

Observation, Performance and Revolution: Exploring “The Political” in Visual Art and Anthropology

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Following up on Marcus’s seminal article on cinema and ethnography [1995] and weaving together anthropology, film theory and the analysis of four films—from the ethnographic, commercial, art and documentary genres—I argue that cinema can open a democratic and egalitarian space of observation of and interaction with “the other” and that anthropologists should approach their subjects in ways similar to some other filmmakers. But unlike Marcus, who considers films as metaphors of ethnography and advocates a posture of modernist distance, I look for juxtapositions between film and anthropology and, extending the Surrealist notion of “the double” across the fields of politics and aesthetics, I argue for a humanist anthropology, one that celebrates the dual nature of humans and cinema.

A BLURRED INSTANCE OF ETHNOGRAPHIC REALITY

As an anthropologist interested in “new” Brazilian politics, I spent eight months in Volta Redonda, a steel town built in the middle of a tropical valley in 1930 by the dictator Getulio Vargas. The steel town is an appendix of the Companhia Siderurgica Nacional (CSN), Brazil’s first industrial complex and the largest in Latin America. The town had a long history of collaboration with the dictatorship and also of political repression. The CSN’s iron walls, yellow benzene smoke and red fire from the furnace spread feelings of fear, danger and paranoia widely into the city and the tropical valley. On one of my first days of fieldwork in the *favela* where I lived, a confrontation between the residents and the police broke out. As I drew closer to this I realized that policemen and the demonstrators were in reality film *extras* and that the fight was being staged for a global-brand advertisement shoot. But during that shoot a real confrontation emerged between the real police and the real residents. The police were trying to confiscate the barking dogs belonging to a local resident, a popular leader. Eventually the fight escalated, some people got wounded, and the film shoot was interrupted.

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The episode made me think of Giorgio Agamben's reflection on politics as "movement," in which the author asks: "When can an event be considered as a political movement? When does the movement start and when does it end? Why and where does it end? Who is in charge of it?" [2004].

Doing "fieldwork," a long period of immersion in "other" societies, anthropologists learn that the grammar of human behavior is both open-ended and culturally specific. Indeed, my Brazilian fieldwork was a process of learning the—often-counterintuitive—rules of local politics: warfare expressed in elaborated gift-giving rituals, rebellions emerging in joyous dances, and higher status achieved through self-mutilations. But through comparative anthropology I also experienced politics in cross-cultural and universal forms. The light, noises, smells and life-rhythms of my Brazilian *favela* were similar to those that I had experienced in the English steel town of my previous fieldwork. Looked at comparatively, "poverty"—viewed as a category of political economy—emerges in similar sensuous and material patterns: fragmented and dense human networks, fractured interactions, fragile and open-ended cosmologies and architectures, stark lights and smells, violent processes of growth and separation. But because our ethnographic fieldwork is spatially and temporally bounded, anthropologists can only describe politics through some *ex-post* contextualization, as "gender politics," "environmental politics," "human rights politics" or "labor politics." This process of ethnographic contextualization of the political, itself a political process, misses out the broader patterns of human behavior that exist "outside" the ethnographer's presence. These invisible, abstract and sensuous *patterns* are as much the stuff of politics as the *content* that they acquire locally.

Below I argue that cinema provides an expanded intellectual and sensuous framework for the understanding of both the concrete manifestations and the broader patterns of human behavior. In weaving together aesthetics and anthropology, I partly follow up on George Marcus's [1995] use of modernist cinematic aesthetics to deconstruct "realist" ethnographic categories such as space, time, authenticity and mono-causality. But unlike Marcus, who portrays abstraction and realism as two oppositional anthropological and aesthetic tropes, I describe them as dialogical and continuous. Instead of modernist cinema here I follow up on the sociologist Edgar Morin's idea of "humanist cinema" [1995]. He argues that cinema and humans are "double beings": real and abstract, pragmatic and mythical, technological and natural. The "magic" of humanist cinema consists in the way that it re-composes this split human consciousness through fluid movements between these opposite worlds. As discussed in Hastrup's influential article [1992], film provides a bridge between flat, mono-dimensional, abstract, iconographic, formal and stereotypical *images* and thick, sensuous, reflexive, polyphonic and multi-dimensional *texts* and their respective ethnographic authorities. But Hastrup suggests an implicit hierarchy between the observer and the observed, whereas I argue that cinema can open a democratic or egalitarian space of observation of and interaction with "the other," and that anthropologists should approach their subjects in ways similar to some other filmmakers. I suggest that the notion of humanist cinema is good for us anthropologists to rethink our discipline with, along a humanist agenda: one that celebrates the dual nature

of human beings by combining ethnographic immersion in the flow of the real with playful reflection, self-criticism and creative imagination.

Discussing the intersection between aesthetics and politics, I also aim to contribute to contemporary debates on art and anthropology. Turning away from the “grand narratives” of modern(ist) art and politics, some artists have immersed themselves in ethnographic and relational practices that focus on the micro, sensuous, intimate, transient and everyday forms of politics [Bishop 2006]. Often this paradigm of the “artist as ethnographer” [Foster 1996] has reproduced essentialist notions of “the other,” usually associated with the racialized, tribalized and dispossessed “Third World.” This artistic turn toward “ethnographic realism” was paralleled by the emergence of a new generation of “avant-gardist”¹ anthropologists who approached cultures as fields of aesthetic abstraction. Stepping into each other’s epistemological fields (i.e., realism and abstraction), art and anthropology have reproduced the very boundaries that keep these fields separated. Instead I propose that they engage in a joint critical reflection on the way political boundaries between these “two modes of distribution of the sensible”² are created in the everyday.

Below I analyze four films that deal with human politics both ethnographically and in a broader philosophical sense—*The Ax Fight* by the anthropologist Timothy Asch; the artist Harun Farocki’s *Videograms of a Revolution*; *Les Maîtres fous* by the anthropologist Jean Rouch; and *Rize* by the fashion photographer David LaChapelle. All four films deal with real or ritualized warfare taking place in specific contexts; but they also reflect on the politics of their own images and question their own filmic apparatus: their film techniques, ideological positioning and authorial power. They are not “neutral representations” but rather pieces of cultural criticism and performance.

TOWARD AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF CONTEMPORARY POLITICS

With the collapse of industrial capitalism and the world of factories, wage labor, nuclear families and the nation-state in the West, the classical notion of “democracy” has also entered into a terminal crisis. Today Western empires exercise their powers through global flows of immaterial money and labor and sensuous, soft and micro forms of bio-politics. In this new context political participation does not take place in specific and fixed spaces and institutions—the factory, the street or the party office—but in localized, contextual, precarious, impermanent and everyday zones of actions. For the anarchist philosopher Bey [1994], contemporary political activism takes the form of “immediatism,” that is, a way of living that is not mediated by capitalist institutions such as the state, the family or the workplace. Bey does not believe in classical revolutions but in soft counter-insurgencies and in nomadic, loose and intransient human gatherings at the margins of the crystalized structures of state power. Similarly Virno [2004] and Negri [1999] describe the politics of late capitalism as a soft and dispersed movement of “the multitude,” a political subject without unity, finality or fixed identity. The politics of the multitude is pure movement, revolutionary energy and uncontainable desire.

For Agamben [2004] the idea of the multitude is a naive utopia. Human politics cannot exist as pure movement because human actions always attach themselves to some kind of material or immaterial institutions—rules of behavior, language, the state or the factories. Unlike animals which are “open” to change and self-transformation, humans are inherently conservative and undemocratic because they need to fixate, inscribe and objectify their actions in permanent enclosures and gated *communitas* detached from the rich flow of life. Negri is less pessimistic. For Negri it is Western society rather than humanity at large which is inherently conservative: the West is unable to produce real revolutions because its political philosophy is grounded in two conservative traditions. First, it is grounded in Judeo-Christian religion, which ascribes to the political movement unity and finality. Western political revolutions are epiphanies of the sacred, parables of human awakening and journeys to the end of time. In them the strength, the living passion and the desire of the multitude attach to, and get neutralized by, a living god, a king, a tyrant, or a democratic leader. Secondly, due to our tradition of transcendentalism, we can only imagine the political as a form and structure, not as movement.

These contemporary political theories touch upon questions that are profoundly anthropological. They ask: What distinguishes human from animal behavior? Can actions exist outside the mediation of human institutions, such as language, families or states? Are political identities reflections of material factors, such as class or ethnicity, or are they more a matter of sensuous movements and patterns? Do warfare and revolutions reproduce or annihilate communities? Can humans imagine themselves at the same time as singular and multiple subjects? What are the forces that draw people together? Is it social, biological, or is it some sort of intangible force or energy?

For long, anthropology has looked at politics either as a set of functional institutions or as symbolic forms and superstructures. My argument is that through the lens of visual art, anthropology can reflect on the political as a “movement” between these two realms and can combine ethnographic description and aesthetic reflection in the forms, movements and distributions of “the political.” But before I analyze the films, let me offer some makeshift definitions.

DEFINITIONS: ETHNOGRAPHY, FILM, ANTHROPOLOGY

Crudely put, anthropology is “the study of other cultures,” as I’m sure we know. There are two strands to this: *Ethnography*, originally an administrative tool of 19th-century colonialism as much as a scientific endeavor, looks at tribal or non-Western societies as bounded, isolated and authentic communities. The film critic Rony [1996] compares ethnography to taxidermy: a process of mummification and display of cultures frozen in space and time. *Anthropology* is inspired by the modernist³ philosophy of Rousseau and Kant, and looks at “other cultures” for a guide toward radical reform of “our own” society. Aesthetics or “the politics of the distribution of the sensible” is a central concern of anthropology. Tribal leaders draw their power from skillfully crafted arm-shells, carved canoes, and magic gardens; Western politicians mesmerize their subjects with choreographed

spectacles, theatrical stage-sets and film-star performances. Film has been a particularly important technology of mediation of the colonial encounter, in the form of magic lanterns, photographic slides and Victorian topographical studies of human motion.

Ethnography and Anthropology, thus defined, can be seen as two competing visual frameworks. *Ethnographic films* use observational styles, minimal editing, indigenous characters and authentic locations. As in Westernized portraits of tribal leaders, close-ups of indigenous bodies and staged religious rituals, they are contextual, scientific and objective. Unlike ethnographic film, *visual anthropology* abstracts, edits and de-contextualizes reality. For instance, Robert Gardner's *Forest of Bliss*—a visual journey through the sacred city of Banaras, India—is more “anthropological” than “ethnographic” because it is a reflection on human death rather than an ethnographic representation of death rituals in a specific cultural context.⁴ The aim of that film is to force the audience to share a universal human experience rather than to observe a specific culture. We can think of anthropology and ethnography as two ways of “encountering the other,” two political and aesthetic frameworks. Ethnography is localistic, micro, tactile, contextual, analytical, nostalgic, scientific and realist. Anthropology is generalist, critical, macro, visual, all-embracing, modernist, revolutionary and multi-perspectivist.

Ethnography and anthropology can also be viewed as two kinds of political “movement,” sometimes overlapping. The former is an inward, linear and empathic approximation *toward* reality; the latter an outward and concentric journey of critical abstraction *from* reality. Films are good to think about these movements of proximity and distance.⁵ Cutting across the frames of ethnography (focused on realistic close-ups) and anthropology (based on critical distances) films open up spaces in between these two modes of aesthetic distribution.

FILMS AS ETHNOGRAPHIES AND PERFORMANCES

The Ax Fight

The Ax Fight, made by the anthropologist and filmmaker Timothy Asch, his wife Patsy Asch, and the anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon, describes a conflict in a Yanomami village called Mishimishimaböwei-teri, in southern Venezuela. The film is an investigation of their warfare and follows up on Asch's interest in “event analysis,” a methodology inspired in part by *ethology*, the study of animal behavior. So, at least implicitly, the film is a reflection on the differences between human and animal warfare. Animal warfare is a set of genetically programmed action-sequences through which political and sexual roles are constructed within communities. In the human realm warfare has the same function of stabilizing and reproducing communities. But unlike animal warfare whose meaning is universal and biologically pre-programmed, the grammar of human violence is both open-ended and culturally specific.

The first part of this film consists of unedited footage of a fight among members of the village. It is a classic vision of primitive warfare: women cry,

swear and beat their naked bodies, men confront each other with axes and machetes in emphatic poses, kids gather around them in uncontained excitement. The majestic longhouses and the Amazon forest appear as a theatrical stage in the background. Like the anthropologist, the viewer is confused by what is seen. On the one hand, the fight could be read as a structured sequence of actions through which dominance between two groups is established, so akin to animal warfare. On the other hand, the fight is an open performance based on individual techniques, chance and improvisation. Observed in this unedited version, the fight is unsettling in its open-ended structure. Are we experiencing an instance of anarchic tribal war or a scripted social drama? Is death—of the fighters and the community—a possible outcome? Or is this a peaceful ritual through which the community reproduces itself and the fighters acquire social prestige? Will the arm holding the ax above the enemy's head strike? Can the community survive the death of its leaders?

The second part of *The Ax Fight* replays these events in slow motion, while Chagnon explains the relationship between the members of the community. In this part we learn that the fight is “a ritualized contest” in which combatants choose sides in the dispute on the basis of kinship obligations and clan structure. Several kinship diagrams are used to stress the centrality of kinship in Yanomami politics. Here the anthropologist's graphs and knowledge are used to translate their cultural performance for a lay audience. The final part of the film replays an edited version of the fight. But unlike the unedited and incomprehensible sequence at the beginning of the film, here the fight is edited into a linear narrative and its structure is explained through a “scientific” commentary.

Asch used sequence-film analysis as a pedagogical tool, involving his film students in the editing of long rushes into shorter and self-contained sequences.⁶ He was intrigued by the grammar of human behavior and by the fact that this grammar, unlike animal behavior, is open-ended. Proceeding from the unedited and confusing opening sequence to the final edited version, *The Ax Fight* shows that human behavior, like films, can only be observed from a partial angle and that in order to be understood it must be framed, edited and translated through some artificial medium.

Shot at a time of great political tension and popular debate on the horrors of the Vietnam War [Martinez 1995], *The Ax Fight* argues that human violence, unlike animal fighting, makes sense only from a very narrow perspective. Turning the agenda of biological anthropology—the comparison between human and animal behavior—on its head, the film questions the very boundaries between these two realms. It shows the paradox of the human condition as split between raw and unmediated actions—akin to animal behavior—and artificial and mediated ones. Anticipating the ideas of Agamben, *The Ax Fight* pursues an “anti-anthropological”⁷ agenda, asking: Can humans reach the state of unmediated behavior? Can they get rid of their cultural institutions and political superstructures and gather spontaneously, like animals in “the Open?”

As noted by both Biella [1996] and Ruby [1995], *The Ax Fight* is ironical and self-reflexive in the way it incorporates within the film's structure a critical reflection on its own process. It unveils the layers of anthropological knowledge, conjectures, cuts and edits that make “indigenous” actions readable to a foreign

audience. It shows that human behavior is meaningful only when it is mediated through a process of “artistic” creation by the anthropologist/filmmaker.

Videograms of a Revolution

Videograms of a Revolution is an extraordinary document of the revolutionary uprising in Romania in December 1989 that led to the deposition and execution of Ceausescu, the country’s dictator, and to the establishment of democracy. The film is made out of a number of different films—of independent, professional and non-professional documentarists and of state television—edited together into a video-collage of the revolution.

The opening sequence shows a wounded woman on a hospital bed on the day of the uprising. In the original version the film is without subtitles and its meaning must be guessed by non-Romanian speakers from people’s actions, voices and expressions or from the filmmakers’ framings and edits. The woman is screaming with pain but her main concern is to address the camera. She formulates a long speech, which appears as a personal testament or a political manifesto. She is reading out from a script off-screen but acts as if she were improvising. This image of the woman is similar to the opening of the Yanomami video: in both we struggle to understand what is going on, and in both human violence appears as both real and staged, raw and mediatic. But the playful and anarchic nature of the Yanomami performances, the natural setting in which they take place and their distance from the camera somehow cause us to suspend our judgment. The claustrophobic framing and proximity of the camera to the Romanian woman push us into paranoid distance. Why is she reading out a scripted manifesto? Is her pain genuine? Are her politics real?

After the opening sequence this film shows an amateur video of people marching in the street. The voiceover tells us that they are marching in protest toward the central square where Ceausescu is giving a public speech. Then it discusses the framing of the image. The image is divided between the solid grey concrete building in the foreground and the moving crowd in the background. This voice-over makes us understand that the film is as much about the revolution’s framing as it is about the revolution. Then Ceausescu delivers a speech from the balcony of the Central Committee, recorded by the national television. Something taking place off-screen annoys the dictator: he stops and restarts. His voice is now anxious and hesitant. The transmission is interrupted, the TV camera points toward the sky, according to their rule for disturbance during a live broadcast; but a broadcasting van continues to film the event. The perspective now switches onto the nervous movements of people in the square. This is Ceausescu’s own mental image of the political event unfolding before him. His eyes are transfixed, absorbed in the movements of the crowd and perhaps even in the image of his imminent death.

The Romanian uprising described in *Videograms*... is an instance of Alain Badiou’s notion of “the event” [2005]. The “event” is an historical break, a moment of revolution and collective revelation, in which old structures of meaning and power vanish and new ones emerge; a public act where the audience and

the performers blur; an opening of infinite possibilities, including those of death and the end of society. But in *Videograms* . . . the uprising is not a single, coherent, unmediated and unified event but a collage of different *views* of the event, a layering of cuts, angles, frames and voice-overs. In fact, the film is not about the Romanian revolution, but about how the Romanian revolution was edited, framed and mediated by a “multitude” of political subjects. Jones argues that *Videograms* . . . opens up a new form of video democracy and activism that is “less about simply witnessing political change and more and more about mobilizing soft power in the hands of citizens with cameras” [2007: 25]. Jones’ description of the soft power of video-activism recalls Negri’s notion of the dispersed power of the multitude. But in my opinion *Videograms* . . . does not share such optimism: on the contrary, this film shows the impossibility of *real* revolutions and democratic uprisings in the era of digital capitalism.

All forms of human representation are partisan and political; but the film image is particularly deceptive because, more than text or other human media, it appears neutral and real. Developed as a tool of surveillance and control—of workers, prisoners and citizens—during industrial capitalism, film relies on a hidden technological apparatus of lenses, frames and edits. For Kodwo Eshun [quoted in Fusco 2009] Farocki is an archaeologist of the film image. Indeed, most of Farocki’s work discusses the ideological nature of cinema and the power implicit in the filming process. It looks at how films produce the illusion of truth and at how image technologies contribute to the exercise of power and control. *Videograms* . . . discusses the role of digital film technology in the (re)making of Romanian history, following two lines of enquiry. On one level the film casts the ideological nature of traditional film technology—that serves as a tool of propaganda for both the old and the new regimes—against the democratic forces of digital technology, controlled by “the people.” But on a deeper level it argues that in the era of “digital capitalism” the filmic apparatus used is even more invisible—and hence, more powerful—than in the era of film and industrial capitalism. In the Romanian context, the revolution appears entirely mediated, artificial and hopeless. In the film truth and fiction, propaganda and revolution, humans and images are indistinguishable. Thus, *Videograms* . . . is not a film about the emergence of a new kind of video-democracy and the end of tyranny but about the emergence of a new video apparatus following the triumph of democracy.

The issue at stake here is the relationship between the film process and the political event rather than, as for Jones, the political possibilities of the video format. Farocki explores this relationship within the tradition of classic revolutionary cinema. Like Sergei Eisenstein, he uses the film process not to capture history but to restage it. Yet for Eisenstein the camera is a catalyst of political consciousness, whereas for Farocki the camera is a mental filter, a de-humanizing and de-politicizing device. In *October* [later called *Ten Days that Shook the World*; Eisenstein 1927], the crowd of extras who re-stage the revolution go through a process of self-transformation and become part of a living history, a revolution that is still unfolding.⁸ In *Videograms* . . . the revolutionary impulse of the insurgents is co-opted into media exposure. Midway in the film we learn from the commentary that the square in front of the Central Committee in Bucharest

and the national television station are the two focal points of the revolution. Real politics and media politics face and feed off each other. The revolutionary army storms the media station. "We need the TV and the military in order to avoid the bloodshed . . . we need the media in order to make the revolution real," one man says, begging support from the media crew. The revolutionary committee sits in front of the camera to announce the birth of the new democratic Romania. What will be the colors of the new flag and the name of the new nation? What will be the format of the revolutionary broadcast: a short announcement or a long transmission? Individual or group shots? Close-ups or wide shots? Here politics is as much about the TV format as it is about the format of the new nation. Later, the Minister of the Interior resigns in front of the crowd from the balcony of the Central Committee. But the cameras of the national TV—now controlled by the revolutionary army—do not record it, so the ritual of the resignation has to be repeated. Without the media record the resignation is invalid; politics is now real only when mediated.⁹

The second central issue of this film is that of political subjectivity, in particular of the relationships between individuals and the collective. Toward the end of the film a long sequence depicts a mass gathering outside the balcony of the Central Committee at night. The building is illuminated by powerful floodlights. It looks empty and timeless, a debris of the French Revolution. From the crowd someone shoots toward the building. Are they members of the Securitate (Ceausescu's private police) or are they shooting against Ceausescu's army which still occupies the palace? We don't know. Politics is like theater, and the dictator's palace is like a stage-set. Human silhouettes move in obscurity on the top of the palace, intimating to the crowd through an amplifier to stop shooting. They look like loose extensions of the crowd, eerie reflections of its energy. In the next sequence, the camera zooms on the wounded face of Nico Ceausescu, the dictator's son which was captured by the insurgents. The face is without expression; but the camera is so close to his eyes that we can guess what goes on beyond them: confusion, pain and terror. When he faces the menacing TV crew and revolutionaries in dignified silence we feel drawn toward him. He becomes the sacrificial victim, the tragic hero, the timeless king whose death will regenerate the political community.¹⁰ In the tradition of modernist revolutionary cinema *Videograms* . . . describes the epic struggle between tyrants and the revolutionary collective. But in Eisenstein the socialist "collective" defeats the bourgeois "individuals" as the revolution unfolds, whereas in *Videograms* . . . the power of the crowd is defeated by the dark charisma of the tyrant. The crowd has passion, energy and commitment, but has no direction and no face. In order to become visible, real and permanent, it needs an individual—an empty shell—like Nico Ceausescu, on which to attach itself. Enclosed and entrapped inside the mask of the tyrant the crowd becomes like him. At the end of the film Nicola Ceausescu and his wife Elena go through a pre-execution medical examination.¹¹ Then they wait in a small room to be executed. Conscious of the camera, Elena adjusts her hair and Nicola grins scornfully. In the last image of the film, their corpses appear on a black-and-white home television. The spirit of the revolution is gone, frozen into two shapeless corpses in a prison courtyard.

The third core issue of *Videograms*... is that of authorial politics. Are the video-activists aware that their films will be used? And how? Have they been involved in the editing and discussion of the film? In the end-titles each filmmaker and their extracts are individually listed in order of time and date. The list is impressive. In this final sequence the immense work of Farocki—of watching, selecting, re-filming and editing—becomes evident as the identities of the video activists are acknowledged. Transcending the distinction between reality and fiction—activism and filmmaking—Farocki's politics emerge here in the film's democratic internal structure, in the cuts and edits that reveal the different views of the activists.

In *Videograms of a Revolution* the unresolved struggle between real and media politics is incorporated into the film's internal structure:¹² in the dialogue between observation and montage, linear and reversed narrative, absorption and distance, commentaries and real voices, images and movement. Highlighting these ruptures within the filmic apparatus, the film shows a revolution happening simultaneously in different places: in the dictator's palace, in the streets, in the filmmakers' mind and in the film itself. In its movement of self-criticism—of abstraction, opening-up and folding within itself [Kreimeier 2009]—the film takes us into another dimension, unreal, paranoid, fantastic. It opens up small fragments of a revolution, where we are torn between visual pleasure and political engagement.

Les Maîtres fous

Shot in 1954, Rouch's *Les Maîtres fous* ("The Crazy Masters") describes three days in the lives of some members of the Hauka sect in Accra, West Africa. They are otherwise daily laborers—the "hygiene boy" (a mosquito killer), the tin boy (who sells empty petrol drums), the "goldmine boy" (a miner)—working on the margins of Accra's colonial economy in British times. In the first day we see them busy in the town market, surrounded by French cars, traffic wardens, market stalls and other symbols of colonial power. Day two records their trip to the countryside to reach the compound of Mountyeba, their high priest. This is the central part of the film. It is Sunday night; we are at the periphery of the city. The initiates start to call "the gods of the city, the gods of technology, the gods of power," as Rouch puts it in his own voice-over. The gods appear and mount the adepts; so, as their trance starts, they slowly become gods themselves. Their faces are shown in close-up: their eyes bulge, foam bubbles from their mouths, heavy mucus drips from their noses. Then the initiates stage "surrealist" re-enactments of colonial rituals (a round-table conference between the colonial Governor, the wicked Major and colonial officers), colonial characters (Madame Salma, the prostitute wife of a colonial officer) and symbols (the statue of the Governor bearing a thick moustache, swords and a freshly cracked egg on the top of his head, suggestive of the feathers on the real Governor's pith-helmet). The collective trance ends with the killing and eating of a dog, a taboo animal. At the end of the evening the community return to the city. Day three presents them back in Accra. Images of the "crazy masters" now performing heavy

marginal work are contrasted to their images as powerful gods in the ritual of the day before. The film ends with a reflection on whether trance is a panacea against mental disorder.

Connecting psychoanalysis and politics and anticipating the ideas of Deleuze and Guattari [1983], this film can be read as a critique of the political schizophrenia of capitalist societies. In the alienated, mono-dimensional and repressed West, political power is associated with the realm of rationality, logic and order, and people who embrace the irrational and the unknown are often marginalized and stigmatized as pathological or mentally ill; whereas in the tribal African context the political is a polyphonic process of creative appropriation, carnivalesque ritual, group therapy, Surrealist performance. In fact, the Hauka possession ritual of the film can be looked at as a process of political regeneration. In that ritual irrational fears, repressed desires and violence are brought out in public view. The members' darkest thoughts are externalized, neutralized and socialized and the limits of the community—including violence, death and social fragmentation—are collectively explored, exposed and overcome.

The possession ritual of *Les Maîtres fous* suggests an alternative notion of political agency. In the ritual the two Hauka leaders do not control their subject through formal authority or coercion but construct their leadership through creative collaboration. Unlike the leaders of the West—strong, rational and pragmatic—the Hauka leaders are imaginative performers, empathic mediators and talented players. Indeed the ritual is constructed in such a way as to deny the authority of the leader. And chieftom and the collective are two sizes of the same political community. The smiles of the informal laborers toward the cameraman at the end of the film are mirror images of the distorted and awesome faces of the gods who mounted them during the possession ritual. As in the Surrealist theater of the double [Stoller 1992] the sacred and the mundane, as well as individual agency and group performance, are confused and conflated in the same political vision.

Les Maîtres fous can be considered as an early form of "indigenous" video activism. The Hauka cults first appeared in Niger in 1920 at the time of French and British colonial expansion. Mimicking violent European behavior, staging burlesque colonial parades and violent slaughtering of taboo animals, the Hauka initiates and priest were jailed and persecuted in those days. At the time of *Les Maîtres fous*, forced industrialization by Western companies was disrupting the rural economy of the Gold Coast. The "crazed masters" in the films are the unemployed, illegal workers and migrants who struggle to survive in this new political economic context. *Les Maîtres fous* is an exposé of the colonial system in defense of the Hauka cult, made through the very voice of the Hauka initiates: through their invented language, their makeshift totems, indigenous music, theatrical dances and pagan iconography. The politics of the film is trans-cultural or cross-cultural in that it uses the sensuous language and cultural performances of "the indigenous people" to challenge not only colonialism but also the perceived boundaries between "the colonialists" and "the other."

A comparison between *Les Maîtres fous* and *Videograms of a Revolution* is useful here. Both use the camera to capture and catalyze political processes that are (1) staged throughout the film process and performed by characters aware of the camera; (2) constructed as a dialectic between "the collective" and charismatic

individuals—dictators, poets, priests or filmmakers; and (3) happening at a moment of transition: post-communism in Romania and post-colonialism in Africa.

But Farocki and Rouch have opposed film politics. In *Videograms*... the real and the imaginary, the unmediated and the mediated are in conflict, whereas *Les Maîtres fous* playfully crosses these oppositional spaces. For Farocki the dual nature of cinema—of fiction and reality—is dangerous, whereas for Rouch the cinematic double is liberating and empowering because it mirrors and sublimates the double nature of human beings. With regard to their internal politics, *Videograms*... is a romantic¹³ and *inward* journey into the dark folds, cuts and frames of the cinematic apparatus, whereas *Les Maîtres fous* is an *outward* loss of consciousness into an alien culture.

The cinema of Rouch also reveals within its structure the “double” nature of cinema—both real and magic, staged and improvised, material and imaginary. But unlike the other films, in which reality and fiction are in mutual tension, in Rouch’s these forces feed each other, overflowing the boundaries of the film structure. His “*ciné transe*” blurs the boundaries between the film process and the real world, mixing political activism, group therapy and theatrical performance.

Rize

Rize is the feature film debut of the internationally renowned fashion photographer and music-video director David LaChapelle, who famously photographed Kanye West as a black Jesus, Paris Hilton sucking a giant pink lollipop, and directed Elton John’s show *The Red Piano* at Las Vegas’ Caesar’s Palace.

Rize documents two dance subcultures that flourished in the African-American ghettos of South-Central Los Angeles, clowning and krumping. These are free-style dances based on aggressive movements, African tribalism and athleticism. Here too the main concern of the film is politics as performance. The film starts with historical footage of the Watts riots there in 1965, and then the Rodney King riots of 1992. Things are ablaze; people are getting beaten up. An African gospel group in the background praises the Lord. Then the scene cuts to LA in 2002. Two teenage girls are beating up a third, it would seem. Slowly we realize that they are dancing, mimicking with violent movements a police beating. In the background a voice says, “this is our neighborhood, this is where we grew up and this is where we still live.” The gospel fades into a rhythmical sound, like the sound of a heart beat, perhaps a frightened animal ready to strike. A collective “dance fight” begins. Kids and adults dance in a state of heightened excitement, semi-consciousness and violence. The dancers are enclosed by a tall fence; people gathered outside watch them in awe and tension. The two most powerful dancers confront each other with violent strikes, frantic vibrations and virtuoso movements. The defeated fighter jumps onto the edge of the fence, trying to escape. The screen suddenly darkens, the music stops. Did he make it onto the other side?

Most kids growing up in South-Central end up joining either the Crips or the Bloods, two rival gangs. But young Tommy the Clown, one of the main characters in the film, refused to join any gang. He painted his face in tribal war paint, dressed up in colorful African clothes and created his own tribe,

taking to the streets to “fight” other kids in violent dance performances. The gang masters of South-Central respected his decision. Inspired by Tommy the Clown, Lil C and Tight Eyez formed their own group and a rival dance practice, krumping. *Rize* follows the lives of Tommy the Clown and the other members of the community of South-Central as they prepare for the final dance battle between clowns and krumpers in the Battle Zone.

Lachapelle spent three years filming in South-Central. During this time his identity remained anonymous and he got a glimpse of the tragic life of the ghetto. People of South-Central realized that he was a celebrity only when they saw him on the MTV award ceremony on television. The immersion in the world of “the poor” was apparently very emotional and inspiring for Lachapelle. In an interview he says, “We think we are rich but actually we are poor; it’s all a big lie. We get all these material things and all they are is a ball and chain. And the poor who think they are poor are actually rich. They have the joy of dancing in the streets and, when you see them in the house, they share love and camaraderie” [Magiera and Rabenau 2007].

Following Lachapelle’s romantic vision of the urban poor as a sort of contemporary “noble savage,” *Rize* is a piece of ethnography of the inner-city ghetto, a pilgrimage into multiculturalism and a journey into the “wilderness” of capitalism.

Partly inspired by Jennie Livingstone’s *Paris is Burning* [1990], *Rize* shows that dance can be socially and personally empowering for marginal subjects: drag queens in *Paris is Burning* and the black poor in *Rize*. In spite of their tragic lives Tommy the Clown and the other characters reject the violent and superficial culture of the capitalist ghetto, centered on money, cars, girls and hip-hop, and “rize” above their personal circumstances thanks to their dance culture. Structured as a musical (like *Paris is Burning*), the film arranges syncopated monologues and saturated and sanitized dance performances against a flat surface—more video portrait than documentary.

In many ways, *Rize* resonates with Maya Deren’s experimental film *The Divine Horsemen: Living Gods of Haiti* [1951], a description of voodoo rituals there. In her film the dancers are mounted by powerful gods (*loa*) and enter into a state of trance. In this film, dance is an invisible energy through which the community connects itself to the gods and becomes aware of its cultural and spiritual potential. It is a process of self-healing and of appropriation and subversion of the European jig, jive or waltz. Like Maya Deren, Lachapelle is fascinated by the inner energy, violence and eroticism of tribal dance and by the encounter between tribal and urban cultures.¹⁴ As with *Divine Horsemen*, *Rize* embodies a mystical search for higher forms of human consciousness—achievable through dance—rather than an ethnographic interest in specific cultures.¹⁵ A commentary in the opening alerts us that “the footage in this film has not been sped up in any way.” What we are about to witness cannot be contained within 24 frames-a-second. According to Lachapelle, krumping means literally “a state of altered consciousness in which people’s minds are absorbed and artistically creative.” Even if it is constructed like a documentary, *Rize* focuses on the altered state of consciousness and the pure movements that exist *beyond* and *above* the reality of the ghetto and its people.

In a recent interview Lachapelle claims that his film challenges the stereotype of the violent inner-city enclave and shows positive characters, real heroes and

non-violent struggles. On the contrary, the strength of *Rize* is to create the social stereotype of the inner-city poor as the new hero of late capitalism and to cast a magic light into the urban ghettos. It is interesting to compare *Rize* with Lachapelle's work as a celebrity fashion photographer. Half-Warhol and half-Koons, his fashion photographs portray celebrities as artificial, fake, rigid, hyper-saturated and sanitized icons of privilege and self-obsession. These celebrities are not human beings but reflections of a social class. Their poses are frozen under the weight of too much privilege and wealth. *Rize* is a mirror image of the same stereotype. Poor people are fired by a divine energy; they are possessed, furious, wild, tribal, sweaty and angry. *Rize* rejects real characters and de-constructs "people" into abstract stereotypes: masks of tribal fighters, symbols of inner-city violence, urban heroes possessed by the gods of music. As in *Divine Horsemen*, the subject of *Rize* is dance and not people. Even the issue of racial politics, through which the film is framed at the beginning, is lost in the sound of hip-hop. The central character of the film is a black clown covered in thick white make-up and colorful outfits for most of the time.

Similarly to the other films analyzed here, *Rize's* politics is reflected within the internal film apparatus. The conflict between its flat and formal photographic framing and the erotic physicality of the dances triggers doubts, questioning and dissonance. Are we observing a fragment of social reality or experiencing a moment of altered consciousness? Framed as a traditional documentary on a working-class ghetto, the film questions the very notion of class politics by freezing the energy of the masses into a flat and abstract social portrait.

VISUAL ART AND THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF THE PRESENT

The films discussed here are "ethnographic films" and "documentaries" that portray realistically "other," non-Western forms of politics. Unlike conventional Western politics—rational, individualist, competitive, logical, anonymous and disembodied—the politics they show are magical, polyphonic, sensuous, theatrical, collective, carnivalesque, paranoid, violent and cruel. They transcend linear time and fixed spaces and emerge in liminal zones (the periphery, the ghetto, the media station), marginal subjects (temporary laborers, urban poor, tribes and political insurgents), and transitional times (the dusk, post-communism, post-colonialism). These films are ethnographic in that they are "real" testimonies of political practices that challenge the colonial or capitalist order: a colonialist apparatus challenged by possession rituals, a socialist state fragmented into nomadic gatherings, anthropologists lost in gang wars, an urban neighborhood scarred by tribal warfare. Taken together these films also show the continuity between "modern" and "tribal" politics: the political anarchy that arose in post-socialist Romania resembles the Yanomami's disorganized warfare; the anti-colonial performances of the Hauka initiates resemble the possession rituals of the urban poor in contemporary America.¹⁶

In addition to their *outward* ethnographic journey into contemporary politics, these films also reflect on their own film politics. Embarking on an *inward* journey into their filmic apparatus they reveal the magical distortions, ideological frames and creative illusions of the artistic medium.

In an influential article Marcus [1995] looks at film montage as a metaphor of a new modernist ethnography that problematizes ethnography's classic space-time framework and embraces polyphony, dialogism and bifocality. In a similar way I suggest looking at cinema and visual art as metaphors of a humanist anthropology, one that celebrates the dual nature of human beings through a dialogue between ethnographic observation, self-criticism and creative reflection. Negri [1999] is probably right that Western philosophy is inherently conservative, trapped in linear, dichotomous, transcendental and rationalistic thinking. But unlike humans, films can be revolutionary. Like fire, poetry, axes, rhetoric and other eccentric artifacts of the ethnographers' *Wunderkammer*, films create expanded frames of imagination. These ethnographic artifacts are powerful technologies of the imaginary, enchanting fetishes through which chiefs, priests, shamans and filmmakers draw boundaries between history and the present, humans and animals, the *communitas* and the enemy, magic and evidence, reality and illusion. But unlike these dead artifacts, films have anthropomorphic qualities. Like humans, films are physical and immaterial, logical and insubstantial, associative and exclusive, honest and deceptive, emphatic and distant. In their ambiguity, duplicity and unreliability—deeply human qualities—films may open spaces for artistic reflection and political subversion.

NOTES

1. The term is used by Foster [1996: 181].
2. Here I am using Rancière's discussion [2004] of the relations between politics and aesthetics.
3. I am using Greenberg's [1960] famous definition of modernism.
4. In spite of the fact that Banaras is known for its "overgrown" death industry [Parry 1995].
5. In a similar fashion, Marcus [1995] argues that cinematic montage provides a link between ethnographic realism and (post)modernist deconstruction.
6. For a discussion of Asch's use of film analysis as pedagogic tool, see Moore [1995] and, for *The Ax Fight*, Biella [1998].
7. Here I am following up on Agamben's suggestion that anthropology reproduces perceived boundaries between humans and animals.
8. For an analysis of the politics of historical re-enactments in Eisenstein, see Nesbet [2007].
9. Kreimeier [2009] also discusses this unresolved dialectics in *Videograms...* between direct cinema and media propaganda.
10. The Surrealist philosopher Roger Caillois [2001] discusses how the sacrifice of political leaders during revolutions reproduces the ideology of the community.
11. The images recall those of the much more recent pre-execution medical examination of Saddam Hussein in Iraq.
12. Brenez [2009] calls Farocki's cinema "auto-critique," that is, a cinema that reproduces its political message within its internal structure.
13. Brenez [2009] also compares Farocki's work to the cultural *kritik* of the Romantics.
14. Deren was famous for her shamanic performances on the New York art scene.
15. Deren's mysticism is evident in her "An Anagram of Ideas on Art, Form and Film" [2005]. On her mysticism see also Russell [1999].

16. Clifford's and Foster's argument that there is a continuity between modernism and "the tribal imagination" is supported by the way in which some radical contemporary political theories, such as "immediatism," are grounded in an anthropological rediscovery of the pre-modern and the tribal, in the form of ritual gatherings, urban graffiti, magical shamanism, situationist carnivals, dance trance and tribal warfare.

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