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WHEN PERSONAL BECOMES COLLECTIVE: TAQWACORE’S AUDIOVISUAL AUTHENTICITY AND THE ACTUALISATION OF AN IMAGINED COMMUNITY

As the outcome of a personal reflection that subsequently became the trigger for an aggregation involving individuals, artists and musicians, the impulse that led to the creation of taqwacore represents a particularly fertile example for theoretical reflection and analysis of both individual and collective strategies of representation in contemporary society. The novel by Michael Muhammad Knight, which provided the name for the genre and acted as catalyst for the aggregation of a community with a relatively stable – although ephemeral – identity, makes it possible to observe in action an auto-ethnographic impulse able not only to pursue a personal reflection but also to become the springboard for an ‘imagined community’ that rewrites the present and foreshadows the future. It attracts a considerable media attention in the short period, and has been the subject of a documentary in 2009, Taqwacore: The Birth of Punk Islam, followed by the adaptation of the novel The Taqwacores in 2010; the analysis of both films will be the core of the following remarks on the audiovisual representation of the genre. The crucial position of music in such a process shows how popular culture can be a place of symbolic communication particularly suited to the creation of new hybrid identities, exploiting its nature as at once inclusive and exclusive, «[...] a social force for bringing different people together and for affirming communal identity – which is always done in opposition to outsiders».


2 M. KNIGHT, The Taqwacores, Telegram, London 2007. First edition was self-published in 2003, then the rights have been acquired for US publication by Autonomedia in 2004.


1. «I STOPPED TRYING TO DEFINE PUNK AROUND THE SAME TIME I STOPPED TRYING TO DEFINE ISLAM»

In the opening pages of *The Taqwacores* Knight himself defines the points of contact between punk and Islam:

Both began in tremendous bursts of truth and vitality but seem to have lost something along the way – the energy, perhaps, that comes with knowing the world has never seen such positive force and fury and never would again. Both have suffered from sell-outs and hypocrites, but also from true believers whose devotion had crippled their creative drive. Both are viewed by outsiders as unified, cohesive communities when nothing can be further from the truth.

I could go on but the most important similarity is that like punk as mentioned above, Islam is itself a flag, an open symbol representing not things, but ideas.

In this passage setting out the novel’s *raison d’être*, the salient features coagulate around oppositions between truth and falsehood, believers and non-believers, community and individuality, ideals and actions, evoking what has become a key word in studies of popular music: ‘authenticity’. In its effort to survive into the eighties (and beyond), the ‘authenticity’ of punk was increasingly subject to a mechanism of ‘aestheticization of politics’. In an experience like that of the band Crass, and unlike other previous youth cultures, punk (notably in the transition to the more typically American phenomenon of hardcore) managed to ensure its survival by adhering to a dual strategy. On one hand it rejected co-optation into the cultural industry, and on the other it made common cause – with different degrees of practical commitment by individuals, groups and scenes – with anarcho-pacifist political stances. In this perspective the ‘spectacular’ quality of this style is not simply a means to attract attention but forms part of an attitude that even in its outward expressions manifests a radical ‘otherness’ with respect to society and social conventions. Punk can be seen as similar to the noise genre – and perhaps to popular music genres on the whole – as comprising «[...] a set of “open texts” through which listeners may project their own identities, experiences, histories, and ideologies upon a text».

To further pursue the parallel between punk and Islam, and return to the quota-

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5 Knight, *The Taqwacores*, p. 7.
6 Ibidem. Italics in the original.
7 In this case the musical genre acts as a collector of diverging ideal and musical elements, held together by processes which Slobin calls “self-conceptualization”, i.e. «[...] a polysyllabic label that refers only to how the group defines itself through its choices» (M. Slobin, *Klezmer Music. An American Ethnic Genre, Yearbook for Traditional Music*, 1984, 16, p. 35).
9 As Elizabeth Stewart well clarifies, it was precisely thanks to the connection between pursuit of identity, ethics and resistance to the dominant cultural models that punk and hardcore could be seen in terms of visions of an alternative spirituality able to give its practitioners a sense of the transformation of reality not unlike that of religion. See F. Stewart, “‘Punk Rock is My Religion’. An Exploration of Straight Edge Punk as a Surrogate of Religion”, PhD thesis, University of Stirling, Stirling 2011, pp. 103-150.
tion by Knight at the beginning of this section, it is also important not to lose sight of the multiplicity of traditions that make also the Muslim world anything but monolithic.

Since authenticity is a central issue in the articulation of social meanings in popular music, it may be relevant to explore how this value is expressed in its audiovisual representations. In the case study regarding taqwacore, it would mean to show how textual strategies are linked to shared collective identification, via a particular artist’s or group’s personal qualities acknowledged through his, her, or their peculiar performative features. The most recent reflections on authenticity have highlighted a common matrix in the mediation of technology. In the process of recording, editing and postproduction the aim is to communicate a bodily presence, a sensation of ‘liveness’ specific to electronic arts, whether in the audio or audiovisual format. This also means restoring the centrality of the text, in considering how, starting from the singularity of any cultural product, its characteristic features go on to constitute ‘nebulae’ of cultural connotations. Particular strategies of enunciation become fixed points for associating a specific object with a certain discursive form, shifting the analyst’s attention from the concept of authenticity to the potential processes of authentication elicited by the texts themselves. At the same time, when the authenticity of an artist is recognized by the community of his fans or listeners, it also implies a fundamental shift from personal to collective values through a shared aesthetic experience – even though it could be real or virtual.

Having set the context in which authenticity is, first, a crucial quality for the social formation of meaning in popular music and, second, a feature that could be discerned in the text itself, I have chosen to speak of authenticity markers, meaning those elements that, in two recent audiovisual products featuring taqwacore, trigger what Allan Moore has labelled different typologies of authentication processes. Following his theoretical assumptions, three types of markers could be distinguished:

1. stylistic (third person authenticity): based on the authenticity of the performance, relying on a common recognition of past styles and musicians. I match this to the choices made in terms of genre, both musical and cinematographic;

2. topological (second person authenticity): based on the authenticity of the experience, relying on the creation of a shared cultural space linking performer and listener within its boundaries, in a constructivist perspective which makes use of concepts such as diegetic and non-diegetic as analytical tools;

3. syntactic (first person authenticity): based on the authenticity of the expression, concentrating on an audiovisual construction which tries «[...] to communicate in an

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unmediated form with an audience)\textsuperscript{19}. This category covers the phenomena related to a precise correspondence between image and sound, in terms of a tighter or looser synchrony and a ‘natural’ mode of perception.


According to this theoretical framework, the analysis starts from stylistic elements that could provide a general interpretative framework in which music operates as a ‘cultural synaesthesia’, or allusion to a whole culture or community\textsuperscript{20}. In term of their own style, the songs of Kominas, Al-Thawra, Secret Trial Five, Vote Hezbollah and the other more or less ephemeral bands associated with the genre do not appear to genuinely take over musical or audio elements from the respective cultures of the musicians (for the most part second generation Pakistani Americans, Palestinian Americans, Iranian Americans and so on). In order to denote cultural belonging, they merely calls on allusion to their ethnic backgrounds in their lyrics, on fragments, often sampled, of non-Western instruments or music, television or radio programmes, and only occasionally elaborates a characteristic melodies in their riffs and tunes. This all occurs in a great mixture of styles which can nonetheless be ascribed to the common matrix of punk, very similar to the products of scenes that have no ethnic or religious connotation\textsuperscript{21}. Far from being anomalous or indicating that this phenomenon of hybridization is merely superficial, this appears perfectly natural if we consider that Western popular culture is the only common denominator for young people whose origins are rooted in a variety of backgrounds.

The criteria that led to the inclusion of non-taqwacore songs in the sound tracks of the two films we are investigating goes in the same direction. The choice to present, at structurally critical moments, \textit{Babelogue/Rock ‘n’ Roll Nigger} (1979) by Patti Smith in the documentary \textit{Taqwacore: The Birth of Punk Islam} and \textit{Big Takeover} by the Bad Brains (1981) in the film version of the novel \textit{The Taqwacores}, denotes a pursuit of authentication through style which has to be viewed first and foremost in relation to the history of Anglo-American popular music. The first sound we hear in Omar Majeed’s documentary, as sound off with a blank screen bearing the words «TAQWA Islamic concept of “God consciousness” / Hard CORE punk» which continues to accompany the images of a portable camera going off towards the concert venue that marks the start of the narration, is the spoken introduction to Patti Smith’s song\textsuperscript{22}. In \textit{The Taqwacores} the final concert (1h 11’ 17’’), which brings the story to a close, is represented by black and white still and moving images, accompanied by the Bad Brains’ song, one of the first hardcore groups to assert their Afro-American cultural identity and to comprehend in their lyrics explicit Rastafarian claims.

In terms of cinema studies it is also possible to extend considerations of genre by

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{M}oore, \textit{Authenticity as Authentication}, p. 214.


\textsuperscript{22} The stratification in this quotation operates at two levels, in view of the fact that in Knight’s book some lines from the same song, «At heart, I am a Muslim / At heart, I am an American / At heart, I am a Muslim / At heart, I am an American artist / And I have no guilt», are written up on the wall of the room of one of the novel’s main characters, Rabeya (\textit{Knight, The Taqwacores}, p. 132).
emphasising the common features linking these audiovisual products to what is known as ‘punk cinema’. It is characteristic of such products that procedures typical of the musical genre are applied to the treatment of audiovisual flow: the use of images with different formats, resolutions and grains as a mark of stylistic *bricolage* taken to extremes, the importance of a do-it-yourself production displayed in the self-consciously limited resources, the refusal to contemplate a promotional function for the film, the documentary feel at the core of their agenda, the rejection of the conventions of film and television narrative, the juxtaposition of narrative fragments to contrast the linear logic of storytelling\(^{23}\). According to Nicholas Rombes, the role of the film maker in this genre is to manifest what he calls an ‘ironic disposition’: «[...] to evoke a sincere emotional response while, at the same time, to create the possibilities for the audience to see through the very mechanisms that elicit this response»\(^{24}\). Paradoxically one might say that authenticity in productions inspired by punk expresses itself precisely in putting at the heart of the audiovisual strategy the constructed, artificial quality of this value, showing just how radical and patent the ‘rock ‘n’ roll swindle’ conveyed by commercial media is\(^{25}\). All these aspects also come into play in the two films devoted to taqwacore, for they feature collages of images of varying quality, provenience and definition (photographs, fixed and moving images, professional and amateur filming). In both of them the story line is not linear but based on the juxtaposition of different fragments, and – in the documentary – photographers, microphonists and cameramen are quite often to be seen, as a visible record of the material conditions of its production. Thise aspects are further emphasized by the participation of Michael Muhammad Knight himself: he is the protagonist and narrator of *Taqwacore: The Birth of Punk Islam*, while he worked on the adaptation and screenplay of *The Taqwacores*, making a cameo appearance at the party prior to the final concert (1h 05’ 29’’).

Finally, in terms of audio, we can note how criticism of the language used by the mass media, television in particular, is a significant element: for example in *The Taqwacores* the appearance of Knight (as the ‘bad Muslim’) clearly departs from the rest of the film in the adoption of construction modes typical of television, using a split screen to give parallel close ups of the writer and the protagonist Yusef (1h 05’ 39’’) which opens outwards from the centre at the end of the writer’s monologue (1h 06’ 36’’). As we have seen in relation to musical and visual style, here authenticity markers are first and foremost related to punk as a shared communicative matrix embracing both an historical continuity with earlier styles of punk and hardcore, and its typical visual display based on collage, *detournement*, irony, subversion\(^{26}\).

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\(^{26}\) I suspect that in this regard the ethnicity of Knight (i.e. male, white Caucasian etc.) plays an important role in developing the Islamic aspects as a generic ‘flavour’ rather than a constitutive part of the scene, but this aspect will deserve specific attention and might be the subject for further investigations particularly focused on the merging of different stylistic elements.
3. TOPOLOGICAL MARKERS: HOW SOUND IS POSITIONED BETWEEN PERCEPTION, SIMULATION OF REALITY AND NARRATION

A closer look on topological markers give us the opportunity to focus on how the film is constructed, on the relationship between sound and image and how each is organized. Such phenomena, whose effect obviously depends on firsthand, and hence subjective, experience of the film, can nevertheless be linked to some fundamental perceptive mechanisms. Irrespective of the individual attributes of knowledge, background and mental associations, these features can orient the consumption of audiovisual products towards a shared horizon, in which each audio-spectator constructs its own experience through individual perception\(^\text{27}\). For if a film’s viewing can be analysed from an exclusively cultural standpoint, we cannot fail to take into account the fact that such complex sensorial stimuli are processed by the brain in a way that is quite similar to ‘ordinary’ perception\(^\text{28}\).

Deviations from perfect vision and hearing in film representation disturb our normal obliviousness to the subjective (proximal) aspects of perception. Moreover, they create stress and arousal in the viewer. Given the proper context (for instance, the horrible experiences in Myrick and Sanchez’s *The Blair Witch Project* or the stressful work of a policeman in Los Angeles), you might argue that the lack of perceptual realism is transformed into emotional realism by inducing nervous, stressful feelings in the viewer that are appropriate to the scenes depicted\(^\text{29}\).

To put this in another way, audiovisual stimuli are constantly processed by the brain through ‘reality status mechanisms’ to determine whether they are actual sensory perceptions, dreams, hallucinations, memories and so on. In the case of ‘realistic’ stimuli - when films mimics the way we experience the world outside cinema, we are inclined to believe in what we see, while dissociation between audio and visual gives rise to a more contemplative state of reflective detachment\(^\text{30}\).

The two films we are looking at exploit mechanisms of perception differently, according to the characteristic perceptive modalities of their respective genre. In the documentary *Taqwacore: The Birth of Punk Islam* we can recognise a dual audio stratification which articulates the film’s sound dimension on two distinct planes. The first comprises the sound track and the voice-over of Michael Muhammad Knight and the musicians involved, and the second includes the sound recorded in real time. The two elements are constantly mixed, and may be more or less evident, but are almost always both present, integrating one another in the construction of the documentary with different roles in the audiovisual communication. While speech and the songs ensure continuity, the direct sound authenticates the images in a realistic perceptual space, depicted as if it is the product of an unmediated recording of reality. The decisions regarding editing in a narrative film like *The Taqwacores* are obviously very different. Here we cannot see evident anomalies with respect to the most standard conventions in contemporary Anglo-American


\(^{29}\) Ibi, p. 260. Keith Beattie also recognizes that increasingly the language of subjective authenticity (which operates at the emotional and empathic levels) is linked to the use of amateur equipment, cameras, mobile phones. See K. Beattie, *Documentary Screens. Non-Fiction Film and Television*, Palgrave, Basingstoke 2004, p. 121.

film making\(^{31}\), except for certain specific moments of hiatus in the onward audiovisual story line: the telephone calls of the protagonist Yusef to his parents (at 1’ 26’’, 15’ 04’’, 36’ 26’’ and 54’ 22’’), and some sequences in black and white during which fixed images alternating with moving images show some of the film’s protagonists asleep in front of a television broadcasting voices of Islamophobic politicians and opinion leaders (Ayyub at 9’ 21’’, Jehangir at 20’ 01’’, Rabeya at 48’ 40’’, Muzammil at 1h 02’ 21’’). In the first case we only hear the voices of Yusef and his parents while on the blank screen the passing of the seasons is evoked with captions: «Spring», «Summer», «Fall», «Winter». In the second case the audio presents first a static sound of feedback, overlaid with a series of fixed images giving the sense of temporal compression, and then the sound from television at the end of each black and white sequence restores the normal audio and visual parallelism. These moments of dislocation between the two dimensions introduce a lapse from a realistic modality of perception into a more reflexive one, serving to break the film up into distinct narrative portions, acting as ‘chapters’ which adopts and adapts the organization of Michael Muhammad Knight’s novel to the audiovisual form. From the point of view of their organization, then, sound and video tracks work together to underline the main communicative aims of each film; in \textit{Taqwacore: The Birth of Punk Islam}, stratification of different sound sources authenticate the image reinforcing their documentary feeling, while in \textit{The Taqwacores} momentary dissociation between the components of the audiovisual flow is the sign of its connection to the narrative mode of the novel.

4. SYNTACTIC MARKERS: NARRATIVE AND SEMANTIC IMPLICATIONS OF THE STRUCTURAL ORGANIZATION OF IMAGE AND SOUND

Coming to the final typology of authenticity markers, we can be even more specific about how they respond to different functions, first concentrating on the ways in which the live concert is depicted, and then examining an example of their semantic connotation. Obviously performance is one of key moments in films featuring popular music, both on account of its ‘ideological’ significance in the reception of rock\(^{32}\) and for the use of characteristic types of audiovisual syntax\(^{33}\). In \textit{Taqwacore: The Birth of Punk Islam} the bands on stage are always presented with sound recorded on location taken from different songs, accompanying shots of various musicians (18’ 07’’, 27’ 58’’, 37’ 28’’, 47’ 20’’, 1h 13’ 45’’), following the collage-like quality of the documentary’s audiovisual syntax. In \textit{The Taqwacores}, as we mentioned above, the sequence of the concert that concludes the story line relies on a close juxtaposition of black and white images, whether still (some with the name of the group that is performing in caption) or moving, while the sound track relays \textit{Big Takeover} by the Bad Brains. At 1h 10’ 51’’, as a bridge to the subsequent shot, a slow fade-in of the introduction on bass and drums begins to be heard, passed through a low-pass filter. Then the filter is gradually eliminated to highlights the dull quality and distance with respect to the image (rather like listening to a

\(^{31}\) These standard modalities relating to the narrative conventions of Hollywood and post-Hollywood films are seen as manifesting a fundamental realism (\textit{ibid}, p. 258).

\(^{32}\) \textsc{Auslander, Liveness}, pp. 88-95.

piece of music through a wall). With the entry of the guitar riff A at 1h 11’ 17” the filter is gone, in parallel with an increase in the volume, so that the perception of distance is annulled. The images go from colour to black and white, and we find ourselves plunged into the audience at the concert, once again represented with a montage of subjective shots. The central section of the song, comprising three verses which are identical in musical structure, proceeds without revealing any particularly significant points of synchrony with the superimposed images. At the end of the verse’s third occurrence, corresponding to the entry of riff B and the subsequent double repeat of riff A followed by an unison intermezzo involving guitar, bass and drums, we see Rabeya performing a blow job on Fasiq on stage and then spitting in disgust in the direction of Bilal’s Boulder, a group which championed an extremist interpretation of Islam and had little in common with the libertarian ideas professed by the protagonists of the novel. This triggers a brawl in the audience (1h 13’ 27”), into which Jehangir plunges in defence of his friend, but he is overwhelmed by the crowd and dies. The moment of the tragedy (1h 13’ 42”) is accompanied by a sound event in perfect synchrony which annuls the guitar melody by applying a narrow high-pass filter allowing through only a feedback saturated in the highest frequencies and a mournful reverb on the low frequencies, culminating in a fade-out on a blank screen which ends the sequence. Up until this point the song had involved an anti-realistic and asynchronic reception of the images, serving to compress a narrative span covering the whole concert. This enables the music to gain the upper hand for a moment as the prime mover of the audiovisual organization, then the subsequent inversion of the roles of the two components, re-establishing the syntactical centrality of vision, occurs with the scene’s dramatic finale.

Synchrony between image and sound in *The Taqwacores* is also significant from the semantic viewpoint. The original sound track was composed by Omar Fadel making emphatic use of a few basic components: a ‘classic’ rock instrumentation (two electric guitars, bass, keyboard, drums, with the addition of a violin), recourse to arpeggios, distorted sounds and feedback. While Umar goes upstairs with the protagonist Yusef (2’ 28”), a slightly distorted guitar arpeggio begins, and four bars later a sound in feedback is overlaid coinciding with Yusef approaching an empty room where a Saudi flag is hanged with a large black anarchist symbol sprayed onto it. The bass semibreve in b. 7 (Example 1) marks a reverse shot of Yusef looking at the flag in puzzlement; the arpeggio goes on in fade as Umar calls him again to show him his new room.

Soon afterwards, as the protagonist is performing the ritual ablutions in preparation for morning prayer (5’ 55”), Jehangir, the character who is really the personification of taqwacore and its contradictions, makes his first appearance. He delivers the call to prayer (6’ 37”) played on an electric guitar with a very saturated sound from the house roof. Then, as the scene proceeds and Umar and Jehangir talk together, the sounds of the environment are overlaid by a brief instrumental piece for two electric guitars, one slightly distorted, playing arpeggios in semiquavers alternating G#, and F₃, while the other, with a more saturated timbre, makes a melodic elaboration on the same descending interval treated chromatically.

34 Each verse features the repetition of riff A 6 times, the first two instrumental and the others as accompaniment to the singing, followed by two repetitions of riff B, whose propulsive character is highlighted by a rhythmic break and ends with insistent cymbal clashes in the drum kit. At the macro-structural level, we can point out how the Bad Brains song underwent a mix that altered the logic of its parts: if on record (*Bad Brains*, 1982) the piece’s overall structure had introduction-I verse-II verse-solo-III verse, in the film it becomes introduction-I verse-II verse-I verse.
Again, a few minutes later, at the end of a sequence during which Jehangir pulls off a memorable trick on skateboard (13’ 03’’), he tells Yusef he has decided to hold a Friday prayer session for young ‘alternative’ Muslims in their house. This dialogue is preceded by an arpeggio on electric guitar, again slightly saturated, accompanied by the bass which is also distorted. The entry of the drums and the melody played in unison on violin and a highly saturated electric guitar (at b. 7 in example 2) is synchronised with close-ups of the other young housemates, together with acquaintances who we shall see again at the religious session. Half way through b. 16 the repetition of the motivic idea with the same instrumental character coincides with a close-up of the Xs tattooed on Umar’s hands (the symbol of his ‘straight-edge’ choice of lifestyle) and his face. The musical accompaniment is pared down once again, leaving the guitar playing arpeggios on its own from the middle of b. 18, when we see Rabeya proposing his reflections on the Quran (khutba) to the gathering. Here the lead guitar is accompanied by bass – still distorted – and from b. 19 onwards its volume steadily increases in a sort of crescendo that culminates at the beginning of b. 27, when the last note of this part coincides exactly with the choral response «Allah Akbar» preceding the prayer, while the guitar disappears in fade out.
There are two central elements that recur in these opening sequences and are constantly re-évoked in the film so as to further emphasise their profound association with the unorthodox approach to religion proposed in Knight’s novel. The first is the timbre of the guitar in saturation, a clear allusion to the standard sound of this instrument in punk rock: rough, compressed, uncertain in terms of precise pitch and harmonic value. At the same time, it is significant how this sound is superimposed on the violin: with the association of this last instrument with Middle-Eastern music the texture created by these two instruments, with their shared quality of microtonal inflections and continuous sound production, alludes to a union between two worlds that has already been realised in art but will be much more difficult to achieve in reality. From this viewpoint the ambiguous and problematic nature of all the characters in the book, hamstrung between West and East and constantly trying to establish an identity for themselves without feeling drawn to one culture or the other, is reflected in the recurring use of the arpeggio, with its constantly fluctuating and unstable quality (further reinforced by either postponing the tonic or causing it to come on the upbeat), providing an effective counterpart in terms of musical symbolism. All these elements, together with the close relation between musical and visual events highlighted in the concert sequence, points out to a discursive construction where sound and vision are deeply interrelated in the expression of complex, multi-layered levels of meaning and possible readings.

4. «DO YOU ONLY WANT A COMMUNITY SO YOU CAN MAKE SOMEONE ELSE BE THE OUTSIDER?» ³⁵: AUTHENTICITY AND AUDIOVISUAL REPRESENTATION OF TRANSITIONAL IDENTITIES

The application of an analytical approach founded on different typologies of authentication has made it possible to organize and reconstruct the various mechanisms that are interwoven around this key word, providing a common context in which the stylistic, audio, semantic and structural aspects can be related and made sense of. In such a perspective we can see the aggregation of genres, scenes, and styles as a process in which a collective identity based on shared aesthetic experiences and judgements can recognize itself in texts with certain characteristics. The detailed examination of the representational strategies used for taqwacore has made it possible to cast more light on some of the constituents of this highly particular social formation. Originating in an autoethnographic

³⁵ KNIGHT, The Taqwacores, p. 212.
impulse, and subsequently becoming a reality thanks to socialisation on the web and a scene that was as ephemeral as it was rich in input for further reflections, it undoubtedly had the merit of attracting media attention to a community of young people who neither feel comfortable with their own cultural heritage, nor with the context in which they have grown up. Despite being short-lived, the significance of such cultural formations is to leave a tangible sign, becoming the stimulus for further encounters of the same type, a sort of ‘tachytopia’. In our analysis of the two audiovisual products, we have seen more than once how a basic fluid, transitory character is fundamental in describing the experience of a genre like taqwacore which, in proposing to unite identities that are unstable and difficult to define – and in which also other elements such as history, racial, class and postcolonial dynamics come into play as defining forces for individual identification within the scene –, relies on a mode of identity-making that distinguishes itself not in terms of difference but on account of its fundamentally inclusive matrix based on doubt, on continuous and relentless quest. Perhaps this is the way forward to overcome the impasse between individualism and the need for a collective belonging typical of our ‘liquid modernity’, in which there only seems to be room for ‘carnevalesque’ communities which come together pro tem merely to satisfy a need for personal security, while, at the same time, seem incapable of setting in motion deeper social transformations.

RIASSUNTO

Per quanto effimero il fenomeno del taqwacore, sottogenere del punk americano caratterizzato dalla rivendicazione da parte dei suoi partecipanti delle proprie radici islamiche, ha ricevuto negli ultimi anni una considerevole attenzione a livello accademico, soprattutto per la sua vicinanza con nuclei tematici quali la negoziazione tra identità culturali differenti, la fobia verso i musulmani dopo l’11 settembre, la resistenza alle visioni più conservatrici delle relazioni tra Oriente e Occidente. L’articolo si concentra su due recenti prodotti audiovisivi dedicati a questo genere musicale, il documentario di Omar Majeed Taqwacore: The Birth of Punk Islam (2009) e la trasposizione cinematografica del romanzo di Michael M. Knight The Taqwacores diretta da Eyad Zahra (2010), alla ricerca delle modalità con le quali viene elaborato il valore dell’autenticità attraverso un uso strategico degli elementi sonori e visivi. L’analisi di questi due lungometraggi cercherà di sottolineare in quale modo venga rappresentata la trasformazione di una comunità immaginata in una realtà concreta, ricostruendo il ruolo della rappresentazione audiovisiva a livello sintattico e semantico in tale contesto.

SUMMARY

However ephemeral the taqwacore phenomenon might be, a subgenre of American punk characterized by its participants’ claim to their Islamic roots, it has received over the last few years much attention from the academic environment, especially for its closeness to such themes as the negotiations between different cultural identities, the phobia against the Muslim after September 11th, the resistance to the most conservative visions of relations between East and West. The article focuses on two recent audiovisual products to highlight how the value of authenticity is elaborated through a strategic use of audio and visual elements: the documentary by Omar Majeed Taqwacore: The Birth of Punk Islam (2009) and the film transposition of the novel by Michael M. Knight The Taqwacores directed by Eyad Zahra (2010). The analysis of these two feature films will underline the textual elements representing the transformation of an imaginary community into a concrete reality, piecing together in this context the role of audiovisual representation at a syntactic and semantic level.