

Notes on *Videomusicking Al Ándalus*

Dario Ranocchiari

1. The research project...

Videomusicking Al Ándalus is a sort of making-of film of three participatory music videos that have been produced with bands of the city in which I live, Granada. It is also the main result of a postdoctoral research project I began in 2017¹, and the starting point of another ethnomusicological documentary². But its origins date back to the very beginning of my relationship with anthropology, when as an undergraduate I went to Lisbon for 1-year fieldwork with Afro-Portuguese rappers and I refused to shot music videos for them. Why? At that time, I said to myself that I didn't want to influence their musical practices. But now I think it had more to do with some kind of shyness: 'serious' ethnographer can do documentary films, but videoclips...

Doing research in Colombia for my PhD dissertation I've been asked again, and I gave up. The experience of co-producing music videos while I was doing fieldwork with musicians completely changed my relation with the field, helping me to understand the relationships between musical practices and ethnicity I was investigating (Ranocchiari, 2020). Ever since, I've been reflecting about the possibilities that the participatory production of music videos can offer to who, like me, is interested in understanding the cultural meanings of musical practices.

1.1 Ethnographically grounded music videos

I have recently co-edited a special issue of *Visual Ethnography* on what we defined as ethnographically grounded music videos. We gave a minimal definition in the introduction:

they are basically music videos produced while (part of) their authors were doing ethnographic fieldwork; whose fieldwork they influenced and from which have been already influenced. [...] So they are not conventional ethnographic videos. They don't document any aspect of the real life of local communities. They don't portray directly the daily life of subjects that are representative of a certain cultural context. They don't tell the story of an ethnographic encounter... they are rather one of the consequences of it. If that weren't enough, they are works of fiction that move on the imaginary level and not on the level of the academic documentation of cultural practices. (Ranocchiari & Giorgianni, 2020)

What is a videoclip after all but an audio-visual piece in which music and moving images merge into a unique filmic discourse? It makes the audience live an experience that is radically different from both hearing music and watching a short film. To do a videoclip, then, means to elaborate a product in which visual and musical dimensions interact. For the musicians (if they actively participate into the video-making) it means to go beyond the expressive modalities of musical production and to work creatively at a visual level.

¹ The title of my postdoc project at Universidad de Granada is *Ethnographically grounded video clips as tools for the participatory research of activist practices* (2017-2020).

² *Past and Present Musical Encounters Across the Strait of Gibraltar* (<https://www.musicalencounters.co.uk/>). The project's PI Matthew Machin-Autenrieth and I are in the middle of the production of a documentary film on the topic.

For the filmmakers it implies to accept the prominence of music and to put the images at its service.

As a researcher interested in experimenting shared ethnographic practices, I see in the process of co-producing a music video an occasion for building relations with the non-academic participants that are even less hierarchical than the ones we establish when we shot ethnographic documentaries. Relations that are not based on the elaboration of an academic product that is (like the most part of ethnographic documentaries) *external* to the context, but on the creation of an artifact that belongs to the musicians' cultural horizon.

1.2 Why to shot ethnographically grounded music videos?

Trying to answer briefly to this question (I sum up from Ranocchiari & Giorgianni, 2018 & 2020a), the interest and the utility of producing this kind of videos have to do with:

- 1) **The position of the ethnographer** with respect to the participants, during and after the fieldwork. Working as a videomaker in projects that are important for the musicians, the ethnographer takes on a role that is more internal to the cultural context than the role of academic researcher: videomakers are part of many music scenes, so an ethnographer-videomaker takes on a role comparable to the one of ethnomusicologists that perform music with their research partners.
- 2) **The possibility to understand the creative process from the inside.** As the increasing literature on artistic research proves (Butt, 2017) to participate into the creation of cultural artifacts can allow us to understand aspects that possibly would not emerge using more conventional ethnographic methods. (Again, a similar situation to that of ethnomusicologists that perform music with their research partners.)
- 3) **To work on musicking at a visual (and not only sonic and performative) level.** Unlike what happens to ethnomusicologists-performers, making music videos means to challenge musicians to reflect on their musical work at a different level from that of the sound. To think music visually can be an occasion to understand aspects of musicking (Small, 1998) that could not emerge working only on the sound. This is also true for the musicians themselves, for whom the (auto)reflexive process of creating a video can constitute a unique occasion to research on their own musical world and its relations with different dimensions such as space, territory, storytelling, embodiment.
- 4) **The possibility to establish a more balanced collaboration** between musicians and ethnographer-videomakers. Unlike papers, PhD dissertations, essays but often also documentary films and multimodal outcomes, music videos are products in which the musicians are often very interested in. To engage – or to be engaged – into projects of music video making makes easier to establish experiences of participatory research-creation. Experiences that respect the essential requirements of any form of collaborative research, such having shared aims and taking together any important decision.
- 5) **To experiment with 'transmodal research products'.** If it is true that music videos are products internal to the music market and external to the academy, there's no reason why they should be *only* this. The real challenge is to create music videos that can transcend the barriers imposed by specific *modalities* of

knowledge transmission, and to work also as some sort of visual ethnographies. As we wrote in the introduction of the special issue I quoted before,

it is not a problem of medium, of using writings rather than audiovisuals, live performance or any combination of them (i.e. through digital ecosystems). It is definitively a matter of *mode*: how do we shape the knowledges originated by our experience of shared research in an equally efficient way for all the implied subjects? (Ranocchiarì & Giorgianni, 2020)

2. ... and the film

This last point resumes what attract me the most of doing ethnographically grounded music videos. When I decided to try to produce such kind of videos, I understood that I had to figure out a workflow that were capable to conciliate the substantial openness of the participatory creative process, with procedures that brought this process back to an (auto)ethnographic research on topics that the all the participants wanted to deepen. To put it another way, it meant to find a methodology for facilitating the transformation of an audiovisual production process into a process of construction of new knowledge(s) that were useful for all the participants.

Videomusicking Al Ándalus arose from the need to experiment these new methodological approaches and to systematize the procedural findings of the dispersed experienced I had had as an ethnographer-videographer. Despite the film is not the purely methodological film I had planned years ago – as any ethnographic film, it transformed itself over the process – auto-reflexive and procedural aspects are still crucial in its narrative.

The three music videos that are at the base of the film constitute three diverse collaborative experiences of research-creation on the relations between the band's musical imaginaries and the reminiscences of Al Ándalus in Granada. The film intertwines the processes, blending them into a single narration that focuses on the current role of the Andalusí past. Before moving forward, perhaps we need to make a short digression to contextualize the cultural meanings that this past assumes today in Andalusia.

2.1 A short contextualization

The Sultanate of Granada has been the last Muslim state in the Iberian Peninsula. Its last leader, Boabdil, handed over the keys of the city to the Catholic Monarchs in 1492. Eight hundred years of Islamic rule left deep traces on the culture and the territory. In toponomy, perhaps the most suggestive example is the mountain pass *Sospino del Moro* (Sigh of the Moor), the point in which is supposed that Boabdil turned round to look for the last time the city, and cried. But the most recognized signs in Granada are the district of the Albayzín – with its narrow streets, *aljibes* (cisterns) and churches that once were mosques –, and obviously the Alhambra. Considered by many to be the most spectacular palace-fortress that we received from the ancient Islamic culture, it is also a crucial node of European orientalism: a central stop of the Romantic *tour* in Spain and, today – also thanks to its patrimonialization by the UNESCO – one of the world most visited monuments.

Granada, and particularly the Albayzín, is one of the clusters of the 'return' of Muslims in Spain. On one hand, the last 40 years migratory fluxes have increased the presence of Islamic communities. On the other, and more significantly, the attraction of the *andalusí* past and its symbolic implications brought to the city from the 1970s people who choose

Islam as a spiritual path – popularly defined as *conversos* or *moros nuevos* (new Moors). In the 2000s the construction of the first mosque in the city from 1492 aroused controversies and enthusiasm, reinforcing the attractive of Granada as one of the symbolic centers of European Islam, a hub between East and West.

Already in the early 20th century one of the fathers of Andalusian nationalism, Blas Infante (1885-1936), claimed the *andalusí* past as one of the identity elements that distinguishes the Andalusia from Spain. The *andalusí* instances of Andalucism remained undercurrent for a long while but recently re-emerged powerfully, mostly thanks to the work of the law professor, poet and writer Antonio Manuel.

Antonio Manuel is also the main promoter of a reinterpretation of flamenco – a genre with highly symbolic and identity implications – as the most important heritage that the subalternization and oppression exerted by Catholic Spain on Gypsies and Muslims has originated. This new lecture, that is increasingly popular outside the academia but contested inside, is contributing to re-orient a previously existing musical scene that is based on the fusion of oriental sonorities with flamenco.

The film focuses on this musical scene, that exists in Granada from the 1990s and that has always had its center in the Albayzín. As a resident (from 2008) of this neighborhood, I lived and observed its development with a growing interest. From ‘hippie’ groups looking to make a living in an increasingly touristic context, to spiritual or even liturgic *ensembles*, and passing through many other grades of fusion marked by the highly cosmopolitan community of temporary residents that characterizes the Albayzín, the music scene that I tentatively call ‘*neoandalusí*’ is defined by both inhomogeneity and organicity.

It is inhomogeneous due to its internal diversity, the inconstancy of its members (that typically pass only short periods in Granada) and the discontinuity of the market (venues, commercialization, but also the conscious acknowledgment of a ‘brand’). At the same time, it is organic because the musicians fluctuate between bands, , learn from each other, exchange peculiar musical instruments, and sometime fight to take advantage of the few economic opportunities offered by local institutions. But most of all, because they share a cultural and musical imaginary that for sure has been marked by orientalism, but that is also rooted in history, the territory and into the musical and embodied repertoire of the place in which they decided to make music.

2.2 Al Firdaus, Darash and Pablo López (with Sra. Performer)

This organic unity constitutes a common ground for the three participatory processes that led to the music videos. Three different experiences that are however comparable and that correspond, on one side, to my project’s epistemological/methodological restlessness, and on the other, to the need that we (the musicians and I) had of understanding how *neoandalusí* music is related to the traces of Al Ándalus in Granada. Or better, more than to its traces, to its echoes and reflections: because the groups that participated into the project, Al Firdaus Ensemble, Darash and Pablo López, worked mainly on sound and visual ‘remains’ (Schneider, 2011).

Two main factors made me choose these particular groups and not others. The first one is my desire to work with bands that had different approaches to the musicking at both musical and identity levels. Al Firdaus is an ensemble of five Muslim musicians, three of them – including the leader – ‘new’ Muslims (a British, a Spanish and a Venezuelan. The other two members are Moroccan). They met in Granada, a city where they moved

mostly because of the specific position it has on the geography of Islamic imaginary, and they make music with a clear spiritual intention.

On the contrary, despite its apparently similar musical style, Darash is the result of the interest that some Granadian musicians had for 'other musical genres' (other than flamenco) that permeate Granada's sonosphere. Musical genres that they perceive principally as Mediterranean world music. The band only performs original instrumental pieces in which the diversity of the instruments and the combination of different styles and rhythms play a major role.

Finally, Pablo López is an outsider to the *neoandalusí* scene and, in part, also to the underground rap scene. He produced two digital albums of what he calls '*andalusí rap*', and he made some shows in collaboration with the Muslim feminist influencer Sra. Preformer. Pablo's music moves away from any orientalist stereotype and focus on the reminiscence – or, as Toni Morrison would say, re-memory (Ticineto Clough, 1998) – of the *andalusí* 'essence' of being Andalusian.

The second factor has been their willingness to participate into a process that I presented from the very beginning as quite different from others they had had. A demanding process that would have required many hours of collaborative work and a quite constant commitment. And, most important, that implied to accept the challenge to transform every stage of production in occasions for investigating the deep reasons of their approach to music.

3. What I learned (some sort of conclusion)

It should be clear at this point that I consider the film, *Videomusicking Al Ándalus*, a sort of inquiry about the role of *andalusí* imaginary in Granada's contemporary musical scene, and an occasion to experiment a methodological approach centered on ethnographically grounded music videos. Shooting these videos and the film that accounts their making changed my approach to visual ethnography, at least in two ways. The first has to do with the ethnographer's role in the filmmaking process. Shooting music videos (that means to shot fiction films) pushed me to deal with aspects of filmmaking that are different from the ones I was accustomed as an ethnographic filmmaker. The role of producer, and particularly of executive producer, turned out to be very stimulating for me as an ethnographer. Much more than the role of camera operator, that is usually considered crucial in more author-centered ethnographic approaches it hasn't been the almost mythical camera-mediated ethnographic gaze what determined the ethnographic richness of this filmmaking experience, but instead the situations and solutions I lived as (co)producer – that is basically a facilitator of creative and collaborative processes. On the contrary, the power of the ethnographic gaze revealed itself to me in another role, that of the editor. Editing alone, and receiving feedback on the cuts by the participants, I found in this key moment of postproduction many of the chills that, in other projects, I had lived while shooting. In this occasion, the most part of the shooting has been done following the collaborative needs a single video and not thinking on its possible future use for *Videomusicking Al Ándalus*. It has been only editing that I (re)discovered some of these significant moments, and it is building on them that I constructed the narrative of the film.

The second aspect has to do with the role of fiction in achieving the ethnographic truth. As I told, music videos are basically fiction films built on a musical piece, and what facilitated the discovering of new aspects of that is happening now around the imaginary

of Al Ándalus in Granada has been precisely the creative, fictionalized dimension of the music video making. Far from the descriptive paradigm of ethnography, it has been through fiction that we managed to touch ethnographically relevant dimensions such as intimacy, sense of place, memory and desire. As Rouch (2003) suggested, sometimes going beyond the real using imagination can drive us closer to the truths we are looking for when we do visual ethnography. Even more when we are not alone in this quest, but part of a group that tries to work collaboratively.

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