

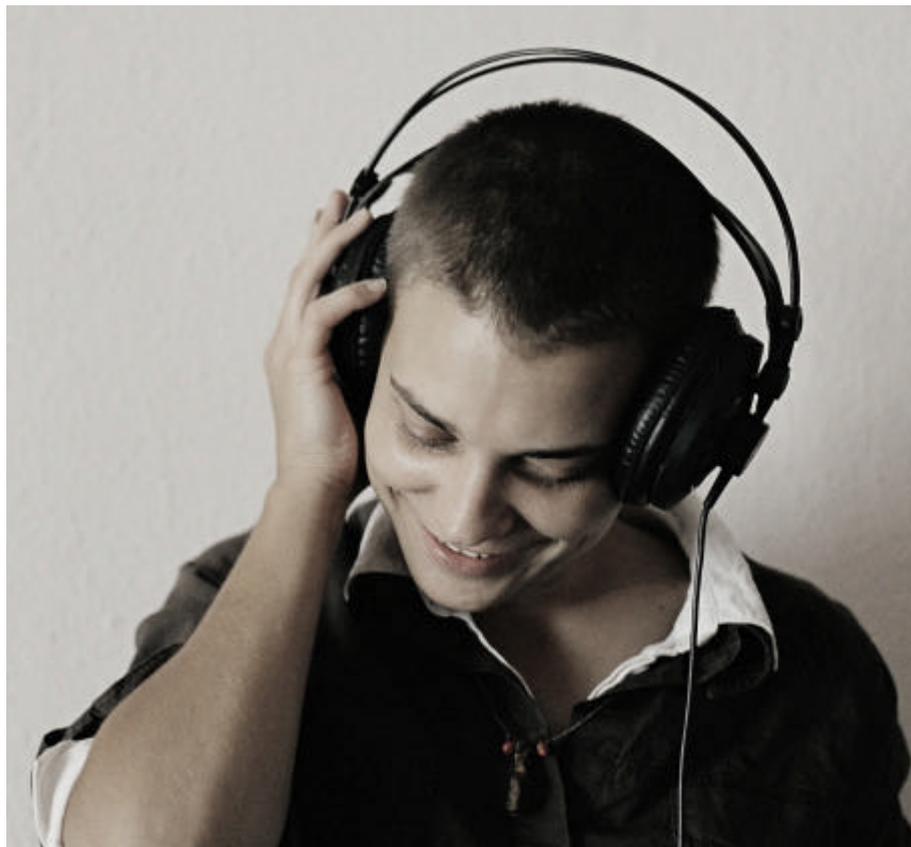
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'Hearing Memory' and 'Micro-Verité'

The first part of the title reveals a specific sensory experience. The second part carries an idea created by the ethnographic filmmaker Ivo Strecker and derives from cinema-verité of Jean Rouch.¹ By exploring these issues I would like to enter a discussion about anthropology, its audio method as applied in ethnographic research, and the future of auditory phenomena in everyday life.

The sensory experiences are not only natural phenomena of human perception of the world but are also culturally determined. We see and we hear linguistically, conceptually, and figuratively within a particular cultural context. For an anthropologist, these are significant features necessary for a more thorough understanding of the people under the study. In regard to the filming process and a synchronized camera, for instance, one captures not just images but also multiplicity of voices and sounds. One creates and re-creates the stories. An audio recorder as well as photographic or film camera were and still are necessary tools for ethnographic fieldwork. While being in the field one lives with the people and shares with them a lot; one listens and talks, watches and is watched; one collects the data about particular social organization, religious and other practices, social and cultural changes, and so on, and plans to create an accurate, theoretically well informed scientific account of a particular group of people and a particular topic. In the mainstream anthropology, that is when the results are presented in the written form, we lose a huge part of peoples' lives, their actual appearances, their struggles and pleasures, their feelings and thoughts, their laughs and their tears. We are limited by the size, the form, the style, the plot, the flow, and the text. At the same time we are left to discover other dimensions in a written text often generated by these same limitations. There are additional mental images which pop up while reading. The same occurs when we listen to conversations recorded during ethnographic fieldwork. We close our eyes and we 'hear the memories'. These mental images are produced by and producers of signs; they are memorized and intangible. "Our images originate in either perception or imagination and may be visual, auditory, or kinaesthetic. Whether thinking, dreaming, or hallucinating, our heads are full of sights, sounds, and sensations, of flashes, buzzes, and twitches. We seem to hear our own voices, the voices of others, snatches of songs, disembodied verses; we see forms, faces, and figures, and remember the smell of roast beef..." (Tyler 1978:89). If one stays in the field for a long time and then regularly returns, the memory produces a wide range of images and sounds over

¹ Ivo Strecker is recently in Vienna and I had an opportunity to discuss with him his interest in auditory phenomenon, importance of language and its tones, the use of a microphone in the field and the Hamar people (see more on his web side > http://www.ifeas.uni-mainz.de/ethno/kulturanthro_afrika/Ivo_Strecker.html).

and over again. One reflects upon events, experiences, and stories and gets ideas for a deeper analysis of their meanings. It is a process through which one creates new signs and memorizes them for the future. By embodying of different ways of and perspectives on life the ethnographer enters a space between his or her world and the world of the people with whom he or she lived during the fieldwork. Some mental images become interwoven others remain radically separated. In the latter case one feels as living in limbo. In which way the ideas get later expressed fully depends on him or her, on the art of reading the signs and understanding them in a specific social and cultural context. This is not an easy task to do. Ivo Strecker writes about 'polyphonic ethnography', where the text has occult form, because of ethnographer's voice in it.² It creates evocations about 'the others' and about the human commonalities in the life. However, every person understands and interprets the writings or documentary material from a different angle of view and within a specific cultural background. Ethnographic film has a very different position in polyphonic representation. An anthropologist-filmmaker can give the words (with a physical appearance) to the people with whom he/she lives and works. It means that there are no fixed rules of representation but an open minded approach to creation. In earlier times it was quite difficult to document with a film camera in the field. There had to be a team of people in order to realize the whole project. Later on, when Jean Rouch 'lost the tripod' (a joke which circles among ethnographic filmmakers), the synchronized and moveable audio-visual tool became easier to use and also more easily accepted by people who were documented. His *cinema vérité* became a classic in anthropological method. It provides a feedback in a kind of a boomerang that matches human interactions. In contrast to the visual equipment, a microphone as a medium in fieldwork was less studied and analysed. For that reason Ivo Strecker's and his wife Jean Lydall's thoughts about perception of a 'social drama' through auditory experiences and creation of living-transcribed conversations became for me very important and indeed interesting.³

Filming without a lens

Nowadays, anthropologists use video as easier and cheaper tool for their recordings. With the video camera one gains a different status in social interactions. However, it is still something like a 'box of pictures' (*bokis piksa*, as one says in Tok Pisin, Papua New Guinea *lingua franca*), and the recorded sound is generally not even mentioned. A microphone with audio recorder was and still is a less disturbing apparatus; it works differently in peoples'

² Ivo Stecker (1994). *Tone, Film and Polyphonic Ethnography. Experiences from Hamar*. Addis Abeba

³ The concept of 'social drama' was established by Victor Turner. More can be found in his book > (1957) *Schism and Continuity in an African Society: A Study of Ndembu Village Life*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

perceptions, interactions and exposures. Strecker and Lydall question people's representations in ethnographic works. They question the written, visual and audio accounts as well as ethnographer's authority in them. Their *Work Journals: The Hamar of Southern Ethiopia* (1979), is composed of several volumes dealing with explanations, discussions and dialogues with the Hamar people. An audio recorder allowed Strecker to interact for many hours with his main informant, Baldambe, in so called 'micro-trance'. The breaking point came when they wanted to transcribe the stories without losing their poetry, rhythm, pauses and speaking atmosphere. "When taping, I thought of the whole process of film making in reverse. 'Filming without a lens' moved from sights and sounds which can be experienced to script which could only indirectly invoke the reality from which it was derived. The reader would no longer see or hear but would only imagine the sights and sounds of the actors in the story. Such 'inverted' ethnographic films which only use cheap tape and no expensive celluloid obviously allow a lengthy documentation of complex events including both the dark and bright sides of reality, and an insight into the degree to which realities fall short of people's dreams."⁴ Our ears with the whole hearing process create signs for the memory; they are more sensitive and more opened than our eyes. Some scholars such as, for example, Edward Schieffelin and Steven Feld working on the sound among the Kaluli of Papua New Guinea, focused in their writings on sensory experiences. They write "that there should be more integrated understanding of the 'interplay of tactile, sonic and visual senses' in all societies" (Feld 1996: 94-96 in MacDougall 2006: 60). The images are embedded in rhetorical context and imaginary. This brings us back to mental images, to see without looking. Strecker clearly writes that to understand peoples' dreams means to understand their lives. Moreover, he adds that he used the lens to expose the lighter sides of Hamar existence and the mike for the darker sides. If we connect audio with visual and also with a written part we get an interesting combination, a story, a 'polyphon'. We get a picture of a particular event within a particular social and cultural context that seems more valid. Lydall and Strecker began to produce films after some years of living with the Hamar and knowing their language properly. The audio recordings, writings, and discourses with people merged into a kind of screen-plays. When we watch a documentary film where a non-character narrator talks to the spectators, we perceive and associate the images in a different way than we would without a narrator. However, whenever we hear Baldambe's commentary in the film, it creates a special kind of credibility. "A final reason why Baldambe's commentary was enriching has to do with the fact that film can only produce images of things which are

⁴ Ivo Strecker (1992). *Filming Dreams*. *Sociology, Ethnology Bulletin*, 1(2): 94-97.

actually present 'out there'. It cannot film the images which people hold in their minds of what could or should or should not be 'out there'".⁵

The ethnographic discourse moves between visual, auditory and written contributions. The new media allow richer varieties of cooperation and support the creativity in didactic approaches. What an anthropologist and many other people share is something that exists in the memory, turbulence of movements, speeches and imaginary. The articulation of them and interpretation of their meanings leads towards discovery of peoples' selves. The whirlpool of mediating processes in computerized era causes the loss of a concrete physical space and of personal, face to face communication. One learns the theory through digitalized modules, one feels to be an object of technological experimentation. As all this shifts the meanings and interpretations, one can easily get lost. Therefore, there is necessity to engage all sensory experiences in the interpretation of meanings. A long term study embracing auditory, visual and textual approach could confer a different quality to ethnographers' outputs. Establishing of friendships with people with whom he/she lives is physical and without any doubt the actual presence is very important. Moreover, not only the knowledge of people's language but the sensitivity for the idiosyncratic utterances in a particular cultural and social context moves dimensions in conversations, feelings and mutual understanding. In the case of Lydall and Strecker – as well as in the case of my own personal and anthropological existence – I see 'micro-verité' as auditory phenomena of everyday life.

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⁵ Ivo Strecker (1997). The Turbulence of Images: On Imagery, Media and Ethnographic Discourse. *Visual Anthropology*, Vol. 9:207-227.