Intersubjectivity and Collaboration

A Conversation with Steven Feld

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LF: I think it would make sense to start from your new beginning with filmmaking, I believe that was in Greece, in 2004. I know you had had a training in the USA and in France before you left for Papua New Guinea, many years before, but then for a long period you seemed to concentrate on publishing works in (and on) sound. I'd be curious to know what made you take up the camera again, and to keep using it for such a long period during your West African fieldwork of the last 10 years. Something specific to the kind of research you were doing, the field site itself, or just a will to experiment in a different medium?

SF: Yes, you are right. I went to film school in 1973-1974 and was totally excited about making film a critical part of my first ethnographic field project, in Bosavi, in Papua New Guinea, during 1975-77. Jean Rouch taught me in Paris, in 1974, and at the same moment I discussed film experiments for musical and ethnographic work with other Musée de l'Homme researchers: Hugo Zemp, Gilbert Rouget, and Tran Quang Hai. Despite what I thought were reasonable proposals to develop research film approaches in Papua New Guinea, all of my grants were turned down. 16mm film, especially in a remote location, is a very expensive and logistically complicated matter. I simply could not afford to do fieldwork with film. So when I went to Bosavi I focused the research and all of my technological experiments on sound. That was because I owned my equipment, a stereo Nagra and AKG microphones, thanks to jobs in the film industry, and the costs for transporting, recording, and caring for ¼" tape was minimal compared to 16mm film. Well, it turned out fine! I mean there was so much about sound, in language, song, weeping, stories, environmental ambience to discover and apprehend in Bosavi. So in the end that period of work really set the stage for my ideas of anthropology of sound and voice, even if I did not get to make 16mm film as part of the project.

In the years immediately after that fieldwork I did some small experimental and research film projects, and also began translating more of Jean Rouch's work. Then I taught filmmaking and visual and sound communications, from 1980-1985, at the Annenberg School at the University of Pennsylvania. And on a six-month trip back to Papua New Guinea in 1984 Shari Robertson and I shot with an Éclair NPR 16mm camera. Bad luck intervened! The NPR's control switch was cross-wired.

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So when we selected "Sync 24 FPS" the motor actually ran non-sync and wild. Nothing of what we shot was synchronous sound at 24 frames per second. It was only when we saw the incorrect exposures and were unable to synchronize the 16mm workprint to magnetic film transfers that we got to the root of the problem. I still have the workprint and color negative original and the ¼" tapes with sync pulse. Maybe some day there will be a way to bring the material into the digital domain, synchronize it, and edit it; I would certainly love to do it!

Then, from 1985 to 1995, when I was at the University of Texas, I was intensely focused on anthropology of sound and its linguistic and musical branches. The most important project from that period was *Voices of the Rainforest* (Feld 1991), the one hour "day-in-the-life" of the rainforest and Bosavi people in sound. The editing and approach to that was very cinematic, very much like making a sound track to a film, with no images. And so I continued to think often and deeply about film and sound interactions. The same can be said for most of the next ten years.

It was the experience of spending some time teaching in the NYU Anthropology Department in the late 1990s/early 2000s that changed things and really brought filmmaking back into my life. The department's strong emphasis on film training, and the chance to work with excellent visual anthropology students and colleagues was inspiring. Faye Ginsburg organized a Chronicle of African Modernities film retrospective in 2000 where we all had a great reunion with Rouch; that also led to the *Ciné-Ethnography* (Rouch 2003) book project. Co-incidentally I was beginning to study bells in Europe in the early 2000s, and I bought a Canon GL2 camera in the months before a recording trip to the February 2004 Skyros carnival with anthropologist Panos Panopoulos and photographer Dick Blau. After the first long day and night of carnival shooting and recording Dick and I returned exhausted to our hotel room. At about 1am the phone rang. It was a friend calling to tell me that Rouch had been killed in a car accident in Niger. I immediately felt the swift kick of that pale fox. So from that moment, my thirty previous years on the outskirts of film led to these last ten years of intensive involvement with filmmaking. During these years, particularly in my Ghana jazz cosmopolitanism project, I've tried to work ethnographically and experimentally in film just as much as in sound or text.

LF: When I look at your 1976 article Ethnomusicology and Visual Communication *I think that the influence of Sol Worth's approach is fairly evident – retraceable also in the title of the article itself. I think in that article many of the principles that will guide your future work in sound and images are retraceable, yet I would like to ask you how do you feel your approach to filmmaking has changed with respect to those days. I refer mostly to the theoretical paradigms and expectations for what a film can do.*

SF: I met Sol Worth in 1972 at the Summer Institute of Visual Anthropology. I thought he had a great eye as a photographer and a deep intellect as an analyst of visual materials. That he was not an anthropologist was a strength and critical foundation for his argument that a visual anthropology had to first be an anthropology of visual communication. I was very young, 22, and had just finished my

first year in graduate school. Sol made a huge impression on me. I immediately wanted to read everything he wrote and I loved the conversations that continued very regularly for the next five years. Sol's early death in 1977 was truly tragic. Another twenty years of his work would have had an extraordinary effect on the field as we know it today. I was both saddened and deeply honored to replace him at the Annenberg School, running the film lab after his passing, and learning so much there from his close friends Larry Gross, a communications theorist, and Amos Vogel, a film historian. By the way, Larry and Jay Ruby have recently put together an important e-book of Sol's complete works, and it is great to see that now alongside the new critical interest in his "Through Navajo Eyes" project.

So yes, Sol was an important early influence for me in sound and film thinking, particularly in terms of how I came to integrate ethnographic, critical, experimental, and aesthetic practice. What I loved most and learned most from him was ways to simultaneously think with big and small ideas, to work laterally and contextually. In general I would say that it was talking with him about Bateson, Merleau-Ponty, Wittgenstein, Arnheim, and Gombrich that really helped me think about sound and image as interacting epistemologies, ways of knowing with and through the materiality of the senses. He deeply helped me to imagine ways to apply and to infuse those understandings artistically into film and sound projects.

My understanding and orientation to things visual in the 1970s was also deeply impacted by later teachers. One was Robert Plant Armstrong, author of *The Affecting Presence* (1971), who taught me aesthetic phenomenology and introduced me to more of the work of Dufrenne and Merleau-Ponty. In film and film sound, of course, there was the critical influence of Jean Rouch (particularly the Rouch of *Jaguar* [1969], *Petit à Petit* [1969], *Moi, un Noir* [1960], *Les Maîtres fous* [1955], *La pyramide humaine* [1961]). Also through Rouch, I was influenced by the attention to vocality and storytelling in the films of Oumarou Ganda, Inoussa Ousseini, Mustafa Alassane, and, later, Safi Faye. I was taken in this work by possibilities for radical political projects of reversing dominant representations, projects that could go considerably beyond what Rouch himself accomplished. I was also more broadly taken in the 1970s by the anti-anthropology cinema of Ousmane Sembène, as well as the work of experimental film diarist Chris Marker, and narrative and temporal experimentalist Alain Resnais.

LF: I'd also be curious to know how you think your work in sound in PNG has influenced your use of film in Ghana. This could be a very broad question, but here I'm thinking mostly of fieldwork methods – collaboration, feedback etc. – and of the continued interest in the relationship between sound, place and multispecies environments. In particular, how does this reflect in your films made in Ghana?

SF: This indeed all started in sound and in Bosavi, PNG, where in the 1970s I learned an enormous amount about feedback by playing back my tape recordings to work on annotated transcripts of song, story, weeping, and conversational texts. Sitting with headphones together with one or more Bosavi assistants, listening in

groups or in sequential duos really taught me so much about how text is made through contextual listening, and about the constructed, negotiated meaning-making process of translation.

The key shift in the writing and recording strategy of the Bosavi work, representationally speaking, came when I returned to Bosavi for a second and third time, in 1982 and 1984. By then I had been deeply reading the dialogical theory writings of M.M. Bakhtin, and had also begun to be involved in conversations with members of the "writing culture" and "anthropology as cultural critique" movement that emerged strongly in the US in the mid 1980s. My 1987 "Dialogic Editing" essay, later the afterword to the 2nd edition of *Sound and Sentiment* (1990), set in motion years of dialogic experiments with sound and writing, of which *Voices of the Rainforest* CD became the best known (both the sound recording and editing techniques, and the liner notes in the form of a letter to Mickey Hart). The experiences and experiments with sound and text in PNG over twenty-five years directly impacted everything I did with film in Ghana from 2004.

So all the Ghana work, like that in PNG, emphasizes participatory, shared, reflexive, collaborative and experimental practices, developed through techniques of dialogic editing in text, sound, and image. What is unique in Ghana is that the film work is inseparable from the work in sound or text; the ethics, politics, and aesthetics of my practice are one across the three media of representation. Emphasis on techniques of inspired improvisations among friends, and the search for new ways to make images sonic, make sounds visual, make texts vocal, that is to engage the full sensuality of each medium, follows as a heightened method for the work.

For example: the *Hallelujah!* film (2009a) was made at the request of Ghanaba and its structure was directly negotiated and edited with his participation. The *Accra Trane Station* film (2009b) started out as video recorded conversations about John Coltrane with Nii Noi Nortey, and chronicles three years of our deepening musical relationship. The *Por Por Funeral for Ashirifie* film (2009c) was made at the request of the La Drivers Union and Ashirifie's family and only achieves its intense intimacy because of their generous invitation to participate in the funerary events as both mourner and videographer. *The Story of Por Por* film (Feld and Nunu 2013) was made collaboratively with photographer Nii Yemo Nunu, and mimics the local storytelling form by an overlapping interplay of his voice with voices of twenty-five of his elder transport industry colleagues. These films all developed over long periods, with a great deal of dialogic editing and collaborative negotiation back and forth between the US and West Africa, making the camera a point for gathering conversation, a point of confluence of situated, negotiated, and potentially contested perspectives.

LF: I believe I can say that a common thread in your work has always been a certain degree of your own participation and reflexivity. I remember the pages in Sound and Sentiment *where you tell of your experiences at composing songs and weeping after the departure of Buck and Bambi Schieffelin from Bosavi, and their role in establish-*

ing the basis for a dialogue on music and emotions with the Kaluli. Or your playing Charlie Parker in the rainforest and commenting on his music with local musicians. It is possible to retrace your presence also in the films you have made in Ghana, and like the realisation of your sound compositions it has a twofold aspect: at times you are present as a point of view/listening, and the images and recordings have a definitely emplaced perspective that makes them very corporeal. But other times your presence is acknowledged by the subjects – I think especially to the speech at Ashirifie's funeral which mentions your film project and your closeness to the deceased – or you even appear in the frame – as a musician of the Accra Trane Station ensemble, for example. I was wondering if you could say more about the importance, relevance and purpose of your presence in your Ghanaian works, as it seems to be much deeper than the nowadays ubiquitous wink to reflexivity on the filmmaking process evident in so many images of filmmakers in the mirror – which seems to me just a box to be ticked to show awareness of the constructed character of the filmic ethnography.

SF: There is a shot sequence in the *Por Por Funeral for Ashirifie* film where you see my image with the camera reflected in the glass of the funeral hearse as I follow musicians all the way around it on their way to the cemetery. And you see me performing with Nii Noi and Nii Otoo in the *Accra Trane Station* film. And in *Hallelujah!* it is Nii Yemo's Nunu's black and white photograph of me behind the camera looking at Ghanaba that begins the conversational second half of the film. These are visual markers that have come to be associated with genre conventions of self-conscious, personal, or "reflexive" filmmaking.

But for me, "reflexivity," and, more critically, Rouch's notion of "ethnographic film in the first person" cannot be reduced to a moment here or there of such visual signs. And I would agree with your critical evaluation that the term "reflexivity" has been reduced, often cheaply, to a banal level of "selfie" shots in many documentary productions. I do not think of or practice "reflexivity" as a genre convention. I practice reflexivity as the epistemological, methodological, and ethical cornerstone of all of my research and representation. What is most critically at stake in the term reflexivity is ethnographic accountability: to self, others, and the making of representational work.

I was enormously influenced in my earliest thoughts about this by Rouch and Morin's *Chronique d'un été* (1961), the full character of which is only understood by both watching the film and reading the whole monograph. In Morin's essay *Chronique d'un film* you will see a masterful weaving of the situated, relational, perspectival, personal, ethical, intellectual dimensions of what it means to make a film. It is a brilliant essay on film as an ethical, political, and aesthetic commitment to, with, and for others. Morin's discussion poignantly dissects all aspects of the relations of the participants, of their historical and social contexts, of his relations with Rouch, with cinema, of the unfolding drama of cinematic and interpersonal process that was played out during that summer, and then negotiated, debated, condensed and left wanting in the editing process.

In the long tracking shot at the end of the film, when Rouch and Morin walk

up and down the corridor in the Musée de l'Homme, you experience an interaction of the two that is equally enthusiastic and tentative, equally pleased and worried. It is the premier example for me of the way reflexivity lives simultaneously in anxiety and hope, knowingness and vagueness. It is so telling that the film ends with an acknowledgement of complicity, a tricky, edgy, complicity that signals the delicateness of both a knowing responsibility and a lingering ambiguity: "nous sommes dans le bain." There is some remorse in those words, indicating that the participants didn't come together in a particular way through the film. There is a hope about what the film's playback might yet catalyze. The filmmakers are in the know about what didn't quite work, about how much screen time plays out in alienation, and how much in miscommunication, or what might be slightly deceptive or misleading about sociality and conviviality. At the same time they are in the know about the fact that they made a film and not a society, that they made a test of experiment, not a test of engineering. To acknowledge that a cinematic work of documentary art has limits as both documentary and as art strikes me as taking on the full sense of accountability signaled by the word and concept of "reflexivity."

This is why I think the *Chronique* film and book are still hugely relevant as a work that speaks to cinema, sociology of art, and visual anthropology. When I presented this monograph to Larry Gross and Jay Ruby they instantly agreed that we devote, in 1985, a complete issue of *Studies in Visual Communication* to translating it in its entirety. I was very happy to be able to include this all in the *Ciné-Ethnography* volume as well.

Returning to "reflexivity:" for me the Ghana films, both the features and the shorts, are instances of the very same thing that you can hear in the ten CDs and read throughout the *Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra* book: artistic experiments in collaborative research and authorship that honor intersubjectivity in and as intervocality.

LF: You have recently completed a new documentary entitled J.C. Abbey, Ghana's Puppeteer. *It is evident from watching it how this project has been collaborative since its inception, with Mr. Abbey performing with a series of marionettes for the camera, and Nii Noi Nortey providing a commentary that takes the viewer through this musical history of an independent Ghana. We also see the protagonists watching themselves on screen, and performing a soundtrack for some of Abbey's characters. Can you speak about the genesis of the project, and the role of your collaborators in it? I am also interested in the role of recording technologies in shaping the film as it is through layers of feedback.*

SF: I met musicians Nii Noi Nortey and Nii Otoo Annan in 2004 in Accra and we have collaborated on music performance and recording projects since that time. In 2005 they introduced me to their friend Nii Yemo Nunu, a photographer, and I have worked with him since then too, especially on the Ghanaba and Por Por recording and film projects. These three friends then introduced me in 2008 to puppeteer J.C. Abbey, their elder and colleague. Nii Noi and Nii Otoo have long

provided soundtracks for Mr. Abbey's community puppet shows, and Nii Yemo has photographed these activities for many years as well. Additionally many of Mr. Abbey's puppets reside at the Anyaa Arts Library, Nii Noi's community center for art, music, and education.

After this introduction I began to research marionette history in Ghana, saw one of Mr. Abbey's puppet shows, and also had occasion to film Mr. Abbey dancing and playing music at funerals (he appears in both roles in *A Por Por Funeral for Ashirifie*). So after years of work with Nii Noi, Nii Otoo, and Nii Yemo, I proposed that we join with Mr. Abbey to make a collaborative and collective film. I had in mind that Nii Noi, Nii Otoo, and Nii Yemo were very familiar now with the film storytelling process from the four Accra film projects and that they could convey the logic of working in film to Mr. Abbey in Ga, avoiding translation. I also had also been teaching digital photography to Nii Yemo, and he expressed interest to be more involved with filmmaking after our previous co-directed feature, *The Story of Por Por*. So it seemed the right moment, with Mr. Abbey's enthusiasm, to rename ourselves the Anyaa Arts Kollektif and work in a new and more completely collective and collaborative way.

We spent more than two years to develop and film this project, about Mr. Abbey's visionary puppet show rendition of Ghana's music history since independence. Mr. Abbey organized the puppets and performances and with the rest of us designed the sets. Nii Noi and Nii Otoo provided most of the soundtracks. Nii Yemo and I did the filming and I researched and sourced the older visual and sound materials. All five of us discussed and planned the narrative elements and storytelling form based on interviews with Mr. Abbey done by Nii Noi and Nii Otoo and then translated by Nii Yemo and me. We did a lot of dialogic editing as well, versions of the film edit going back to Ghana four times for feedback. So there were many collaborative layers to the production and this felt like a natural development from our ten previous years of music and video work.

From my side I also wanted the film to capture the friendship and camaraderie and complicity evident in the creative artistry of my collaborators. To set this tone the first thing that Nii Yemo and I filmed was Nii Noi, Mr. Abbey, and Nii Otoo watching a TV pop music video on my laptop. In fact it is a video featuring eighteen of Mr. Abbey's puppets. Although widely circulated in Ghana, Nii Noi and Nii Otoo had never seen the TV video and not heard the story of its production. I knew that filming the three of them watching a musical puppet show together would produce the feeling of closeness and pleasure that characterizes their friendship. We intercut shots from that group viewing with the actual TV video from 2000, as well as with Mr. Abbey's "lip sync" performance to the song. We ended up using this sequence to close the film and it serves well to summarize the spirit of the whole.

Regarding sound, yes, the film was very much shaped by recording, and this is something that we all came up with collectively. For most of the puppet shows Mr. Abbey performs his puppets to playback. Among pre-recorded tracks we have, for example, Mr. Abbey's Kwame Nkrumah marionette performing Nkrumah's 1957

independence speech, with the audio rich in patina from the original BBC radio broadcast. We also have materials from LP, CD and MTV-style video. For several sequences we first filmed Nii Noi and Nii Otoo performing; then we filmed Mr. Abbey's puppets performing to audio playback from those film soundtracks.

LF: This film has a decidedly different visual aesthetics from your previous documentaries, and you seem to have abandoned the previous verité *style through multicamera shooting, fast cutting and crossfades between different angles and use of archival footage. How much of this is a response to the specific subject of the film and what continuities are there with your previous films that go beyond the surface?*

SF: I never want to make the same film twice or even to completely use the same film techniques twice. Every film feels like an opportunity for a new experiment. And because of the new form and focus on collaborative method it seemed only right that this film should also have a very different look and sound. So, yes, this film employs a very different visual aesthetic to the four previous films. Not because it is inherently better, but rather, because it organically comes from the collaborative organization and from the specific possibilities, visual and sonic, of filming the scale, motion, and performance of Mr. Abbey's puppets. Different as that is, the main continuity with the previous four Accra films is the emphasis on storytelling through voice, sound, and motion.

In terms of technology experiment, this was my first experience with DSLR cameras and multiple lenses. We always filmed with two cameras, one operated by me, the other by Nii Yemo. A good deal of the time they were on mini tripods. Most of the sound was recorded with separate audio equipment and not synced via a microphone mounted on the cameras. This is all very different to anything I had done before. In most instances Mr. Abbey performed to playback of the pre-recorded, premixed, or pre-filmed audio tracks. This meant that we could film each puppet show two or three times in sequence, holding constant the same sound reference. Multiple takes of the puppet performances synced to unbroken audio also meant that we could edit each show from four or six synced image options. Additionally we always had a GoPro camera filming Mr. Abbey himself, adding additional cutaway possibilities. And of course in several cases we also had film of the musical performance to add in, not to mention archival photographs and footage.

All of this yielded a new approach to editing, including many different cutting speeds and rhythms, as well as optical overlay techniques. I had never tried any of these things before. Our editor, Jeremiah Richards, who has worked with me on all the Accra films, also happens to be a skilled deejay. Once again he brought a vibrant post-field creativity into the construction. Mixing and blurring the genres of historical documentary with pop music video was novel to all of us both during the filming and through the post-production. But I think that this genre mix and blur reveals Accra's intertwined politics of traditionality and modernity, colonial and post-colonial realities, nationalism and cosmopolitanism in Mr. Abbey's exceptional artistry.

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