

# The Bilan Adventure: The Shadow-journey.

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## Abstract

In this paper some remarks are made about the intriguing happening of the Bilan: the presentation of all sorts of films and video's which try, in their cinematographic way, to bridge the gap between people from different (sub)cultural background, each with their own activities, perceptions, opinions, and ideologies.

Climbing up that long staircase, it is seemingly underlined that, in the third week of March, the Musée de l'Homme houses a fantastic airport from which you can take off, completely free of charge (!), in order to embark upon all kinds of journeys in various directions. You pass the control tower where the traffic-controller Foucault has organized outward-bound flights assisted by Rotschi or Pellé. Pilots and others enjoy a cup of coffee. The traveller, however, walks on towards the large, time-honoured departure hall dating from 1932. If he does not see the blue eyes, he is on time. During the twenty-five years that the Bilan exists, the traveller has often had to deal with minor delays regarding flight schedules caused by the somewhat late arrival of the renowned tour guides Jean Rouch and Germaine Dieterlen accompanied by their party. They were, however, readily forgiven. Had they not, fortyyears ago, attended the Premier séminaire pour l'évaluation des films ethnographiques et folkloriques in Florence in 1966? The beginning of something Rouch had always wished within the framework of the Comité du Film Ethnographique and the C.I.F.E.S. of which the Bilan, too, is a continuation: viewing together and discussing films originating from the field of anthropology/sociology as well as the world of film dealing with mankind in his culture?

Prior to, after a short word of welcome, signaling the first take-off, the hall is darkened, and we, the travellers, along with the shadows on the screen will set off for our first destination, I will try to express part of my view on this weird and wonderful adventure. It has not only to do with the informative, but also with the manner you contact the Other on such shadow-journeys, the directness and the evocative. How the Other looks you in the eye, how he presents himself to you in his surroundings. In the latter case, it is all about approaching a reality generally

found in the arts: you draw that reality from a stereotype, a traditional perspective, so that you see, hear it in a fresh manner. The intermediary 'dégagé' (Van Gogh-1914 (1):200) treats it in a creative way. (Grierson c/o documentary: Reisz & Millar-1972:298), seeks to turn it into a sensory experience in order 'to reach the secret spring of responsive emotions' (the author Conrad 1967:58; Read-1962:33-35). What goes for books, however, goes to a certain extent for paintings and films, too: 'Thus originates a book: the author writes it, the reader makes it' (presumably Diderot-1774; Monaco-1981:136-137). And, this certainly seems to apply to trans(sub)cultural communication: 'A foreigner's eyes are wide open, but only see what he knows' (West African proverb: Jane Rouch-1956). Let alone regarding the shadow-traveller, this is indeed quite a problem for the anthropologist, too, for the filmmaker in direct contact with the Other. In my opinion, this is splendidly presented in the following conversation between Rouch and Dieterlen with reference to filming in the course of the Sigui ritual of the Dogon:

Jean Rouch: What does the cinema mean to you?

Germaine Dieterlen: It is very, very important. For you have the opportunity to view once again that which you have seen with those people. You cannot understand and explain something if you have seen it only once. That is impossible. You must really see it again and again, understand, analyse, study it with those who themselves performed the acts. (De Heusch-1984<av>; also used in Constantini-2004<av>)

It is not about a completely finished film here but about footage, at the most roughly edited, recorded by Rouch. It can help Dieterlen with her task as an anthropologist during research: getting to understand the meaning the Dogon give to their complex actions. It is the problem linked to communicating between two cultures, to the connecting between two different systems of codes. In other words, we can assume that a culture expresses itself by means of the actions of its participants and the consequences thereof. These expressions originate from the actual heart of that culture: a complex of views on how you must co-exist with your fellow human beings, and with your cultural, natural, and supernatural surroundings. It is an entirety of ideas organized hierarchically by means of a system of values. It determines the faculty of cognition, the emotion, and leads to perceptive faculties that may be called configurative and slightly deformed. A member of the society concerned experiences, relives the (enculturation) view and expression as an entirety (meaning and sign) through his education. Only together, do they form 'his reality' or even better 'his culturally conditioned view of reality' (Planck 1949; Bidney 1970:18/19). Each participant again has a slightly different view on reality, but there is enough in common to be able to communicate and that which is shared could be named the 'culture' of that society (Sapir-1914, 1934; Goodenough-1963: Chapters 7+10). If you enter a culture as a foreigner unaware of the culturally conditioned reality, you are not

familiar with the codes, then you do indeed 'look' and 'listen', but you do not 'see' and 'hear'. If you do not know a language, then you do not even re-cognise a word in the stream of sound forms, do not recognise a lingual signal, let alone the meaning. This is also the case with non-verbal communication: if you look at a game of chess as a non-chess player, you do not really see a thing. You can hardly recognise the difference between a pawn and a castle. The orchestration of each and every chess-piece in relationship to the other, determining the position of both players, escapes you completely. ('Eyemarker': Mackworth-1958<av>, Boekhout & Kylstra 1972; Anonymous 1951<av>; Allport & Pettigrew 1957). To which degree are outsiders in touch with the reality of another culture when looking at/listening to expressions of that culture? With the human tendency to classify the unknown, the new in the present system of knowledge, he will be inclined to recognize, also on film or video, parts of expressions of that other culture, as signals similar to those departing from his own, culturally determined system of codes and connect to it the corresponding significance, possibly leading to considerable misunderstandings. Of course, the film has a commentary. Quite rightly so in that translation process from one system of codes to the other, but indeed somewhat 'cold', from a distance (France-1989). Alternatively, the Other who personally tells it to you. Much closer. I was much impressed by the Jie who at the start of *To Live with Herds* (MacDougall-1972<av>) talks in his way about the neighbouring societies. However, really near? How much translation work do those sub-titles include? How do I understand those words? From which system of knowledge? Can I instantly grasp that which took that anthropologist took months and months, years and years to understand? In order to fully understand the meaning of that film should I not view it many times, in combination with repeatedly reading the monographies concerned perhaps even linked to an Excel sheet on DVD for a more encyclopedic approach? However, in spite of these reasonable considerations, this image of that man touched me, seemed to tell me something about man and human kind in general and something about myself, too. Is this the real reason that the shadow travellers like to come?

Dieterlen's answer also makes clear she is not dealing with an artistic use of film. She aims at other possibilities this medium offers, namely registering actions in a manner they are presented as best as possible in their physical form. It is not about 'objectivity', seemingly a useless concept in anthropology, but about the best possible perception of the physical action thanks to a descriptive use of film. You see this, for instance, in an excellent way in Flaherty's film *Nanook or the North* (1922<av>) during the walrus or the seal hunt with the family members running to the assistance (Bazin-1958:131-135), or in Ivens's *Zuiderzee* (1931-33<av>; see Ivens-1970:39-45). Films made by anthropologists such as Rouch or my former boss Gerbrands clearly show this notion for acting, you could say *avant la lettre*. Claudine de France brings to the fore a crystallized development of theories on human actions in connection with the use of film in her important publication *Cinema et anthropologie* (1982). Leaning on Marcel Mauss (1936) and Leroi-Gourhan (1943, 1945), she presents human beings in an ever-changing dialogue with their surroundings: other people, objects,

instruments, enclosed spaces such as houses, work-places, streets, fields, kinds of food, the remaining nature and supernatural world as recognized by culture. Having distinguished the four main groups of techniques and the important spatial territories of action belonging to these 'dialogues', Claudine de France goes on to present us with indications for the standpoint of the camera and cadrages. The course of time, too, has her attention, but there we are also firmly supported by Dauer (1980) with his analysis in distinguishing main acts and repeating acts. Furthermore, I also consider the criteria Heider (1975) set for the ethnographic film to be of importance for a documentary approach, as is also the remark of Gerbrands that you should show activities of other cultures more extensively in the editing because the public has less or no foreknowledge (1969:6; Monaco 1981:136).

I feel that directly when seeing it: such camera technique, such montage, such *découpage* paying attention to work, to action. Is not activity indeed the core of the ethnographic film? That is why I very much like to view those films made by students from Nanterre, as shown on the Wednesday morning of the Bilan: that is playing billiards with many cannons. Must those *découpages* always be? Not at all. That Jie was not at all cut. The camera follows him at length. One sometimes wishes to shorten the time, sometimes one does not. Think of *Plan séquence d'une mort créée* (Baraldi-2004<av>) shown last year during Bilan. We were allowed to attend, in the back rows, a gathering of mourning of gypsies. We looked and listened along with the others in front of us, through a wide-angle lens and an almost static camera. On the one hand, you were swept away in the waves of emotion, not caused by artistic filmed images, but by the event itself with those violins. On the other hand your eye itself was allowed to choose. No *decoupage* to lead you or take an emotional hold on you. We are in the excellent company of Chantal Akerman with *Jean Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, Bruxelles* (1975<av>, for example the bathroom scene) and Jim Jarmusch with, for instance, *Stranger than Paradise* (1984<av>). Sometimes the filmmaker must dare to withdraw in order to activate the viewer, to allow him search for himself. This is also the behavioral researcher's approach when looking for descriptive images in order to bring about an analysis and feedback.

In ethnographic museums, you find the esthetical approach aside of attempts to present the artefact in its cultural context. Filmic poems, impressions such as *The Nuer* (Harris & Breidenbach-1971<av>) or *Forest of Bliss* (Gardner-1985<av>) can entice me to a certain degree with their beautiful images and montages but at a certain moment, I will miss the cultural context too much. My soundboard as an anthropologist does not really vibrate. That is absolutely indeed the case with a film like *Salamou 1969* (Echard-1971<av>): beautiful descriptive imagery with a very distinctive handling of sound. An emphasis on the working-sound, perhaps even from the studio, through which it is completely lifted to a kind of surreal plan and I seem, in a correct way, to contact the marvel of this acting, of this other human being. Another counter point, that for me brought an event to a singular level, was the investigatory comment of the anthropologist Piault in *Akazama* (1985<av>) who tries to understand how one arrives at the choice of a new chief. 'Direct cinema' suddenly appears to have

needy aspects due to its realistic approach next to the rich aspects we see in Sidheswri Ashram, the baffling report on an eating-place in Calcutta (Valissant-Brylinski & Jouas-2004<av>) or the various parts of Les maîtres du balafon (Zemp-2001/03<av>). With that crystal-clear, plastic images (Spectra lens), those flowing, compliant camera movements and that balanced information presented by means of imprint titles. Fragments lingering quite strongly in my memory are the one of the man looking at a photograph of himself in Ondas Surdas (Halloy-2001<av>), or the fragment showing houses and streetlife in Havana during a search for herbs in El monte de la Habana (Fito-2000<av>). This happens sometimes because of the fragment itself, sometimes only because of the preceding montage. My neighbour will probably recall other moments. Including ethnographic films such as Hamar Trilogy (Head & Lydal 1990/91/94<av>) and many others making up the Bilan adventure, of which we, shadow-travellers, sincerely hope it may long exist in an attempt to construct bridges, and to present magical moments of intense human experiences that, although often originating from a different culture, indeed seems to formulate regarding our own feelings, our own lives.

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