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DOSSIER: REIMAGINING AUDIOVISUAL ETHNOMUSICOLOGY

## Discussing, Doing, and Teaching Audiovisual Ethnomusicology Today

### Debatir, hacer y enseñar etnomusicología audiovisual hoy

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#### Abstract

Our initial encounters on the topic of audiovisual ethnomusicology in Valladolid (2014) and Ljubljana (2016) revealed a rich and diverse landscape of contemporary musical inquiry. Throughout this journey, we have identified various approaches and perspectives within our field. Looking ahead, we recognize an opportunity to reflect on the discourses and debates that have unfolded over the past years.

While we celebrate the multiplicity of methodological and theoretical orientations in audiovisual research, we believe that understanding each other's perspectives requires thoughtful consideration of how we construct spaces for critical debate. Here, we summarize some key issues related to doing, discussing, and teaching audiovisual ethnomusicology.

In the following pages, we explore how we might rethink the formats through which we share and promote discussion, and we outline some theoretical debates that have emerged since our inaugural meeting. Our focus is not on defining what constitutes audiovisual ethnomusicology but rather on developing vocabularies that help us better articulate and communicate our diverse approaches. This has an immediate impact on the teaching of audiovisual ethnomusicology, a discipline gaining popularity not only among scholars but also among undergraduate, postgraduate, and doctoral students. Our final aim is to open a space for debate about methods, orientations, and potential outcomes.

#### Keywords

Ethnomusicological filmmaking, audiovisual ethnography, multimodal publishing, audiovisual pedagogy

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#### Resumen

Nuestros primeros encuentros de etnomusicología audiovisual celebrados en Valladolid (2014) y Liubliana (2016) revelaron un rico y diverso panorama de investigación musical contemporánea. A lo largo de este recorrido, hemos identificado diversas aproximaciones y perspectivas en nuestro campo. Mirando hacia el futuro, reconocemos una oportunidad para reflexionar sobre los discursos y debates que se han desarrollado en los últimos años.

Si bien celebramos la multiplicidad de orientaciones metodológicas y teóricas en la investigación audiovisual, creemos que entender las perspectivas mutuas requiere una consideración reflexiva sobre cómo construimos espacios para el debate crítico. Aquí resumimos algunos temas clave relacionados con debatir, hacer y enseñar etnomusicología audiovisual.

En las siguientes páginas, exploramos cómo podríamos replantear los formatos a través de los cuales compartimos y promovemos la discusión, y esbozamos algunos debates teóricos que han surgido desde nuestra primera reunión. Nuestro enfoque no es definir qué constituye la etnomusicología audiovisual, sino más bien desarrollar vocabularios que nos ayuden a articular y comunicar mejor nuestras diversas aproximaciones. Esto tiene un impacto inmediato en la enseñanza de la etnomusicología audiovisual, una disciplina que está ganando popularidad no solo entre los académicos, sino también entre estudiantes de pregrado, posgrado y doctorado. Nuestro objetivo final es abrir un espacio para el debate sobre métodos, orientaciones y posibles resultados.

#### Palabras clave

Cine Etnomusicológico, etnografía audiovisual, publicaciones multimodales, pedagogía audiovisual

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## Discussing, Doing, and Teaching Audiovisual Ethnomusicology Today

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### Discussing audiovisual ethnomusicology

Jennie Gubner

Over the last few years, Nico Staiti, Matias Isolabella, and I have had multiple opportunities to come together to converse with each other and a growing international cohort of colleagues about audiovisual research in ethnomusicology. These discussions occurred at the 2016 International Council for Traditional Music (ICTM) Audiovisual Ethnomusicology Study Group meeting in Ljubljana, Slovenia, at a 2017 International Seminar of Audiovisual Ethnomusicology in Torino, Italy, and at the 2017 ICTM World Conference in Limerick, Ireland. In 2018, we came together once again to support the launch of an "Audiovisual Essay" section in the new peer-reviewed Italian ethnomusicology journal *Etnografie Sonore/Sound Ethnographies*, edited by Domenico Staiti, Sergio Bonanzinga and Giorgio Adamo. We were able to continue these discussions in 2018 during the 2nd Symposium of the ICTM Study Group on Audiovisual Ethnomusicology in Lisbon, Portugal, where this roundtable was presented.

These multiple international and multicultural encounters have been valuable in opening spaces to dialogue about what motivates each of us to work with film and audiovisual methods in our research. They have also allowed us to collectively address the question of how to legitimize audiovisual forms of ethnomusicological research with the same intellectual rigor as our written texts, both within and beyond our discipline. In this roundtable, we present some of the key themes that have emerged from these ongoing discussions, as well as some of the next steps we see as important in advancing the growth of this exciting sub-discipline of ethnomusicology.

#### *Reflections from an audiovisual ethnomusicology film jury*

To begin my reflections, I would like to share some of my experiences working with Ram Prasad Kadel and Nico Staiti to establish frameworks for the evaluation of the films screened at the 2nd ICTM Audiovisual Study Group Meeting in Lisbon, Portugal in 2018. It was exciting to watch the nearly 40 films submitted, and inspiring to see both the breadth of regions represented and the geographic diversity of researchers who sent in submissions. However, as researchers from three

continents with very different backgrounds, figuring out how to evaluate these films presented a unique challenge when we realized how much our value systems about film in ethnomusicology differed. The lack of existing standards for the evaluation of audiovisual material in ethnomusicological research made our task that much more difficult.

Ram Prasad Kadel is a scholar from Nepal who has organized the International Folk Music Film Festival in Nepal for the last 9 years. In discussing the criteria for evaluation, he felt it was important to consider the value of under-documented musical traditions and that the technical abilities of the filmmaker should not be judged too harshly as not everyone had access to the same equipment and training. Nico Staiti, an Italian professor of ethnomusicology at the University of Bologna, was concerned with a given film's ability to address underlying ethnomusicological research questions drawing on ethnographic methods, as well as a certain level of technical competence in editing/cinematic approaches. As an ethnomusicologist and visual ethnographer from the United States interested in short film formats and creative and non-linear experiential approaches to filmmaking, I was interested in evaluating films based on their ability to communicate ethnomusicological knowledge and contemporary ethnomusicological ideas in traditional as well as unconventional, or less-conventional ways.

The process of establishing a rubric that balanced these three diverse perspectives turned out to be an exercise in recognizing privilege, aesthetic orientations, and underlying assumptions about the nature of ethnomusicological research from a global perspective. In the end, we established the following criteria: 1) The value of content and subject matter to the field of ethnomusicology, 2) The quality of presentation of the film including editing, narrative structure, aesthetics, and sound, and 3) The creative and compelling use of film as a critical medium for communicating audiovisual ethnomusicological research. The films we chose, conceptualized from many different angles and with many different research goals, offer a diversity of examples that should inspire us as we move forward.

Having participated in three international ethnomusicological film juries in Canada, Uruguay, and Portugal in 2018, my overall impression is that while there seems to be growing enthusiasm about ethnomusicological filmmaking, many films made by ethnomusicologists continue to be made without much contemplation about where they fit within a tradition of ethnomusicological film, ethnographic and documentary film, and/or visual ethnography more broadly. Since the field of ethnomusicology does not have a well well-organized canon of theories regarding audiovisual documentation, and since most ethnomusicologists do not train in theories of ethnographic filmmaking, this is not surprising. Furthermore, as most of us are trained primarily in text-based forms of scholarship, it is not easy to translate research questions to cinematic language and communicate those to an outside audience. Making films is hard, and making films that communicate nuanced ethnomusicological ideas, harder still.

The challenge of placing our work within broader frameworks and discourses lies thus not only on the technicalities of filmmaking, but also on the filmmaker's ability to indicate to the viewers "how", and from what cinematic mode, to watch a given film. To achieve this clarity, we must work harder to position the films we make in dialogue with each other, and within lineages and

vocabularies of filmmaking from adjacent disciplines like documentary filmmaking, film studies, and visual anthropology. As David MacDougall writes about films in anthropology “anthropological films... do not provide a ‘pictorial representation’ of anthropological knowledge, but a form of knowledge that emerges through the very grain of the filmmaking” (1998: 76). Translating this idea to ethnomusicological films offers an invitation to individually and collectively ask what kinds of unique knowledge ethnomusicological films are capable of producing, and how these forms of knowledge can dialogue with one another to advance the field at large. The fact that we don’t yet have a clearly defined canon—in one sense a weakness—also represents a strength, as we can embrace these gaps as an invitation to imagine a place for audiovisual research without being tied down to historically engrained normative practices.

### *Multimodality and the value of writing about filmmaking*

In my own research, I have found it productive to conceptualize my films within what I refer to as multimodal frameworks of ethnomusicological scholarship and knowledge production (see Shorter 2011). What I mean by multimodal frameworks is that I embrace film in its ability to communicate certain ideas through cinematic vocabularies difficult to convey in text, and I embrace writing for its ability to communicate other kinds of knowledge, equally difficult to convey through film (see Gubner 2018a, 2018b, 2022). If, as semiotician, Gunther Kress says: “modes are resources whereby we can make meaning material,” (2012) then multimodality allows us to get away from using language as the primary way of communicating meaning, opening creative spaces for the multi-layered production of ethnomusicological ideas.

Thinking of our films in multimodal frameworks does not mean that our films must always exist alongside the texts we write about them. As most of us know, our films can and often do have multiple lives depending on the audiences viewing them and the contexts through which they are shown. Nonetheless, writing about the films we make creates opportunities to reflect, explain, and critique the processes behind our audiovisual productions. This process of reflecting, explaining, critiquing our work becomes particularly valuable in revealing the ethnographic and theoretical frameworks behind our projects and in entering into conversation with other academics and filmmakers. Through writing and reading about each other's films, we can begin to articulate how we each approach the process of blending ethnomusicological research questions with audiovisual methodologies of knowledge production, sharpening our diverse approaches and dialoguing with each other in illuminating ways.

Without a real collective effort in this direction, I fear filmmaking will continue to live on the sidelines of ethnomusicology as it has done for so many years now. Study Group meetings like the ones in ICTM are valuable for coming together to articulate these ideas as a subfield, but we need to reach out more broadly with our ideas if we are to open cracks and educate our non-filmmaking peers about the value and relevance of our practice. Whether our writing should take the form of long essays, short accompanying film statements, multimodal webpages, interactive articles, or books, depends on the nature of each project and should be an invitation for creativity.

Over the past few years, I have heard some ethnomusicological filmmakers say that they see no need for text to contextualize their filmed work, that by writing about our films we are somehow lessening the ability of film to communicate ideas without the assistance of written words. Conceptually, I understand where these comments are coming from, but I have yet to see ethnomusicological films that do not leave me with questions about process and content that could be productively addressed through writing. While I am quick to advocate destabilizing hierarchies of written scholarship in academia, and quick to urge filmmakers to experiment with moving away from using verbal narratives as the dominant structure of films, writing about filmmaking does not delegitimize the value of our filmed work. If we look toward anthropology, the discipline of ethnographic filmmaking developed not only by scholars creating films but also by writing about those films. Jean Rouch's essay "The Camera and Man" (1974) does not lessen the cinematic validity of his films, nor does David MacDougall's book *The Corporeal Image: Film Ethnography, and the Senses* (2006) lessen his many filmic contributions to sensory ethnography and observational cinema.

Writing about the theories and methods behind our films will both help us better understand each other's work and will also help non-filmmakers understand how/why we turn to film as a central component of our different research projects. Steven Feld's translation and editorial of Jean Rouch's essays, *Ciné-Ethnography* (2003), and Benjamin Harbert's book *American Music Documentary: Five Case Studies of Ciné-Ethnomusicology* (2018) offer great examples of ethnomusicologists who are putting in the time to really write at length about filmmaking<sup>1</sup>. I am eager to see more written about films made by ethnomusicologists in the future. The proceedings from the 2014 MusiCam conference, *Ethnomusicology and Audiovisual Communication* (Cámara de Landa *et al* 2016), the proceedings from the Ljubljana symposium, *Ethnomusicology in Audiovisual Time* (Hui 2018), my recent articles in the *Yearbook for Traditional Music and Sound Ethnographies* (2018a, 2018b), and this special edition of *TRANS-Revista Transcultural de Música* all offer models and examples that take steps in this direction.

### Multimodality in tango research

In my own work, conceptualizing my filmmaking as part of multimodal ethnographic research practice has kept me accountable and honest, pushing me to interrogate the slippery lines between aesthetics and ethics, between subjectivity and ethnographic accountability, between artistic creation and academic research. For me, writing, like film editing, acts as a powerful space for reflection and self-critique. For example, the short films I made about neighborhood tango music scenes in Buenos Aires (see Gubner 2018a, 2022) were filmed to evoke sensuous experiences of music making as part of a larger study on the production of locality in contemporary tango music scenes. I made these films because I believed that cinematic language was better suited than written text to evoke the ways certain neighborhood music making practices were re-localizing tango

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<sup>1</sup> Since the time of this roundtable discussion, other relevant contributions to this literature have been published, including D'Amico 2020 and MacDonald 2023.

aesthetics for new generations of artists in Buenos Aires. The films are emotional because, as Silvio Carta writes, “empathetic reactions to films often correspond to profound forms of knowledge in which the resonances of feeling and thinking are equally significant” (2015: 238). I wanted to make films that made people feel and think simultaneously, just as these music making practices blend sentimentalism and activism (or feeling and thinking) in their own ways. I also made these films to help legitimize and bring visibility to artistic communities I had known for years who felt unseen or overshadowed by mainstream tourist industries and official-government-funded narratives of tango culture in Argentina today. In these films, I tried to provide experiential windows into certain events, places, and artistic communities, prioritizing experiential and sensory knowledge over analytical and scientific narratives. My goal was both to communicate the feelings of some of the social actors in these films, as well as to open spaces for outside viewers to gain their own sensory understanding of tango through the sounds, sites, and edited sequences I created.

What makes these films ethnomusicological is that they are the products of ethnomusicological research and are driven by ethnomusicological questions about the role of participatory music making in the localization of globalized genres, and in the politics and production of locality in 21st century cities. Their emotional, engaging, subjective, evocative, and intentionally not overly explanatory nature is not antithetical to their academic value, but in fact, at the heart of their function as imaginative, cinematic ways of knowing neighborhood tango culture. They convey meaning through what Peter Crawford has called the “experiential cinematic mode” (Crawford 1992: 75) and the way we learn from them should be different than an academic text.

When I write about these same neighborhood tango music scenes, I interrogate the production of locality in different ways, citing ethnomusicological references, historical data, and weaving together theoretical frameworks related to participatory music making, urban music scenes, and Latin Americanist approaches to activism. If you were to see my films with no explanation, much of these broader references would be lost, though of course if you read my writing without seeing my films, arguably all the sensory knowledge contained within my films would also be lost. Each would teach you something of value, but neither is intended to give all the pieces of the puzzle. As Michael Brims explained at this symposium when presenting a film he made with Jaime Bofill in Lisbon, films have layers, and those layers can unfold depending on who you are, how many times you see a film, and what context you are given before or after their viewing.

Even though my films were made deeply informed by ethnomusicological questions, I recognize that they become much easier to insert in broader academic conversations when I am able to frame them with spoken or written words, citing both the film theories that inspired them as well as the ethnomusicologists, and Latin Americanists that informed the frameworks behind their production. If the films are intended to bring you into ethnographic moments that are crafted to produce new kinds of knowledge that inform how the viewer understands a genre or practice, my writing serves to frame those moments within broader intellectual discussions.

Outside of an academic context, what makes my films meaningful as pieces of public scholarship is that they are consumed and shared within the communities where I made them, and by non-locals interested to learn more about tango from my point of view. Their emotional,

engaging, and experiential nature allows them to be accessible to non-academic audiences, who, in many regards would be less attracted to watching a lengthy film full of academic language, explanation, and analysis. Through multimodality, I can reach multiple audiences and make films that serve multiple functions. Multimodality has given me the freedom to embrace film and writing in their complementary but totally different ways of communicating ethnomusicological knowledge.

### Looking Forward: Peer-reviewed audiovisual publication platforms

One of the great advantages that we have right now in comparison to scholars that came before us is the ability to embrace the multimodal capabilities of digital publication platforms. Although the flagship ethnomusicology journals have yet to transition to fully integrated multimodal publication models, or models that offer rigorous peer-review for the publication of films, I am hopeful that as a discipline we can work toward these changes soon<sup>2</sup>. Building peer-reviewed multimodal and audiovisual publication platforms for ethnomusicological research into our flagship journals would represent an enormous step toward moving audiovisual work from the periphery to the center of critical discourse in our discipline. Furthermore, it will allow filmmakers to legitimize audiovisual research within academic processes of publication so critical in tenure and promotion guidelines (allowing more of this research to occur) and would encourage our readers/viewers to engage with audiovisual and written outputs in integrated and interactive ways. In closing my reflections today, I'd like to turn my attention to a few of these platforms. Whereas books about films create unavoidable distance between writing and filmed ideas, online platforms offer us possibilities to shrink that distance in compelling ways.

In preparing for this conference, I spent some time looking through different online anthropology journals that specifically allowed for the peer-reviewed publication of audiovisual materials. The *Journal of Anthropological Films, Screenworks*, and the *Journal of Video Ethnography*, are three open-source, peer-reviewed online journals that allow for the publication of films. Interestingly, each journal takes a slightly different approach to this process. I thought outlining a few of these approaches might be helpful in moving toward conceptualizing what kinds of peer-reviewed, online spaces would fit the specific and collective needs of our many different approaches to doing audiovisual ethnomusicological research.

The journals *Screenworks*, based out of the University of West of England in Bristol, and the *Journal of Video Ethnography*, published out of DePaul University in Chicago follow similar models. In these journals, authors submit a film with a research statement of approximately 2000 words that outlines research questions, context, methods, outcomes, and impact. Rather than the text functioning to explain the film —which would fall into the trap of creating a hierarchy of words over

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<sup>2</sup> The new *Journal for Audiovisual Ethnomusicology (JAVEM)*, launched in 2022 as a new official publication of the Society for Ethnomusicology, represents a major advancement in this subfield offering finally an open-source, peer-reviewed publication platform entirely for films related to audiovisual ethnomusicology.

film— *Screenworks* states that the text should operate as a “‘route map’ of the research process”<sup>3</sup>. While both journals require a research statement, they emphasize the film as a stand-alone piece to be complemented by a text. In this way, they distance themselves from the potential of more integrated multimodal approaches to research presentation that I think we as a field might be wise to embrace. One of the interesting things about *Screenworks* is that once a film has been accepted, peer reviews are published underneath the film and author’s research statement, allowing for open dialogue about both the content of films and the written analysis of visual work. This model might be helpful in encouraging open debate and conversation as we move through the growing pains of learning how to watch and critique each other's work.

The *Journal of Anthropological Films* (JAF), based out of the University of Bergen in Norway, states that “Contributions should be based on anthropological or equivalent longer-term fieldwork and methods of research”<sup>4</sup>. They explain that their peer review process includes one person with regional/thematic expertise, and another with a background in visual anthropology. Unlike the *Screenworks* and *JVE*, the *JAF* does not require a research statement of any kind, but only publishes the films along with a short abstract. Although I don’t find this part of their model as productive, what I like about this journal is the way they highlight the need for audiovisual specialists and research-specific specialists in the peer-review process, and how they emphasize that the films should be made as the product of ethnography.

Beyond these journals there are a few examples that allow for the publication of multimodal essays where images, sound clips, maps, films, can be embedded alongside text. In ethnomusicology, the journals *Music and Politics* and *Ethnomusicology Review* each have examples of this approach. Similarly, *American Anthropologist*, the journal of the American Anthropological Association, now has a section now called “Multimodal Anthropologies.” Yet another model can be found in the open-source journal *Entanglements: experiments in multimodal ethnography*, launched in 2018. Although each of these represent important and valuable efforts, none of these publications clearly outline the processes by which the non-text-based materials are considered critically in the review process of these journals. Borrowing some of the examples of guidelines from the film journals above might be helpful as we further develop these, and other multimodal and audiovisual platforms in the future.

In each of these models I see value and also limitations, and this exercise, much like sitting on the film jury, has proven to be a valuable learning experience. I am left eager to continue imagining how we could shift our journals to accommodate the multiple shapes and sizes of our films, the multiple intended academic and public uses of our audiovisual research, and the varying lengths of text each of us feels would be helpful to communicate our work to one another. For films made to be shared with our interlocutors, could we, for example, have a kind of peer-review or feedback from a local cultural expert to include in a publication to open a dialogic space in our

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<sup>3</sup> “About,” *Screenworks: The Peer Reviewed Online Publication of Practice Research in Screen Media*, <http://screenworks.org.uk>.

<sup>4</sup> “About the Journal,” *Journal of Anthropological Films*, <https://boap.uib.no/index.php/jaf/about>.



review process? What would this look like? Could we create a space where we could publish parts of a series of films together to show our process of moving through filmmaking methodologies? I am eager for us to think about these things and to brainstorm how, as a study group, we might build these kinds of platforms<sup>5</sup>.

This year, I had the privilege to help Domenico Staiti, Giorgio Adamo, and Sergio Bonanzinga brainstorm some of these elements in the first edition of their new open-source journal, *Sound Ethnographies* or *Etnografie Sonore*. I also took on the complex task of writing the first multimodal essay for the journal, as well as undergoing the peer review process of a film and accompanying written essay (see Gubner 2018b). I found the process both inspiring and challenging, in particular because I felt at many times that I was treading on uncharted waters. I flipped back and forth between developing the theoretical ideas underlying why I decided to film tango in the first place and the relationship to broader literature on tango music and the localization of globalized music cultures, and a desire to talk about the film itself, how I filmed, with whom, what had worked, what had been a challenge, what I had learned in this process. Would people read the article and then see the film, or the other way around, did it matter? In a way, writing this article was a humbling exercise in moving from theory to the messy practice of multimodal thinking, and left me excited to keep exploring this new terrain. Just like I think we need to train each other in “how” to watch our films, I think we need to collectively invent and experiment in the shape and form and how to write and experience multimodal essays.

For me, multimodality offers a productive solution that allows us freedom and space to explore other creative approaches and formats to filmmaking that push beyond the traditional ethnographic film models that often fall in the traps of colonizing and exoticizing gazes. Multimodal approaches also offer many possibilities to make films that are accessible and engaging to public audiences. I am and will always be a supporter of radical creativity within academia, but without explaining our methods of imagining, rupturing, de-colonizing, queering, de-centering and rethinking academia, we run the risk of losing touch with our own theoretical and ethical processes as researchers in an ethnographic discipline. So, let’s keep making movies and watching each other’s movies, but let’s also collectively work to take the time to sit and reflect and write about the movies we make, to teach each other “how” to watch our films with a 21st century ethnomusicological eye, and then to work together to find ways to create critical, peer-reviewed platforms for circulating our research in exciting, transformative, and meaningful ways.

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<sup>5</sup> Since this ICTM symposium roundtable occurred, the Society for Ethnomusicology has supported multiple efforts to create visibility and legitimacy for the growing field of audiovisual ethnomusicology. The first of these was the 2019 Society for Ethnomusicology Pre-Conference Symposium on “Film as Ethnography, Activism, and Public Work in Ethnomusicology”, organized by myself and Rebecca Dirksen at Indiana University, Bloomington. Building on this event, the Society for Ethnomusicology officially launched the *Journal for Audiovisual Ethnomusicology (JAVEM)* in 2022. This new peer-reviewed, online, multimodal publication represents a major milestone in advancing this subfield as an open-source, peer-reviewed publication platform entirely dedicated to audiovisual ethnomusicology.

## Doing audiovisual ethnomusicology

Domenico Staiti

I tend to grumble; I'm never satisfied with anything. My only consolation is that I have been this way since childhood, so I don't think I have gotten much worse with age. I present here some considerations about ethnomusicological documentary cinema that are entirely consistent with my grumbling nature. These considerations have been guided and reinforced by the task of selecting the films to show in these days, which Ram Pradesh, Jennie Gubner and I each carried out on our own but in collaboration.

We ended up selecting more than forty films: a good number. Watching them one after another, musical traditions from different places and continents, however, I was overcome by an increasing feeling of annoyance caused by certain features shared among many of these films (but not, of course, the ones we selected): annoyance for the lengthy introductions, exhausting shots of landscapes, close-ups of the faces of elderly people or women's legs: elements that flirt with a fascination for the exotic or an exclusively aesthetic dimension, like a shabby version of National Geographic. Annoyance, furthermore, caused by coquetry, commonplace elements, the ticks of cinematographic language: gratuitous fade-outs, the excessive use of irrelevant details and the pursuit of unusual shots.

Annoyance, again, caused by the overabundance of interviews, in which the actors of the traditions seem foolish even when they are not, because they express vacuous considerations about their music, traditions, identity or the fascinating, universal nature of music. They do this instead of displaying their own specific expertise. And this is not surprising: if the interviewer does not know what elements to look for or how to find them, he or she obtains generic and stupid answers even from the most skilled player of a tradition: as the saying goes, garbage in, garbage out.

Finally, annoyance caused by the invasion of ornamental elements, purely decorative, often aimed at concealing the lack of in-depth research and accumulated expertise in relation to the research objects, the spuriousness and superficiality of the musical references. If a documentary has interesting content, it's because the film communicates elements of effective research; if there is no underlying research, no amount of technical devices, exotic landscapes, the wrinkled faces of old people or girls' legs can ever compensate for or embellish this fundamental weakness.

Of course, some ornamental elements do contribute to the narration: they serve to convey the context, the researcher's perspective, the actors' points of view or much more. In many cases, filmmakers need to use ornamental elements to solve editing problems, and this is even more pronounced in ethnomusicological documentaries where the timing of the voice-over is complicated by the timing of the music and performative actions. On the other hand, frills that do not aid in describing the storyline in one way or another or are not strictly necessary to the unfolding of the film's syntax (just like punctuation in a written text) do not enrich, they are only an annoyance. Often, the best solution is the simplest one. I prefer a film that is technically poor but fully depicts a story, a musical tradition, over a film that is rich in sophisticated artifices but recounts nothing and

is only pleased with itself. Few of the so-called ethnomusicological films actually engage with music, much less do so from an ethnomusicological perspective.

Of course, this is not the place or time to provide a comprehensive definition of ethnomusicology, or to lay out what is or isn't ethnomusicological. Nor do I believe that anyone could really provide such a definition at this time. However, I do believe that we must focus precisely on the boundaries of our discipline and its objects –however blurry, ephemeral, and relative they might be– and pay attention to the way we articulate them. This is completely different from thinking that, since borders are blurry, ephemeral, and relative they do not exist and, therefore, we can simply wallow in these issues without any method or prospects, in the name of a kind of freedom that actually boils down to a lack of competence: that kind of wallowing is a contemporary trend that I oppose. In very general and relative terms, however, my point here is that many of the films claiming to have an ethnomusicological focus fail to pay specific attention to musical structures, the objects of music, or the way that the segments of musical cultures conveyed in the film fit into a framework of traditions and also run counter to it. We might say that cinema is capable of conveying all this, and of doing so in a specific and in-depth way. By showing things that could not be communicated in any other way and offering interpretations and analyses that could not be offered in any other way.

Sometimes this occurs, and it produces results that are also significant in terms of the overall enrichment of the discipline. But sometimes, or often, this does not occur. On the contrary, cinematographic language often makes it possible not only to disguise a lack of competence but also to avoid taking on the task of interpreting, of providing an analysis of the traditions under observation. Cinema therefore becomes a space in which to exercise empty and pretentious narcissism. All in the name of an idea of modernity that I cannot agree with, and which has actually become quite old-fashioned, worn out and stale: a modernity that seeks to transcend competence and inevitably leads to superficiality. A modernity that gives us an empty vision of otherness, one that empties of meaning by rendering objects exotic, as if the entire last century of abundant ethnographic research and anthropological insight were completely useless. A modernity that celebrates itself rather than the objects of discourse: the rhetorical celebration of change, innovation and globalization are obviously part of this. Suffice to zoom in on a smartphone in a straw hut, show an African man playing in the streets of a European city or an Indian man building a postmodern installation in New York, or even show segments of Indian or Melanesian African traditions alongside shots of a European or American kid enacting these same traditions and your job is done. It is no longer necessary to talk about things, it is enough to talk instead about how things are not what they used to be or show what they have become. In the end these are evidently all the same, or at least flattened by the uniformity of discourses about them. There is little effort to understand and describe these things, first of all.

It is also true that, today, we tend to attribute great and often excessive importance to the innovative features of traditions, at the expense of practices of conservation and perpetuation. Without realizing that, in many ways, the videos people share on YouTube or elsewhere for example include more elements of continuity with the traditions of village communities than elements of

adaptation to the globalized world.

Additionally, and once again because of the specificity of the technical medium and its narrative codes, filming often leads filmmakers to privilege the direct relationship with an individual or a small group of people who represent an easy means of accessing a tradition, repertoire, ritual or ritual system. This certainly works well and helps to solve a number of problems. It also helps to produce a finished piece, with little effort and in a shorter amount of time, that conveys a partial and subjective interpretation, completely closed in on itself, self-referential, lacking any critical approach or interpretative labor: I, the author, am showing the actions or point of view of X or Y actors, and this is an absolute, indisputable and reassuring fact. I do not set out to analyze and interpret a segment of a tradition; rather, I show a certain individual or group of individuals doing something and narrating themselves: in this way I don't run the possible risk of anyone critiquing my skills, analysis or interpretations.

Anthropology –and, from a specific point of view, ethnomusicology– have been debating the interpretation of cultures for over a century. And at the end of this process, the fact that points of view –of both the author and the actors– are highly subjective inevitably reintroduces the very elements scholars wished to discard: the objectivity of knowledge, which subjectivist restructuring brought to the heart of investigation and interpretation.

In general, when speaking of films and ethnomusicology, the issue is that researchers need to assume critical responsibility. Responsibility for producing a filmed and edited text which, as such, can be accessed and interrogated by other members of the scientific community. But of course, there is no denying that films tend to be self-referential by their very nature, even more so than written texts. As finished products that can be used only passively, by their very nature they offer themselves to the eyes of others, more than other products of research such as conference proceedings, articles or books. Because this specularity is in the nature of the medium, in the way it tends to account for the reality being observed and documented.

Additionally, although it is not exactly clear why, it is widely believed that films must always and in any case appeal to an audience beyond the group of those who are interested in and expert on the subject in question. Much more than an essay or a book. Mostly, films are considered tools for disseminating research results broadly, and mostly for non-experts. And, often, it is believed that they should be linked to market logics, that is, the fact that they can reach a wider audience through television channels, social media, international competitions and awards. But why is this?

Have you ever heard anyone discuss the content of *Les Maitres Foux* or *Mami Wata*? Someone writing in another publication who added information about *Hauka* or water spirits based on what Jean Rouch showed and said about those specific things? Only a few studies on possession in West Africa have done so, and only marginally: instead, all the other studies of these films have focused their energies exclusively on discussing Jean Rouch's filmmaking techniques and style. Despite the fact that these films are important in terms of research, providing information and interpretations that are quite relevant for the ethnographic disciplines.

So, in the end, that's what I wanted to say: in my opinion, when a film doesn't offer enough

content to allow us to discuss the phenomenon it documents and observes, forcing us to focus instead on the way the film was made, its language and techniques, I would not consider it an ethnological film. Or, more specifically, an ethnomusicological film. It is something else, whether beautiful or ugly, interesting or boring, it does not belong to a community that recognizes itself in research and the dissemination of research results.

### **Teaching audiovisual ethnomusicology**

Matías Isolabella

My paper is in some way connected to what has been considered by my colleagues: obviously, teaching audiovisual ethnomusicology requires a doing and discussing its approach. We thought this roundtable could be an opportunity to talk publicly about both our discrepancies, and what we observed are some lines that could be developed within our still new-born study group. As you may have induced by now, we are not pointing in any specific direction, nor do we have particular answers. We rather aim at touching some sensitive topics that, since our first meeting in Valladolid, we believe require further discussion and, probably, a more collaborative approach.

To start, I could say that my interpretation of the sub-discipline lays somewhere in-between that of Nico Staiti and Jennie Gubner, not only based on what they presented but also on many private conversations that we recently had<sup>6</sup>. I understand Staiti's reaction to theoretical and methodological superficial productions in which a non-reflexive esthetical approach to film is dominant, and I agree that it is sometimes hard to consider the "ethnographicness" of films that do not seem to be fully engaged with academic methodologies<sup>7</sup>. Of course, we are not discovering the problem; it has already been extensively discussed both by anthropologists and ethnomusicologists, mostly starting around the last quarter of the XX Century (see Hockings [1975] 1995 and Feld 1976). However, for many of us, these topics are still relevant today.

Furthermore, during the last decades several authors have been thinking and writing about audiovisual anthropology, offering resumed versions of such discussions. I am referring to Banks and Morphy (1997), Barbash and Taylor (1997), Ruby (2000), El Guindi (2004), Pink (2006 and 2007) or Banks and Ruby (2011), only to mention a few, echoed in Spain by Ardévol (1995, 2001 and 2006), Grau Rebollo (2002 and 2012) and Álvarez (2016) among others. Nonetheless, it seems that the dichotomies of art/science, subjective/objective, fiction/non-fiction, and so on, that lay beneath are hard to dissolve. These dichotomies were explicitly formulated, I believe, from the seminal conversation between Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson (Brand, Bateson and Mead 1976), but they were implicitly present since the very first uses of cinematography in the field (see, for example, the work of Félix Louis Regnault or Robert Flaherty). The spectrum of styles in ethnographic documentary, from Gottingen's IWF to impressionistic or evocative approaches and everything in

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<sup>6</sup> Please note that this article was written in 2019.

<sup>7</sup> I discussed some of these topics in a previous article in this same journal. See Isolabella and Rossano 2015.

between, must be understood in this frame (see D'Amico 2012).

I agree with Gubner that, in a time of epistemological and ontological changes marked by de-colonial and feminist turns, multimodality, post-humanism, etc., the search for a sub-discipline that may produce a decentralized and sensorial knowledge seems to be particularly appropriate. Since Margaret Mead's observations of anthropology being a discipline of words ([1975] 1995), many authors explored this frontier, David MacDougall being one of the most relevant today:

[...] the need to build an intellectual foundation for visual anthropology by enabling a shift from a word-and-sentence-based anthropological thought to image-and-sequence-based anthropological thought. Visual Anthropology can never be either a copy of written anthropology or a substitute for it. For that very reason it must develop alternative objectives and methodologies that will benefit anthropology as a whole (1997: 292-293).

Based on several private conversations, I know for sure that Nico Staiti is not exactly a follower of MacDougall's thought; nevertheless, I believe that the short film he presented in this occasion can be interpreted as a step in that same direction, highlighting the radical difference between observer and observed in their approach to audiovisual as a representational tool, its ritual meanings and contradictions.

It is widely known that, in ethnomusicology, Zemp was among the first authors to express the need to establish autonomy between our way of seeing and representing music through film from that of commercial audiovisuals: "[...] are we as ethnomusicologists going to defend our point of view and distinguish our conception of filming music from that of television producers and independent documentarians, as well as from the conception of human (but not humanistic) ethologists who film human behavior?" (1988: 394). Despite the fact that three decades have passed from his statement, what Staiti and Gubner observed as members of juries and film committees seem to confirm that, as scholars, we may be well aware of the meaning of Zemp's quote but, as filmmakers, we are still struggling to emancipate our way of seeing. In this sense, I share Staiti's irritation towards what seems to be an empty mannerism. Still, the search for a new language, a new way of expressing knowledge without words, has a long way to go and requires the willingness to take risks exploring possibilities that might not result successful. If, on the one hand, it is true that "different kinds of information are handled best in different types of media" (Feld 1976: 300), on the other hand, I agree with Titon that "it is easy to show something in film, but telling is hard" (1992: 91).

Furthermore, our tendency to fall into superficial mannerisms needs to be analyzed not only as a naïve attitude caused by a poor ethnography or by our limited technical or theoretical knowledge about filmmaking, but also as a visual style that talks about ourselves: about our western society (and sometimes even our discipline) as, unfortunately, still entangled in a romantic, exotic and colonial view of the world, and of our discipline's maturity and ability to reach society at large. Such analysis would fall under what Worth defined as a semiotics of ethnographic film (1995). As

ethnomusicologists interested in the use and study of the audiovisual language in its multiple forms, I believe it is crucial to be engaged in critical reviews of commercial music documentaries not only as a form of auto-ethnography, but also as a sort of activism. In my still limited experience, I have often collided with the quite different perspectives between academic and cinematographic approaches: filmmakers and scholars rarely seem to be able to understand each other. Given this gap, we should try to make our voice sound loud out there, at least regarding documentary films about music that might pass a message with important conceptual flaws.

I agree with the dramatic issue that Staiti puts on the table: sometimes it looks like the last one hundred years of ethnography meant nothing. This reflection, of course, could be extended to many other concepts related to our discipline, like the immortal belief of music being a universal language, instead of “musics”, or humanly organized sounds, being a universal behavior. More than a century after the invention of the Cent by John Alexander Ellis which, as many scholars would say, represents one of the first steps in the deconstruction of naturalistic and ethnocentric approaches to the study of musical systems<sup>8</sup>, today in many music conservatories, schools, and sometimes even universities –at least in the Spanish State– music is still presented as a universal language that particularly favors communication between cultures, evidencing a problem of communication between academia and society that transcends our sub-discipline.

These reflections, among many others, are unavoidable when approaching the teaching of audiovisual ethnomusicology. Even when escaping hegemonic definitions of the discipline, each of us is inclined towards specific conceptualizations of the field. In the next few pages, I would like to share with you my experience teaching an optative course of audiovisual ethnomusicology to 4<sup>th</sup> year students of musicology at the University of Valladolid (Spain) and how I believe our study group might contribute to improve it. I will start by briefly describing how my colleague Raquel Jiménez and I organized the course, then I will focus on how this study group could contribute to the improvement of the teaching.

### *Written and audiovisual materials in ethnomusicology*

The title of this section, which coincides with the title of the subject taught, refers to the multimodality mentioned by Gubner in her text, and is broad enough to allow different didactic approaches. The subject was created in 2009 due to the interest of the Music Section staff at the University of Valladolid, marked by the trajectory of Enrique Cámara de Landa who, over the previous decades, has made extensive use of audiovisual tools in his research (see Cámara de Landa 2016)<sup>9</sup>. The first professor of the subject was Grazia Tuzi (now at Sapienza University of Rome) and

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<sup>8</sup> In recent years, a controversy has been raised around Ellis' genuine relativism. See, among others, Gribenski 2021.

<sup>9</sup> From the 1990s the Music Departmental Section has had the collaboration of various researchers and students which have shown interest in the topic, contributing to the creation of the subject. Below I limit myself to citing those who published ethnographic materials derived from their own research: Victoria Eli Rodríguez, Marita Fornaro Bordolli, Antonio Díaz Rodríguez, Grazia Tuzi, Mónica de La Fuente, Nacho Corral Bermejo, María Gonzáles Legido, Leonardo D'Amico, Leonardo Díaz Collado, Salvatore Rossano and myself.

is currently shared by Raquel Jiménez and by me. The subject (6 ECTS, which in Spain is equivalent to 60 teaching hours) is divided into three main sections.

The first one consists of a historical, theoretical and stylistic introduction to the use of (audio)visual documentation (both photographic and filmic) in ethnographic research through the viewing of classic documentary films and the study of consolidated bibliography. The second provides students with a basic alphabetization of audiovisual language (rules of composition, shots typology, camera movements, narrative structure, handling of equipment, etc.) and aims at a double purpose: on the one hand, to allow students to analyze ethnographic films with an enhanced level of consciousness and, on the other hand, to provide them with a practical know-how through which they will have to create a short ethnographic film (around 5 minutes long) that addresses a relevant issue for ethnomusicological research. The third part of the subject, which is articulated around topics equivalent to those presented for the first section, focuses on the history of audiovisual ethnomusicology, highlighting its specificity and problems.

A detailed account of our didactic approach goes beyond the purpose of my contribution to the roundtable, so I will move on to discuss how this study group might help improve the teaching of audiovisual ethnomusicology. I will focus on three main topics: the scarce accessibility to audiovisual productions; the lack of specific handbooks; and the need to perform historiographical research about national, regional, and local ethnographic or folkloristic audiovisual productions.

#### *Accessibility to audiovisual productions*

We can probably agree that audiovisual ethnomusicology is not a very common topic to be taught in musicology degree courses. Even so, I have observed a rising interest among young generations of students in Spain, who are willing to express their thoughts and feelings in more creative ways. Its relative success is very good news for those of us willing to add audiovisual tools to our methodological toolbox, but it is also challenging because students usually have a distorted idea of what audiovisual ethnomusicology is, often filtered through their experience with, let's say, transcultural documentaries: typically, productions lead by professional filmmakers with highly expensive and sometimes sophisticated technology, featuring a sort of adventurous enterprise in far away and exotic places, impregnated with colonialist and superficial discourses. Films whose main purpose is to entertain and to evoke a sort of anthropological nostalgia.

But how can one blame students or the general public? Anthropologists and ethnomusicologists have always complained about the difficulties in getting access to other colleagues' works: research footage often remains unpublished and films lack both distribution and academic support. As we all know, nowadays there are streaming services like Kanopy or Alexander Street (just to mention two) that offer a reasonably wide collection of titles but, unfortunately, the vast majority of the universities around the world cannot afford (or prefer not) to pay for them. If their cost is a problem for an important percentage of European public universities, it is hard to imagine their viability in less wealthy areas of the world.

In recent years, DER –Documentary Educational Resources, has been editing and distributing



several anthropological and ethnomusicological films, but at a price that seems too high, well over two or three hundred dollars for institutional purchases (the purchase of a single one of these films would exceed the annual institutional budget that I have assigned by my university for the acquisition of bibliography). This is in line with other neoliberal policies within the academic field, where some prestigious publishers are easily charging one hundred euros for a book, sometimes with a symbolic price-drop for the eBook version. These policies are, I believe, radically incompatible with what universities should be and represent. And this is particularly true for public universities.

When talking with colleagues at international conferences, there seems to be a general agreement that the academic industry is going in the wrong direction but, ironically, we all end up meeting in its *cul-de-sac* forced by the dictatorship of impact factors. Nevertheless, we should react and realize that, as unpaid peer reviewers, we are guaranteeing the quality of such publications and, in a way, justifying their prices. I believe that, as a study group, we can and should come up with an alternative system to validate our audiovisual publications that, at the same time, favors their distribution. The digital revolution allows us to explore infinite possibilities: It could be an official study group online free-access audiovisual journal or just an editorial brand that provides an ISBN and a verifiable impact factor. In any case, the result would be a win-win situation: getting academic legitimization for our audiovisual productions and, at the same time, favoring their accessibility<sup>10</sup>.

On the other hand, it is also true that an increasing number of scholars are uploading their documentaries for free on their webpages: the problem here is that it is often impossible to keep track of the ever-changing World Wide Web. In this case, as a specialized study group, we could curate a webpage with a section devoted to systematizing these materials at least by author. I am thinking about a virtual space with hyperlinks to films or personal webpages. The idea of having an official webpage for our study group has been discussed many times over the last years but, for several reasons, we are still struggling to create one.

### Lack of handbooks

Another important contribution our study group could make to the academic field is the publication of handbooks of audiovisual ethnomusicology<sup>11</sup>. There is a reduced but important collection of articles and a few books that are reference points to our field, many of those have been quoted during this conference. Nevertheless, we are still lacking a comprehensive theoretical and methodological work that stimulates dialogue between audiovisual conceptions and ethnomusicological theory at large, including the trans-disciplinary approach that characterizes our time. IWF Gottingen films are the reflection of a time in which the conceptualization of social sciences was informed by natural sciences. Zemp films, for example, are a clear translation to film

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<sup>10</sup> Note that, since the presentation of this text in 2018, the SEM sponsored the creation of the *Journal of Audiovisual Ethnomusicology*, which published its first volume in 2022.

<sup>11</sup> Note that, since the presentation of this text in 2018, Leonardo D'Amico published in English an extended version of his PhD research, already published in Italian (see D'Amico 2012 and D'Amico 2020), which represents a solid first step in that direction.

of the author's methodological concerns with ethnotheories, informed by ethnomethodology. John Baily's films are in line with a growing interest in the life stories of particular musicians and their interaction with their historical time, in a post-structuralistic frame concerned with the agency of particular actors. Recent films challenge the concept of authorship and are engaged with the sensorial turn and the post-humanistic theories. And so on.

Of course, these suggestions should be expanded and articulated systematically, but I believe that a historiography of filmmaking related to ethnographic film theories and methodologies, film studies and the history of cinema, ethnomusicological theories and the historiography of social theory at large would be extremely useful both for students and researchers, a contribution that could be engaged through a collaborative approach. Benjamin Harbert's (2018) and Michael MacDonald's (2023) recent books offer an excellent example of the kind of work I am referring to.

### *Ethnographic music documentaries and political cultures*

I would like now to address the third issue. This hypothetical handbook would probably be focused on scholarly productions. There is no doubt this should be our first concern. Nevertheless, in the long term, I believe it would be extremely useful to perform systematic research to investigate how music has been audiovisually represented for expositions in local museums, on national, regional or local televisions and by NGO's and international institutions, etc. What were the cultural policies behind these projects, what discourses were they supporting and how were they functional to power structures. An example would be the critical review of audiovisual materials included in the applications for the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage program.

I believe that providing an answer to these issues would enrich our competence, critical approach and historical understanding of the field, and would provide essential support for the teaching and understanding of audiovisual ethnomusicology.

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**Cita recomendada**

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