Avi Mograbi,
Avenge But One of My Two Eyes
(2005). Courtesy of the artist.

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Rituals of filming and the dialogic camera

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Dialogue is the encounter between humans, mediated by the world, in order to name the world.
Paulo Freire (1972)

What has come to be known as the crisis of representation[1] may be summarized as a set of concerns about any kind of description or representation of an other's social, cultural, historical or personal reality. The crisis stems from the realization that any account is always mediated, or indeed distorted, by a system of ideas, attitudes, politics, power relations and practices that construct both the speaking or representing subject and the object or world they show.[2] In recent decades many discursive fields (e.g. anthropology, history, documentary practices, etc.) have analysed the impossibility of neutrality or objectivity specific to their discipline. In 'The problem of speaking for others' (1991–1992) focusing on the social sciences, Linda Alcoff makes the case that merely acknowledging the epistemic impact of a speaker's social location and her privileged status does not do away with the ethical and metaphysical ramifications of speaking for or about others, especially if they are less privileged (1991–1992: 30).[3] She goes as far as to ask: 'Is the discursive practice of speaking for others ever a valid practice, and, if so, what are the criteria for validity?' (Alcoff 1991–1992: 7).

The question loses none of its urgency when extended to visual practices that involve representing an 'other' (place or person). The aforementioned resulting crisis of representation has previously been tackled from two sides: from the vantage point of a number of critical discourses, the identity and privilege of the speaking or image-making subject has been deconstructed in favour of a non-hegemonic,

1. The term was coined by George Marcus and Michael Fisher in their 1986 essay 'The crisis of representation in the human sciences' but refers to a problematic whose lineage goes back at least to Foucault's 1969 discourse analysis in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and Said's critique of orientalist representation in *Orientalism* (1978) as well as James Clifford's *On Ethnographic Authority* (1983).

2. In his seminal essay 'The discourse on language', Foucault analyses how discourse is controlled in terms of objects (what can be spoken of), ritual (where and how one may speak) and the privilege or right to speak (who may

non-essentialist position;[4] meanwhile, at least at the documentary end of image production, the problematic claims of objectivity, truth, authenticity and reality have also been unpacked, resulting in more permeable boundaries between so-called non-fiction and fiction.[5] Looking beyond who makes the images and what is depicted, how and where representation takes place are key determinants in the production of meaning by and in the image. Following Michel Foucault and Alcoff, and focusing specifically on moving image practice, I will call these determinants, 'rituals of filming'; by which I mean those actions and positions of the camera and film-maker that constitute meaning and perform symbolic value within the work in question. To be clear, I use rituals of filming as distinct, if complementary, to other forms of critical analysis of moving image practice, including shot analysis, film semiotics or the deconstruction of the ideological underbelly of film mechanics by apparatus theory. What interests me in particular in the notion of ritual is that it allows an enacted, performative, practice-centred approach without aiming for a generally applicable theory. Thinking about rituals of filming challenges us to consider the event of filming itself, including the people and places involved in or affected by the filming as well as the film-maker's own position behind the camera, *vis-à-vis* what they film and within the wider context of its social, ideological and aesthetic space. In the following, I aim to trace the critical potential of these rituals of filming by looking at practitioners who have developed dialogic filming strategies that acknowledge the complex interrelationships between film-maker, camera and filmed, and as such consciously address, and indeed depict the quandaries of representing an 'other'.

Positioning the camera: The topography of dialogue

In the seven-minute opening shot of Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub's *Trop Tôt Trop Tard* (1981), the camera is placed on a car driving around the traffic circle of the Place de la Bastille in Paris. The lateral movement of a conventional travelling shot is turned into a spiral, a movement revolving around itself but looking out at the city. This produces a paradoxical establishing shot: it anchors the film geographically and historically at the centre of contemporary Paris/France, while at the same time creating a vertiginous unhinging of place and time. The rotating, centrifugal viewpoint undermines a stable or fixed central position and the repeated revolutions of the camera literally and physically evoke the film's theme of past revolutions in general and the events of 1789 in particular. The rest of the film is structured as a diptych. Part one is set around various locations mentioned in a letter by Friedrich Engels to Karl Kautsky. Read off-screen by Huillet, the letter describes the wretched state of the French countryside where the seeds of the French revolution were sewn. Part two takes place along the Nile in Egypt and the rural images are accompanied by a commentary written and narrated by Mahmoud Hussein.[6] We are told that here too peasants revolted too early and succeeded too late in their resistance to the British occupation, up until the 'false' bourgeois revolution of 1952, Naguib's military coup.[7]

It would be easy to dismiss the binary structure of the film as a didactic comparison. Instead it is a conscious act of positioning. Starting the film in their backyard as it were, the film-makers avoid a patronizing look at Egypt's woes. Both parts focus on the land itself and on those who toil in it, showing nearly deserted landscapes with traces of activity: a village, a fence, a field – images that invite a historical materialist analysis literally from the ground up. With a few exceptions such as the establishing spiralling pan, the film consists mostly of static durational shots or slow pans. It is

speak). Foucault, Michel (1972), *The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, New York: Pantheon Books.

3. Alcoff makes an important distinction between positions of discursive power achieved through merit (e.g. teachers) and privilege conferred by certain races, classes, nationalities, genders or sexualities, and producing a more favourable, mobile, dominant position within power/knowledge structures in specific societies, relationships or locations. However, she also acknowledges that the two forms of privilege and authority are often mixed.

4. For example, the work on hegemony, identity and agency under the umbrella of cultural studies (cf. Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams, Homi Bhaba et al.), and the various approaches from postcolonial, feminist and gender studies perspectives (bell hooks, Griselda Pollock, Judith Butler et al.).

5. For example, Renov, Michael (ed.) (1993), *Theorizing Documentary*, London/New York: Routledge; Nichols, Bill (1991), *Representing Reality*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press; Maria Lind and Hito Steyerl (eds) (2008), *The Green Room: Reconsidering the Documentary in Contemporary Art*, Berlin: Sternberg Press.

6. Mahmoud Hussein is the pseudonym for two Egyptian intellectuals who together penned, *Class Conflict in Egypt* (New York/London: Monthly Review Press, 1973), from which the film's commentary is drawn.

their careful positioning, above all, that allows for a dialogue to emerge, not simply between part two and part one, that is, between the landscapes and histories of Egypt and France, but, on a 'micrological' level,[8] that is allowing for the observation of minutiae within the Egyptian landscape and situation itself. Serge Daney was the first to perceive this clearly:

> One […] has to see the second part of *Too Early, Too Late* as an odd performance, made up of approaches and retreats, where the film-makers […] search for the spot – the only spot, the right spot – where their camera can catch people without bothering them. Two dangers immediately present themselves: exotic tourism and the invisible camera. Too close, too far. In a lengthy 'scene', the camera is planted in front of a factory gate and allows one to see the Egyptian workers who pass, enter and leave. Too close for them not to see the camera, too far away for them to be tempted to go towards it. (1982: 20–21)

This performance, this dance to find what Straub himself calls 'the right topographic point'[9] embodies an ethical and aesthetic response to the problem of representing an 'other'. Straub asserts:

> That is the least one can do when filming […]. You need to go there and walk around. Walk around a place or a village three times, and find the right topographic, strategic point. In a way that one may be able to see something, but without destroying the mystery of what one sees […] but this isn't specific to this film, this is the case in all our films. (2011)

Staub and Huillet implicate themselves and the camera in the shot in an attempt to clearly be present but not intrude on the delicate privacy of a given situation, even if it is an uninhabited landscape. The long, slow pan across an empty field flanked by trees on the horizon towards the end of the film remains an attentive, mesmerizing long shot, without any faux-intimacy that a zoom or close-up might provide. More than the film's commentary and its rich contextual information, it is the ritual of its topographic positioning – from the spiralling opening shot to the long stares and slow almost caressing pans that make up much of the rest of the film – that creates a dialogue between the film-makers and the place they seek to represent. This dance of the camera reflects their engagement with the location's social and historical geography, unfolds a visual conversation that is aware of its context, and acknowledges where and how it takes place.

Repositioning the viewer: Sharing the frame

The power of commentary to frame what we see is placed at the centre of Dominique Dubosc's collaboration with Jean Rouch. A small viewing studio is the setting of *Jean Rouch – First Film, 1947–1991* (1991). The characters are Rouch himself, three young African-French interlocutors (themselves ethnographers and film-makers)[10] and Rouch's first film *In the Land of the Black Magi* (1947). In a brief conversation about the background of this film, Rouch explains that he shot the material in Niger in 1947 and showed his first edit at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris where it was spotted by a producer from a French news company. Broke and naive, the young Rouch entrusted his footage to this producer who proceeded to create a 'monster' out of the film. The rushes were re-edited with added stock footage and 'tropical muzak'. An exoticizing and patronizing commentary dramatically delivered by

7. Aimed at overthrowing King Farouk, the Egyptian Revolution of 1952 started on 23 July with a coup d'état by the Free Officers' Movement, a group of army officers led by Muhammad Naguib and Gamal Abdel Nasser. They abolished the constitutional monarchy and established a nationalist, anti-imperialist republic headed by Naguib.

8. The term micrological is coined by Adorno as a focus on the particular to counter the totalizing logic of the universal. His *Minima Moralia* (1951) offers the most successful realization of the micrological as a methodology.

9. Danièle Huillet confirms the ethics at the heart of this positioning: 'On essaye de trouver le point de vue juste (le plus juste), la hauteur juste, la proportion juste, entre le ciel et la terre, de manière à pouvoir faire des panoramiques sans devoir modifier la ligne de l'horizon, même à 360°'/'We try to find the correct point of view (the most correct), the right height, the right proportion between the sky and the land, in such a way that we can create panoramas without having to modify the horizon line, even whilst turning on 360°' (Huillet, *Écrits*, Independencia Éditions, 2012).

10. N'Diagne Adéchoubou, Brice Ahounou and Tam Sir Doueb.

a famous sports presenter added a plethora of colonial clichés about an 'ageless Africa' with its 'mysterious and eternal charms and sorceries'. The reel is loaded onto the projector and with Rouch and his young colleagues we begin to watch this film within the film. It shows the preparation, chase and killing of a hippopotamus, culminating in a Songhay possession ceremony to thank the gods. Only in reality the ceremony took place before the hunt! Rouch confesses his shame at the film and the kind of representation it produces. He acknowledges 'the need to discover another image of Africa' and immediately asks, but 'what does "to discover" mean? It means to know and be known'. Rouch stresses the importance of reciprocity in representation, the dialogic principle at the heart of getting to know another person or place. In his later films he consciously introduces feedback mechanisms such as organizing local screenings of his rushes or even handing over the camera to someone 'local'. [11]

These collaborative, dialogic rituals of filming and viewing evolved into the notion of 'shared anthropology'. In providing both a form of direct, observational cinema and at the same time being participatory docu-fictions, these strategies can be associated somewhat paradoxically with both cinéma-vérité's and ethnofiction's acknowledgement of the mediated and constructed nature of any truth or authenticity. In *Jean Rouch – First Film, 1947–1991*, Rouch subjects himself to this feedback mechanism, watching his own film again after a gap of forty years. Realizing the manipulative effect of both the producer's ending and the commentary that accompanies it, he decides to intervene. The last section of the film is replayed – this time without sound and Rouch improvises a new commentary. He simply explains, over the same images, that the woman who we see in a trance actually asks the river god for permission to kill a hippopotamus. In contrast to the pathos of the commentary in the 'original' film, his words are neutral and descriptive, both demystifying the apparent strangeness or exoticism of the situation and at the same time allowing us, the viewers to remain strangers to it. He explains, for example, how the dancers make their mouths foam by stirring their saliva and that anyone could do it. The combination of Rouch's obvious familiarity with and deep understanding of the possession ritual and his impassioned delivery undermines the exoticization the images on their own might produce while at the same time acknowledging our continued distance to them. The new commentary locates the image of the 'other' (person, culture, place) within a particular cultural, social and historical context. Thus the 'dancers' we see no longer perform a generic African Other, but become specific social agents.

Meanwhile, the camera switches back and forth between Rouch watching and explaining what he sees and the film itself with Rouch's new voice-over. This Brechtian move of staging the act of adding a voice-over – which usually is totally invisible – unstitches the voice-over's seamless integration with the film and allows all the agents and actors involved in knowledge production to become visible. Thus we become aware of the film and what/who it depicts and the commentary that frames our understanding of both what we see, and, importantly, the author and viewer of the film. This first film is 'finished' as it were at the other end of a career, as its author watches it with a younger generation of film-makers and ethnographers. This ritual of temporal and contextual repositioning shifts the focus from the event of possession depicted in the original film to the very mechanisms of the production of meaning. In turn we as viewers become witnesses of our own viewership. The repeated interruption of the seamless flow of representation and production of meaning in the film produces a *mise en abyme*, whereby as viewers, we are placed both inside and outside the film. This mirrors the affective impact of the film's attempt to create a familiarity with and de-exoticization of an 'other', while at the same time allowing us to remain – and become aware of being – strangers to this 'other'.

11. For example, Rouch, Jean (1958), *Moi un Noir*.

Undoing positions: Dialogue beyond the frame

Avi Mograbi's *Avenge But One of My Two Eyes* (2005) begins with black. We hear the voice of a man, speaking in English with an Arabic accent: 'Tanks around the house, all day. They are also entering a lot of houses. […] I filmed a little bit from the window […]'. We never get to see his footage. Instead, the image fades in and we see the listener, the film-maker, on a phone in his home office with what appears to be Al Jazeera on small monitor next to him. These conversations between Mograbi and an unnamed Palestinian film-maker friend under siege in the occupied territories are intercut between three further locations throughout the rest of the film. First, at the mountaintop fortress of Masada overlooking the Dead Sea, tour-guides take students emotively through the story of the Roman siege in 72 CE asking them to confront the same choices as their forebears; to surrender, to pray, to fight or to kill yourself. Most decide the latter would be the most patriotic, which was indeed what the first-century Jews did.[12] The second location is an elementary school where pupils are told the biblical story of Samson who was given supernatural strength by God to combat his enemies. Eventually he was sold to the Philistines, blinded and imprisoned in Gaza where he decided to commit suicide by bringing down the pillars of a temple, killing more of his enemies through his death than in life. The third type of location shows the day-to-day oppression of Palestinians, and connects the historical analogies of the two historical stories to the present, while at the same time inverting the positions of their protagonists. We see peasants in a field arbitrarily asked to stop their work by an Israeli soldier, or a Palestinian pleading with young soldiers to let his bleeding wife through a checkpoint.

While atop Masada and in the classroom, the camera is simply observing, in these scenes, the camera and film-maker become implicated in the situation filmed. Sometimes the soldiers approach the camera and ask for it to be turned off. But even when they allow the filming to continue, the presence of the camera is felt and affects them. In an interview Mograbi says:

> It is always a dilemma for documentary film-makers brought up on this fly-on-the-wall notion: 'We observe, we collect, we don't influence.' First of all, the concept of objectivity is a distortion of what happens in reality; whatever the situation, it responds to the camera, whether explicitly or not. There is no way you can introduce a camera at a checkpoint so that the soldiers do not notice it. Sometimes it makes them more polite, they will be a little nicer, or they will simply stop people moving. […] There is no such thing as a transparent camera, and I don't want to continue this charade. I am here, and my presence influences what you are doing. (2007)

However, the film goes beyond merely acknowledging the influence of the camera, by turning the act of filming itself into an intervention. In one of the last scenes of the film, Mograbi confronts a soldier who refuses to open a gate where Palestinian children wait to pass and the film-maker's hands gesticulating in front of the lens can be seen. Mograbi comments: '[…] my films are based on subjects that trouble me […], that I am involved in. So I do not think I should become less active because I film. […]. So when I am driven to react, I do […]'.

What interests me in this activist mode of film-making is not only the politics of the resulting film, i.e. taking a stand against the occupation, but also how the intervention of the camera and film-maker within the film produce an intricate web of implication and agency. That is, the visibility of the camera can actually influence the behaviour of the soldiers – perhaps for the good. So the film shoot/camera has an unexpected and immediate agency before it becomes a film and form of representation. This potential

12. The siege of Masada by troops of the Roman Empire towards the end of the First Jewish-Roman War in the first century CE ended in the mass suicide of 960 Jewish rebels and their families holed up in the mountain fortress in the Judaean desert built by Herod the Great.

for intervention and agency is clearly rooted in the given micro-context of a situation and does not make any claims towards political efficacy on a macro level. However, it can be seen as an implicit critique of the fly-on-the-wall approach as a lack of engagement. Moreover, the dialogue between the heard but unseen Mograbi behind the camera and the soldier in front of it is a structural reversal of the conversation scenes in which he films himself talking on the phone to a heard, but unseen Palestinian friend. The dialogic encounters of both situations point to the need to transform spaces where dialogue seems impossible. They acknowledge the power relations and hierarchies that make this dialogue less than equitable: the friend cannot leave the Occupied Territories for a face-to-face encounter; the soldier cannot prevent the film-maker from filming but the film-maker does reclaim some agency *vis-à-vis* the vagaries of the soldier.

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What interests me in these three films are the different strategies the film-makers employ to position themselves in and through their films: Huillet and Straub locate themselves and the camera topographically, Rouch and Mograbi return the gaze, undoing and entering the frame. These performative devices acknowledge not only the film-makers' implication in the mechanisms of representing an 'other', but also foreground specific aspects in the process of film-making and the production of meaning within structures of power and control. The agency of the camera, its actual movement – e.g. the circular motion of Straub/Huillet's opening shot and Mograbi's shaky, handheld subjective camera – can be seen as a set of strategies of awareness that challenge the viewer's gaze. As rituals of filming they point to the need to reconceptualize filming as an event that includes the film-maker, the filmed, the location/context and us, the viewers. At best these strategies of the camera allow all these parties, to varying degrees and in different ways, to participate in the production of meaning and thus become active agents involved in making sense of a shared, if conflicted, world. As such, these reflexive rituals of filming might help to create, to return to Alcoff, 'conditions for dialogue and practice speaking with and to rather than speaking for others' (1991–1992: 23). The dialogic (rather than monologic) camera attempts to produce less hierarchical, hegemonic and mastering forms of representation. But, some knotty questions remain. Can these strategies really create more equitable conditions of representation? And if an authorial imbalance is almost always part of film-making, is it enough if, through these rituals of filming, the inherent inequalities and the film-maker's own position are at least acknowledged and foregrounded? And finally, positing these 'self-conscious' filmic strategies as rituals points to another inherent contradiction. As I tried to extract from the selected examples, rituals of filming can be understood as a set of actions by the camera and the film-makers performed for their critical potential or agency. As such, these rituals can be repeated and established as critical traditions, and thus run the risk of becoming reified into easily assimilable or imitable tropes that lose their effectiveness, becoming empty gestures of exoneration. This means that the rituals of filming constantly need to be reinvented, re-calibrated and reassessed in order to remain effective. Even if the camera does produce a dialogue, as I have tried to show in the examples above, the quandary of representation is not dissolved by these strategies. However, whilst not doing away with the problematics of representing an 'other', rituals of filming do compel us to engage with the attendant questions of representation. Similarly, the dialogic camera is not simply a bridge that abolishes distance and joins the film-maker and us, the viewers, with the represented 'other', thus reducing difference to sameness. On the contrary, by affirming difference it allows us, as viewers, to remain strangers.

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