

IN SEARCH OF MUSIC: ON THE USES OF THE CAMERA AS FIELD DIARY IN *O SOM DOS PÁSSAROS*¹

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ORCID
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8940-9133>

MARIANNA KNOTHE SANFELICIO

Universidade de São Paulo, São Paulo, SP, Brasil, 05580-000 –
antropologia@usp.br

ABSTRACT

This text presents a review of the experimental film *O Som dos Pássaros*, made by anthropologist Kelen Pessuto. The filming was done as part of her doctoral fieldwork, in 2014, in Turkey. It is proposed in this study that the film transits between different categories and it can be classified as both a documentary and as a visual and audio field diary. Thus, the film exists between the borders of these concepts, just like the Kurdish people, who exist, statelessly, between borders. The impossibility of the field originally intended led Pessuto to seek other possibilities of being with the Kurds. This opening to another possible field, in turn, led her to find a new sound universe, which she shows the viewer throughout the duration of the film. This music, rooted in Kurdish identity, is found in the *dengbêj* tradition.

KEYWORDS

Visual Anthropology;
Ethnomusicology;
Field diary; Memory;
Dengbêj.

1. Experimental film *The Sound of the Birds*, Kelen Pessuto, 2017. Available in: <https://bit.ly/3SaT2rS>.

Silence. A black screen. Suddenly, music: the image that follows gives the viewer the initial context of the film. November 17, 2014, São Paulo, Brazil. In the center, a photograph of Kurdish filmmaker Bahman Ghobadi. He holds a large cinematographic camera, which hides part of his face. This is how we enter the fieldwork that gave rise to the medium-length film *O Som dos Pássaros*, by Kelen Pessuto. Produced within her Ph.D. research (Pessuto 2017), the film places itself in a frontier position, between experimental film, documentary, and field diary. It exists between these constraints, just as it happens with the Kurds, a people who also exist between borders and who become Pessuto's interlocutor in her research.

The film can be divided into three parts, in which she traces her path during her fieldwork in Turkey. In the first part, we see the researcher in her original path to meet with Ghobadi. The second part shows when Pessuto is forbidden to enter Iraq, leading her to consider a Plan B. The third and final part follows the execution of Plan B.

During the first part, the film shows a brief email exchange between Pessuto and Ghobadi. Done in the form of an on-screen animation, this email exchange indicates her trip to Iraq in an attempt to participate in a shoot by the Kurdish filmmaker. After Ghobadi's affirmation that she could participate in the filming and after a time jump, on November 22, we are now in Istanbul, Turkey. The instrumental music accompanies us throughout this visual trajectory, in which we see images of Istanbul, its streets, a mosque, the marina. The sound starts with only one instrument and, as the images appear on the screen, other devices come into play, and the music becomes more complex, just like the journey. At a certain moment we also hear Pessuto's voice, a sound with no visual reference point, which appears together with the music. The sound layers operate together, combining the images from the field with the thoughts of the researcher. On November 24, we set out with Pessuto for South Kurdistan. In one of the few moments in the film in which there is no music, the filmmaker shows us, from an animation, how her entry into Iraq was denied. She has to return to Istanbul.

Then, the second moment of the film begins, the one in which a new path is traced. In the center of the screen, a *derwish* in white robes dances. Two men dressed in black, one on each side, play instruments. The setting seems to be that of a bar or restaurant in Istanbul, and there are people sitting between these men and the camera. The *tempo* is one of waiting.

At this moment, the sense of field diary appears again in the film. With the entry into the intended field denied, it is necessary to reconsider the meanings, to resignify the sensations, to understand which path to follow from this break. This moment of waiting, in which the screen



shows this rhythmic dance, is a moment of reevaluations. The whirling dance of the *dervish*, the Zema, is a meditation ritual. On the canvas, the contingencies of the field trace the discontinuity of life from the images and sounds. Now we move on to other possibilities.

On November 30th, while still in Istanbul, Pessuto seeks a new field, which opens up from the search for the sound universe of the Kurdish people. We come into contact with Ciwan, a Syrian refugee. In another short moment without music, we hear his voice, speaking in English, superimposed over images of children and animation, telling us about the life of the Kurdish refugees. The image of children singing together on a staircase shows us the direction that will be followed. Instead of being instrumental, as has been the soundtrack until now, this song is made up only of the children's voices. While making a nod to the theme of his thesis, which deals with the role of children in Ghobadi's films, this insertion leads us down a path in which those who sing will come into importance.

It is now December 1st. A quote from Ciwan appears on the screen: "If you want to know a people, you have to listen to their music." We enter the third part of the film heading to Diyarbakir, in North Kurdistan, in search of the nightingales of the mountains. In terms of state borders, we are still inside Turkey. Taking location as a fluid configuration (Appadurai 1996), Pessuto recognizes the fragility of the borders of the territories in which she walks, and sets off in search of the *dengbêj* house, the singers' house. The *dengbêj* space, as the film tells us, is the one in which the stories of the Kurdish people are passed on. With the course set, we begin to follow the director in her search for this space. The music stops, and the moments of pause say as much as the moments in which it plays. The pause comes just as Pessuto is talking about the political interdictions that Kurdish music has suffered during its history. The lack of sound works to mark a political ban to a certain sound universe.

We follow Pessuto in a place where the language is unknown, and the search becomes difficult. The camera goes through the streets, bars, houses, restaurants, focuses on some faces, even on cell phones that help in the translation of the language. Finally, we find the person that will take the director to the *dengbêj*. The camera in her hand, an extension of the director's body, turns around corners of the bazaar, showing the back of the man who is her guide. The music returns when they arrive at *Dengbêj Evi*, and it is finally possible to hear the singing of nightingales. The songs presented at this point are the climax of the film.

In her thesis (Pessuto 2017), the director tells us that the Kurdish language is divided into two linguistic groups, Kurmanji and Sorani. When we enter

the sound universe of *dengbêj*, we do not know which of the two we are listening to. Just like the director during her first incursion into Kurdish cinema, we also stand in front of the screen without understanding what these men are singing, without even being able to tell which linguistic group they belong to, so that an approximate translation of their words can be attempted over the internet.

We are taken, along with her, to her immersion in the sound universe of a language that is radically other, just as we are taken to the whole sensitive universe that this strangeness can bring to our ears. The strategy of creating an audiovisual field diary helps to put the spectator in a position of discovery, which happens together with the director's discoveries about a forbidden language and about songs that were criminalized for a long time. From Pessuto's mediation, as well as from the mediation of her camera, we enter with her into this sound universe in which "music induces us to make connections between diverse memories and to create a space to articulate our lives to other lives and our presents with a multitude of pasts and temporalities" (Reily 2014, pp. 2, translation is our own).² This universe does not occur only from the musical making, created from the space of the *dengbêj*, but also from a practice of creation and recreation of the individual and collective memory of the Kurdish people. Memory – in this case, musical memory – becomes a process, a performance, and a practice, a "dynamic means of articulating the past to the present" (Reily 2014, pp. 2, translation is our own).³ The music sung in the *dengbêj* becomes part of this practice, used by the Kurds for the transmission of their stories and their language. From 1980 to 1991, the singing of the *dengbêj* became criminalized. Pessuto tells us in voice-over that since 1991, one can only sing the songs allowed by the government. "Memory [...] is also a space of contestation, marked by ideological, economic, and cultural interests" (Reily 2014, pp. 11, translation is our own),⁴ and this is also the case with the memories transmitted by Kurdish songs. The continuation of this musical practice happens as a resistance practice of a people living today in a fragile situation, an ethnic group with no state and no official flag (Pessuto 2017).

As for the way the film is constructed, Didi-Huberman (2020, pp. 197-198), dialoguing with Godard, tells us that montage is the art of producing a form that thinks, "It is what transforms the partially remembered time of the visible into a reminiscent construction, a visual form of haunting, a musicality of knowledge [...] it is the art of *making the image dialectical*."

2. "A música nos induz a fazer conexões entre memórias diversas e a criar um espaço para articular nossas vidas a outras vidas e nossos presentes com uma infinidade de passados e temporalidades."

3. "Meio dinâmico de articular o passado ao presente."

4. "A memória [...] é também um espaço de contestação, marcado por interesses ideológicos, econômicos e culturais."

The way Pessuto constructs these images – both filmic and drawn – is taking us through streets, houses, and spaces of Kurdistan, to the *dengbêj* space, being held by her hands. The editing is also done while filming,⁵ and the editing one sees in the film, speaks to the numerous decisions Pessuto made in the field. Considering that “[...] the filmer is always collecting samples” (Feld 2016, p. 262), it can be said that Pessuto’s fieldwork was built on an approach geared towards filmmaking as well. The director collects excerpts from her experience as an observer of the reality that is placed in front of her.

In fact, the construction of the imagery of the video, made with camera in hand, leads us to a subjective and sensory mediation of what the field experience was for this filmmaker. After all, “[...] the filmmaker systematically makes selections in every stage of the planning, shooting, and editing, and these choices constitute the way interpretive communication with the film medium works” (Feld 2016, p. 247). Even if the idea of using the camera is to create a field notebook, the way the images were selected and organized in sequence shows Pessuto’s intentionality in presenting her journey in a certain way, betting on the encounters and relationships she traced on her way in the field.

An example of this is the soundtrack, which mixes the diegetic, the synchronous sound, captured at the moment of shooting, and the non-diegetic, the sound inserted in post-production, in such a way as to create sensorialities in the spectators. In this sense, it is worth remembering the scene that shows birds flying over the sea in Istanbul: the sound of the birds and the sound of the music overlapping each other, as if they were one. The sound of the birds, together with the sound of the music as a soundtrack, reminds us of Pessuto’s line: the singers of the *dengbêj* are the nightingales of the mountains. It is also interesting to note the use of music and voice, both non-diegetic, placed next to the diegetic sound made during filming, to work the soundtrack as a totality of sounds. What is presented in front of our eyes is the reality of this fieldwork, not as a faithful representation of the reality that would be found in Turkey, but rather a presentation of the construction of the research. The use of non-diegetic music in this film brings a fictional characteristic that deepens the experimental sense and also presents a concern with authenticity, which brings the experiment closer to documentaries.

In Ghobadi’s films, as in Jean Rouch’s ethnofictions, the subject-characters are constructed in the relationships between them and the filmmaker and between all of them and the camera (Pessuto 2017). In Pessuto’s film,

5. “The director-cameraman who shoots direct cinema is his own first spectator in the viewfinder of the camera. All of his bodily improvisations (camera movement, framing, shot lengths) finally result in editing while shooting” (Rouch 2003, pp. 39).



what we see, in turn, is the construction of the filmmaker herself in her fieldwork, (re)constructing her path and her thinking during part of her research. The filmmaker tells us that this is an immersion in the loneliness she felt during her fieldwork (Pessuto 2017), in our journey, watching the film, however, her voice keeps us company and we are not alone. The choice of the voice-over, which the director uses to explain her steps during the fieldwork, goes well with the experimental nature of a film that is and works, at the same time, within several categories. Pessuto works at the borders of cinematic categories, which is similar to the borders where the Kurdish people find themselves. In many societies, as is this case, “boundaries are zones of danger requiring special ritual maintenance” (Appadurai 1996, pp. 179). The *dengbêj* appears, both in society and in the film, as a bind that does not take locality as a pre-fixed given, but rather as a contextual construction, a space for maintaining the Kurdish language and history.

Even though music does not seem to have been the director’s primary interest when she began her research, the questions she starts asking turn to the musicking of the Kurds, musicking being understood here as “to pay attention in any way to a musical performance” (Small 1999, pp. 12).

Music, as we know, is present from the very beginning of the film. The editing of the film is designed in such a way as to place the music as always present: it is always there, diegetic or not diegetic. Therefore, it is impossible to search for the music itself since it is always present. So, what does this director seek? On the part of this spectator, I believe it is possible to affirm that what Pessuto seeks is not only the music, but the context in which it creates and is created. The search, more than just for the music, is for the people who create it, for a specific instance of creation that is part of the creation of the memory of a people.

The music practiced in *dengbêj* builds a shared feeling structure among Kurds and their rituals that promote intense experiences and “[...] allow participants to experience their emotions in a context in which other people can also have intense experiences, generating experiences of shared feelings” (Reily 2021, pp. 13). For a stateless people, this is an extremely important maintenance ritual. By setting out on this quest, Pessuto shows us the path she took to reach this place of musicking and memory making. Upon entering the *dengbêj*, even without speaking the Kurdish language, the director becomes part of the music of this people together with them, as someone who listens. Understanding music as any act that involves music, Pessuto becomes part of this sound universe, part of the shared experience of this people. Throughout the film, we were also led to listen. The sound of the streets and the sound of music overlapped, as if they were

one, as if music were a constituent of the space through which Pessuto passes – the soundtrack of a field diary that opens itself in possibilities.

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Marianna Knothe Sanfelicio is a master's candidate in Social Anthropology at the University of São Paulo (USP). She has a degree and licentiate in Social Sciences also from USP. She is currently a member of the Cemetery Studies Research Group at the Núcleo de Antropologia Urbana (LabNAU), at USP, and works as an audiovisual production assistant. She is interested in Visual Anthropology and Urban Anthropology. Email: ma.sanfelicio@gmail.com.

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