Of all the recent findings on Jean Rouch’s *Les maîtres fous* (1956), an ethnological cause célèbre in film, the mimicry talk seems to gain more and more momentum, all spawning from Michael Taussig’s celebrated *Mimesis and Alterity* (1993). *Les maîtres fous* is a documentary on the possession rite of the Hauka movement practiced by the Songhay migrant workers from Niger, who resided in Accra, Ghana, during the colonial fifties. Rouch was invited by them to make the film (Rouch 1978, 1006; 1995, 224), with a glaring surrealist *ciné-transe* as its result (Young 1995, 198–99, 203–5), but what becomes even more glaring is the trance of the subjects in the film as possessed by the British colonial authority, bearing weird demeanor and “abundant salivation” that makes their “faces look very ferocious” (Muller 1971, 1472). Driven by the white men’s spirits, they go on to kill a dog and eat it. Taussig writes: “they so clearly are and are not Europeans” in their “mimetic faculty,” unwittingly carrying a critique of modern Europe (1993, 241–42). Leaving aside more questions this claim may beg, we know that one thing is certain: the film brings a positive message. The visual crisis stirred up by the film may now find a good cause to make peace with itself.

This does not fit the big picture of how the film has been received. At its first screening at the Musée de l’Homme in 1954, Marcel Griaule, along with most other anthropological luminaries in the disturbed audience, called the film “a travesty” and urged Rouch to destroy it (Rouch 1996b, 83; Stoller 1997a, 119). If we could not pluck out our eyes, Griaule seemed to suggest, we could at least burn the film. And yet among those in the same room who judged the film
racist were African students (Rouch [1981] 1989, 279). Later in the
mid-sixties, Ousmane Sembene, in what has become a famous quip,
accused Rouch in person of observing the Africans like insects (Cer-
since Sembene have to a greater or lesser degree defined their film
practices in opposition to Rouch” (1996, 87). The general hostility
toward Rouch, in Paris and elsewhere, lingered, as detected by Pierre
Haffner when conducting his interview with six black African cine-
asts in 1980 (Haffner 1982, 63). Around the same time, Teshome H.
Gabriel called Les maîtres fous a racist film that had taken the Afri-
cans as “scientific specimens, laboratory subjects and insects” (quoted
in Russell 1999, 222). By 1995, Manthia Diawara arrived at his con-
cluding remark in his pensive voice-over to accompany the clips
of Les maîtres fous in Rouch in Reverse, his documentary on Rouch:
“These have remained,” he said, “some of the most disturbing images
in modern cinema.” To someone like Michael M. J. Fischer, how-
ever, this judgment does not seem good enough. He tasks Rouch
in Reverse by “Raising Questions about Rouch” (his review’s title)
and considers Diawara to be speaking only “superficial clichés”
(1997, 142). Instead, he wryly suggests, “Diawara must turn to his
fellow diasporics” for advice (142), not Rouch, whose “slightly
obtuse, but mainly just romantic, idea of doing ‘shared anthropology’
and ‘giving voice’ to Africans” (140) is, like Rouch’s Chronique d’un été
(1960),4 “campy and silly” (141), no less pretentious, passé, and better
forgotten.

Surprisingly, Fischer spares one film, Les maîtres fous, his strident
rhetoric. This is a film, he claims, in which we witness “one of those
emotionally powerful cults that mimic, mock, and make the colonial
and bureaucratic forms alien” (141). Rather than following Rouch,
who has “lamely” (Fischer’s word) defended the film as depicting
the colonial white lords as the true “mad masters,”5 Fischer, consid-
ering the film an “exorcism,” relishes the view (of a certain French
African scholar he never identifies) that the film and cult are trans-
ferral of a psychoanalytic kind, unveiling all that is dysfunctional
from de Gaullism to modernism (141). Gleaned from “the richly dis-
comforting emotional tonalities” (142) of his text (an attribute he
ascribes to Diawara’s film), what he seeks to implicate by singling out
the mimetic repercussion of Les maîtres fous seems very like a critique
of Europe in Taussig’s wake. And yet, facing this approach that looks
at the matter from the surface, from mimicry, the dialectical reversal
Rouch attempts to bring across, an explanation more structural in
kind, has to give way for the moment to the phenomenological one
of Taussig’s.

Diverse as these views are, they agree on one point: they all aim
at questioning the ethical underpinning of *Les maîtres fous* and, in a
larger sense, of ethnographic filmmaking. Sembene’s accusation,
which might not be entirely fair to Rouch, had also aimed at that
higher level of moral concern. In response, Rouch told him how he
had taken pains, whenever he showed the film, not to let *Les maîtres
fous* spark racist perceptions or fall into the wrong use (Cervoni 1982,
78). His disclaimer in French at the film’s opening and his insistence
on dubbing the film in English by himself (Rouch 1978, 1015; Eaton
1979b, 49) are part of this effort to contextualize the film. This only
suggests that it might have all too often fallen into the wrong hands
and subjected, as in its very first screening, to unintended interpreta-
tion. The situation, ethical in kind, is a familiar one: it is the general
anxiety of the documentary community writ large, the community of
ethnographic filmmaking especially, when filmmakers have virtually
no control of what may come of the films they have made. Just note
the tone of anxiety in the passages on ethics by Michael Rabiger
(1998, 356–64) and Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Taylor (1997, 48–61) in
their textbooks of documentary filming, and we soon realize that
hardly any other film genre need undergo such a straining moment
of soul-searching to define its identity. In the majority of cases, the
ethical code such as the one laid down by the American Anthro-
pological Association,” add Barbash and Taylor, “is more abstract
than practical,” according to their hands-on experience (48). Trinh T.
Minh-ha’s thesis that “There is no such thing as documentary” (1991,
29), however radical it is as an attempt to reassert the identity of doc-
umentary, may need a further negation by the ethical anxiety we
have mentioned to claim this identity.

We bring up the issue of context and background because the
lack of them, or the impossibility to provide them—or simply ones
that are convincing enough for one reason or another—is often the
source of anxiety. We see Rouch wrestle with it, but the embarrass-
ment is perhaps more common than we assume. In his essay “Who
Constructs Anthropological Knowledge?” Wilton Martinez reports similar unpleasant encounters in his anthropology classroom (1992, 132). Indigenous media produced by aboriginal people about themselves are not spared, either: when shown, the films must be respectfully “re-contextualized” with sufficient anthropological information (Ruby 1995, 80).8 In the case of Les maîtres fous, Peter Loizos, noting that in virtually all Stoller’s screening sessions there is at least one student who throws up (Stoller 1992, 158), would rather screen the students before he screens the film for them: he will pick, whenever he can, “the final-year anthropology specialists” as his chosen audience (Loizos 1993, 48–49). To see a cocksure—and for that reason, unscrupulous—filmmaker at the screening explaining his or her documentary with pleasure may not be a very good sign, for decontextualization might have taken effect, causing the audience to show little interest in the film’s context. If they are not happy to be anthropologically informed, it is because the filmmaker has not cared to be informed in the first place.

Like it or not, we are here given an establishing shot of what Eliot Weinberger has identified as “the Camera People,” whose first record of being sighted is also the one ringing with ethical resonance: “There is a tribe,” he begins his field notes, “known as the ethnographic filmmakers, who believe they are invisible” (1994, 3). Which is to say, they did not know that they could also become insects. The call for ethics arises not because the Camera People are hunters of images that they prefer to consume raw (3), but because they move in sheer visuality, all-seeing but not seen, seemingly having no concern for their own visibility (as one would say, “for their own safety”). It is not clear whether this unscrupulousness is part of the nature of their trade, essential to the hunt of visuality, or because they hold no scruples at all, and for that reason, no taboos as a people. This is very strange, for we have known no tribe that does not at least reckon some of those fears. The call for ethics on our part is an apparent attempt to answer this mystical origin of that hunting trade, filling up the possible ethical vacuum that we suspect is there. Perhaps our actual fear is less with this people than with visuality, that which they hunt as some very ferocious game. If we cannot tame visuality, at least, we think, we can tame the Camera People. So, like the missionaries, we hand them our bible, our code of ethics. Some of those tribal
men and women soon convert to our faith, but they also begin to develop anxiety attacks. The most conscientious of them, knowing that they carry an original sin, begin to raise doubt about our bible, which they have been asked to bring along to cure the plague caused simply by their presence that has turned others into insects. Again, it is visuality, still at large, that has worked all this mess; there must be something heretical about the Camera People that has brought our bible to a stall. Pointing out to them that they are also insects serves only to concede the omnipotence of visuality, not the other way round.

Our view is that the riddle cannot be resolved without conducting an anthropological inquiry of the tribe. Weinberger has meant to use the title “the Camera People” as a convenient metaphor in his brilliant account of them; we want to take the name as an anthropological category sui generis. Our aim is to hunt down, conceptually at least, that elusive—and dangerous—existence called visuality, without which the secret of the Camera People cannot be disclosed. But doing anthropology alone is enough to raise disputes in our village—a “civil society,” which we prefer to be called in accordance with our code of ethics—for, some of us claim, anthropology is what our biblical mission seeks precisely to wipe out, lest we all become insects ourselves. Our fear is then with anthropology, with the plague and magic the Camera People unleash, with visuality. Soon this fear cannot but reduce us to insects, even though our disputes have made us look very bad, like them. Which is to say, we now need anthropology to disperse the charm that holds us as insects.

**VILLAGE DISPUTES**

The village disputes flaring up from Rouch’s *Les maîtres fous* have sadly let pass one important fact: in this film the anthropology of visuality we seek is actually in the making. Viable only on camera, this anthropology, we will soon see, focuses on the psychical logic through which we all become insects, surpassing what a mere reverse anthropology, such as Diawara’s *Rouch in Reverse*, can claim to do. We will also show why Lacanian psychoanalysis must come into the picture, when it has an equal stake in this logic. While this new kind
of anthropological venture in Rouch remains largely unconceptualized, he has been hailed, for various reasons, as a surrealist filmmaker (Roberts 1996, 80). Despite his debt to the surrealists, as he has admitted, what earns him the title may well be the unbearable visual excess painted in his films; at the height of his visual feasts, he would invite his visual guests to eat dogs. Luis Buñuel was completely aghast at seeing a dog butchered and devoured in Les maîtres fous, though Rouch would consider Buñuel and his films more relentless, all working like “the cutting of the eye in Un chien andalou (1929)” (Rouch 1991, 100). Now Rouch brings his own surrealist dog (alias “an Andalusian dog”) to the mad masters to champ, slashing in return the eye of all the surrealists, who have probably never tried dog meat, despite their notorious fascination with primitivism, for which James Clifford has coined the term “ethnographic surrealism” (Clifford 1988b, 117; Roberts 1996, 80). Not surprisingly, André Breton is walked through an ethnographic lesson in Ken Feingold’s mockumentary spoof Un chien délicieux (A delicious dog) by learning to relish dogs as a culinary delicacy. If all the white people could do just that, the next time someone like Senegalese filmmaker Blaise Senghor should attend the screening of Les maîtres fous he would not be hailed as another dog eater by his fellow Caucasian audience simply because he is black.13

Still, Rouch’s surreal way of filmmaking is more wayward than simply surrealist. The psychic force that drove a possession might have seized him from behind the camera while he saw there for the first time the possessed eat a dog (Rouch 1978, 1006). Meanwhile, heavily charged in this force was the colonial fantasy of the colonized, triggering, as he once witnessed without filming, a “military parade of the Hauka” with about “one hundred of them possessed” (1007). Thirty years into his research by 1971, he had “attended several hundred possession ceremonies” and “filmed about 20 of them” (Rouch [1971] 1978, 2–3). But why film? Apparently, the force and intensity of the possession rite had pressed him for some filmic kind of surrealist unruliness over an immediate political interpretation. He recalls:

When I saw my first possession ritual, I was confronted with something I could not understand. For the first time in my life, I saw a dialogue
between human beings and the spirits. And I thought of the “possession” experiment of [the surrealist poets] Breton and Eluard. And from the very beginning, I said, “There’s only one way to study that, it’s to make a film.” (DeBouzek 1989, 307, quoted in Young 1995, 204)\textsuperscript{16}

Hence, Rouch’s “cine-trance” is in turn indebted to a very unlikely totemic master, Dziga Vertov, as Rouch puts it in one interview:

> With the camera to my eye, I am what Dziga Vertov called the mechanical eye…. With a ciné-eye and a ciné-ear I am a ciné-Rouch in a state of ciné-trance in the process of ciné-filming. So that is the joy of filming, the ciné-pleasure. (Rouch [1981] 1989, 268)\textsuperscript{17}

A few lines down, his interviewer adds, it is in fact both “maximum joy and maximum tragic furor” that Rouch has been filming. The jerkiness of his handheld 16mm camera in Les maîtres fous testifies precisely to this excessiveness, both horrid and trancelike.

The general viewing reactions, the political ones aside (to which we will return), are a bizarre surrealist pastiche when pieced together. The British, then ruling Ghana, banned the film, while the mad “priests” in the film would again be possessed as soon as they saw themselves on the screen (Rouch 1978, 1009). British director Peter Brook trained the actors of his Brechtian as well as Artaudian production of Marat/Sade with Les maîtres fous (ibid.; Eaton 1979a, 6). Claude Chabrol, a French filmmaker, thought that the film was a fake, since the performance was too fantastic to watch (Rouch 1978, 1009). Tallou, an African staff member working for Rouch to film Les maîtres fous, virtually shocked by the “priests,” became possessed later by a lion nicknamed the Whiteman, when confronting it in the wild in great horror (1008, 1016).\textsuperscript{18} Only Dr. Jacques Lacan remained composed: these people in Les maîtres fous, he opined, were very, very normal (1009).

A better assessment of Rouch’s filming project lies, however, in the reception by the anthropological community. Anthropologist John W. Adams finds Rouch ingenious in picking out “unique events” but not “types” even in dealing with his own Parisian tribe, a dynamic approach few anthropologists ever grasp (1005).\textsuperscript{19} Adams adds:
At their best his films are about peak experiences and are densely packed with detail. They show individuals who display a creative spirit, a wholeness and excitement which are rare in any cinema and virtually unique in ethnographic films. (ibid.)

One important factor is pivotal to achieving the intensity described here: Rouch’s “subjective involvement” with “the presence of his camera” (1005–6), in order to venture into the realm conventional anthropology cannot. Since they are visually intense, Rouch’s films offer the detail not necessarily captured by a written ethnographic treatise, though the latter is needed to supply the background information, without which his films can make very limited sense (1005). Jean Claude Muller also offers a similar warning (1971, 1472–73): a good ethnographic film must invite good anthropological work and in turn be backed up by it. More than that: like all great ethnographic films, such as Hilary Harris and George Breidenbach’s The Nuer (1970) and Robert Gardner’s Dead Birds (1963) (Weinberger 1994, 9–10, 16–18), Rouch’s films bring us sometimes close to death, to the intensity of the warlike lion hunt, to the unbearable possessed state of mind, to the fears of taboo or the breaking of it, and, for that reason, to a dog feast. It is all a matter of inheriting the savage mind—a la Lévi-Strauss—in great visual intensity.

Rouch’s films may be vulnerable to the political critique that he never draws enough attention to the historical circumstances under which he works. Still, the crucial distinction between Rouch and Margaret Mead may come as a convenient defense for him, a distinction explaining why his films may not be the type the ethnographic purists are so happy to see. That said, however, Rouch’s distance from any committed political stance is steadfastly pronounced, although he has never relinquished his concern in politics altogether (Rouch 1991, 98, 101). Diawara therefore wants to bring his concerns about European paternalism, colonialism, and racism to Rouch’s attention in Rouch in Reverse; feeling uneasy each time politics is brought up, he, observes Diawara, would rather think that modernity is to blame. After that, Rouch deploys evasive tactics, for which we hear Diawara complain, “Rouch is notorious for not answering questions.” “I am suspicious of Rouch,” Diawara continues, “for diverting me from my reverse anthropology when bringing me to
the UNESCO for the centennial of cinema”—to another film, that is, instead of sticking to this one in the making. If we sift through enough interviews of Rouch, we find that he has apparently shut himself off from this one with Diawara. The latter becomes worried, as Rouch’s images of Africa have very much shaped our perceptions of it (Fischer 1997, 141). Richard de Medeiros explains the rationale of this worry nicely: Rouch, after all, belongs to the privileged class; he cannot therefore overcome his naïveté enough to instill a structural analysis of the African reality. But Medeiros insists that we must also do justice to Rouch, who never pretends that his films represent what Africa actually is, only the Africa he sees;25 but he is no doubt reproachable for his lack of political consciousness (Haffner 1982, 67).

Owing to this understanding (which we largely endorse), perhaps, Diawara’s camera becomes unexpectedly inoperative; at least, he no longer seems to know how to mobilize its presence. If all can be said by words, why bring a camera to Paris? Why a reverse anthropology of Rouch at all? At the outset, Diawara seems to want to show that he, too, owns the trade secret of cinéma vérité;26 Rouch, by shying away from him and sending the dynamic of their interaction adrift, implicitly suggests that it lies elsewhere.27 As it turns out, Diawara does not actually know or need this secret, having said his final words about Rouch. Motivation is soon lacking in Diawara’s camera, functioning now more like his prop. At one point in Rouch in Reverse, Rouch even stops the interview to teach Diawara how to hold and use the camera (Fischer 1997, 141). But it is too late; Diawara’s cinéma vérité is dead. Fischer’s criticism of him for being “chiasmatic” with Rouch is partly accurate (141): Diawara does seek to “cross-breed” with him but stalls at the crucial moment when his political judgment of Rouch is passed in full force. Unfortunately, it is easy to blame Rouch for being sly and shrewd, yet harder to blame Diawara for giving up the provocative cinéma vérité prematurely. In fact, Diawara could have scripted no comfortable judgment beforehand, which his camera might script for him, should it click into place. And had it been wild enough, Rouch could very likely have eaten a dog on screen. With Diawara’s camera ceasing to track and spin, the provocative anthropology of Rouch’s kind also ceases to roll, leaving behind our political judgment as the greatest mystery of all, now staring forlornly into these existences: the mad masters
and their sacrificed dog, the visual excess, the reason of filming, the
presence of the camera, as well as the limit of our political judgment.

**OF MIMICRY AND WHITE MAN**

It is in this light that Taussig’s approach becomes neatly pertinent: he
is one of the few critics who are able to take visual dialectical reversal
into consideration in his political understanding of mimicry. We want
to resume from here the “mimicry talk” that begins this essay and go
on to contend instead that what lies in *Les maîtres fous* is more than
a matter of mimicry. It is easy to understand why Taussig would so
hastily incorporate the mad masters’ mimicry into his critical con-
cern, when it all started out from his shock at seeing that the curing
figurines of the Cuna Indians of San Blas, Panama, were white men.
He speaks his transference thus:

> What magic lies in this, my wooden self, sung to power in a language I
cannot understand? … The very mimicry corrodes the alterity by which
my science [Euro-American anthropology] is nourished. For now I too
am part of the object of study. The Indians have made me alter to my

Later, Taussig is to regard this as “Cuna ethnography” of the first
world (1993, 251), as if the Cuna Indians were conducting their
“reverse ethnography.” His own project, in turn, is dialectically the
one “on the power of the copy to influence what it is a copy of” (250).

Taussig has also called the shocking encounter of his kind the
“second contact,” the first being presumably the one that involves
no reversal (252). The climax of the second contact lies often in the
“mimetic excess” that may touch off laughter, an example being a
sequence from *Les maîtres fous* in which Rouch juxtaposes the scene of
the British governor-general wearing a plumed helmet with that of
the mimicry of him by the possessed priests who pour egg yolk over
a white man’s statuette (242; Stoller 1997b, 70). It is Rouch’s montage,
Taussig observes, that “creates in this sudden juxtaposition a suffu-
sion of mimetic magic” (1993, 242). Although agreeing largely with
Taussig, Stoller is more reserved at his jubilation:
Taussig’s second contact with the Hauka is through the “mechanical reproduction” of the film camera—Jean Rouch’s aforementioned classic ethnographic film, *Les maîtres fous*…. Separated from the Hauka deities by screen and space, Taussig’s … second contact … is a telling example of the “Western rebirth of the mimetic faculty by means of modernity’s mimetic machinery.”

For Songhay audiences, as well as for the European occupying the body of an anthropologist, the terrifying antics of the Hauka, however, are something other than Taussig’s narrowly defined “second contact.” Their presence is a shock to everyone, but Songhay observers, I would guess, are not so much concerned with the rebirth of mimesis in Euroamerica (1997b, 69–70).

There is something startlingly revealing here: no matter how truthful and powerful the “second contact” is as an experience for the white man, it has virtually no bearing on the natives. With this, the postcolonial theory of mimicry, the one by Bhabha especially, must need a drastic rewriting, for it also shares what has been presupposed by the concept of second contact. Preceding Taussig’s definition of mimicry in years, Bhabha’s more refined version in “Of Mimicry and Man” is meticulously given as follows:

The menace of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority. [The colonial subjects are then] the figures of a doubling, the part-objects of a metonymy of colonial desire which alienates the modality and normality of those dominant discourses in which they emerge as “inappropriate” colonial subjects…. It is a desire that reverses “in part” the colonial appropriation by now producing a partial vision of the colonizer’s presence; a gaze of otherness. ([1984] 1994, 88–89)

The function of the gaze pointed out by Bhabha is what has jolted Taussig’s subjectivity in a series of dialectical reversals, explaining why the reverse gaze from the colonized must carry “a hidden threat” (Bhabha [1984] 1994, 89). The otherness, be it the wooden figurines or living subjects in trance, presents as its gaze the “form of difference that is mimicry—*almost the same but not quite* … [a]lmost the same but not white” (89).

Like Taussig after him,28 Bhabha now wants to suggest that “mimicry” amounts to a successful form of colonial resistance by
itself (Moore-Gilbert 1997, 181). To him, colonial mimicry is no more than a matter of performativity seeking to achieve the hybridity of culture; if hybridity is regarded as a triumph, it is because mimicry, whose “performance” yields hybrid effects, is often menacing enough.29 Once mimicry is assured to be happening, according to Bhabha, the only struggle left is for one to claim the “authorship” of this performativity:

Terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively…. The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation. (1994, 2)30

There is one problem, however: as Susan Standford Friedman observes, critics have found an inevitable paradox in most “hybridity talks,” in which cultural hybridity is “both ‘routine’ and ‘transgressive’” in the sense that, as in Pnina Werbner’s words, it “is celebrated as powerfully interruptive and yet theorized as commonplace and pervasive” (quoted in Friedman 1998, 86).31 Bart Moore-Gilbert, treading along the same logical path (1997, 129–30), goes one step further to point out that Bhabha, by overstressing the performative aspect of hybridity, has placed too much “emphasis on preventing sublation of subordinate cultures by the dominant [a sublation that gives rise to the Caribbean cultures, for instance], by insisting on the incommensurable aspects of cultural differences” (181). Laid bare to us is also the fact that hybridity, at least in Bhabha’s understanding, is no more than a matter of the surface (performativity). Its lack of “depth,” of structurality, nicely explains why the dialectics of sublation that Moore-Gilbert brings up cannot subsist here. Similarly, mimicry must also remain on the “surface”;32 it exists by being detected by the Other (the white man) as the gaze (from the natives), even though the natives do not actually “look back,” whose subjectivity is not in any case determined (structurally, dialectically) by their own alleged mimicry. In this case, mimicry is taken as an element to structure only the white man’s subjectivity and exists as such.

It is interesting to see that both Taussig and Bhabha have taken pains to work on a theory of resistance that turns out to be that of the
white man’s existence. With a twisted logic, they want to call the mimicry he perceives as the “resistance” by the colonized. The paradox does not stop there: as can be inferred from Stoller, the natives may not, and structurally cannot (since they are not white men), learn of the existence of their so-called resistance. If all our critics are correct in their speculations, this “resistance” must have sprung out of the misrecognition of the white man, who happens to discover the gaze from unlikely places. This does not sound like good news to the natives, for their identity remains unrecognized even after the white man’s self-enlightening “second contact” with them.33

There is a further problem caused by the concept of the gaze formulated by Bhabha. His underlying assumption is that the “gaze” from the colonizer can always be thwarted by the “reverse gaze” of the natives—as is pictured here by Moore-Gilbert:

the disciplinary gaze of the colonizer is destabilized anamorphically by a blind-spot, which is the consequence of the crucial differentiation which the strategy of mimicry requires between being English and being “Anglicized.” (1997, 120)

Despite his reference to Lacan, Bhabha’s understanding of the gaze is Foucauldian ([1984] 1994, 90). Michel Foucault’s description of the “faceless gaze that transformed the whole social body into a field of perception” in light of the panopticon (1977, 214) does not yet reach the structural level of Jacques-Alain Miller’s psychoanalytic account, according to which this panoptic gaze is menacing, because the recognizing gaze that internally sustains the subject’s identity has been externally hijacked by the panoptic device.34 What is new in Bhabha is that he goes beyond Foucault by suggesting that the panoptic gaze can be “mimicked” and turned into a recognizing gaze that looks back; Taussig’s unsettling “second contact” confirms this. A Lacanian perspective allows us to explain what has happened in what Bhabha and Taussig detect: the gaze internal to the white man (structural to the subjectivity as a gaze would be) has been unexpectedly hijacked by the natives’ alleged “mimicry,” being misrecognized now as the “reverse gaze.” That is to say, if the “reverse gaze” exists at all, it must first do so within the white man’s identity, only that it is “hijacked” later as “reverse.” On the other hand, nothing has changed
in the natives’ subjectivity; the colonizer’s gaze (or rather, the gaze internally overlooking the natives as hijacked by him) has never been “destabilized” by them at all. Their colonial fate is sealed, with no “resistance” to come along.35

Taussig may at this moment ask: Is what we see in Les maîtres fous not the mad priests’ mimicry of the colonizers? Do the possession scenes not amount to a resistance by revealing to the Europeans that it is they who are actually insane, not the Africans, as Rouch’s interpretation insists ([1981] 1989, 270; 1978, 1007)? Our answer is: granted that there is a political resonance as indicated, we have only explained how the incident is perceived by the Westerners, not quite how it has come about among the mad priests in terms of their structure of desire. For that reason, we still cannot answer, among other riddles, why they should get possessed at all to mimic the colonizer. We know, as they also know, that sacrificing a dog is not a very pleasant experience, which seldom gets practiced unless there is a trance. It would be very unintelligent for us to believe that they eat a dog in order to put on a “political resistance.” Perhaps it sounds more reasonable to think that they munch our canine friend in order to also mimic the Westerners, who are equally ferocious in terms of their colonialist enterprise, if our theory of mimicry should make any sense. In this case, it is better for us to allow a political interpretation to intervene, so as to shy away from anything about the mad priests—about, for instance, what they are subliminally cogitating when they tear man’s best friend limb from limb. As a cushion against the shock of the “second contact,” our theory of mimicry is therefore invented to do nothing but dream, literally: it dreams the dream of the father of the burning child,36 who speaks with an imploring gaze, “Father, don’t you see I’m eating a dog?” The child’s gaze is essentially a recognizing gaze, which also sustains the desire of the theorists. If they should get recognized, they too would have to eat a dog; otherwise, they had better follow the father of the dead child by continuing to dream in their consciousness after waking up, to weave theories around themselves as if doing so with the signifiers (Lacan [1964] 1981, 70). Soon all the mimicry talk will get churned out, to be supported by the illusion that “the colonizer’s gaze” can be thwarted by the “reverse gaze” qua the “mimicry” the natives allegedly put on.
If we are honest with ourselves that our greatest fear has been the need to sample the dog meat, the fear for which we begin to mimic the mimicry talk, we are halfway to explaining why the mad priests have to gobble up a dog. In case this explanation still sounds too vague to follow, let us try the psychoanalytic one: they eat a dog because they cannot dream; the gaze is too near.37 Inferentially, they cannot mimic anyone, in a strictly Lacanian sense. Mimicry is to Lacan a matter of “becoming mottled ... against a mottled background,” like the “camouflage practised in human warfare” ([1964] 1981, 99), with a purpose like that of painting, in order to tame the gaze from the Other (100–101). By doing the mimicking, we are being camouflaged, becoming anonymous, and most important of all, getting sutured into the signifying chain, as does the father of the burning child (70).38 We no longer get burned by the gaze of recognition. In like manner, our theorists, having warded off this gaze that carries the clue to their real identity, begin to assume a presumptuous one: as theorists, that is, now in mimicry by appropriating in various ways the concept of mimicry.39

If the mad priests cannot perform mimicry in the Lacanian sense, it is because they have been doomed to perform it without success. Those who can are those who, among other things, will enjoy the last laugh after seeing others struggling with(in) their mimicry. Taussig tells of the “reader’s response” to the incongruous juxtaposition, mentioned earlier, of the scenes of the British governor-general being mimicked by the mad priests in Les maitres fous: “Those of us,” Taussig writes, “watching the film in a university lecture hall in New York City gasp” (1993, 242). A few lines down, after his report of Rouch’s finding that the Songhay priests being filmed would go into a trance when seeing themselves on-screen, Taussig brings up an unexpected, honest question: “we, who are watching, who have never been possessed; what of us? How is it that we escape this shock of the possessed?” (243).40 We are rather curious why Taussig does not find his gasp and puzzle related. Fueled by the film’s “dialectical imagery” (246) as energy,41 his interesting “reader’s response” may suggest a safe distance that has allowed him to have his last laugh, despite his having been shocked. Unlike the mad priests, he acquires his “mimetic faculty” by comfortably arriving at his alterity (242): the distorted representation (mimicry) of him produced by the priests.
The latter have striven so hard to reach their own aspired alterity (the Westerners) but are bogged down in their (abortive) mimicry, whose impossibility, in turn, is what keeps the Hauka possession going. Inversely, Westerners like Taussig, who can truly reach their alterity through their camouflage as mimicry, are also always able to leave mimicry behind; after all, one can only have the last laugh at it from a distance, not within it. Any shocking effect of mimicry finally finds its settlement, dissolution, comfort, and explanation in one’s ability to laugh the mimicry off. To these privileged few, laughter is inevitable, and they can never get possessed.

**LA CHASSE AU VISUEL À L’ARC**

To be possessed, on the other hand, involves a very difficult ethical decision on the part of the mad priests: irked by the pain of being regarded as insects, they could have chosen to put up with that pain; now by asking someone to film them, they choose instead to make a movie. The possible reason: the new Hauka spirits, derived from the colonial white lords against the advice of the cult elderly, have become extremely evil, destructive, and ferocious (Muller 1971, 1471); new measures must be taken to “accommodate” them. The priests shop for all the white man’s inventions and choose cinema (Rouch 1978, 1009). Film is to them nothing but another form of possession, magic, or sorcery that provides the same sort of intensity as cult experience (Rouch [1971] 1978, 7). Some of the children who follow the Hauka find it even more worthwhile to hang out at a possession than a movie for their weekend pastime (1978, 1007). The Songhay priests have a far longer view: gravely aware of the power cinema can bring (such as, perhaps, its “mass reception” as the power of mass mobilization in Walter Benjamin’s sense [(1936) 1969, 239–41]), they might have been tempted by the idea to call up, through film, a massive Hauka movement in the land (Rouch 1978, 1009). So they invited Rouch “to come and film their ceremony which they planned to use as part of their ceremony” (1006).42

Rouch has been chosen for another reason: he is white, who owns this white man’s expertise. Only much later does he realize how this factor plays a pivotal role.43 Still, he is certain about one thing, and
becomes more so when later making another possession film, Tourou: discovering how “the shooting itself was what unlatched and sped up the possession process.” The priests seem also to share the inkling that cinema is more than a matter of “mass reception”; to them, certain admirable qualities in the Camera People happen to matter more in determining the subsequent course of a possession.

Here lies the Camera People’s trade secret, which can be more conveniently explained by way of a lion hunt recorded in another film. In La chasse au lion à l’arc (1965), Rouch films an excursion of the Gow, who are less an ethnic group (the Songhay) than “an open caste for people of knowledge” to hunt lions, with whom the hunters form a bonding in return (Rouch 1978, 1012). Whence the trade secret of this vocational sect is acquired: the hunters follow the taboo of when to kill, when not to kill; what to use as weapons; what to chant when putting a lion to death; and what unfavorable retribution shall a hunter expect after killing one. In most cases, the Gow would advise against a lion hunt; if they should go ahead with it, they forbid using firearms but proceed only with arrows and traps. They become very anxious when Rouch brings his camera along, as it smells like a gun, which would induce ill will and cause the lion to charge unexpectedly. For the entire time, therefore, Rouch has to put herbs on his apparatus to suppress the smell. Even so, the camera goes on to cause a near-death incident to a Fulani shepherd, who is not a hunter and whose community has requested the Gow to kill the lions (1012–15). In the film, we encounter a moment of terror with Rouch’s camera still recording the sync sound while tumbling. He explains the incident thus:

In fact my presence among the Gow was the cause of an accident with the Fulani herdsman. He saw me with the Beaulieu camera, which had a small zoom, and thought I had a magical weapon with which to kill the lion. He said, “Well, this man is not a Gow, yet he’s following the Gow, so we can go along too.” ... That was the real cause of the trouble, because they [the Fulani herdsmen] are not supposed to follow the Gow. (1015)

Which is to say, Rouch, the ethnographic filmmaker, is not supposed to follow, either. With his presence having brought the group into trouble, he begins to realize more, as he says elsewhere:
when I made my first film about lion hunting I stopped filming as soon as the lion charged. Immediately I felt very guilty—for *I was the only White man there*; we were accompanied by Fulani shepherds who would never normally hunt lions (*the presence of the foreigner and equipment meant that it was no longer taboo*)—the lion charged, and almost killed this poor shepherd. (1991, 100; emphasis added)

This time, we realize that this risky moment is because the taboo has been broken—by Rouch’s presence as a white man in particular. Even if he has meant only to *objectively record* (if this were possible) the hunt, his doing so has sent the whole excursion of the Gow into disarray. He ends up in the worst nightmare possible in a lion hunt, the fiercest of all lion charges, and everything the taboos of the Gow have worked against. The camera becomes a Pandora’s box; anyone holding it as such a box shall be qualified as a fellow tribal member of the Camera People; and by definition, this is a people always present in the wrong place—or rather, always turning the right place into some very awful one, simply by their presence. As Rouch puts it:

So I had the same feeling—that the intrusion of people from outside in something which is very dangerous could create real mistakes—maybe even the death of a man.... Ethics seem not to exist today in television. (1991, 100; original ellipsis)

Whereas Rouch wishes with full justification to consider this an ethical issue, we would regard it as the accursed destiny of the Camera People—or inversely, of anyone who should be spotted by them.

To the Hauka mad priests, such an inherently malicious trait of the camera tribe seems to be what they are looking for. Who else, they may ask, acquires the power to be present in sheer luminousness with all hell breaking loose in no time? The history of documentary is not short of examples in which the camera causes havoc simply by its very presence. Napoleon Chagnon once shot a Yanomamō husband-beating-wife sequence, which might have been spurred by the presence of his camera (Barbash and Taylor 1997, 58; Weinberger 1994, 14–15). In a milder case, Scott MacKenzie reports how the Waiapí Indians in Brazil reinvent their cultural tradition in their autoethnographic filmmaking, in which they mimic a custom *for the camera* (1994, 21). We soon see that this visual equipment, other than merely
changing the course of the event, brings the inevitable power to be substituted for all the existing rules of game, taboos included, that govern it. It is perhaps this function that the Hauka priests have learned to admire in the camera. Rouch sums up his apprehension thus:

> Europeans are not supposed to be afraid of anything. They don’t care, they break taboos, they do what they want, and I think that the Hauka represent the same behavior, which is very important: people who are afraid of nothing, people who don’t care. (1978, 1007)

In *Les maîtres fous*, therefore, Rouch’s camera turns out to be what breaks the taboo for the priests to slaughter a dog, all the more so because he has been invited to film them (1006). Appalled at seeing a dog slashed and skinned, he begins to feel uneasy that they may do the same to the toddlers nearby (1991, 100). There is no reason why a baby cannot be treated like a puppy, given that the white lords have set the precedent: they wipe out entire villages wherever they go by their presence as part of the epidemics they bring (Lévi-Strauss [1955] 1973, 39).

The possibility of this all-powerful presence translates into that of the existence of these contraptions: the panopticon, camera, and visual anthropology, to name a few, all being the white man’s devices to hijack the gaze that structures the subjectivity of a colonized subject. In the last analysis, they are meant to stand in for the white man’s presence. Inviting a camera to intervene, the Hauka priests are conjuring up this presence as a Hauka spirit; for its ferocity to be unleashed in full force, all taboos must be broken. That includes literally eating a dog. This is a sublime moment, in which the priests and the gaze upon themselves unite into one singularity, assuming a new presence by mumbling to Rouch through their frothing mouths: “White Father, don’t you see we’re eating a dog?” By which they are equally asking, “don’t you see we’re filming?” It is hard not to see that they are also producing an ethnographic documentary about the callous Camera People and their hunt for visuality, given that the possession itself is now such a hunting excursion. As soon as the gaze that has stepped upon the mad priests and trashed them as insects is captured, they and their dog become one. It is only at this sublime moment of sheer enjoyment (*jouissance*) that all others, except themselves, become insects.
Now if we look back at the whole “mimicry” talk, the only complaint we have is that “mimicry” is too gentle and too mild a concept to sustain the violence involved in the hunt for visuality. In particular, the concept falls short of a *structural* explanation of the most sinister aspect of colonialism, which is to implant the white man’s desires in the colonized.48 This “enterprise” involves a series of intricate dialectical relations the “mimicry” talk has unwittingly glossed over. To further point out what they have missed, let us recapitulate, by way of conclusion, our theory in terms of the Hauka possession.49

**First Dialectical Relation**

It all starts out by the mad masters being recognized as nothing by the gaze now usurped by the white man. It is as if they found him in sheer visuality speaking to them in their dream by using the N-word: “don’t you see you’re insects?” Worse still, they can hardly wake up from their nightmare: in their waking life, the same visuality lingers in order to torment them, as if it were the only entity in the universe that is not bound by any taboo. Soon their own universe begins to evolve around it; their only concern becomes always this luminous, all-seeing white man.

It is easy to see why our ethical codes (developed by our “civil society”) can do very little to overcome such an awful situation, which is not merely *historical*, but also *structural* in kind. If we understand historicality to be inherently structural in itself, we will not so easily give in to the hope that these codes alone can remove the structural plague caused by the presence of the white man. We by no means want to advise against their use, but to point out the immense difficulty they may structurally happen to overlook. In particular, the codes may lure us into performing mimicry in the Lacanian sense to *suture* ourselves by not detecting the dialectical relations triggered off by the gaze.

**First Dialectical Reversal**

It is then incumbent upon the mad masters to do something. As noted earlier, they could have chosen to compromise, like most of us. Instead, they follow the Hauka; choosing to be possessed turns out to
be their ethical move. Unlike the father of the burning child dream, they approach the burning gaze that has been hijacked. When their subjectivity is dispersed in the trance, they are, as we have mentioned, united with this gaze into one singularity. As if in a dream, they could now look at themselves where the Other looks at them. Only at this moment could they, as the gaze, be identical with themselves, like Choang-tsu (Zhuangzi) in his dream to become a butterfly for itself. In his dream, Lacan explains, “he sees the butterfly in his reality as gaze” ([1964] 1981, 76). But since the gaze is always terrorizing, any such gaze, now united with them, must be sheer terror, being some very unfriendly jouissance. It is therefore admirable to see the mad masters choosing to meet the gaze without plucking out their eyes. They get burned and see the gods.

Like what Rouch himself asserts, his “ciné-trance” has been invented in order for him to understand the dialogue of humans and spirits in the possession (DeBouzek 1989, 307). “There’s an attitude,” he adds, “of both mockery and respect in Les maitres fous, they’re playing gods of strength” (Rouch 1978, 1007). Mockery, perhaps, but in truth, the mad masters do not mimic gods. Only those who can get away from being burned do, such as the father of the burning child dream.

**Second Dialectical Relation**

Only we are in mimicry, in other words, not the mad masters. Until now, we have had no idea that what we witness in horror in the film Les maitres fous is anamorphosis. Seeing the colonial pomposity going awry in mad masters’ “representation,” we think that they are only mimicking it. We look for every rationale to tell ourselves—like the father of the burning child dream—that it is just a dream, so that we can maintain our sanity to face this burning gaze as anamorphosis that pops out from nowhere, takes us aback by recognizing us, and keeps from us the reason why we can laugh at all instead of being possessed. We are attacked by a momentary hysterical blindness, which exposes our camouflage, but soon we are salvaged by our misrecognition. Mistaking anamorphosis as mimicry is our way of continuing to dream in our consciousness—precisely, again, in the way the father of the burning child wakes up from his dream. In Lacanian
terms, we are photo-graphed, written by light into the big picture, so to ward off the anamorphosis ([1964] 1981, 106).

Second Dialectical Reversal

The mad masters turn out to hijack our gaze and structure our identity, so long as we are in mimicry. They howl with dog flesh and blood in their mouths, brandishing knives and torches, with their limbs jerking, torsos trembling, mouths frothing, and eyes rapidly rolling: “White Father,” they cry, “don’t you see we’re burning?” It is a surprise that we consider them only mimicking someone else; in fact, they are making a movie to capture the spirit worshiped by the Camera People. The power of the camera, as a European thing, now explains the existence of the mad priests, in accordance with what Rouch discovers in his afterthought about Les maîtres fous:

My hypothesis is that they would have used a camera in the cult just as they used a gun: a crude wooden camera, and it would have been a normal part of the cult, if this [Hauka] movement had not been stopped by [Ghana’s] Independence. (Rouch 1978, 1009)

If the camera had been used at all, it is because the mad masters wanted to capture the visuality, the gaze, that had overpowered them. Even without this gadget as their prop, the hunt appears to be a success with all taboos being broken—the one on incest especially (our anamorphosis is the evidence); otherwise, we would not feel the need to pluck out our eyes.50 This is the worst meltdown scenario; the Camera People have wanted to keep it to themselves as their trade secret, but it is now seized by the mad masters. In response, the Camera People must be thinking of rallying its savage war cry in the profession. With their community presently in crisis, we can almost devise a healing prayer for them to chant: The African mad masters have ravaged our village, they lament. Let us make it a taboo that this secret be not disclosed. Let this only taboo be our trade secret. Let it be known, however, that we remain invisible in our mimicry and camouflage. To hell with the mad masters! They screwed things up by hunting down—by stealing—the gaze normally trapped inside our cameras and they did so bare-handed, without resorting to Western technology. And they had turned themselves into a camera by
imposing the gaze upon us. Thank God, they got burned and ended up swallowing a dog. To hell with Jacques Lacan, who knows that they were not insane. Thank God, no one has made sense of what he says. To hell, too, with Rouch, who filmed *Les maîtres fous*. But we should be grateful, for no one has understood what his film means. May the film be burned, lest we all need to pluck out our eyes....

It is perhaps too late for this litany of the Camera People to summon up any fearful effect. For their smell is tracked down, their horror known. To the mad priests at least, the hunt is complete.

**Notes**

I want to express my gratitude to American Museum of Natural History, New York, and the Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica, Taipei, for allowing me to see some of Rouch’s films. I am greatly benefited by Thomas DiPiero’s comment on my first draft. My thanks are also extended to Lisa Cartwright, Mary Dombeck, D. N. Rodowick, and Sharon Willis for their sympathetic reading of my essay. All errors, however, shall be mine.

1. The French title can be rendered as either “mad masters” or “master madmen” (Eaton 1979b, 5). I will retain the original title to keep the pun. More on the title later.


3. “In the Hausa language, *hauka* means ‘crazy.’ From the Songhay perspective the behavior of Hauka spirits is crazy, indeed” (Stoller 1992, 145). The movement is still alive today (156); for its genealogy since the colonial period, see *Fusion of the Worlds* (1989) and *Embodying Colonial Memories* (1995), two of Paul Stoller’s comprehensive ethnographic studies. Indispensable for anyone to approach Rouch’s films is Stoller’s scholarship, which he sums up thus: “My own writing on the Hauka has included (a) discussions of the history and evolution of the Hauka from colonial times to the present; (b) considerations of the political power of the Hauka, especially following Nigerian independence; and (c) critical assessments of Jean Rouch’s films, including, of course, *Les maîtres fous*” (1997b, 53). For a further background reading on the film, see Stoller’s chapter devoted to it in *The Cinematic Griot* (1992, 145–60); its brief but exhaustive synopsis can also be found in the same chapter (147–51).
4. The film is in fact directed by both Rouch and Edgar Morin, a sociologist.

5. Rouch: “The title of this film, Les maîtres fous (The Mad Masters), is a play
on words which translates both the word Hauka (master of the wind, master of
madness) and, at the same time, the colonial situation where the masters (the
Europeans) are crazy” ([1981] 1989, 279). Rouch also has a similar comment else-
where (1978, 1007).

6. Similarly, Mahama Traoré and Timité Bassori, two African filmmakers,
denounce Rouch in a roundtable interview with him, not so much because of
Rouch personally but because of ethnographic film as an institution that has
propagated European prejudices (Rouch 1996a, 78-79).

7. The code of ethics by the American Anthropological Association is avail-
able on-line at http://www.aaanet.org/committees/ethics/ethics.htm (accessed
June 1, 2001).

8. This applies only when they are successfully made; otherwise, they can
be, for a number of reasons, “more inauthentic, more staged, more manipulative,
than traditional ethnographic documentary,” suggesting that we cannot be naive
toward the indigenous media (Roberts 1996, 90n7). MacKenzie provides a South
American case supporting this view in the context of his discussion of Les maîtres
fous (1994, 21).

9. Stephen A. Tyler: “The ethnographer is a symbol of doom. His appear-
ance among the natives is the surest sign of their disappearance” (1987, 99;
quoted in Stoller 1992, 200, and Young 1995, 193). By the same logic, his appear-
ance also signals the appearance of the natives as his ethnographic data; if the
natives should disappear at all, it is because he has invented them as natives. Jean
Baudrillard has a similar comment elsewhere: “For ethnology to live, its object
must die. But the latter revenges itself by dying for having been ‘discovered,’ and
defies by its death the science that wants to take hold of it” (1983, 19). Tyler,
whose line of thought, like Baudrillard’s, is less anthropological than philosop-
ical, is quoted by Stoller mainly to confirm, however, that Rouch has incorporated
Tyler’s idea in his films: “Was Tyler thinking about images in Jaguar, The Lion
Hunters, or Les maîtres fous when he wrote those lines? For embedded in those
Rouch films are the very themes Tyler writes about” (Stoller 1992, 200). Note that
Stoller’s quote of Tyler reads: “The ethnographer is the symbol of doom” (empha-
sis added), perhaps indicating a stronger sense of identity crisis in Stoller as an
ethnographer.

10. Historically, asserts Edward Said in Orientalism, anthropology has been
a branch of learning wielded by the white man to colonize the rest of the world
(1979, 227). Similar arguments against anthropology can be found elsewhere

11. Anthropologist Jay Ruby provides an example of reverse anthropology:
“Why not try to comprehend the mysteries of the corporate power structure/the
power elite or homogeneous rural communities through ethnographic film? I
would personally find an ethnographic exploration of any of the Fortune 500 cor-
porations to be more exotic than a study of the Trobriand islanders” (1995, 81).
Baudrillard, however, would consider such a project naive, for it serves only to salvage ethnology by elevating it to a project of *simulation* (1983, 15–16).

12. One exception is perhaps Martin Roberts, who considers Clifford’s concept of “ethnographic surrealism” problematic, especially when it is applied to Rouch’s *Les maîtres fous* (1996, 83).

13. Senghor related the incident to Stoller in person (Stoller 1992, 151), as is cited by Roberts (1996, 89n4). Rouch himself also reports the eerie feeling of a Senegalese friend of being thought of as a dog eater by others after the screening of the film in Venice (1996b, 84).


15. For the list of Rouch’s films produced up to 1996, see “Filmographie” compiled and annotated by René Prédal (1996). Rouch is not the only ethnographer to have filmed the possession rituals; he is preceded by Margaret Mead and many others. For an overview of some of the major works in this field, see Russell (1999, 193–237). “As a film,” Russell speaks more specifically of *Les maîtres fous*, “it is more successful than the efforts of either Mead and [Gregory] Bateson or Maya Deren. Rouch is able to transcend the scientific empiricism of the former and to theorize the affinities between film and trance that Deren failed to reconcile” (229).


17. Rouch’s similar comment on Vertov can be found elsewhere (Rouch [1971] 1978, 7). Vertov’s film that he refers to in particular is *The Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). Note, on the other hand, Rouch’s words on “ciné-trance”: “because I made films, I have never been possessed” ([1981] 1989, 272; quoted in Russell 1999, 219). This may have prompted Russell to conclude that “*Les Maîtres fous* is not a ritual but a film” (228) and that, when shooting other films on the possession rite, Rouch might not have been “possessed” as he himself claims (220).

18. Rouch has called the lion “The American,” on which he made another hunting film, *Un lion nommé l’Americain* (A lion named the American, 1969) with Tallou’s help. As a matter of fact, the lion has been “called in Songhay simply The Whiteman,” according to Rouch’s interviewers (Rouch 1978, 1016).

19. Adams’s incisive commentary can be found in his brief introduction to Rouch’s interview (Rouch 1978, 1005–6).

20. As we will soon see, Rouch’s style of filmmaking is highly dialectical, as in Dennis Young’s account, with Stoller as his reference: “The entanglement of observer with [the] observed which Rouch’s films attempt—the movement of the camera ‘within’ the ritual ‘directed’ by the movement of the participants, the camera’s movement within the ritual in turn ‘provoking’ movement among the participants—is meant to communicate something of the ‘immense complexity’ of the experiential matrix, which includes dreams, fantasies and mystical intuitions as well as sensory and ‘scientifically observable’ phenomena, and which
embraces the experiences, conscious and unconscious, of both observer and [the] observed in their indeterminate interactions with each other, with the camera and with the event” (Young 1995, 197).


23. Fatimah Tobing Rony’s *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* credits Rouch as a director of the “reflexive and collaborative cinema in an effort to get beyond scientific voyeurism” (1996, 8) and sharply discerns, on the other hand, Mead’s colonialist bent (194). She is essentially a “culture collector” of “lost cultures” (Clifford 1988a, 230–33), with the panopticon as her camera model (Weinberger 1994, 12). See how Mead depicts her mission as an ethnographic filmmaker in her own words in “Visual Anthropology in a Discipline of Words” ([1974] 1995). For this reason, she always assumes a transcendentally cosmopolitan identity. At least three times in *Margaret Mead: A Portrait by a Friend* (1978), Rouch’s film interview and portrayal of her, he suggests in his questions to her that New York City should count as one of the many “villages” she has been to (and implicitly that she is equally an insect). Mead does not get the message. Rouch’s makeshift solution is to offer her a hint by leading her out of the American Museum of Natural History in a long tracking shot, walking her into the foliage of Central Park across the street, and leaving her there all alone. See also Rony’s comment on Mead’s words in this film (1996, 194).

24. The Oxford-based scholars Marcus Banks and Howard Morphy, for instance, define visual anthropology as a discipline leaning, in particular, toward ethology and ekistics (1997, 3) for “an understanding of the place of the visual in human culture” (4). Working in the direction of evoking Margaret Mead’s ghost (10–13), Banks and Morphy contend specifically that “[t]he ethnographic film programme approach can all too easily lead students away from anthropology into film production for its own sake. The film screening approach encourages a view of visual anthropology as an optional extra, as an entertaining introduction to the real business in hand. At very worst, ethnographic films are babysitting devices for busy teachers” (4–5).

25. Rouch, in the meantime, has never faked any scene, which Inoussa Ousseini asserted when comparing him with Robert Flaherty (Haffner 1982, 75).

26. The term *cinéma vérité* was first used by Dziga Vertov in French, as is noted by Rouch ([1974] 1995, 83). Further detail can be found in M. Ali Issari and Doris A. Paul’s exhaustive study, *What Is Cinéma Vérité?* (1974, 6). A succinct but very precise definition of cinématographe vérité as a style developed by Rouch can be found in Musser (1996, 527, 528). For its critical comparison with direct cinema, see Brian Winston (1993, 42–57).

27. There is an intersubjective dynamic, a very psychoanalytical one,
always at work in cinéma vérité (Musser 1996, 528), as also confirmed by Edgar Morin about the filming of Chronique d’un été (1996, 126). This is one aspect that is missing in Diawara’s film.

28. Martin Jay observes, “mimesis is understood by Taussig as a powerful force capable of challenging capitalist reification, instrumental rationality and the fetishism of the modern state” (1993, 80).

29. Following Bhabha, Russell wants to therefore consider this performativity as an emancipative moment in Les maîtres fous: “As a figure of ambivalence in colonial culture, the mimic man performs his identity. If the possession ritual represents the most ‘savage’ and ‘crazed’ figure of the Other, it also represents a subjectivity that remains uncolonized” (1999, 227). However, this possible emancipative moment must also be an ambivalent one, as there is this split of “identity” and “subjectivity” in the subject.

30. Bhabha writes elsewhere in terms of mimicry and its “authorship”: “Under cover of camouflage, mimicry, like the fetish, is a part-object that radically revalues the normative knowledges of the priority of race, writing, history. For the fetish [as mimicry] mimes the forms of authority at the point at which it deauthorizes them” ([1984] 1994, 91).

31. For a succinct genealogy of the concept of “hybridity” in the English usage, from its biological root to its postcolonial fruition, see Friedman’s section entitled “Theorizing Cultural Hybridity” in her essay “‘Beyond’ Difference: Migratory Feminism in the Borderlands” (1998, 82–93).

32. In the case of Taussig, Jay notes: “Taussig, however, resists the very value of profundity, insisting instead that ‘not the depths but the surface has attracted me’ (Taussig 1993: 251)” (1993, 79).

33. Both MacKenzie (1994, 14) and Roberts (1996, 82–83) have also questioned Taussig’s theory of mimicry when discussing Rouch’s Les maîtres fous, without going so far as to consider it a matter of misrecognition.


35. We cannot, however, logically rule out that subsequent dialectical reversals may be triggered by the misrecognition of the white man. Nevertheless, as it is he who starts off the dialectics, the fate of the colonized remains sealed.

36. The dream is reported by Sigmund Freud in his The Interpretation of Dreams (1900): “A father had been watching beside his child’s sick-bed for days and nights on end. After the child had died, he went into the next room to lie down, but left the door open so that he could see from his bedroom into the room in which his child’s body was laid out, with tall candles standing around it. An old man had been engaged to keep watch over it, and sat beside the body murmuring prayers. After a few hours’ sleep, the father had a dream that his child was standing beside his bed, caught him by the arm and whispered to him reproachfully: ‘Father, don’t you see I’m burning?’ He woke up, noticed a bright glare of light from the next room, hurried into it and found that the old watchman had dropped off to sleep and that the wrappings and one of the arms of his beloved child’s dead
body had been burned by a lighted candle that had fallen on them” (5: 509). Modeled after Lacan’s interpretation ([1964] 1981, 70), Slavoj Žižek’s account reads: “Can’t you see that I am burning?”, implying the father’s fundamental guilt—is more terrifying than so-called external reality itself, and that is why he awakens: to escape the Real of his desire, which announces itself in the terrifying dream. He escapes into [the] so-called reality to be able to continue to sleep, to maintain his blindness, to elude awakening into the real of his desire” (1989, 45).

37. This may parallel what Mary Ann Doane has called the overvisibility of a black subject, when suggesting that Fanon has been speaking of, among other things, “a kind of paranoia of the visible attending an identity chained to appearance” in a black subject (1991, 231).

38. Lacan therefore cautions us against the mimetic implication in his use of “mimicry” as a concept: “we should not be too hasty in introducing some kind of inter-subjectivity. Whenever we are dealing with imitation, we should be careful not to think too quickly of the other who is being imitated. To imitate is no doubt to produce an image. But at bottom, it is, for the subject, to be inserted in a function whose exercise grasps it” ([1964] 1981, 100; emphasis added).


40. Compare, in turn, these words by African filmmaker Mahama Traoré when speaking of Les maitres fous: “I attended a ceremony of this type and felt integrated. On the contrary, the Europeans who were there with me interpreted the [cult] presentation in a different manner. The foreign eye has perceived things African in a manner that is either unjust or badly adjusted” (Rouch 1996a, 78; my translation).

41. With an interesting—and enlightening—lapse, Stoller’s quote of Taussig reads “dialectical energy” (1997b, 69).

42. An interesting anecdote is that there is, according to Russell, a poster listing four Hollywood movies in the Hauka compound in Les maitres fous, one of the films being The Mask of Zorro (1999, 228, 344n105).

43. In other words, Rouch might not be aware of the underlying psychical logic that governed the trance in Les maitres fous. As is noted by Russell, “despite the film’s utopian and surrealist ambition, the African unconscious remains unknown and invisible, as the trace of experience within mechanical reproduction” (1999, 229).

44. The words are from Rouch’s own account of the film’s shooting process ([1971] 1978, 8). See the disagreement about the film’s title and date of shooting in Russell (1999, 343n81).

45. Literally, “Lion hunt with bow and arrow” (Winston 1996, 529). Rouch
complains that there are parts missing and out of sync in the version of the film distributed in the United States (1978, 1014). The present study is based on the French version. For further background reading, see Stoller’s chapter devoted to the film in *The Cinematic Griot* (1992, 118–30).

46. Elsewhere, Rouch comments with a tacit understanding of how the gaze functions: “Most people refuse to recognise that any anthropology must destroy what it investigates. Even if you are making a long distance observation of breast feeding you disturb the mother and her infant, even if you don’t think so. The fundamental problem in all social sciences is that the facts are always distorted by the presence of the person who asks the questions. You distort the answer simply by asking the question” (quoted in Eaton 1979b, 49; Young 1995, 206).

47. Parveen Adams’s “Father, Can’t You See I’m Filming?” (1996), a brilliant Lacanian analysis of Michael Powell’s film *Peeping Tom* (1960), deals mainly with the structure of perversion, in which the subject assumes the status of the object a, the gaze, to maintain the jouissance of the Other. Powell’s leading character makes documentaries of others’ jouissance as death—that of the young women killed by him on camera and horrified at seeing their own death. As for *Les maîtres fous*, we need more analysis to support the view that the mad masters also structurally maintain the jouissance of the Other. Still, we need not rule out the possible perverse trait in their possession, especially the one related to phobia as abject, as what we also experience in the nightmare. Julia Kristeva has theorized the perverse abjectness of phobia in terms of Lacan’s object a in the visual field (in Lacan’s “mirror” of identification) in her *Powers of Horror* (1982, 7). For us, her analysis seeks to, as it were, supplement Lacan’s analysis of the burning child dream, though the dream is not mentioned by name. As inferred from her theory, if the father should go on dreaming, or indeed see his burning child in his waking life, he would be equally “swallowed up,” “corrupted,” “edged” by his child’s corpse and be “expelled,” abjected in his union with this gaze. His subjectivity, if it survives at all, will be hollowed out. Phobia will be his only existence—one with no correlative small other (object a) but with the sole aegis of the Other, “having dwelt in me as alter ego” (10). The reason perversion must be considered is this: “The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them” (15).

48. Western colonialism has created in third world subjects, blacks in particular, the conscious or unconscious wish to become white, as forcefully argued by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* ([1952] 1986, 100). Citing Fanon’s view, Joan Copjec concludes from a strictly psychoanalytic perspective: “the cruelest, the most insidious effect of the colonizing enterprise is that it constructs the very desires of the colonized subject” (1990, 36).

49. The subsequent series of dialectical thinking has been inspired by Lacan’s discussion of Dora’s case in his “Intervention on Transference” ([1951] 1982). In no way is this a ventriloquistic effort to have the Lacanian paradigm override anthropology, if we do not forget that we have argued along the finding
of anthropologist Paul Stoller, not Taussig’s “second contact,” which is largely a theoretical whim (Stoller 1997b, 69-70). To substantiate, in psychoanalysis, the claim that theorists such as Taussig have been, in quite a ventriloquistic manner, dreaming the burning child dream, is our way of preserving the integrity of Les maitres fous as an ethnographic event.

50. The reference here is Oedipus. He has witnessed what happens in the primal scene: his incestuous act with his mother, after he has killed his father—a scene he cannot bear to see out of horror. He soon “tears his eyes out of their sockets,” for feeling that he has been gazed at by his own eyes (Quinet 1995, 144). See also Freud’s account of the Oedipus story, the act of knowing, and the eye in The Interpretation of Dreams (1900, 4: 263).

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