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The Possibilities of Filmic Anthropology.

Review of *The Possibility of Spirits* (2017) by Mattijs van de Port.

Christos Varvantakis

What is it that you film, when you film a spirit? Mattijs van de Port¹ explores this question visually and analytically in his film on spirit possession in Candomblé, in Bahia (Brazil). In so doing, he simultaneously explores, critically and reflectively, issues of representation and ethnographic practice. The film opens with scenes from a place called the Miracle of Saint Roque (Milagre de São Roque), in Bahia. Water drips from the side of a rock and two boys conspire, talking quietly to each other and occasionally glimpsing at the camera, the filmmaker and the viewer. One of them decides to direct the filmmaker, asking him whether he has ever made a film about werewolves? He replies that, no, he hasn't. A few moments later, the director asks one of the boys, Andres: "what is all this?" Andres disappears from the frame. The filmmaker insists, "what do we see here? The miracle of..."² he prompts the boy. The boy doesn't speak, and the filmmaker further comments to himself on the recorded narrative "Oh come on, Matheus, it's the miracle of Saint Roque."³ The filmmaker comments, both to the viewer and to himself, how he might have missed life happening in front of his eyes while he was occupied with getting his frame right, and we hear this narration over shaky shots which one might not have expected to see in the final cut of a film. He goes on to comment how, in the spirit of anthropological inquiry, he has been the one asking the questions and determining what was of interest and what not - and werewolves weren't featuring in his questionnaire.

In the opening of the film, van de Port establishes his epistemological and filmic framework, in the format of a film essay. The self-critical opening remarks, along with the choice of shots, publicly expose the anthropologist and the filmmaker, making him vulnerable to the viewer as he reveals in a matter of minutes a complex set of frustrations that filmmakers as well as anthropologists face - and about which they usually just don't say much. But these remarks are also expressing a much more far-reaching epistemological critique, on how much anthropologists discuss their research practices. This is one of the aims of the filmmaker and one in which he fares particularly well, by critically denouncing obscurity in the research process and by preferring rather to set out his own practice in broad day light. He comments that he could have shown images from possession rituals and he could tell us that we watch persons possessed by a spirit, and that Candomblé is an afrobrasilian religion, with spirit possession being its

¹ van de Port, M. (2017a). The Possibility of Spirits (Video). *Journal of Anthropological Films* 1(1).

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² van de Port, M. (2017a). Director's narration in the film.

³ van de Port, M. (2017a). Director's narration in the film. Here the director refers to himself as 'Matheus', instead of Mattijs, presumably as his interlocutors would have called his name in Portuguese.

most striking feature. However, such a “narrative would assume that you and I know what a spirit is. But, the problem is that we don’t know.”⁴ As he tells us, this is a film about spirits - and, what exactly is it that you film when you film a spirit? This film is a visual anthropological exploration of this issue, and of its implications for anthropology. The anthropologist behind these remarks, Mattijs van de Port, has studied Candomblé in Bahia over many years and has written extensively on the subject, remarkably in his book *Ecstatic Encounters*.⁵ Here, however, van de Port engages and experiments with the filmic medium and addresses other questions as well as other histories.⁶

Alongside its thematic exploration of spirit possession in Bahia, this is also a film about “half knowing, not knowing, thinking that you know”⁷ - a film about doubt, ambiguity, not paying attention. In choosing to deal with such matters, the filmmaker essentially delivers a significant film essay on issues of representation and reflexivity. Taking a cue from John Law,⁸ van de Port is critical of how academics distort reality into clarity. He sees the film as a medium capable to address ambiguity, and thus with the potential to explore other forms of doing science, which will be more open to the messiness of real life.⁹ In his exploration of the film as a medium, he pushes the limits of the film essay as a “genre.” At the same time, he creatively explores the encounter of anthropology with documentary film inquiring their capacity to represent reality. A capacity that, as sharply expressed by the documentary film editor Vaughan Dai, is always subject to the tension produced by the fact that a “film is about something, whereas reality is not.”¹⁰

The film represents, through voice-over and interviews, different experiences of spirit possession. The interviews, which are often commented upon through the filmmaker’s narration, provide very rich fragments of such experiences. For instance, we hear an interlocutor, Zé, commenting on how modernization has disturbed the sacred balance – van de Port offers to take him to a forest, but once there, Zé feels his body vulnerable to spirits and wants to leave. In the spoken narrative, the filmmaker comments that through this excursion, he had hoped for an interview, as he had expected that the excursion would invoke his interlocutor to narrate stories, for instance about the green feather spirit, or stories from the time when the spirits were roaming the world. Being fixated to his expectations, van de Port didn’t notice at the time a song that was being performed while they were there, and thus he failed to notice knowledge that was coming to him as performed culture. Van de Port comments to himself: “You weren’t even listening, because you were trying to film, thinking how to turn this bloody mess into philosophy.”¹¹ This type of commentary, that the filmmaker facilitates throughout the film, invokes a sort of reflective inner dialogue to which the viewer is given access. Such commentary appears to be simultaneously directed to himself, to the audience, and to the wider discipline of anthropology, and it enables the viewer to understand the dilemmas, dead ends and reflection involved in the anthropological

⁴ van de Port, M. (2017a). Director’s narration in the film.

⁵ van de Port, M. (2011). *Ecstatic Encounters: Bahian Candomblé and the Quest for the Really Real*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

⁶ MacDougall, D. (2006). *The Corporeal Image: Film, Ethnography and the Senses*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; Pinney, C. (2004). *Photos of the Gods: The Printed Image and Political Struggle in India*. London: Reaktion Books.

⁷ van de Port, M. (2017a). Director’s narration in the film.

⁸ Law, J. (2004). *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research*. New York: Routledge.

⁹ van de Port, M. (2017b). *Film making and messiness* (Video). Produced by Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wPA7G51g-nE> (Last accessed: 27/03/2018).

; van de Port, M. (2018). Interview (video), 8th *Athens Ethnographic Film Festival*. Available at <https://vimeo.com/264631378> (Last accessed 22/04/2018).

¹⁰ Vaughan, D. (1999). *For Documentary: Twelve Essays*. Berkeley: University of California Press. P. 63.

¹¹ van de Port, M. (2017a). Director’s narration in the film.

work. However, the film is also rich on interlocutors' stories and voices. For instance, Jorge, an interlocutor interviewed in the film, narrates the story of the spirit of Castro Alves. In his lifetime, Alves had a crippled foot which he always pretended was the result of an accident. His spirit returned through Jorge to reveal the truth, namely that in fact his foot was crippled because of a gunshot. But this story is also an embodied one and Jorge tells the filmmaker that he has a wound at the very spot in which Alves was shot, that this wound hurts and that in the past he was afraid that his leg might need to be cut. According to Jorge, the injury in his own feet is a mark left by his possession by the spirit of Castro Alves.

When studied as a practice of creating publics and of its relationship with the public sphere, Candomblé has provided very significant grounds to discuss belief and disbelief subjectivities in relation to publics and public discourse.¹² Similarly, processes of possession in different socio-cultural contexts have provided the material upon which (visual) anthropologists have recently very fruitfully explored beliefs, disbeliefs and certainties. Christian Suhr's film *Descending with the Angels*¹³ is a point in case, in which he films a Palestinian migrant in Aarhus, Denmark, being simultaneously treated ceremonially by a local imam for being possessed and through medication by doctors for being mentally disordered. Furthermore, Itshusi Kawase, in his film *When Spirits ride their Horses*,¹⁴ explores syncretic aspects and the interplay of religions and beliefs in the Zar possession cult ceremonies in Gondar, Ethiopia. *The Possibility of Spirits*, however, adds creatively to such filmic anthropological exploration of belief and public discourse around spirit possession, in particular by choosing to address the issue in a deeply reflective form of a personal film essay.

The choice of the particular medium of the film essay, as this for instance might be different to an observational ethnographic documentary, is very significant as it is in accordance with the filmmaker's epistemological aims and scope. According to Giannetti, the film essay, being neither purely fiction nor fact, is a form of investigation which involves "both the passion and the intellect of the author."¹⁵ Furthermore, according to Alter, the film essay defies strict definitions and traditional borders as it "strives to be beyond formal, conceptual and social constraint" and "is transgressive both structurally and conceptually, it is self-reflective and self-reflexive."¹⁶ Van de Port's film is an exemplification of transgressing traditional narratives and epistemological forms.

The use of the voice-over narration in the film is illustrative of the transgressions that the filmmaker attempts. The practice of voice-over narration, often a defining characteristic of film essays,¹⁷ is largely

¹² Sansi-Roca, R. (2005). The Hidden Life of Stones: Historicity, Materiality and the Value of Candomblé Objects in Bahia. *Journal of Material Culture* 10(2), pp. 139-156; van de Port, M. (2005). Priests and Stars: Candomblé, Celebrity Discourses, and the Authentication of Religious Authority in Bahia's Public Sphere. *Postscripts* 1(2-3), pp. 301-324; van de Port, 2011.

¹³ Suhr, C. (2014). *Descending with Angels* (Video). Distributed by Documentary Educational Resources.

¹⁴ Kawase, I. (2012). *When Spirits ride their Horses* (Video), National Museum of Japan.

¹⁵ Giannetti, L. D. (1975). *Godard and Others: Essays on Film Form*. New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press. p. 26.

¹⁶ Alter, N. (1996). The Political Im/perceptible in the Essay Film. *New German Critique*, no. 68, pp. 165-192. p. 171.

¹⁷ Lopate, P. (1992). In Search of the Centaur: The Essay-Film. *The Threepenny Review*, 48, pp. 19-22.

considered an out-of-date practice in anthropological filmmaking, indeed an almost no-go area in ethnographic documentaries, as it connotes earlier employment of such narrative devices in films through which anthropologists would speak in authoritative and all-knowing manners.¹⁸ Van de Port, however, chooses to employ this technique for precisely the opposite purpose: to admit that he often doesn't know, to discuss the messiness of real life, and to narrate his, often desperate, attempts to see and to show. If the voice of the narrator as an all-knowing authority in early ethnographic films can be seen as reassembling colonial practices, the employment of the very same technique by van de Port appears as another step towards decolonizing filmic representations of otherness. In addition, drawing inspiration from Chris Marker's narrative techniques,¹⁹ van de Port employs the voice-over narration to address the multiplicity and complexity of experience via multiple co-existing timelines.²⁰

In the film's final section titled "The possibility of spirits," the filmmaker concludes his film through an exploration of a moment of revelation that occurred during the editing of the film. In this section, he discusses how there might not be a totality in understanding or in believing, but rather moments and instances in which a possibility of spirits may make itself available, and thus open up to different world-views. While editing the film, van de Port developed a skin disease, a fungus that leaves white marks on the skin. This was around the time that the filmmaker, as he tells us, was preoccupied with trying to "decipher," to grasp the meaning of patterns in white fabric, which are extensively used in Candomblé - and he is visually accompanying his narration in this section with images from a ritual for the Orisha [Orixá] Obaluaê, a spirit identified with infectious disease. While researching on the white fabric, he found out that "Pano Branco," Portuguese for white fabric, was the very term used for the disease that was leaving white marks on his skin. The film thus closes with a reflective section, with shots of the filmmaker applying cream on his marks, which is followed by filmic experiments in creating visual patterns, similar to those on the white fabric used in Candomblé, by applying visual effects on the recorded footage. This is a moment of revelation and of knowledge for the filmmaker. Of his own personal involvement with the subject of his study (in a degree he wouldn't have thought), and of the involvement of Obaluaê in the makings of this film (channeling the filmmaker's attention to his presence through signs and hints). The filmmaker comments that such moments, which are open to the possibility of spirits, also open up to alternative readings of the world.

Similar to Jorge, the filmmaker chooses to show his wounds, as he has been showing and sharing his thoughts, doubts, fascinations and uncertainties all along this filmic essay. In so doing, van de Port has undertaken a most formidable task: that of being sincere. A truly reflective and reflexive piece, this critical filmic essay constitutes an important addition to the anthropological study of spirit possession and simultaneously a very significant experiment on the possibilities of the ethnographic film, resulting in a piece of rigorous and critical analysis, which chooses to embrace the messiness of real life.

¹⁸ Lansing, S.J. (1989). The decolonization of ethnographic film. *Visual Sociology* 4(2), pp. 10-17.

¹⁹ See for instance: Marker, C. (1983). *Sans Soleil* (Video). Distributed by Argos Films.

²⁰ van de Port, 2018.

Aknowledgment:

The Possibility of Spirits is now published in the Journal for Anthropological Films, and can be openly accessed here: <https://boap.uib.no/index.php/jaf/article/view/1316>. I wish to thank Ieva Jusionyte for her very helpful commentary on a previous draft of this review.