

Ethnofiction and Beyond: The Legacy of Projective Improvisation in Ethnographic Filmmaking

by Johannes Sjöberg

This paper is based on my doctoral study, entitled, *Ethnofiction: genre hybridity in theory and practice-based research*,¹ a practice-based research project considering whether the ethnofictions of Jean Rouch, offers a means of integrating a hybrid study within drama and ethnography. Rouch asked his friends, collaborators and fieldwork informants to act out aspects of their life-experience in front of the camera in improvisations. This approach has been referred to as ‘ethnofiction’ and was used in several of Rouch's films, of which the most famous probably are *Jaguar* (1957-67), *Moi, un noir* (1958) and *La pyramide humaine* (1959). The doctoral research project explored ethnofiction, not merely as an indefinable surrealist game as Rouch often described his filmmaking, but as a method that consciously draws on dramatic work processes to conduct ethnographic research and representation through narrative filmmaking. The thesis argued that a combination of improvised acting, fiction and reflexivity, is a useful complement to contemporary and established methods for ethnographic research and representation.



Screenshot of Savana 'Bibi' Meirelles and Fabia Mirassos in *Transfiction*

¹ Sjöberg, 2009.

The methodological approach was tested during 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork in São Paulo that resulted in an ethnofiction about transgendered Brazilians called *Transfiction*. Brazilian transsexuals (males-females) and *travestis* have been males that have adopted a female appearance. While transsexuals (male-to-female) identify as women, Brazilian *travestis* identify neither as men, nor as women; but mostly just as *travestis*. Brazilian transsexuals and *travestis* often work as prostitutes and suffer from intolerance which is why *Transfiction* came to focus on identity and discrimination in the daily lives of transgendered Brazilians. In the film, Fabia Mirassos projects her life through the role of Meg, a transgendered hairdresser confronting intolerance and re-living memories of abuse. Savana ‘Bibi’ Meirelles plays Zilda who makes her living as one of the many transgendered sex workers in São Paulo, as she struggles to find her way out of prostitution.

Projective Improvisation

As a result of Fabia’s, Bibi’s and my own background in acting, the research came to focus on the function of improvised acting in ethnofictions. Peter Loizos describes the acting in Rouch’s ethnofictions as projective improvisations: ‘The use of improvisation and fantasy as projective methods in the exploration of people’s lives’² was one of the major innovations that Rouch brought to ethnographic filmmaking ‘to convey something fundamental about real lives’.³ By the term ‘projective improvisations’ Loizos refers to the notion of ‘projection’ in psychology and its meaning of making something implicit, explicit:

Once you allow film subjects some freedom to improvise what they say, or do, you get the possibility that they will reveal values and feelings which they might otherwise not directly express, not because of repression or inhibition necessarily, but sometimes because they are “taken-for-granted”.⁴

In *Moi, un noir* Oumarou Ganda addressed the audience in first person and told them about his dreams and desires. More than speaking of whom he is and how he lives his

² Loizos, 1993:46

³ Ibid: 50

⁴ Email correspondence with Peter Loizos, July 2008

life as a migrant worker, Ganda tells us who he would like to be and how he would like to live.⁵ A boxing scene was staged by Jean Rouch and inter-cut with real boxing to show Ganda's dreams of being a world champion boxer. As noted by Loizos: '[Rouch] didn't hesitate to introduce the dimensions of the imaginary, of the unreal - when the character dreams that he is boxing, he boxes...'⁶

In Rouch's work, the anonymity of the fictive character allowed the protagonists to express their own feelings. Rouch suggested that the approach of *Chronique d'un été* (1960) offered some privacy for the participants since they could seek shelter in the anonymity of their roles. Even though *Chronique d'un été* was not an ethnofiction but rather a documentary hybrid, the film suggests how the projective improvisations were conducted in Rouch's ethnofiction:

The extraordinary pretext I offered was [the] possibility of playing a role that is one self, but that one can disavow because it is only an image of one self. One can say: "Yes, but it's not me".⁷

The process would lead the protagonist to start thinking about their own problems and about who they are. '[They] begin to express what they have within themselves. These moments are short and one must know how to take advantage of them'.⁸

When preparing to film Marceline outside *Les Halles*, Rouch provided Marceline with a sense of privacy by leaving her to walk alone with a microphone as he filmed her from the back of a car. It had been his and Morin's intention talk about Marceline's experiences of Auschwitz, but the unexpected environment and the unrehearsed situation fed her imagination and gave life to new associations.

All of a sudden she began to talk – not of the camp – but of her return! Why? Because Les Halles resembles a railroad station. And you see, by association

⁵ Loizos, 1993: 50

⁶ Eaton, 1979: 8

⁷ Blue, 1967: 85

⁸ Ibid: 84

of ideas, she immediately began to talk of her return when her family came to meet her but her father wasn't there.⁹

This revealing scene presents another example of the play of the subconscious that Rouch and Morin would refer to in different ways. The environment triggers the associations of the protagonist and allows for a creative flow through the improvised acting. Paul Henley traces this approach to Rouch's admiration for surrealist poets:

Rouch had much admired ... the Surrealist poets, whose surrendering to the 'objective chance' of the *Rencontre* and whose reliance on automatism in the moment of artistic creation, were but two different methods by which they sought to unleash the creative potential of the Imaginary.¹⁰

In *Transfiction* the scenes that Rouch described as the precious moments where the protagonists 'begin to express what they have within themselves',¹¹ usually appeared in scenes that lay exceptionally close to issues that had more of a relevance for the lives of the protagonists. During the previous fieldwork research Bibi had not been willing to speak about her family and childhood in any video recordings. Before the absolute first take of *Transfiction*, I asked Bibi if she would be willing to improvise a scene about her childhood as the fictive character Zilda since the audience would not know if the experiences were her own or Zilda's. Bibi agreed and to further support her privacy I supplied her with a radio microphone and filmed her from far away, as Rouch had done with Marceline. As a result, Bibi started to speak about Zilda's upbringing with an intolerant father and a caring mother and how she came out as *travesti* and later realised herself as transsexual.

⁹ Ibid: 85

¹⁰ Henley, 2008

¹¹ Blue, 1967: 85

Screenshot of Bibi filmed on distance as she tells her life story



Transfiction was destined to become something completely different from Rouch's ethnofictions, but it was still based on a very similar approach. Even though it was always my intention to remain faithful to Rouch's approach throughout the filmmaking, Fabia, Bibi and I would colour the dramatic work process with our own diverse experiences of acting. Instead aesthetics of Rouch's films inspired by French surrealism and West African griot traditions, Bibi's experience of amateur theatricals became visible in her performance and sometimes Fabia seemed to project her lived experiences through a filter of Brazilian *telenovela* (soap opera). As director I would draw on what I had learned from theatre teachers such as Philippe Gaulier, influenced by the tradition of Jaques Lecoq and Jaques Copeau. Given the Brazilian context, Augusto Boal and *Theatre of the Oppressed* landed leading roles influencing the production. The theoretical basis of Boal's theatre presented itself as a useful complement to the understanding of ethnofiction. Boal was inspired by Paulo Freire's concept of the 'dialogic' in relation to the learning process: 'the dialogic discourse in emancipatory education deployed in the service of the oppressed.'¹² He suggested a dialogic encounter where the tutor and the learner are both engaged equally in a two way communication in a collaborative spirit.¹³ These views obviously link in well with Rouch's shared anthropology with regards to the dialogic relationship between

¹² Jackson, 2007: 183

¹³ Ibid: 186

anthropologists and informant. Boal suggests that his theatre offers an aesthetic space with the qualities of *plasticity*, *dichotomy* and *telemicroscopy*. The aesthetic space has the same *plasticity* as dreams that allows for a creative interplay between memory and imagination. The actor of the aesthetic space sees himself *dichotomously*. The protagonist is both the person performing and the character he performs. The *telemicroscopy* of the aesthetic space allows for human action to be observable. It makes the invisible visible and the unconscious conscious.¹⁴ Boal's theories of the aesthetic space fit in well with ethnofiction and especially with the revelatory aspects of cinéma vérité where the dream played a central role for Rouch. Besides surrealist notions of dreaming, Rouch was also inspired by the importance of dreams for Songhay-Zerma religion that he encountered during his fieldwork research.

Descriptive Improvisation

All performance in ethnofiction is projective to a certain degree, as it draws on the protagonists' experiences through the means of improvised acting. One can however distinguish between the 'descriptive' and 'expressive' function of acting in ethnofiction. Most of the improvisations in *Jaguar* were descriptive since the actors aimed to explain their understanding of a series of events that evolved through their improvisations. Rouch started to devise improvisations to be able film events that were difficult to show in any other way. *Jaguar* was a filmed extension of the research Rouch had conducted on seasonal migration in West Africa during the early 50's, where he had examined the economic activities of migrant groups. Inspired by the re-enactments in Robert Flaherty's documentaries, Rouch asked Damouré Zika, Lam Ibrahim Dia and Illo Goudel'ze to improvise on the theme of migration to illustrate his doctoral research. Fiction made it easier for him to deal with an event like the seasonal migrations of the Songhay people from Niger to the Gold Coast and the Ivory Coast. The enactments enabled him to emphasise certain important aspects instead of showing everything,¹⁵ and allowed for him to animate his ethnographic research.

¹⁴ Boal, 1995: 18-28

¹⁵ Eaton, 1979: 7

As Loizos suggests,¹⁶ the actual research of the descriptive improvisations were conducted as the protagonists expressed knowledge that they usually would take for granted. Unlike modern drama-documentaries where most of the research is conducted before the shooting and developed into a script, the research in Rouch's ethnofiction continued during the shooting as the protagonists projected their knowledge through the improvisations. The research relied heavily on the imagination of the protagonists and the improvised situations that occurred between the actors and their environment at the *moment* of shooting. The projective improvisation thus stands at the very centre for the research process in ethnofiction since the protagonist are not merely re-enacting events, but actually expressing partly subconscious knowledge of ethnographic value through their improvisations.

The descriptive value of the improvised acting primarily rested on Fabia and Bibi's imaginary perception of their first hand experiences, but their acting was also based on situations that had been informed by other sources, including my fieldwork among different *travestis* and transsexuals. I suggested a rough outline for the narrative, based on my ethnographic research with other *travestis* and transsexuals. Though this research often made me have certain situations in mind for the enactments, it was Bibi and Fabia that decided how the scenes would evolve.



Screenshot of Bibi injecting Fabia with industrial silicon

¹⁶ Email correspondence with Peter Loizos, July 2008

The scene in the film where Zilda injects Meg's breast with industrial silicon would have been impossible to show in a documentary since it is forbidden to *bombear*¹⁷ in Brazil. The improvisation was primarily based on Bibi's own experience and I had understood the importance of the issue from my fieldwork with *travestis*. Without descriptive improvisations it would also have been difficult to show Zilda's futile search for employment and apartment since documentary protagonists would feel hesitant about displaying their intolerance in front of the camera.

Descriptive improvisations in *Transfiction* are not merely *re-enactments* conducted out of necessity, but *enactments* where the acting has the function of an interview that attempts to make the most out of the protagonists' personal knowledge. Unlike re-enactments, descriptive improvisations are thus not only applied out of necessity because there is *no other way to tell it* as in drama-documentaries,¹⁸ but since ethnofiction could be *a better way to tell it* from an ethnographic point of view, depending on the subject matter of the film.

Expressive Improvisation

Besides the *descriptive* use of the projective improvisations, Rouch would also use more *expressive* improvisations to reveal personal feelings, dreams and aspirations of his protagonists. The expressive aspect of the improvisations in Rouch's ethnofictions would become distinctive in *Moi, un noir*, where the performances moved beyond the descriptive function to express the inner life of the main protagonist. This approach became clearer in some scenes of *La pyramide humaine* and *Chronique d'un été*. Through this use of projective improvisation, Rouch would embark on an approach that would be increasingly concerned with the interior life of the characters. As Oumarou Ganda walks along the Abidjan Lagoon in *Moi, un noir*, he takes us on a bitter journey through his memories of the war in French Indochina and the ingratitude of his colonial masters. In *La pyramide humaine*, and in *Chronique d'un été*, Rouch would intentionally use his camera to provoke his informants to reveal personal and sensitive subjects in the improvisations and the interviews.

¹⁷ Inject industrial silicon.

¹⁸ Kilborn and Izod, 1997: 138

A fictional frame was created for the protagonist to encourage them to feel more at ease with themselves and the confrontational situation. For the protagonists ethnofiction provided an opportunity to express hypothetical aspects of themselves and approach their own problems from new angles: ‘The cinema became for these people a pretext to try to resolve problems that they were not able to resolve without the cinema.’¹⁹ Given these therapeutic possibilities of ethnofiction, it was not surprising that Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin used socio- and psychodrama in their attempt to describe their approach in *Chronique d’un été*:

Our film will not be a matter of scenes acted out or of interviews but of a sort of psychodrama carried out collectively among authors and characters.²⁰

Psychodrama is a psychotherapeutic technique developed by the Austrian physician Jacob Moreno in the United States from the 1920’s and onwards.²¹ As in psychodrama, the actor of ethnofiction portrays his own private world and is given the freedom of improvisation and fiction to elaborate on it. Rouch’s concern with cinematic truth echoes through Moreno’s ambition to use dramatic methods and fictive means to help his patients reveal truths about themselves. Though Rouch’s motives were not therapeutic, he aimed to reveal cinematic truths about the ‘existence’ of his protagonists through ethnofiction, as a surrealist project.

The expressive function of projective improvisations in ethnofiction thus draws on the therapeutic power of imagination and role-playing to reveal the inner life of the protagonists through their associations. Fabia would intentionally use *Transfiction* as a pretext to confront her problems as her fictive character Meg. During the fieldwork she told me a story from when she was in her early twenties. She was sitting on the bus on her way from São Paulo to her home in the suburbs, when a group of school children identified her as a *travesti* and started to throw paper balls at her. She told me that it was an important turning point in her life since it made her realise that it would be difficult to change people’s attitudes towards her. Instead, she tried to change her own attitude towards her environment, to not let their intolerance affect her.

¹⁹ Blue, 1967: 85

²⁰ Morin, 1985: 6.

²¹ See Fox (1987) for a selection of Moreno’s texts.

It would take me almost ten months after I first met Fabia to ask her to improvise the scene. I brought three young actors to her home. She explained her situation and background to them, and afterwards we improvised a scene based on her experience. Fabia wrote the following text in her internet blog to describe the enactment:



Screenshot of Fabia being bullied

Today I had to return, return seven years back, when they threw paper balls at me sitting squashed in that bus. Yesterday, I kept thinking of how I would do to not hurt myself too much with all of this.

Today was the big day, I was a bit scared when I opened the door and met up with them, I thought: So these are the boys that are going to throw paper at me. We sat down, had a cup of coffee, and after that I started to tell them of how it was since they needed to know who I am and what had happened that day. We spoke and after one hour we were ready to poke around even more in that wound. There is nothing like time, sometimes it heals more than we think, when I finished speaking about the subject - it was time to film.

Scared again. We arrived to the street and received instructions about what to do, and I did it. Mission complete, and do you know something? After

making my legs hurt by running several kilometres I just felt an immense relief to have gotten rid of yet another weight from my shoulders, after all, this had pursued me since 1999. What Nonsense!!!! This is why we should resolve our problems right away and not create additional problems, because of something that already happened... But I just learned this right now.²²

Conclusion

In the end the scene was never included in the film, but Fabia's description suggests certain ethical concerns with regards to projective improvisation. In spite of Bibi's and Fabia's informed consent, they would risk being exploited for the purpose of the film. After making *Chronique d'un été*, Rouch abandoned his and Morin's experiments with 'socio- and psychodrama' since he regarded the approach to be a 'dangerous game'.²³ Rouch realised that besides the more immediate consequences of having people acting out their own life, his approach to acting also had an impact on the minds of his protagonists:

When you have people play out this psycho-drama which engages their whole existence --- you become a kind of Prometheus creating creatures for whom you alone are responsible! The camera and the cinema are the only justification of their existence: once that stops, what happens? You haven't got the right!²⁴

Rouch's romantic notion of 'shared anthropology' that stands at the very core of ethnofiction would thus be problematised through the work with *Transfiction*. The freedom of the protagonists to express their own ideas in improvisations could only remain an ambition since the film, as any other ethnographic fieldwork, became a negotiation between researcher and informants, rather than collaboration in the egalitarian sense of the word. Fabia did, nonetheless, maintain that *Transfiction* was the best therapy she ever had.

²² Fabia Mirassos internet blog posted 19 July 2006, also published in Sjöberg (2006).

²³ Blue, 1967: 83

²⁴ Ibid: 85-86

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