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Visual Artropology? - Experimenting with non-verbal forms in ethnographic film.

Language differences are obvious and difficult barriers in transcultural communication. Can visual forms of communication help across these boundaries? Non-verbal dimenions of film promise a potential worth exploring.

German students conducting fieldwork in Morocco were invited for a lila, a trance-night performed by Gnawa-musicians in Essaouira. Both sides asked me to document the encounter. Editing the footage, I intended to give identical versions of the film to the members of both these cultures. As both groups shared the experience it seems logical that there should be a single cineastic representation equally valid and comprehensible for all participants involved.

And others.

A transcultural version.

This exercise attempts to communicate meaning without words: no subtitles, no voice over, no commentary, making full use of exclusively nonverbal forms expression: music, images, movement, gestures. Rather, the language of film is invoked: making statements via framing and focussing, making sense by montage, via cuts and transitions.

Do these restrictions still permit effective communication of meaning? Dare we think of word-less science? Do we have to claim to be artists?

The djinn who escapes the bottle opened by these questions starts asking even more threatening ones: How should we describe inner states of mind in ethnographic film? In my case: Is a state of trance adequately pictured by filming its visual surface, by recording the outer movements of an ecstatic dancer?

Furthering this investigation, I will return to Morocco to search for new answers. I plan to collaborate with two artists in Marrakech, a painter and a photographer, adding the dimensions of movement and sound to their arts. Both their work echoes Moroccan realities; both inner and outer ones. These paintings reflect Gnawa music and live onjema el-fna, the photographs explore textures and structures found in the Medina.

I will try to follow the path of the artists' concept. That is, to animate their art with the technical possibilities of video filming and digital editing. In order to let it perform a dance, thus giving an expression to the state of trance. The visual arts of painting, photography and film will join to represent a state of mind that doesn't seem to be described easily with words.

A trancecultural cinema? A Visual Artropology?

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