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Releasing Heritage through Documentary: Avatars and Issues of the "Intangible Cultural Heritage" Concept

Every year since 2008, the jury of the Jean Rouch International Festival awards the Intangible Heritage Prize to a documentary film. During the films' selection process, we then consider choosing movies which will compete for this prize. To make such a choice, several elements are taken into account.
On one side, the way the Unesco defines the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) is quite opened, which allows, for such a prize, to select films within an opened thematic range. On the other side, though, this openness remains problematic as it supposes, when considering a social or cultural event, to distinctly discriminate what falls under a "tangible" order on one part, and under an "intangible" one on the other.
One could imagine, given the "testimonial" role which they generally assume, that documentary films could precisely participate to this discrimination process, and thus help to define more precisely the notion of "intangible" heritage. Still, during the films' selection process for this prize, it stays quite difficult to determinate the decisive criteria of this category. Moreover, it sometimes leads to question the relevance of the tangible/intangible distinction when considering a cultural event.
Besides, the very notion of "heritage" in the field of cinema owns its specific history in France, as state institutions have been willing to use anthropological cinema and researches in order to "preserve" what they considered as a "heritage to be protected". The Intangible Heritage Prize awarded at the Jean Rouch Festival is indeed the successor of the prize previously awarded by the Ethnological Mission, a sub-department of the Ministry of Culture.
How can then documentary cinema contribute to embody an "intangible heritage", and how do we, as festival's organizers and anthropologists, take part of this definition when we make programming choices? Through this reflection, we propose to support a documentary cinema which offers a shared eye on cultures, and which moves away from the document to leave place to plural and contrasted visions of reality, thus questioning events more than categorizing them.

1. The History of the "Intangible Heritage" Prize in Jean Rouch Festival

- The "Ethnological Mission" Prize at the Bilan du Film Ethnographique

This prize was the former one designed to award a film highlighting a "heritage" between 1983 and 1995 in our Festival (which name was at that time the "Bilan du Film Ethnographique"). It was awarded by the Ethnological Mission, which is part, in the French Ministry of Culture, of the Department of Archeology, Ethnology, Inventory and Information Systems within the Direction of Architecture and Heritage. The institutional position of this department is worth being considered: the contemporary (and let's say, new) concern of French cultural institutions on intangible facts directly originates and develops from the preservation concern for material facts, such as architectural or archeological ones. But although until the 1990ies the "heritage" was generally more understood as tangible than intangible, this "Ethnological Prize" had precisely been created to award a film documenting a specific practice, competence or know-how which deserved to be "preserved", *i.e.* which was considered to be a memorial testimony in need of protection before disappearance. These practices were presented as emblematic of a cultural identity, which scale of definition could range from a very local to a regional or national level. The cinematographic representation given in the awarded films thus often provided a definition of the "authentic" nature of the heritage.

However, analyzing the anthropological approach followed at that time, a distinction was made between several kinds of practices or heritages. On one side, the experiences or know-how essentially defined as the manufacturing, the use of "things" (artifacts) of precise "function": the whole human activities required for the satisfaction of the human needs and leisure (such as industry, crafts and arts), understood as technical acts of tangible efficiency, successions of operational sequences along with successive transformations of raw material. On the other side, more "intangible" experiences in the basic sense of the term were considered: everything that does not refer to the efficiency of a fact: art in its abstract sense (let's say art in concept), rituals, words such as prayers, inefficient thoughts. That is, what was considered as "symbolic thoughts".

The effort of the Unesco to point out the important part of "intangible" within a culture and in its transmission is nothing but recognizable. Still, in the consideration of cultures, such a distinction between tangible and intangible "facts" or practices sometimes appears questionable. For example, the relationships between technical facts and facts of thought (or mind) are too complex to be considered apart from each other. In this sense, we can refer to the reflection of French ethnologist André Leroi-Gourhan (1964): "Every production consists of a dialogue between the producer and the matter". Deciding whether a film dealing of a heritage more tells about tangible or intangible facts or events may then appear difficult.

- The Intangible Cultural Heritage Prize at the International Jean Rouch Festival

After the suspension of the Prize of Ethnological Mission between 1995 and 2007, the Intangible Cultural Heritage Prize came as its successor from 2008 until now on.

The Ethnological Mission proposed us to create and award this new Prize, given its role as one of the French actors and representatives of the Unesco's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage[1]. Through this action, it thus aims to support the "highlighting of productions related to the intangible cultural heritage"[2], considering the value

[1] The Ethnological Mission has published on its website the main principles of the Convention as they understand it, and provides details about the Mission's actions in this regard. See http://www.ethnologie.culture.gouv.fr/index-immat.html.

[2] http://www.culturecommunication.gouv.fr/Disciplines-secteurs/Patrimoine-ethnologique/Patrimoine-culturel-immateriel.

of documentary cinema in both its ethnological knowledge significance and its diffusion capacities.
The definition of heritage, and its representation through cinema, has evolved from one prize to another. Indeed, the Unesco's definition of the ICH defines the kind of heritage that should be considered as ICH – and thus be preserved or at least be candidate for safeguarding – within a vision which considers "the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills" as accompanied or joined to "the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith". So though this definition provides a similar logic as the one formerly adopted by the mission, it does not separate tangible objects from their use or representation any more. As we already said, it allows a wide understanding of what can be considered as a potential ICH, and thus allows selecting films within a wide range of thematic. Still, one issue remains. In the Unesco's definition, the "association" of tangible objects to their representation stays problematic: they are not considered as being *part* of the "intangible" practices.
In other words, when trying to state if a film interests ICH or not, shall we consider the materiality of things or objects as independent from their symbolic investment (interpretation, representation in words, emotions – more generally appropriation)? And conversely, shall we abstract a skill or a practice from its very material context[3]?
What we want to point out concerning documentary films which can witness of an ICH is that the whole goal may be to promote films showing the association between the context in which the objects are used (*i.e.* technical fabrication and use processes) *and* the representations and skills they led to develop, or which initiated or accompanied their development (and conversely). Here lies the issue of "the thingness of the intangible thing" as this conference pertinently pointed out.

2. Main issues during the films' selection process intended to compete for the Intangible Cultural Heritage Prize

We thus permanently address this issue during the films' selection process for our ICH Prize. Let's take a concrete example (short excerpt). The film co-awarded last year by this prize, "Quand les mains murmurent" [When Hands Murmur], deals with the apprenticeship of conductors at the Musical Conservatory of Paris. The reasons for which it has been awarded are quite clear: its concern for music (art) and skills' transmission. Still this film also constitutes, in our point of view, a very-well led reflection on the Conservatory of Paris, which is a specific learning institution, unique in France. If one considers the apprenticeship of conductors in another place or space-time, the resulting vision of music or conductors' teaching or skills – the "heritage" here concerned – shall be totally different of form and content. According to the film-maker Thierry Augé, it can not be asserted as representative of a shared identity, as the personality of the teacher makes the difference with other similar classes. So the question is: does this film witness French classical music and conductor's experience transmission – and in this case it can be considered as part of ICH definition; or does it more document one particular practice or the internal functioning of a unique learning institution (the Conservatory of Paris), embodied in a building of specific architecture specially designed for this institution? In this last case the film may appear irrelevant to the ICH Prize category, as it documents an institution in terms of "tangible" as much as

[3] The notion of ICH, and its establishment as a cultural actor, led to lots of debates. About its translations and following actions in France, see for example the papers of Bortolotto and Tornatore in Bortolotto (ed.), 2011.

"intangible", and more testifies of particular than "common" practices – even though it stills document music and transmission… It thus depends on our interpretation.
The whole process of selecting films for this Prize is moreover dependant on several interpretations:

- the one of each member of the films' selection committee, who may not agree to each other in their understanding of what is relevant as ICH, or – as much important – on the interpretation of the main subject of the film (to follow our last example: is it the music or the teacher or the Conservatory?)
- the one of the filmmaker on his own subject.

Regarding this last issue, we cannot forget that a movie always proposes a specific discourse – a personal representation – on a reality, as Jean Rouch et Edgar Morin put as an evidence in their film *Chronique d'un été* (1961). The editing, the shots, the sounding effects and the camera's place and vision are all and permanently issues of personal choices from the filmmaker to witness a reality as seen by his eyes. Indeed, these very choices and visions allow us to define which prize category we shall assign a film, which subject or theme shall be considered as the main important. There is thus a permanent oscillation between the undeniable construction of the film discourse, the film's subject, and the real-time recording of situations and events.
For us at the Comité du film Ethnographique, it is primordial to consider this last aspect. And it thus means to highlight films in which the filmmaker's approach, his specific eye, is not denied but on the contrary, claims his very presence, as much as the presence of filmed people shall be evident. We consider that, the more the shot reality consists of an encounter between the filmmaker and the actors, the more this film shall be able to witness this reality.

3. A vision of heritage in harmony with a vision of documentary cinema

All these issues finally address as much the way to consider intangible heritage as the forms and goals of documentary cinema in the way we want to promote it.
Trying to put down the stakes of our Intangible Cultural Prize for this conference made us realize that if the way we consider films dealing with intangible heritable is intimately linked to our cinema's vision, this is precisely because a documentary film is never only documenting on a practice or representation, but itself consists in a representation.
So in this last part of our presentation we will address some of the primordial stakes we, at CFE, think important to be considered when using documentary films in order to release, promote, or preserve ICH.

- The "alive" being of heritage and cinema

If we consider, like the Unesco does when defining ICH, that a socio-cultural heritage is alive, the immediate corollary is that its translation through documentary can't be the one of an illusory fixed reality, taking place in fixed space and time and which "traditional" component relies on its supposed "preservation" since years or centuries. If a heritage stands alive, this is precisely because it has endured transformations, relocations or translations, of which both its anthropological and cinematographic treatments should testimony. Documentary films can and should be used to make the world aware of its diversity, and especially concerning disappearing practices or memories confronted to homogenization and globalization. But in this regard, showing or demonstrating memories as if they were museum pieces or fixed realities will not help their preservation, it shall more lead to their final death. A living subject or heritage could thus indeed become a dead recollection. Instead of representing a heritage as

a pure essence, the film should seek how it stays alive and through which modalities, which necessarily requires to question its several and possibly contradictory positions.

- Heritage as an idenditary stake

One of the crucial points of the definition of ICH is that the concerned people (being a community or individuals) recognize it at their own heritage, and identify themselves through it. This is not here the time to discuss how much identity consists of a construction, but when releasing films presenting such a heritage, we shall keep in mind that the claim for one's identity, particularly though intangible heritage (because, precisely, it does not explicitly contain any "tangible" signature), always might be subject to political manipulation. This may not be a problem if the film reflects this dimension, but it would be if the film assesses a "true" identity without minding of the constructed ontology of an identity. This is particularly obvious in cases of a rivalry between individuals or communities claiming for a single heritage property (examples, music in Central Asia). Releasing documentary films about a specific heritage brings recognition to a intangible heritage, and we must think of how this recognition can be used and serve political goals, in its originating place as well as abroad.

- A shared encounter *vs.* the assertion of the authentic knowledge or memory

We already spoke about the documentary film as a reflection of the necessary encounter and reciprocity between the film-maker and the actors. To go further on this point, a single narration or appreciation of a "culture" in general, or of one its specific aspects (such a defined ICH), appears insufficient to document and moreover witness the life of a heritage. That's why several points of view and cinematographic approaches are needed. It can be done by releasing several films on the same thematic subjects, which will bring different views and narratives, through different aesthetical and cinematographic forms (that's what we do with the week of screenings which we devote, during our Festival, to "Compared Visions" on the same cultural or conceptual thematic). Another possible way is to highlight films which proceed from collaborations and co-productions, or from several narrations and authors. This confrontation of visions appears to us the only way to allow films to carry cultural memories – because memory itself becomes intangible through cinematographic process, objects becoming weaker in terms of memory value, in favor of the image.

In our vision, the more documentary cinema shall be engaged in a process of reciprocity between the actors and the film-maker, the more it will be able to serve a ICH. The selection of these films should take for primordial criteria the witnessing of this encounter, for an intangible heritage will stay alive only if it is shared. (short excerpt: "La Boucane").

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Directed by Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin (France)

« La Boucane »
France, 1984, 35'
Directed by Jean Gaumy (France)

« Quand les mains murmurent » [When Hands Murmur]
France, 2012, 58'
Directed by Thierry Augé (France)