

THE BANQUET OF THE GODS IS A MESS

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Como as imagens fazem você pensar sobre a religião? This question was sent to me by Rodrigo Toniol, organizer of the Jornadas sobre Alternativas Religiosas in Rio de Janeiro, and was to be at the heart of a public dialogue with my colleague Hugo José Suárez. The rather general formulation of the question could obviously lead us into a whole lot of different directions: how are one's thoughts provoked by saintly statues, byzantine mosaics, buddhist mandalas, Islamic calligraphy? How to understand the materiality of religion? Or how to understand religious prohibitions of making images? Yet I immediately took up Rodrigo's question as an invitation to reflect on my move from being an anthropologist who writes about religion to an anthropologist who films religion. Not in the least because camera-based research and image making was the immediate common ground with Hugo.

So how does the making of images allows me to think about religion? My answer to that question starts in the early days of my career in anthropology, when in the early 90s, I was doing long time fieldwork for my PhD project in the former Yugoslavia. Four months after my arrival, war broke loose, and I became a witness to the violent break-up of Yugoslavia, seeing a world falling apart: literally, as towns and villages where destroyed, and figuratively, as people had to come to terms with the fact that the stories that had comprised their life world – the story of a Titoist Yugoslavia, of socialism being the road to a glorious future, of *bratstvo e jedinstvo*, brotherhood and unity among the countries constitutive nations – no longer made sense. Yugoslavia was, in popular parlance, a total mess.

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When after 14 months of fieldwork I returned to the Netherlands, there was but one question everybody asked me: given the overall confusion as to what was going on in these Yugoslav lands, people asked whether I could clean up the mess they kept seeing on their TV screens, so they would finally understand what they were looking at. I immediately felt that there was something impossible about this question. I could of course start cleaning up the world I had lived in, by producing clear cut categories of thought, constructing clear narrative lines, introducing logical arguments, using solid methods. But in that procedure, that which had been most striking during my fieldwork would be gone: the maddening confusion, the frightening disorder, the very real chaos of a country falling apart.

This incapacity of academic conventions of writing to incorporate the messiness of the world – its insistence on order and clarity – has plagued me ever since. When I moved my research to Bahia, Brazil, to study the candomblé religion, the problematic assumption that understanding requires clarity presented itself again. There was no clarity in the dense layeredness of religious ceremonies, or in the not-knowing and half-understandings as to what goes on between people and spirits. An image I found in an early photo reportage by José Medeiros in the journal *O Cruzeiro* became an apt symbol of what I sought to avoid. The ‘banquet of the gods’, as the photograph of a candomblé altar is called, comes with an inserted box where all the different elements that make up the altar are neatly outlined, numbered and named, so the spectator can say: “aha, now I see! Now I know what it is!” I decided my writing would have to be different. I embraced the literary turn in anthropology, sought for more poetic ways of articulating research findings.

Encountering the work of the British sociologist John Law (2004) on “the sociology of mess” was a great inspiration. His observation that “parts of the world are caught in our ethnographies, our histories and statistics, but other parts are not, or if they are, they are distorted into clarity...” (Law, 2004: 2) became something of a mantra. I began to see how Academia forces our story-telling in an aesthetic of squares, grids and straight lines, offers forms and formats and tools to bring the world to order: word processing software that cannot but produce an orderly lay-out; the rigid sequentiality of the power point presentation; modernist conference rooms where not a single curl can be found. Indeed, I was

alerted to the undeniable fact that Academia actually has an *aesthetic*, however much this fact tends to be ignored and denied in the name of objectivity.

My move to visual anthropology and camera-based research may be understood in line with the above (cf. Van de Port 2018). Photographic images in motion do not negate the chaotic dimensions of the worlds I study, but make these visible and audible. Of course, film making has its own modes of ordering and producing clarity. Yet the density of information that photographic images present us with can never be contained by the narrative and editorial structuring that the filmmaker introduces. The enormous amount of details in every single shot will always remind a viewer that there is more to the world than how the film maker seeks to (re)produce it. The inexhaustible excess of possible other meanings, possible other narratives will always reveal that the researcher is not being in full control, that the world he studies always escapes him.

This particularity of film is especially relevant for the study of a mystical religion such as candomblé. For all of their realism, photographic images do not break the mysteries that are at the heart of candomblé religious practices. They show and make present, but they do not explain. They evoke the silence that is at the heart of religious experiences, hint at our not-knowing, the limits of our human ways of understanding. For the study of an afro-brazilian religion, whose worshippers seek to keep the mysteries of their religion center stage, moving images and sound have a crucial role to play.

Now I am not suggesting that camera-based research reduces the study of religion to a mere showing and documenting of the material culture and practices of religious communities, and gives up on the intellectual, theoretical ambitions of anthropology. Far from it. The genre of the essay film, which I have been exploring in my cinematographic work, is very much engaged with film as medium for the advancement of thought (cf. Rascaroli). In the essay film, a voice-over seeks to engage the audience in a thought-process, a kind of thinking-out-loud. But this thinking-out-loud takes place in the co-presence of images, sounds and silences, which are constantly modifying the thoughts that are being articulated in language. The idea is not to speak about images (so as to occupy and silence them) but to speak “nearby” them, as Trinh T. Minh-Ha (1982) put it in her felicitous phrasing.

I like to think of the essay film as a new *environment* for my thinking. Whereas as a writing anthropologist my thoughts would land in the silent, passive recipient of white paper (or its simulated digital version), in film my thoughts find themselves in a dynamic, audio-visual ambience which speaks back to whatever I say. For the study of religion and religious experiences, with its interest in the beyond of human understanding, this interrupted, interrogated mode of thinking – where the searching is the goal, not the reaching of conclusions – is particularly relevant.

Through the work of Hugo I learned just how different ways of doing camera-based research can be, and how inspiring it is to see that diversity. Hugo's films are long sequences of "stills", commented on in voice-over narration. The images meticulously document what Hugo sees and notices when he walks the streets of different neighborhoods in Mexico City. In the narrative, Hugo points out what the viewer should be paying attention to: highlighting details and observations that together produce the patterns and structures through which the sociologist seeks to make sense of religious life in the Mexican capital. His eye rests on street-altars and graffiti; plaques with regulatory do's and don'ts; decorations and architectural forms; bill-boards and shop-windows; mass-produced saintly statues and artworks. The absence of the eternal self-questioning and self-doubting of the anthropologist – burdened by the colonial history of his discipline, and always uncertain about his expertise – is striking. And refreshing, I might add. "Here speaks a sociologist, and this is what sociologists deem noteworthy", is the self-confident attitude that seems to inform the narrative. I want to add that I found no arrogance in this attitude: the tone of Hugo's voice is cautious, modest, soft-spoken and pensative.

Como as imagens fazem você pensar sobre a religião? If anything, the dialogue with Hugo José Suárez, showed that there are widely different ways of using images in the study of religion. More importantly, it underscored the idea that breaking out of Academia's logocentrism greatly enriches the study of religion.

References

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