

## RITUAL IN FILM

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The purpose of this paper is to explore the problems inherent in the visual construction of ritual activities on film. Ethnographic film is an area of considerable controversy in terms of method and theory. It is my intention to present the problems with ethnographic film as it constructs ritual performance. In addition I hope to present some of the considerations which those who watch ritual events in the course of ethnographic film need to take into consideration. This approach will problematize the cinematic experience of ritual activities and hopefully develop some insights which might be of value to those wishing to produce ethnographic films based on ritual activities as well as provide some consideration to those who consume these films.

### **The role of ritual in film**

The role of ritual in ethnographic film has many different levels of incorporation. Ritual can form the main focus of the film, be a supporting element among other activities or exist as an illustrative periphery which is mentioned or shown in fleeting passing. All of these approaches to ritual construction in the process of the ethnographic film are based on what the film maker is attempting to communicate in the film that they produce for consumption by an audience. For the focus of this paper I will keep my analysis to the particular problems created when a single ritual is the subject of the entire film.

For the purposes of this investigation I shall use the ethnographic film *Les Maitres Fous* by Jean Rouch as my primary example of a film whose whole purpose is to document a specific and single performance of a ritual. It runs 35 minutes long and was produced in color. It was released in 1954. By the account of Rouch he was asked by the Hauka to make the film (Rouch 1974b:224).

The film begins with a role call of all the various jobs which individuals have in this particular African town of Accra in the (current) nation of Ghana. It presents various roles which rural migrants to the town fill in the urban community. The people who perform the ritual are a sect called the Hauka. It is a ritual which is based on spirit possession which has been traditionally practiced among the Songhay.

We follow a group of Hauka as they travel out of the city to a site where the ritual takes place. The ritual seeks to have individuals become possessed by the spirits of certain British colonial archetypes of administrative and military roles. As the spirits take control of the people Rouch narrates what is happening in each individual shot, connecting attention to specific material features of the ritual such as the various paraphernalia found in the Union Jack, old movie posters, simulated guns and other material pieces which are used as attributes of the colonial spirits. The visual features of this ritual are prioritized over other cognitive elements of the ritual. The presentation of the bodily aspects of spirit possessions also overpower the presentation with their images of the possessed foaming at the mouth. As Rouch describes the colonial administrators that are represented in the possessions he cuts to footage of how the real colonial administrators act and then cuts back to spend some time talking about how the possessed re-enact the colonial authorities. With exaggerated body movements they reproduce the rigid body postures of the military administrators.

As part of the ritual they sacrifice and eat a dog. Rouch explains that this is done expressly because it is taboo. The process can be understood as a ritualized criticism of the colonial government which is seen as uncivilized and unnatural by the culture which exists in relation to it. The film shows the possessed arguing, inspecting and generally behaving in stylized ways which they see in the behavior of the colonial administrators.

The film shows the participants of the ritual the next day, cutting between the ritual possession actions and the more reserved behavior of the individuals in their nonritual roles. This connects the possessed ritual actions of these individuals and their presentation in the nonritual environment of day to day work. This provides a very humanizing effect in connecting what is seen as "bizarre" (by untrained observers) with more normal activities. As such the participants are framed by their ritual performance, but the fact that there is a reality outside the frame is commented upon.

While this film deals with controversial matters by today's values it should be noted that the meaning of the ritual itself is created by the observer, with some influence by the film maker's editing and narration. A hermeneutic approach to film viewing is necessary in regards to ritual in film when the ritual is not a subservient part of the film but the total subject. While one observer of this film may witness a disturbing series of images of spirit possession and eccentric behavior I see a ritualized form of collective resistance to colonial hegemony which creates caricatures that are acted out in the ritual performance. Those participating in the ritual would necessarily have different interpretations of their own actions.

This is a necessary problem with the visual representation of ritual. The process of filming a ritual will have an impact on the rituals performance as well as how it is edited and presented. In an effort to better explore this I will enumerate some of the considerations that must be made in the process of viewing a ritual through the medium of film in the next section.

### **Theorizing the representation and reconstruction of ritual**

An important aspect of an ethnographic film is the medium which it is tied to. When ethnographic films first began to be distributed the primary medium was the film projector. The most common forms of film were 8mm, 16mm and 35mm. Film projectors were limited by the length of film stock that could be held on one reel. On average an 8mm standard reel would hold about 12 to 18 minutes of footage. The previously mentioned film by Jean Rouch was 34 minutes because this would be 2 reels of 16mm film footage when projected at a standard rate. It is quite common for films of this period to be edited to a length which facilitates the length of the medium by being one or two reels of film long. A 16mm reel would hold more on average, and 35mm projectors are designed to play multiple reels without any break in the projection. The 8mm and 16mm projectors would require rewinding and reloading of the machine between multiple reels and would result in a loss of continuity of the performance.

The major change in the delivery of ethnographic films was the introduction of videocassettes in the 1980s. This changed the major method of playing footage. Instead of the large picture created by the film projector, the videocassette forces one to use a television as the playback viewing source, resulting in the size of the picture being the size of the television. The videocassette is more robust in that it can have more playbacks with less damage to the medium. The videocassette also allows for multiple playbacks of specific scenes as well as the manipulation of tape playbacks to allow freeze frame or slow motion. Videotapes also allow for the ability to immediately showing the film footage to informants with the aid of playback equipment, whereas celluloid film footage requires time to develop in addition to the necessary chemicals to develop the print (Asch and Asch 1974).

The next major innovation in video playback technology is the Digital Video Disc or DVD. This is a digitally based playback method which allows many of the same features as videocassettes, with the additional benefits of chapter selection and separate audio streams. The DVD is still tied to the television for the most part, though digital projectors have recently become affordable alternatives to television based playback.

One major innovation in video delivery systems is the internet. The increase in connection speeds has combined with better methods for video playback on computers to allow for the viewing of films over the internet. This is still in its early stages, though the trend towards using video in internet based presentations is already being explored. The main problem is that the video is tied to the computer screen, which is often much smaller than a regular television. There is the option of making the video file available for download and allowing individuals with enough technical skills to convert them to a DVD format. The direct input of a computer's video signal into a television is something that is still being perfected.

A main problem with ethnographic films is that they are expensive to distribute, therefore their availability is contingent on the resources available to a researcher or institution. They also present a singularity in that they are edited for a single viewing. There is necessarily only one way that they are viewed, which is in the way that they were designed by the film maker with the intended edits and narration which they provide. In addition they are often made with broadcast intentions in mind and as such will be certain lengths in order to facilitate that need: 30 minutes or 60 minutes for Public Broadcasting and television in many government subsidized channels without commercials and less for those markets which use commercials in their broadcasting.

All of these factors about medium length, playback method of viewing and length considerations have an impact on the final production which an ethnographic film maker produces. These considerations will be dealt with at some point in the production of the ethnographic film even if they are not part of the ethnographer's decision making process in the act of filming.

The main value of an internet based distribution of ethnographic film is that it removes the costs of production of the medium that is sold (DVD or VHS). This is costly since most ethnographic films are produced in small quantities. A film designed for internet consumption also allows for the creation of multiple versions with different editing, length, audio narration (different texts as well as different languages) and other variations in presentations.

All of these considerations of methods of playback represent the problems presented by the boundaries of the medium of ethnographic film. In all cases it is necessary to have access to the recording of the film and some way to play it back. Additional considerations are also necessary since there are specifics to each form of playback as well as the needs of broadcast transmission.

Another important problem to address in the discussion of ethnographic film is the problem which is created when a single event is recorded and edited into a film that may well be the only film on a particular culture or ritual that has ever been recorded. This creates a singularity which becomes the measure for all other interpretations of the event. For the most part an ethnographic film will analyze one ritual, bounded by its own beginning and end, and present this as either the whole of the film or as a scene within a greater production. If the ritual being presented is lengthy there is the generally accepted notion of "cutting down" the event so that only highlights are presented. By this a montage of ritual events is constructed with the intention of maintaining the more explicit and visible aspects of the ritual performance in order to make the ethnographic film shorter and more tolerable to the observer. Additionally, the editorial conventions of adding music and narration alter the observers position in seeing and hearing the ritual performance.

An additional consideration lies with the meaning of the ritual as it is observed in ethnographic film. If we follow Rappaport's concepts of ritual meaning (1999:70-74) then we are faced with the problem that ritual presents different levels of meaning. While the low order meanings of observational effects (such as the presentation of goods to one person or the deference given to a particular participant) can be transmitted through the aural and visual reconstruction of the ritual events the higher level meanings are not as readily represented. The construction of meaning that is not contained specifically in the ritual such as the qualitative matters of social position and ritual obligations which are developed outside and prior to the ritual through individual interactions with other participants of the ritual. These aspects require the use of narration conventions which can at best only mention these facts and their connection to the ritual as it is observed through the construction of ethnographic film.

Rappaport also presents an idea about ritual that complicates the ways in which ritual can be constructed in ethnographic film through his concept of self-referential messages (1999:52-54). This consideration of the effects of ritual events as an indicating important information to all those present at the ritual is well founded in the functionalist view that ritual contributes to the social epistemology by making information about individuals known through a public event. The problem is that a narrator can say what an event may mean, what the ritual activities represent or what transformations are carried out on the social order by the ritual but the narrator cannot with clarity fill in the interactive roles that each individual has in the ritual by the fact of their individual connections to other individuals in the ritual performance (Collins 2004:3-46). This is a level of analysis that is often overlooked in ethnographic film, as the focus is necessarily on performance and those participants who are in the process of witnessing the ritual

performance exist mainly as a crowd in the background of the ritual specialist though their attendance and acceptance is a necessary part of the ritual.

The privileging of the ritual specialist and performative aspects of ritual is a matter of pragmatic film convention, since the most interesting activities are contained in the most performative aspects. Editing conventions also privilege those parts of the ritual which are the most interesting or considered representative of the ritual activity according to the ethnographer. There is some variation in where this privilege lies since in some cases the camera operator is the ethnographer and in other cases (such as the Granada series produced by the British Broadcasting Corporation) the camera operator is trained in the construction of film and would have a different understanding of the events as they pertain to the process of filming. In addition different considerations will affect the editing process, with the anthropologist often acting more in an advisory position than being involved in the actual editing itself.

There are also the pragmatic aspects which much be appreciated. For long-term fieldwork constant filming is not possible. There are also considerations of remote locations, no ready supply of electricity, camera and equipment maintenance and other obstacles to the ethnographic prospect that it often becomes a project of a specific trip to the location and necessarily outside of the general ethnographic fieldwork (McCarty 1974, Rouch 1974a).

An additional consideration must be made about the fact that observing any event necessarily will have some alteration to that event itself. This is similar to the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle in physics. The observation of any event, be it a quantum level event or a ritual performance, will have an impact on the results by the very nature of the observation (Heider 1976:53). Additional issues include a consciousness of the camera by the individuals being filmed which results in an exaggerated performance in order to "play up" to the camera (54). When this is coupled with the typical Western induced practice of "smiling for the camera" we end up with a contrived level of performance in which the observational role of the camera is incorporated into the ritual as well as the bodily presentations of the individuals which results in an alteration of the performance.

The level to which this alteration occurs would be related to the level of technological sophistication which the individuals have. Those who have some experience being filmed might react less than those whom find being filmed a novelty. Children tend to form a group which looks at the camera in almost all ethnographic films, and editors tend to incorporate them into their productions due to their humanizing value for what can often be difficult (for Western observers) constructions of activities that seem alien to many who consume ethnographic films

without any anthropological training. Without a necessary level of cultural relativism there is the danger of exoticizing and creating value-centered judgments of a culture through the process of consuming an ethnographic film. Such "humanizing" tropes like the group of children smiling and laughing for the camera is one such method which editors use to create a necessary illusion which creates a connection between the observer and the subject which is being filmed.

Another problem with the representation of ritual through the medium of film is that it can only present what is physically present. The role of ideology (as a construction of reality, form of socialization, structuring of the dissemination of culture) is left to the narrator to comment on (Bell 1992:188-193). No matter what theoretical consideration is used in the construction of the ideology behind a ritual it is a problem to present a significant statement about how the ritual contributes to ideological notions within the time which is allotted for narrative voice over to convey such information (Heider 1976:70-74). Information such as this is usually only superficially addressed or must be placed in text based supplemental materials.

To consider cinematic representation also requires the recognition that time as it is represented in film is not the same as real time in which an activity takes place. What may take hours will be edited down to a few minutes in the course of an ethnographic film. Except for very specialized film sources all ritual activities are cut down so that they are expressed in a fraction of the time which the whole event takes place. The use of montage and other expressive forms of editing can cloud some of the natural features of ritual action such as rhythmic qualities (Rappaport 1999:45-46) or the creation and release of "tension" (Collins 2004:102-140). Such experiential qualities of ritual activities necessitate that one witness the complete ritual performance to understand it in the same sense as those who are actually present in the physical sense.

In reference to the film by Jean Rouch mentioned at the beginning of this paper, there is an issue of misrepresentation of the process of ritual possession. In the ethnographic descriptions of other ritualized possession occurrences (Brown 1991, Metraux 1959, Obeyesekere 1981) it is not a simple switch which is activated by the performance of certain ritual actions rather than a long and continuous process whereby participants move into and out of possession over a long period of time. The cinematic reconstruction might make mention of this, but it does not receive explicit treatment.

We must also consider that those who watch cinematic versions of rituals are seeing activities that are usually not within their own cultural purview. Such a position of the observer leads to the disjointed comprehension of ritual movements

of the body since they have no frame of reference of non-ritual body movements with which to contrast their observations. The issue of what actions performed in a ritual have significance has been raised by some theorists (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994) with the intention that meaning is tied to the significance of an action. The problem is that the cinematic presentation of a ritual frames all that is shown in the ritual as having significance and therefore meaning. A certain gesture or action may be an affectation which the individual adds to their ritual performance and as such will be translated through the process of constructing the representation of this ritual as a singularity (single event in time and space) into a reference that will be utilized in other research and carried beyond this single event into an existence as a representation that is repeated through subsequent views and added with meaning by way of the interpretations of other viewers. Catherine Bell has noted this tendency towards the "mystification" of ritual actions by way of adding meaning implications where they might not necessarily exist (1992:108).

The performance of a ritual is also only a part of the life of those who are involved in it. While this is evidenced at the closing of Rouch's film other films are not so contrite in making it know to the viewer that ritual might well only form a small part of an individual's day to day existence. This hypervaluation of ritual is problematic in that what we are being presented with is only a small piece of the cultural existence as it is for the individuals in the film. The hypervaluation of ritual also provides some false ideas based on the voyeuristic role of the outsider about what those in the rituals see themselves doing in the process of performing the ritual (Bell 1992:109).

## **Conclusion**

Through the analysis of the various problems which are created by observing ritual through the medium of film I hope to have an effect on how cinematic viewing of rituals can better be understood by researchers. It has not been my intention to deconstruct the ethnographic film's subject of ritual to the point of negation, but to better facilitate what aspects of ritual performance need to be addressed by the film maker and audience in order to create a representation of ritual which can convey a better "sense" of what is actually occurring in the ritual. Sometimes this can be aided by more explicit notation of the events by way of narration. The problem is that aesthetic choices often find themselves being made at the cost of a more explicit representation of the ritual actions as they occur. A 30 minute representation of a ritual that takes 12 hours to perform will have some obvious omissions in its construction of the event.

Ethnographic film is best used as a heuristic method in the process of showing aspects of ritual performance and bodily presentation that are aided by

visual representations. Ethnographic film is also of great value in the presentation of anthropological subjects and inquiries to the general public which might not even read a book by an anthropologist, let alone any book (Pink 2006:17-19). Representations of different cultures and different peoples is an important role of anthropology and as the United States grows more aliterate it is up to anthropologists to look towards visual anthropology to fill the role of telling the story of human diversity to those who do not have access to the written texts and to introduce ethnographic films into the market for documentary cinema.

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