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13) The Ethnofiction in Theory and Practice
by Johannes Sjöberg

This article comes in two parts. Part II will be published in NAFA Network 13.4 to be sent out later this year.

The Ethnofiction in Theory and Practice
Part 1

During the mid-50' the social anthropologist and documentary filmmaker Jean Rouch brought his ethnographic filmmaking into the borderland between fact and fiction, filming his West African friends as they improvised stories inspired by their own lived experiences. Rouch hoped their stories and their acting would contribute to his research and the representation of his fieldwork. He would occasionally refer to these films as 'cine-fictions', while a French critic would call them 'ethnofictions.' (Stoller 1992; 143)

At the beginning of the second year of my practice PhD in Drama at the University of Manchester, I set out to test the approach of Jean Rouch applied on the culture of Brazilian travestis and transsexuals living in São Paulo. Male to female transsexuals are born as men but identify as women. Brazilian travestis are also born as men and identify as women, however having good acceptance of their biological sex. Travestis, as well as transsexuals, are generally marginalised and met with intolerance by the Brazilian society. I wanted to examine whether the use of improvisation, combined with participant observation, could be an effective ethnographic research method. Could a nuanced understanding of travesti and transsexual culture in São Paulo be created, and mediated, by combining ethnographic research methods with the processes of dramatic work?

After only one year of theoretical research, and another year of fieldwork and filmmaking, I would not be able to give any definite answers to these questions, which are becoming increasingly complex as the research continues. Instead, I will give a short review of my research and filmmaking, and hopefully contribute to earlier theoretical knowledge of the ethnofiction by reflecting on some of the practical experiences I have made in the field so far.

This article will be published in two parts. The first part gives a brief introduction to Rouch's ethnofiction in theory and my fieldwork on travesti and transsexual culture in São Paulo, including a description of the ethnographic documentary film I have made as an introduction to the ethnofiction. The documentary features some of the transsexual actresses that participated in the ethnofiction during the latter part of the project.

The second part of the article explores the ethnofiction in practice and will be published in the next NAFA Network. I describe the practical experiences I have made filming the ethnofiction in São Paulo, and put these experiences in relation to the theoretical research I have conducted on Rouch's ethnofictions. I will conclude this series of two articles by discussing the use of the ethnofiction in applied drama as well as visual anthropology.

The Ethnofiction in Theory

I have been using four of Rouch's famous feature-length films as points of references for my own work: *Jaguar* (1957-67), where Rouch explored alternative ways to represent his doctoral research on Seasonal migration by filming an improvised story about three men from Niger with different ethnical background, traveling to the Gold Coast; In *Moi, un Noir* (1957) Oumarou Ganda and his friends borrowed characters from popular contemporary culture to improvise their lives and dreams as migrant workers in the port of Abidjan; *La Pyramide Humaine* (1959) features a group of black and white students in Abidjan, confronting the racist prejudice of their environment by creating a story on the theme; In *Chronique d'un été* (1960) Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin interviewed and followed a group Parisian workers and students in the streets, to their places of work and in their homes. *Chronique d'un été* was never referred to as an ethnofiction. It was launched as Cinéma vérité and would mark the beginning of modern documentary filmmaking.

Rouch's use of a documentary film style to portray non-professional actors improvising scenes on-location was not unique. Robert Flaherty had constructed scenes for his ethnographic films in collaboration with his protagonists since the early 20s' and the Italian Neorealists would use similar techniques to lend authenticity to their narrative films during the 40s'. While Flaherty created exotic dramas about man's struggle against nature, the characters of the Italian Neorealist films would suffer from poverty and oppression. Filmmakers like Rossellini, Visconti and de Sica learned to use the inherent knowledge of the communities they were filming. Poor people from the cities and villages of Italy would contribute with their own stories, or acting, to create films that grew out of their own lives and environment. In the 50s' the filmmakers of the French New Wave would also present films reminding of Rouch's. They filmed fragmented narratives as improvised jazz scores with hand-held cameras in real and recognisable locations.

Rouch worked in dialogue with these filmmakers. He saw Flaherty as one of his strongest influences and exchanged ideas with the filmmakers of the French New Wave, while Rossellini, Truffaut and Godard all acknowledged the importance that Rouch's films had for their own work.

Filmmakers of today¹ use similar techniques to create films reminding of ethnofictions, but there are some aspects of Rouch's approach that set his ethnofictions apart from all the other films. To separate the ethnofictions of Jean Rouch from other films using documentary techniques to shoot non-professional actors on location I have identified four main principles:

- Ethnographic Filmmaking

Besides being a cineaste, Rouch was an anthropologist. An approach typical of ethnographic filmmaking has been used when making the ethnofictions. The films are based on an extended period of ethnographic fieldwork and have been made by a small camera team in order to reach a high level of intimacy with the protagonists.

- Improvisational Cinema

Directing and cinematography are improvised. In dialogue with his environment the ethnographic filmmaker follows his protagonist into a fairly unplanned film production. Rouch called this approach 'Pourquoi pas?' ('Why Not?'), named after a ship, an Arctic explorer on which his father was the captain. The process of filmmaking was a discovery in itself, where the story was invented as he went along. Rouch also used the camera to create 'cineprovocations'. The camera became a catalyst that made things happen that would otherwise be hard to reveal. To Rouch, the process of filmmaking was a 'cine-trance' where he no longer distinguished between the camera, himself and his environment.

- Improvised acting

The protagonists of the ethnofiction act out their cultural knowledge in front of the camera. These improvisations are created along themes that have surfaced during the ethnographic research, and are based on the protagonists' own experiences. They are not re-enactments based on real events, instead they often showed dreams and aspirations inspired by the surrealist and poetic view that was typical for Rouch and his production. Rouch compared these improvisations with psychodrama - by projecting their experiences through fiction and drama, the protagonists revealed the 'hidden truths' of their culture as a part of the ethnographic research project.

- Shared anthropology

The ethnofiction is created in a collaborative spirit between the ethnographic filmmaker and the protagonists. They participate actively in the creation of the film by contributing with their own ideas and suggestions. Informant feedback secures an ethical approach and guarantees the quality of the ethnographic research. Rouch often participated in his own films, in dialogue with the protagonists. In the final stage of the production, the

¹ The heritage from Flaherty is visible in Duvaa's and Falorni's film *The Story of the Weeping Camel* (2002), while the Italian Neorealism influence is clear in Penny Woolcock's television dramas about Tina Crabtree, made for Channel four in the UK (1999 and 2001).

protagonists sometimes improvised the narration to the film rushes. Furthermore, a rough cut of the film was often screened to the protagonists who were given an opportunity to participate in the film with their own critique.

These briefly formulated principles would prove useful to me as a reliable guide and a basis for the practice part of my PhD conducted among Brazilian travestis and transsexuals living in São Paulo. I will return to these principles in the second part of the article where I will describe how I applied them in my own ethnofiction. I will dedicate the rest of this article to the fieldwork and the ethnographic documentary film that I made as an introduction to the ethnofiction.

The Fieldwork

It is difficult to find of any reliable statistics that show how many travestis and transsexual live in São Paulo, but the city is generally considered to have the biggest concentration of travestis and transsexual in the country.

Transsexuals are men or women that are born with a biological sex they can not accept. My research on transsexual culture was only directed at male to female transsexuals. Brazilian travestis are also born as men and identify as women, but in contrast to transsexuals, they have good acceptance of their biological sex.

Transsexuals and travestis make serious changes to their bodies to appear more feminine. These changes include major operations such as application of liquid silicon and breast implants, as well as minor changes such as laser treatment of the facial hair. Only transsexuals are prepared go through with sex reassignment surgery, even though many of them avoid surgery due to the physical risks and the monetary costs.

During my time in Brazil the discussions within the political movement have been directed towards the separation of sexual and gender identity. Transsexuals and travestis, are not prepared to be bundled together with gays and lesbians since they regard their identities to be sexual while travesti and transsexual identity is based on gender.

Brazilian travestis and transsexuals suffer from intolerance and violence. Due to prejudice, many transsexuals and travestis find it difficult to get access to education, employment and to rent apartments. Prostitution is the most common profession among travestis and transsexuals, though an increasing number of travestis and transsexual are looking for alternative ways to live.

It would be fair to say that I barely knew anything about travesti and transsexual culture when I first arrived to São Paulo one year ago. I had decided to spend my first half-year in São Paulo to make an ethnographic documentary and the second half-year to make an ethnofiction. Making a documentary as an introduction to the ethnofiction was a strategic choice. The production of the ethnographic documentary would give me a chance to establish my fieldwork, perform ethnographic research through the filmmaking and to create a point of reference for the ethnofiction.

Establishing the fieldwork

The documentary would give me a chance to establish my fieldwork, to find protagonists for the ethnofiction, and to cultivate a friendship based on mutual trust. Most of the ethnofictions of Jean Rouch were created together with a group of people that he had been friend with for years. Several films have been made about this long-term collaboration and friendship: *Rouch's Gang (1998)*, *Mosso, Mosso (1998)* and *Friends, Fools and Family (2005)*, are probably the most famous. Rouch's informants became his friends and collaborators. They gave him ideas for his films and worked professionally on his projects. I could not hope to find myself in a similar group of people in just one year, but I realised that if I was to create a good ambient for improvisation I would at least have to find people that were interested in the approach. I created the following information sheet for the future participants:

Thank you for to taking part in *The Ethnofiction* research project. This information sheet gives you some background information about the project.

My name is Johannes Sjöberg and I am doing doctoral research in Drama at The University of Manchester in Great Britain about *The Ethnofiction* - an experimental ethnographic film genre. As a part of my research project I will make one ethnographic documentary film and one ethnofiction. The aim is to compare the two films to understand what the ethnofiction is, and how it can be used.

Ethnographic documentary films try to show life in other cultures from the filmed peoples own point of view. One of the things that make ethnographic films different from other documentary films is that the filmmaker will observe and ask questions about the everyday life of the people he films, during a longer period of time. The filmmaker does this to explain the filmed people's life in a way that would make the audience understand them better, even if the audience's way of living is very different from the filmed people's culture.

Ethnofictions investigate and explain other cultures as well, but the filmmaker use drama and fiction to try to understand and show the same things as the documentary. At a later stage of the project, some of the participants will be asked if they would like to be actors in an *ethnofiction*. They would be asked to act out scenes from their own life and other stories related their way of living. Could the ethnofiction reveal something that the ethnographic documentary couldn't?

If you would be asked to participate in the research project, or in the ethnographic documentary film or in the ethnofiction, I would unfortunately not be able to pay you any salary. Your only reward would be to participate in an interesting research project that tries to

explore different ways of creating cultural understanding, tolerance and empathy.

I was paralysed during the first three months in São Paulo. My Portuguese was not sufficient for fluent communication, and even though I lived in one of São Paulo's centres for transsexual and travesti prostitution – I felt a world apart from their culture. The population of the greater city of São Paulo is estimated to be around 19 million inhabitants, representing a rich diversity of cultural origins. Even though these different cultural groups co-exist in their everyday life they do not have to confront each other for anything more than the necessary business transactions. I found myself quickly becoming a part of this segregated co-existence; the only world I knew was my Portuguese class for foreigners...

The breakthrough came a three months after my arrival when I was introduced to Rodolfo García Vázquez. In 1999 he had founded the underground theatre *Os Satyros* together with Ivam Cabral, at Praça Roosevelt in central São Paulo. Praça Roosevelt was famous for its transsexual and travesti community, and since one of *Os Satyros* main features was to create plays in dialogue with the environment, they had recently released the play *Transex* (2005). *Transex* was a play partly based on the lives of the two transsexual friends Savannah 'Bibi' Meireles and Phedra D. Córdoba. They participated in the play together with other actors playing transsexuals and travestis, and gave a humoristic portrayal of the transsexual and travesti culture surrounding the theatre. Rodolfo introduced me to Bibi and Phedra, and later on to Fabia - a theatre student at *Os Satyros*.

Bibi, Fabia and Phedra represent three very different periods in the development of transsexual and travesti culture in São Paulo. Phedra is originally from Cuba and has made a successful career as a performer in Brazil. She is 68 years old and has worked as a stage artist in Brazil since the 60s'. Savannah 'Bibi' Meireles occasionally works as a prostitute but is increasingly getting more involved in the theatre productions of *Os Satyros*. She is 37 years old and her generation represents a period of fear of HIV and violence in São Paulo, as well as a dawning resistance against discrimination among transsexuals and travestis in her country. Fabia is 25 years old. She is a modern transsexual, and has her own hairdressing saloon in Cotia, a suburb of São Paulo where she lives with her husband.

Fabia, Bibi and Phedra all accepted to participate in the ethnographic documentary that would be filmed between October 2005 and February 2006. The documentary would serve as a probation period for both parties. If we would enjoy filming the documentary together, we would also continue to work with the ethnofiction.

Ethnographic Research

The documentary became a tool of ethnographic research when exploring transsexual and travesti culture in São Paulo. Though the ethnographic documentary would focus on performance and popular stereotypes of travestis and transsexuals in São Paulo, the film also served as a trampoline into the bigger issue of the research and provided me with additional material for the ethnofiction.

The camera gave me an identity and a *raison d'être* among travestis and transsexuals in São Paulo. Though I initially only had access to transsexual and travesti stage artists, I would soon gain reputation as a researcher and filmmaker among transsexual and travesti activists in the political movement. Bibi and Fabia made a play together that they presented in a conference where I met travesti and transsexual 'militantes'² that invited me to other meetings. My activist friends would in their turn introduce me to travestis and transsexuals working with health issues among prostitutes, who in their turn would help me to film travestis working as sex professionals in the streets. I would experience travesti and transsexual culture through my viewfinder, filming their everyday lives, as well as the forging of ideas at political meetings and conferences.

The disadvantage of filmmaking was security; carrying around a video kit worth 8000 euros in the store, restricted my mobility. To avoid being robbed I only filmed between 6 AM and 8 PM in the streets and learned to avoid the most dangerous neighborhoods, and instead of renting an apartment in the same house as my transsexual and travesti friends I decided to live in a safer building. This was maybe the worst drawback since it prevented me from living among my informants.

Since the main objective of my research was the ethnofiction, and not primarily travesti and transsexual culture, I accepted my situation and settled for a "light" fieldwork. I would meet the main participants of my project continuously during the year, and sometimes several times a week. Even though I would concentrate my research to *Os Satyros* and Praça Roosevelt during first five month of filmmaking, I would soon move on to extend my research to other aspects of transsexual and travesti culture.

I realised that I had an incorrect and anachronistic notion of community. As urban anthropological research has shown, the same structure of communities could not be expected in cities as in rural environments where anthropologists traditionally have conducted their research. The steady current of people with different backgrounds constantly flowing through the city of São Paulo creates a melting pot of incomprehensible dimensions.

Given this, it was ridiculous of me to expect the same kind of untouched homogeneous societies that Malinowski and Flaherty projected through their works. And even though Rouch's ethnofictions were concerned with urban life in the colonial West African cities of the 50s', these cities would be very hard to compare to the city of São Paulo today.

This realisation made me adopt a wider and more holistic view on transsexual and travesti culture in São Paulo, but it also made my fieldwork shallower since I would not have the opportunity to gain a profound intimacy with all of the participants of the project.

These circumstances changed the documentary film style. Since I would get less time with every participant, observational filming became harder, and informal interviews increased together with the ambient rushes. Nonetheless, I was careful to not end up with a talking heads film. I made sure to get some observational rushes, since I believed observational cinema would improve my research and the ethnographic value of the film.

² Militantes means political activists

Reference Point for the Ethnofiction

The ethnographic documentary would serve as a reference point for the ethnofiction and I was curious about the production of popular stereotypes surrounding travestis and transsexuals. Since I was about to film an ethnofiction in which travestis and transsexuals would dramatise aspects of their own lives, I needed to learn about the images dominating representations of travestis and transsexuals in Brazilian popular media and culture. I hoped that Bibi's, Phedra's and Fabia's work at *Os Satyros* would shed some light on these images, since *Os Satyros* specialised in fictionalising the lives of travestis and transsexuals.

Even though *Os Satyros* is one of the most considerate theatre companies in São Paulo in relation to transsexual and travesti culture, they also tend to echo some of the popular transsexual and travesti images from the surrounding Brazilian society. Even though the presence of travestis and transsexuals is prominent in São Paulo, other 'Paulistas'³ do not show much understanding for their existence. During my fieldwork I had the opportunity to speak to several persons not at all related to travesti and transsexual culture. It was rare to find anyone among these Paulistas actually being able to distinguish between travestis and transsexuals. Most of the persons I met regarded all of them as travestis, and some just called them 'tudo viado' (all queer). They were not able to differentiate between sexual identity and gender identity, and as a result travestis and transsexuals were all perceived as homosexual men with a sexual need to adopt a female appearance. Some Paulistas would go as far as regard them as sexual freaks indulging in their sexual habits with the intention to provoke their environment. Travestis were generally being associated to prostitution, HIV and criminality and regarded as a threat to mainstream society.

These images were all enhanced and spread through press, television, cinema and theatre. Actors playing travestis in popular television 'novelas'⁴, cinemas and theatres would mostly be male actors and sometimes female. Caudia Wonder, transsexual performer and columnist at São Paulo's biggest gay magazine, described transsexual and travesti actresses as suffering from the same situation as black actors in the United States during the 20s'; they could not find any employment since most black characters were played by white actors with painted faces...

Os Satyros stood out in this aspect. Even if most of the travesti and transsexual characters portrayed in plays at *Os Satyros* were played by male actors or female actresses, *Os Satyros* at least took advantage of the knowledge of their transsexual collaborators and contracted them as actresses in the plays. Though these plays still often focused on the dark and spectacular side of travesti and transsexual culture, the participation of transsexuals in the production process also gave the performances a complexity and humanity, hard for any other theatre company to match.

There is also a question of how much transsexual and travesti performers enhance these stereotypes themselves. I saw Bibi act in three plays during my stay in São Paulo, in all of these plays she interpreted characters occupied with prostitution or a destructive sexual behavior. She never seemed to suffer from her characters behavior, and told me that she liked to interpret these roles. In contrast to the political activists, the travesti and

³ Paulista is a popular name for an inhabitant of São Paulo.

⁴ Novelas are popular Brazilian soap operas.

transsexual artists make art for arts sake, and are mostly not politically conscious about the images they might encourage.

All stereotypes surrounding travestis and transsexuals in São Paulo are not negative. The romantic imagery surrounding 'The Glamour Queen' has grown out of the Drag Queen Shows performed by 'transformistas'⁵, transsexuals and travestis. Drag Queen Shows are all glitter and glamour with sing-back and dancing to popular songs, often set as a contest. Another 'glam' event is the yearly selection of a 'Miss Brazil Gay', where travestis and transsexuals get the chance to be selected as the beauty queen of the year. The public recognition of the transsexual model and actress Luiza Bambine Moreira, alias Roberta Close, could be said to personify this image of glamour, since she stands out as positive icon for many travestis and transsexuals in Brazil. Roberta Close had sex reassignment surgery in London in 1989, and has become accepted as a woman and an adored sex symbol in mainstream Brazilian society.

In my interview with Claudia Wonder (November 2005), she compared the two clichés surrounding travestis and transsexuals, with the contrary images of the sacred Madonna and the sensual harlot. Brazilian travestis and transsexuals exist in dialogue with these two extreme images, sometimes for pleasure and fun, and sometimes just to gain acceptance in an intolerant society.

Conclusion

In March 2005 we had completed the filming of the documentary and I was confronting the ethnofiction together with Bibi and Fabia who had decided to keep filming with me. A major challenge of this new project was to manage to reach beyond the traditional clichés of transsexual and travesti culture, and to create a film that could show relevant experiences of Fabia and Bibi that would resonance through the audience without playing on the usual cords that everybody would recognize. It was my hope that we would manage to create a film without Madonnas and harlots and hopefully use drama, fiction and ethnography to discuss problems that the entire audience would recognize – whether they were transsexual, travesti or not.

In the second and concluding part of this article I will explore the ethnofiction in practice and put my own experiences in relation to the filmmaking of Jean Rouch. I will tell the story of how I made the transfer from the ethnographic documentary filmmaking to tell an improvised story about travesti and transsexual identity and discrimination in São Paulo, Brazil.

If you want to read more about our work and download video samples from the documentary, please visit my website at www.faktafiktion.se

⁵ Transformistas are non-transgendered men putting on female clothes and make-up to perform on stage as women.

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