

***Payada*, Empathy and Social Commitment: A Filming Experience in an Argentinian Prison**

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Abstract

The use of video as a research tool has been growing in the last decades. Many of the topics currently debated about its usage are common to diverse disciplines and represent the development of long time discussions: dualities like objective/subjective, fiction/non-fiction, art/science or reflections around the representation of reality, dialogic editing, ethics, etc., are constantly engaged. These debates involve epistemological issues that make it difficult to reach a wide consensus. Therefore, they are interpreted in different ways, depending on many variables: specific dialogic relationships, field of studies, methodological and theoretical frames, personal sensibility, etc. In the following chapter I present some reflections about my research with *payadores rioplatenses*, specifically the audiovisual documentation of a performance that took place in Dolores' penitentiary, in the Province of Buenos Aires. In doing so, I will address some of the main topics currently debated in the discipline, with particular focus on the relationship between the performers and the public, the ethical implications of filming in a prison and the audiovisual representation of human experience.

Keywords: Improvised poetry, performance, audiovisual representation, experience, ethics.

In this essay I will address some theoretical and ethical issues related to the use of audiovisual techniques as a research tool. Particularly, I will present my reflections on the ethnographic representation of human experience and its ethical implications. As it has been highlighted several times in the specific bibliography, fieldwork is -to a certain extent- a subjective and dialogic experience that is based on specific human relations. Hence, to fully understand the ethnographic use of audiovisual techniques as a research tool it is necessary to ground the discourse on the ethnographic experience. To do so, I will briefly introduce my research topic stressing those aspects that are important to support my point; I present some of my concerns regarding fieldwork and audiovisual research and, finally, I describe the filming context explaining step by step my choices and reflections.

Singing opinions

Payada rioplatense is a genre of sung and improvised poetry from Argentina and Uruguay that can be included in a category of practices common to various cultures and societies, such

as the so-called verbal duels or traditions of improvised poetry (Foley 1985; Zumthor [1983] 1990; Finnegan 1992; Pagliai 2009). One of the main analogies between these genres is that they are often performed in the form of challenges between two or more improvisers. Furthermore, *payada rioplatense* is specially related to other Ibero-American improvisational traditions (Armistead 1994; Díaz Pimienta 2013; Trapero 2014); the Iberian influence over these genres, both Spanish and Portuguese, is the linchpin that connects them and relates them back to Europe. The language¹ and the poetic structures are Iberian, while the music and content of the improvisation are the result of the many contingencies involved in the different hybridization processes that are particular to each area. Contemporary *payadores* are also involved in a wide network of international festivals that promote cross-cultural challenges, mostly between Spanish speaking traditions². This helped the creation of strong ties of friendship and brotherhood between improvisers who, until recently, were convinced that they were the last representatives of such traditions (Trapero 1996). Nevertheless, these genres must be considered in a wider context that goes beyond the Hispanic influence and includes, at least, native American and Mediterranean traditions (Armistead 1996; Díaz Pimienta 2013; Scarnecchia 2014).

Among the diverse peculiarities of the *payada rioplatense*, one of the most representative is the improvisers' commitment to a shared set of values. Being a *payador*, as they themselves declare, is something that goes beyond the technical ability to improvise complex poetic structures. Being a *payador* means assuming certain values and commitments that affect many different aspects of an individual's life. Among these values it is particularly important to represent the voice of the people, of the *pueblo*. This is an element that has been historically existent in the tradition and that *payadores* try to preserve. This is not the place to deeply analyse the historical elements that influenced contemporary *payada*, which are partly grounded in the *gauchesca* poetry and the Argentine independence and civil wars (19th century). To be short, *payadores* and *cantores* were present in the forefront of the battles, sometimes improvising verses, sometimes interpreting patriotic *cielitos* written by intellectuals of that time and disseminated in *cordel* literature³. What has been recognized as a complex process of appropriation of the gaucho's voice (Ludmer [1988] 2000) reached a climax with José Hernández' epic poem called *Martín Fierro* (1872). In this book, Hernández does a critique of the society of the time describing the misadventures of the gaucho Martín Fierro, who narrates his story in improvised verses (Hernández [1872] 1967). At that time the gaucho was treated as a barbarian in a society that was trying to build an identity based on "civilized" European models (Sarmiento [1845] 1961; Altamirano and Sarlo 1983; Ludmer [1988] 2000).

This concept changed at the turn of the 20th century, when a huge number of immigrants coming from Europe were weakening the on-going construction of the Argentine national identity. As a response, some intellectuals elected the gaucho as the symbol of the "truly" creole Argentine identity (see for example Lugones [1916] 1944). Nevertheless, this commitment with social issues has been perpetuated during the 20th century, as some *payadores* assumed anarchist ideals and included social criticism in their improvisations (Martín Castro, Carlos Molina and Marta Suint among others). Another famous example of appropriation of the *payadores*' voice from outside the tradition can be found in the poem *El*

payador perseguido, by the Argentine songwriter Atahualpa Yupanqui (1972). Once again, the *gauchesca* style is chosen to denounce the injustice suffered by the pueblo, incarnated by a “persecuted *payador*”.

As mentioned before, contemporary *payadores* continue on this line; in fact, they assume as an identity symbol a verse from Martín Fierro that says (Hernández [1872] 1967: vv. 61-66):

<p><i>Yo he conocido cantores que era un gusto el escuchar; mas no quieren opinar y se divierten cantando; pero yo canto opinando que es mi modo de cantar.</i></p>	<p>I have known singers it was a pleasure to listen to; they amuse themselves singing and don't care to give opinions; but I sing giving opinions and that's my kind of song.</p>
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To sing giving opinions and to be the “voice of the *pueblo*” implies a particular connection between performers and their audience. When the *payadores* arrive to a new place, they start to talk with people and try to find out what is meaningful to them: mayor injustices recently perpetuated, successful endeavours achieved by members of a particular village, historical anniversaries, etc. Furthermore, they usually comment on recent chronicle episodes occurred at a national or international scale, like political issues or natural tragedies. In doing so, they present values and perspectives pertaining to their culture and use expressions that may be familiar to their *pueblo*: mostly people from the countryside, *gauchos* and *paisanos* (peasants). Sometimes, they even defy the *pueblo*'s conservative established assumptions, accomplishing a function that could be recognized as educative (Moreno Cha 2005). In general, *payadores* seek to express the voice of those that cannot speak for themselves, the misfortunates. This aspect could be easily misunderstood: sometimes the line that separates demagoguery from social commitment can be thin, but I am confident that the videos I am presenting here will highlight the importance of empathy both in the *payadores*' values and in the mechanisms of improvisation. To do so I will use as a case study the audiovisual recordings I made at a solidarity event that took place inside Dolores' prison (Province of Buenos Aires) in 2010.

Audiovisual and research: some personal considerations

Since the beginning of my research I decided to use audiovisual recordings following the ethical guidelines common to the discipline. At first, I used the camera to record only the performances: the *payadores* were happy to receive a copy of their improvisations and were already used to being recorded by enthusiast followers. Performances are often held on stages with lights and amplification, and the public is usually numerous, from fifty to a thousand or more, depending on the venue; recording every performance was not an issue. I did it following the discipline's recommendations: full recordings of the performance in a fixed frame and, occasionally, panning between performers in a long uninterrupted sequence. The audio was recorded both in camera (from the second trip with an external stereo microphone) and directly from the mixer.

Apart from that, I consciously avoided the use of audio, video or photographic recordings in order to be fully concentrated in constructing relationships with and participating in my informants' lives; at first as a host and sometimes, gradually, as a friend. As a methodological choice, after a few encounters I started to record in audio informal one-to-one conversations with some *payadores*, usually about general topics like their life story, how they started to improvise, etc. I did it in order to have a record of the *payadores*' mechanisms of representation at the first stages of the research, when I still was an outsider, the new guy "from Spain" who was following them everywhere⁵. This was also useful in order to make explicit my intentions as a researcher even though, during these years, I had to explain many times -and frequently to the same persons- what my final goal was. As many ethnomusicologists had experienced before, it can be hard to explain our job to people from outside the academia; and I am consciously not differentiating between informants and, for example, my family⁶. After a few months (and mostly in my second research trip), I started to do audiovisual recordings during other casual situations, following a process that I perceived as non-invasive⁷.

As a personal attitude towards research, I am rarely obsessed with data gathering. I usually try to focus on getting the whole picture, on understanding the processes involved in the traditions I am studying. Of course I do record and, at times, I can be highly systematic, but I prefer to prioritize fieldwork as an experience. At present, no technology can represent exactly what another person is experiencing. We can only translate these experiences intellectually and/or through empathy, which means relating others' experiences to our theoretical and emotional background and attempting to understand how others think and feel. Before representing the *payadores*' experiences to a third party through any media, I needed to understand them; empathize with them so as to be able to translate their experiences into something meaningful to me. Therefore, I was usually relaxed when recording: technically I tried to be as accurate as possible but, until now, my priority has always been the fieldwork as an encounter between human beings, each one playing a different role.

Nevertheless, as many researchers before me, I consider audiovisual recording an essential part of any ethnomusicological research (Feld 1976; Zemp 1988; Baily 1989; Elescheck 1989; D'Amico 2012; etc.). In this project, I am especially concerned with the documentation and representation of the contingencies that determine each improvisation. *Payadores*, as well as improvisers from other traditions, are always attentive to what is happening around them and try to incorporate it into their improvisations. This is explained by several reasons that are related to the performers' motivations: demonstrating to the audience that they are truly improvising; receiving external inputs so as to enrich their verses; expressing ideas that are meaningful to the public they are singing for; getting the feedback from the audience's facial expressions and body language; etc. In fact, when improvising in theatres they usually ask for at least the front rows of seats to be lit. The consideration of the context is relevant for any performance, but it is particularly easy to be observed in traditions in which this is verbalized on the spot. As an inexperienced filmmaker, the technical challenge was to evoke this 'celebration of the fleeting moment' in video using one camera.

To film or not to film?

As part of their tradition, *payadores* frequently collaborate in solidarity events with different purposes: to raise money for schools, to help solve problems caused by natural calamities, to help a colleague with health issues or too old to work, etc. The performance held in Dolores' prison is part of this tradition. In this case the *payadores*' purpose was not to raise funds but to entertain a group of good conduct convicts. For the group of *payadores* who participated in this event it was their first improvisation in a prison. It is important to highlight this in order to relativize the intensity of the footage: despite it being usual to have a strong connection between the *payadores* and the audience, in this case the connection was amplified both by the context of the performance and by the *payadores*' own expectations.

During the days before the show, I was staying at the house of Luis Genaro, a young *payador* and a good friend of mine. David Tokar, one of the *payadores* who participated in the event, lives in the same town and the three of us were spending a lot of time hanging around together. Many of the conversations we had in those days were about David Tokar's expectations about the improvisation: "who knows what I will be able to say once there, in front of them..." he repeated many times. Conversations about the emotions and expectations of improvising in a prison were of main importance also during the journey to Dolores. *Payador* Alberto Smith, who organized the event, came to pick us up at Luis' house, in San Vicente (Province of Buenos Aires). In the 200 km that separated us from Dolores, all of us, including me, were particularly excited. How would the experience go? How would the *payadores* be received? Would the Director of the prison allow me to shoot inside the premises? The prison's staff was not informed about my presence that day, but the *payadores* considered it better: once there the Director could not refuse.

I am telling all this in a written text because I have not filmed any of the conversations I am recalling. At that moment it just felt wrong, I wanted to be part of the experience and share in the *payadores*' sensibility. I wanted to allow myself to be excited as well, not rationally detached while documenting everything. In the end, also for me this was the first time inside a prison, I could not put my feelings aside. It could be argued that a participatory camera in Jean Rouch's style would have been appropriate, but I believe there is a meaningful difference between a participatory camera and an experience: to a certain degree, a technically accurate audiovisual recording implies a rational detachment from what is being observed. If it is truly possible to reach a cine-trance without detachment, I must confess I am still unable to reach it⁸.

Nevertheless, I do not regret not filming those conversations, because the way I shared the experience with my informants was crucial to enhance the quality of our human relationship and, therefore, the accuracy of my interpretation. But every choice comes with its downsides: in this case, for example, it prevented me from editing an ethnographic film about it. The heading of this section (To film or not to film?) is not only a question regarding whether it is appropriate to shoot in certain situations. It is also a question about the role of audiovisual recordings in the divulgation of research. Do audiovisual materials need to become narrative films and be shown publicly in "mainstream" ethnographic festivals to earn consideration? What could be valid alternatives (e.g. hypertext, web-documentary, etc.)? What

is the role to be played by this new-born Study Group in shaping the formats and styles of Audiovisual Ethnomusicology regarding representation and divulgation?

Improvised shootings

The emotions we felt were increasing as we approached Dolores. Once there, I started to film the outside of the prison until the guards suddenly interrupted me. Fortunately, the director allowed me to shoot on condition that I should solely film in the room where the performance would take place and that I should avoid interviewing the convicts. I was also asked not to bring a tripod inside. Clip 1 is a short introductory video that shows how the *payadores* prepared their instruments and explored the surrounding space. At times they look engrossed, perhaps trying to find ideas for the improvisation; at times they are joking together or talking with the convicts, trying to release the tension.

As an external element to the performance, my presence had to be explained. Alberto Smith, the organizer of the event, took care of it during the presentation of the show: what he said was not previously arranged between us. His words are also a good example of the *payadores*' values I introduced at the beginning of this text (Clip 2). As you can see, he explicitly mentions that the footage was not intended to be published. This is the reason why, in spite of being allowed by the director of the prison to publish the footage, I decided to blur many sequences: in the end, convicts never had the chance to refuse being filmed⁹. This also responds to my ethical concern over the persons who might have been affected by their actions; although it is highly improbable that they will ever see this footage, I feel more comfortable this way. I do show the “uncensored” images during conferences or lessons because the face expressions are extremely communicative, but I prefer to keep control over the circulation of these images.

Blurring the frames was an ethical choice, but not an easy one to make. In fact, at first I decided not to send my contribution to this book: if the videos are meant to explore the connection between performers and audience and its implications for improvisation, what is the point of publishing them without showing the convicts' faces? Would the images keep their power? Furthermore, the poor quality of the footage, the concentration of faces in a single frame and the need to create tracking animations for the blurs transformed my first tries into a nightmare. In the end, I occasionally opted for blurring the whole frame just enough to make faces not easily recognisable and to allow a comprehension of the main action. The result, aesthetically, is unfortunate (partly because of my technical limitations in post production) but hopefully good enough to be comprehensible.

As I did not know the shooting conditions in advance, my technical set up was improvised: I connected the Zoom H4n to the mixer but, unfortunately, after a few minutes, it stopped recording without me being aware of it. The only audio I have is the one from the camera's internal microphone, which provides a really poor quality¹⁰. The performance began with songs, jokes and short narrative stories in verses, as usual in the *payadores*' shows (due to time restrictions I do not include examples of it in this publication). Halfway through the show, the *payadores* ran a raffle. The raffle is an element that has always been present in the tradition, and I use the term “always” from an emic perspective, in connection with the

payadores' oral memory. According to this tradition, *payadores* organize raffles when performing in small bars (*boliches*) or folklore associations (*peñas*) and offer a show that is similar to the one depicted here. The raffle represents a relevant part of their earnings for the job. Like in any raffle, numbers are sold to the audience, with the prizes being usually tools or objects related to the life of the countryside: *ponchos*, traditional clothes, knives, etc. On this occasion, the raffle pursued a different end and numbers were distributed for free: prizes were gifts to entertain the lives of convicts behind bars (Clip 3). What is interesting here is the elimination of the physical distance between performers and audience: the *payadores* enter the audience's space annulling all symbolic distances between them. They always do it during the raffle, but on this occasion their emotions were different, as were mine while filming among them.

In the other's shoes

The emotional conflicts we were all experiencing were extremely important and assumed a determinant role during the improvisation. On the one hand, we all felt sorry for those young men deprived of their freedom and forced to live in difficult conditions. Their faults are not always the result of a personal choice, but are in part determined by social structures and misfortunate living conditions, as pointed out by *payador* Gustavo Avello while recounting his impressions after the performance (Clip 6). On the other hand, we were also sorry for their victims: many of the convicts were serving sentences related to sexual abuse and domestic violence; among them, there were even murderers. This conflict had also consequences on the structure of the show: at first the number of *payadores* meant to participate was four, in order to have two *payadas*; but finally, one of them decided not to go for personal reasons. I had the chance to talk with him afterwards, and he confessed to me that for him it was impossible to appease his emotions for the improvisation, he could not mediate his internal conflict. As anticipated above, being the voice of the people is not just a sentence in their discourse; it responds to a certain set of values that *payadores* take quite seriously.

It is impossible to show the full improvisation here, therefore I have selected the *décimas* improvised by two of them, Alberto Smith (left) and David Tokar (middle; on the right, Gustavo Avello). The beginning of the recording coincides with the beginning of the *payada*, the order of the interventions was as follows: Gustavo, Alberto and David. All transitions to black indicate a jump in time to another moment of the improvisation, while a visual representation of the poetic structure has been embedded into the video (Clip 4). As you can see, almost all *décimas* addressed the topic of being deprived of personal freedom: while David Tokar focused on the expression of the inmates' feelings, Alberto Smith prompted them to reflect on their mistakes so as not to repeat them again. The context of the improvisation was of central importance in the determination of the topics to be addressed, and the response of the audience was one of the most powerful I have ever experienced in *payadores'* performances.

At the beginning of the *payada*, I moved from the side of the "stage" to sit on the floor in the central corridor of the room, embracing my knees to stabilize my shooting as much as possible. After David's first *décima*, in which he cleverly plays with the polysemy involved

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in the place name Dolores, the roar of the audience was shuddering. At that moment I regretted my conservative choice of filming the whole improvisation in a fixed shot: I really wanted to see the convicts' faces! I could have done it at that time, but I did not want to be too much intrusive standing between the *payadores* and the audience. Fortunately I was quick enough to stand up at the end of the improvisation and reach the side from where I was recording before. The audience invaded the *payadores*' space for an interaction that left us all breathless (Clip 5). Suddenly surrounded by a lot of people, I was unable to move. All I could do was to film this unexpected moment as best I could. In spite of not being allowed to interview the prison inmates, these few minutes of action are an invaluable evidence in showing that the connection between performers and audience was successful.

Clip 6 is an edited version of the *payadores*' first impressions. The three of them expressed the importance of the *payadores*' values, but I would like to stress David's words. He was remarkably moved, nevertheless he was able to clearly verbalize the importance of empathy in the *payadores*' creative process:

A beautiful experience. It has both sad and emotional aspects. When you improvise you try to put yourself in the other's shoes. For that reason, one becomes... becomes sad, but tries to find what they really feel being in here. It is tough.

This empathy, which David expressed in such an excellent way, is what enables them to become the voice of the people, to be 'the other' in the liminality of the improvisation. His words are also meaningful in stressing the importance of filming after consolidating a human relationship. David is one of the *payadores* I have been spending more time with; I could easily say that we are good friends. This is quite evident in the way he communicates with me: I don't even need to ask him a question; he just talks to me as he had been doing during our conversations previous to the show. I also have a good relationship with Alberto and Gustavo, but I have spent less time with them and their approach to the camera was more formal: both of them, at one point, felt the need to praise my research, as if it was a television interview (I have not included this part for time restrictions).

Concluding Remarks

Many of the issues regarding the use of audiovisual materials as a research tool have a long tradition in the academic discourse; here I addressed some of them directly and others more subtly. Presenting a chapter in this style is also a statement of how I consider audiovisual techniques could be used as a scientific tool. Explaining the relationship between researcher and informants and the way the shooting has been made is of primary importance. I believe the excerpts presented here are also a good example of how audiovisual media can help to evoke human experience. As stated above, there is no way to fully represent it; each medium has both advantages and disadvantages. That is why I find it extremely useful to use as many tools as possible in order to provide a record of my research without being constrained by an arbitrary set of rules. Every choice should be valid if scientifically informed. In this case, the combination of written text and audiovisual recordings allowed me to present my interpretation in a way which would have been impossible using only written or audiovisual

language.

- 1 Excluding local expressions and vocabulary.
- 2 In these festivals it is common the presence of improvisers from Chile, Uruguay, Venezuela, Cuba, Puerto Rico, México, the Canary Islands, Andalusia, etc.
- 3 Popular literature printed on inexpensive chapbooks, usually sold at local fairs or by street vendors who sing or recite aloud its content.
- 4 I am fully aware of the problematic use of this term, whose critique has been extremely important for the development of the discipline. Nevertheless, I am not comfortable with the alternatives that have been proposed until now (e.g. friend, teacher, collaborator, interlocutor, etc.). They do not account for the complexity of the relationships that are built on the field and, above all, they do not represent the intentionality that underlies the encounter, dialogue and construction of meanings: that of a researcher who seeks to respond to academic questions (Cámara de Landa 2012; Isolabella 2012).
- 5 In fact, I am from Argentina but I grew up in Italy since I was five years old, travelling often to Buenos Aires to meet my relatives. I am doing my PhD in Spain, where I moved just a few years before the commencement of this research. Nevertheless, *payadores* usually introduced me not only as an outsider, but also as a Spanish foreigner.
- 6 “I have to confess I still don’t get what are you really doing with us...” told me once a *payador* and good friend at the end of my second research trip (2011), when I had not published anything yet. The publication of a short article for a non-academic encyclopaedia of Argentine heritage in 2013 helped them to have a material and practical reference to what I was doing. On that occasion, that same *payador* contacted me through Facebook and asked me to tune in to his live streaming radio program: he wanted to greet me publicly and thank me for my contribution to the divulgation and valorisation of their tradition (Isolabella 2013).
- 7 But, as we all know, personal perceptions can occasionally be wrong. At the end of my first fieldwork experience, which lasted four months, I was invited to an *asado* (the typical Argentine barbecue) to celebrate the birthday of a famous *payador*. Many of the *payadores* I was working with were there, so it was also an opportunity for the farewell. On that occasion I was asked not to bring the audiovisual equipment. Their main concern was to enjoy some free time together, with me fully participating in jokes and conversations and not being distracted by technical matters. I eventually brought my camera along with me, but I simply recorded the informal *payada* they did at the end of the lunch, which I consider a very illustrative document to show the differences between formal and informal improvisations.
- 8 I am not suggesting that a filmic ethnography is not possible. Probably, a participant camera style would have allowed me to build a different dialogic knowledge. What I am saying is that at that time I was more interested in exploring a different type of knowledge, in which audiovisual recording was not always essential. In future fieldwork experiences with *payadores*, I will probably change my approach to audiovisual recording: after a few years our relationship is well established and my understanding of the tradition is more mature.
- 9 When I went back to Argentina in 2011 I met the Director of the prison again to show him an edited version of the performance. He was satisfied and gave me permission to make it public.
- 10 I used a Full HD Panasonic compact video camera. However, the quality of the sound in these recordings was particularly bad.

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