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# Review Essay: The Films of Simone Rapisarda Casanova

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**Abstract:** This essay examines three feature-length works by Italian-Canadian experimental film maker Simone Rapisarda Casanova. I discuss how Rapisarda's collaborative and process-driven methods draw from a tradition of "shared ethnographic" filmmaking advanced by Jean Rouch, but also how Rapisarda innovates this tradition through his aesthetic and technical choices.

**Keywords:** Ethnographic film; experimental documentary; ethnofiction; visual anthropology; Jean Rouch; Simone Rapisarda Casanova

**Résumé :** Cet article examine trois longs métrages de la cinéaste expérimentale italo-canadienne Simone Rapisarda Casanova. Je montre comment les méthodes collaboratives et processuelles de Rapisarda s'inspirent de la tradition cinématographique « d'ethnographie partagée » proposée par Jean Rouch, mais aussi comment Rapisarda renouvelle cette tradition par ses choix esthétiques et techniques.

**Mots-clés :** Film ethnographique ; documentaire expérimental ; ethnofiction ; anthropologie visuelle ; Jean Rouch ; Simone Rapisarda Casanova

I grew up in a family of physicists, so I took for granted the idea that you can't observe something without changing or altering that thing. When I began making films, I applied this principle almost intuitively.

– Simone Rapisarda Casanova

On one level, the problem of ethnographic distance – is it possible/desirable/representable? – would seem to have been solved with the advent of visual anthropology. All one needs to do is turn on a camera, let it roll, *et voilà*, unadulterated observation will follow. But not only does this fundamental axiom of the Direct Cinema tradition ignore the presence of the filmmaker, and how he or she chooses to frame and edit the captured footage in postproduction, but also it tends to elide the necessarily estranging apparatus of the camera. As Niels Bohr has pointed out, in quantum mechanics, the instruments used to measure phenomena (for example, the diffraction of light as either wave or particle) end up altering the state of those phenomena. In other words, apparatuses (be they double slit plates or movie cameras) are phenomenal in and of themselves.

Building on the work of Bohr, the contemporary feminist theorist of science studies, Karen Barad, has developed a theory of the entanglement of all matter that seems especially fitted to the practice of Italian-Canadian film maker Simone Rapisarda Casanova and to ethnographic film making more generally. In what Barad refers to as "agential realism," subjects and objects, situations and events do not precede their interaction; instead they emerge through particular "intra-actions."<sup>1</sup> Likewise, in Rapisarda's films, the story being told is neither scripted in advance nor unmediated in its capture. Rather, it manifests very materially through the setup of the camera and the intra-actions that result between the subjects being filmed; between these subjects and the film maker; and between everyone and the apparatus of the camera itself. We see this especially in Rapisarda's first feature, *El árbol de las fresas/The Strawberry Tree* (2011), in which

the residents of the northern Cuban coastal town of Juan Antonio repeatedly make us aware of Rapisarda's proximate offscreen presence – as when Rosaida, Rapisarda's most persistent onscreen teaser, informs him that because he took so long to prepare for the shot she has already finished peeling her bowl of plantains.

In this and similar scenes throughout Rapisarda's oeuvre, we can trace the influence of the "shared ethnographic" film making model pioneered by Jean Rouch, who was interested not just in fly-on-the-wall observation, but in prompting events to occur; "hop[ing] that the presence of the camera would 'catalyze' subjects into putting on revelatory performances."<sup>2</sup> At the same time, Rapisarda would be the first to acknowledge his role in shaping our reception of his subjects' performances, with the cut being central to both Barad's theory of agential realism and the craft of film editing. In both cases, a decision has to be made about what to include and what to exclude from observation, as well as what separations or transitions will be enacted between different observational sequences. This imposes a structural framework to help us understand and interpret what we are observing – in Rapisarda's films, as in the world. But it also ideally makes us think, along with the kinds of stories Rapisarda is interested in telling, about why some people and ways of life are more visible in contemporary media than others.<sup>3</sup>

Speaking of what gets included and excluded from the story I am telling in this essay, it bears mentioning that Simone is a colleague of mine. To cut such a detail from this analysis of his work would be as disingenuous as pretending that by continuing to refer to him by his surname I will maintain greater objectivity and academic distance in my assessment of his work. Instead, it is important for me to acknowledge that this writing has been informed by my conversations with Simone, and by additional contextual materials he has provided. Such reciprocity is a hallmark of his collaborative and process-driven filmmaking method, which together with his technical expertise and intellectual curiosity has pushed the hybrid genre of experimental ethnofiction in important new directions.

Watch *The Strawberry Tree* and you will understand what I mean. At once an homage to and a critically self-reflexive updating of Rouch's improvisatory techniques (like Rouch, Simone prefers to work without a crew), the film invites us to dwell among the residents of Juan Antonio, often through long fixed-camera and low-angle takes that narrativise and render poetically meaningful everyday activities and scenes, such as grinding coffee beans, mending fishing nets, or fixing a punctured motorcycle tire with a borrowed condom. As the visual anthropologist David MacDougall has argued, the long take, together with synchronous sound and

subtitled dialogue, has perhaps done more than anything else to redress the decontextualised, anonymous and fragmentary images of exotic "others" that characterised early ethnographic film, with the uninterrupted documentation of quotidian human behaviour providing "a means of refiguring the relationship between the person on screen and the viewer."<sup>4</sup> But, as I've already suggested, Simone takes things a step further by exposing his own absent presence in these scenes and by inviting commentary from his onscreen collaborators about his quixotic approach to film making. "What a boring shot of the old lady grinding coffee," jokes Rosaida at one point, to which one of the children in the scene responds, "And here I am dying of hunger!" The child's mother, Yaneli, who had earlier told her son he couldn't have a snack before dinner, bursts into laughter and gestures toward the camera: "Simone, here you have your film," she says.

*The Strawberry Tree* also contains many scenes of interspecies ethnography, two of which I found particularly memorable, if not overtly symbolical. In the first, two men from the community truss up the legs of a goat, hang the animal upside down from a tree branch, and then slit its throat. As the blood drains from its body, the goat jerks and spasms wildly, and the shock of the scene comes not so much from the violence of the killing, nor even the matter-of-fact way the men attempt to keep the dog who has accompanied them from lapping up the spilled blood. Instead, it comes from the way the syntagmatic placement of this scene forces us to reevaluate a preceding one in which we are provided an almost pastoral vista of Yaneli feeding the village goats. In a later scene that is as poetically lyrical as the goat's slaughter is starkly literal, we linger underwater with Simone's camera as it captures the elegant choreography of an Indigenous Taíno method of cast net fishing, which, in this modern incarnation, involves several snorkel- and flipper-wearing men of Juan Antonio enclosing a school of bar jacks and then ushering them to the surface in the virtuosic manner of a highly trained *corps de ballet*. Knowing that shortly after Simone finished principal filming on *The Strawberry Tree*, Juan Antonio was destroyed when Hurricane Ike swept through the town in September 2008, it might be tempting to read such scenes within a classically tragic telos (complete with the bleating song of a dying goat), the film surviving as a poignant elegy to a now lost way of life. And, indeed, the painterly graininess with which Simone shoots the ever-darkening horizon (achieved in part through a 35 mm lens adapter), not to mention the roar of the wind that seems to grow louder over the course of the film, suggests on one level that these citizens of the global South are destined to suffer disproportionately as a

result of a plot (let us call it climate change) beyond their control. At the same time, *The Strawberry Tree* resists any attempt by Western viewers to absorb it as a quaint archival document of “soft primitivism.” And it does so most especially through the use of humour, its tone of comic jesting established in the opening framing scene, shot one year after Hurricane Ike. Here Yaneli, Rosaida, her husband Elia, and their son Disney take turns mocking Simone’s Italian accent while also reflecting on the upside of their present situation, including improved temporary housing. Simone’s collaborators remind both him and us, at the outset of their story, that they are firmly in charge of the manner in which it will be told.

Something that’s maybe an ancient version of psychogeography that interested me in [*La creazione di significato*] and also in *The Strawberry Tree* is what my ancestors called the “spiritus loci,” which means “spirit of the place.” It’s a spirit that lives in a place, its soul. It’s all that happened in that place, which is somehow remembered by this spirit, which is somehow the guardian of the place. All the killings, all the people making love, even the animals or whatever else, belong to the spirit inhabiting this place. When you visit a place, it welcomes you there. I don’t know if you’ve had this experience. It’s really strange. Sometimes you go into this empty space and there’s this energy, and you don’t know where it’s coming from. That’s a myth that always fascinated me. So in this and other films, I always try to get a glimpse of what the majestic memory of the spiritus loci can hold.

– Simone Rapisarda Casanova

On the way back to Canada, after screening *The Strawberry Tree* at the Locarno Film Festival, Simone stopped off to visit his mother, who lives at the foot of Pania della Croce, a mountain just north of Lucca, Italy. She told him of the shepherd Pacifico Pieruccioni, who lived near the top of the mountain, and said Simone should talk to him, because she thought there might be a film in his story. The result is *La creazione di significato/The Creation of Meaning* (2014). In it, Simone continues to explore the interplay of past and present, as well as documentary and fiction. Working once again from an improvised scenario devised with Pacifico, Simone offers both a trenchant critique of European Union economics post-2008 and a materialist history of German–Italian relations since the end of World War II. From its opening depiction of a school field trip to the Gothic Line that divided retreating German defences from advancing Allied forces and Italian partisans along the Apennine Mountains in Tuscany in the final months of the war, to a long concluding scene that features Pacifico talking to his new German landlord and his cranky son, and featuring a heritage-style film within a film of a group of Italian men re-enacting an ambush

of partisan fighters. *The Creation of Meaning* is both a poetic and a philosophical investigation of the historical place of Italy within a larger European imaginary: as, for example, a cultural touchstone, or a playground for pleasure, or the butt of political jokes.

Politics certainly hovers over many of the scenes in the film, in ways that are at once subtle and hilarious. Lighting a morning fire and preparing his breakfast, Pacifico listens to talk radio, and as we watch him boiling water for his morning coffee we hear a profanity-laced anti-Communist rant delivered by a Berlusconi supporter. And while the worry that Pacifico might have to leave the land he has lived on and worked all his life when it is sold is resolved in the extended final scene, Pacifico’s dependence on German beneficence is clearly meant to be read as a metaphor for Italy’s place within a new Europe. This part of the narrative is completely fictionalised, but it does nothing to diminish the “realness” of Pacifico’s domestic situation; his attempts to placate – first with a cookie, and then with a toy – the landlord’s unruly son in his own kitchen speak volumes about the personal accommodations he has had to make in order to preserve his very particular way of life.

And as myriad scenes in *The Creation of Meaning* demonstrate, the particularity of Pacifico’s daily existence is directly connected to the local landscape. Some of this simply has to do with the unique topography: early in the film we watch as Pacifico descends a series of steps with a bottle of fresh sheep’s milk, depositing it in an outdoor fridge built over an underground cave; later, we marvel at Pacifico’s ingenuity as he employs a mule and a jerry-rigged pulley system to transport bags of sand needed for repairs up and down the side of the mountain. Other scenes, however, attempt to capture a more dreamlike and ephemeral “spirit of place” through cutaway shots to local flora and fauna, or by suspending time through an extended shot of a shared meal in which members of Pacifico’s community spontaneously burst into song. *The Creation of Meaning* also registers sensorially as a sumptuous work of film aesthetics. Simone has said that he wanted to capture light in this film in a manner akin to the chiaroscuro techniques of Renaissance painting, lingering on shots of the mountain mists and using strategic cross-fades. He succeeds through a technical sleight of hand, once again adapting the lenses of his camera to shoot at hyperfocal distance, thus capturing a greater depth of field.

In the same way I like shooting from a low angle, I enjoy working with children. They have a different perspective of the world, and they keep my filmmaking grounded.

– Simone Rapisarda Casanova

From the young boy who proclaims his hunger in *The Strawberry Tree* to the baby who does his best to disrupt his father's conversation with Pacifico at the end of *The Creation of Meaning*, the unscripted behaviour of children is often a key index to understanding the ethnographic context and visual composition of many of Simone's films. Two works in progress are exemplary of this approach: *E Così Entra La Luce/And That's How the Light Gets In* focuses on four children wandering through a post-postapocalyptic landscape, and *Playing with Worlds*, a collaboration with ethnographer Dara Culhane, cedes a 360-degree camera to 15 child participants in order to document their imaginative relationships to place. The seed for both of these films, however, was planted in Simone's most recent release, *Zanj Hegel La/Hegel's Angel* (2018), which from its opening establishing shot – of boats being unloaded, a lone white woman amid otherwise all black bodies being carried to shore on the shoulders of a shirtless man – is focalised through the point of view of its child protagonist, Widley.

*Hegel's Angel* was made with students at the Cinema Institute in Jacmel, Haiti, where Simone went to teach following the completion of *The Creation of Meaning*. Drawing inspiration from Susan Buck-Morss' *Hegel, Haiti and Universal History*,<sup>5</sup> which seeks to contextualise the influence of the Haitian Revolution on Hegel's theorisation of the master–slave dialectic and a subsequent tradition of historical materialist thought, Simone juxtaposes scenes of Widley and his father, Mentor, making their way in a country still recovering from the devastating 2010 earthquake with what appear to be outtakes from another film within a film, this one a surreal pastiche of tourist narrative, salvage ethnography, and colonial melodrama. In it, the white woman from the opening shot, Sarah, presents herself before a desiccated white priest, Father Charles, whom we have previously seen being sexually serviced by a young black woman. Sarah seems to have been summoned to complete a job for the priest, although it's not clear what exactly, in part because subsequent scenes in which we witness her engaging with local residents, including in ritual ceremonies, appear to be a product of Widley's "post-colonial" imagination. Of course, in exciting our fetishistic desire to understand the relationship between Sarah and the priest, and then subsequently thwarting that desire, Simone is commenting self-reflexively on the larger project of ethnographic filmmaking, which presents as authorial and all-encompassing what is only ever partial and incomplete.

It should perhaps come as no surprise, then, that at one point in *Hegel's Angel* Simone tropes on the absurdity of auteur theory. Specifically, he has the on-screen editor of the film within the film, played by Eddy Fleursaint (one of

Simone's co-writers on the film), remark to Widley that the story they are trying to follow on the screen of Eddy's computer – and that we in turn see via the interpolated scenes involving Sarah – is so improbable because the director suddenly absconded from the country without telling anyone how the script, which he alone retained inside his head, ended. At the same time, the dialectics of Simone's film are neither so binaristic nor so mechanical, with Haiti's colonial past and economically dependent present often captured simultaneously via different juxtapositions within a single frame, as when both Widley and the camera follow Sarah through a market selling "authentic" local souvenirs to local tourists. Then, too, *Hegel's Angel*, like *The Strawberry Tree*, engages seriously with the antecedent ethnographic films with which it is in dialogue, both aesthetically and politically. This includes the work of Maya Deren, whose posthumous *Divine Horsemen* is clearly being referenced in the climactic Vodou ceremony that comes near the end of *Hegel's Angel*.

The Marxist literary and cultural critic Frederic Jameson, who has written a lot about Hegel,<sup>6</sup> once wrote that all third world texts necessarily function as national allegories, whereby the mundane daily struggles of characters such as Widley and Mentor, or Rosaida and the residents of Juan Antonio, or even a southern European such as Pacifico, always serve to illustrate the machinations of larger state apparatuses within what Jameson called "the era of multinational capitalism," or what we would now simply characterise as globalisation.<sup>7</sup> It is tempting to apply such a reading to any of the three of Simone's films I have just discussed. For example, the contract that Mentor enters into to paint and hang an election banner in *Hegel's Angel* – and for which he is paid in the form of an old television set that in the last scene we see Widley and his young friends crowding around to watch a Chuck Norris film – comments ironically on the local politics of disaster capitalism and the Western cultural exports that prop it up.

But such a reading is fundamentally reductive. What I would say instead is that all of Simone's films deploy an aesthetics of allegory without ever succumbing to the ideological telos of allegory. What I mean by this is that for all of their blurring of the lines between ethnographic documentary and fiction, Simone's films are always grounded – quite literally – in the quotidian material realities of his subjects' here and now: the joy we take in watching Mentor and Widley play a game of soccer with a homemade, make-shift ball, or in honouring the care and precision with which Pacifico makes his bed in the morning, or in siding with Rosaida as she tries to goad Simone into helping her wash dishes. That, for me, is the "spirit of place" that Simone captures in his films: that which entangles place, bodies, and experiences in a greater – and, yes, reciprocal – sense of knowing the world in all its local and global complexity.

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## Notes

- 1 Barad 2007, 139.
- 2 Henley 2009, 249.
- 3 Barad 2007, 140. In an unpublished notebook on *The Strawberry Tree*, Simone has written that cuts in film mostly mask rather than create meaning, and that the cut – as the base unit of cinematic montage, more generally – can be seen as “a lowest-common-denominator solution to diegesis,” one that “magically turns diegesis into mimesis without anyone consciously noticing – that is, an intimate betrayal of diegesis.” Simone Rapisarda Casanova, *The Strawberry Tree: A Notebook*, unpublished, 2009.
- 4 MacDougall 1998, 219.
- 5 Buck-Morss 2009.
- 6 See, most recently, Jameson 2010.
- 7 See Jameson 1986. For a critical response to Jameson’s article, see Ahmad 1987.

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