

# Audiovisual Literacy and the Anthropology of Music

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## Abstract

*The paper presents three examples of ethnomusicological documentaries, all dealing with music cultures but deriving from diverse methodological viewpoints and techniques, to analyze how music, sound, and other aural dimensions of ethnographic films could enhance audiovisual literacy practices. The main focus of this review is on the cinematic representation of the nonrepresentational art of music to establish awareness of image-sound literacy and seek a balance between visual and audio channels in contemporary multimedia contexts. The purpose of this interpretation is to investigate how the visual matches with the aural aspects in these ethnographic documentaries and to inaugurate alternative approaches to handle the relationship between sonic and optical film narration. In this respect, our study attempts to critically expand the idea of “visual literacy” to a more comprehensive concept of “audiovisual literacy,” offering a more holistic approach to understand and communicate multimodal phenomena.*

**Keywords:** audiovisual literacy, music anthropology, ethnomusicological film, ethnographic documentary

## Introduction

The role of media has changed over the years, and, today, they operate not only as documentation tools but also as independent channels for the analysis and interpretation of various phenomena for the humanities and sociocultural studies. However, the conjunction of images and sounds through audiovisual representation as a significant research and literacy means has not been widely established. According to the Western taxonomy, vision is the noblest of the five senses (Jütte, 2005, p. 64-65); thus, the perception of audio expressions has been scarcely investigated in the context of modern audiovisual channels. Despite the benefits of illustrating human lives and behaviors, scholarly and educational environments do not largely implement audiovisual practices. However, there are specific films — the ethnomusicological/anthropological films on music cultures — that focus on sound and music as key components of the audiovisual continuum. This paper highlights how visual and acoustic representation can document sight and sound phenomena and reveal them in profound and innovative ways. What can we learn about specific cultures, practices, performances, and their interaction through the film lens and cinematic soundscapes? What is the role of an ethnographic film’s acoustic narration? How can we train ourselves to decode audiovisual elements featured in this kind of film? How does the audiovisual context of musical practices contribute to creating and sharing knowledge? Could we critically expand the idea of “visual literacy” to a more comprehensive concept of “audiovisual literacy”?

To shed light on these questions, the paper presents three selective examples of relevant documentaries, all dealing with music cultures but deriving from diverse methodological viewpoints and techniques. Our study focuses on the cinematic representation of music as a nonrepresentational art to establish awareness of audiovisual literacy and seek a balance between the visual and the audio channels in contemporary multimedia contexts. Arranged in chronological order by their year of release, the films involve faraway communities and their music practices, using the anthropological approach of ethnographic fieldwork (Pink, 2001). One of our main interests is to investigate the way the visual matches the aural aspect of these films. The analysis is selectively aimed at these three documentaries that establish an alternative way to handle the relationship between sonic and optical film narration; namely, *Siaka, an African Musician* (Zemp, 2005), *Roaring Abyss* (Piñero, 2016), and *Voices of the Rainforest: A Day in the Life of Bosavi* (Feld & Richards, 2019).

### Theoretical and Methodological Conceptualization

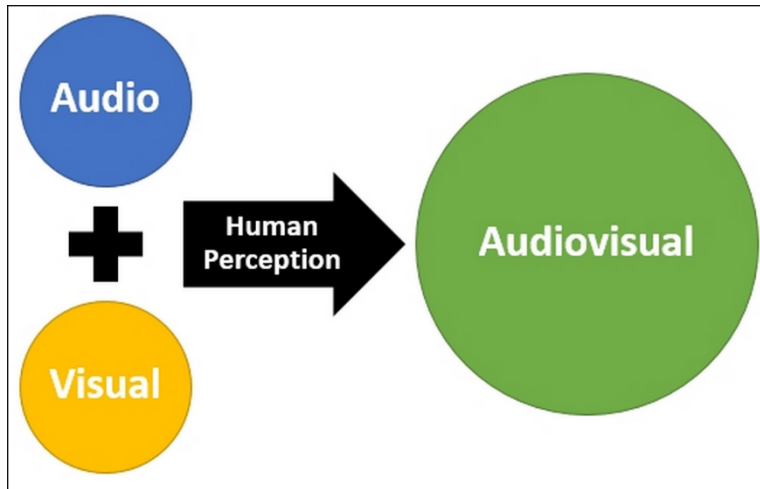
We could define the anthropology of music as the study of music concerning culture, that is, music perceived within its social context and not as an absolute, mechanical, and self-referral process (Merriam, 1964). Furthermore, ethnomusicology is the scientific research of music as a sociocultural performance to understand not only what music and music-making are but also what they mean to their practitioners and audiences (Rice, 2014, pp. 9-10). On the other side, media literacy is a selective conception of literacy that involves the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media in various forms (Thoman & Jolls, 2005). Contemporary audiovisual media have been largely used for this scope, although there is an emphasis on their visual features against their aural qualities. The use of audiovisual media in ethnomusicology and anthropology of music is not recent in terms of meeting new needs or modes of expression. The theoretical and methodological foundations of the advent of film and video in music anthropology were introduced many years ago as tools for academic exploration based on ethnographic fieldwork. It is not easy to determine the exact origins of the history of ethnomusicological films; we could instead look for its roots within the initial steps of ethnographic filmmaking. Films of ethnomusicological interest are linked to anthropological films and ethnographic documentaries that investigate music as cultural performance (D'Amico, 2020, p. 23-24).

As early as the 1930s, German and English ethnomusicologists encompassed film within their field research procedures. At the same time, anthropologists recognized the innovative assets of moving images and used film to record and analyze either body movement or nonverbal communication related to music. For example, as a pioneer of visual anthropology, Franz Boas paid special attention to music and dance, as he considered performing arts to be an integral part of human culture (Ruby, 1983, p. 27-29). After the end of World War II, various styles of ethnographic, anthropological, and ethnomusicological films were created in Europe. The most important of these were the “concept film” style of the Institute for Scientific Film in Germany, the “participatory camera” style of Jean Rouch and his descendants at the National Center for Scientific Research in France, as well as the “portrait film” style of John Baily and the National Film and Television School in England (D'Amico, 2020, p. 24-25). During the 1960s, most ethnomusicologists adopted audiovisual recording as an essential tool for fieldwork in music (Rice, 2014, p. 39-40). As soon as the late 1970s, video documentation with small, light, cheaper, and easy-to-use cameras made it easier to shoot with direct sound throughout on-site research and motivated ethnomusicologists to create more films (Simon, 1989, p. 40).

Over the past decades, a subfield of ethnomusicology and music anthropology, which could be defined as “audiovisual ethnomusicology,” has emerged and begun to develop. This domain underlines the combination of the cultural study of music and visual anthropology. The subject matter of this new discipline is the “ethnomusicological film.” Although the term is under construction, ethnomusicological films are recognized as effective ways to audiovisually explore and represent music within its natural and cultural environment. In particular, these films depict the lives of musicians, highlight musical and social structures, and introduce a holistic ethnographic approach to peoples’ musical and sound practices (D'Amico, 2020, p. 22-23). There is no universally accepted norm for what exactly an ethnomusicological film is, how it is made, and how — ultimately — it should be interpreted. Ethnomusicologists and music anthropologists produce films using diverse methods and techniques. Each adopts different strategies, such as ideas and criteria for filming and editing, methods of collecting and analyzing data, ways of applying novel research tools, and channels of communicating their work to the broader public. Their distinctive goals, intentions, and approaches result in a compilation of means aiming to visually inscribe musical realities during their research fieldwork (Killick, 2013, p. 82).

There is a need to connect ethnographic films and documentaries, which intend to represent particular facets of music cultures, with audiovisual literacy and pay equal attention to both visual and auditory stimuli. This process requires sticking with Michel Chion’s concept of “audiovisual contract” — ideal for all audiovisual media — as “a kind of symbolic contract that the audio-viewer enters into, consenting to think of sound and image as forming a single entity” (Chion, 1994, p. 216). As seen in Figure 1, the audience tends to forget that sound and pictures are coming from different sources and considers these two components to be parts of one the same world.

**Figure 1**  
The illustration of Michel Chion's "audiovisual contract"



### Films' Outlines and Contextualization

The first film analyzed is *Siaka, an African Musician*. It is a 2005 film directed by Hugo Zemp, presenting Siaka Diabate, a musician from Côte d'Ivoire. Having a mixed ancestry, Siaka is not a pure griot (troubadour), although he considers himself one. He has the musical talent to be recognized as an accomplished musician. The film documents Siaka performing with the Soungalo Group while practicing his instruments (Figure 2). Zemp's film includes five chapters, each dedicated to one of the instruments played by Siaka. It also includes interviews with him and master drummer Soungalo Coulibaly about Siaka's music life story. Ethnomusicologist and filmmaker Hugo Zemp is a prolific folk music researcher and has created several films on music from Africa, Oceania, and Switzerland. Besides his recorded discs and ethnomusicological analyses, Zemp has also written several articles on filming ethnic music.

**Figure 2**  
Still image from the website of the film "Siaka, an African Musician"





The second film is Quino Pinero's *Roaring Abyss* — a sound journey across the mountains, deserts, and forests of Ethiopia and its vivid cultural universe. Produced in 2016, *Roaring Abyss* takes the viewer through the miscellaneous music scenes spread all over the country and, thus, manages to keep a record of this dynamic tradition of unreleased music recordings regarded as important for the transmission and preservation of African musical heritage. It constitutes the outcome of the director's two-year fieldwork in rural Ethiopia that revealed and documented rich music practices of these places — a material afterward transmuted in this audiovisual survey (Figure 3). Piñero is a sound engineer, music/sound producer, and documentary filmmaker working in Africa and Europe.

**Figure 3**

Still image from the website of the film “*Roaring Abyss*”



Finally, *Voices of the Rainforest: A Day in the Life of Bosavi*, created by Steven Feld and Jeremiah Ra Richards in collaboration with the Bona community of Bosavi people in Papua New Guinea, is a 70-minute “eco-rockumentary” a cinema concert of the rainforest's daily life and the music it inspires for the locals. The film presents numerous activities of work, leisure, and ritual in the full ambient visual and aural setting of the rainforest throughout the day and night. Steven Feld is an ethnomusicologist, anthropologist, and linguist who worked in Bosavi from 1975 to 2000 and recorded the original CD also titled *Voices of the Rainforest*. Together with acclaimed sound editor Dennis Leonard, Feld recomposed the CD's 25<sup>th</sup>-anniversary surround soundtrack. A 2018 return to Bosavi, with filmmaker Jeremiah Ra Richards, and research into the archival photographic material, led to the creation of this fascinating film (Figure 4). Feld is a pioneer in audiovisual ethnomusicology. Since the mid-1970s, he strongly supported audiovisual means in ethnomusicological fieldwork as a crucial tool for representing cultural life, human behavior, and social relations via texts and images and music and sound.

**Figure 4**

Still images from the website of the film “Voices of the Rainforest: A Day in the Life of Bosavi”



#### Films' Analyses and Critical Interpretation

In *Siaka, an African Musician*, Zemp's shooting and editing reveal his general artistic approach. His style is subtle but never dull, as he rarely allows shots to linger too long — a common challenge for ethnographic films that seek to develop full shots of whole bodies and actions. This axiom towards a wholeness of visual representation often applies at the expense of the audience, who grows uncomfortable with such slowly-paced editing, so Zemp avoids this trap. According to D'Amico (2020, p. 169), Zemp — following Jean Rouch's “cinéma vérité” — suggests a specific method of filming music performances that underlies his intention to respect both the music and the musicians. Although filming music requires sound-synchronized shots and cinematographers have been using new equipment since the 1960s, Zemp (1988, p. 394) affirms that several filmmakers and editors often decide to use out-of-sync images of musicians while playing other music. For Zemp, a film ethnomusicologist should try:

to film a music piece, and to edit it, in its entirety; to keep music performance free from voice-over narration, and to translate song texts with subtitles; to film the musician as a human being and not like a thing or an insect, and to show the relationship between filmmaker and musician in the film, rather than hiding it; [and] to allow expression of the musician's point of view, respecting his voice and his language through translations in subtitles” (Zemp, 1988, p. 393-394).

Zemp (1988) examines the various ways of shooting a musical piece synchronously and in its integrity, such as stationary framing, panning, zooming, long sequence shooting with a moving handheld camera and several cameras, or multiple shooting with one camera. Each decision should match with the special circumstances of the music performed. In the fourth part of the film in question, Siaka performs the kora harp, a large string instrument. First, Siaka plays a cassette tape he has just purchased and, with his eyes closed, tries to reproduce the kora harp music he hears. In this sequence, we can identify another important

— though rarely documented — aspect of a musician’s trade: practicing. Siaka listens to the tape for a while and then stops and tries to play the music in his way. He comments on the complexity in adapting another musician’s performance to one’s style and how he started playing the kora. In this long shot, the viewers watch (without interruption) Siaka performing, practicing, and informing them about his instrument and his relation to it. Zemp (1988) prefers capturing the moment as he experiences it in the field and lets Siaka express himself the way he wants. This direct approach reflects also the methodology he employs to document and edit this scene, having as few as possible different shots and camera angles and using the recording audio from (probably) one microphone, which is not visible on screen.

Concerning the particular ethnomusicological film, D’Amico acknowledges that “using long continuous shots that give priority to the music and to what Siaka and Soungalo have to say, this documentary is an example of an ethnomusicological film that serves a double purpose” (D’Amico, 2020, p. 178), as “a video with both high entertainment and high educational value” (Knight, 2009, p. 261). Zemp (1988) prefers sequences showing, in real-time, the relationship between the musicians themselves and between the musicians and the local people attending an event. Accordingly, the film’s audience feels present on site, along with the camera, in the heart of the action.

Meanwhile, for Quino Piñero, the director of *Roaring Abyss*, sound and music are fundamental elements of filmmaking. In his website (<https://quinopinero.com>), he explains:

Sound plays a main role in the story, it gives a meaning to that character in your film, makes you jump from your seat or take a deep breath after those powerful words. [...] Recording on location; editing the sound; adding foleys, extra dialogs, sound effects, atmospheres; mixing the music; [...] putting all these elements around you through surround mixes; designing the sound from the very first stages to the last re-recording moment.

Music is the main subject of his documentary creation, portraying lands and cultures through field recordings. In particular, *Roaring Abyss* is a virtuous combination of different elements that had appeared in his prior films. The film contains many uninterrupted live music performances with transparent images and sound documentation. For this occasion, all musicians are placed on site to perform for the shooting. In addition, audio equipment is usually visible to remind the audience that they are not watching a spontaneous music performance.

Apart from the abovementioned performances, the documentary contains bridging shots that transfer — visually and aurally — the cultural identity of the places presented. Villagers walking in the forest and talking, impressive landscapes, people working, and animals wandering around — all these offer an experimental combination of the images with the sound recordings, reorganized according to the creator’s prior experiences and his overall conceptualization of the project. In one of his interviews, Piñero (personal communication, February 5, 2019) reveals:

One of my main goals is to deal equally with image and sound. Most of the time, the sounds we hear in films do not belong to the correlated images; they do not match the actual context. In Ethiopia, I collected a large number of recordings, [and] started composing various soundscapes, mixing the sounds together and adding many layers of sound [...] [thus, creating] a “hyper-reality”. [...] Then, I asked myself and my teammates what images could fit into these soundscapes. It’s the reverse process of a director wanting to add sound to the moving images. [...] Showing not only the music in a film, but also the other “sound” life that is part of it, is a necessity for me. [...] Ethiopian traditional music is a “repetition” of the elements people hear in their daily life.

Most of Piñero’s points of view appear in *Roaring Abyss* — an experimental piece of cinema that stimulates the senses by immersing the audience into a new world of sights and sounds not often encountered in the West. From the first scenes of the documentary, we recognize the filmmaker’s intention to include both direct music performances and the cultural milieu surrounding them in the film’s audiovisual spectrum. As a characteristic example of this approach, the film begins depicting a man weaving on a loom and creating rhythmic motives from the machinery’s noises. As the filmmaker admitted, these sounds have been recorded in a different context and recomposed for the needs of the specific documentary. This cultural



soundscape is incorporated gradually into the next scene, where we can watch a realistic music performance with an aural reference to the previous section. The sounds of weaving “penetrate” into the performance of the second scene, in which we observe a long sequence of moving images switching according to the rhythm of the music. The musicians’ gestures follow a musical rhythm, and the rhythm of music attends the realm of the loom that produces sounds as continuous circles in our ears and eyes.

*Voices of the Rainforest* is based on a 24-hour timeline without a verbal narrative structure, as a “compressed soundscaped day.” Musicologist Kirsten Paige describes the film as “the litany of ongoing connections between the environment, its birds, and the Kaluli people who sing with it” (Paige, 2021, p. 130). The documentary could be divided into ten sections, interrupted by some bridging shots of the drones that seize the impressive immensity of the forest. In these units, there is a constant visual and sonic alteration, slowly and captivatingly transferring us from one part of the day to the next. The documentary’s temporal “emplacement and displacement” (Paige, 2021, p. 130), as the community of Bosavi has changed in the last decades, is further complicated by the directors’ decision to pair historical images with novel sounds and newer video footage with old recordings. The film has an experimental character with artistic dimensions in the way that Feld has combined archival material with high-resolution drone shots. For example, there are some scenes where the Kaluli people are scything trees, but it is not clear whether the sound of their singing is either a “live” recording or a pre-existing track.

The film’s sequence titled “Relaxing at the Creek” recounts the story from the viewpoint of birds moving through and around waterways, as well as the perspective of Ulahi Gonogo’s musical and poetic imagination. Ulahi is an artist whose singing words and phrases are flashed on the screen through manifold dissolves, jump cuts, repeats, splits, and overlaps. The recording of Ulahi singing at the creek was multifaceted. At the top of the mix is a stereo track of her voice. Then, there are additional tracks above and behind her. We can also hear the sound of the moving water from the tracks recorded by microphones facing her and at her left and right. Furthermore, there are three sets of tracks down the stream in each direction and behind her. And, finally, a close-up recording at the creek bank edge in front of her. Feld wonders but answers, “So why record and mix twelve tracks to present this sound space? Because the sound is already an image. [...] Those multiple tracks are [...] indexes of ‘audio-vision’ (Chion, 1994). [...] That ‘far greater textural density’ [...] is the way the new technologies of cinema surround sound make possible [...] a deeper ‘audio-vision’” (Feld, 2021, p. 225).

Feld proposes a holistic approach that is also applied in this film, while he tries to experience and feel the world depending on his multi-sensorial instincts (Apley, 2020). For Feld, “to say that sound is a way of knowing is to acknowledge the importance of feeling the vibrational subtleties of a world, whether or not they are ever visible or touchable, and whether or not they are ever verbalized” (Feld, 2021, p. 222). He describes the forest of Bosavi as a locale interlinked with histories of listening, a place where water flows through the land as voice flows through the body.

The presence of a film aesthetic is more a matter of the ways the sound and image interact multiply, and comes from the many visual and sonic economies employed to tell different kinds of ethno-dialogic stories. [...] I want the image-sound to be a total universe of exploration. This means doing anthropology of sound in sound together with doing anthropology of the image in images. Sound and image are primary material, the media and method of discovery of course. (Feld & Ricci, 2015, p. 50-51)

This comment conceptualizes the multimodal utterance of contemporary ethnomusicological films as audiovisual paradigms created for capturing and diffusing — where possible — an all-inclusive representation of the perceived reality that surround us, underlining not only its visible but also its sound qualities.

## Conclusions

The three films offer a different perspective on how a researcher and filmmaker can act in the field and make specific decisions concerning film shooting and editing. They also depict new, unconventional cases of analyzing and interpreting music rituals and cultures, thus contributing to approaching and strengthening audiovisual literacy a more balanced handling of the correlation between cinematic sounds and images. Despite its hegemonic tendency, the visual dimensions of cinema could be interpreted and perceived in various ways, according to the organization of its sounds and silences. Starting from a simple approach and successively proceeding towards an experimental one, as seen in the three film examples of this paper, we can discover that these two dimensions — the acoustic and the visual — could balance to be perceived as an audiovisual nexus and could, in advance, frame the film's overall creation.

The first film under consideration (*Siaka, an African Musician*) has a typically structured form by applying simple techniques in filmmaking. For Zemp, the integrity and the entirety of the musical event has been of high priority. Therefore, there are no radical approaches, like complex audio recording sets or several cameras and different angles. His methodology of capturing the whole ritual without many interruptions creates a feeling of immersion into what is happening in that single moment and place. As opposed to the next two works, this film's aural facet is not something separated from all other film elements.

On the other hand, Feld's film (*Voices of the Rainforest*) relies a priori on the idea that sound and music can create a novel and unique film universe when being in dialogue with the image. This film employs a more artistic and experimental style, being a mosaic of different elements (old photographs, new recordings, old recordings, and new compositions), offering a ground-breaking way of dealing with audiovisuals in modern ethnomusicological documentaries. Finally, the second film presented in this paper (*Roaring Abyss*), stays somewhere between the other two. Its filmmaker — Quino Piñero — is interested in capturing the cultural milieu surrounding the rural locality's musical life. He prefers to create distinctive film soundscapes reflecting his personal experiences. At the same time, he innovatively incorporates live recordings of entire music performances, interviews with the musicians, as well as rehearsals of musical events or other rituals. His main objective is to contribute to the documentation and safeguarding of regional music culture, while paying attention to its optical and aural elements. All three films provide an ideal context for representing, analyzing, and interpreting sounds and images in conjunction with a view to an anthropologically-driven audiovisual literacy (Poulakis, 2016).

John Debes, the founder of the International Visual Literacy Association, delineates visual literacy as an ocularcentric branch of learning:

Visual literacy refers to a group of vision-competencies a human being can develop by seeing and at the same time having and integrating other sensory experiences. The development of these competencies is fundamental to normal human learning. When developed, they enable a visually literate person to discriminate and interpret the visible actions, objects, symbols, natural or man-made that he encounters in his environment. Through the creative use of these competencies, he is able to communicate with others. (Debes, 1969, p. 27)

Although more than fifty years of Debes's definition have passed, the main motivation of exploring, learning, and communicating through mediated representations has not changed. Nevertheless, current intermingled milieu demands for a stronger connection with humans' audiovisual sensors. As seen from the foregoing case-studies, ethnomusicological documentaries and anthropological films on music provide notable examples of moving from visual literacy to a more comprehensive concept of "audiovisual literacy." These films incorporate extended fieldwork research with critical analysis and interpretation through a multimodal representation that involves optical as well as auditory stimuli. Beyond the films' pictorial construction, the emphasis on sound and music could aid targeted — but also general — audiences to better understand the visuals. According to Larry Sider (2003, p. 10), "[s]ound changes the image' — in fact, some would say it multiplies it." This resembles Michel Chion's (1994, p. 5) notion of "added value," which considers audiovisuality as an enhanced quality of present-day multichannel production and perception.



To conclude, contemporary media could open up numerous possibilities for audiovisual literacy drawn on sound and image ethnography. Film, in particular, has the potential to contribute to music research as a more technical apparatus to analyze music performance (for example, the synchronization of music and movement) or the study of musical instruments and genres as an interpretive agent. At the same time, it can highlight the relationships between the musicians and their audiences or approach the sociocultural contexts of musical phenomena. Since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, new digital technologies and multimedia practices, combining texts, sounds, and moving images have encouraged several ethnomusicologists and anthropologists of music to create fresh audiovisual representations of music cultures and disseminate them all over the world. By overcoming the obstacles posed by the Western dogma of the domination of visuals over sounds, ethnographic documentaries on music could aid current work in audiovisual literacy by broadening its objectives, structures, methodologies, and outcomes.

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