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and Jean Rouch

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Between the sensible and the intelligible

Anthropology and the cinema
of Marcel Mauss and Jean Rouch

Ruben Caixeta de Queiroz

Abstract

In this paper I explore the connections between the anthropology of Marcel Mauss and the anthropological cinema of Jean Rouch. In the process, I identify elements in the work of the filmmaker and anthropologist that amount to a critique of any simplistic opposition between prose and poetry, science and art, rational and irrational, material and immaterial, the thought world and the lived world, ethnographic description and creative interpretation, sound and word, ethnographic film and documentary, anthropology and cinema.

Keywords: French anthropology; Anthropological theory; Ethnographic film; Marcel Mauss; Jean Rouch; Surrealism.

Between the sensible and the intelligible

Anthropology and the cinema
of Marcel Mauss and Jean Rouch¹

Ruben Caixeta de Queiroz

“When a natural science makes advances, it only ever does so in the concrete, and always in the direction of the unknown.” (Marcel Mauss)

Following Caiuby Novaes (2005:108) the consolidation of rationality and the possibility of positive knowledge during the formative period of anthropology (and that of science in general) seems to have necessarily implied the abandonment of passions, vision and the imagination. Moreover “the search for order, an order that produced consequences and results, had to impose itself on the accidental, the impermanent and the changing.” However some authors clearly have attempted to combine poetry and science in their academic works, or more precisely, have attempted to incorporate poetry within science, emphasizing the irrational in pursuit of a deeper knowledge of life, taken here in its widest sense. This was the view of authors like Jean Rouch and Michel Leiris, each of whom – and this is precisely what the current article seeks to show – was influenced in distinct ways by the master Marcel Mauss. Were it not for the fact that Jean Rouch made no less than three films in tribute to Marcel Mauss² – films that recognize Mauss’s huge influence on an entire generation of anthropologists and artists – the link between the filmmaker-ethnologist and the anthropologist would perhaps have gone unexplored.

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented and discussed at the *Jean Rouch International Colloquia and Conferences* held in 2009 in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Brasília, as well as the Special Symposium on Jean Rouch and Anthropology, organized by Rose Satiko during the 27th Meeting of Brazilian Anthropology in Belém/PA, 2010. My thanks to Mateus Araújo and Rose Satiko for the invitation to take part in these events, as well as their observations and criticisms. I equally thank the anonymous reviewers of this journal for their comments and suggestions.

2 All these films are in fact in homage to former students of Marcel Mauss: 1) Germaine Dieterlen; 2) Taro Okamoto; and 3) Marcel Levy. On Mauss’s influence on some of his female students, see the video made by Carmem Rial and Miriam Grossi, *As alunas de Mauss*, 2000.

The connections between the thought of Marcel Mauss and that of Jean Rouch are not easily discernible and indeed often appear ambiguous and multifaceted. Trained under the direct influence of Marcel Mauss were authors as diverse and sometimes antagonistic as Claude Lévi-Strauss, Alfred Métraux, Georges Bataille, Georges Balandier, Marcel Griaule and Michel Leiris. In the mid twentieth century, these and other intellectuals working from the Musée de l'Homme in Paris discussed and produced some of the most interesting and heterodox questions of the period in relation to the fields of anthropology, ethnography, surrealism and ethnographic film. At the Musée de l'Homme, Jean Rouch attended the anthropology seminars run by Marcel Mauss and the ethnography seminars of Marcel Griaule. The latter was the person who persuaded Rouch to travel down the Niger river in Africa, armed with a 16mm camera to capture and record the everyday life and thought systems of the populations inhabiting the region.³ While Marcel Griaule could be said to have taught Jean Rouch the rigours of ethnographic description, Michel Leiris passed on the value of lived experience. A multifaceted figure, Jean Rouch, precisely because he had absorbed these polyphonic voices into his own thought and filmmaking, knew how to combine apparently opposing elements over the course of his life's work or even simultaneously in the same film: reason and irrationalism, the intelligible and sensible, thought and matter, ethnographic description and the art of cinematographic narrative. Later in the article, I turn to some specific examples, including a brief analysis of the films *Horendi* (1972) and *Le dama d'Ambara* (1974/ 1980 or 1981), in order to show the place of science and poetry in Jean Rouch's work and to demonstrate that this convergence can be already seen or glimpsed in Marcel Mauss's thought.

In his introduction to the work of Marcel Mauss, Lévi-Strauss writes

3 There is an extensive literature by and on Jean Rouch's filmmaking and intellectual career. In the catalogue published for the *Jean Rouch International Colloquia and Conferences*, Mateus Araújo Silva (2010) provides an extensive survey of the bibliography by Jean Rouch (books, university theses and scientific research reports, texts published in the acts of colloquia or congresses, journal and catalogue articles, film scripts and découpages, interviews and conversations with Jean Rouch), the bibliography on Jean Rouch (books, catalogues and special issues of journals dedicated exclusively to Jean Rouch, articles on Jean Rouch in journals and newspapers or book chapters), and the filmography published on Jean Rouch. *Revista Devires* published two issues on Jean Rouch (vol. 6, 2009), available on the website <http://www.fafich.ufmg.br/~devires>. In Brazil a thought-provoking book has recently been written on Jean Rouch by Marco Antônio Gonçalves (2008). Among scholars of Jean Rouch's work we can also highlight Marc Piault (1997, 2000).

that few teachings remained so esoteric and yet had such a profound influence as those of this thinker: “No acknowledgment of him can be proportionate to our debt, unless it comes from those who knew the man and listened to him. Only they can fully appreciate the productiveness of his thinking, which was so opaque at times; and of his tortuous procedures, which would seem bewildering at the very moment when the most unexpected itinerary was getting to the heart of the problems” (Lévi-Strauss 1987:1).⁴ These bewildering shifts veered sometimes towards the comparison of human phenomena undertaken by anthropology – based on the contemplation of a spontaneous mass of data obtained from the huge diversity of societies across time and space – and sometimes towards detailed and painstaking ethnographic description of either systems of thought or the various dimensions of everyday and material life.

Germaine Dieterlen,⁵ a student of Marcel Mauss and Marcel Griaule, liked to call attention to the former’s simultaneously open and erudite spirit:

His comments seemed to be as much questions posed to himself as to his students. Indeed his culture was the result of a deep instinct: the study of the ‘other’ through the many different civilizations found in space and time. This study encompassed, of course, the East, the classical Mediterranean world and the Slavic and Nordic societies, but also those called ‘primitive’ at the time. He underlined, of course, the importance of the research carried out for a long time by philologists, especially on Indo-European languages and their range. But his erudition went much further. At the same time as he might recommend, indeed insist, on reading Hesiod, he would not hesitate, when discussing a Maori cult, to tell us to study an act from Shakespeare or a verse from Virgil

4 While, as Lévi-Strauss writes, Mauss’s work and thought mostly acted through the mediation of colleagues and disciples in regular or occasional contact with him, rather than directly in the form of words or writings, the work and thought of Jean Rouch could be said to have acted through his films, his talks at the Comité du Film Ethnographique and the Cinémathèque Française, and through his disciples who had close contact with him in these spaces and elsewhere. Just as it is difficult to find an anthropologist who has not been touched or moved by the ideas of Marcel Mauss, so it is difficult to find an ethnologist-filmmaker, or anyone who has at some point in their lives been interested in anthropology and cinema, who has not been moved by the ideas of Jean Rouch.

5 Germaine Dieterlen is the strongest link between the anthropological theory and practice of Marcel Mauss, Marcel Griaule and Jean Rouch. She was undoubtedly the main mediator in this network, a fact observable in the co-production of the series of films on the Dogon or in the courses and debates run by Rouch under the auspices of the Comité du Film Ethnographique and the Cinémathèque Française. A more detailed investigation of the influence of Mauss and Griaule on Jean Rouch must necessarily include, I believe, the mediating role played by Dieterlen.

[...] And although his arguments did not appear immediately clear, it was not a question of a blind association, but an approximation – his own – of man and his environment as a whole in every part of the world.⁶ (Dieterlen 1990:110)

Marcel Mauss, nephew and disciple of Émile Durkheim, continued the latter's project of approaching social facts or symbolic systems as elements independent of individual mental phenomena. Humans are presumed to communicate through shared permanent signs located outside the individual conscience each person: "In the majority of collective representations, it is not a matter of a unique representation of a unique thing, but of a representation arbitrarily, or more or less arbitrarily, chosen to signify other representations and to govern practices" (Mauss 1979:16 cited in Dieterlen 1990:112). From this viewpoint, Maussian anthropology could be said to be shaped by the attempt to understand collective representations formed within a given society and constructed in continual interaction with thought systems located nearby in space and time.⁷

However, in a relatively late text, Mauss, while not denying the influence exerted by the symbolic dimension on social practices, draws attention to the close connection between thought and matter, the intelligible and sensible, mind and body, spirit and the biological dimension of social life: this is the text "Techniques of the body" from 1938. If society leaves its marks not only on language and the spirit, but also on human bodies and their interface with physical techniques, the ethnologist must also dedicate himself to observing and describing the most prosaic dimensions or material aspects of social life, and not only the major discourses or ceremonies where society is presumed to leave a larger 'footprint.'

Inspired by "Techniques of the body," Jean Rouch, in his famous commented film sessions held on Saturday mornings at the Cinémathèque Française, always liked to cite a kind of secret revealed by Mauss at the very

6 From this perspective, therefore, Marcel Mauss wished to comprehend the universal through the diversity of human symbolic manifestations or systems of thought. A cult in Africa or Oceania could be more readily understood by comparing it, for instance, with a 'cult' from Ancient Rome. I wonder whether some of Rouch's films, like *Enigma* (1986) and *Dionysos* (1984), were not inspired indirectly by Mauss. It is also worth noting Dieterlen's recollection that, for Mauss, training in ethnology had to include learning about physical anthropology, pre-history and linguistics.

7 By way of example, we can cite the texts "A general theory of magic" from 1902-1903, "The gift: forms and functions of exchange in archaic societies" from 1922, and "A category of the human mind: the notion of person; the notion of self" from 1938.

outset of the text: “the unknown is found at the frontiers of the sciences, where the professors are at each other’s throats” (1973:70). This same text contains a revelation that occurred to Mauss as lay recovering from an illness in a New York hospital:

I wondered where previously I had seen girls walking as my nurses walked. I had the time to think about it. At last I realised that it was at the cinema. Returning to France, I noticed how common this gait was, especially in Paris; the girls were French and they too were walking in this way. In fact, American walking fashions had begun to arrive over here, thanks to the cinema. This was an idea I could generalise. The positions of the arms and hands while walking form a social idiosyncrasy, they are not simply a product of some purely individual, almost completely psychical arrangements and mechanisms. For example: I think I can also recognise a girl who has been raised in a convent. In general she will walk with her fists closed. And I can still remember my third form teacher shouting at me: ‘Idiot! why do you walk around the whole time with your hands flapping wide open?’ Thus there exists an education in walking, too. (Mauss 1973:72)

In this passage Mauss’s shrewd mind alerts us to the traces of cultural behaviour disseminated by the cinema, or more precisely, to how the modern cinema fabricates human minds and hearts. As Jean-Louis Comolli (2008: 296) later wrote in his analysis of the film *Close-Up* by Kiarostami, “the social potential of the spectacle commands the facts, feelings, codes and relations between people; the cinema commands the real.”⁸ In other words, if we wish to produce an anthropology of the contemporary world, in the sense of describing the way of life and the social relations making up this world, we need to keep one eye on the ‘real world’ and the other on the world of transmitted or projected images. This, perhaps, can be conceived via an analogy with the dyslexic gaze of Jean Rouch (“the right eye sees the film, the left eye sees what is outside the field”): in other words, when making a film, the director needs to see the film that is made and the one that is not made at the same instant of filming, just as it is necessary to see simultaneously what in

8 In one of his various interviews Jean Rouch, commenting on the film noir of François Truffaut, says that fictional films provide a good way of thinking about society and that Truffaut’s idea of transposing *romans noirs* to the cinema was heavily influenced by Marcel Mauss, since police films provide us with true sociological ‘images’ of contemporary society.

the lived world is inseparable from fiction and the real, from the *mise-en-scène* and the *auto-mise-en-scène*.

As early as 1934, the date when Mauss presented “Techniques of the body” as a lecture, he raised the possibility of producing an entire anthropology through the observation of fictional films, since every movie is also inevitably a documentary on the bodies of the actors performing their characters, in every fiction there is a residue that persists of the real, and, of course, in every documentary there is a residue of fiction. Even today there is an entire field open to the experimentation of new cinematographic analyses and critiques inspired by anthropology beyond a pure sociological, sociological or psychoanalytic analysis. Outside the cinema, the field of investigation into body techniques, as proposed by Mauss, is still little explored by anthropology. From the long list of techniques, we can cite: birth and obstetrics, child raising and feeding, breastfeeding and weaning, adolescence, adulthood, techniques of sleeping and resting, techniques of activity and movement (including running, dancing, jumping, climbing and swimming), body care techniques (including rubbing, washing and lathering), reproduction techniques (including sexual acts considered normal and abnormal), techniques for caring for the dead body, and so on.

As we know, some researchers working in the fields of documentary cinema or anthropological filmmaking have put into practice the experience of filming corporal, physical and ritual techniques in a manner very close to the kind of observation proposed by Marcel Mauss.⁹ However these experiments are generally limited to the description of the techniques in question, seldom going beyond the limits set by the imagination and poetry. This derives from the belief that the very physics of cinematography poses an insurmountable limit: namely the idea that two things cannot be shown at the same time, or at least cannot be shown with the same degree of emphasis. In other words, physical technique and body technique, words and music, compete with each other within the cinematographic narrative, making it the filmmaker’s task to negotiate this dispute. It is as though there were an incompatibility between body and spirit, matter and thought. But if so we are led to ask whether

9 Here I refer to the school of anthropological cinema founded by Jean Rouch in 1976/1977 at the Université de Paris X (now the Université Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense). The book published by Claudine de France (1994) contains the principle methodological rules of this school, which was named and became known as ‘filmic anthropology.’

this is not incompatible with the Maussian social fact? Is there an incompatibility between science (or ethnographic description) and poetry (cinematographic description)? Answering these questions necessarily involves overcoming the dichotomy between systems of thought and aspects of material life, the imagined and the lived.

As Germaine Dieterlen (1990:115) reminds us, Marcel Mauss loved to delve into the concrete and would sometimes say, paraphrasing Shakespeare: “There is more poetry in a grain of reality than in all the brains of all the poets.” The introduction of cinema into ethnographic research, along with the sound recording that accompanied the films, allowed an examination of the more prosaic aspects of social life, we could say, its material side, the conjunction of the lived with experience. As we know, it was still in the 1940s that Marcel Griaule made the first ethnographic films and, in doing so, perfected the ‘ethnographic method,’ making it simultaneously and paradoxically more objective and more subjective. Dieterlen (1990:115) writes that all these films made on lived experience, whether depicting a technique, a rite or a market, represented an advance in ethnographic research:

Not only did they allow the different takes of the recorded subject to be watched repeatedly as many times as was necessary, the films could also be screened to the people concerned in order to resume the analysis with these same people. These two procedures allowed the investigations to progress from one research mission to the next. [...] Reviewing the images of the landscape, individuals, collectivities, events that we saw happen, this acts on the sensibility of those shooting a film, as on the subjects of an audiovisual record. This retrospective restores the atmosphere and situates each person in an affective context, which in my view is highly favourable to research whatever the theme in question.

From this viewpoint, then, the introduction of audiovisual resources into ethnographic research enabled more objectivity since it allowed greater access to everyday and material life – or, in Mauss’s terms, a greater proximity to the collective representations expressed through body techniques – while, at the same time, pursued greater subjectivity by incorporating the thought of the other through the linguistic and musical categories inscribed in the soundtrack and through the inclusion of the other’s point of view in the commentary on the images and in the subsequent analyses of the latter.

However in Jean Rouch's work the emphasis on lived experience is achieved by distancing himself from the more scientific part of the Maussian project (pursued more directly by the latter's student, Marcel Griaule) and thus took him closer to the critique of science postulated by a former student of Mauss: Michel Leiris. In fact, in terms of the more scientific dimension of his work (represented by anthropology's comparative dimension), Mauss continued the Durkheimian project and was followed to some extent by Lévi-Strauss. What I wish to show in this article, though, is that the poetic and scientific dimensions were already present in Mauss's project and, albeit less explicitly, in the work of Lévi-Strauss. Indeed the surrealist movement, effectively an ode to irrationalism, left its marks both in Lévi-Strauss's work and in that of Michel Leiris (and consequently in the work of Jean Rouch himself). We have to be careful, therefore, to recognize the nuances of any opposition between science and poetics, at least in terms of twentieth-century French ethnology.

Writing about Michel Leiris, who had a major influence on the work of Jean Rouch (distancing them both from Mauss), Marco Antônio Gonçalves (2009:33) argues the following:

For Leiris (1988:157-158), surrealism represented a revolt against what was taken to be Western rationalism; hence Leiris pursues his interest in the writings of Lévy-Bruhl on primitive mentality as a counterpoint to a Durkheimian approach (Leiris, Price & Jamim 1988). His primordial interest in Lévy-Bruhl, combined with the surrealist matrix, seems to have led him to explore the phenomena of ritual possession and corporality, rather than so-called systems of primitive classification. It is in this sense that we can understand Leiris's phrase that "...surrealism is basically a validation of the irrational" (Leiris 1988:160) and not a search for the rationality of the 'savage mind.'

As Marco Antônio Gonçalves (2009: 42-35) stresses, Michel Leiris moved away from the "methodical Maussian field rule when [...] he 'transgresses' the ethnographic rules through the deliberate intromission of the author into the object of investigation itself." At the same time, though, by setting out from a place situated in ethnographic experience and a body contextualized within it, Jean Rouch "advances a critique of both Lévi-Strauss and Leiris in terms of the issue of ethnography and theory building in anthropology. For Rouch the crucial problem of anthropology was to produce theory when at a distance from ethnographic practice."

All in all, I think it is correct to say that Jean Rouch worked to distance himself from the academic or scientificist mind-set. Here we can briefly cite some examples of Rouch's position. Commenting on the 'ethnographic' film *Histoire de Wahari* (1975), on the Piaroa Indians of Venezuela, made by the anthropologist Jean Monod and Vincent Blanchet, Jean Rouch argued that their montage was very similar to that of *Man with a Movie Camera* by Dziga Vertov: the directors of *Histoire de Wahari* had conceived an audiovisual record of the Piaroa mythic narrative through their quotidian lives. This narrative was based on small mythological assertions in the Piaroa language without subtitles or commentary. Adopting a poetic viewpoint, the film abandoned prose and narrative in favour of an 'other' thought (overly complex and ultimately untranslatable, meaning that the partial access to this thought by 'ourselves' involves the sensible rather than the intellect). Clearly a structure exists behind the profusion of images (here perhaps we can identify Lévi-Strauss's influence, as Jean Rouch points out): this is the structure of the myth itself and at this moment the film ceases to be a film made by French filmmakers to become a film made by the Piaroa themselves.¹⁰ But what interests me here is the reason why Jean Rouch, in his own words, thought so highly of this film:

There are for me, in this domain, two completely different positions: one position I would call 'scientificist' in which human facts are things that must be classified and catalogued, included in a network of explications frequently pre-established, in fact, and that allow a certain number of hypotheses to be verified. When we engage in this kind of exercise, we very frequently become uneasy, the result of this same intellectual imperialism which means that we can never see others except through our own eyes and our own concepts.

¹⁰ Jean Rouch relates, with a certain air of joy, the experimental montage produced by Jean Monod, who "was as crazy – perhaps even more so – than Vincent Blanchet." "In the first version, he transcribed the myth. And since he was not interested in presenting a translation, which would take the form of a 'commentary,' with everything this implies in terms of didacticism in the narrowest sense, he went to one of his poet friends, a skilled manipulator of language, who transposed the myth. The effect of the film was not disquiet but a terrible discomfort – which, in fact, I liked a lot – that came from the discovery of a surrealist 'exquisite corpse': the encounter of two things that had nothing to do with each other and that collide with each other constantly. But there was something truly lacking still: recounting a Piaroa myth in a poetic language is something that does not 'stick.' Blanchet therefore took over the film again, keeping the montage made to 'sustain' the myth, but removing the commentary. This moment was a revelation. From the instant that these 'French words' were removed, a kind of explanation was suppressed. But at the same time the viewer was left to 'swim' or not. And if he 'swam' (as in my case) he made it infinitely superior to what had existed previously" (Jean Rouch 1975:75-76).

The other method is infinitely more difficult, a method I would call a 'poetic perspective' and involving an attempt to communicate directly with the reality before us. (Jean Rouch 1975: 74)¹¹

During one interview, Jean Rouch (1981) explicitly declared his opposition to structuralist scientificism and, when asked whether his own method of analysis shared anything in common with that of Lévi-Strauss, replied 'no' without hesitation before elaborating:

Many of us think that the structuralists practice scientificist methods. Now the human sciences are something very specific: as Marcel Mauss said, the observer inevitably has, by definition, a perturbing role. Clearly the fact of speaking to people perturbs yourself and the others. From the moment when you interview me, you are no longer the same and I am no longer the same. I have the impression that the structuralists strive to camouflage this inescapable perturbation with the aim of reducing human behaviours to a limited number of themes and pre-established structures. The desire is to force reality into a certain number of pigeon holes at any price. For example, when kinship structures are studied, love is never taken into account.

Clearly Jean Rouch's interpretation of structuralism and Lévi-Strauss in the above paragraph is somewhat limited. In analyzing the mythological system of the Indians of the Americas, Lévi-Strauss discovered that the system is structured by figures of the sensible and the physical, and that the structuralist method must follow its object such that, ultimately, object and subject become irrevocably mixed. This is why the *Mythologiques* are, in Lévi-Strauss's own words, myths of other myths.¹²

11 Reading this passage from Jean Rouch, it is near impossible to take seriously the critique advanced by the Senegalese filmmaker Sambène, who maintained that Jean Rouch had treated the Africans as mere research objects or insects.

12 It would be fascinating to explore at more length elsewhere this opposition, which frequently presumes in a facile and erroneous form a contrast between thought on one hand and matter on the other; between large-scale rites and everyday life, the thought and the lived. Alongside Jean Rouch, André Leroi-Gourhan also played a key role in the institutionalization of ethnographic film in France: the two men were founders of the *Comité du Film Ethnographique* in 1952. However in the academic field, specifically the area dedicated to prehistory and the material dimension of human life, Leroi-Gourhan was just as important as Lévi-Strauss for anthropology. We can recall in passing that Leroi-Gourhan was innovative in his methodological premises: he replaced the earlier habit of discarding everything that did not appear immediately relevant with the concern to conserve the slightest vestige, whatever its nature, minutely noting its spatial relation to other vestiges found in the same layer of the archaeological site. For his part, while the anthropologist Lévi-Strauss was concerned with understanding the deep structure of

Despite his critique of structuralism, Jean Rouch was certainly not obtuse in his separation of science and poetry. On the contrary, in analyzing the first films made by Marcel Griaule at the start of the 1930s, he pronounced that they were “superb documents, the world’s first ethnographic films” (Rouch 1987:02). Moreover, in Marcel Griaule’s experiments he saw a continuation of the scientific experimentation conducted by Regnault at the end of the nineteenth century. In other words, while cinema can be said to have been born as documentary, it was also born from the desire to make science. Jean Rouch (1987:01) writes:

Doctor Regnault had used Marey’s chronophotographic gun to record and compare the initiatives of the Senegalese visiting Paris at the time of the 1895 Colonial Exhibition at the Eiffel Tower. Regnault added: “it is impossible henceforth to show an object in a Museum without showing the chronophotographs of its manufacture and use.” One of his colleagues, Doctor Azoulay, who used the first Edison wax cylinders, added that in the case of musical instruments it was necessary to hear their acoustic recordings. [...] Thus even before the invention of cinema, the ethnographers already knew that these instruments were research tools. Indeed the ambition of the inventors of cinema was to perfect a new optical apparatus, like the telescope or microscope, but one capable of recording movement. (Rouch 1987:1).

Jean Rouch undoubtedly made many films with scientific objectives, or more precisely, with the intention of describing reality and human experience more accurately. At the same time, though, he made many other films merely to delight himself and his viewers through the use of imagination or fiction (which are also systems of thought) of others and ourselves. In the latter case, we are talking about those films classified as ethnofictions (or the more fictional films, like *Moi un Noir*) and, in the former case, those labelled

myth, he did not set out from abstract categories, but, just like indigenous peoples, from an explanation of the world based on categories of the sensible, where cooking, fire and table manners play a decisive role in this explication and speculation concerning the world of humans, non-humans and spirits. Lévi-Strauss writes (1978:506-507): “correct behaviour requires that what must be, should be, but that nothing should be brought about too precipitately. And so it is that, in spite of the humble functions assigned to them in daily life, such apparently insignificant objects as combs, hats, gloves, forks or straws through which we imbibe liquids, are still today mediators of extremes; imbued with an inertia which was once deliberate and calculated, they moderate our exchanges with the external world, and superimpose on them a domesticated, peaceful and more sober rhythm.”

ethnographic.¹³ However, here we can recall the quotation from Marcel Mauss in which he claims that more poetry is found in the grains of reality than in the mind of poets, an idea that forces us, by way of counter-example, to cite the poetry contained in those films identified as ethnographic (and thus more real? less constructed?).

It was at the end of the 1960s and start of the 1970s that Jean Rouch made most of his 'more realist' films, notably the series *Sigui* and other films on the Dogon. However, as I stated above and as we shall see below, these realist or ethnographic films are constructed in compliance with a cinematographic aesthetic that serves art and the sensible, rather than a narrow and restrictive conception of objective knowledge.

After making a large number of films in which voice-over commentary (or commentary over the image, as I prefer to refer to this type of commentary invented by Jean Rouch) plays a crucial role – for instance *Moi, un Noir* (1958-9) and *La chasse au lion à l'arc* (1958-65) – we can observe in Jean Rouch's cinematography a silent withdrawal from the scene in favour of words spoken or sung by the people being filmed, along with music, the sound of drums, and, in terms of imagery, in favour of the gestural expression of bodies. This tendency can be interpreted as a distancing of the anthropologist-filmmaker from what is shown and, in this sense, as an approximation to a form of observation based on neutrality. However, as I shall try to show, this stance is informed less by the pursuit of objectivity (supposedly guaranteed by ethnographic observation) and more by the belief in the impossibility of being able to account (through commentary or the written text) for the complexity of the filmed rituals (which mix everyday life with the mythic universe). Rouch's distancing works to switch the viewer's attention to the images, the interplay of body and filmed words, rather than enabling the viewer to understand or gain access (through a verbal commentary) to the truth behind the images, whether these are taken to be the structures of ritual or myth, or the structures of the unconscious.

In films like *Batteries Dogon* (1964-66), *Horendi* (1972), *L'enterrement du Hogon* (1972-73), or in the six episodes of the series of seven making up *Sigui*, that is, *Sigui no. 1* (1967), *Sigui no. 2* (1968), *Sigui no. 4* (1970), *Sigui no. 5* (1971),

13 It is interesting to note that Lévi-Strauss, in an interview given to Jacques Rivette in 1972, republished in the first issue of the journal *Sexta Feira* in 1999, makes some serious reservations concerning Jean Rouch's ethnofictional films, in contrast to his admiration for films of a more ethnographic nature.

Sigui no. 6 (1972) and *Sigui no. 7* (1974), we can see the minimal level of interference of the filmmaker-ethnologist within the filmed ceremony or event. In most cases, the latter is filmed with a hand-held camera, combining shots of the ambient with others of the scene's interior, long shots with close-ups. The editing is minimalist (sober, shunning any inclusion of elements external to the filmed scene or any inversion in the 'real' flow of the ceremonies) without subtitles for the dialogue and songs, and without any verbal commentary. In other words, the editing seeks to reconstruct the rhythm of the bodies and the environmental sound (using synchronized sound technology) and the sequential flow or stages of the observed and filmed event. Many of these films are seen as prime examples of ethnographic films (in contrast to the 'montage' or 'constructivist' documentary film, taken to be closer to fiction), 'drafts' or 'raw footage' supposedly closer to an objective reality. My claim here, though, is that this was not Jean Rouch's own understanding. To pursue this hypothesis further, we can examine the case of the film *Horendi* (1972).

As we know, following the invention of 16mm synchronized film at the start of the 1960s, there was an obsessive rush for the filmed word, which trivialized and reduced it to a form of naturalism. Further still, it banalized the idea of using cinema to 'give voice' to the people filmed. Nonetheless, in Rouch's cinema, while we can identify the return to verbal dialogue after *Moi un Noir*¹⁴ (as in the films on the Dogon and Ambarra rituals¹⁵), there are also those films in which speech disappears to give way to just bodies moving in relation to the music.

Horendi was a film shot in 1971 with a camera connected to direct synchronized sound, an electrically powered camera with a long chassis, which enabled long takes capable of accompanying a ritual as it unfolded.¹⁶ When it came to editing the film, Rouch provided the viewer with almost raw footage,

14 Here I refer to the work of Phillipe Lourdou, presented at the *Jean Rouch International Colloquia and Conferences* (2009), who divides the commentary in Jean Rouch's films into distinct periods: 1) intensive commentary exterior to the film; 2) the delegation of the spoken word to the people filmed and the virtual disappearance of commentary from the author/director; 3) the return to the voice of the author/director and the reappearance of informative commentary.

15 As we shall see below, in the film *Le Dama d'Ambarra* (1974/1980 or 1981) Jean Rouch intercalates his own informative comments on the images with phrases spoken during the ritual by the people filmed and excerpts from texts by Marcel Griaule, all without us knowing the precise meaning of these words.

16 If we discount the commentary, present in *Le Dama D'Ambarra* and absent in *Horendi*, the edited structure of these two films is very similar.

limiting his intervention to placing these long takes one after the other so as to correspond to the order seen in situ (and verified by information obtained from the people being filmed, who saw screenings of the raw footage). However during the editing, Rouch follows a normal take (24 i/s) with a 'natural' sound with the same take in slow motion. This procedure, fair to say, seems to have been adopted with a scientific (or descriptive) intent: assisted by the ethnomusicologist Gilbert Rouget, Rouch sought to determine whether the recorded music followed the step and movement of the dancers' bodies or whether the opposite was true. Nonetheless this strategy results in a surprising aesthetic effect where the dancers appear to float in space to the distorted sound of the music.

Undoubtedly the introduction of synchronized sound at the start of the 1960s and the possibility of recording long takes in documentaries led to greater rigour in cinematographic narratives, providing researchers with valuable documents for the analysis, for example, of possession rituals among the Songhai or Dogon. In other words, ethnographic films, at least those made by Jean Rouch, were able to get closer to the physicality and sound of the rituals and of the setting in which they unfolded. On the other hand, the introduction of this new technique in Rouch's filmmaking enabled visual recording (now combined with synchronized sound) to continue to be used for a scientific purpose. In fact ever since cinema's protohistorical period, one of its aims was to study the movement of bodies: to describe their movement, the latter had to be slowed down or even stopped. On the other hand, we can legitimately ask: 1) does the cinema's knowledge function not also contain an aesthetic function? 2) is there any doubt that Jean Rouch's so-called descriptive and ethnographic films are reminiscent of Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*?¹⁷

As mentioned earlier, it was at the end of the 1960s and the start of the 1970s that Jean Rouch produced most of the films following a method similar

17 Among the interpreters of Jean Rouch, there are those who see the 'ethnographic side' of his work being strongly influenced by Robert Flaherty's *Nanook*, and the 'documentary side' by Dziga Vertov. Moreover, as part of this opposition, a more 'realist' or 'illusionist' value is attributed to Flaherty's influence, while the more 'constructivist' or 'artistic' value is attributed to Vertov's. While I think that we can indeed identify – if we consider his pedagogical practice and his writings as a whole – a decisive influence of Flaherty and Vertov on Jean Rouch's cinematographic practice and thought, it nonetheless seems to me almost impossible to map the boundaries where one of them clearly had a more decisive influence.



to that used for *Horendi* (1972): a type of film in which the viewer is offered virtually raw ‘data’ of reality without any subtitles or voice-over. However while this kind of experimentalism from Jean Rouch during the period did not convert him into an orthodox proponent of the ‘ethnographic film’ or into an obtuse believer in the objectivity of film-based observation, he also continued to make films over the period in which there is a higher level of intervention from the author/director, notably through the intensive use of voice-over commentary.

There are two films by Jean Rouch on the same topic, funeral rites among the Dogon, made almost simultaneously, in which the filmmaker-ethnologist uses two different narrative strategies: *Funerailles à Bongo: Le vieil anai* (1972) and *L’enterrement du Hogon* (1972-3). In the first film, the cinematographic description follows the ceremony’s stages and activities in detail over a period of several days, while the montage is accompanied by a voice-over commentary by Jean Rouch, interspersed with (subtitled) dialogue from relatives of the deceased, all done with the intention of restoring a social and mythic meaning to the rite left ‘illegible’ in the images. In the second film, though, a different strategy was adopted: here the images and sounds are enough and the director provided no additional commentary to what is shown, meaning that any viewer who has not seen the other film and who has no knowledge of Dogon ethnology is forced to ‘enter’ into the filmed rite through sensible experience alone.¹⁸

In the series *Sigui*, the viewer is allowed access to the ‘invisible’ aspects of the rite presented in the first two episodes only in the third episode, *Sigui no*.

¹⁸ A small detail can perhaps help explain the conceptual and narrative difference between these two films: while in the first (*Funerailles à Bongo*) the direction and script are credited to Jean Rouch and Germaine Dieterlen, in the second film (*L’enterrement du Hogon*) the direction is credited to Jean Rouch alone. It seems to me that in his films on the Dogon, Rouch only dared intervene with his own descriptive and analytical commentary when backed by the participation of the ethnologist specializing in the study of this people, Germaine Dieterlen.

3 (1969), when the filmmaker-anthropologist provides a sophisticated commentary to break the 'silence' of the first two episodes (to which he returns in the following three), supported by sources on Dogon ethnology and his collaborator Germaine Dieterlen. More precisely, the viewer, using the information provided by the commentary to *Sigui* no. 3, can reorganize in his or her mind the almost sensory experience offered by the imagery and sound of the other episodes. Additionally, in 1981 Jean Rouch and Germaine Dieterlen produced a summarized version of the seven episodes of *Sigui* (1967-1973) in which a fairly impersonal commentary traverses the entire film, reorganizing the images and sounds of the ritual cycle as a whole in accordance with ethnographic sources on the ritual and the myth inspiring it, with the aim, in fact, of offering the viewer a synthesis of the sensible and the intelligible. Nonetheless this synthesis was not based on the belief that a deeper understanding of the 'raw' or 'irrational' images and voices (of the natives) could be acquired through the (translated or commentated) words mediated and rationalized (by the ethnologists-filmmakers), but rather on the belief in the impossibility of complete knowledge and the idea that the viewer can only have partial access to this knowledge over the timespan of the screening of the various episodes – a retrospective and projective form of access in which, gradually, a more complex image of the ritual complex takes shape, just as in ethnographic experience itself. In other words, the cinematographic experience (of seeing a series of films) is similar to the ethnographic experience (of field research) and the editing of a film.

We can now analyze more closely one of these films, which combines ethnographic commentary with images and sound: *Le Dama d'Ambara* (1974/1980 or 1981). This film includes an exhaustive use of voice-over commentary. Right at the beginning of the film we are told: "In April 1974, the Dogon of Sangha village, on the Bandiagara escarpment, celebrated the ceremonies for the end of mourning of Ambara Dolo. This film, *Le Dama d'Ambara*, was made on the occasion, directed with Germaine Dieterlen, based on the texts of Marcel Griaule."

In fact this citation is generic: over the course of the film, the author is seldom rigorous or precise in terms of his citations – it is indeed fair to suppose that the citations from Marcel Griaule in Jean Rouch's voice-over are mixed with phrases from the filmmaker himself. In these commentaries we frequently hear references to Ogotemmêli, the blind hunter, who was one

of Marcel Griaule's most important informants, through testimony that enabled the reconstruction of the complex Dogon cosmology. In this sense, in *Le Dama d'Ambara* Jean Rouch and Germaine Dieterlen pay homage to Ambara Dolo and through him to Marcel Griaule and Ogotemmêli. Indeed the film-makers-ethnologists in this and other films continued to develop a form of collaboration between anthropologist-filmmaker and informant-native in the reconstruction and reinvention of indigenous thought. More to the point, they remained faithful to the principle that the native cosmological system (in this case, Dogon) was so complex that it was on a par with Western philosophy: hence the precaution and sincere respect shown for the knowledge expressed by the 'renowned' Africans (such as Ogotemmêli).

In the preface to his book *Dieu d'Eau: entretiens com Ogotemmêli*, Marcel Griaule (1965:1) wrote the following:

The author of this book and his numerous fellow-workers have been associated with the Dogon for some fifteen years, and through their published works these people are today the best-known tribe in the whole of the Western Sudan. *Les Ames des Dogon*, by G. Dieterlen (1941), *Les Devises*, by S. de Ganay (1941), and *Les Masques*, by M. Griaule (1938), have furnished scholars with proof that the life of these Africans was based on complicated but orderly conceptions and on institutional and ritual systems in which there was nothing haphazard or fantastic. Ten years ago these works had already drawn attention to new facts concerning the 'vital force', about which sociologists have been telling us for half a century past. They have shown the primary importance of the notion of the person and his relations to society, with the universe, and with the divine.

Based on these works, Griaule concludes, the Dogon could be said to: "live by a cosmogony, a metaphysic, and a religion which put them on a par with the peoples of antiquity, and which Christian theology might indeed study with profit." At the end of the book, having learnt of the death of Ogotommêli, in 1947, Marcel Griaule (1965:220) writes:

This death is a serious loss to human studies. Not that the blind old man was the only one to know the doctrine of his people! Other Dogon notables possess its main principles, and other initiates continue to study them; but he was one of those who best understood the interest and the value of European research.

In the film *Le Dama d'Ambara*, citations from Ogotommêli relating to the

Dogon ritual and cosmological system appear various times, quoted by Marcel Griaule and subsequently quoted by Jean Rouch. In fact, as we saw earlier, as the commentary to Ambara's ritual unfolds, we are left unsure whose voice is speaking in the film as the words of Marcel Griaule, Ogotomméli, Germaine Dieterlen and Jean Rouch become mixed. In the end, everything combines, whether to provide a deeper insight into the Dogon sociocosmological system, or to reconstruct the different stages of the filmed ritual in the editing, or to produce a cinematographic narrative. The commentary in *Le Dama d'Ambara* thus performs multiple functions including: presenting the connection between the ritual and mythology; presenting the ritual's figures, material dimensions and stages of development; presenting the ritual's sociological elements; situating the geographic and spatial context in which the ritual is filmed; explaining and complementing the images that are not shown; revealing the native discourse; and finally producing a unity to the film.

Below I provide an excerpt from a sequence of the commentary in which we can observe some of the elements mentioned above:

Pangalé, Ambara's son, returns from fibre dyeing in Ogolda, on the Gona river. In the primordial times, men were immortal, but God gave them speech in exchange for death. The fox, master of disorder, inventing the first mask for God's funeral, revealed marvellous funeral rites to men. So death became contagious. The first dead ancestor resuscitated here [images of this site shown] in the form of a serpent. Afterwards he died forever. Since then all men have followed the same tragic fate.

First the impure corpse is placed in the cemetery-cavern. Six months later the funerals entrust the wandering soul to the water spirit, but the soul still continues to visit its house all the time. Soon the village is invaded by the souls of the dead, so seductive that they drag with them the souls of the living.

Every four or five years, the Dama [in other words, the ritual], the 'dangerous thing,' puts an end to this leakage. Seduced by the great display of masks, the souls of the dead leave the village and, following the route taken by first dead ancestor, reach the country of the dead, there in Monga.

Traditionally the funeral begins one day after *dembaye*, market day [images of the market shown].

Sangha is a double village, made up of two neighbourhoods: Upper Ogol and Lower Ogol.

Amadine Dolo, chief of the masks of Upper Ogol goes to Lower Ogol and the

house of Pangali, son of Ambara, who is completing the carving of a new Kanaga mask; he also repairs two others: a 'multi-storey' mask and an antelope mask. [This commentary is followed by a short interview, one of the view interviews featured in the film.]

This great Dama is the end of mourning for seven dignitaries, who had died five years previously, among them Ambara, who we had filmed here, in his home, in 1966. Ambara had worked with Marcel Griaule's team since 1931. After the interviews with Ogotemmêli in 1948, Ambara became one of the biggest specialists in the Dogon system of thought. [This commentary is again followed by a very short interview.]

The next day the masks are painted and decorated with coloured fibres: black for water, yellow for earth, white for air, red for fire. These are the four elements that will give the masks vital force, enabling them to enchant the dead. At night, on the rocky outcrop at the northern entry to Upper Ogo, the drums beat, marking the *ginne yelê* rhythm, to call the new masks, which, leaving savannah, will come to the village for first time.

[At this moment we encounter a type of commentary used frequently throughout the film, whose purpose is to describe in detail the type of mask used and the order in which they appear in the ritual, naming them and describing their ritual function or connection, with the commentary accompanying the images.] Illuminated, the small Dyobi appear, the Peul horsemen, fantastic like the fox, perpetually searching for his lost twin sister. Afterwards come the *juriti* masks, *tene tona*, mounted on their wooden legs, perching from tree to tree.

Next the commentary returns to a citation from Marcel Griaule without mentioning the precise source: "This dance body, the society of masks, is the image of the entire world, all men, all trades, all foreigners, all ages, all functions and all times figure in the ritual as wooden masks and fibre bonnets."

This is followed by a small pause in the commentary, strategically placed in order for the viewer to absorb the sensory dimension of the image and sound that accompanies the mask dance spectacle. Next the commentary resumes its function of describing the ritual masks and figures, accompanying their appearance on screen step-by-step:

Leading the parade is the mask of Azagay, the fox, master of disorder who invented the first Dama, wearing scarlet fibres, made from the bark of the Sa, to dance the death of God, the death of his Father, from whom he took the

placenta-sun and the seed of sex. Its six eyes surround its head. The masked persona holds a ritual staff of the usurper; he has been looking for his lost twin sister since the beginning of the world.

Immediately afterwards we come across another kind of commentary, also fairly widely used in the film: in fact, this is nothing more than Jean Rouch's repetition, in French, of a native – and in this case ritual – discourse, a device widely used by the filmmaker in other films:

A Muluno, chief of masks, recites the motto of the masks: Burning, burning, burning mask, it is the mask of God, the mask coming from the east, to all of us, to our village. Hail, mask. May God give long life to all men. A clever man went to the savannah and saw a bad tree. He caught a lizard with his head and took its head off. The mask became powerful, very powerful. Burning, burning. He hit the mask with a branch and mask became powerful, powerful like the sun, powerful like the fire, powerful like the dart. So that all the men put the masks on their head, the masks over their eyes, on their arms, on their legs [...]. Juriti, I heard your voice. I don't know if you are a girl or a boy. If you are a boy, your voice is very high. If you are a girl, you keep your words deep in your throat. When it is a good thing, may your voice be high. When it is a bad thing, store your words in the depth of your throat.

And so the film continues, exhaustively, the commentary describing and explaining the ritual and its mythological connections, identifying the masks and translating the dialogue emerging over the course of the filmed event.

At this point a question arises: is all this commentary provided only in the service of knowledge or ethnographic description? Not necessarily, I believe, since, just as the aesthetic cause gradually acquires autonomy in Dogon society and tends to overcome life and death from a material and physiological viewpoint, so in the film *Le Dama d'Ambara* does the aesthetic concern or taste for art supersede, at a certain point, the rigour or desire for a cine-ethnographic description. Almost at the end of the film, therefore, we encounter the return to an editing technique, image and sound in slow motion, no longer solely with the objective of knowledge (as in the case of the film *Horendi*, whose main aim, as we have seen, is to expound the relation between image and sound), but, I suggest, intended to perform an almost purely poetic function. In this part

of the film *Le Dama d'Ambara*, over the slow motion images of the masks dancing in the centre of the village clearing, we hear a commentary that goes beyond the frame and the 'real' image and takes flight, transporting us to the world imagined by the thought of the Dogon and the ethnologist Jean Rouch himself:

Marcel Griaule tried to analyze the emotion of the viewers. Here the emotion is religious and sombre: "a soul is present when the masks dance. And, seeing the red fibres, the spectators have the same fearful puzzlement as the fox in the myth: "Is it the sun? Is it fire? Is it a something alarming? The crowd is instructed. Each mask is a myth, each mask a poem, each mask the pivot of an oral literature. It asks then in a way improvised by the ancient artisans. While the mask is an enchantment for the dead, it is also a charm for the living. The world is the deceased who allows himself to be tricked by the enchantment of the masks through a trick conjured by the living. All the living are caught in their own traps. And after using the beguiling experience of the masks to attract the souls of the deceased, they become enchanted by this image, which communicates a malefic quality: the fascination and enthusiasm provoked in the living by the dance costumes and their choreographies release the contagion of death.

It is in fact because the masks and their cosmetics seduced the residents of Pégué village that they pay to learn their technique, thereby introducing suffering in their midst. It is because the choreography of the funerals enchanted the people of Ogol that they bought a corpse and the right to perform the ritual. This set off the mortal contagion. The rupture of the prohibited destroyed human immortality. The new rule of the world comprehended the universal (cerebral) necessity of death. But despite the risk of the contagion of death, men wanted to feel the same emotions before the dancing masks. Little by little the masks acquired more importance than those who actually wore them. And today the mask seduces (and imprisons) man, who became just an anonymous motor. The mask is the persona: it is the mask and no longer the dancer who provokes exaltation. The ethic of the society of masks became the aesthetic of the dancing masks.

Likewise we no longer know if Jean Rouch borrowed the concepts of mask and person from Marcel Griaule or Marcel Mauss, or if Griaule had taken them from Mauss and passed them to Jean Rouch or Germaine Dieterlen, or



indeed if Griaule had taken them from the Dogon and, subsequently, passed them on to the theory of the person developed by Marcel Mauss, which, finally, had been appropriated by Jean Rouch's commentary in the film *Le Dama d'Ambara*. In this film, as in others by Jean Rouch, for example, *Moi un noir*, we no longer know to whom the words belong: the Dogon in general, Ogotommêli, Ambara, Marcel Mauss, Marcel Griaule, Germaine Dieterlen, Jean Rouch.

It matters little. Jean Rouch knew that the commentary did not just serve to imbue his films with a more objective knowledge. For this reason he made (or improvised) the commentary over the image.¹⁹ He never scripted it since, he liked to say, the commentary to his films was intended to follow the oral tradition: writing it to be read over the images would kill the spontaneity and creativity of the same tradition to which his films were and should remain connected.

Earlier I wrote that Marcel Mauss's work influenced virtually every branch of French (and world) anthropology, whether those of a more intellectualist tendency, or those more experimentalist and irrationalist in nature. Marcel Griaule and his student Germaine Dieterlen (collaborator and co-director of many of Jean Rouch's films) never hid the direct influence of Mauss's work on their ethnographic productions in Africa (notably the ethnographies on the Dogon and the Bambara). A critique of the idea of the relative incompleteness of primitive thought in comparison and opposition to Western rational thought can already be seen to be formulated in Marcel Mauss's work. This critique

¹⁹ Various authors have already analyzed the use of commentary in his films, among whom we can highlight Scheinfeigl (2008). On the concept of 'commentary over the image,' see the interview conducted by Philippe Lourdou and Nadine Wananou with Jean Rouch, published in the book edited by Claudine de France (1994).

was specifically pursued in the ethnographies of Marcel Griaule and Germaine Dieterlen later in the 1940s. In his major ethnological work, Mauss (1979:32, cited in Lévi-Strauss 1987) tells us that “Above all it is essential to draw up the largest possible catalogue of categories; it is essential to start with all those which it is possible to know man has used. It will be clear that there have been and still are dead or pale or obscure moons in the firmament of reason.”

The encounter between ethnology and ethnographic film in Africa through the work of Jean Rouch and his closest collaborator, Germaine Dieterlen, enabled a considerable expansion in the scope of this critique of Western reason through visual ethnographies that demonstrated the grandeur and complexity of the great rituals and ceremonies, especially those of the Dogon – events based on an orality that, in some ways, perform the same functions as the major written texts of philosophy and literature. Moreover these visual ethnographies allow the description of what Marcel Mauss called ‘body techniques’ in a more complete form than the written text, since their raw material is the sensible experience of gestures, silences, pauses, the fabrication of material things, songs, dances, the poetry of everyday life.

In this work I have tried to show how Jean Rouch’s ethnographic cinema is multifaceted and prevents any simplistic division between ethnographic film and documentary film, as though the former were more descriptive, more objective and less edited, and the latter more intuitive, more subjective and more edited. In the course of the article I analyzed two kinds of films made by Jean Rouch that I have simply qualified as distinct experiments: those that are edited little and where there is little or no kind of commentary or subtitling, and those that are heavily edited or commentated.

In the case of the former, I have striven to avoid a line of interpretation that considers these ‘raw films’ to be closer to so-called ‘ethnographic film.’ I have argued that those of Jean Rouch’s films that have little editing and little or no commentary, such as *Horendi*, stem not from an attachment to raw reality or an (objectivist) distancing on the part of the ethnologist-filmmaker, but, more precisely, from a two-fold intuition of the author-director: firstly that there are sociocosmic and technical systems that can only be comprehended or transmitted very crudely through the written or commented text, and secondly that we can gain better access to these systems through sensible experience.

In the case of the more heavily edited and commented films, we have seen that the author’s intention was to provide a set of information that, although

intended to deepen the experience of the sensible (of the captured and projected image and direct sound) through the presentation of data coming from the invisible (from the hidden dimension of reality) and the inaudible, did not mean to Jean Rouch an ultimate reality that could be revealed or demonstrated through the commentary.²⁰ On the contrary, we have seen that the extensive commentary to the film *Le Dama d'Ambara* goes far beyond the demonstration of an objective reality, revealing itself to be a kind of discourse that is at once rational and irrational, descriptive and generalizing, scientific and poetic, intelligible and sensible, very distant from the dogmas of objectivity. As mentioned earlier, in this beautiful 'ethnographic' film we do not know who speaks via the commentary: the living or actual Dogon or their ancestors, Ogotommêli or Ambara, Marcel Mauss or Marcel Griaule, Germaine Dieterlen or Jean Rouch himself.

Whether or not his films are accompanied by a commentary, I argue that Jean Rouch continues to believe that reality is multiple and diverse and that, in all events, there is always something of the real or the imaginary that remains unknown or inaccessible to those who try to comprehend them, whether through the literary or scientific text, or through writing or speech, or through ethnography or ethnographic film. Jean Rouch, perhaps due to his long-term ethnographic immersion in Africa or to his extensive experience of filming and editing, had reached the conclusion that reality is composed of multiple layers, arranged in disordered form and incomprehensible in their totality. I think that Rouch's position in relation to anthropological knowledge anticipates what Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, inspired by Roy Wagner, called equivocation:

I wish to make clear is that equivocation is not just one among other possible pathologies that threaten communication between the anthropologist and the 'native' – such as linguistic incompetence, ignorance of context, lack of personal empathy, indiscretion, literalist ingenuity, commercialization of information, lies, manipulation, bad faith, forgetfulness, and sundry other deformations or shortcomings that may afflict anthropological discursivity at an empirical level. In contrast to these contingent pathologies, the equivocation is a properly

20 It is important to note that Jean Rouch's view of documentary, and especially commentary, has nothing to do with the widespread view that this kind of film has an informative, objective or pedagogical function.

transcendental category of anthropology, a constitutive dimension of the discipline's project of cultural translation. It expresses a *de jure* structure, a figure immanent to anthropology. It is not merely a negative facticity, but a condition of possibility of anthropological discourse [...] (Viveiros de Castro 2004: 10).

For Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Jean Rouch alike, it would be an illusion to believe that ethnography (or ethnographic film), which is no more than a form of translation, could reveal the ultimate 'truth' of reality. Viveiros de Castro (2004:12) writes that the error or illusion par excellence indeed resides "in imagining that the univocal exists beneath the equivocal, and that the anthropologist is its ventriloquist."

In conclusion, Jean Rouch's cinemanthropology can be said to be sustained by a number of basic principles: that reality is accessible to knowledge only in partial form and that access to this reality involves poetry as much as science. It is not for nothing that during his memorable classes at the Cinemathèque Française he liked to quote a phrase dear to Marcel Mauss: "all we know is that we do not know." There is nothing paradoxical about this formula since at the same time as we know the impossibility of complete knowledge, 'raw reality' (I would say, ethnographic reality) is a path of inspiration for scientific knowledge in general and for artistic creation. Documentary and fiction are not two opposite and irreconcilable poles, but two points on the same trajectory.

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