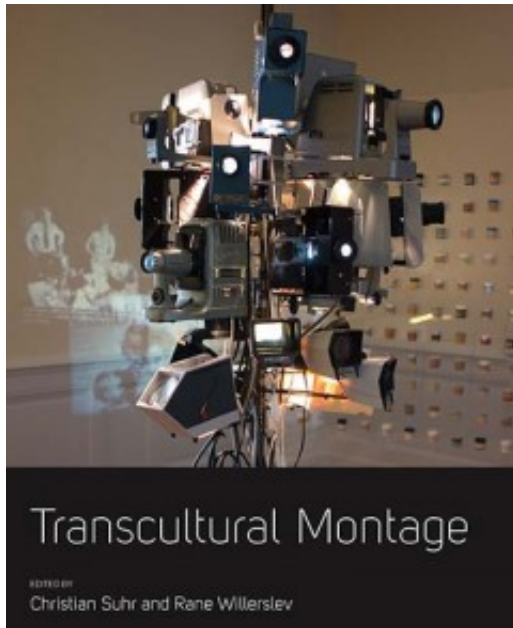


<http://somatosphere.net/?p=7353>

Book review: Transcultural Montage

2014-03-10 16:09:47

By Maria Vivod



[Transcultural Montage](#)

[Christian Suhr](#) and [Rane Willerslev](#), editors

Afterword by George E. Marcus

Berghahn Books, 2013. 300 pp.

Transcultural Montage contains an abundance of fresh ideas in many sub-disciplines of anthropology such as medical anthropology, cognitive anthropology, cultural and economic anthropology, but also semantics, museology and knowledge production not to mention visual anthropology, the main sub-discipline to which this publication is dedicated. As one flips through the pages of this aesthetically striking edition (300 pages with more than 70 color illustrations) one stumbles upon beautiful, almost poetic accounts, photo images, self-ethnographies and descriptions of religious rituals. While reading the book one has the feeling of having a nice, handpicked collection of anthropological ideas in one's hands.

But let us take one step at a time: *Transcultural Montage* is, as its title

states, devoted to the theoretical examination of a technique applied in visual anthropology. The most rudimentary definition of 'montage' would be an editing of filmic material in order to state something, usually used to suggest the passage of time. However, as the publication shows, montage is also used in many other modes of thought and its presentation — not all of them visual. Elaborating on the 'disruptive power of montage' (5) the editors of this volume offer more than a few possible and creative answers to the question of what montage is. Is it a technique? Is it a way of presenting—and therefore of 'seeing'—a topic?

The editors challenge the reader to think on the basis of Merleau-Ponty's work about 'montage' as a tool for making "present by a certain absence." (9) Montage can be everything- that is what they claim- it's a mirror of realities, a means of knowledge production and cinematic representation (11-13). Students of visual anthropology are taught about the meaning and the importance of Rouch's kilometre- or hour- long footages, an uncut material whose purpose was to report without interfering, to show reality 'as it is'. The goal being to report objectively as possible while the camera replaced the researcher's eye. However to avoid montage during editing is also a kind of a montage- its absence is also a statement. This publication is a handbook of how montage can be defined, thought about in its visual, semiotic and verbal-written forms.

Every time when the reader of this book thinks 'now, this is an original chapter' or an innovative way to approach theoretically or empirically the notion of 'montage', the following chapter or definition of the term in question surpasses the previous one. The book starts with an introduction written by the two editors and places the notion of 'montage' into the human endeavour, whether in science, art or cultural practices. The editors invite the reader to feel free to make new connections, to do the 'montage' ourselves in our scientific and social expressions. As the editors claim, the publication has set a goal of venturing into the realm of the invisible and to define 'montage' by what it doesn't show, or by its absence (3). This is a wonderful idea to play with, the human sense and the positioning of the camera: a view cannot be present and cannot be presented from all angles. That infinity of viewpoints- an 'impossibilis'- provides the "invisible ground upon which objects present themselves as visible to us" (3). From that point the editors orient the publication to make present and to "explain by a certain absence the invisible ground of the visible world" (4).

The publication is structured in four major thematic divisions or parts and contains 16 chapters. The major divisions are short introductions to how montage can be used, exploited or explained.

The first part of the book is an introduction to visual anthropology. There

are four detailed articles based mainly on the Deleuzian concept of cinema – in which cinema is an ontological practice that creates different ways of organizing movement and time – a creative/constructional human action grounding existential experience (21). Kapferer's excellent analysis of a ritual (on *hat adiya*) that relies on montage as an analytical tool also appears in this section. Nielsen's examination of montage as representation of social identities through the example of house builders in Maputo (Mozambique) pushes us to grasp the notion of time in montage as a means of catching differentiations inherent to social life (p.41).

My personal favourite in this part is Irving's description of montage as an ethnography of the phenomenology of human senses (76). His description of a descent into the abysses of blindness of a photographer is breathtaking: it's a mimetic voyage which enables the reader to better grasp what 'seeing' can truly mean. This chapter is so well written that one is overwhelmed by the universe of a man which slowly loses his sense of seeing – his basic sense and his main tool and engine of his artistic expression. One feels empathy and profound admiration toward the almost blind photographer who continues to create through ekphrastic [\[1\]](#) dialogue with his assistant. (86)

The second part places montage in the domain of writing anthropology. Dalsgaard takes us into the world of identity constructions, presenting existential conditions as a kind of montage. Antick displays an ethnographic account made of remarks and photographs through a favela tour which makes this chapter a very original contribution to this volume. It contains snapshots, accompanied by just a couple of words which could either be interpreted as 'explanations' *strictu sensu* or simple 'thoughts', notes of ideas and feelings.

The third part of the book elaborates the cinematic montage. However, this section is even more original than expected because of the way the five contributors approach the topic. Russel compares, shifting perspectives on gender in Japanese and US movies of the 1930s through archival montage. During the 1930s "institutional authorities mastered the art of montage as a mode of social control" (165). Both countries are struck with an economic depression and cinema, although glittery (168), offers a form of critique of social realities via its female characters in the two analyzed examples. Grossman shows how memory can be analyzed and deconstructed through the eye of the camera attached to the bike (my personal favourite) while Grimshaw dissects the observational practices of filmmaking.

Finally, the fourth part is a fantastic multidisciplinary approach between museology, visual anthropology, and sociology. The nostalgia for a structural unity of museum collections and exhibitions is tested through

three exhibitions. The selected comments on the Villa Sovietica exhibition which appear as an annex to Chapter 16 – and which are either very positive or very negative – are really worth a read: they are a nice example of how the gaze can be (mis)interpreted.

Overall the editors of the volume deliver on what is promised in the introduction and more. This publication articulates the slipperiness of the idea of ‘montage’ and works as an attempt to introduce the notion of ‘montage’ and all its complexity into anthropology’s glossary of thinking.

One thing is certain: after reading this book, you will never again take for granted the notion of ‘montage’.

Maria Vivod is an Associate researcher and Ethnologist at CNRS (Centre National de Recherches Scientifiques) – UMR 7367 D.E. Dynamiques européennes, Strasbourg, France. She received her PhD in Ethnology in 2005 from the University Marc Bloch in Strasbourg, France. Her research interests include identity, ethnic, and social conflicts; ethnic belonging; world tradition and change; politics of the Balkans; medical anthropology; social mobility and migration; and visual anthropology. She can be reached at vivod AT hotmail DOT com

[1] *ek* and *phrasis*, ‘out’ and ‘speak’ (Greek)

AMA citation

Vivod M. Book review: Transcultural Montage. *Somatosphere*. 2014. Available at: <http://somatosphere.net/?p=7353>. Accessed March 10, 2014.

APA citation

Vivod, Maria. (2014). *Book review: Transcultural Montage*. Retrieved March 10, 2014, from Somatosphere Web site: <http://somatosphere.net/?p=7353>

Chicago citation

Vivod, Maria. 2014. Book review: Transcultural Montage. Somatosphere. <http://somatosphere.net/?p=7353> (accessed March 10, 2014).

Harvard citation

Vivod, M 2014, *Book review: Transcultural Montage*, Somatosphere. Retrieved March 10, 2014, from <<http://somatosphere.net/?p=7353>>

MLA citation

Vivod, Maria. "Book review: Transcultural Montage." 10 Mar. 2014. Somatosphere. Accessed 10 Mar. 2014. <<http://somatosphere.net/?p=7353>>