

Hopa lide – On Visual-Ethnographic Methods

(excerpt from my PhD thesis)

Since 2015, I have been employing various visual methods as auxiliaries to my ethnographic work. More specifically, I have engaged with photography and video. For my MA fieldwork in 2015, I went to Klenovec and Kokava equipped with a DSLR camera – a digital single-lens reflex camera, *a priori* designed for still photography. Around this time, this type of camera had become a popular device in the toolkit of many ethnographers, owing to its versatility. Firstly, DSLRs took excellent stills. I benefited from this feature when documenting music events and, later, I used digital copies of the photographs as gifts for my research participants on my return trips. Secondly, DSLRs were also capable of taking video that could easily out-perform some of the best digital cameras from the time in many technical and aesthetical aspects while packing the technology into a compact piece of gear. These are just some of many reasons that these cameras caused a significant ‘revolution’ in the genres of documentary and ethnographic film and in ethnographic practice more broadly. I have addressed the phenomenon of the ‘DSLR revolution’ in my other scholarly work (Nuska, 2015a, 2018c).

Hence, my first attempts to shoot video in Klenovec and Kokava in summer 2015 were mainly driven by a curiosity about the performance of this technology. I documented various Romani *bašávely* and other music-related occasions. Additionally, I was testing out how my research participants would react to the presence of a camera. I was pleasantly surprised to see that it did not have any noticeable inhibiting effects on Romani music-making. Quite on the contrary, the musicians seemed to react to it in the same way they would to cheering and applauding from the audience. These preliminary observations led me to think about incorporating visual methodologies more extensively into my further research.

I am relatively well-trained in various methods central to pursuing visual-ethnography and/or visual-ethnomusicology research. I have been involved in dozens of projects as an independent film- and video-maker – mainly in the field of documentary, educational and activist videos, and music videos for independent musicians. In my second Master’s degree, in New Media Studies, I dealt with theories of visual art and culture and learned how to work practically with digital photographs, video and sound. I have also pursued a course in film production at the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts (FAMU) and attended two special courses on ethnographic filmmaking, organised by the Studio of Visual Ethnography [*Studio vizuální etnografie*] at the University of West Bohemia and the Granada Centre for Visual Ethnography at the University of Manchester respectively. Thanks to all these opportunities, I have become well

acquainted with the most important skills for producing photographs, sound and video.

It was in my mind for some time that this background might help me ground my later research in visual methods, possibly even enabling me to contribute to the fields of visual-ethnography and visual-ethnomusicology by pursuing certain methodological innovations. For these reasons, I incorporated visual methodologies into my PhD research proposal, making them an important pillar of my research plans. This proposal was accepted into a unique PhD programme called the Interdisciplinary Training Programme in Visual Culture, which was based at the Centre for Visual Arts and Culture (CVAC) at Durham University. Pursuing this programme allowed me to be supervised across three departments, granting me support in all of the music, anthropology and visual aspects of my research proposal. Embarking on this programme motivated me to live up to my visual methodology commitments.

I spent the entire first year of my PhD reviewing literature on contemporary trends in visual anthropology and visual ethnomusicology. I also dedicated a lot of contemplation to the methodologies of these disciplines (e.g. Nuska, 2018a, 2019b, 2019a), although none of this work has directly found its way into this thesis. However, neither my previous training nor the thorough methodological preparation at the beginning of my PhD provided me with the answer to the most fundamental question: how will visual methods help me fulfil my research objectives, and in what way will they complement my ethnography? Fortunately, I managed to resolve this question in the course of my PhD fieldwork in 2018/2019 (I will explain how in the section concerning methodological reflections). For my PhD fieldwork, thus, I employed two auxiliary visual methods in particular: 1) photographs and photo-elicitation, and 2) video documentation and participatory music video-making.

Regarding the first, I continued my established practice of photographic exchanges – taking photographs of research participants who asked me to and bringing them back printed copies. Soon I learned that I was not the first visitor to carry out this practice in Klenovec and Kokava. Thanks to serendipity, I discovered an extensive collection of documentary photographs taken by Claude and Marie-José Carret – French photographers who have been documenting the locality with a special focus on Romani musicians since 1984. I met with the photographers during my fieldwork, and we agreed on a collaboration. I eventually started visiting my research participants with a selection of the Carrets' photographs for unstructured interviews – employing the so-called photo-elicitation method (e.g. Harper, 2002). Eventually, in collaboration with the photographers and my research participants, we exhibited these photographs at two exhibitions in Klenovec and Kokava (Carret, Carret, & Nuska, 2019). The employment of these pictures in my research was a vital source of information for this ethnography and

an important act of reciprocity involving my research participants and myself. I will evaluate in detail the benefits of this method in the final section of the thesis.

Secondly, I continued to employ video in my ethnography. At the beginning of the fieldwork in 2018, I started documenting the various music events of professional musicians (with their consent), providing them with the material I shot. As the musicians were satisfied with (and often excited about) the media I offered, they provided me with repeated chances to document more of their events. Video-making eventually became the core of our collaboration, allowing me access to the community of professional music-makers in the locality. Much like the photographs, video material has also worked well as a item of reciprocal exchange, exerting a positive effect on our collaboration. After the PhD fieldwork, we transitioned our joint video efforts from quasi-accidental documentation of live events into *ad hoc* video projects – “ethnographically grounded music videos” (cf. Ranocchiari & Giorgianni, 2020). We designed the production of these music videos in a participatory manner so that my research participants stayed in control of how *they* wanted to be represented (e.g. Lunch & Lunch, 2006). I will also bring up more details about video-making in the project and share some outcomes in the final section of this thesis.

Finally, both the employment of photographs and music videos have inspired and influenced the development of ethnographic films, whose production took place mainly *after* the end of my PhD fieldwork. There will be two ethnographic films related to Romani musicians from Klenovec and Kokava: the first – following up on the work with photographs – is now (March 2022) in late post-production, and the second – based on work with music videos – is planned for production in spring and summer 2022.

[...]

Reflection on Visual Methods

Since 2015, whenever I have set foot in Dolinka, I have immediately been surrounded by dozens of Romani children asking me two typical questions: either “Would you take a photo of me?” or “Have you brought photos today?” It has become an important ritual for me to bring back photographs I took last time. Although I started performing this ritual without thinking of it as an ethnographic method, over time, photographs have become an important means of communication between myself and Roma from K&K – especially those families of ‘non-musicians’ living in distinctly less privileged conditions. For many of them, I have become “Peťo from Czechia who takes and brings pictures.” My participants have always accepted photographs with genuine pleasure and excitement, and the smartphone era – bringing a certain devaluation of photography as a medium –

has not seemed to diminish this. I was glad that I found *something* (albeit something tiny and insignificant) that I could give back to my research participants and friends regularly. It was not until autumn 2018 that I realised I was not the first one in Klenovec and Kokava to practise the very same routine.

During one of my endless car journeys with musicians, I sat next to Janko Deme, who told me that some 30 years ago, a couple of French photographers came to Klenovec and took photos of local musicians. Thanks to the keywords he gave me, I managed to find an outdated web portfolio of photographers Claude and Marie-José Carret with an email address that I soon contacted. I did not have to wait more than one hour for their enthusiastic answer. We met in January 2019 in Klenovec, and we came up with an idea for the repatriation of their photographs – that is, co-organising photo exhibitions in which we would show their pictures to Roma from Klenovec and Kokava for the very first time. To start this project, they provided me with digital copies of their photographs, which I soon found to be a powerful research tool. I started visiting my research participants with printed copies of the Carrets' photographs, my camera and an audio recorder. I was primarily interested in the names of the pictured musicians for captioning purposes, but people rarely stopped talking after giving me this information. This encouraged me subsequently to use the photo-elicitation method more systematically and purposefully.

Through this method, I ended up learning a lot of stories about local musicians from the past. It was fascinating to see how even the youngest generation of local Roma relate to their predecessors in the pictures taken more than three decades ago. In return, my participants often showed me photographs from their family archives, some of them allowing me to make digital copies and thus enrich my photo-elicitation sample further. In August 2019, we exhibited 28 of the Carrets' photographs on large canvases in Kokava, and, one month later, we moved the exhibition to Klenovec.

Meeting Claude and Marie-José was serendipity with an immense effect on how my ethnography shaped up. Photo-elicitation sessions revealed historical perspectives on the Romani musical craft in Klenovec and Kokava, encouraging my participants to talk about its glorious past, dubious present and uncertain future. Both at the sessions and the exhibitions, the photographs were received with fascination and strong emotions. As I distributed the digital prints of the Carrets' photographs to descendants of the people in the photographs, I felt that I had finally returned to my Romani friends in K&K *something* truly extraordinary and meaningful.

The use of video in my ethnography was also influenced by serendipity. Although I did travel to K&K equipped with a video camera for my PhD fieldwork, I had not been quite certain as to how I would use it in my ethnography. Luckily, I got one strange question during my first journey in October 2018. "Are you gonna put that

somewhere?” [Budeš to niekam dávať?] a musician asked me right after I had filmed his band’s outdoor performance (with their consent). “Of course, I’m gonna give it to you. Then you can upload it wherever you like.” “Really?” Their enthusiastic reaction surprised me. It was not long until I got the exact same question from another Romani musician: “Are you gonna put that somewhere?” I cannot count how many times I heard this phrase throughout my fieldwork. It made me realise an important fact about contemporary professional Romani music-making in the locality: Romani musicians are used to being filmed while playing, but rarely do they manage to get hold of the audio-visual material afterwards. When I first brought them digital copies of my videos, they accepted them with genuine joy and excitement. So, I started doing it on a regular basis. I sometimes brought audio tracks, sometimes videos, sometimes both on my USB drives. Whenever possible, we reviewed the material together on the musicians’ TVs or my tablet. Over time, these audio-visual media exchanges became the very core of our collaboration.

My role as a video documentarian also justified my presence in the field. In the eyes of my research participants, my activity in gathering and distributing the audio-visual material made my presence somewhat more comprehensible for them. Later, I learned that some of them saved my phone number under a nickname: “Peťo the Cameraman.” For the musicians, I was, indeed, a cameraman who always had something to give them back. I think it was one of the main reasons why they gladly accepted me into their crowded cars on their journeys to perform their craft. Romani musicians (who – as I got to know – tend to have very business-oriented minds) seemed to have accepted our *quid pro quo* ‘business model’. And this model was, indeed, highly beneficial to my ethnographic work. Thanks to our media exchanges, we always had good reason to meet. I learned what musicians like (and dislike) about their music (it is worth adding that the vast majority of the material ended up unpublished as the musicians did not find the playing good enough). The videos provided a unique insight into how musicians think about the commodification of their music and, last but not least, into what they consider makes ‘Romani music’ truly Romani (and what does not).

From 2021 onwards, our collaboration developed into a more distinct form: we switched from documenting live events to making scripted and directed music videos. For these collaborations, I stayed in my role of ‘cameraman’ (and later, editor) while letting my participants become directors and producers – that is, in control of their self-representation. As this collaboration was very much in progress as I finished up this thesis, it is far too early to evaluate it now. I am sure, though, that it will eventually fill the pages of a dedicated methodological paper (cf. ⇒Updates on Music Videos).

Overall, although I consider visual methods auxiliary to this ethnography and while none of their outcomes is essential for comprehending the content of this thesis, they have certainly played an important role in the collaboration with my research participants – in forming our mutual relationship and providing me with access to

the core information upon which this ethnographic thesis is based. I also think that visual methods assisted me with balancing the asymmetry of our relationship, a quality inherently present in almost every relationship between an ethnographer and their ‘informants’. I hope I did not use visual methods merely as an “extension of participant observation” (e.g. Hurworth, 2004, p. 173), affirming my “monopoly on observation” (Rouch, 2003, p. 46). Rather, my intention was to employ them so that my research participants could stay in control of how they wanted to be represented. I hope that visual methods helped me effectively fulfil the role of a “non-Romani ally” to my friends, with all the responsibilities and dilemmas that this role implies whenever combined with the role of researcher (cf. C. Silverman, 2018). Finally, I hope that these visual methods supported me in doing research *with* Roma and *for* Roma, rather than just *on* Roma, and that I succeeded in giving *something* useful and meaningful back to my research participants and friends. It is up to them to judge that, though.

Towards the Films...

For the ongoing and upcoming production of the ethnographic films, I will also have to develop my role of ‘cameraman’ towards those of producer and director, something I have not yet explored much in the context of my field. But there is a fundamental wish I share with my research participants (and film protagonists) to maintain the model based on the collaboration just described. As I pointed out in the introduction, there are two ethnographic films – one short and one feature-length. The former is in its late-postproduction phase, and the latter is awaiting production in spring and summer of 2022 – that is, around the time when this thesis will likely be examined. The films are produced under the umbrella of the Annual Diego Carpitella Scholarship (facilitated by Fondazione Giorgio Cini), which I was awarded in June 2020.

The first film is 16 minutes long. It depicts perceptions of Claude and Marie-José Carret’s photographic work expressed by Roma from Klenovec and Kokava. It is based on my footage from photo-elicitation sessions and the preparation of the two photographic exhibitions. A preview of this film is now available here => <https://nuska.me/RMFK>

The second will be a feature-length film (50–80 minutes) based on participatory music-video making, showing portraits of three Romani bands from Klenovec and Kokava and documenting the creative processes behind the making of the music videos. The film starts – conceptually speaking – where the thesis leaves us. The main question for the film is: what would Romani musicians do if they had chance to “break free” from restrictions associated with their craft and to fully explore their creative potential? (cf. =>Updates on the Films).

My aim is for the films to complement the thesis with new insights. I hope, though, that they will not only be useful in affording a deeper understanding of professional Romani music-making in Klenovec and Kokava, but also in appreciating the needs of my research participants and friends. I see them not as a *full stop* for this long research project. Rather, I hope the films will be an *ellipsis*, breaking ground for further collaboration...

Note: For the references, please refer to the following document =>
<http://dx.doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.11099.64808>