
Nader Koochaki *Dorsal landscape*



CD **Blind scapes/Paisajes ciegos**

#11 Nader Koochaki *Artaldeak: 3, 8 eta 12*

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When the editor told me that he would like to feature my project in this issue, I realised its potential relationship with the landscape. My aim is to reflect on the notion of intermediation through this project focusing on shepherding. Therefore, I will here consider one of the aspects: the project to record the flocks of sheep with more than one hundred animals in Gipuzkoa. I shall leave the anthropological studies on shepherding directly on one side (anyone interested in the topic can turn to Fermin Leizaola, the anthropologist that has most written on this subject), in order to try to establish the links that the area I am studying might have with this issue of the *Zehar* magazine.

Rather than approaching it in an ordered and coherent way, I prefer to jot down some notes or some thoughts about the theme (from laziness or inability, decide as you see fit) and, at the same time, transcribe some passages from the notebook of the recordings.

About intermediation

I think that shepherding provides us with an exceptional setting to discuss the notion of intermediation: observing it from a restrictive point of view shows us the preconception of the individual who cares for and runs a flock using different mechanisms. This system is perfectly captured in the sheepdog competitions. In fact, if we translate the shepherd's activity into the language of games, we can see the image of the person that guides a set of animals through fear of a dog. The dog is here the main intermediary. Going to and fro, it acts as a bridge between the human domain and the animal domain. Using this as our starting point, there are other elements that come under the bridge category. The sheep bell is one of them.

The sheep bell is the means or technology that enables the shepherd to identify and locate the flock. On the one hand, it is a sign of ownership and, on the other hand, a control mechanism. The sound is produced in the sheep bell and the sheep bell, according to the type of sound generated, specifies identities and identifications. It is a type of remote working. The sheep bell, attached to the body of the sheep, is an extension of the shepherd. The language of the shepherd, embodied by the sheep. The sound that the sheep carries in its body.

Just like the ear tags or the colour branding on the rump, the sheep bells are a means to distinguish the flocks. The different sheep bells (*dunbak*, *kalaxkak*, *kanpaiak*...) produce certain tones depending on their shape and size. Thus, each flock is a polyphony and it can be said that it becomes the sound identity of the shepherd. Semi-

nomadic shepherding or *transhumance* is really rare nowadays, but it is not hard to imagine the pride that the shepherd felt when, without saying a word, he announced to the village that he was leaving or arriving, by means of this huge din. Needless to say, he did that *by means* of the flock.

About the field work

I had no choice but to adapt to the rhythm and timing of the shepherds and sheep in order to build up the sound archives of the Gipuzkoa flocks with more than one hundred sheep. As part of this task, dawns and dusks were the main times of recording: moments when the shepherds went out to locate, herd or gather together the flock. That was when I recognised links that I was initially incapable of capturing. The shepherd then became an intermediary and provided criteria to read what we could call landscape. It is a surprising experience to begin to understand the links, indicators, limits and marks that were invisible to us up until then. The landscape that appeared flat and bare, was filled with relief, made up of vanishing points and links. Quite contrary to the map, it is a network communication system where each element leads to another element in a linear manner. At they are signals that produce a mutual reference, the starting point loses importance and the notion of the finishing line becomes blurred.

Thus, each recording requires awareness and inevitable participation. Underlying the act of recording, the intervention in the territory of the shepherd was tense, with the ensuing epistemological flow. Insofar as it is not a tourist view of the shepherding world (which does not mean that it is a conflicting posture), this requires journeying, repetition and reaction. Waiting for the ideal moment and place to make the recording, it is as much to do about waiting as action.

Now, as I go over the material I compiled, I realise the relationship that this project could have with photography: it is technically impressive, insofar that it seeks to capture something on a medium, like in photography. Even though you are the one who is recording, methodologically it is distant and intervening at the same time, insofar as the action and outcome of the recording have consequences. It is dependent on light, as the position and direction of light conditions the contents of what is going to be recorded.

There is a time that is called the magical hour in photography. It is at dawn and at dusk. It is then when the sun lights up obliquely, instead of directly. This is said to be the ideal time to take photographs.

Even though, unlike the camera, the sound recorder does not need light to record sounds, those timeframes turned out to be absolutely fundamental when making these recordings.

At the hottest part of the day, the flock looks for cool places and if possible in the shade. If they cannot find any, the sheep provide the shade for their heads (the part of the body that is most affected by the heat of the sun's rays) amongst themselves. At that time, the flock does not move and, therefore, does not produce any sound.

Thus, we can state that there is a direct relationship with light in these sounds: it is a work guided by the amount and direction of the light. Even though it may seem strange, listening to this implies listening to light.

Some reflections about the visual landscape from the romantic interval

The landscape is not the mere image that we can see. It is not all the shortcomings that we do not see in what we see; nor is it, even though we do not see them, the composition of the elements that we imagine to be there. The landscape has more of what we see than of the space that we want to see and it is not, in any way, proof that can be acclimatised to the category of reality. Nor is it what we can see by means of the imagination and the dream-like sieve. The landscape in order to be landscape has to slip away from our hands, it has to escape from our eyes, as, despite being considered as natural, it is a human artefact built for us to lose ourselves in the place. The landscape makes the observer insignificant, as it does not accept action or language that could support it. The landscape is always an overdose for the desire to dominate. It is there visually welcoming and subjectively aggressive.

The landscape overwhelms the observer and questions his act of observation.

As it is a game to seduce the territory, power relations are present there. On the one hand, the observer feels that he dominates what he is seeing by means of the contemplative act, insofar as it is an action performed from far at his own ambit of decision. But on the other hand, the holistic nature of what he is seeing strikes the gaze of the observer, pervading it, to the extent that it is general and vast. The observer surrenders to the immensity, approaches the landscape with intense attention, and ends up stripped bare, with the desire shattered.

Landscape is directly related to memory, as it will end up being its limit, like a slippery territory that always seems out of our grasp. The embodiment of the landscape challenges its nature of being hard to grasp, transcendent and boundless, and the result is a fetish or an icon. The experience of the landscape produces total destruction (here we cannot speak of value); the sublimation, however, becomes hypothetical and validates what had been nothing more than a thing, and makes it manageable. Named and informed, it becomes governable, as a fact with its own autonomy; it is thus separated from its conditions of being and deletes the traces left along the path to reach them.

Thus, the text is anti-landscape, but its reading has something of the landscape about it.

Landscape requires distance. I believe that the very notion of landscape comes from a rift, as a review that comes from a loss, a negation or fleeing. The landscape requires separation or displacement, and it is always distant, like an object of desire, like a horizon. The landscape is blue, as Rebecca Solnit sees it.

About sound

Our knowledge of landscape is mainly figurative. Related with the sense of sight, we reduce it to the consequence of a contemplative act. Therefore, it is cognitively visual. However, and even though I have no intention of delving too far into the subject, I think that I should highlight the specific sound aspect of the experience. The sound of the landscape adds depth and perspective. I will go even further: the sound of the landscape provides the observer/listener with more options to penetrate into its territory than the image. In this landscape, the listener goes from being yet another resonating body and the intangibility of the waves provides him with the opportunity to remain in meditation. In its relationship with hearing, the sound landscape remains more *balanced* than the image landscape.

When dealing with landscape, we talk about architecture, chromatism, vegetation... but without taking the knowledge of sound into account. The notion that we use of the landscape is mute, and even though it describes everything except itself, the key that describes all these aspects has not been specified. Therefore, the problem is epistemological rather than theoretical. The key can lie in beginning to think about how landscape is, rather than what landscape is.

Finally, the sound experience is endogenic. The sound surrounds the listener. On the other hand, the image experience is an exogenic one. The viewer has to confront the image. I do not want to relate this to the permeability to the landscape of the viewer/listener, as that experience is connected to their education, sensitivity and capacity. However, I think that it is a matter of location or situation of the subject, and it also works inversely.

As far as the viewing is concerned, the notion of landscape only functions from the distance. The image can only capture the nature of the landscape from a distance. The notion of landscape is lost if it is seen from a closer perspective (although it can be recovered by moving further away).

As far as hearing is concerned, the notion of landscape only functions from the testimony. The only requirement of sound is that the listener delves into its sphere of listening. Leaving it means the loss of the notion of landscape.

The two come together in the field of memory as, being an experience free of physical conditions, it has neither both nor one. The same can be said of aesthetics, in the way that an experience that does not reduce perception to a single sense. We would be wrong if we began to talk about the aesthetics of landscape, as are not aesthetics and landscape *a propos* of a single ontological category?

The nature of the sound or the intangible depiction hinders its being considered as a natural or cultural asset. Our comments about landscape are paradoxically aesthetic. These Aralar recordings should enrich the readings that claim that shepherding is a cultural asset and also challenge other ways of understanding the countryside. Otherwise, it would fall on deaf ears... well, literally.

RECORDING #03

- Flock of 340 sheep (8 rams / 332 ewes)
- Place: Arbelo
- Shepherd: Gerardo Garmendia Salsamendi «Mozo»
- Time: 08:15

After spending the night in the Igaratza hut, I set off at dawn to look for a shepherd with his flock. At Doniturrieta Garaikoa, shrouded in fog, I heard a car and immediately made my way to where the sound was coming from. I found a shepherd and his dog in the car, ready to set off to find the sheep. I told him what I planned to do and he took me with him.

We went towards the eastern slope of Ontzanburu and we stopped and looked out over the valley. We had seen some sheep, but they just looked like white patches to me. *Mozo*, when he heard the sound of *dunba* sheep bells, first of all identified the flock as belonging to «Zinkunegi de Regil». He continued to look warily out over the valley, and later on, and less worried, he told me that he could also hear *kalaxka* sheep bells. He said that the sheep with *kalaxkas* were his flock and that they must have spent the night with Zinkunegi's sheep. «They will now go on their own way», he told me and, along the path that he had indicated, the white blotches divided into two groups and, without the help of anyone, each group set off to its own grazing area. He later showed me the Beldarrain flock. The sound of the *kalaxkas* could be heard mixed with the sound of the mare's bells.

RECORDING #12

- Flock of 339 sheep (13 rams / 326 ewes)
- Place: Arritzaga stream
- Shepherd: Javier
- Time: 19:15

It is a recording of when Javier the shepherd, helped by his cousins, was driving the flock to the Kantina. Javier and his dog were at the back, urging the flock on. The cousins, on the other hand, were ahead: one on a mule and the other on a mare, and were encouraging the animals on with their shouts. We made the recording when they were crossing the bridge over the Arritzaga stream. The reason for going to Kantina: to have a shower against parasites the next day.

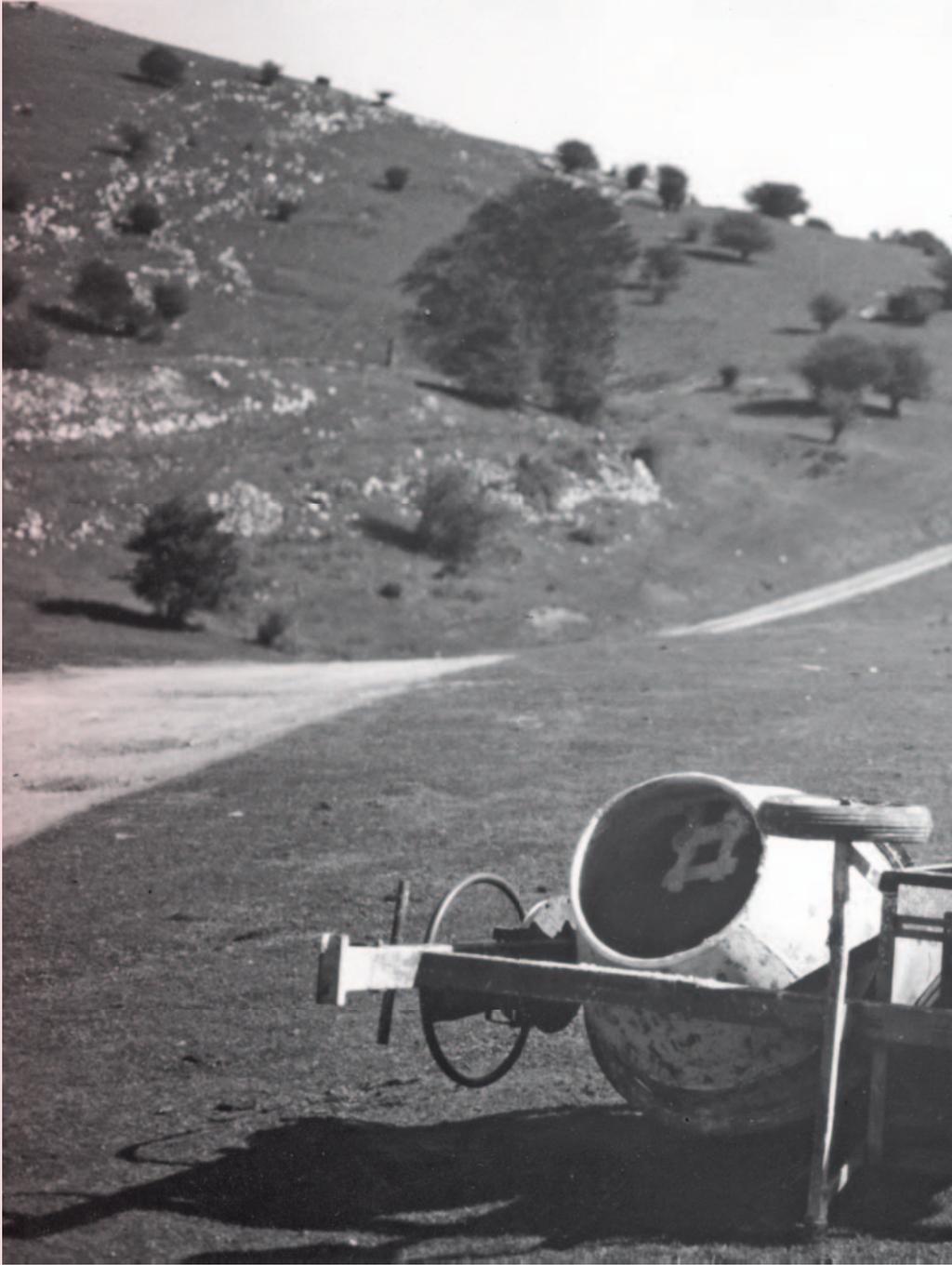
RECORDING #08

- Flock of 458 sheep (4 rams / 454 ewes)
- Place: Zotaleta's way
- Shepherd: Dionisio Goitia Alberdi
- Time: 09:13

In Arbelo, where we were waiting for the sheep to appear, we saw Dionisio. He was in the distance, upstream along the stream, on the back of a mule, singing and whistling a pretty tune. Shortly afterwards, we were clumsily trying to catch up with him without being able to see the path that he was going to take. When we caught up with him, we told him about we planned to do and agreed on the best place to record the sheep. According to what he told us, at around seven in the morning every day, he set off on the back of his mule from the hut towards Ganbo. At dusk, he brought the sheep down to drink at the stream. He then left them near Menditxiki, grazing on the northern slope.

The majority of the sheep bells are *kalaxka* and there are three *dunbas*. There were two goats in the flock with bells that sounded like town bells. The wind can occasionally be heard and the dog breathing at the end.

Dionisio waited until we finished the recording. We chatted for a while and he invited us to his hut, to drink wine and eat Eroski cheese, as he called it. He was a generous, cheerful shepherd, who loved a joke.



↑ *Enirio*, Nader Koochaki, 2009.

