Cadernos de Arte e Antropologia

Stop the Academic World, I Wanna Get Off in the Quai de Branly. Of sketchbooks, museums and anthropology

Manuel João Ramos

Abstract

Drawing as part of ethnographic observation practices has been systematically undervalued in anthropology, due to an academic tradition that has long favoured realist writing. Yet, sketching, not only as part of one's fieldwork activities, but as a means to convey one's first-hand impressions and interpretations can be given some room in academic publishing, if its rules are to be tweaked and image-recognition and tagging are introduced. To help make this case, this article presents the reader-viewer with a practical instance of interaction between field notes and drawings produced during a series of visits to the Parisian museum of Quai de Branly, as

means to a reflexion about the potential of drawing in anthropology's teaching and research practices

Full text

Prologue: sketch, publish and try not to perish

You are told you were born with a gift, with a talent for drawing. You hear this, you have your ego trip, you forget about it. But then you hear it again and again, and you start believing what others say about your "gift". And then you think: "what a nice way to socialize". So, you keep drawing and sharing your sketches throughout your life. You may make a living out of it, or you may not and prefer to do something more intellectually gratifying (possibly). But then drawing is already something you like doing and you keep it as a side practice, something that you enjoy because it does away with conscious verbal brain activity. And you still get a chance at socializing by showing (off) your sketches.

Consider the following scenario: you are pushed into pursuing a university carrier and your academic background is in a sketchy discipline known as "anthropology". Jobs being scarce in your home country, you still manage to "get in" and do the sort of things you're supposed to do as a "university guy": teach, read, talk, collect, mash-up and publish. And all is well for a few years until the whole concept of what the university is supposed to be seems to change. New words, new practices and new postures develop and you try to grasp them and adapt your old ways because you are resilient and you welcome the money every month's end. You are introduced to the "university of excellence", the "market university", the academia of inputs and outputs, of clients and products. You are told you're accountable and evaluatable, your job stability is threatened as a thing of the past. You are now supposed to sell young student-consumers new illusions or rather wrapping the old ones in new clothes. You had never made much of possible matches between writing and drawing before, and now you can't, really. You are being squeezed into being a mediator between the "university of excellence" and the emerging multinational market of online edition that sucks your written production into the standard boring format of bibliometrics. You are publishable or perishable and the inspector is a computer algorithm. You find out that there's no human mind running the machine of academic production and reproduction because it's quantity, not quality, that matters. And, as you are too coward to relinquish your job and to

fall off the grid, you learn about journal rankings and you interiorize the "P word" – P for project-based and time-framed research, as opposed to open-ended, meandering investigation (Walker Bynum 2007) – you waste much of your limited time writing up project call applications, shaping up your CV, reporting and offering yourself to evaluation and accountability, never wondering who evaluates your evaluating peers, but darkly wishing that they one day be as accountable to you as you are to them.

And then one day you receive a phone call because someone you had met before had remembered that you enjoy sketching and that someone thought of including your drawings in an edited book. You say, "Yeah, why not?" and you accept the offer. You travel, you do the drawings and then you learn that the book is not going to be published after all. You are left with the unpublished drawings and a sore taste in your mind; you put them away, and decide not to think anything of it. Except…

As the tyranny of the asphyxiating academic format spreads, you look for oxygen. You wish you could draw your way out of paper-writing boredom. You find out that you're not alone: you read that there are anthropologists valuing the long history of improbable connections between the drawn and the written (Ingold 2007; 2011); that they search for novel ways of ethnographic description through the use of drawings (Afonso, Kurti & Pink 2004; Gunn 2009; Ingold 2010); that some have actually produced ethnographic accounts in comic form (Newman 1998; Castillo Debal & Wagner 2012), that it is even possible to use drawings as part of one's teaching practices (Kushnir 2014); and that there's a niche market for drawings, travel and ethnographic accounts even in academic publishing (see, for instance, the University of Toronto Press series' *ethnoGRAPHIC*). And then you think: "Well, why not looking into my neatly ranged sketchbooks in the upper shelves of my office?" And those forgotten drawings are vying for your attention. You say to yourself that they can be easily published because they were made to be published anyway. You want to publish them as is, but – alas – no academic journal would publish them as is, without a proper introduction, a jazzy hypothesis, a deep-enough state-of-the-art, a small word on method etc. And what's worst, you are going to accept being "double-blind peer-reviewed" for something that wasn't meant for that kind of game. You re-shelf your sketches and give up. Or not.

This is roughly the story of how I ended up submitting the present article and accompanying series of sketches to an academic journal.

Is graphic anthropology possible?

The relation between drawing and ethnography is for the most part an historical one. It's a virtually dead relation. Travellers and ethnographers no longer have the money or the will to invite painters and draftsmen along in their incursions in the exotic world of the "other". That was a tradition developed by Western dilettanti from the 16th century onwards that had made sense in publishing terms because of Western eagerness to imagine the "other" with the supporting clutch of the printed drawing, watercolour or engraving. That tradition was took up by early 19th century explorers and ethnographers, reached interesting peaks in the illustrated ethnographic atlases, but quickly waned as portable photographic cameras became easily available (Kümin 2007: 59-60), and the authoritative naturalist paradigm based on "optical ethnography" emerged (Thomas 1987: 17). Thenceforth, as photographic and printing technologies

developed, and ethnographers turned into amateur photographers, drawing was progressively left in the hands of the "natives" (Soukup 2014: 536). Instances of collaboration were nevertheless kept during most of the 20th century among local folklorists and ethnographers, primarily as a function of museographic work and specially directed at illustrating material culture (Afonso & Ramos 2004: 66-67).

As the rhetoric of the lone-ranger anthropologist single-handedly taking on whole communities settled in the discipline and the monograph format was standardized in the early 20th century, all possible potential of investing in creative graphic forms to represent, describe and interpret ethnographic data faded away. More importantly, dismissing the practice of drawing as a relevant aid to observation and immersion in the field – and to that most mystical and exhilarating mental state of "being there" (Bloch 1997: 25-26; Watson 1999: 3, 15) – strengthened the perception that "objective" cultural comprehension could be exclusively attained through transfer of oral statements into standardized academic writing (Sperber 1982: 46, 83; Bloch 1997: 16); later, as "objectivity" gave way to "subjectivity" and "reflexitivity", the realist writing emporium was to be nevertheless unquestionably retained, for writer and reader are usually oblivious of the self-contained nature of the practice – i.e., of the spiralling traps of what Roland Barthes called the referential illusion of the *l'effet du réel* (Barthes 1968: 88) in the peculiar "game of writing" where the anthropologist imaginarily dissolves his/her self in the voice of orality in the very process of affirming his/her authorship of the text (Gomes da Silva 2006: 15; see also Sperber 1982: 24-26).

Of course, there is only so much anthropology has been able to do with drawings, even considering the growing attraction of the public for the "visual", the "graphic" and the "multimedia", and the mainstreaming of comics and graphic novels. It would of course be tempting to bring into a new light the graphic qualities of classics such as the *Renard pâle* (Dieterlen & Griaule 1965). But overall we have to admit that there is a fundamental obstacle to a revival of the relation between drawing and writing in anthropology: that of almost total lack of training at the early stages of learning the craft in academia. It takes a carpenter to be sensitive to the teaching of carpentry, and most anthropology lecturers around the world simply don't know how to draw or even think visually – notable exceptions notwithstanding.

On the other side of the mirrored wall, those that know what drawing is about and who even teach drawing academically – and particularly those that recently have been able to make a carrier out of the newly reinvented gender of the travel sketchbook (Campanario 2012; Salaviza 2008, 2014) – are too aloof of the semantic, epistemic and rhetoric intricacies of the intellectual world of ethnographic observation and anthropologic interpretation of culture and society. They basically like to draw and share their chiselled productions in neatly crafted volumes (see Perella 2004) and tend to show very little interest in the stiff art of theorizing.

Thus, the relation between drawing and writing in anthropology is, if not totally dead, at least in a dead-end and the most one can hope for is that a small niche market may develop that lets those few of us who have some sort of anthropologic background training and simultaneously like to draw go about without a sense of extreme frustration. That can hopefully be operated by some limited tweaking in the editing rules of peer-reviewed journals and books, specially now that online publishing is about to overcome print as the main source of diffusion of academic knowledge under a ruthless monopolizing scheme (Monbiot 2011). Bibliometrics and the newer webometrics (Thelwall 2008: 7) are surely a problem for those wanting to publish "ethnographic drawings", but then again they always tend to have visible limitations when it comes to social and human sciences' and humanities qualitative outcomes. Future

developments in webometrics (such as altmetrics; see Priem, Taraborelli, Groth & Neylon 2010) and particularly in image processing and pattern recognition may one day offer a way out of this conundrum but still the tyranny of the algorithm is here to stay, at least as long as the brave new digital world is not switched off or at least curtailed (Mayer-Schönberger 2009: 128 ff.).

Excursus: where the case is presented

The following pages are digital reproductions of 29 travel sketchbook pages produced by the author (me) during a weeklong series of visits to the *Musée des arts premiers*, a Parisian museum inaugurated in the last days of the presidency of Jacques Chirac, and situated in the Quai de Branly in the left bank of the Seine, a few hundred meters from the tour Eiffel (for a comprehensive account of the museum's creation, see Price 2007). As is mentioned in the accompanying notes of my sketchbook, the act of creation of such a museum derived from a presidential decision and should be understood both within the French quasi-royal tradition of the presidential *grands oeuvres* that mark the city's monumental architecture and within the framework of the highly competitive market of the cultural tourism industry, and namely as a Parisian cornered response to London's mecca of contemporary art mass fruition that is the Tate Modern. The materialization of an old cliché that has been cherished by the Western art history narrative – that of the opposition between the modern and the primitive –, the Museum of the Quai de Branly embarrassingly acknowledges the political incorrectness of the old expression "primitive" but by preferring that of the *premier* (translatable in English as "primal" with a wink to "first") it does little to question the validity of the ideological background from which its meaning derives. The further specification that it is dedicated to exhibiting the "arts" of all continents except Europe lends to the whole project an egregious sense of unabashed ethnocentrism. As my sketchbook notes also point out, the museum seems to both address the political intention of cultural integration of the non-Gallic selves of part of the French population that doesn't commune in the feeling that visiting the Louvre is an act of commemoration of national identity and offer paradoxical returns to the long-term French diplomatic investment in the process that lead to the approval of the UNESCO Convention on Intangible Heritage in 2003 (see Zacarias 2009: 162) – the exhibition of material culture of Oceania, Asia, Africa and the Americas is wrapped and sold as an illusionary telescoping to their far-off immaterial foundations, and the supporting presence of the Lévi-Straussian paradigm of the "symbolic" is overwhelming in its museographic discourse.

The visits, and their subsequent material outcome, the sketchbook, were made possible thanks to a creative reinterpretation of the scope of a grant offered under a bilateral Portuguese-French academic exchange programme. Bertrand Hirsch, former director of the former *Centre d'études des mondes africains* (CEMAF; now IMAF) of the University of Paris I - Sorbonne, had contacted me and a few other researchers to participate in the production of a critical and reflexive edited book on the Museum of Quai de Branly that in the end never saw the light. Two reasons for my enthusiasm towards the project were: 1) the fact that I had previously organized a series of conferences and seminars in Portugal on the ambiguous meanings of "intangible heritage" and the ideological parameters that bounded UNESCO's proceedings that led to the *Proclamation of Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity*,

and later to the *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*, and had published a number of articles and edited books on the subject (Ramos 2004, 2005; Medeiros & Ramos 2009); and 2) the possibility of publishing a book chapter that did entirely without printed written text, an interesting challenge in itself – Bertrand Hirsch had gladly accepted that I would circumscribe my participation in the book to the reproduction of the sketchbook that I was about to produce (the only limitation being that, for financial reasons, I would have to stick to using only black and grey on white paper).

    There was also a third reason for accepting the proposed task that was less evident for me then. I had first met Bertrand Hirsch in 1999 while in Ethiopia for the first time: he was then the director of the *French Centre of Ethiopian Studies* in Addis Ababa, an important logistic base for many European university researchers working in Ethiopia. The French intellectual presence in the country has stable and rooted traditions since the late 19th century and the Centre, with its rich and accessible library, its administrative support and its human resources, provides unusually good conditions for research there, be it for anthropologists, historians, archaeologists, geographers or linguists. There was an interesting *Trocadero* atmosphere about it – meaning that one could sense a mix of pro-colonial intellectual endeavour with interdisciplinary tones, and the ghostly presence of the anthropologist Marcel Griaule – who notoriously directed the Dakar-Djibouti Mission in the early thirties with the declared aim of collecting ethnographic materials for the future *Musée de l'homme*, and the less declared aim of returning to Ethiopia, where he had made his debut as linguist, anthropologist and novelist, some five years before (see Griaule 1991; Debaene 2007). The controversy surrounding the mission, and Griaule's activities in Northern Ethiopia, though very subdued in the anthropological academic circles because of his later success as the charitable *connoisseur* of the Dogon from Mali, is in itself both thrilling and shaming, a number of very interesting works having already dealt with it (Bosc-Tiesse & Wion 2005, Brumana 2002, Macé 2002). In my earlier visits to the *Musée de l'homme*, in Paris, I had been fascinated and intrigued by the carelessly dusty vitrines protecting the panels taken from the *Ab'ba Antonios* church in the rural vicinity of Gondar (Northern Ethiopia), one of the centrepieces of the predatory collecting activity led by the Dakar-Djibouti Mission members. As it is detailed in Michel Leiris' *Afrique fântome*, the published diary he had written as member of the Mission (Leiris 1996), the episode that resulted in the unhanging of the 17th century beautifully painted panels of the church and their transport to France is a masterpiece of deception equalling the offering of beads and mirrors to Amerindians or Africans in exchange for gold and silver in the Age of Discoveries: Griaule had convinced the local Orthodox priests of the amazing advantages of Western oil-mixed pigments over Ethiopian tempera by having the Mission's *artiste* Gaston-Louis Roux paint a "Crucifixion in the purest Abyssinian style" (so notes Leiris; 1996: 547) and then throwing a bucket of water over it; the church panels being heavily damaged by many years of negligent care of the church's thatched roof, Griaule and his team – as clear proof of the Westerners good intentions towards the Ethiopians – offered to repaint the panels with the magic pigments ("éblouissantes" is the word Leiris uses; 1996: 572). This they did with great enthusiasm as is depicted in the black and white photographs printed in Leiris' book, and for that they had of course to unhang the old and rotting canvas panels. The priests and the local population were thrilled with the glittering new panels and forgot about the old ones that lay next to the church; Griaule thus offered that the Westerners could do the Ethiopians the further favour of ridding themselves of the old panels and quickly tucking them away with the illuminated books, manuscripts, altars and the rest of the trove that was later to cost Griaule a legal clash with King

Haile Selassie (Bosc-Tiesse, Wion 2005: 18), and make him *persona non grata* in that country.

Now in Ethiopia I visited the same church and was astounded, not so much by the poor condition of the building, but by the almost total absence of the panels that had been painted by the Griaule team. The two decoloured and shabby paintings that remain in the lateral outer walls of the church's *maq'das* (or "saint of saints", the Ethiopian churches' equivalent to the Eastern Orthodox iconostases) were already in the late 1950s the only surviving ones (Staude 1959: 187, n2), the rest of the panels being of much more recent composition. When I interviewed the local priests, they ensured me that it was virtually unthinkable that Westerners could ever have painted the panels because that would amount to sacrilege – only an ordained Orthodox painter would be allowed to paint religious panels or icons (I preferred not to show them the 1930s photos proving otherwise). So ludicrous Marcel Griaule's trick seemed to me, and so insulting the whole business would feel to present-day Ethiopians, that for long it was difficult for me to make out much of it. One of the Mission's chief goals in Ethiopia, according to Griaule's preparatory notes, (Bosc-Tiesse & Wion 2005: 13), besides collecting fine examples of Ethiopian art and craft to exhibit in (French) museums, had been paradoxical from the start: they would endeavour to preserve *in situ* religious painting styles while offering local artists new techniques and materials. As it was, in the name of collecting and preserving (in Paris) a recognisably fine example of Ethiopian 17th century church painting, Griaule went about disqualifying his interlocutors' traditional painting techniques by shamefully peddling the superior virtues of Western oil painting and arrogantly show off their own artistic capacities (Bosc-Tiesse & Wion 2005: 15).

As I later toured the upper floor of the Museum of Quai de Branly, I understood the reason for the string of strange cubic extrusions that decorate the outside of the eastern façade of the massive building, the creation of architect Jean Nouvel: they are actually a series of niches reminiscent of side chapels in a church, and the central one is in fact the one harbouring the *Abba Antonios* panels that were brought there – as many of the Museum's contents – from the neighbouring *Musée de l'homme*. There they were (and are), at last in full glory, carefully restored and beautifully arranged for public fruition. But none of the intangible story of their stealthy displacement from the hilly rural Gondarian church was being told, maybe because Griaule's aura as the model French ethnographer is to be forever untouched, and because the iconoclasm inherent to the nature of museums is never to be openly exposed (Tamen 2001: 57-59).

Un-genreing anthropology

Writing, suggests Tim Ingold (2007: 122), is still drawing and their mutual fundament is both to partake cerebral images and to linearly relate them (idem: 90). Edmund Leach, in another context – that of Bible analysis – had already insisted in the need for a more comprehensive understanding of co-relative natures of writing and painting as complementary genres (Leach 1983: 89 ff.). One can write endlessly about museumgoers, about face-to-face encounters between humans and their material productions, about museum environments and logics. But here I would argue – maybe not very convincingly and surely not very originally – that a drawing might be worth a thousand words. This is what led me to offer to show (off) my sketches and my unsystematic jottings produced in a sunny summer week in the

Musée des arts premiers, in Paris. This, but also the wish that un-genreing and re-genreing anthropological production may help free it from its boring academic format, shake up its stiff argumentation forms and sapped styles – all too reliant in the game of referencing, quoting, paraphrasing and bowing.

   One final word about my decision to publish this article in English rather than in Portuguese (my "native-language"), in a mainly Portuguese-speaking journal: the texts that accompany my sketches were originally written in English – a small provocation given that they were supposed to appear in a French book and I felt that English would give the reader a better sense of distance in relation to a subject that is somehow very domestic in France. Rewriting the manuscript notes in Portuguese seemed to me artificial and an unreasonably unnecessary task, and one that would require the use of digital tools to remake the sketchbook pages. But if the manuscript text were in English, what sense would it make to write the present introduction in Portuguese, specially given the hurdles of the lack of a common orthography and syntax between Portugal's and Brazil's Portuguese? Also, as my own university evaluation platform clearly reminds me yearly, writing in English credits me with at least a third more points than writing in any other language.

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References

About the author

Manuel João Ramos
ISCTE-IUL, Lisbon, Portugal. Center of International Studies, ISCTE – University Institute of Lisbon.
manuel.ramos@iscte.pt

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