A FILM FOR THE EARS: AN EXPERIMENT IN ARCHIVAL LISTENING AND SONIC ETHNOGRAPHY ON DAVID MACDOUGALL'S *TEMPUS DE BARISTAS*

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Abstract

Among the tasks that shape my work as an ethnomusicologist, one of the most recurring is a form of time travel—an encounter made possible by placing a reel of magnetic tape on a recorder and allowing past worlds to resound once more. One such journey took me to the countryside of Urzulei, in Ogliastra, Sardinia, through the digitisation of the Nagra IV-S reels containing the sound recordings of *Tempus de Baristas* (Time of the Barmen), the 1993 documentary directed by David MacDougall. This process offered a rare opportunity to revisit a foundational work in Sardinian documentary cinema and immerse myself in its sonic dimension, creating the conditions for an experiment: I chose to watch the finished film only after completing the listening of all the reels, approaching the documentary first as "a film for the ears." This listening-first approach involved reconstructing the film from sound alone and then comparing the result with its visual architecture. The article examines how this methodological inversion illuminates key elements of MacDougall's transcultural cinema, particularly the ways sound shapes narrative form and ethnographic presence. It argues that the multiple layers of sonic production—environmental, conversational, ritual and mechanical—demarcate the boundaries of filmed action and structure the documentary's experiential field. Through an analysis of these acoustic strata, the article demonstrates how *Tempus de Baristas* operates as a cinema in which listening becomes a critical mode of knowledge, revealing dimensions of pastoral life that remain latent or peripheral in the visual domain.

Keywords: Sonic ethnography, archival listening, acoustemology, observational cinema, soundscape

Introduction: Into the Archive

Over the past several years, my work as an ethnomusicologist has increasingly involved close engagement with sound archives and the material infrastructures of documentary filmmaking. This engagement has been shaped by my collaboration with the Istituto Superiore Regionale Etnografico (ISRE), one of Sardinia's central cultural institutions, whose audiovisual collections include more than five decades of field recordings, conferences, musical events and ethnographic documentation of the island's social and cultural life.[2] Working within this archive means inhabiting an in-between space: on one hand, the contemporary digital environment of audio restoration and long-term preser-

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2 The founding of the Istituto Superiore Regionale Etnografico (General Regional Institute of Ethnography, commonly referred to by the acronym ISRE) in 1972 marked a significant turning point for anthropological research on Sardinia. ISRE's mission is to "research, study, and document Sardinia's cultural and social life in its traditional, contemporary, and historical setting and its transformations." ISRE has taken a systematic approach to studying and documenting Sardinian expressive culture, and since its inception has conducted several research projects focused on the audiovisual documentation of traditional music. For a general overview of the ISRE sound archive, see Pani 2021.

vation; on the other, the resolutely analog world of magnetic tape, playback heads and portable reel-to-reel recorders.

Within this digital-analog ecosystem, I had the chance to work with a legendary machine, the Nagra IV-S.[3] Developed by the Swiss company Kudelski Group under the direction of Polish engineer Stefan Kudelski, the Nagra series transformed location sound recording during the second half of the twentieth century. Its portable design, exceptional reliability and synchronization capabilities allowed filmmakers to record high-quality sound directly in the field, reducing reliance on post-synchronisation and fundamentally altering the relationship between camera, microphone and filmed subjects (Hoffmann 2005). Widely adopted by documentary filmmakers, broadcasters and ethnographic researchers, the Nagra became synonymous with professional field recording. The arrival of such high-fidelity portable equipment enabled new forms of sensory realism and opened possibilities for sound design grounded in the contingencies of fieldwork. This shift has been central not only to observational documentary traditions but also to the gradual move in visual anthropology away from an "ocular" paradigm (Omrani 2023) toward a genuinely multisensory practice.

Recently, using one of ISRE's Nagra IV-S recorders, I transferred the original sound reels recorded for *Tempus de Baristas* (Time of the Barmen), a 1993 documentary directed by David MacDougall and co-produced by ISRE and the BBC.[4] Filmed in the mountains of Ogliastra in eastern Sardinia, the film follows three shepherds belonging to different generations and examines how their lives and expectations are shaped by the transformation of Sardinian pastoral society. The digitisation process demanded close, methodical attention to the analog medium, carried out at the pace the tape itself imposed: cleaning the machine's heads, checking reel integrity, guiding the tape along its path, setting the recorder into real-time transfer and capturing the output through high-resolution digital converters (see Figure 1). The original Nagra reels were exceptionally well preserved. Apart from minor oxide shedding and a few instances of tape splicing, the recordings exhibit minimal physical degradation, making them well suited to long-term preservation.

3 The Nagra IV-S has been considered the industry standard for documentary sound since the 1970s. A technical sheet and a descriptive video of the device can be found on the website of the Swiss manufacturer of the recorder. See Nagra Audio n.d.

4 As for this collaboration with BBC, the Istituto Superiore Regionale Etnografico (ISRE), throughout the 1980s and 1990s, played a central role in commissioning visual ethnographies of Sardinian communities.

Figure 1. Placing a reel on the Nagra IV-S. Photograph by the author.

Each of the 107 reels carried fragments of pastoral life recorded in Urzulei, Ogliastra, during the summer of 1992. This technical labour soon revealed itself as something more than a preservation task. Listening closely to the first reels before viewing the finished documentary brought into focus an aural world that was both densely layered and narratively meaningful. Inspired by sound-centered approaches in documentary analysis (Ngong 2020) and by the broader turn to auditory and sensory ethnography (Pink 2009; Marano 2022), I decided to carry out a systematic "listening experiment" to treat the unedited sound recordings as a work in their own right, a "film for the ears," and only afterwards to watch the edited documentary.

Engaging with the reels before viewing the film, a sonic map of pastoral life emerged—one composed of environmental cues, human and non-human interactions, work rhythms, linguistic shifts and moments of intervention by the director or sound recordist. Without having seen a single frame, I had already begun to reconstruct the texture of the film's world through its sound alone. This raised the guiding question that frames the present analysis: What does the sound tell us? And further: what forms of knowledge become available when listening is placed at the centre of film analysis?

Throughout the project, I kept a diary, recording my impressions of each reel: the sounds I could identify, the scenes they seemed to describe and the questions they raised. These notes, cited below as my digitisation diary, are the primary record of the listening experiment and the source of the entries quoted in the sections that follow.

A Listening Experiment and Its Theoretical Framework[5]

The decision to listen to all 107 sound reels of *Tempus de Baristas* before viewing the edited film constituted not only a methodological choice, but also a way of reframing how knowledge can be produced through documentary sound. The sequential, real-time digitisation process invited a form of analytical attention distinct from that of ordinary viewing. I approached the reels as if they were independent sonic ethnographies: continuous, uncurated auditory accounts of pastoral life, shaped only by the contingencies of the recording environment and the sound recordist's sensibilities.[6]

This listening-first approach resonates with Steven Feld's notion of acoustemology, the idea that sound constitutes a "way of knowing" rooted in emplacement and embodied perception. As Feld clarifies, "Acoustemology combines 'acoustics' and 'epistemology' to theorize sound as a way of knowing. It inquires into what is knowable and how it becomes known through sound and listening" (2015, 12). Acoustemology is thus understood as an ethic of perception and learning grounded in listening. Sound (and the participatory act of listening to it) becomes the primary means through which a sonic event is known, appreciated and experienced. This way of knowing unfolds through a form of total listening, in which sustained attention to a sonic event becomes the means of understanding it. An acoustemological approach can be crucial for understanding the extent to which sound alone can construct a scene, delineating the boundaries of what takes place within the footage.

This methodological and philosophical framework also aligns with Sarah Pink's framework of sensory ethnography (2009), which situates knowledge production within embodied listening practices and emphasizes the multisensory conditions through which ethnographic understanding takes form. Within documentary practice, this methodological orientation parallels David MacDougall's sustained attention to the sensory and relational dimensions of ethnographic cinema (1998, 2006), where sound and image operate together to shape modes of perception, interaction, and presence. As Pink (2009) argues, ethnographic knowledge is not constructed solely through visual observation but through the researcher's multisensory participation; sound is a principal site where lived experience becomes perceptible. Francesco Marano's contribution to contemplative ethnographic cinema (2022) similarly stresses the role of soundscape as a compositional strategy that structures not only the aesthetic form of documentaries but also their ethnographic claims. In this sense, listening to unedited field recordings made it possible to encounter the sonic world of Ogliastra not as background to images but as an autonomous, generative field of meaning.[7]

5 I presented a preliminary discussion of the earliest results of this listening experiment, together with an initial account of the methodological and practical processes involved in the sound digitisation work, in an Italian-language essay published by the Istituto Superiore Regionale Etnografico (see Pani 2024).

6 Regarding the digitisation of the reels, I produced a digital copy of each of the 107 Nagra IV reels associated with the project. Each digital copy was encoded as a WAVE file in linear PCM at 48 kHz sampling frequency and 24-bit depth, using an ADI-2 Pro for analog-to-digital conversion and Pro Tools software on a Mac-based system. In addition, for each reel I scanned the container in order to preserve a copy of the handwritten notes on the object at the time of filming. All these notes were subsequently transcribed into text files, reproducing in full the information originally recorded.

7 The term "soundscape" was coined by Canadian composer and theorist R. Murray Schafer, a pioneer in the field of acoustic ecology. The concept was first introduced in his work *The Tuning of the World* (1977), where Schafer explores the role of sound in the environment and stresses the importance of understanding and preserving the acoustic quality of the spaces that surround us.

The acoustic materiality of the reels also reveals the collaborative dimension of their production. The presence of the sound recordist, sometimes guiding conversations, sometimes negotiating the acoustics of the environment, echoes what Bee (2024) identifies as situated and collaborative filmic knowledge: audiovisual documents are co-produced by those behind the camera as much as by those in front of it. The recorded interactions between the sound technician and the shepherds, audible in the raw footage and selectively included in the edited film, demonstrate how local expertise, linguistic competence, and social familiarity shape what eventually becomes visible and audible to audiences. These traces complicate any assumption of observational neutrality and point toward a knowledge that emerges from the interplay of voices, gestures, translations and silences (Omrani 2023).

Technically, the reels also embody a set of sonic decisions and constraints inherent to field-based sound design. Levels fluctuate, insects or weather conditions intrude, mechanical hums disappear or re-emerge and work sounds dominate intimate conversations. These variations are not sonic imperfections but ethnographically meaningful artefacts: they anchor the recordings in the embodied conditions of pastoral labour, atmospheric shifts and the environmental textures of rural Sardinia.

As the listening progressed, it became clear that the reels functioned as a form of acoustic cartography. Without recourse to visual cues, I learned to recognise locations by their sonic signatures: the density of goat bells during transhumance;[8] the near-silence of domestic interiors; the reverberant space of the village church where Italian liturgical melodies momentarily replace Sardinian vernacular speech; the overlapping conversations and radio fragments at the local bar. These recurring patterns made it possible to reconstruct the documentary's underlying spatial and temporal architecture purely through attentive listening.

The 50 Hz pilot tone,[9] followed by the sound of the recordist's voice providing basic information about the scene, the type of shot and the location, introduces us to a different dimension—namely, that of observational cinema. The director's interventions, his voice, and the sound recordist's voice seem to come from another world, detached and distant from the one inhabited by the protagonists. After the pilot tone, one enters the documentary's sonic universe, which may open onto the silence of the countryside, the words of an interviewee, the overwhelming presence of the animal world and much more. These compelling sounds compose entire sequences that, for me, emerge as a "film for the ears."

Sonic Protagonists and the Construction of Narrative through Sound

Listening to the unedited sound recordings of *Tempus de Baristas* reveals a narrative architecture grounded as much in acoustic presence as in visual composition.[10] The reels map out a world in which people, animals, environments and even meteorological events become identifiable through recurring sonic features. In this sense, sound does

8 Transhumance is the seasonal movement of livestock and shepherds between different grazing areas, typically from lowland pastures in winter to mountain pastures in summer. This practice has historically been a central feature of pastoral life in many Mediterranean regions, including Sardinia.

9 The term pilot tone refers to a constant audio signal at a specific frequency used in recording and playback systems for reference and calibration purposes.

10 The average duration of each reel is 40 minutes. In these documents, the final title Tempus de Baristas does not appear; the project is referred to as "Shepherds."

not merely accompany the documentary's images; it actively constructs the identities of its protagonists and the contours of the pastoral landscape.

A first category of sonic protagonism concerns the relationship between human figures and the work that structures their daily lives. In multiple reels, voices and labour sounds are inseparable: cheese-making, shearing, gate-building and herding produce distinct sonic textures that frame each interaction. My digitisation diary captures this entanglement with clarity. For example, the entry for reels 16–17 reads:

> Contrast between the village soundscape (dominated by church bells, almost hypnotic after prolonged listening), the silence of the interior of the house (similar to what is found in the countryside), and the overwhelming sonic mass produced by the goats: here the bells return, no longer those of the village church but those attached to the animals' necks.

This passage illustrates how work, environment and human presence generate a stratified acoustic field that signals location, activity and social relations. The bells of the goats—distinct from the rhythmic tolling of the village church—become a fundamental marker of pastoral movement.

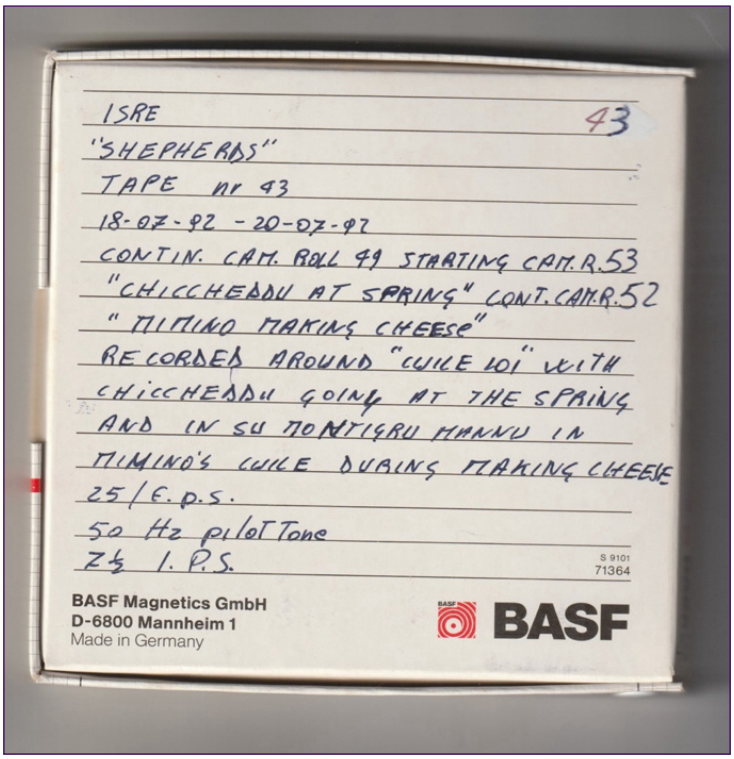

Figure 2. The back of the reel case for tape number 43, recorded 18–20 July 1992, detailing the sound of one of the protagonists, Miminu, making cheese. Photograph by the author.

Another recurring protagonist of the soundscape is the "sound of doing", the noises that accompany manual labour. These include the dripping of milk during cheese-making, the heavy rustle of sheep's wool during shearing, and the scrape and clang of tools. In one of the reels, the phrase *tempus de baristas* is pronounced by a shepherd while shaping a wheel of cheese (see Figure 2). Literally meaning "the time of bartenders," the expression refers to a perceived shift in local aspirations and forms of employment. The shepherd uses it to describe a historical moment in which younger generations increasingly sought work in bars, shops, tourism and other service-sector occupations rather than continuing pastoral livelihoods. The phrase, which would later become the title of the film, thus encapsulates broader concerns about social and economic change, the declining appeal of shepherding, and the growing distance between younger generations and the pastoral world. The sound of hands pressing curds, the dripping liquid and the controlled rhythm of the process function as sensorial anchors: auditory elements that bind the speaker's narrative to the physical context of the action (Marano 2022).

A defining feature of the *Tempus de Baristas* sound archive is the extensive presence of what documentary practitioners refer to as "wild sound": environmental audio captured independently of image, often without synchronized action. In this film, wild sound is not a secondary layer to be placed beneath dialogue; it is a structuring element of the narrative. Through its textures, densities, and interruptions, wild sound conveys temporal, spatial and ecological information that is essential to the film's ethnographic depth.

The audio reels contain many sequences consisting entirely of environmental sound: wind, insects, water, distant animals and the shifting textures of the Sardinian summer. The digitisation diary entries emphasize both the sensorial intensity of these sounds and their ethnographic relevance. For reels 43–45, my note reads:

> At the beginning of reel 45, the sounds of what seem to be insects are almost unbearable, almost ruining the recording because of how loud they are. Yet they represent the sounds of summer. Through this sonic stimulus it is possible to understand the time of year in which the scene is being filmed: a continuous hiss accompanies the recording, the sound of the Mediterranean scrub in July.

Such acoustic cues provide temporal and environmental information independent of the image. They exemplify what Pink (2009) describes as sensorial knowledge: the capacity of sound to communicate seasonality, weather and ecological context without the need for visual confirmation. These wild-sound sequences demonstrate how the filmic world is constructed not only through framing and montage but through the ambient continuity of non-human sound.

In the reels, long stretches of unaccompanied environmental audio reveal the acoustic ecology of the Ogliastra countryside. Wild sound also plays a central role in establishing meteorological context. In several reels, thunder is heard before any verbal reference to weather conditions. The digitisation diary describes one instance—corresponding to the shepherd's remark "*sta per piovere*" (it is about to rain)—as follows:

> Before one of the shepherds turns to say "it's about to rain," we are warned of the approaching storm by the recording of a loud thunderclap, accompanied by the summer sounds of crickets and the Mediterranean scrub.

This moment illustrates how acoustic anticipation contributes to narrative formation. Ethnographic sound often precedes and conditions the interpretation of filmed action; sound "leads" perception rather than following visual cues. In this example, thunder acts as a narrative hinge, setting the scene for unfolding events while simultaneously signaling the cyclical rhythms of pastoral life. Wild sound in the film does not merely document the environment; it animates the pastoral world and binds its inhabitants, human and non-human, into a shared acoustic field.

The contrast between countryside, village and domestic interiors is also reflected sonically. Interior spaces are characterized by sparse, intimate sounds (footsteps, a cough, the ticking of a clock) while village areas feature dense layers of conversation, radio music and the echoing acoustics of stone alleys. Finally, the presence of animals (particularly goats) emerges as one of the documentary's most prominent sonic motifs. Their bells, bleats and collective movements generate what might be called an acoustic topology: a dynamic spatial field through which movement, distance, and density are perceived. My diary notes highlight this vividly:

> During a transhumance scene, one has the impression of perceiving a passage, marked by an enormous sonic mass that becomes increasingly overwhelming as it approaches the recording source, capturing the very essence of transhumance: passage, movement.

Here, the sound of the herd is not background but a mobile, corporeal presence that structures the temporal unfolding of the recording. The sonic protagonists (shepherds, animals, church bells, insects, domestic interiors) form an interconnected network of cues through which the documentary world becomes intelligible. The next section deepens this exploration by examining how dialogue, language and social interaction are rendered audible, and how these contribute to the film's broader ethnographic argument.

Language, Code-Switching and Sonic Markers of Social Space

One of the most revealing aspects of the *Tempus de Baristas* sound recordings concerns how linguistic practices and musical fragments delineate social boundaries and modes of interaction. Transitions between Sardinian and Italian are not random; they follow the spatial and relational contours of daily life. These shifts demonstrate how language itself becomes an acoustic marker of context and community.

In informal conversations among shepherds, whether in the countryside or at the village bar, Sardinian language dominates. The tonalities of these exchanges, their tempo, prosody and occasional overlaps convey a sense of intimacy and shared experience. However, when protagonists enter institutional or formal spaces, such as school or church, Italian becomes more prominent. This phenomenon aligns with sociolinguistic research on bilingual communities, where language choice indexes social domains, hierarchies or ritual frames. The reels provide a clear illustration of this dynamic. A notable diary entry captures this contrast in detail. For reels 14–15, my note reads:

> The sounds of the church, of Mass, of Catholic devotion, introduce Italian for the first time, mainly through hymns and covers; for example, the Italian text of "When the Saints Go Marching In" becomes "E quando il ciel dei Santi tuoi." Once Mass ends: birdsong, people speaking Sardinian in the distance, the noise of an engine. From the church one moves back

> home. The door closes. Inside, everything is calmer, with great attention to "small sounds": footsteps, a clock, a man coughing.

This passage demonstrates how the acoustic transition from church to street to domestic interior is mirrored in the linguistic shift from Italian to Sardinian and then to minimal, intimate sound. It is a movement not only across spaces but across sonic registers. In this sense, the reels become a record of code-switching practices shaped by space, ritual and social interaction. Language itself functions as a sonic marker, signalling transitions between domains of everyday life. Similar patterns emerge in the reels documenting youth interactions. At the bar, Sardinian is used when discussing work, livestock and rural life, subjects that are embedded in local knowledge and masculine peer culture. However, in the recordings, male speakers consistently shift from Sardinian to Italian when addressing young women. The recurrent shift from Sardinian to Italian in interactions between young men and women should not be understood as a deterministic sociolinguistic rule. Rather, within the corpus examined here, it reflects the unequal social positioning of the two languages in late twentieth-century Sardinia. Throughout much of the twentieth century, Italian was actively promoted through schooling and state language policies as the language of education, social mobility, and modernity, while Sardinian was increasingly stigmatized as the language of rurality and limited socio-economic opportunity (Blasco Ferrer 1984). These language ideologies often affected women more directly: girls were frequently discouraged from speaking Sardinian and encouraged to use Italian from an early age, even within the household, since competence in Italian was widely regarded as a marker of education, refinement, and social advancement (Gobbo and Vardeu 2021). As a result, interactions between young men and women often took place in Italian, even when conversations among male peers remained in Sardinian. The code-switching documented in *Tempus de Baristas* can therefore be understood not merely as an interpersonal adjustment but as an index of broader language ideologies and the unequal symbolic value historically attributed to Italian and Sardinian.

Beyond speech, the archival recordings preserve sonic markers that situate the documentary within the cultural and historical landscape of early 1990s Sardinia. One reel contains an especially telling fragment of popular music. During a conversation between Pietro and his friends, my diary notes that a car stereo plays a distinctive musical excerpt:

> During the conversation, we hear engine noise and music from what seems to be a car stereo; the track lasts only a few seconds but is recognizable: it is "Fight da Faida" by the rapper Frankie Hi-NRG MC. It is 1992. The track has just been released and is crucial in the history of popular music in Italy, as it was one of the songs that brought rap to national radio audiences.

This short sonic event functions as a historical marker. It positions the film within a precise cultural moment when Italian rap (in those days an emergent, urban, politicized genre) began circulating through national and local media. Hearing "Fight da Faida" in Urzulei in 1992 situates the village within broader trajectories of musical globalization and youth culture. The juxtaposition of this momentary rap excerpt with the pastoral soundscape underscores the complexity of rural Sardinian life. Contemporary influences and global media flows coexist with longstanding local practices.

Taken together, the reels suggest that the pastoral world portrayed in the documentary is not acoustically isolated. Rather, it resonates with competing liturgical, domestic, popular and institutional registers that intersect through speech, music and environmental sound. This constitutes a multi-layered sonic cartography in which identity is both expressed and mediated through listening.

Political Discourses, Environmental Conflict, and the Sonic Mediation of Modernity

Beyond its rich environmental textures, the *Tempus de Baristas* sound archive also reveals how political concerns and debates about rural futures emerge through sonic interaction. The reels document long, unfiltered conversations among shepherds, capturing not only their reflections on work and livelihood but also their reactions to policies affecting their land. Of particular significance is the proposed creation of the Gennargentu National Park, a plan that, in the early 1990s, became a focal point of intense local controversy.[11]

In the unedited sound recordings, the topic of the park surfaces repeatedly, more prominently than in the final film. These extended discussions disclose the anxieties and frustrations associated with state-led environmental initiatives perceived as external impositions. In the reels, voices overlap, tones rise, and conversations accelerate, producing an aural texture of agitation that communicates more than the content of the words alone. As the digitisation diary entry for reels 21–26 records:

> The debate becomes particularly heated when the topic of the Gennargentu Park is mentioned, with strongly contrary positions, especially regarding the restrictions it would impose on those who make their living off the *campagna* (countryside). "*Custos birdes, custos ambientalistas*."[12] Especially in reel 24, the conversations become very noisy, interrupted only by music coming from a radio, what seems to be Antonello Venditti.[13]

The sonic texture of this moment is dense and unsettled. Voices rise above one another, as if competing for space; interruptions and sudden silences punctuate the conversation; the intrusion of popular music from a nearby radio adds another layer of contemporaneity. The shepherds' objections articulate a broader dialectic between rural autonomy and institutional governance. Their resistance to the proposed park reflects fears of losing access to pastures, of being displaced from traditional forms of land management and of having their way of life judged from outside. The reels make audible a set of oppositions that structure rural life in late twentieth-century Sardinia. Sound reveals emotional atmospheres: frustration, irony, resignation, solidarity. The debate on the park becomes an acoustic event in itself.

11 The Gulf of Orosei and Gennargentu National Park was officially established on 30 March 1998 by presidential decree. It is worth noting that, although legally instituted, the park is currently not operational.

12 The expression can be translated as "these green activists, these environmentalists," with a derogatory connotation.

13 Antonello Venditti is a famous Roman singer-songwriter.

Another note from my diary highlights the entanglement between these political concerns and the documentary's overarching narrative about pastoral life:

> The debate on the park is closely tied to the film's central narrative: a reflection on the shepherd's life in a modern space-time that seems no longer able to accommodate certain life choices.

This observation points to a structural insight: the political dispute is embedded within a broader temporal narrative of transition. The shepherds perceive themselves as living at a crossroads between enduring tradition and accelerating change. Their discussions about the park thus acquire symbolic resonance, representing not only a local policy dispute but also a crisis in rural identity amid shifting socioeconomic conditions.

Interestingly, the final edited film incorporates only a brief reference to these debates, compressed into a single bar conversation. By contrast, the reels dedicate substantial time to them, indicating a deliberate directorial choice to foreground other themes (such as intergenerational relations) over explicit political critique. Listening to the unedited sound uncovers layers of meaning that remain only partially visible in the finished film.

The Sound Recordist as Local Researcher and Collaborative Author

Among the most revealing aspects of the *Tempus de Baristas* sound archive is the prominent role of the sound recordist, Dante Olianas, whose presence is intermittently audible across the reels. What emerges from these recordings is not merely the technical trace of someone operating a microphone, but the audible imprint of a cultural mediator whose linguistic, social and ethnographic knowledge actively shaped the filmed encounters.[14]

Dante Olianas is not an invisible technician; he is a participant in the field, an interlocutor and, at times, a guide. The scene unfolds as a shepherd speaks with intensity about his life and difficulties. The recording reveals a moment in which Olianas translates the shepherd's words for the director, prompting a directorial instruction. The digitisation diary notes this dynamic:

> The interview stops halfway when the sound recordist translates everything to the director, who listens with interest and asks questions. Then he gives an instruction to the sound recordist: "Don't ask direct questions, just give him a topic to reflect on, so it's not that direct".

This brief exchange exposes the layers of mediation embedded in the recording process. Language flows from the shepherd to the sound recordist, from the sound recordist to the director, and back to the protagonist through adjusted prompts. Olianas's presence in the reels also reveals his deep familiarity with the pastoral context. The tapes capture moments of informal dialogue between him and the shepherds (brief exchanges, clarifications, expressions of encouragement) that would be imperceptible without careful listening. These interactions position him as someone whose sensory and cultural

14 Dante Olianas is well-known in Sardinia for his research on oral musical traditions, most notably on the world of the *launeddas*, carried out within the association Iscandula, of which he is president. For further information, see Iscandula 2002.

embeddedness shapes how knowledge is produced. Being a Sardinian speaker, locally rooted, and knowledgeable in ethnomusicology and visual anthropology, Olianas was uniquely positioned to navigate the sociolinguistic and relational terrain of the field. His interventions—sometimes subtle, sometimes explicit—gave structure to the narrative flow of the interviews.

The final edited film includes selective instances of Olianas's voice, a choice that departs from conventional observational-cinema practice. As the final notes from my diary observe:

> In the final version of *Tempus de Baristas*, I was surprised by the inclusion of the sound technician's voice in some scenes. In the reels, his interventions to stimulate conversation are relatively few. MacDougall chose to include the voice of the person who was in the field with him—a clear directorial choice.

The selective presence of his voice in the final cut underscores an important point: observational cinema, far from being a neutral or "invisible" mode, is always shaped by the micropolitics of interaction. Thus, the figure of the sound recordist emerges as a critical component of the documentary's authorship. Through the reels, we witness the construction of networks of trust, translation and embodied presence that underpin ethnographic filmmaking (Bee 2024).

Character Construction through Sound and Image

The unedited sound recordings of *Tempus de Baristas* reveal a multi-layered process of character construction that differs markedly from the visual strategies of the final film. Whereas the edited documentary visually foregrounds the young shepherd Pietro as its central figure, the reels portray a more dispersed distribution of sonic protagonism. Voices overlap, conversations extend across reels and acoustic proximity often determines whose presence is most strongly felt.

Listening to the reels before viewing the edited film made this divergence particularly evident. Pietro's prominence in the final cut is not proportionally reflected in the audio archives. My final diary notes describe this discrepancy:

> The centrality of Pietro in the film does not emerge directly from the recordings, which contain a great deal of other material, often related to the other protagonists. This clearly indicates an intervention of selection by the director: the montage creates Pietro's presence even when he is not sonically prominent (digitisation diary, final notes).

This observation underscores the difference between aural and visual authorship. Through camera movement and selective editing, Pietro becomes visually central; through listening, however, the weight of the narrative is distributed across multiple generations and social relationships. Sound in ethnographic cinema often works in tension with the image, revealing patterns of participation not always visible in the final montage. The reels contain extended conversations among the three main protagonists—Pietro, Franchiscu (his father) and Miminu (a family friend)—but Franchiscu and Miminu are heard more often. Their voices animate discussions about labour, kinship, memory and modernity; and their interactions with the sound recordist generate mo-

ments of interpretive insight. At the same time, the reels also capture indirect portraiture: characters are often defined not only by their own speech but also by what others say about them. For example, multiple scenes include comments by Franchiscu and Miminu about Pietro, his temperament, ambitions and struggles. This divergence between visual and sonic prominence reflects MacDougall's argument that observational cinema is grounded not in a mimetic reproduction of reality but in a continuous sensory negotiation between filmmaker, subject and environment (1998).

Conclusion: Listening as Method, Sound as Knowledge

My listening experiment was guided by the idea that sound can become a method of knowledge in its own right, capable of revealing aspects of reality that may elude other forms of perception. Approaching the film through participatory listening allows full immersion in the spatio-temporal context of the events narrated. The analysis of sound in David MacDougall's *Tempus de Baristas* reveals the importance of sound as a vehicle for understanding reality. In the film, the rich and articulated soundscape of Ogliastra countryside and the village of Urzulei guides understanding of the life experiences of the three protagonists: the sounds of the surrounding environment intersect with words and silences, act as a counterpoint to conversations and then become protagonists of the everyday actions that underpin that particular context of life and work. Sound allows the listener to enter that reality, to grasp emotional nuance, to establish an empathetic connection and to access dimensions of knowledge that would otherwise be inaccessible. Attentive and participatory listening makes audible the power of sound as a tool of understanding and narration in documentary cinema.

Acoustemology invites us to reflect on what can be known through sound and underscores the importance of giving space to listening in research and audiovisual storytelling. In the case of *Tempus de Baristas*, sound brings us closer to the lives and cultures of the shepherd protagonists, opening possibilities for a deeper understanding of their social and sensory world. From these recordings it is possible to infer how observational cinema is, at the same time, a cinema of listening.

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