

Translating ritual into film – Notes on Paul Henley’s ‘spirit, possession, power, and the absent presence of Islam: re-viewing *Les Maîtres Fous*’

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In his 2006 article for the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, ‘Spirit Possession, power, and the absent presence of Islam: re-viewing *Les Maîtres Fous*’ (Henley, 2006, pp 731-62), Paul Henley gives an in-depth analysis and re-examination of the seminal classic “*Les Maîtres Fous*” by the late French film director Jean Rouch. One of the most striking elements in the text is the rift Henley detects between what he calls ‘Rouch The Author’ and ‘Rouch The Film-Maker’. The article goes to great lengths in its analysis of possible new viewing angles for the anthropological material at hand, being the *hauka* – cult in Accra, West-Africa – as observed in the film. Henley has a clear view on all possible alternative interpretations and re-viewings of the film from an anthropological point of view, but seems to struggle when it comes to juxtaposing these with the reality of the film. He chooses to make a sharp division between the two sides of Jean Rouch (‘Author/Anthropologist’ and ‘Film-Maker’) without ever delving into the historiography of anthropological films at the time, nor the influence Rouch was under from directors such as Luc De Heusch and Alain Resnais. He also neglects to place Rouch’s work within the broader context of filmhistoric developments of the 1950’s. Henley’s paper does not attempt to address these questions and there is the clear choice of interpreting the work only from an anthropological point of view. This paper will address these gaps, offering a few possible explanations which address Rouch’s work as a director, a side that should complete the anthropological data in Henley’s paper. This text will provide a basic layout for understanding the cinematographic choices Rouch made, placing them in a larger framework and making a case for the interpretation of the film on its own terms and not only as an (seemingly) objective account of an anthropological study.

Key words: Jean Rouch, Paul Henley, Luc de Heusch, anthropological film, self-reflexivity

Introduction

The first part of Paul Henley’s text, offers sharp insights into the origins (both obvious and more hidden) of the *hauka* cult, the competing views of different authors and some new ideas about the exact interpretation of the ritual. It is beyond the scope of this paper to also analyze these views. Thus the focus of this text will mainly be on the parts of the article in which Henley analyses the film in itself and its significance in the canon of anthropological cinema.

This paper first examines contemporary influences on Rouch, to then place them within the broader movements within film culture in general and anthropologic film specifically. The aesthetic and formal choices that Rouch made were not born out of a vacuum and clearly bear the signs of the changing landscape of cinema in the 50's and 60's. As I will demonstrate, some predecessors shaped the path that Rouch chose to take for his "Les Maîtres Fous" (LMF) and some of the decisions involved in that changing perspective on the film medium, proved to also open up a new realm of vivid possibilities for anthropological cinema, as the later stages of Rouch's career, clearly demonstrated.

By delving into this wide array of influences, I will establish that LMF should be looked at first and foremost as a film. The process of transforming the ritual into a film creates a new text-in-itself and should thus be analysed as such, In my opinion Professor Henley still tries too much to read the film as a direct representation of the anthropological work of Jean Rouch. Although not the first film in which Rouch tries to break the mold of the classical ethnographic film in which – as Heider stated – 'Film is the tool and ethnography the goal' (Heider, 1976/2006, p 22), LMF is certainly Rouch's first radical departure from the then reigning tradition in anthropological (French) cinema – a tradition that was established primarily by his mentor Marcel Griaule. By analyzing LMF in a way that is too grounded in this tradition – established through films such as *Au Pays Des Dogons* (Fr, 1931), *Sous les Masques Noirs* (Fr, 1949) and – admittedly – by Rouch himself in his early efforts such as *Au Pays des Mages Noirs* (Fr, 1947) and *Les Magiciens du Wanzerbe* (Fr, 1949); Paul Henley places LMF outside of the broader movements in film history that lead to the crucial changes in the development of the medium, which occurred around the midway point of the twentieth century. The following will widen the scope of the way in which LMF has been interpreted, enriching Henley's analysis.

Resnais, De Heusch and Rouch– the dawn of new ideas

Paul Henley's article offers an in – depth and very detailed analysis of the anthropological background of the hauka cult, featured in LMF, but does not position Rouch's work in the broader context of film history. This section will expand on a few of Rouch's main contemporary influences. By examining the way in which these influences are reflected in LMF, I will provide some possible explanations for the choices Rouch made as a director, which Henley finds to be – at first sight – at odds with his anthropological work.

Alain Resnais and Chris Marker: "Les Statues Meurent Aussi"

The first major shift in (French)anthropological cinema took place in the early fifties, when Alain Resnais (who became one of the prominent names of the French 'Rive Gauche' movement) and Chris Marker released *Les Statues Meurent Aussi* (LSMA) in 1953. For the very first time, an element of self-reflexivity became manifest and anthropological cinema would no longer be a mere illustration of reality. In LSMA the medium evolves into a means of examining questions about representation, the way images tend to distort our views of cultures and how a director (anthropologist or not) chooses the way he or she wants to deal with these issues. This is a fundamental shift that Allow White de-

scribes as the '(...) the logic of the signified may be subverted by the logic of the signifier' (White, 1984, pp 138-9). The formal language and the self-reflexive element in thinking about the way that the images subvert the meaning of the subject (the signified) into a new text, will become fundamental in the theoretical discourse about anthropological film (and film in general). The idea that the director brought a personal subjective vision (and style, as the Nouvelle Vague would emphasize time and again) to the material, became a central idea and Resnais, Marker and – later – Rouch were clearly injecting their work with this new approach.



Figure 1: *Les Statues Meurent Aussi*, Franay Saint-Cloud, 1953.

In several interviews late in his career, Rouch expressed his enormous admiration for LSMA that Alain Resnais co-directed with Chris Marker – who wrote the texts that accompany the images. The message and the self-reflexive stance of the film are clearly translated into Marker's sharp rhythmic and poetic lines, that underline and enhance the visual power of the film. As Rouch stated in a 1978 interview: 'In the Alain Resnais short "*Les Statues Meurent aussi*", Chris Marker's commentary is a masterpiece" (Yakir: 1978).

I will first briefly summarize the contents of the film, offering some reflections on the subtext. The film opens with the famous line by Chris Marker that claims: 'when souls die, they pass into history, but when sculptures die, they pass into art'. The camera then takes the viewer into several museums in the French capital, showcasing African art and more specifically African sculptures and masks, on display in the endless halls of the popular museums. The narrator ponders the question of whether these statues have been robbed of their proper soul, by condemning them to a new life in completely different surroundings that alienate them from their own culture. Marker and Resnais conjure up here, echoes of the writings of John Dewey who wrote in 1934: 'When artistic objects are separated from both conditions of origin and operation in experience, a wall is built around them that renders almost opaque their general significance, with which esthetic theory deals.' (Dewey, 1934). It should be noted that the film already deals with a number of issues, that would continue to fasci-

nate scholars for years to come, most famously in the work of Alfred Gell and Arjun Appadurai's "The Social Life of Things" (Appadurai, 1984). These themes however belong to the socio-cultural interpretation of LSMA and go beyond the scope of this text.

The second part of the 30-minute film, shifts the focus to the way in which these objects strengthen the exotic and colonial view the westerner has of the African culture. What began as a reflection on the role of art objects, ends in a full frontal attack on the structures of colonialism and western cultural imperialism. Resnais and Marker demonstrate how the colonial machinery abolishes the local culture, by incorporating it into the logic of an alien economic system and by robbing it of its true heritage, much like the objects in the museum.

It took only a few weeks for LSMA to be banned, by both the British and French authorities -as the French government had done with René Vautiers *Afrique 50* (Fr, 1950) – but its influence was to be felt for years to come. The banning of LSMA probably prepared Rouch for the reception that awaited LMF, although he later clearly stated that he was surprised and troubled by the rejection of the film by African intellectuals. LSMA had an immeasurable influence on Rouch, as will be demonstrated in the next paragraphs.

First there is the self-reflexivity of LSMA. Ethnographic and documentary film evolved from the work of Robert Flaherty (a personal friend of Rouch) who chose to approach the genre in a way that closely resembled the mainstream dramatic feature film, rather than the traditional "scientific" approach that would be the mainstay up to the 1950's, which struggled with the juxtaposition of the presence of the camera and the desire to offer an image that was as authentic and objective as possible. It is telling that this exact approach was often mentioned by Rouch as the basis for his concept of feedback (Ginsburg & Himpele, 2005, p 114). Like Flaherty before him, Rouch thought it very important to show his images to the people portrayed in them:

He considered feedback from his subjects an essential element in the exchange. For him, the shooting of Nigerian spirit possession rituals was by necessity an interactive experience because trance and possession result from the interactions between all the people who were present (...) Under these conditions, the presence of a foreign observer could in no way be neutral (Ginsburg & Himpele, 2005, p 114).

Anthropological film at this point was trying to pose as an objective account of its field of study – an endeavor that was doomed to failure, as the process of making images already changed the object of study, something Rouch clearly understood. The fact that the director took 'center stage' (Ginsburg & Himpele, 2005, p 114) was an essential part of what Rouch coined as 'ciné-transe' (Rouch, 1981, pp 8-9): the fact that the interaction between the director and his subject(s), through the process of filming, was an act that created a new artistic reality, which differed from the supposedly 'neutral' account that the use of images in anthropology was supposed to offer. As we will see it was exactly that duality that the new wave of anthropological/ethnographical films was trying to solve.

With LSMA, Resnais and Marker renounced the traditional approach and chose to emphasize the subjectivity of the ethnographic film. LMF incorporates that same sub-

jectivity. The anthropologist himself – with his camera – is part of what is going on and influences not only the view of the spectator but also offers his own interpretation of the subject. As stated earlier, Rouch’s whole idea of anthropological film was based on this concept of reciprocity between filmmaker and subject (Ginsburg & Himpele, 2005, p 117). As we will see, it is no coincidence that Luc de Heusch took exactly the same route – in a more extreme form – that same year, he and Rouch clearly influenced each other’s work and shared their ideas. Incidentally, the fact that both the ritual and the film are part of the same process of “staging” is something Paul Henley is well aware of in his text, as he quotes Rouch himself: ‘Rouch reports that some hauka events are little more than a form of entertainment, considered by the participants to be somewhat superior to going to the cinema’ (Henley, 2006, p 753).

Surprisingly, this does not lead Henley to the conclusion that by translating this “performance” into a new medium that is itself a new form of “performance”, it also takes on a new significance and a new reality, which does not necessarily run parallel to its original meaning: the act of filming transforms it. Rouch however seems to be very much aware of this fact, as he says in a 1977 interview: ‘My hypothesis is that they would have used a camera in the cult, just as they used a gun, if necessary a crude wooden camera, and it would have been a normal part of the cult’ (Marshall/Adams, 1978, pp 1005-1020).

The fact that bringing a camera into the ritual actually changed the ritual (Rouch clearly hints at this in the same interview) and acknowledging that creating a film changes the reality, is a factor Jean Rouch was clearly aware of and should be taken into account in viewing LMF. It is possible that the interpretation of the hauka ritual in the film might differ greatly from the original version Henley describes in his article, as translating it into the film medium also means translating its meaning and significance. It should be clear that Rouch was not trying to make LMF into an objective filmic account of the hauka cult, but was trying to “translate” the hauka cult into a film – a ‘performative act’ (Ginsburg & Himpele, 2005, p 114) that is at the heart of the process of change that shapes the final film. This difference is extremely important, as it also means we need to look at the film through different eyes than at the subject of the film itself.

David Bordwell, acclaimed film researcher and author of many standard textbooks, clearly refers to this fact that the filmmaker himself and his subjects are part of a new reality within the film when he states about Jean Rouch: ‘(...) but also by using the filmmaking act to create a bond between the researcher and his subject’ (Bordwell & Thompson, 1994, p 483). This is the more filmtheoretical approach to what Rouch himself simply referred to as ‘ethnofictions’ (Ginsburg & Himpele, 2005, p 108), a term that incorporates both the ethnographic element, the feedback between director and those filmed and the fact that the director creates a new reality through the use of his medium.

Rouch here is no longer the anthropologist studying the cult. He is a filmmaker, searching for a (new) form to convey a message and he is very much aware of the fact that he is creating a new ‘version’ of the ritual at the heart of his film.

A second element that Rouch retained from LSMA is that he learned from it that ‘If there’s no message, there’s no form’ (Yakir, 1978). Resnais and Marker clearly took the level of

subjectivity one step further, by giving their film a clear message. Rouch picked up on this and his subsequent films no longer adhered to the tradition of ethnographic cinema of the time. From now on, Rouch used his camera and his material to convey clear messages about colonialism and its structures. Both *Moi, Un Noir* (Fr, 1958) his feature film debut and *La Pyramide Humaine* (Fr, 1961) built on this idea, while also boldly experimenting with the form of the cinematic language. Eventually Rouch would make this message the center of his later films, as the somewhat too explicit message of *Petit à Petit* (Fr, 1970) would show.

As demonstrated above, Jean Rouch realized that making a film about the hauka ritual drastically changed the reality of the ritual, both for the viewer of the film and for the people involved in the ritual (Rouch hints at this in many of the numerous interviews he gave on his work). That changed reality and the idea that the form should always translate a message, again transformed the original : translating into the (art) medium of film, means altering and interpreting reality, which is exactly what Rouch did (see the ‘performative act of ciné-transe’ above), but also influenced by esthetical, formal and political currents in film and filmtheoretical discussions at the time. The text by Henley seems to focus only on the historical meaning and backgrounds of the cult and not necessarily on the translation of the ritual into film. Obviously Henley does not need to delve deeper into this problem, as his text is only addressing LMF from an anthropological point of view, but it does leave open the question of the difference between the anthropological work of Rouch and his role as a director. It is exactly this step, this process, that should be at the center of re-viewing and interpreting LMF if one wants to gain a better understanding of this discrepancy. Jean Rouch was experimenting here for the first time with the subjectivity of ethnographic filmmaking. As we will see below, Rouch was not the only director who started to alter his view on how ethnographic and anthropological film should deal with its subjects. This aspect grounds LMF strongly within the field of theoretical debates on film, images and representation, that dominated the early fifties and which fully blossomed with the advent of the French ‘New Wave’. As I will try to demonstrate, Rouch was not the only anthropologist/director who was already experimenting with these ideas a few years before 1959. His colleague and friend Luc de Heusch did the same and upon viewing *Ruanda: Tableaux d’une Féodalité Pastorale* (Belgium, 1955) (RTDFP) one cannot fail to notice the same basic ideas about anthropological film at work.

Luc de Heusch: “*Ruanda: Tableaux d’une féodalité pastorale*”

Imagine the following scene. We are seated in the film theater of the Musée de L’Homme. It is late 1954, and a select audience of African and European intellectuals has been assembled to see a film screening. Marcel Griaule is there as is Germaine Dieterlen, Paulin Vierya, Alioune Sar and Luc de Heusch. Jean Rouch, who is in the projection booth, beams onto the screen the initial frames of ‘Les Maîtres Fous’. (...) Marcel Griaule says the film is a travesty; he tells Rouch to destroy it. In rare agreement with Griaule, Vierya also suggests that the film be destroyed. There is only one encouraging reaction to ‘Les Maîtres Fous’, that of Luc de Heusch. (Stoller, 1994, p 84)



Figure 2: Ruanda: tableaux d'une féodalité pastorale, Institut pour la Recherche Scientifique en Afrique Centrale, 1955.

Late 1954, early 1955 – the same year as Jean Rouch's LMF – Belgian director Luc de Heusch made a film that equally challenged the way anthropological cinema was being made.

Once again, first a look at the film itself:

RTDFP tells the story of a Hutu farmer, whose cow – his only possession, which he rents from a Tutsi landlord – is stricken with illness. After the cow dies, he has no other choice than to undertake the journey to his landlord's compound and ask for a new cow, running the risk of the landlord accusing him of neglect and refusing him a new animal. The film follows the farmer as he makes the trip, interacting with several others along the way, until the final confrontation with the owner of the cow.

The viewer might think he's watching actual events, but for a small text at the start of the film that clearly states that all events were staged and inspired by stories told by the local villagers. Striking, low camera-angles which offer majestic silhouettes against a vast sky panorama, the use of vibrant colors to enhance the local textiles and ingenious lighting – creating the look of an opera – makes the spectator very much aware of the fact that he is looking at the interpretation of the filmmaker in regard to the original material. Rather than hiding the presence of the camera and the process of film making, the director chooses to make the film *about* that process and the ability to transform the original ethnographically gathered raw material. The aestheticization of the material and the imposed order of a coherent narrative – the locals narrating their own traditions – veers away from the classical approach of anthropological cinema, that above all tried to hide any possible trace of subjective “tampering” with reality. This approach differs radically from the way anthropological films were still being presented at the time. From the works of Marcel Griaule, through the early films of Rouch, these films were accompanied by texts that testified to the truthfulness of the imagery. As late as 1949, in *Les Magiciens du Wanzerbe*, Rouch is still using an introductory text that clearly states the imagery only serves to illustrate that which the explorers could not describe. The message at the begin-

ning of RTDFP does exactly the opposite: it makes the viewer aware of the fact that this is an artistic representation by the director – the fact that the villagers themselves re-enact these stories makes for an even more complex field of stagings. That same idea of making the involvement of the director visible to the viewer is present in LMF and clearly de Heusch and Rouch were pondering the same theoretical questions about their medium. Rouch already experimented – more modestly – with these ideas in *Bataille sur le Grand Fleuve* (Fr, 1953) where the hunt for a hippo is transformed into a ritual in itself. The shift by which the director dictates form, aesthetics and meaning to the raw material, Bill Nichols described as fundamental to the changes in anthropological cinema: ‘(the questions about) the representation or self-representation, of one culture for another’ (Nichols, 1994, p 62): the fact that the stories of the subject-culture can be re-interpreted by the director and are never a pure neutral account; even the original stories are already a (self)representation of a culture. These words are echoed by George Marcus: ‘As written ethnography moves more toward its represented narrative dimension, it is more likely to appreciate new links with film. This shift of constructing the real through narrative rather than classification (...)’ (Marcus, 1994, p 38).

It is no coincidence that de Heusch, who previously used a strictly “classical” approach to anthropological cinema (as in one sanctioned by the anthropological community) – eg. *Fête chez les Hamba* (Belgium, 1955) – decided to change directions at the same time Rouch did. As with Rouch, the transformative power of the film making process, became increasingly important to de Heusch. It is exactly this self-conscious, self-reflexive dimension that seems to be lacking in the analysis by Paul Henley. By focusing solely on the anthropological background of the hauka ritual, Henley misses the fact that Rouch was trying to break the traditional mold of the ethnographic/anthropological film and that his work on the cult and his work as a filmmaker merged into a new whole, which should be read as a new “text” and not as merely an “illustrated” version of his study on the hauka cult. There is less of a difference between Rouch as anthropologist and Rouch as film director, than there is with Rouch trying to find a new way to merge these two aspects. The result – LMF – should thus be examined on its own terms and not strictly as an anthropological text. As a side point it is worth mentioning that there are notable differences between LMF and RTDFP. De Heusch was quicker to adopt the new spatio-temporal modus of ‘de-dramatisation’ that was introduced by the Italian Neo-Realism, something Rouch only did a few years later in his *Cinéma-Vérité* experiments. The self-reflexive element however links the films together even though the formal elements vary.

The merging of film and ethnographic reality that Rouch was looking for, is best summed up by Film Theorist Martin Rubin in a small commentary piece he wrote for the ‘Gene Siskel Film Theatre’ a subsidiary of The Art Institute of Chicago:

‘Rouch sought to break down the boundary between filmmaker and subject through such concepts as shared anthropology (by which ethnographer and subject are put on equal footing) feedback (by which the filmmaker shows the footage to his subjects and seeks their input) and provocation (by which the filmmaker and his camera acts as catalysts that participate in and even precipitate the action’ (Rubin, 2015).

Conclusion

The article by Paul Henley offers a fascinating take and an incredible set of tools for re-interpretation of the work Jean Rouch captured on the hauka cult. The use of these tools however, is limited to the strict field of anthropology and fails when it is applied to the completely different entity that is the film LMF. By doing exactly that, Henley can only concede the fact that there seems to be a large discrepancy between “The Author/Anthropologist Rouch” and “The Filmmaker Rouch”. By translating the ritual into a new medium – an art form – its heritage and meaning are altered and a new object of study takes form. For participants, anthropologist and spectators alike, the process of filmmaking has created a new reality. The consciously self-reflexive element that Rouch attempted to bring into ethnographic film at the time, adds another layer of meaning and a message that should not be ignored. LMF was born out of a larger movement of its time, shaping film theory in general. De Heusch and Rouch were frontrunners in the implementation of these ideas, by injecting them into their anthropological films. Consequently it is of prime importance that any analysis of these works should take into account exactly those (film)theoretical ideas that shaped them.

This new form is in itself also a performance – a ritual – and should be studied using not only the anthropological means Henley applies, but also a filmhistoric paradigm as offered in this text. The approach by Paul Henley is an ideal starting point, but only looks at one side of the coin. The combination of two methods, should enable us to delve deeper and explore the shifts of meaning that take place in the process of making a film about the hauka cult and the way the tradition blends with the vision of both roles Rouch takes, that of the filmmaker and the anthropologist. To fully grasp this process, LMF should thus be studied from both an anthropological and filmhistoric point of view. Taking only one approach will inevitably lead to missing part of the bigger picture and missing elements from one field of research that might shed light on questions raised by the other field.

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