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TOWARDS THE AUDIOVISUAL ETHNOMUSICOLOGY: THE CONTRIBUTION FROM THE RESEARCH OF SERBIAN EPICS

This paper¹ has three main goals: to promote audiovisual ethnomusicology as a way of opening up new possibilities for music research, to contribute to the audiovisual ethnography of the Balkan epics, and to induce the upgrading of the state scientific policies in Serbia. The starting point has been the author's personal experience from her long term research of Serbian epic singing accompanied by the *gusle* that the audiovisual records strongly improve the understanding of the *guslars'* performances as a complex communication processes. This type of media has a unique potential to represent visual and even olfactory sensations, which are both very important, in addition to the aural component of this type of communication. Furthermore, the visual component is necessary to represent social and spatial aspects of the *guslars'* private and public practices. Finally, the video recordings have turned out to be important for the research on some specific topics, such as the *guslars'* musical cognition. The analysis of personal experiences leads to a more general consideration of the practical, ethical, and theoretical issues of the audiovisual ethnomusicology.

Keywords: audiovisual ethnomusicology; epistemology; methodology; Serbian epics; singing with *gusle*.

Introduction: throughout the 20th century towards audiovisual ethnomusicology

The potentials of film as a new tool for the research of music were recognised already in the beginning of the 20th century, when Erich M. von Hornbostel remarked on the benefits of synchronised cinematographic and phonographic recordings [Hornbostel and Abraham 1975(1904)]. A film by Rudolf Pösche from 1908 is regarded as the first synchronic ethnographic document [Schüler 1987]. Exactly 50 years later the IFMC's Manual for folk music collectors included advisory statements on the use of motion film [Karpeles 1958:32–40]. The next decades of the presence of audio-visual media in the field of ethnomusicology deserve serious attention, such as S. Feld's discussion of the situation, trends, problems, and scholarly status of film work in his seminal article "Ethnomusicology and visual communication" [Feld 1976], the thematic issue of "The World of Music" [Baumann 1989] and a number of volumes, including the work of Eckehard Pistrick, Nicola Scaldaferrri and Gretel Schwörer concerning Southeastern Europe [2011]. The foundation of the ICTM Study Group on Audiovisual Ethnomusicology [2015] is the most explicit confirmation of the importance of audiovisual media in a wide range of ethnomusicological activities: research, preservation, and dissemination.

The documentary film also has deep roots in Serbia – the oldest preserved film is "The crowning of King Petar I" from 1904 [Jugoslovenska kinoteka 2015]. The Ethnographic museum in Belgrade started to produce films about folk rituals and customs including music and dance in 1930 [Drobnjaković 1930:169]. After World War II the number of people working in this discipline were still minimal and the equipment was modest. Our distinguished senior colleagues Dragoslav Dević and Radmila Petrović, and later Dimitrije Golemović, made a number of ethnographic films in collaboration with the Serbian Broadcasting Corporation and the film production companies [Radinović 2003:680–682; IMDb 2016; Lajić Mihajlović 2016]. The economic transition at the end

of the twentieth century changed the conditions for ethnographic film making. Therefore, contemporary ethnomusicologists are rarely in a position to complete film projects as was the case of “Krst pod Šarom” [The cross under the Sharr mountains] produced by the Serbian Ethnomusicological Society [Zakić 2015:134].

The first camera used in ethnomusicological research in Serbia was a Bell & Howell 8mm at the end of the 1970s [Lajić Mihajlović 2016]. Video cameras began to be used at the end of the 1980s, but went into a broader use in the early 2000s. The researchers were mostly autodidacts when it came to both the technical and interpretative skills required to gather and analyse audiovisual data. Unfortunately, the educational system still does not pay adequate attention to the visual literacy – the capacity to understand, create and present messages in the video format. On the other hand, the state policy on science is still conservative with respect to the results acquired by means of new media formats. Furthermore, the sparse budgets of the state funded projects do not recognize the need to hire professional cameramen, or to provide DVDs with audio and video examples within ethnomusicological volumes. In such a context the researchers use video cameras in accordance with their personal affinities and capacities, as well as their own estimation of the usefulness of video recordings for specific research.

The audiovisual ethnography of the Serbian epics

Except for the framework that I have briefly described, a specific circumstance that has shaped my experience with regards to the audiovisual representation of the “music cultural phenomena” [Bakan 2009:87] was my decision to research the epic tradition, in particular the soloist performances of the epic songs accompanied by the *gusle*. Namely, in the process of turning the epic tradition into one of the Serbian national symbols, the complex traditional folklore practice of the performance of epic songs was reduced merely to its verbal component – “epic poetry”. It started with the printing of collections of texts – the anthologies of Vuk S. Karadžić [1985] were of a special importance in that sense – and continues till our days through the state-controlled educational system which places the knowledge of epic tradition within the subject “(Serbian) language and literature”. Hence, the study of this tradition was assigned to the folklorists who were primarily trained as philologists. A set of circumstances of both an objective and subjective kind resulted in the epic tradition being relatively marginalised even by the ethnomusicologists themselves. Bearing this in mind, back in 1989, when I was still an undergraduate student and I embarked on my first independent fieldwork, I found myself at a social gathering of the members of the *Guslars’* Society “Njegoš” in Vrbas, Northern Serbia. It was the importance of my first encounter with this practice that made my impressions strong and unforgettable. Even stronger was my disappointment with the fact that the kaleidoscope of individualities and a palette of performing qualities which fascinated me the most could not be captured adequately in the audio recording. The conviction about the importance of the visual component of the *guslar’s* performance was additionally strengthened when I got hold of the second edition of Albert Lord’s “The Singer of Tales”, which contained a multimedia disc including one video clip (now available online [Milman Parry Collection 2012]). Although the importance of technology, especially for sound recordings, had previously been pointed out by Matija Murko [1951], this short film is important for understanding how crucial it was for Parry to capture the moment of the performance as accurately as possible, as was outlined by Nicola Scaldaferrì [2011:19].

I made my first video recordings during my individual fieldwork to document my interviews with *guslars*, their singing and playing techniques and repertoires. The recordings were in a more ‘observational-style’: the camera was used rather ‘passively’,

with a focus on the *guslar*. The established collection of video materials is especially useful for researches with a comparative nature. Moreover, they are instructive in terms of capturing the individual responses to the presence of the camera, even if it was tripod-held and thus acted more as a 'voyeur' than a 'research assistant'. The camera had an inhibiting effect on some of the performers, although it was hard to relate it to technophobia (more typical for those from the older generations) or to the lack of experience with the institutionalised public representations (which were usually filmed), while others were stimulated by the camera – primarily in relation to their personality type, either introvert or extrovert. It was obvious that the ethnomusicological analysis of the video materials derived from research-driven situations must take account of the psychological effect of the presence of the camera to the entire act, including the musical behaviour.

Even more important is that "a passive camera used to create pure observational-style films does not reveal culture", as it expressed by Jay Ruby [2000:241]. Since singing with the *gusle* is a pronouncedly social practice, in order to research tradition alongside the relation between an individual performance and collective reception, one must consider social and spatial behaviour. The *guslars'* practice has been a part of both public and private domains for a long time, which makes its video recording particularly demanding. My basic dilemma was commonplace with respect to filming social events: should I use the tripod-held camera and the wider constant frame, or a hand-held camera and combine different perspectives and slow panning in order to document the relationships of the musician with his audience at the very moment of the performance, including environmental specifics and other important aspects in a more complex way.

In private contexts – in the *guslars'* homes, and at relatively exclusive gatherings such as the social events organised by the members of the *guslars'* societies in smaller public spaces – filming with the camera was more delicate, hence I usually opted to participate in the event and did the filming using the "fly on the wall" strategy of some cinema-verite filmmakers [Zamp 1988:404; Young 2003]. However, the spatial organisation of these events was often unfavourable, with lots of people in a rather small spaces, therefore it was difficult to position the camera to do the wide frame shooting. Another aggravating circumstance is the poliocentricity of the event – the interchange of several *guslars* [more in Lajić Mihajlović 2014:173], which is often impossible to film adequately without changing the position of the camera. In such cases, I had to immediately estimate the relationship between my own research interests – the usability of the potential video material, and the ethics of the research in the sense of being unobtrusive and respecting the other participants in the event.

A specific type of material that I used for the research of social aspects of the praxis includes video recordings from various private situations filmed by the *guslars* themselves and the followers of this practice. At the very moment when they assessed these videos as 'reflective' and offered them to me as 'representative' it became a form of participation in the research – a type of "collaborative audiovisual ethnomusicology" [more in: O'Brien 2014].

Finally, the audio-video documentation of concerts and competitions – both of which are important performance contexts for contemporary *guslars* – has made me face another type of methodological questions. Firstly, such situations are usually filmed by the cameramen hired by the organisers, who are not professionals, but they are experienced filming various public events and family festivities. They usually film using the tripod-held camera, usually from a single position, dynamizing the recording mostly by the zoom tool. My interest in the immediate personal experience of the *guslars'* performances and the audiences' reception at the concerts was the initial reason why for a

long time I opted for the “camera-aided participant observation” and filmed in an “objective manner”, just like these hired ‘professionals’. Practically, these recordings only made sense insofar as I owned copyright for them. Only when I became more familiar with these events and felt the varied atmosphere, I decided to film them with the intention to represent my own experience: to mark different points of view and more cognitive perspectives, the activities of different participants and the contexts of this specific type of communication. Such an engagement involved ‘splitting attention’ due to following the event through the camera lens and, consequently, the quite different experiences of included music practice.

This methodological choice was also quite limited due to my respect for the *guslars*, audiences and organizers. Hence I never insisted on filming the concert from the perspective of the performer himself, although this is one of the key positions with respect to the influence of the visual aspects of the context, the spatial circumstances of communication and the light effects onto the *guslar*’s psychological state during the performance. Moreover, my ideas about how the films should have been done were based on a vast research experience, but my camera skills were insufficient. What I managed to film by myself is the audio-video material which possesses associative value for me and for those with whom I share experiences regarding the genre and culture, but also the manner of representation and methodology of its documentation.

Aside from documenting my experiences with respect to the “standard” communicative situations in the contemporary *guslars*’ practice, the video recordings have been particularly important for my research on the memorisation strategies of the *guslars* as an important aspect of the transfer of knowledge and improvisation as a quality of their performances [more in: Lajić Mihajlović 2012]. The fieldwork was designed according to research examples from experimental psychology and realised as a pilot project in Vrbas, Northern Serbia. The entire research was filmed on a video camera, which turned out to be important even when I was examining memorisation of auditory stimuli via direct reproduction. More precisely, while listening to the played assignments, the *guslars* held their instruments in an active, usable position – a seemingly pragmatic solution, given a series of subsequent tasks, but it was observed and – thanks to the camera – documented that in the course of formation of mental representations one of the *guslars* combined auditory and tactile (kinesthetic) memorization – moved his fingers on the string thus embodying a melody. Additionally, the filmed material turned out to be important in terms of documenting some other qualitative behavioral indicators such as a spontaneous verbal and particularly non-verbal *guslars*’ reactions to their own musical responses during research, and the indications of the immediate degree of interest for collaboration and the level of focus on the given task.

Another example of the specific potential of video recordings in ethnomusicological research comes from my experience with the *Guslars*’ society “St. Nicholas” in Novi Sad, Northern Serbia. Namely, the experience collected from numerous talks during social gatherings of the Society members about *guslars*’ communication with the auditoria and the aesthetics of their performances urged me to suggest to them to watch together a video recording of one of the *guslars*’ competitions and comment on it. The use of the recording has enabled various choices related to the goal of the research as well as a providing all participants in the discussion with equal information. Moreover, referring to the video provoked the *guslars*’ feedback on media representation generally and their comments on the media as a didactic tool. On top of all that, it was a specific fieldwork because I had a collaborator – Smiljana Đorđević Belić, PhD, a philologist and a folklorist. The idea was to film the entire event with two cameras, one fixed on a tripod and the other one hand-held that was used to follow the course of the conversation and/or

to capture the particular observations of the researcher. This strategy significantly enhanced our documentation of this event and its further analysis, while the process of filming itself did not disturb my attention of the attendees and the subsequent discussion – or, in other words, my ethic and the research efficiency.

The ethics concerning ethnographic video production

In Serbia the ethical questions concerning the production and use of ethnographic video material have not been legally regulated yet, and the sociocultural conventions provide the researchers with ample freedom. Practically, that brings additional responsibility. Besides the aforementioned limits of making ethnographic videos, similar to those described by Hugo Zamp [1988:393], even more delicate is the use and dissemination of the recordings with the explicit agreements of interlocutors regarding the use of videos for research purposes, but also with the implicit suggestions that certain testimonies and opinions were 'not to be made public'. The identity protection by means of editing video material similarly to the strategies of using initials in written texts almost stultifies the media format. Thus, such materials are primarily usable for the purpose of documentation, but not for public presentations.

The epics and visual as a part of complex sensory perception – from audiovisual to sensory ethnography

The usefulness of video for studying musical performance has already been widely confirmed, from an essentialist focus on the performers' behaviours (singing and/or playing) to the influence of the other constituents of this communicative act, in other words – for establishing and developing the relationship between the musicians and their social and material surroundings. The cases from the research of Serbian epic tradition demonstrate the potential of the visual component for the research of those musical genres which do not possess a remarkable kinetic aspect (as opposed to ritual music, or the singing to accompany dancing or work). Additionally, some newer investigations of the textualisation of the epic which take a revisionist approach towards Parry and Lord's oral-formulaic theory point to the 'image power' in creating the epic [Honko 1998:96–97]. This direction of research further leads towards cognitive linguistic and cognitive psychology of music by means of rethinking visual aspects of other folklore genres and 'the types of thinking' behind them. On the other hand, it reminds me of the affective potential of the pictorial symbolism of the epics – starting from the blind singer-*guslar*, via the eagle-eyed birds which are commonly carved onto the *gusle* as decorations, to the (auto)suggestive effect of the costumes worn by contemporary *guslars* during public performances.

In this way we realise that the epic is the genre which reflects complex historical changes of sensory profiles of the culture, as well as the changes in the hierarchy of the human senses and relations of sensory order to the social and symbolic order. By moving from an oral culture into a literate culture, and then existing in times of the availability of technologies of audiovisual communication at a distance, the epic has become a true research challenge which affirms sensory ethnography. As a "knowledge beyond language", to use Judith Okely's term [1994:45], it requires a complex experience. Although audiovisual media at the level of representation of 'ethnographic reality' is not entirely satisfactory – they do not 'translate' the entire sensation, it not only improves the complexity of representation (on the level of expert use) but, even more importantly, manages to reflect on the researcher's position. From epic research experiences it is obvious that video is "not simply a replacement for film but a medium with its own capabilities and limitations" [MacDougall 2001:9]. Working with video is more akin to a

fieldwork than a film-making situation. It is a medium and technology that allows us both to represent and to explore, a narrative device that uses metaphor to represent emotions, experiences and actions of both researchers and interlocutors [Pink 2004b:175–177].

The debate on the capacity of ethnographic video and film is complex and still open [see, for instance, Ruby 2000; 2005; Durlington, Ruby 2011]. The process of methodological questioning results in new ethnographic film forms but also in CD-ROM hypermedia that combine and intertwine photographs, audio recordings, and video footage with different kinds of written texts – from descriptive ethnographic writing to theoretical written texts [more in: Pink 2004a]. As Sarah Pink suggests, hypermedia allows us to produce new anthropological texts that are multilinear, multimedia, interactive and reflexive [2004b:169]. The combinations of theoretical written texts, descriptive ethnographic writing and ethnographic video clips and quotations from interviews are widely present in ethnomusicological (live) presentations, but publishing of results as combinations of that kind – in the multimedia format – are still not available to many researchers, both for financial reasons and for the conservative state-regulated scientific policies.

David MacDougall, one of the most important ethnographic filmmakers, described his experience with ethnographic films as something that brings the individual to the fore [1997]. A film stresses the most fundamental element in anthropology – the relationship of an individual fieldworker to individual interlocutors, and turns the video-camera into one of the main tools of contemporary anthropological disciplines. It is hard to imagine the studies of the transfer of knowledge or improvisation or the studies on music safeguarding or applied ethnomusicology, without videos. The (re)affirmation of the visual brings to ethnomusicology a new impetus for a complex investigation of music, including the visual component in its broad spectrum from the seen to the visualised, in particular when it comes to its affective potentials, just like the humanities as a whole, in particular the fields of visual and sensory anthropology, (can) profit from researching music. Without doubt, audio-video records cannot replace the immediate personal experience necessary for in-depth analyzing of the social construction of culture, as we are reminded by the proponents of the 'sensory' ethnographies and of 'radical empiricism' [more in: Ruby 2000:260]. I would agree with Cristina Grasseni who sees the possibility to resolve the tension between the rediscovery of "sensuous scholarship" and the critique of visualism that has branded virtually all exercise of intelligent vision on the part of the ethnographer in the rehabilitation of vision as a skilled sense, not as "a colonial tool" [Grasseni 2004:24].

Finally, the fact that film can offer a 'deep' and complex reflexivity that cannot be achieved in the same way through the 'explanatory' reflexivity of writing, as pointed out by MacDougall [1998], elevates the camera into a part of the researcher's identity: an ethnographer with a video camera is the person with a video camera. Sarah Pink asserts that in order "to be reflexive, ethnographic video makers need to be aware of how the camera and video footage become an element of the play between themselves and informants, and how these are interwoven into discourses and practices in the research context" [Pink 2007:99]. If "conferences about methods are arguments about power" [Young 2003:113], it is expected that the choice of the audio-visual representation of music and dance as the topic of a regional conference will become an important stimulus for the development of audiovisual ethnomusicology in the region. I think that there is no need to argue for the epistemological and methodological exclusivity of the audiovisual, as "colonial tool", but rather to consider it as an already affirmed possibility and a potentially productive challenge.

Endnote

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