

# **Cine-weapon**

The poiesis of filming and fishing

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## **Abstract**

This paper discusses the use of moving images in the anthropology of technique, specifically, the ethnographic recording of the capture with harpoon of arapaima fish in the coastal lakes of Amapá, in the Brazilian Amazon. Inspired in Rouch's notion of *cine-trance*, I ponder on the possibility of doing ethnography by intertwining the technical processes of capturing that fish and capturing images. I also describe the way in which I take the relationship between the movie camera and the harpoon – their rhythms and properties – as a helpful tool to describe the major features of the dialogical interaction between harpooner and fish, namely, the harpooner-harpoon link, the perception of signals emitted by the fish, and the meaning of the capturing gesture.

**Keywords:** Fishing, hunting, Amazon, image, visual anthropology

## **Resumo**

O presente trabalho discute o uso do registro de imagens em movimento na abordagem da antropologia da técnica, mais especificamente, na etnografia da captura do peixe pirarucu (*Arapaima gigas*) com o uso o arpão, em lagos na costa do Amapá. Com inspiração na ideia do cine-transe, de Rouch, reflete-se sobre a possibilidade de uma abordagem etnográfica fundada na associação entre os processos técnicos de captura do animal e de captura de imagens. Descreve-se também de que modo investiu-se na conexão entre a filmadora e o arpão – entre seus ritmos e propriedades – como via privilegiada para etnografar as principais dimensões da relação dialógica entre arpoador e peixe: o acoplamento arpoador-arpão, a percepção dos signos emitidos pelo peixe e o significado do gesto de captura.

**Palavras-chave:** Pesca, caça, Amazônia, imagem, antropologia visual

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(...) I mounted the camera and Nanook, stringing his harpoon, began slowly snaking over the crest.  
Robert Flaherty, 1922, “How I Filmed ‘Nanook of the North’”.

Poiesis: a combining form denoting production.  
Webster’s Dictionary

Cautious, I carried nothing, not even a camcorder in the first phase of field-work. After a few weeks with no record of images, as we grabbed the paddles in a canoe for yet another fishing trip to the lakes, one of the fishermen, a bit self-consciously, asked if I had brought a “machine.” When I answered that all I had was a still camera, he could not conceal his disappointment. I even suspect that, for a moment, I was poorly compared to the few researchers, mostly in biological sciences, who had passed through Vila Sucuriju and surroundings on the Amapá coast, Brazil. The fishermen made a point of telling me that those researchers invariably carried movie cameras and used them all the time. Thus, my caution produced the very impression I so wanted to avoid, for not filming seemed to them a mixture of contempt and incompetence on my part.

Nonetheless, there was nothing that could not be remedied during our time together and, especially, when I returned to the field with a movie

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<sup>1</sup> A partial version of this article was delivered at the round table “Hunting and filming technology”, as part of the film exhibition titled “The animal and the camera” during the *Belo Horizonte Documentary and Ethnographic Film Festival* (Forumdoc) in November, 2011. I am grateful to the organizers, especially to Professor Paulo Maia, for the invitation. I also thank the participants in the debates who inspired some of the thoughts expressed here.

camera in hand. Photographs, particularly in black and white taken with an analogical camera that provides no immediate images, would be of little local interest, were it not for my habit of taking people's pictures and then giving the copies back to them. Started by chance, this habit created several kinds of interactions and strengthened my relationship with many of the five hundred villagers. It even changed the meaning of my comings and goings to and from the field, when it was possible to copy the photograms.

As soon as I carried a camcorder, I was frequently requested also to record, not so much people, but "lakescapes" as well and, above all, arapaima fish harpooning.<sup>2</sup> There was also much interest in the outcome of film shooting, which triggered off a number of *in loco* screenings of raw footage. On the one hand, people who did not go to the lakes, or were mostly unfamiliar with them (such as women in general, but also coastal fishermen) enjoyed looking at such an important region in the local cosmology. On the other, the *languistas* (lakers), specialists in handling harpoons in the region of the lakes, commented vivaciously on the performances shown on the TV screen. They remarked on what had been filmed, what had been left out (the ethnographer-filmmaker, for instance), but mainly uttered joking or praising comments on their own performance in that kind of capture, outstanding for the agonistic relationship between the harpooner and the fish. The prestige conferred by a successful capture, extremely important for the *languistas*, thus gained yet another dimension among the villagers. Moreover, my debates with the fishermen about the video images were immensely valuable for my ethnography, as well as the repeated screening of their harpooning. All of this allowed me to refine my analysis on the central theme of my doctoral research, namely, the relationship between fishing techniques and the construction of the person (Sautchuk 2007a).

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2 *Arapaima gigas* is the largest fish in the Amazon Basin and the largest scale fish in the world, reaching up to three meters and two hundred kilograms. In Brazil it is known as *pirarucu* and as *paiche* in several Spanish-speaking countries. It is at the top rank in the trophic chain of aquatic systems. Its double breathing apparatus - air and water - is needed throughout its entire life. It was a staple food during the colonization of the Amazon and is highly valued in the whole region. Due to predatory fishing, especially with nets, its population ebbed to critical levels, leading to the total or partial prohibition of its capture in Brazil since late twentieth century. The case analyzed here focuses on a vast area of lakes and flooded grasslands in the Amazon estuary, within the *Lago Piratuba* Biological Reserve, where an agreement warrants the fishermen of Vila Sururiju the exclusive right to fish (or to hunt, if you want) arapaima only with harpoons.

Editing a short film in documentary format (Sautchuk 2007b) was not part of my initial research goals, but raised much local interest. The video was first shown as an ethnographic synthesis at the defence of my dissertation and later, with varying reactions from the viewers, at other academic events and situations when public policies affecting the local people were being discussed. This makes one think about the meaning of films from the viewpoint of their interaction with specific viewers – like an artefact that acquires meaning according to its use – and not merely about the form of their production, the ethnographic context, the local people, and the film parameters adopted.

Through the use of image recording in video in my ethnography of fishermen in Vila Sucuriju, all these aspects have become very relevant. My interest is to explore not so much the relationship between anthropology and image, but that between ethnography and filmmaking. Image devices are for me a sort of ethnographic relationship rather than a medium to show results. I take images as process rather than as products because, since the beginning of my research, video recording stood out as a potent medium to build ethnographic engagement and to understand the meaning of relationships between beings and things in that Amazonian context.

For me, filming and photographing were never mere chores for recording material processes, if for no other reason, because I had in mind John Collier's warning about the use of images in research on material culture:

“ (...) a major problem is learning enough about the technology so we can meaningfully observe it. Cross-culturally this can be a challenge, for the significance of a craft is embedded in the very ethos of a culture. (Collier e Collier 1986: 65).”

Here we have a relationship that is more than purely objective – gathering data or illustrations – because photography, somehow, must be associated with a comprehensive reading of the situation being depicted. This was my position at the onset of my research, but it soon turned out to be insufficient given the kind of context in which I was involved. As I adopted the ethnographic approach of being directly engaged in fishing activities – which, obviously, involved a learning process and a positioning vis-à-vis the relationships between fishermen, artefacts, and animals – the very act of filming was defined by the technical processes under way. In other words, the use of

the camera became part of the fishing chores, alternating with the handling of other objects and with other tasks, such as rowing, killing a fish, helping with scanning for signals, etc.

On the one hand, I approached understanding the meaning of the actions, beings, and artefacts pertaining to the technical activities of fishing through my practical engagement in them, which, naturally, involved my learning certain skills. On the other hand, when using the camera, there seemed to be a repositioning of the terms in Collier's argument. In short, it was not a matter of knowing more and then getting the images, nor of capturing images beforehand and then knowing more. What happened was an ethnographic approach *through* the operation of image production devices, especially, the camcorder.

The way that machine entered my research takes us to two arguments MacDougall spells out in his proposal about observational cinema and participation in anthropology. He argues that participation is the intense dialogue between people about film intentions and forms, while here I attempt to connect two sets of technical relationships (fishing and filming), in which the most relevant aspects are mediated by relationships between humans and non humans. Second, MacDougall is mostly interested in the relationship between the film product and the people filmed (the film and the group), whereas I seek the relationship between the processes (to film and to fish). Despite these differences, MacDougall's clues for how to transcend forms of written knowledge have been inspiring, especially when he suggests that the connection between film forms and anthropology should be expanded. He is particularly persuasive when he suggests that ethnographers should abandon attempts to meet preconceived notions of what good cinema should be: "to conjecture that a film need not be an aesthetic or scientific performance: it can become the arena of an inquiry" (MacDougall 1975: 128).

Therefore, my focus is not on the context or on the local impact of camera use, on image as anthropological narrative, or on further use of the recordings in the ethnographic observation of techniques. Although these issues are important, what interests me here is the connection between the gestures of filming and of capturing fish as an ethnographic *modus operandi*. In other words, I probe into the idea that the connection between capturing images and capturing arapaima is not only a matter

of simultaneity, but also of mutuality. It is possible to explore the ways in which fishing adapts to camera (from the weight of the ethnographer-camera aboard a canoe, all the way to the most prestigious form of killing fish, in anticipation of its screening at the village). However, I focus on just one question, namely, how the meeting of both techniques furthered my ethnography of fishing. I do not defend a strictly instrumental use of a camera, but see its operation as a process of technical transformation of the ethnographer himself, which leads to a substantially different relationship with the ongoing activities being studied.

Well-known criticisms in visual anthropology have attributed an objectivist aesthetic to certain documentaries that dodge the presence of the camera to build the illusion of a straightforward gaze at reality. On the other hand, there has also been another type of mimesis, equality illusory, which, in acknowledging the presence of the camera, uses it as a means to place the spectator directly in contact with the filmed subject, in an attempt to humanize the film. Such postures, vastly discussed in debates about observational cinema and its spin-offs (cf. Grimshaw and Ravetz 2009), are somewhat distant from what I present here. After all, both approaches disregard the changes produced by filmmaking devices, one being realistic, the other humanistic.

If, on the one hand, I avoid realistic voyeurism, on the other, I think along the lines of Suhr and Willerslev (2012), when they defend a breach with the mimetic dogma of the humanized camera. In this direction, they elect montage as a way to bring tension to the sense of realism in ethnographic films. Inspired by this viewpoint, although concerned with the relationship between filmmaking and ethnography, rather than with the film as product, I shall argue in favor of the camera as a technical device linked to another set of technical relations, namely, those being filmed. I deem it a good alternative, particularly when the recording of moving images coincides with the ethnographic interest in the meaning of relationships between humans and non humans. I wish to show how this is connected to the ideas of Dziga Vertov (1995) and Jean Rouch (2003), when they explicitly adopt the technical dimension as a factor that not only institutes the very condition of filming, but also contemplates its potentialities.

## Camera in hand, knock on the head



Photo 1: Harpooner Antenor and his sons, Passarinho and Agenor, searching for arapaima.

When I held a still camera or a camcorder, I sat on the middle bench of the canoe between the pilot at the stern and the harpooner at the bow, who alternates between handling the paddle and the harpoon. Although I was not required to help steer the canoe constantly, but my position could not be totally passive or autonomous, as my movements and positions directly affected the whole vessel. In one of my first chases of a fish in flight inside an intricate mangrove, as I tried to get for my camera the best angle to record the signals of the animal, I was hit on the head with the end of the harpoon, as the fishermen swirled it backward in preparation to throw it forward. That blow aborted the capture and nearly threw the camera into the water. Actually, it could have been worse, for, in similar situations, there is the risk of having an arm or neck entangled in the harpoon rope and tightened up with the throwing of the weapon, with severe consequences. When children (and the ethnographer) travel in the middle of the canoe, they must remain very alert and synchronize their movements to those of the harpooner so as not to be caught by a sudden motion, quite common in this activity.

This episode highlighted two important aspects. The first is that I was filming on the lakes awaiting a singular, spectacular and unexpected event – the animal's appearance – and losing the focus of the intense process that

went on in the broader interaction between harpooner and fish. That is, my attention was far from the set of operations under way, concentrated exclusively on the result – the capture – and neglecting the relevant features of the other actions that connected the harpooner to the fish. On the other hand, I acted according to a subjective camera, disregarding the place of the harpooner in the frame, as though the camera’s gaze were his own. This proved to be a big mistake, not only because my actions were incompatible with the relationships inside the canoe, but also because I was cutting out part of the activity, which is ethnographically unjustifiable. The second aspect, resulting from the first, is the following: if there was a very clear notion of co-substantiality between harpooner and harpoon – a coupling in a single body, as they say locally – it also generated an encompassing process, i.e., the whole canoe – pilot, vessel, and everything else – was part of the harpooner’s actions.

As I noticed this, it seemed that filming arapaima capture should not be limited to trying to set up aesthetically effective links between the recording device (the camera) and the fish. To take the relevant features into account, recording the images should contemplate a much broader and complex arrangement. Above all, it was necessary to start with the coupling of ethnographer and camera – that is, it would not be feasible to dodge the fact that the camera was totally situated, materialized in the action flow. Moreover, when I took the camera in my hands, I should keep a carriage similar to that of someone who was actively fishing, and not convert my posture into that of a voyeur who records images as though he was detached from the flow of the actions. When all this dawned on me, I began to film with my attention also turned to the procedures inside the canoe, attempting to match the handling of the camera to small chores (evidently, at the expense of the “aesthetic quality” of the images). Secondly, this ethnographer-camera coupling was encompassed by another, guided by the primacy of the harpooner-harpoon in the canoe. These relationships must have been established if filming a capture was to happen from inside the canoe; after all, to record the fishing without the harpooner’s mediation would have been inexcusable, given that my research interest was focused, precisely, on the relations between fishermen, artefacts, and animals.

My understanding of that activity in these terms changed my challenge to film. It was not a matter of location, for the ethnographer-camera had no choice but to stay in the middle of the canoe, lined up between the



pilot and the harpooner. Ideally, the best direction for harpooning is forward, because the strength of the arm in propelling the harpoon is added to the speed of the canoe, and also because the position of the harpooner's body vis-à-vis the prey gains precision. In terms of shooting the film, this was also a good arrangement, because it kept the signals of the fish and the harpooner's gestures within the same frame, thus encompassing all the elements in action.

When the harpoon was thrown sideways, the simultaneous framing was lost. However, this negative aspect for the shooting underscored the importance of the idea of featuring in harpooning, pointing directly to the relationship between the *laquista's* position and the spot where the fish appears, thus creating a bond between the animal's behavior and what went on inside the canoe. When I tried to enclose the space for a good feature, searching for the best framing revealed that the harpooner's body was not limited to the interior of the canoe, but was projected outward in a sort of irregular blot that surrounded him and set the limits of his virtual predatory capacity and perspective in that context. This sort of action field – or, as I prefer, operation field, because it indicates the potential for action of more than one agent – turned out to be crucial to understand the lake milieu. There are no empty spaces in it, but the successive overlap of the operation fields of different beings, leading to a constant negotiation of perceptions and mutual possibilities for action and reaction.

These ethnographic perceptions can be analyzed in terms of some propositions about cinema and ethnographic films. We may begin with one of the most instigating and best-known proposals by Jean Rouch (1975), that is, that the use of the camera transforms the cameraman himself. This comes from the statements by Soviet thinker and filmmaker Dziga Vertov (1995) on “film-truth”, to the effect that the camera and the tape recorder are perception organs that confer potency and a different pattern to the human senses. For Vertov, cinematic vision is a particular form of looking, which employs a new perceptive organ – the camera or mechanical eye – that enhances its “pilot's” feeble human vision. The point in Vertov's proposition of the cine-eye I would like to emphasize is the central role of movement to understand the properties of both the camera and the world. There is a sort of homology, a deep and definite connection between the properties of life to be filmed and those of the camera, as in kinetics, in

continuous motion. Therefore, we might say that *film-truth* – which despises staging and literary or psychological plots in favor of the real – gets all its strength, precisely, from the connection between the works of the camera and the world:

“Everyone who cares for his art seeks the essence of his own technique. Cinema’s unstrung nerves need a rigorous system of precise movement.”  
(Vertov 1995: 8).

I believe, even with reservations regarding Vertovian realism, that this proposal includes a fundamental anthropological element regarding cinema as a form of recording and exhibiting that is thoroughly intertwined with world dynamics, not only concerning its intentions and products, but also its own working parameters. After all, its form of perception collects and fixes impressions not in human fashion, or rather, via the perceptive apparatus of the human body, but in a completely different mode that is derived from a technical coupling (human-camera).

I shall return to the important and well-known consequences advanced by Jean Rouch in this regard, especially about *cine-trance*. Meanwhile, I insist on the potential of the relation between filmmaking and technique, as it appears in Claudine de France (1998). France’s propositions entail a deep discussion about the articulation of shooting *operations* with ritual-technical *processes*, which, undoubtedly, can also lead to an ethnographic approach to relationships between beings and things. We may start with the high potential for symmetry contained in her propositions, allowing us to deal with processes of agency and passivity, to then enter a type of knowledge that is difficult to access with the naked eye or in discourse, correlated to practical engagement or to ethnographic training. One of the main points in France’s proposal, directly applicable to my analysis of arapaima capture, is the role of her approach to relationships in preparing the mind to grasp bodies and associations from the primacy of actions:

“Or, la cinématographie nous enseigne l’impossibilité de séparer parfois, au plan des faits sensibles, ce que l’écriture nous a appris à dissocier mentalement : par exemple, l’agent et l’instrument corporel réunis en un même corps, tels l’artisan vannier et sa main qui travaille le bois. Aussi les points de rupture ne se situent-ils pas nécessairement entre des éléments ponctuels, mais entre

des regroupements compacts d'éléments de composition, formant un continuum spatial d'agents humains et matériels." (France 1983: 166)

Strongly influenced by Leroi-Gourhan (1948) who, incidentally, was one of the first to stimulate the making of ethnographic films, France (1983) begins with the idea of praxiology, a research method for forms of action, particularly regarding technical relations. It is in line with the deepest implications of the notion of technique as described by Leroi-Gourhan (1993) and Mauss (2006), that is, not as a merely utilitarian action, but as a set of relations that encompass and confer meaning and shape to things and beings, including humans (Karsenti 1998). I even think that, due to her radically operational proposition, methodologically speaking, it was France who most adequately used Leroi-Gourhan's idea of the operational chain. She avoids all sorts of formalization and schematization regarding technical events that, in fact, do not appear in the latter's work, and maximizes the ethnographic potency of these phenomena via cinema. For France, cinematography leads to the cutting of gesture according to parameters derived from the action itself. This raises questions that launch the notion of efficient set – for instance, which are the active poles, who is targeted by that action, and what are the relevant connections.

Moreover, to France, a film results from the encounter of the *mise-en-scène* of those being filmed and of the filmmaker. Taking our theme as a starting point, this leads us, precisely, to the importance of the articulation between film techniques and the technique of the action to be filmed:

"Ainsi peut être envisagée une forme d'analyse qui, attachée jusqu'ici à l'action "filmé", se déporterait vers l'action "filmante" du cinéaste. Cadres, angles de vue, durée des plans, seraient de ce fait considérés en fonction de leurs relations de composition, d'ordre et d'articulation dans l'espace et le temps. Pourrait être alors entreprise une étude de la coordination entre les modes de l'action filmée et de l'action filmante au sein du film." (France 2010: 222).

France sees a film as the outcome of the convergence of two sets of actions: one comes from the relationships of those being filmed with other people and objects, the other, from the articulation of the filmmaker's body, the camera, and cinematographic parameters.

## To perceive, unperceived



Photo 2: Macó prepares to harpoon as quietly as possible, alert to the surface signal of the fish's breathing, knowing it is being chased.

The other key element in the relationship between the techniques of film-making and of arapaima capture, besides spatiality, is the rhythm of events. We cannot overstate the importance of timing and sequence when describing lake activities. Searching for arapaima, if at all possible, involves catching the fish unawares, so as to facilitate approach and, ultimately, harpooning. This can take long periods in the same spot, awaiting the fish's opportunity to meet the *languista* – there were times when I had to wait as long as three and a half hours. The ideal demeanor on such occasions is to be silent and still, or keep noise to a minimum, avoiding moving the canoe and tossing around of objects. As expected, these measures limited the use of the camcorder and required a certain strategy, especially, because the severe limitations of battery and sensitive materials curtailed the recording in the time scale of the approach of harpooner and arapaima.

On the other hand, as soon as the fish gives a chance to be harpooned, events speed up abruptly. Most often, reaction is immediate, so that, even the split second the camera takes to start recording can ruin the filming of the main actions. Given these shifts in rhythm, the solution is to foresee the events, by becoming more familiar with the local perceptive grammar,

reaching some degree of competence in decoding and grasping the meaning of the connections between signals, beings, and surroundings, that is, being able to predict what comes ahead. Therefore, the camera is not simply a way to amplify perception, in Vertov's sense, but to change the filmmaker's perceptions, including his limitations. Thus, the functional specificities of the recording device must also be seen as a vehicle to understand the connections between beings and things, as France (1998) asserts.

Therefore, the central issues here involve the notions of meeting (*topar*) and of chance, opportunity (*enseio*) that condition the harpooner-fish relationship and inform the harpooning gesture. They point to the encounter with the animal and the possibility of harpooning, both perceived as tied to the fish's intention to show itself to the *laquista* and come into his operational field. According to the harpooners, it is the fish that takes the major steps leading to its capture. This does not invalidate the fact that, in order to meet the fish and grab the opportunities, it is necessary to notice without being noticed, to be the first to see. Given that the lake water is murky, the arapaima is not directly spotted. It is sensed in surface signals left by its underwater movements, such as the gas bubbles coming from its contact with organic matter at the bottom, the tenuous ripples of its moving just below the surface, and the stir of aquatic vegetation at its passage. There is also the *buio*, the fish coming up for air, as it too has to breathe. This cluster of signals comprises a set of semiotic relations that I cannot detail here. Suffice it to say that the connections between the (visible) surface signals and the (invisible) fish at the bottom are extremely diverse and sophisticated (Sautchuk 2007a: 107-114).

There is, then, the issue of understanding those signals. Well, many of them are detected in video with a few adjustments in angle, exposure, and focal distance. The problem, however, is not to recognize and record them, but to find their meaning, for the value of a signal depends on the extent to which it evokes some potential action by the harpooner. Hence, seeing those signals does not depend on the mere objective knowledge of the environment and the animal's behavior. It has to do with identifying signals that make possible certain actions and not others, that is, that involve the observer and his attributes in a given situation. This relationship may be best described as affordances, in James Gibson's terminology (1979).

This term indicates that each being perceives the world according to its potential to act, by means of the affordances contained in its relationship to the environment. This is why the meaning of environment is linked to the possibilities each organism has, which differ in each case. In Ingold's phenomenological interpretation of Gibson's ideas, he stresses, "the world emerges with its properties alongside the emergence of the perceiver in person" (Ingold 2000: 168). In the present case, if the attempted relationship is the capture, then a signal sent by the fish is meaningful when associated with the harpooner's dispositions.

However, this is only one part of the question, for the fish also perceives the harpooner and has to avoid giving him clues of its presence. According to Reed (1988: 116), affordance would indicate not only that an organism perceives its surroundings from its and other beings' possibilities for action, but also that it perceives and acts, following the behavior and actions of those other beings that take into account its own affordances. Gibson summarized this in the phrase "behavior affords behavior", explaining that "what the prey affords the predator goes along with what the predator affords the prey" (Gibson 1979: 135). In the behavior of arapaima and harpooner, this is absolutely central when both want to go unnoticed, but also when one becomes aware of the other's presence. They cheat, simulating certain kinds of behavior and playing with each other's reckonings in order to produce mistakes.

If it is a matter of a relationship of mutual moves and perceptions, what the ethnographer does with a camera is not simply to try to locate, record and recognize the surface signals sent out by the fish, because these signals are only meaningful *in relation to* the harpooner's capacities. A feasible alternative to understand the relationships involved in the capture as they are recorded in video might be to transform the camera into a means to enter this affordance game. But then we should think of third-degree affordances, that is, if the fish's signal implies the harpooner's actions (first degree), if the harpooner's behavior affects the fish (second degree), then we should think of what this relationship affords the ethnographer-filmmaker (third degree). In other words, it gives him the opportunity meaningfully to capture the interactions under way. This includes both the limitations and potentialities of the capturing device and the understanding of patterns of image production (light, planes, and frames).

Clearly, I am not proposing that it would be desirable, or even possible, for the ethnographer-filmmaker to reach excellence in this matter. I might even say that, by definition, there is no such possibility for him, nor for the *laquistas* in their approach to the fish, because this is an open system involving intelligent beings with unpredictable reactions. In fact, practically all of the *laquista* discourses and behavior reinforce the cunning of the arapaima, its capacity to cheat the fisherman. Clever and astute, with a very acute perception, the fish also controls the way it emits its signals, so as to baffle the *laquista*.

It seemed to me then, that a cinematographic approach that refused to remain at a distance, outside the relationship between *laquista* and arapaima, had to find a way to be connected to the unfolding of their encounter. Instead of adopting a contemplative stance – turned to the fish’s fleeting appearances – I deemed necessary to enter that constant game of affordances, by entering it via the filming device. For example, a path in this direction is to realize that, on the lakes, vision is engagement. There are distinct ways to engage the eye with signals and animals that should not be mixed up. For *laquistas*, if to look (*olhar*) is merely to guide the eye, to notice (*reparar*) is to scrutinize in search of signals, and to see (*enxergar*) is to establish a visual connection with the fish. These levels are put into action according to the possibility of engagement. In handling the camera, this must be taken into account. The filmmaker who seeks to record situations of capture should not ignore this, lest he miss the meaning of the image being recorded. That blow on my head showed me that the image implies actions, and that the lakes, by no means, must be taken as a contemplative aesthetic. When they say, “the water is pretty,” it is a sign that perceptive conditions for harpooning are favourable (Sautchuk 2011). This means that the ethnographer-filmmaker must position himself properly and set the frame to film, lest he causes an accident or, at least, be charged with the loss of record at a moment of utmost importance, despite the evident warnings of what was happening.

## Harpooning, filming



Photo 3: Macó throws his harpoon in an *aventurada*, that is, without seeing the signals of much undulation at that moment. He simply reckons the animal's presence through a signal that is no longer there.



Photo 4: Macó throws his harpoon a little ahead of a *siringa*, the wake of bubbles that rises when the fish moves at the bottom. The shadow of the tree helped catch the bubbles on the surface.



I have dealt here with filming the harpooner's actions and his perceptive relationship with the fish. However, both the *laguistas'* own interpretations of their activity and the analysis of what happens on the lakes leave no doubts as to the absolute centrality of the harpooning gesture in that environment. Evoking France's analytical vocabulary (1998), harpooning could be qualified as "dominant" in the context of lakes. It is a dimension of the action to which the other dimensions converge. It makes us think of an "efficient set," that is, the association of beings and things that are fundamental for the unfolding of the action. In the case of capture, we have the harpoon that connects the harpooner to the fish – after all, the harpoon does not kill by itself, but captures the animal from the bottom and brings it up closer.

Briefly, I shall draw an apt comparison. Before the camcorder, I used photography as a recording device. At the beginning, I even thought that taking still pictures would be more appropriate and had a greater potential to relate to the gesture of harpooning. This impression was based on the idea that the photographic act of preparing and shooting the shutter had an operational homology with harpooning – premeditated, but discrete, punctual and definitive (as the stills in this text show). Undoubtedly, the exercise of photographing a harpooning was central for me to explore the instantaneous dimension of the gesture. But it soon became clear that the throwing of the harpoon does not start or end with this operation, it is just a link in the chain.

It is the harpooner who must bridge the gap between two media – air and water – by converting affordances, as we begin the guess in the very construction of the harpoon with an appropriate ergology for aerial and aquatic motions. The harpooner must control the way the fish handles both these media, the bottom and the air, including the moment when it searches for the *laguista*. For this reason, the surface line is not only an important frontier, but also a sort of double-face communicating screen in which *laguista* and fish register the signals of their own movements and scan the other's.

Grasping the surface signals and their connection to the harpooner's operation field was a valuable insight, but it soon proved to be insufficient. The stuff of harpooning, after all, resides in the association between these signals and the fish, but, most importantly, between these two axes and a third that closes the harpooning, namely, the weapon's trajectory or, if you will, the submerged extension of harpooner. We might arrange this triangle as follows: the *harpooner-signal* axis is horizontal and aerial, given by the act

of seeing; the *signal-fish* axis is vertical and aquatic, typified by the act of deciphering its connection (depending on the type of the signal, where is the fish located at the bottom?); and the third and decisive axis, *harpooner-fish*, slanted and amphibious, joins the other two axes and is expressed in the gesture of harpooning. In this way, harpooning on target occurs when the fish-signal-harpooner communication circuit brings together and closes in all three axes, summed up as to see (the signal), to perceive (where the fish is), and to throw (reaching it).

Well, let us notice that, despite the crucial role of surface signals in the fish-harpooner relationship, in general, the animal moves and hits the bottom, where no direct eye contact exists. In these situations, filming is restricted to the same visual elements available to the harpooner himself. However, when the harpoon sinks, stretching the man's gesture underwater, a radical difference keeps the ethnographer-cameraman and the harpooner-harpoon apart. If, up to this point, it was possible to draw a homology, at the crucial moment when weapon meets fish, when the latter *consents*, or not, in its own capture, filmmaking has to be resigned to operate on the epiphenomenal level. Nevertheless, if it is true that drawbacks in ethnography must be taken as highly relevant data, we can see in this limitation the right ethnographic key to access the harpooner's value and prestige. First, a harpooner's efficient performance strides the aerial and aquatic media. I believe this aspect is a clue to the harpooners' intriguing statement, when commenting on their own skills, that they "have to have good sight in the eye and in the arm." As it submerges, the harpoon also plays the role of perceptive organ in that semiotic game, and the camera loses sight of it. I think this abrupt disconnection between the potentialities (or affordances) of the ethnographer-camera and the harpooner-harpoon triggers off what is perhaps ethnography's main goal, that is, to put two relationship systems up against each other, face-to-face, and be able to ask partial, but pertinent questions about them. The approaching effort is, in fact, a powerful way to assert alterity: no matter how close their association was, the best conclusions come, precisely, when it is crystal-clear that the ethnographer is not a fisherman and the camera is not a harpoon.

The obvious corollary of all this is the realization that the fish does not "give itself" to the ethnographer-camera, but to the harpooner-harpoon. However, while the harpoon moves to the bottom, image recording can scan

some important points, even without following the fish. Once it is flung, the weapon travels for up to two seconds, both in the air and underwater, with the fish also moving. Therefore, harpooning on target is not exactly due to the harpooner's precision, but to the future convergence of the routes of weapon and fish toward the same spot. It is not surprising, then, that a successful capture – and the very existence of the harpooner – is seen as dependent on the fish's intention, and that the latter is regarded as a being with a status similar to that of the harpooner himself. This is why capture is not considered to be merely a violent act, but also a gesture of surrender to someone deserving of such a prestigious honour.

### ***Cine-weapon* or triple capture**



Photo 5: Macó pulls up an arapaima after harpooning.

Samain shows that the visual quality of ethnographic recordings of images belongs to an “anthropological theoretic project.” Malinowski’s photographs, for instance, reveal his intention to match elements and actions on a coherent plan (Samain 1995). His purpose to depict integrated sets is clear, as exposed in various aspects: unaltered viewpoint, absence of close-ups, horizontal and clustered wide-angle plans. In turn, in *Balinese character* (Bateson

and Mead 1942), plates with photograph sequences or juxtapositions, plus the emphasis on gestures and emotional expressions, are associated with the authors' interest in cultural ethos as conveyed in Balinese behavior (Samain 2004, Jacknis 1988).

To a certain extent, this paper expresses, precisely, the possibility of associating the anthropology of technique with the images it can produce. Moreover, taking this inspiration further, we could also consider associating a certain ethnographic stance that favors participation and learning, that is, exposure to the relationship system one wants to understand (Favret-Saada 1980), through the very act of recording images in the field.

In a final incursion into this terrain, I quote the following passage from Jean Rouch's *The camera and man*:

“For me then, the only way to film is to walk with the camera, taking it where it is most effective and improvising another type of ballet with it, trying to make it as alive as the people it is filming. I consider this dynamic improvisation to be a first synthesis of Vertov's cine-eye and Flaherty's participating camera. I often compare it to the improvisation of the bullfighter in front of the bull. Here, as there, nothing is known in advance; the smoothness of a faena is just like the harmony of a traveling shot that articulates perfectly with the movements of those being filmed. In both cases as well, it is a matter of training, mastering reflexes as would a gymnast. Thus instead of using the zoom, the cameraman-director can really get into the subject. Leading or following a dancer, priest, or craftsman, he is no longer himself, but a mechanical eye accompanied by an electronic ear. It is this strange state of transformation that takes place in the filmmaker that I have called, analogously to possession phenomena, ‘cine-trance’.” (Rouch 1975: 38).

This passage underlines a basic presupposition in Rouch's work, inspired in the role of the camera (Vertov's *cine-eye*), given that the filmmaker's connection with it transforms him, creates with the subject being filmed a singular relationship. Granted, Rouch's truth is relational (Gonçalves 2008 and Sztutman 2009), unlike Vertov's, which is objective. Nevertheless, both think the camera can take us to a different mode of perception, enlarged and utterly distinct from “normal” vision, in that it reconfigures the subject and its relationship to the world. But we must realize that this transformation is undefined, open ended; its content only emerges from the specific kind of

interaction that has been established.

This is exactly why the technical coupling of camera and filmmaker is not enough in itself. Rouch speaks of the need to bring the camera to life, articulating it to the movements of those being filmed. He points out the situated character of this procedure – a sort of ballet or bullfight. It is possible to see in his defence of implicated filming a search for homologies between the camera and what it films, a major difference, say, between a cinematographic approach to an outward and impressionistic hunt and a properly anthropological approach, as in *La Chasse au Lion à l'Arc*. To this end, Rouch deems essential the use of a mobile camera on an optical scale that is compatible with the system of interactions being filmed, even if this brings instability, focus disturbances, etc.

However, I insist that Rouch's proposal is not to access the other's phenomenological experience through a position free of intermediaries, what we might call an attempt to humanize the filming relationship. Rouch's intention is not to suppress the camera or totally tame it, so as not to produce noise in the immediate relationships between humans. To the contrary, he takes for granted that the camera transfigures ethnographers (and those being filmed) into something else, and then allows them to establish meaningful relationships, not exactly with the individuals, but with the processes under way (possession, colonialism, hunting, etc). When he speaks of the director-camera facing a dancer, priest or craftsman, he does not imply any sort of confusion between them, but rather asserts he is transformed in a mechanical eye and electronic ear. As I see it, this is where the whole strength of the idea of *cine-trance* resides<sup>3</sup>.

It is precisely in camera movements and involvement with the activities of those being filmed that Rouch (2003) sees the emergence of its creative (and epistemic, we might say) effect, when the camera can incite hunts or become part of ceremonies, and even trigger off trance. But this participation, involving commitment and improvisation, has its counterpart in the handling of the camera as a technical device, which turns it into an instant form of knowledge, that is, it demands syntheses, approaches, distancing, as it observes. We could see in these aspects a fertile connection between the notions

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3 The point I wish to make here would be better defined, I think, with the sharp analyses of Rouch's cinema, such as those of Gonçalves (2008) and Sztutman (2009), applied to films dedicated to the relationship between humans, artefacts, and animals, as, for example, *La Chasse au Lion à l'Arc*, *Un Lion Nommé l'Américain* and *Bataille sur le Grand Fleuve*.

of Rouch's camera and Ingold's weapon (1986 e 2000) – both refer to an utterly transformative technical coupling that, however, requires a dynamic tie with the movements of those with whom it is related, and operates via *in situ* syntheses. For Ingold, the weapon does not capture an animal, but rather reveals a world, because it is a perception and knowledge device.

We finally return to my ethnographic context in Sucuriçu and to the issue of correlating camera with harpoon. I believe it would be more precise to say that the camera is, at one and the same time, more and less than a weapon. A meta-weapon and quasi-weapon, it seems to me to be a device capable of capturing another person's operation, but, for this, it must be articulated to the system of links and meanings surrounding the harpoon. It is, therefore, a system of triple capture: in accepting the challenge of being *captured* in order to *capture* the act of *capturing* the fish, the ethnographer-filmmaker can perhaps foresee the mutually implicated meanings of animals and humans. At any rate, he captures a great deal more than he would if “unarmed,” to use Vertov's term, or feebly equipped with paper, pencil, and his naked eye. If we take this technical device as an ethnographic medium, perhaps it might not be an exaggeration to propose not only a kinetic, but a cynegetic, inspired in Vertov and Rouch. Hence, following the *cine-eye* and the *cine-trance*, it might be possible to suggest a *cine-weapon*.



Photo 6: Techniques to capture arapaima and to capture images in action.

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