

Methodological fetishism has the power to mix two classic elements of Western philosophy: subject and object

Interview with Massimo Canevacci¹

Por Clodilte Perez²

Recognized by his irreverence and creativity of someone who lives by his anthropological and ethnographic research and not only thinks about it, Massimo Canevacci offers us an enlightened path for those who intent to get closer to the understanding of the manifestations of contemporary culture through ethnography indicating referential authors, but also bringing attention for the need to emerge in digital culture, experience, reflect and transform, creating each of us our own path. He tackles central themes of his trajectory like methodological fetishism, stupor as necessity of investigation and the multividaus. But he also travels through ethnographical film, ethnofiction, the Hollywoodians, going through architecture, fashion and advertising, Canevacci exercises the flaneur about the contemporary landscape with ease and the mastery of a mature and daring individual, but keeping himself open, experimental, simply because this is how it's done. His irreverence is present in his infinite restlessness to how we produce scientific knowledge. His creativity is the fruit of a deeply interdisciplinary walk that goes across Communication, Philosophy, Culture Sociology, Psychoanalysis and Anthropology.

MATRIZes: What are the reasons that made you choose ethnography as a focus in your research? Are there other methodologies that you find profitable for this type of work?

CANEVACCI: When I started my formation in Anthropology I was presented to na author who is a *totem* in our discipline, Malinowski.

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He started a deep change in the scope of the time's cultural anthropology, which was a *desk anthropology*. The anthropologist was always sitting down, reading unending reports of missionaries and colonial workers. Malinowski said that this was not the way that the discipline should be elaborated, that we need to do field work. Malinowski left the classic thought and started a research that he would baptize as ethnography. And this is the most beautiful, difficult, complicated, scary, painful and passionate moment of our discipline. Why? Because ethnography is fieldwork in which the anthropologist need to be alone, trying to live in a context that he knows almost nothing about, is a stranger, where the culture is totally different, the values are different, and the system of life is different; he needs to elaborate a project called participating observation, which seems simple, but also very complex. The anthropologist, but really any researcher, needs to elaborate and develop an enormous capacity to observe each detail, each micrological element that is also filled with meaning, and at the same time participate. To observe and to participate are two contradictory elements that ethnography needs to practice by elaborating a training, so the anthropologist that practices ethnography needs to be trained in this kind of positioning, in which he is completely immersed in the culture, and simultaneously outside of it. Ethnography, to answer the question, was born in Cultural Anthropology; it was the main method of Cultural Anthropology, but in these last 20 years, ethnography does not belong only to Cultural Anthropology, and that is the most beautiful thing. From the development of cultural, post-colonial, genre studies etc., ethnography has become a methodological practice that any researcher who wants to interpret an element of contemporary culture must practice. This kind of autonomy of ethnography from a specific discipline leads me to believe that currently ethnography is an undisciplinary method, it doesn't have a disciplinary reference; it crosses different methodologies and viewpoints and, more than that, expresses the beauty full of pain and passion of staying in the field trying to understand what the researcher cannot understand.

MATRIZes: What would be the ideal formation for a ethnography researcher? What route of studies should he follow?

CANEVACCI: The researcher that intends to take ethnography as a methodology for fieldwork should, immediately, read Malinowsky's introduction. It's 50 pages and it's beautiful. I can honestly say that even now, Malinowski's methodological introduction about ethnography in the book *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) is the best introduction that could have been done.

After that there are other theorists, especially based on the works of Gregory Bateson (1904-1980) because Bateson wrote two fundamental books, the first called *Naven: a Survey of the Problems Suggested by a Composite Picture of the Culture of a new Guinea Tribe Drawn from Three Points of View* (1936), dealing with a Yatmul ritual, and the second, written alongside Margaret Mead (1901-1978), is the best ethnographic research applied to Visual Anthropology. The research about Bali culture, made by Bateson and Mead (published in *Balinese Character – A Photographic Analysis*) still expresses a fantastic dimension of how important ethnographic research using visual technology, specifically exercising the concept of sequence, because sequence (made through photos and video) as cultural unity, can expresser much more than the written word, the meaning of a culture. Another referential author is Geertz. Clifford Geertz (1926-2006), in *Interpretation of Cultures*, especially the first chapter, is a fundamental reading, but with some limits. However, Geertz limits are challenged by a group of researchers, in part his students, Renato Rosaldo, J. Clifford and George Marcus. From a text called *Writing Culture* by G. Marcus and J. Clifford, in which the context of ethnographic authority is put in jeopardy, a type of methodology is developed in which the anthropologist, and any kind of researcher, cannot state its voice as the only instrument that interprets another, because that would be a dimension of monological and authoritarian authority, that expresses only one type of voice, of logic, of epistemology, which is exactly that of the anthropologist. We now call it digital, the culture that since the first experiments has been affirming itself. It's not simply writing, be it from the anthropologist, be it the writing in general that can be formative for an ethnography researcher, he must also penetrate the complex language of visual communication and even more in digital culture. Because should the dimension be visual in general, but mainly the digital, that profoundly changes the critical paradigms of Clifford, Marcus and Renato Rosaldo, but that even so are still fundamental for their own formation. The way to communicate, the syntax, is also the form of power and decentralization that is being developed in the contemporary visual communication is a constitutive part of a formative experience. That means that it is necessary to see not only the great documentaries like the ones by Bateson, Jean Rouch, but also David Lynch, David Cronenberg and so many others. That is, fiction cinema is, in any case, interconnected with documentary language because any type of documentary is also fiction, has editing, sequence, choices etc. Just like contemporary architecture, design, fashion,

advertising, everything creates a kind of sensibility resulting from the expressive use of multiple languages, polyphonic, that the researcher must incorporate in his everyday investigation. On the street, going to the movies, speaking with people on corners, experiencing contemporary art, all of that is a constitutive part of a mosaic of the individual formation that is not equal for all. There is no method that can teach any person. Because sensibility, the aesthetic dimension in its most literal sense, is proper of a feeling of what culture is nowadays is part of a biography that each researcher must elaborate, criticize, develop and displace; so it's, for me, strongly dynamic and also individual work. It's not an only guide; it is a continuous dialogue. The dialogic dimension is an integral part of the formation of the ethnographer along his referential authors.

MATRIZes: In the course given during your stay as a visiting professor at PPGCOM-ECA/USP, one of the concepts that was thoroughly explored was that of *methodological stupor*. In several of your texts we find the concept of *methodological fetishism*. Could you explore these concepts a bit further? How are they similar?

CANEVACCI: First off, the method is always pluralized for me, that is, it's always *the methods*. There is no interpretative *one method* in research; in any discipline, we need to multiply the methodologies. Each person, more or less, in their own autonomy must apply this methodological mixture in the specific context. Each context, in any manner, has its own methodological sensibility, which the researcher needs to understand. We travel from method to methods, pluralizing that kind of imposition. In this kind of panorama, methodological fetishism was the first method that I elaborated more clearly, because I always had difficulty in writing about *the method*; not only because I follow and exercise plurality, but also through other problems that I will tackle later. Fetishism is a constitutive element of experience in our research and daily life. I tried to apply methodological fetishism with a distance, staying outside, staying by the sides, objectifying. Fetishism has this power of mixing two classical elements of western philosophy: subject and object. So, I need to be penetrated in power, staying completely inside, taken by fetishism, and, simultaneously, staying outside, inside and outside. It's like jumping, thinking specifically about rational logic. I imagine that this is no longer possible. In reality, I need to mix elements of new forms and also disturbing elements of my identity construction. This way, it's important to notice that each detail is meaningful, as I

mentioned in the beginning. It's not true that everything is homologated, it is given, everything is "wow", it isn't. Each element is significative many times over in details. In this sense, the interpretation is also a destruction, a segmentation, a fragmentation. Here, an important reference is Walter Benjamin, but also Baudelaire, because it presents a poetry that is offered to communicational liberation. Thus, I started elaborating these concepts about 20 years ago and have been improving on it. After that, I understood it was not enough, that there were some other elements that were born inside me recently, some five or six years ago, based greatly in the concept of stupor. I can also speak of something apparently banal – I am not sure whether it is banal – but I was first watching a movie that dealt with the concept of stupor, based on Adorno and Schumann's view, it seems like I am digressing, but I am not. Schumann was a 19th century musician, an emblematic one. He created a kind of sonic soundscape that had never been heard in the time. That's *the moment before*. In Italian I prefer to say *l'attimo prima*, but I think the translation in Portuguese can be *the moment before*. This kind of *moment before*, to me, is related not only to the exploration of Schumann's music, at the time contemporary, but also to the ethnography method; because the ethnographer, very frequently, stays in a context in which he does not know what will happen (moment before). For instance, there is no way to predict what will happen in a Bororo village, in the São Paulo metropolis, or on the Internet screen. So, as an anthropologist, as an ethnographer, I need to train myself to assume the dimension of stupor as an incorporated methodology. It is the desire, that is, the stupor is a kind of corporal methodology, understanding it as intelligence, rationality, sensibility, fear, angst etc., in front of an event that I do not know, but exactly because I don't know it, I desire it. Because the strange is a constitutive part of the ethnographic experience; the researcher tries to seek what is strange and make it somehow familiar. It is complicated, but he must do it. However, the strange in the formation of the contemporary citizen, when he encounters what is weird, a person seeing other cultures for instance, he needs to understand that the strange is an integral part of his own experience. He is researcher only because the strange goes into his vital experience. And also the citizen is a citizen, because the strange is within his national or urban space. The problem with stupor is that my capacity of being an ethnographer is constantly put in jeopardy and displaced; I must understand the displacement not only as a challenge, but also maybe as extreme pleasure.

MATRIZes: Traditional distinctions between body and commodity, organic and inorganic, normal and abnormal were metamorphosed by fetish, motivating the entanglement and the mutual assimilation, as is explored in your book *Fetichismos Visuais*. One possible direction for reflection is that we walk towards the end of opposites? Would the fetish be the solvent of traditional polarizations?

CANEVACCI: Exactly at the end of the research on visual fetishism, I started asking myself about that. Because it is true, fetishism has a classical element the critical research (based on Marx, Freud, the Frankfurt School), which is based in a dimension of reification. But it was here that my still evolving process was started. Not everything is a commodity. At the same time, the question of commodity is that commodity is not a single synthesis, it's only incorporated. Quite the contrary, the commodity is not that which incorporates each objectivity, or each objectification; there are things or objects that are not commodities. So this kind of relation to subjectivity and objectivity is a central point of fetishism, which has this capacity for unity. Maybe I could favor a type of affirmation and composition, which places in jeopardy what I find very appropriate, that is, the crisis of dialectics. Dialectics are a form of thought, of control, of dominance, of transformation, as a revolutionary form of thought, or human relation, nature, history. I think that this kind of logic is in crisis and we need to always affirm more this crisis of dialectics. This could mean that what we understand as anthropology based on anthropocentrism (anthropocentrism means that anthropos, human being, is the center of all things), is a classic discussion. It exists only because it is useful to subjectivity, but it may be possible to eliminate, cut, destruct the concept of utility, incorporating that of expressive autonomy that Walter Benjamin dealt with in the figure of the collector. Collector is that person, that figure that tries to determine the value of trade of a thing. So, I had the following thought: that fetishism is not simply connected to reification, because the contemporary commodity is different from the classic commodity. It is a material/immaterial commodity, and thus it puts dialectics in crisis. Current commodities cannot be interpreted according to traditional anthropological classifications. Selecting one thing, exactly as if it were an individual, as if it had a personality, an identity, a history, a biography, a biology. This kind of individuality of things is not simple. It exists in its own subjectivity as a human being. Thus, fetishism has a potential of creating a liberation of things, of objects, and sometimes also of commodities. In this way, the concept carries the potential of liberating a viewpoint, which to me is fundamental, that things cannot be, as animal and nature in general, instrumental elements of power of the

human being; they can create their own autonomy, in which the dialectics are put in crisis between subjectivity and objectivity. Even the great contemporary artists of metamorphosis have been working in this perspective, that is, that each form does not stay identical to itself, but the form of each elements can go beyond itself. *Metamorphosis and metafetishism* can be an alliance to present a kind of vision, let's say, I don't want to use the word political – because political is a bit “dirty” – for a syncretic process of liberations that are ubiquitous transfigured and mixed. It is important to understand that the concept of subjectivity is not only from the human being, but from a thing, from a commodity, from an object, from an animal, from a plant. Understanding that, to me, means changing a lot of my traditional thought and understanding how, maybe, the crisis of dialectics brings luck and enriches this discussion.

MATRIZes: In some of Benjamin's books, the basis of his arguments are Hitchcock movies. One of the questions he raises is about the look. He says that Hitchcock films as if the objects could look at us. There is a look in the objects that come to the subject that is watching and, through this view the object talks to us. There is a communication with the character that is looking at the object, be it a curtain, a telephone, stairs.

CANEVACCI: A knife (*laughs*).

MATRIZes: Yeah, the knife! It would more or less proportional, within this idea of metafetishism, to say that objects look at us?

CANEVACCI: Absolutely. I have two Hitchcock references that I love and continue to move me, and are very similar to each other. The first is from *Vertigo*, and the second from *Psycho*. *Vertigo* was revolutionary because in its introduction, the first images, when we still don't know about the plot, are based on vertiginous rotation of what, in the end, is a fixed eye. It's a beautiful sequence of images. In *Psycho*, when the woman is killed and her blood drips down the bathtub and circles the drain, it spins round and round, creating a vertigo that is, again, similar to an eye. The relation of vertigo of looks, but having the sensibility and also the visual is based on an affinity that, to me, Hitchcock created perfectly between what is apparently a hole where water drains and what is the pupil of the look. The pupil is like a knife. But there are many other references in movies. To me, the history of cinema, in great part, is Buñuel and David Lynch. David Lynch is even more advanced in his experiments about look. Lynch can express this kind of subjectivity of an object being filmed with the incredible power that it has

in a single sequence; the sequence of camera movement that is focusing simply on a wall full of sensibility that is also corporeal, organic, *pure* fetish or film metafetishism.

MATRIZes: A concept we evaluated as importante in your research is that of the *multividual*. The multiple identities that cross over. When have you started to notice traces of this identity *shattering*?

CANEVACCI: First I'd like to answer in a humorous manner. I was at the airport, like 3 years ago, and I noticed someone near me doing the crosswords. The question was: which anthropologist elaborated the concept of the multividual? (Laughs). It was a very popular crossword. The most beautiful citation of all my life, who knows how it got there? I cannot imagine, but I was both curious and happy. So, this thing about the multividual, for me, was born in a discussion with my students in Rome, because a lot of them had a very exuberant formation, clearly very critical, even exaggerated in certain aspects. There is also the influence of several authors, I don't remember exactly which was the author of the biggest reference, because they are indeed several. But as I was saying, the concept of multividual was born in a class at *La Sapienza*, as a result of a heated discussion with some students. From that discussion I started a slightly more elaborate thought about the question of identity. I thought that a vocabulary would be dead if it simply reproduced the words we already use; luckily, vocabulary is always in motion, so I thought of creating something different, that was able to express my intentions. Also because of that, I thought that the concept of individual was not anymore the one that could completely give meaning to what I wished to express, a much deeper crisis of the concept of identity, of subjectivity and culture. And also because my second book, which was translated in Brazil, was called *Dialética do Indivíduo*, and I wanted to manifest that change. At the time, I still had my formation in dialectics, very frankfurtian, with a petit-bourgeois tone, I don't know. I wanted to expand that view. Subjectivity has much more meaningful elements, but to me subjectivity is a much more philosophical concept, which is more encompassing, as I mentioned earlier. Individuality has a history that is very interesting to me, because it references Nietzsche, who tried to elaborate a dimension by which the concept of individual could not be, as in the philosophical tradition, subjectified. Nietzsche tried to elaborate a dimension of individuality prior to *dividuality*, of *dividual*, the space changes radically. So, to me, with the spread of digital culture, with the crisis in dialectics and other elements, I started to imagine that

the question of identity in contemporary culture could be developed in a much more pluralized way, without going into the domain of schizophrenia. It could and it should pluralize itself. I think this kind of pluralization of the multivocal, of the “mes”, also has as reference – which I found later with a bit of fright, but was very happy in the end – in Fernando Pessoa. He has a poem called *O eu e os outros eus* (*The me and the other mes*, roughly translated). So, also Pessoa, and it’s not casual that it is Pessoa, because he is also a constitutive part of multivocality (with his heteronyms). However, this plurality is present in several contemporary artists. Thus, I still think that now the concept of *multivocal as heteronymy of mes* is a challenge to contemporary culture, communication and consumption, which can incorporate the dimension of stupor.

MATRIZes: In your book *Antropologia da Comunicação Visual*, you speak of the semiotic character of anthropology, and furthermore, of Visual Anthropology that is constructed from three subjects: the author of visual text, the actor in the scene and the spectator. How do you evaluate this semiotic character regarding the increasing complexity and transit between these subjects?

CANEVACCI: I have this very simple problem and I can easily say that, to me, I interpret semiotics like Geertz in *Interpretation of Cultures*, that is, that they are symbols and signs. I will not go into the scholar semiotic tradition, of Greimas, Umberto Eco, Peirce. I have to understand how signs and symbols proliferate and what is the difference, for me, in the anthropological sense, between these signs and symbols. Essentially, to me, Visual Communication, I think even more so digital connection, because that book was written when it communication was completely analog, that is, the early 1980s. The interpreter, let’s say, academic, would not involve the so-called spectator. So, in first place, I think that everyone agrees that a work of art, a visual work, a documentary, a cinema, his interpretation does not belong only to the author. The author has his point of view. The work becomes autonomous to the author. Each work is partially autonomous of the author. The second question is the spectator. A spectator cannot be spectating, that is, a passive recipient that drink visual communication elaborated by an interpreted author, for instance, an academic, as it happened with students in the past. The spectator now always becomes a *spect-author*, he becomes an author, who has the capacity of interpreting in an autonomous manner the meaning of any kind of movie, play, visual communication in general. In that sense, it is created a certain circulation between the author, the interpreter and the spect-author, who no longer has a closed final conclusion. That is, as is in Nietzsche’s truth, as I said earlier, my way of reading a visual work

from Hitchcock, from Lynch, from Gregory Bateson, from Jean Rouch and others, is not fixed in time and space, it needs to change. In that sense, always stating more than one kind of interpretative fluidity is important in my opinion. Therefore, unfortunately, semiotics as a system does not belong in my way of seeing.

MATRIZes: Even if the visual is central in almost all contemporary communication processes, it is clear the trailing of a path towards the expansion to other sensorialities. So, olfactory, gustatory, textural explorations, present in fashion, in advertising, in design, in architecture. With all this expansion that we are experiencing as consumer and producer, where do these figures mix, the Anthropology of Visual Communication continues to be the path to handle it, or is this *visual* reduced? We know in your trajectory it is not reduced, but couldn't this name be a little limiting?

CANEVACCI: Excellent question, because clearly multisensoriality is not a dimension, but are dimensions that are Always involving the experience of contemporaneity. In truth, this question of multisensoriality already in Symbolism, with an author like Rilke, who had extraordinary visions about the potential of literature, but also art, because he was also a student and secretary to Rodin, seemed to create this type of multisensoriality so present today. Developing a power of seeing against the power of the nose, of the smell. The human being would not be human without putting in jeopardy the determining power of smell. So, because of this, we still smell perfumes etc. However, the relation between our nose, which is which is on the center of our face, and the eyes, which are more lateral, is a dimension of power of the seeing over the nose. So I like to say the nose is an archeological monument, that stays here, but has a meaning more to create symmetry in our face, but does not work in sensorial communication, for now. I think it hardly will, even in the future. The dimension of tact, on the contrary, is strong, incredibly strong. So, certainly, in field experiments, for instance, of art, for a long time has been developed a kind of tactility that is a constitutive part of the aesthetic experience. Yes, we could speak of a Multisensory Communication Anthropology.