

YouTube, migrant rappers and the Early Cinema aesthetics: is there a digital public sphere?

Giacomo Nencioni

Introduction

This chapter will focus on the possibility of existence of a digital public sphere in a specific and very popular environment like YouTube, which we can describe now, after ten years from its birth, as a mainstream online video platform for grassroots contents. The argument will first enlighten the analogies between the online video aesthetics and the early cinema, then will follow Miriam Hansen's suggestion (Hansen, 1991) about the role of early cinema in creating a public sphere for migrant groups in America in the early 20th Century, as well as Negt and Kluge's theory about a 'proletarian public sphere' (Negt and Kluge, 1993) made possible by the consumption of cinema. In light of the parallelism between these two phases of media history, the chapter will try to verify the conditions for a digital public sphere using YouTube and its dynamics as an observatory. In order to do this, the chapter will show four case histories about migrant rappers in Italy who became famous through the typical YouTube celebrity system, finding a place to represent themselves as digital natives as well as migrant citizens in Italy.

YouTube was created in 2005, and in its early days was conceived mainly as a repository website: if we look at the "About Us" section of the site in 2005 we can find a vague description of its possible functions:

YouTube is a way to get your videos to the people who matter to you.
With YouTube you can:

Show off your favorite videos to the world.

Take videos of your dogs, cats and other pets.

Blog the videos you take with your digital camera or cell phone.

Securely and privately show videos to your friends and family around the world.

...and much, much more! (Archive.org, 2015).

The private and the public dimension were, as we can see, both included in the identity of the early YouTube. The "Broadcast Yourself" claim was yet to come. What happened then? Why the identity of YouTube shifted into a public, mainstream media dimension with the specific use of the term "Broadcast"?

Burgess and Green, in *YouTube* (2009), ascribe that to a Saturday Night Live skit, *Lazy Sunday*, a song written by the comedy group *The Lonely Island* and performed by comedians Andy Samberg and Chris Parnell adopting the personas of two hardcore rappers: the skit was posted by a fan on YouTube and in the first ten days the video collected one million and two hundred views, carrying on YouTube the attention of the media, partly because of the subsequent threat of legal action by the NBC, broadcaster of the program, who asked for the cancellation of the video. This episode showed the platform's potential of viral circulation, and tells us about the important role of television contents, which on streaming sites are fragmented, posted, shared, largely by a digital natives audience, the same audience that contemporary television often tries to engage with no results: they do not watch tv in a traditional way, but enjoy television contents on different platforms and in different forms. Synthetizing, YouTube, the main platform for User's Generated Contents consumption, paradoxically started gaining its popularity and its status of grassroots culture realm thanks to a mainstream television content.

Another reason for the fast growth of YouTube has been, according to one of its founders, Steve Chen, the right choice of technological tools. In an interview quoted by Lawrence Lessig in *Remix*, Chen states: 'The sort of initial acceleration for our growth came from the technology. We did some things right— namely, choosing Flash video as a delivery platform so you didn't have to download anything. The video just plays in the browser'. (Lessig, 2008: 194). In Steve Chen's statement we spot the will of conceiving a platform that everyone could easily use, even 'a grandmother in the Midwest' (ibid.). Besides, as a key element in the rise of YouTube, we can not forget all the social networking tools that empowered users and their practices: we can create a profile, or 'channel' (another term borrowed from television) which users can subscribe to; we can favorite videos from other users channels, comment or share them, and even reply to a content with video made for the purpose.

The identity itself of YouTube has been designed by all these instruments: born with a vague function of a digital archive, it's turned into a means of personal expression, becoming what even its founders did not imagine. This transition has been the result of the endless work of the users with their everyday practice and social uses of the site. As Bolter and Grusin argue in their *Remediation* (Bolter and Grusin, 2000), every time a new media appears it has to build his identity and impose itself through a negotiation with the preexisting media; They remind us how obsolete can be a distinction between old and new communication technologies, because different technological environment are subjected to an endless mediamorphosis process. Understanding a new media has always been difficult, even more with the transformations that marked the 20th Century and its final phase, but the book offers a flexible and dialectical interpretation tool –

the “remediation” notion – that helps us getting through the usual problems in arranging stable theories for elusive objects like digital convergence processes.

Marshall McLuhan (1964) had already understood that the content of a media is always another media, just like written words for the press, or the press for the telegraph: Bolter and Grusin started from this idea to describe the birth of the personal computer era, stating that a new media never deletes the existing ones, but tends to incorporate them, like personal computers did with painting, photography and press, giving them a new environment, a new digital life. This exchanges tell us that in order to understand a new media and define its identity we cannot ignore its relationship with the previous ones, trying to identify which are the new features and which are the results of a remediation process.

In the following pages we will try to investigate the elements of a possible YouTube “public sphere” defining its specific hallmarks in relation to “old” media.

Vaudeville 2.0

In a 2006 article Henry Jenkins posted on his blog (Jenkins, 2006b), he suggests that YouTube could represent for the beginning of the Twenty-first Century what vaudeville theatre was for the beginning of the Twentieth Century. He observes that the American popular theatre, in fact, was eclectic and consisted in a series of performances that could range from a Shakespearean monologue to a comic skit, from opera excerpts to animals playing musical instruments (Jenkins, 1992). As well as on YouTube, all these moments were presented without any hierarchy of importance. In addition, the performances were less than twenty minutes long, and focused on short and emotional impact. The same emotional impact that can make a video become viral today: the more extreme, shocking and acrobatic is the show, the higher the possibility that it can be shared by users.

As Kevin Allocca, YouTube trend manager, has showed in a popular TED talk, *Why Videos Go Viral* (Ted.com, 2011), three are the elements that guarantee the popularity on YouTube: tastemakers like popular bloggers or Tv personalities which can give the content a boost of hype inside and outside the web; the participation of a community in terms of discourses around the content, remixes, sharing and parodies, and finally unexpectedness: something that surprises us, a freakish feature that wasn't meant to be, something that makes us spot the video in the vast sea of contents represented by YouTube.

The YouTube celebrities phenomena have a close relationship with these dynamics: Youtube celebrities are users who, for accidental or calculated reasons, gained millions of views with their videos in the first year from the birth

of the site becoming true celebrities, at first online, then on mainstream media (from which they also have all quickly disappeared). The key of their ephemeral popularity? The deviation from the norm, the excess, the bizarre, the fact that in their videos we can find something so original, or so bad, to bring other users not only to watch them, but to comment, often with insults, and share them on other social networks sparking a viral diffusion. Everyone of them has enjoyed a moment of true celebrity, being hit off by comedians, starring in a tv commercial or becoming a character in a South Park series episode: YouTube Celebrities became so popular in collective imagination that they became the subject of a *South Park's* 'Canada On Strike' episode (2008) and also starred in Weezer's *Pork and Beans* videoclip, directed by Matthew Cullen.

One of the most popular and long-running among this characters is Chris Crocker, real name Christopher Darren Cunningham, who created with one of his video, *Leave Britney Alone* (2007), a very popular catchphrase. He appeared in tears in front of the camera, wrapped in a blanket, with too much eyeliner, while imploring the media to stop talking about Britney Spears, his pop idol. He claimed that she was a victim of a smear campaign about her lousy 2007 MTV Awards music performance that, in Chris' opinion, was damaging her image and health. This androgynous american teenager crying and desperately screaming collected millions of views (often with harsh and scornful comments) gaining the attention from mainstream media, with parodies and tv programs guest appearances, that Crocker has been able to capitalize even trying a career as a singer.

The story of the first YouTube viral videos is marked by other popular cases like Tay Zonday, real name Adam Bahner, a University of Minnesota student. Tay, amateur singer-songwriter, posted a videoclip of his song *Chocolate Rain* (Zonday, 2007): he is framed in front of a recording studio microphone playing a keyboard with a neutral and poor amber background. On and off we see Tay moving awkwardly from the microphone while singing: in those moments a superimposed writing appears saying 'I move away from the mic to breath'. The lyrics talk about racism, but the main thing is the unbearable and yet hypnotic repetitiveness of the song, based on a keyboard riff that never changes, and just like the words is repeated continuously for five minutes. Tay's voice is very low, and clashes with the image of a teenager that we see in the video. All these ingredients and the funny naivety of Tay, who informs us very seriously about the reason why he is 'moving away from the mic' made the video the perfect target for users' irony but also a good candidate to become a viral content.

Chocolate Rain did not take over immediately, but after several months, and not on YouTube, but thanks to 4chan.org, an anime and manga-oriented imageboard known for the creation of popular memes like *Rickrolling* or *Pedobear*: the 4chan

goliardic community, always in search for a new meme to launch as a viral, saw in Tay Zonday's performance its next big thing: the boost given by 4chan granted him a good placement on YouTube ranking, and in a year he gained 20 million views, which now have become more than 80 million. Zonday started to appear as a guest in talk shows with his song and became a mainstream attraction, also starring in a parody of its video for a Dr Pepper tv commercial in which he appeared dressed as a hip hop celebrity, surrounded by half-naked dancers and singing *Cherry Chocolate Rain* (Zonday, 2007), an alternate version of the song based on the new taste of the beverage.

As usual, this video took a different path from his author or supporters expectation, and ended up being victim of parodies, mashups, remixed with memes or samples from pop culture memes, like in *Chocolate Rain by Chad Vader* (Blame Society, 2007), spin off video of *Chad Vader, Dayshift Manager*, an american low budget web series by Blame Society Productions which parodies the movie *Star Wars*. Here the song is sung by Chad Vader, the ordinary and less talented brother of the *Star Wars* villain Darth Vader who works for a supermarket., or the video *Vanilla Snow* (Peppergod, 2007), where the race issues of the lyrics are written from white people point of view:

As this example shows, there is much more going on in viral video than 'information' about a video being communicated throughout a population. Successful 'viral' videos have textual 'hooks' or key signifiers, which cannot be identified in advance (even, or especially, by their authors) but only after the fact, when they have been become prominent via being selected a number of times for repetition. After becoming recognisable via this process of repetition, these key signifiers are then available for 'plugging into' other forms, texts and intertexts, they become part of the available cultural repertoire of vernacular video. Because they produce new possibilities, even apparently pointless, nihilistic and playful forms of creativity are contributions to knowledge. This is true even if (as in the case of the 'Chocolate Rain' example) they work mostly to make a joke out of someone.

(Burgess, 2008: 105)

The world of YouTube celebrities is not limited to Chris Crocker and Tay Zonday and includes characters like 'Tron Guy', aka Jay Maynard, a middle age programmer which became famous when he started posting on his website pictures and videos (Tron Guy, 2006) of his home-made *Tron* movie inspired costume; 'Afro Ninja', aka Mark Hicks, a stuntman and martial artists that failed miserably an audition for a Nike commercial slipping and falling flat on his face

and had the video of his performance posted on YouTube (Ebaumsworld, 2006); the 'Numa Numa guy', aka Gary Brolsma, a teenager that posted a video in which he danced and sang the song 'Dragostea Din Tei' by O-zone sitting in front of his webcam, becoming one of the most viewed contents of all times (Brolsma, 2006) and many others. What these web celebrities of the early YouTube years have in common is that their popularity is based on the cooperation of the three elements above mentioned: a legitimacy from mainstream media and trendsetters, the intervention of strong participatory communities and unexpectedness.

The return of the attractions

If unexpectedness represent a bond between vaudeville theatre and online video dynamics, as Jenkins says (2006b), it is also a background that this two share with early cinema. We have to go back to the FIAF Brighton conference of 1978 'Cinema 1900-1906', where for the first time film scholars had the chance to see in a movie theatre a wide overview of the film production of the first ten years of cinema: the conference stated that early cinema was closer to vaudeville and fairs more than to the so-called institutional mode of representation that marked the development of narrative cinema after 1910 (Burch, 1990; Burch, 1991) and had a strong accent on visual elements more than to narration. We can call it, according to Tom Gunning (Gunning, 1990) and André Gaudreault (Gaudreault, 2008), a cinema of attractions, with his will to shock the audience with something unseen, bizarre, or unexpected.

Gunning and Gaudreault tried to reread Eisenstein (Eisenstein, 1988) in order to restore the utopic and revolutionary dimension of cinema, focusing on the role of the spectator. Eisenstein, observing the way popular entertainments like fairs and circuses held the spectators' attention, defined 'attraction' any aggressive aspect of theatre; that is, any element of it which subjects the spectator to a sensual or psychological impact. 'Attraction' is the same word, not coincidentally, that is used to designate the acts of a sideshow, vaudeville, or a circus (Eisenstein, 1988). Gunning and Gaudreault moved this notion from the theatrical context to his relationship with the cinema audience, focusing on its exhibitionist nature and its distance from narration. The attraction is intended as an aggressive moment that addresses the audience causing a sensorial or psychological effect: not a simple trick or acrobatics, but something which is deeply connected to the audience's reaction.

Gunning in particular is interested in the context from which the notion comes, that is the enthusiasm for the emerging mass culture at the beginning of the century, that offered new and unseen excitement to an audience who was not familiar with traditional arts (Gunning, 1990). Benjamin also put the shocking

experience of cinema in connection with the early 20th Century metropolis, which is the birthplace of the cinematic experience: the relationship between early cinema and spectator grew in this environment made of the rising mass society's public spaces, shop windows, theme parks, panoramas, billboards, vaudeville theatre based on sequences of short numbers: dime museums and penny arcade supplied a place for the first film projections but also a specific format, the 'variety format'.

The variety format was a a twenty minutes long random sequence of short films, characterized by a stress on multiplicity of styles and performances. It was a different way of conceiving art consumption: not a focus on a single event but a continuous sensorial excitement, a mobilization of the spectator's attention with a series of attraction, shocks, surprises (Allen, 1980; McNamara, 1974). We have to consider that at the end of the Nineteenth Century, when Edison and his assistant Dickson had completed the Kinetoscope, the first modern device for animated photography, and they had to plan the contents for the projection, they engaged singers, dancers, acrobats, paying attention to the popular tastes. They signed with Sandow, 'the strongest man in the world', the Glenroy Brothers, boxers, the belly dancer Madame Ruth, jugglers, trapeze artists, exotic performers, trained animals like boxing cats or dancing bears. The early cinema audience, in fact, knew the screen as a form of entertainment related to magic lanterns or certain forms of theatrical performances: before the rise of collective consumption of cinema in the nickelodeon (in 1906), cinema gathered organized audiences borrowing the forms of consumption from the existing popular entertainment habits (Uricchio and Pearson, 1994).

The scholars that since the Eighties had the chance to see the early cinema material, thanks to restoration programs, understood that cinema, in his first fifteen years, was not a matter in search for identity, preparing for becoming the medium with a strong accent on stories and narrative structure that we know: they understood that early cinema was instead a peculiar and autonomous mode of representation that deserves to be investigated as such. This peculiarity lies in the ability to show instead of narrate, to solicitate the spectator offering a unique performance, to directly address and engage the audience, in a strong relationship with entertainment formats like variety, vaudeville, café chantants: this ability reveals itself in the exhibition of the new features of the device, like the slow motion, the multiple exposition and the close-up, as in a movie like *Grandma's Reading Glass* (1900) The attraction, here, is cinema itself and its technological wonders. The relationship with the traditional entertainment formats is evident in the prevalent frontal and horizontal position of the camera, in the independence of the single scenes, in the use of the actor's direct gaze in the camera (Carluccio, 1999) as in movies like *The Great Train Robbery* (1903).

So, according to what came out from the Brighton conference, cinema in its early years was part of a context which included parks, exhibitions, panoramas, fairs. Films were shown in this kind of context and followed the *variety format*: as Broeren points out, today YouTube, and online video in general, shows similarities to the early cinema, with his short length modular units, strong accent on voyeurism, actor (or user) centered performances influenced by the vaudeville aesthetics (Broeren, 2009). But these may not be the only analogies between Early Cinema and digital media if we try to go deeper and focus on their respective consumption contexts. In particular we can refer to Miriam Hansen studies on silent movies, that connected the role of the film spectator with the transformation of the American society and the public sphere at the beginning of the twentieth century (Hansen, 1991; Hansen, 1993)

Alternative spheres

According to Miriam Hansen, cinema has been, at the beginning of the century, in the United States, a place in which women and migrant groups found representations of their identity: in *Babel and Babylon* (1991), she argues that the birth of the film spectator is deeply bound with the transformation of the public sphere. We will follow her invitation to look at the changes brought by the advent of electronic media, accepting the challenge to find which could be the elements of a 'digital' public sphere. Habermas saw in the transformation of the public sphere, at the emergence of a cultural industry, the annihilation of the gap between public discourse and private economic interests which defined the bourgeois readers's audience: in the advanced capitalism, cultural products are designed for mass consumption, they are not 'also' goods, but 'just' goods. (Habermas, 1989)

According to Habermas:

Under the pressure of the 'Don't talk back!' the conduct of the public assumes a different form. In comparison with printed communication the programs sent by the new media curtail the reactions of their recipients in a peculiar way. They draw the eyes and ears of the public under their spell but at the same time, by taking away its distance, place it under 'tutelage', which is to say they deprive it of the opportunity to say something and to disagree. The critical discussion of a reading public tends to give way to 'exchanges about tastes and preferences between consumers'.

(ibid: 170-171)

Habermas criticize mass journalism, but above all radio, cinema and television, because he believes that mass media reduce the distance that we need to develop a debate, altering the spectator's behaviour under the 'don't talk back' commandment compulsion. He states, in short, that the world produced by mass media is only apparently public, and that the private sphere that they grant is an illusion that 'becomes the sphere for the publicizing of private biographies, so that the accidental fate of the so-called in the street or that of systematically managed stars attain publicity' (ibid:171).

Some important features of the public sphere, such as the intimate and familiar dimension or the correspondence, are replaced, according to Habermas, by media displaying themselves as authorities in knowing how to live, as recipients of problems and private issues, creating an environment in which intimacy related to the public gives way to a reification related to intimacy. Today, in the digital era, it seems that these cultural industries' structures putting themselves up as problem solvers coexist with, and maybe will be replaced by, strong participation communities. These communities belong to the definition of 'interest community' (Lee and Newby, 1983; Wilmott, 1989), where people share, more than a physical place, a range of tastes and interests. Besides, people tend to discuss and solve problems within the community, and this happens especially between digital natives, who tend recognize only their peers as authoritative (Bauerlein, 2009: 136).

Ten years after Habermas, Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge (Negt and Kluge, 1993) questioned his idea of public sphere because it excluded every non-bourgeois phenomenon, introducing two other types of public sphere: the so-called 'production public spheres', related to industrial contexts, and a 'proletarian public sphere', related to an antagonistic vision and to the theory of experience inherited from Adorno (Adorno, Horkheimer, 1972; Adorno, 1981), Kracauer (1997) and Benjamin (Hansen, 2012; Benjamin,1999). It's from this notion of a proletarian public sphere that Miriam Hansen tries to retrace the path that turn early cinema, enjoyed in a social, collective, interactive dimension (as in sing-alongs) in an institutionalized, homogenized cinema, defined by bourgeois standards of respectability and 'silence discipline' or held emotions. Moreover, she underlines the importance of identifying the features of a possible 'digital sphere' in the contemporary era. We will follow her invitation, trying to interpret the spectator's forms of participation in the digital environment, focusing on the current fragmented, individual consumption of contents.

In the digital era, users are engaged in heavier forms of intervention that partly break the usual broadcasting one-directional transmission dynamics which Habermas criticized: the similarities between the Nineteenth-Century entertainment formats and the new ones on social networks give us the opportunity to investigate what could be seen as the public sphere designed by digital media. Social networks like YouTube are mostly enjoyed in private but at the same time they incorporate the chance to reply and build a discourse; they include both globally developed and complex vernacular forms of entertainment (Jenkins, 2006a) in which the notion of bourgeois respectability is often questioned by popular and immediate forms of appreciation, or harsh critics, as it happens with comments or parodies. These elements may suggest a comeback of that social, active dimension of consumption we saw in early cinema audiences, before the institutionalization of cinema.

In the vast amount of YouTube materials, among pets videos, cult movies, amateur scenes, vlogs or videoblogs deserve attention because, vlogs are a fertile example of this dimension: they represent spontaneous, direct form of conversation, they address the spectator activating the participatory features of YouTube, highlighting the gap with the television language, perceived by users as imposed and not reliable. In this audiovisual diaries we see mainly, even if not only, teenager talking about their everyday life, giving beauty and makeup advices, reviewing books, movies, beauty products: the set is quite the same in every country, with a shot of a bed, a wardrobe, a poster on the wall showing some music or movie star, and the vloggers are often shot with an angle imposed by the position of the webcam. The most interesting examples are among the teenage girls vlogs, where we find specific genres and codes, generated by reply and emulation processes, with the most popular girls involved in a proper star system.

One of the most relevant genres is certainly the 'Makeup Tutorial', where the vloggers, especially young girls perform makeup lessons, generally ten minutes long, made for their peers, suggesting the right makeup for special occasions like Halloween or New Year's Eve, or replying to specific requests made by subscribers, but the main deal is the fact that the vloggers do not have necessarily to prove their expertise: many of the girls, in fact, declare the amateur nature of their tutorials, made for a peer-to peer relationship, valuable because generated inside the community. It's a global version of a know-how exchange that we could see in any teenager bedroom, between a group of friends. The same thing happen with the 'What's in my purse' genre: in this case the plot consists in opening the purse in front of the camera and pulling out, one by one, all the objects from inside: shopping cards, wallets, a letter from a boyfriend, the new smartphone or camera model are the screenplay for a short lenght biopic movie; vloggers want to share a representation of their daily life

through the story behind a shopping good or a photo found by chance in the purse. There's a long list that includes the 'Haul', where the purpose is showing the results of a shopping evening, or the 'Giveaway', sort of a contest with makeup products as a prize: the winner is the subscriber who upload the best makeup video with a specific theme. The judge is, of course, the vlogger herself. Just a few, not exhaustive examples of a universe where the life on the network design a bedroom culture, an aesthetic of confession that wasn't certainly born with YouTube, but found in YouTube a perfect place to develop.

The first tv candid cameras, the earliest experiments with reality shows like *An American Family*, (1973), the Jennicam, a popular lifecast experience that in 1996 showed through a webcam, 24/24, the life of a college student, Jennifer Ringley (Jimroglou, 1999): these and other similar cases have contributed in the birth of the so-called reality television which dominated tv formats since the late Nineties. The story of *Lonelygirl15* can be a significant example of the bond between reality television and the birth of a YouTube aesthetic: between July and September 2006, the U.S.A. news started talking about Bree, a teenage blogger who opened a YouTube channel with the pseudonym of *Lonelygirl15*: amongst others, one of her videos, in which she talked about her difficult relationship with her strictly religious parents, collected 2,5 million views in two days. Hence, her vlogs gave her a sudden popularity, but some users soon discovered that the vlog was an experiment of two independent producers, Mesh Flinders and Miles Beckett, who wanted to test in a fictional content the potential of new digital languages. Paradoxically, the success of the fake vlog contributed in legitimating video-blogging as a genre, and brought the actress who played Bree, Jessica Lee Rose, a role in ABC's series *Greek* (Salvato, 2009).

Vlogs, and especially the ones made by girls, like makeup tutorials, the 'Haul' or the 'What's in my purse' formats are good examples for another reason: their bond to marketing dynamics, as showed by the interest of cosmetic companies in sponsoring the most popular make up vloggers. This reminds us about the role of the market in the erosion of sexual separation between public and private spheres, as Hansen argues, with the rise of a consumer culture that began to blur the hierarchy of male and female spheres. Hansen observes that consumer culture, for its industrial nature, invented a notion of public different from the traditional one, with a more direct stress on consumer experience, pragmatic needs, desires, fantasies. Consumer culture media addressed aspects of the women experience that never had before any public dimension, creating an intersubjective environment for the expression of that experience.

Besides, we can still find certain residual forms of aura around this web phenomena (Hansen, 2008): if Benjamin saw cinema as an accelerator of the extinction of the aura, Kluge considered it an exaggerate statement, saying that cinema still preserve forms of auratic experience. The same thing we can tell

about YouTube, or about the digital environment in general, that include a peculiar star system within communities, with their own web celebrities. YouTube, close to the nature of the phonograph and the peep show, combines the domestic feature of music consumption and some elements of contemporary television and cultural industry with a higher, even if partially developed, chance to reply or debate in a virtual space.

Digital media reconfigure the role of the individual offering more opportunities of intervention and feedback; the private dimension merges with the public one more than has happened with television or with the postmodern spectator's participation around cult movies. Social networks like YouTube configure the typical peep show nature on a global scale. They mix the habit of a private, 'bedroom' consumption with forms of representation created by webcam culture, tv, videoclip, popular theatre and early cinema. Moreover, they develop globalized codes, getting over language boundaries more than what the standardisation of format television did. Summarising, social networks like YouTube are enjoyed in private, but embody the chance to reply, getting over the perplexity of Habermas on mass media ('don't talk back'). They represent forms of entertainment which are at the same time global and vernacular, open to popular expression and harsh critic, configuring a comeback of the social, physical dimension that existed before insitutionalized cinema.

The idea is that if vaudeville and early cinema were able, as Hansen argues, to stage cultural differences which also shaped the immigrant experience in the United States, the same can do YouTube, as a product of globalization showing spanish teenager dancing korean disco hits or chinese and american girls recording makeup tutorials using the same language and conventions. The point is: if there are similarities between the early cinema aesthetics and YouTube, is it possibile that the latter could participate in the trasformation of the public sphere like early cinema did at the beginning of the century? Can we spot in it a certain form of 'proletarian sphere' based on experience as the one described by Negt and Kluge?

YouTube Celebrities

One of the main factors that define YouTube dynamics is the construction of fame, the popularity of videos produced by users: it is a complex process, that involves parameters of evaluation like number of views, comments, or viral replications on other networks, and as we know, frequently popularity is achieved by showing something which users can make fun of (Burgess and Green, 2009). But can YouTube be a proper environment to build a digital public sphere? What we can tell from the following case histories is that at least it offers

a space of self-representation, as long as the contents meet the specific rules of the YouTube aesthetic: a kind of deviation from the average and the ability of someone to gain a form of celebrity especially being teased.

I'm going to focus on four Italian cases, four do-it-yourself rappers who posted their videos on youtube, creating the so-called LOLrap phenomenon, a subgenre made by amateur rap wannabes that most of the time collect fans and popularity just because they're incapable, or teased by the audience.: Spitty Cash, Trucebaldazzi, Lil Angels, Mc Fred Vinile: the reason of this focus is the popularity they gained in and out the web in Italy and the fact that the four of them, among the most popular in their category, are not born in Italy: they are first or second generation migrant, and found on the web a legitimization that they did not find on italian mainstream media.

It all began with Spitty Cash, a young rumenian migrant who posted in 2007 a song called *Difficoltà nel GghGhetto*, "issues in the ghetto", trying to imitate american as well as italian gangsta rappers. The videoclip, poorly shot with an amateur camera, showed Spitty Cash and a friend showing off rapper poses and cheap fake gold chain, counting euros in coins instead of dollars banknotes and trying to act like a street gangster in spite of his clear young age. The lyrics were written and pronounced in a terrible italian and close to nonsense (*When I look around/I see poor children/And not only*). For all this reason users started mocking him and making parodies of his video, making it reach 900.000 views. The circulation of the video through the social network made the rest, generating a huge phenomenon. Spitty Cash has deleted his channel, but the video is still online thanks to fans who keep uploading it (Spitty Cash, 2012).

This success was followed by Trucebaldazzi, born in Sri-Lanka, with a song in which he ranted about his second grade school and proclaimed he wanted to kill his teacher, that reached more than 4 millions views in 2010. The song was called *Vendetta Vera*, 'true revenge', (Trucebaldazzi, 2010), and Trucebaldazzi appeared as an obese, goofy teenager with a white t-shirt and a gold chain, totally unable to rap. The video is shot in black and white in front of his school, where he throws at the end of the clip a bag which is intended to be full of explosives. The song talks about the frustration of a teenager who wants to be accepted and understood, the problems he had in school and the chorus keeps repeating *True Revenge/I won't go to jail/Free Trucebaldazzi*, with a paradoxical mix between a rant about a small town second grade school and the lexicon of a political prisoner. A mix that granted parodies, insults, but also the status of YouTube celebrity for this migrant teenager who never gave up and still keeps posting songs as well as vlogs in which he argues with users and threatens to sue them for defamation.

The third case is the viral popularity of Lil Angels, an african born teenager grown in North-east Italy, who made in 2011 a video that's reminiscent of the gangsta imagery like the others, with his teenager friends posing in a public swimming pool like rap stars. The song is called *Estate*, 'summer' (Lil Angels, 2011) and vaguely talks about the expectation for summer fun, among pools and clubs. The video is shot in a best quality compared to the above mentioned, with a digital reflex camera: in the video we see Lil Angels rapping in various settings like a city park, a beach club, a basketball court with his friends. The lyrics are quite obscure (*Sexy baby/sexy mommy/they will hang out with/they will hang out with*), and Lil Angels shows a complete inability to fit the rhymes and a weird, nasal voice. He actually talks instead of rapping, and his rapping mates, Gioker and Ben J, are, if possible, worst than him. The incongruity between the cultural models of the video and the lousy result got him more than 4 millions views, and a brief interest of mainstream radios, in addition to many spoofs of the clip. Lil Angels' production went on in these last three years on his YouTube channel, *lilangelsmusic*, where he tried to capitalize the unexpected success of *Estate* recording new songs, with no significant improvement in his rapping ability.

The last example is McFred Vinile, born in Brasil, who dedicated a rap/r&b song to his adoptive city, Modena, entitled *Sono in Giro per Modena* (Mc Fred Vinile 2011), literally, *I'm Hanging Out in Modena*. He did not score an enormous number of views like the others (200.000 views) but gained at the time a brief attention on the web, local and national tv and newspapers thanks to his unusual tribute to the city. The shooting quality is definitely terrible, and shows McFred Vinile awkwardly dancing in front of a Second World War monument, singing in his bedroom, and finally sitting on a motorbike. The lyrics are quite hilarious (he actually repeats endlessly *I'm hanging out in Modena* and talks about city's streets and monuments), and differently from the other LOLrappers he also tries to sing, with no remarkable results: his poor singing performance and the bad italian pronounce, the settings of the video and his weird capoeira-inspired dance turned this tribute to Italy in a very funny clip. None of his following videos gain the same attention but he keeps trying on his YouTube channel *Mc Fred*, where he posted also song in brasilian language with the same R&B taste. These rappers became famous because they are, simply, bad at doing it, and their video are classified as trash, following the typical dynamics of YouTube celebrities cases like Tay Zonday or Chris Crocker. Their videoclips show a curious mix of american gangsta rap imagery and the will of impose themselves as migrant rappers in Italy with their stories, and represent a fruitful point of observation to understand a particular way to build a shared identity through digital media. The 'biggest and smallest stage in the world' (Wesch, 2009: 22) gave them the chance to engage users in the game of mocking and parody that guarantees the existence on the web. They used this new vernacular regime built by social networks and granted themselves a life, even though a virtual one, an

identity that has more to do with the digital environment than with a national identity.

It seems, in conclusion, that they consider themselves digital natives before European migrants, and that these two elements are very closely related. Without speaking the right language they could not have represented themselves in the digital sphere. YouTube stardom seems to get over the national identity issue to create a supranational identity that responds to the dynamics and the logic of this new environment. It's the experience of mocking and being mocked that defines this process and the legitimation of these people on the web.

If YouTube is the realm of unexpectedness, a large scale freakshow based on the audience's emotional shock like vaudeville and early cinema, we can also say that it is based on a notion of experience far from the one provided by the traditional cultural industry: it's not unidirectional but open to the users' feedback. And thanks to the users' feedback such as comments, video response and sharing, the viral process of popularity is generated, creating a digital stardom all within the world of UGCs: for the user, to participate in the creation of this process with his feedback is part of the entertainment experience. It seems to be a form of that proletarian public sphere based on the experience which Negt and Kluge described, without any antagonistic element. Instead, beside the vernacular nature, we have the existence of a stardom and a fandom, just like the ones of traditional cultural industry, yet based on grassroots contents and users' choices and tastes.

YouTube appears as an environment with a specific type of public sphere based on a balance between Nineteenth-Century forms of entertainment and Twentieth-Century's cultural industry features: a place in transformation, probably still in search for a stable identity and legitimation in the mediasphere, a significant example of the remediation phase media are going through from the advent of personal computer, and above all the birthplace of a new, hybrid kind of public sphere that we have to interpret and relate to.

References

- Adorno, T., Horkheimer M., (1972) *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, London: Verso.
- Adorno, T., (1981) 'Transparencies on Film', *New German Critique*, No. 24/25, Special Double Issue on New German Cinema, pp. 186-198.
- Allen, R. C. (1980) *Vaudeville and Film:1895-1915, A Study in Media Interaction*, New York: Arno Press.
- An American Family* (1973). Tv program. USA, PBS.
- Archive.org (2015), *Web* section. Online. Available at:
<http://replay.waybackmachine.org/20050719000732/http://www.youtube.com/about.php>
- Bauerlein, M. (2009) *The Dumbest Generation*, New York: Tarcher/Penguin.
- Benjamin, W. (1969) *Illuminations*, NY: Schocken.
- Benjamin, W. (1999), *Selected Writings. Volume 2. 1927-1934*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Blame Society (August 2007), *Chocolate Rain by Chad Vader*. Online video. Available at:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P6dUCOS1bM0>
- Bolter, J.D., Grusin, R. (2000) *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Broeren, J. (2009) 'Digital Attractions: Reloading Early Cinema in Online Video Collections', in Snickars, P. and Vonderau, P. (eds.) *The YouTube Reader*, Stockholm: National Library of Sweden, pp. 154-165.
- Brolsma, G., (December 2006), *Numa Numa*. Online video. Available at:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KmtzQCSH6xk>
- Burch, N. (1990) 'A Primitive Mode of Representation?' in Elsaesser, T. and Barker, A. (eds.) *Early Cinema – Space, Frame, Narrative*, London: BFI Publishing.
- Burch, N. (1991) *La Lucarne de l'Infini. Naissance du Langage Cinématographique*, Paris: Editions Nathan.
- Burgess, J. (2008) 'All Your Chocolate Rain Are Belong to Us?' in Lovink, G. and Niederer, S. (eds.) *Video Vortex Reader. Responses to YouTube*, Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, pp. 101-109.
- Burgess, J. and Green, J. (2009) *YouTube. Online Video and Participatory Culture*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- 'Canada On Strike' (2008), *South Park*, Season 12, Episode 4. Tv series. USA, Comedy Central.

Carluccio, G., (1999) *Verso il Primo Piano. Attrazioni e Racconto nel Cinema Americano (1908-1909). Il caso Griffith-Biograph*, Bologna: Clueb.

Crocker, C. (September 2007), *Leave Britney Alone*. Online video. Available at:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kHmvkRoEowc&feature=player_embedded#!

Ebaumsworld.com (October 2006), *Afro Ninja*. Online video. Available at:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ztoKqIm5eLY>

Eisenstein, S.M. (1988) 'The montage of attractions' in Taylor, R. (ed.) *Writings 1922-1934*, London: BFI.

Gaudreault, A. (2008) *Cinéma et Attraction. Pour une Nouvelle Histoire du Cinématographe*, Paris: CNRS.

Grandma's Reading Glass (1900). Directed by G.A. Smith. Film. In *Early Cinema: Primitives and Pioneers – 1895 - 1910* (2006) [DVD] UK: BFI.

Gunning, T. (1990) 'The Cinema of Attractions – Early film, It's Spectator and the Avant-Garde' in Elsaesser, T. and Barker, A. (eds.) *Early Cinema – Space, Frame, Narrative*, London: BFI Publishing, pp. 56-62.

Habermas, J. (1989) *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Hansen, M. (1991) *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Hansen, M. (1993) 'Early Cinema, Late Cinema: Permutations of the Public Sphere', *Screen* 34 (3) pp. 197-210.

Hansen, M. (2008) 'Benjamin's Aura', *Critical Inquiry*, 34, pp. 336-375.

Hansen, M. (2012), *Cinema and Experience: Sigfrid Kracauer, Walter Benjamin and Theodore Adorno*, Oakland CA: California University Press.

Jenkins, H. (1992) *What Made Pistachio Nuts?: Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic*, New York: Columbia University Press.

Jenkins, H. (2006a) *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York: New York University Press.

Jenkins, H. (2006b) 'YouTube and the Vaudeville Aesthetic', *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*. Online. Available at:
http://www.henryjenkins.org/2006/11/youtube_and_the_vaudeville_aes.html

Jimroglou, K.M. (1999) 'A Camera with a View. JenniCAM, Visual Representation and Cyborg Subjectivity', *Information, Communication and Society* 2:4, London: Routledge, pp.439-453.

- Kracauer, S., (1997) *Theory of film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Lee, D. and Newby H. (1983) *The Problem of Sociology: an Introduction to the Discipline*, London: Unwin Hyman.
- Lessig, L. (2008) *Remix. Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy*, London: Bloomsbury.
- Lil Angels (July 2011), *Estate*. Online video. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7dYMC0LkOSE>
- Lovink, G. and Niederer, S. (ed.) (2008) *Video Vortex Reader. Responses to YouTube*, Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures.
- McFred Vinile (July 2011), *Sono in Giro per Modena*. Online video. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5JrCQ8A-qQI&list=UU9Xi1pQbM1Sb00yGkMQ02-A>
- McLuhan, M. (1994) *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man* (1964), Cambridge: MIT Press.
- McNamara, B. (1974) 'The Scenography of Popular Entertainment', *The Drama Review*, 18, 1, pp.16-24.
- Negt, O. and Kluge, A. (1993) *Public Sphere and Experience: Towards an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, Minneapolis: University for Minnesota Press.
- Peppergod (July 2007), *Vanilla Snow*. Online video. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nTQOpibv_OA
- Salvato, N. (2009) 'Out of Hand. YouTube Amateurs and Professionals' *TDR: The Drama Review*, 53:3 pp. 67-83.
- Spitty Cash (February 2012), *Difficoltà nel Ghetto*. Online video. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DeW_7_M7LXE
- Strauven, W. (ed.) (2006) *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Ted.com (2011) *Kevin Allocca: Why Videos Go Viral*. Online video. Available at: http://www.ted.com/talks/kevin_allocca_why_videos_go_viral
- The Great Train Robbery* (1903). Directed by Edwin S. Porter. Film. In *The Movies Begin. A Treasury of Early Cinema, 1894 - 1913* (2002) [DVD] USA: Kino Video.
- Tron Guy (October 2006), *Tron Guy*. Online video. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=36090tM138c>

Trucebaldazzi, (October 2010) *Vendetta Vera*. Online video. Available at:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iRiWSmGz5E8>

Uricchio, W. and Pearson, R.E. (1994) 'Constructing the Mass Audience: Competing Discourses of Morality and Rationalization in the Nickelodeon Period', *Iris*, 17, pp. 43-54.

Wesch, M. (2009) 'YouTube and You. Experiences of Self-awareness in the Context Collapse of the Recording Webcam', *Explorations in Media Ecology*, Vol.8, I.2, New York: Hampton Press, pp. 19-34.

Willmott, P. (1989) *Community Initiatives. Patterns and Prospects*, London: Policy Studies Institute.

Zonday, T. (April 2007), *Chocolate Rain*. Online video. Available at:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EwTZ2xpQwpA&feature=related>

Zonday, T. (November 2007), *Cherry Chocolate Rain*. Online video. Available at:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2x2W12A8Qow>