject to very quick changes. But, even with a temporary prospective, I believe that the phenomena encountered in my research and reported in this essay give us useful elements to discuss the numerous qualities which are presented by this case. The progressive and massive spread of new instruments for the communication and sharing of complex texts, such as YouTube and other important interactive hypermedia currently available on the Internet, will certainly determine relevant outcomes for diverse ethnographic contexts; nevertheless, if we formulated such an assumption in generic terms it would possibly become banal and content-free. YouTube interaction cannot be described as a phenomenon with unitary features that causes foreseeable consequences easily reproduced in different contexts: despite the strong innovative features they offer, instruments like YouTube are also extremely flexible and adaptable to information streams, which are partially or totally traceable to pre-existing social webs: they are structuring instruments, but in turn they are also structured by a usage logic that derives from diverse context specificities. In the case under scrutiny, cult-related YouTube use mainly involves those who already belong to the devotee communities, which determines a tight relation between the spread of information via YouTube and pre-existing interaction dynamics among different associations, which materialises in substantial functional continuity between the former and the latter. The rituals' self-representative function and the groups' differentiation-imitation strategies strongly condition cult-related YouTube use, which in turn intensifies and quickens processes of mutation and innovations of the rituals and their related musical practices and results in the unexpected strengthening of long-term processes. Therefore discontinuity is not to be sought in the breaking of the dynamics characterising such phenomena in the past, but in their exponential intensification, as clearly emerges in the two cases I have analysed in detail. The strong specificities found in the context of the Madonna dell'Arco devotion should not lead us to consider the latter as an extreme case: on the contrary, they suggest how the spread of instruments such as YouTube may exalt and amplify the strictly local dynamics inherent to the production and consumption of music, and in certain cases make it ever clear and understandable to scholars.

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