

# MARTOR



---

Title: “If Roublev Had Been Given a Video Camera. On Inverse Perspective, Transcendental Style and Ethnographic Film”

Author: Gabriel Hanganu

How to cite this article: Hanganu, Gabriel. 1997. "If Roublev Had Been Given a Video Camera. On Inverse Perspective, Transcendental Style and Ethnographic Film." *Martor* 2: 94-102.

Published by: *Editura MARTOR* (MARTOR Publishing House), *Muzeul Țăranului Român* (The Museum of the Romanian Peasant)

URL: <http://martor.muzeultaranuluiroman.ro/archive/martor-2-1997/>

---

*Martor* (The Museum of the Romanian Peasant Anthropology Journal) is a peer-reviewed academic journal established in 1996, with a focus on cultural and visual anthropology, ethnology, museum studies and the dialogue among these disciplines. *Martor Journal* is published by the Museum of the Romanian Peasant. Interdisciplinary and international in scope, it provides a rich content at the highest academic and editorial standards for academic and non-academic readership. Any use aside from these purposes and without mentioning the source of the article(s) is prohibited and will be considered an infringement of copyright.

*Martor* (Revue d'Anthropologie du Musée du Paysan Roumain) est un journal académique en système *peer-review* fondé en 1996, qui se concentre sur l'anthropologie visuelle et culturelle, l'ethnologie, la muséologie et sur le dialogue entre ces disciplines. La revue *Martor* est publiée par le Musée du Paysan Roumain. Son aspiration est de généraliser l'accès vers un riche contenu au plus haut niveau du point de vue académique et éditorial pour des objectifs scientifiques, éducatifs et informationnels. Toute utilisation au-delà de ces buts et sans mentionner la source des articles est interdite et sera considérée une violation des droits de l'auteur.

*Martor* is indexed by EBSCO and CEEOL.

## If Roublev Had Been Given a Video Camera. On Inverse Perspective, Transcendental Style and Ethnographic Film

Gabriel Hanganu

*The Museum of the Romanian Peasant, Bucharest*

### Dilemmas

Over the last three years I have done field-work research on religious life in the monasteries in Northern Moldavia. I have used a HI8 camera as well in order to add visual information to my notes.

In addition to my theoretical research I have been interested in making a film on the everyday vs. feast rhythms in a small orthodox community of monks. This project eventually came to an end last year, when I made a short film, the name of which is *Roiuri* (Swarms).

Apart from everyday religious life, I was also interested in the popular pilgrimages made on certain occasions to the monasteries in the surrounding area. As a matter of fact, Northern Moldavia is the most well known Romanian religious area. It is renowned abroad mostly for its exterior painted churches, but praised by local people as a sacred region where they usually come to pay respect and ask for Divine help.

Most of them come each year on the Ascension Day, the religious feast of the Neamt monastery, one of the greatest in Moldavia and the spiritual center of the region.

The pilgrims normally begin their trip 3-4 days in advance, and stop at some other 5-6 smaller monasteries on the road. As with other

European pilgrimages, the belief is that the prayer is better received if accompanied by personal sacrifice. Therefore they are happy to walk across mountains, sleep on the floor of small forest huts in the woods, fast all along the road and make small contributions of money for the communities of monks they encounter.

Other pilgrims arrive by car or by bus, but normally not later than the evening before the Ascension. They go into the church of the monastery, bow, cross themselves and kiss the icons, light candles, write lists of the names of their relatives, so that they can be invoked during the Holy services.

They pay special attention to Holy Mary's icon, one of the most venerated in Romania as a miracle performer. People bow and pass underneath it as a sign of their faith and respect.

After the Vespers most of the pilgrims stay awake much of the night. Some of them read special prayers from small religious leaflets, while others simply chat to each other.

Next morning, after the Holy Water ceremony, which takes place in a special building by the monastery, the priests, bishops and the Metropolitan of Moldavia, enter the big courtyard of the monastery, shower Holy Water over the people and give their benediction. They then proceed with the Divine Liturgy, which takes place

on this special occasion not in the church, but on an open air wooden stage in the middle of the court. On such a very special occasion, the altar, which in the orthodox church is normally hidden behind the iconostasis, may be seen entirely, as a symbol of the open heavens prepared to receive Christ's Ascension.

At the end, most of the pilgrims go in front of the altar to have the Eucharist bread and wine, which in the orthodox church are mixed together in the same cup and served by the priest with a teaspoon.

One would normally confess and fast at least several days before the communion; therefore the tough pilgrimage period is generally seen as an excellent opportunity to prepare one's soul for the communion.

This rough description is meant to give a general idea of the facts and should be seen only as a formal skeleton. It is important to have it though, because it relates to the problems I was confronted with, while watching the footage taken over the last three years.

We might call the first difficulty '*the collective character dilemma*'.

Although I have discovered lately that the problem is not new, since most film-makers dealing with religious ceremonies have mentioned it, I was very unhappy at that time with my incapacity to find a proper way of filming big crowds of pilgrims.

I tried to do it in two different ways: first, by taking them as individuals; second, as a mass character.

While watching my rushes I noticed that following the first way, I had shot them most of the time with a sort of intellectual doubt concerning their faith.

'Did they really believe in their sacrifice?'. I was constantly asking myself. The way in which

they proved their faith deceived me to a certain extent. I couldn't understand why they had walked such a long way in order to finally and simply sit on the grass, chat, or look at the others. I expected their sacrifice with the pilgrimage to have been crowned by incessant prayers in the church, or at least by a more concentrate attitude towards the Holy.

They seemed, on the contrary, quite detached and happy.

Shooting them as a mass character, the problem was somehow similar. I had imagined that they represented the body of the Church, the Head of which was Christ, and consequently I had tried to show this via camerawork.

Actually I hadn't been able to film a *visual body* of the pilgrims, but rather a *mental one*. Later on I could see that it was not the best way of doing it.

The second problem I was confronted with, was a temporal one. Let's call it '*the round time dilemma*'.

Since the first shots I had been aware of how important was to spend long enough time with people I was going to film. But how could I do that, when I had to deal with random characters

who came at Neamț for one or two days and who couldn't say for sure that they would be back again the next year. And if they did come again, how could I meet them in that yearly shifting crowd?

In fact, by filming there year after year, I was acting as if unconsciously illustrating a would-be-paper '*The Religious Pilgrimage at Neamț Monastery*'.

I didn't use my rushes about the pilgrimage for an edited film after all. I watched them instead as a good observation exercise for the next stage: what to focus on if and when I wanted to make a film on this subject.



Putna, 2 July 1992  
(photo D. Dinescu)

The third problem was in a way a corollary of the previous ones.

'What about me?', I was asking myself. 'Do I believe what these people believe?' I reasoned that if I did, *I might feel something* of what they experience by being there; but the price to pay is that I won't be objective anymore.

If I didn't believe, I will most probably experience *nothing of their feelings*; and so my testimony will be that of a false witness.

How could I get out of that basic dilemma of the human sciences?

At that time I had no answer to the question at all, and consequently it was mostly intuition that showed me how to film.

Now I have found out that students of religious anthropology are offered various trajectories to follow, but as a general rule they first learn as much as possible about the people they want to work with, and then they carry out fieldwork by trying to get totally immersed in their belief system. Finally, they take an objective stance and distill their experiences into coherent rational theories.

I don't want to comment on this teaching system, since I consider myself only a novice on this apprenticeship ladder.

I can say, though, that my first experience has made me understand that being theoretically familiar with your subject is not enough. And particularly when vision is concerned. For instance, knowing that the relationship between the individuals within the Church is similar to that one between the organs of a body, didn't help me too much. On the contrary, it made me film the collective character in the manner of a visual illustration.

I came, therefore, to the conclusion that I had to share those peoples' beliefs. I spent two months in a small orthodox community in the mountains. This was an important stage in my anthropological 'initiation'. It was there that I filmed *Roiuri*.

## The Inverse Perspective

Strangely enough, it was in France, where I have just spent seven months, that I discovered the visual universe of the orthodox icon. Maybe as a mirror to the catholic religious paintings and statues that I saw in the churches, maybe as a completion of my work there, which was related to Christian mystics.

Anyway, it was there that I found out that the icons I have venerated all along the last years are not mere painted images of Christ, the Holy Mother of God and other saints. They are in fact 'mystical gates', through which the faithful can have a more direct access to the Holy.

I will briefly try to summarize this issue by referring to Pavel Florenski's essay *The Inverse Perspective* (romanian edition: 1997).

Florenski's main point is that the lack of realism in Byzantine religious art did not come from a lack of intellectual development, as is stated in most of the histories of art before him. He demonstrates that since the V<sup>th</sup> century AD, geometry had used the linear perspective (the parallel edges of objects, when represented in a plane, meet at one point). Therefore, if religious artists avoided it in their attempt to represent the Holy, it was by their deliberate choice and not because they were 'geometrically insensitive'.

In Byzantine art and in most of the later orthodox icons, the parallel lines *diverge* instead of converge at a point in the icon. As a result, the viewer can sometimes see three walls of the same building simultaneously; or the forehead, ears and temples of a character on the same flattened face.

The proof that this is not a random device is that the so-called 'aberrations' are reinforced with vivid colors, unjustified by realist logic. For instance, often the edges of the Bible held by Christ are painted violet; or the lateral walls of the houses have brighter colors than the facades.

By quoting Vitruvius, Florenski shows that the first practical use of the linear perspective was the theater design. When he started painting



*The Holy Trinity*; by Andrei Roublev

the background of the stage, the scene-painter fell into the trap of creating illusion. Instead of following the painting's original and sacred attempt to point towards the truth of existence, he began to copy reality.

Byzantine religious artists reacted against this realistic visual device by using the inverse perspective. With its lines meeting somewhere in the viewer's eye, the icon highlights that what we see is *not* what it may seem at a first glance.

In one of the most well-known orthodox icons by Andrei Roublev, we can see three characters sitting at a table. They have wings and silver diadems around their heads, so we may think of them as three angels. The long sticks in their hands suggest that they may be pilgrims or messengers. But note the stones under their feet and the two chairs. This is a classic case of inverse perspective. The parallel edges of the objects *converge in our eyes* instead of meeting somewhere behind the characters, as in linear perspective.

We may notice then the little rectangular hole in the facade of the table.

Gabriel Bunge (romanian edition: 1996) explains in a very interesting essay on Roublev's art that this is the closet where the altar table keeps a tiny piece of a saint's relic. This closet is always set on the eastern side of the altar. But as we can see it, that means that we look at this table from its east side, namely from within the altar.

*We are in fact in the altar*, if we look 'faithfully' at the icon.

This is absolutely remarkable, because in the orthodox church the altar is normally hidden from profane sight by the wooden wall of the iconostasis.

The three characters are sitting in fact around an altar table.

The central one can be easily identified as Christ, because this is the place of the priest during the Eucharistic sacrifice within the Liturgy. He bows his head and looks to the Father as if asking for permission, while his right hand

points towards the third character to his left. It is him he is asking for: The Holy Spirit, whom he had promised to send to his disciples after his death and resurrection.

The Father looks and gives his benediction to The Holy Spirit, who inclines his head and lays down his arm as if nodding.

The three angels are very much alike, but at the same time each has its own personality. Their clothes share the same color blue, generally interpreted as the Divine Essence, but their garments are combined differently one from the other.

Roublev managed to find a specific form within the eastern religious art through which the 'similarity-but-difference' of the Holy Trinity could be expressed entirely.

As for the western artists, they followed the path opened by linear perspective, *trompe l'oeil* and three dimensionality in their attempt to represent the Holy.

Andre Bazin (1967) emphasizes: 'Perspective was the original sin of western painting. From that point on, the spiritual quality of art steadily diminished'.

In brief, Byzantine icon-makers used the inverse perspective as a way of showing that the icon is different from an ordinary painting. They could have used the linear perspective, but they didn't find it appropriate for their goal. Why? Because the role of sacred art is not to copy reality, but to introduce a certain type of movement in the viewer's soul.

### The Resistance of the Holy

In his book *Transcendental Style in Film* (1988), Paul Schrader has an interesting point of view concerning the way in which some filmmakers have attempted to find a filmic form capable of expressing the Holy.

Schrader begins his study by introducing the two terms of a dicotomy concerning the artistic means, which he borrows from Jacques Maritain (1965).

According to it, the so-called 'abundant means' (*moyens temporels riches*) are the artistic devices used by the artist in order to sustain the public's interest. They are mainly concerned with 'practicality, physical goods and sensual feelings' and they demand by their nature 'a certain measure of tangible success'.

The 'sparse means' (*moyens temporels pauvres*), are on the contrary those which the artist employs in order 'to elevate the spirit' of the receiver. They are not oriented toward the public success of the work. Sometimes it is difficult to even notice them, but this is the way they function: 'the less burdened they are by matter, the more destitute, the less visible – the more efficacious they are'.

Schrader concludes: 'The artist who wishes to express the transcendent cannot neglect either the abundant or the sparse means, but he must know their priority. The abundant means must serve to sustain the sparse means; the sparse means must yield to a spiritual awareness'.

When compared to painting, film reveals itself of a more realistic quality, of a stronger impact over the viewer, and accordingly, of a greater potential of abundant means. It is easier for the film-maker than for the painter to maintain the viewer's interest.

On the contrary, the sparse means are difficult to employ within film. How is then possible to have a transcendental style in film?

Schrader suggests that it is still possible, due to the 'temporal quality' of this art; that is, due to the fact that the viewer receives the shift from 'abundant' to 'sparse' within the length of the film.

Certain film-makers, like Bresson, Ozu and Drayer, in their attempt to express the Holy, have managed to create a particular style by skillfully modifying the abundant-sparse ratio within the structure of the film.

This masterfully controlled shift is what he called 'transcendental style'.

Schrader's analyse and conclusions concern fiction films and their attempt to represent the

Holy. I was interested however to see how could one answer to the same challenge within documentary.

Bill Nichols (1991) emphasizes the so-called 'indexical stickiness' of the documentary, that is the fact that this type of films show things that happened in front of the camera.

By being concerned more with 'argument' (*about* the historical world) than with 'story' (*of* the imaginary world), documentary films should be even more appropriate for representing Holy. Their enhanced potential of *abundant means*, coming from their inherent realism, should offer a better opportunity for 'short circuit' between the two means of the film, and thus their range of impact upon public audience should be greater than fiction films.

Does it really happen so?

I tried to find an answer within the sub-field of ethnographic film.

Hockings (1975), Crawford and Turton (1992), Loizos (1993) and others have pointed out that, apart from the evolution in photography and film techniques, the most important shift within the last decennia in Visual Anthropology concerned the way in which the anthropologists *looked* at the other, *represented* him visually and finally *watched* the reactions to their representations.

The most shared opinion nowadays is that ethnographic film itself has elaborated a set of conventions and construction devices, the sum of which may be called, like in fiction film, *style*.

The result of my concomitant interest in both 'transcendental style' and 'ethnographic style' eventually lead me to the following question: Would it be profitable to apply Schrader's transcendental style theory into an ethnographic film on the orthodox life?

The list of films which I could see until then was far from being exhaustive, but I have found out lately that there aren't in fact too many film-makers who deliberately focused on the believers' attitude towards the Holy.

I can remember the disappointment which

followed my multiple attempts to watch some of the most praised films, which I had managed to read about. It was sad, for instance, to discover that the vicious need to over-explain of certain anthropologists unmercifully spoilt the sometimes wonderfully filmed pieces of people's faith.

At the *Comité du Film Ethnographique* of the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, some friends, the kind help of whom I will never forget, offered me the privilege of watching most of Jean Rouch's films, in the famous 'little room upstairs'.

I have learned very much by watching them. I could thus finally understand some of the phrases which I have kept in mind for years, on the so-called *provocatory style*, or on the amazing *cine-trance* theory.

It was on this very special occasion that I realized the strong challenge of the commentary in film, and the fact that, even in the most subtle and intelligent versions, it may become a 'rough filter' between the viewer and the screen, mostly when issues like 'transcendence' are involved.

I remember that after hours and hours of hearing Rouch's and his characters' voices, I came across one of his last films of the *Sigui* cycle, which had no comment at all. It showed neither big religious feasts, nor ritual dances and sacrifices. It was about a group of men who were silently walking through a desert. After days and nights on the way, the desert began to turn more and more rocky, and then a sort of canyon appeared. They crossed it in the same very-little-talk-manner, which they had kept all along the way.

Then, suddenly, from very close, we could see one of the men showing the others some shapes and signs painted on a rocky wall. They seemed to agree with him and nodded comprehensively during his talk. We could hear the words and get a flavor of their attitude, but couldn't understand what they said. We had time instead to pay attention to their gestures, clothing, faces.

Then we could see them crossing back the

canyon. This time they were singing. The melody was rather simple, but very powerful, as they were filmed again from the remote.

Somewhere on the way, they stopped to drink some water from a hollow under a rock.

And then there was the desert again.

I didn't know at that time whether those images had to be seen as a completed film, or as mere rushes, which Rouch hadn't edited by then.

Of course, I very much enjoyed *Chronique d'un été*, *Moi, un noir*, *Les Maîtres fous* and the others 'classics' of his work. But that *Sigui 1974* was one of the very few things that gave me the flavor of what I was looking for.

The fact that I have seen those people on the screen, didn't help me too much in *understanding* their religious life. I cannot *tell* now too much about the *Sigui* religion, can I? But I still *bear in me* some of those people's *attitude* toward the Holy, which I think is important.

While I was making *Roiuri*, I came to the conclusion that actually Schrader's theory revealed itself non-functional when applied to ethnographic film.

I could see that, unlike in fiction film, the process of providing myself with visual material was almost unpredictable. Even if I had known very well in advance the precise moment I wanted to film, I was never able to say on the spot whether the respective shot would function as an *abundant* or as a *sparse* element within the final structure of the film.

It was only with the editing process that I made my final decisions.

Therefore, I think it is almost impossible to take care of the praised *abundant-sparse* proportion during the very act of filming.

Then, again unlike in fiction film, some of the *temporal means* identified by Schrader (doubling of the action with interior narration, the use of music as a mean of transformation in the viewer's mind etc.) may impose such a degree of artificiality to the future film, that its own status as an ethnographic film may become uncertain.

There is, however, another point where his considerations on the transcendental style in fiction film apply to ethnographic film as well.

While watching the rushes from Neamț, I have noticed that the shots taken from apparently the most convenient angles (close enough, well lighted, taken frontally etc.) did not express in the best way the people's attitude towards the Holy.

On the contrary, *some* of the shots taken in a somehow loose manner, almost unwillingly, revealed themselves much more powerful in this respect.

I could amazingly find out, for instance, that the sincere prayer of a certain person knelt down in front of an icon may look totally artificial and insincere on the screen. Instead, her small anodyne gesture could be much more convincing and work as a much stronger testimony of the faith it came out from.

That kind of observations confirmed somehow empirically the ideas emerging from my interest on Byzantine iconography: there is a certain resistance of the Holy to its full, direct, exhaustive representation.

The ancient painters have chosen the icon's deliberate 'visual aberration' in order to express the Holy. What is the answer of the contemporary film-makers to the same problem?

What would be the equivalent of the icon's inverse perspective when applied to the particular case of the ethnographic film?

If Roublev had been given a video camera, how would he have worked out his *Holy Trinity*?

### A Visual Frame Shaped by the Sacred Image

I don't want to give any conclusion in the end of my talk.

I will point out however one of the very few

things I have learned by my own experience so far: the visual universe of the people I make a film about is very important.

If one has to make a film on the religious life of a certain community, one has to be familiar with those people's representation of the Holy. The visual *shape* which they associate to their God determines in a very subtle manner the way in which *they themselves* look like, move, talk, pray etc.

As a result, the micro-universe around each person is somehow *shaped* as well, following the model of their faithful representation of the Holy.

If the film-maker is already familiar with these invisible *shapes* of his characters, he can come by the border of *almost seeing them physically in the viewfinder*, and thus more rightly choose the spatial and temporal frame he has to cut while filming.

I would have liked to film and edit *Roiuri* in a more *icon-like* style; but at that time this idea was only a diffuse, uncertain feeling.

You might notice however while watching it, a certain ambiguity of the narrative thread, as well as a deliberate 'haste' of the

editing style. They were both employed empirically at that moment, in order to enhance the 'non-linear' quality of the film style.

As for the future, I would like to push my research on as follows.

On one hand, I think it would be very useful to draw a parallel between Romanian and other East European series of icons of Byzantine tradition, in order to better understand the strong three-folded correlation between 1) monastic organization, 2) peasant popular faith and 3) iconic imagery of the orthodox communities.

On the other hand, I would be interested to



The Hermit Nicodim from Tarcău

cary out fieldwork research on life and work of some contemporary icon-makers.

One of the main goals would be to find out contemporary testimonies about the so-called

*Transfiguration Light*, the key mystic knowledge which used to be transmitted from the icon-maker to his disciple within the orthodox tradition.



### Bibliographic References

BAZIN André, 1967, 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', in *What is Cinema?*, Berkeley, University of California Press.

BUNGE Gabriel, 1996 (romanian edition), *Icoana Sfintei Treimi a curiosului Andrei Rubliov* (The Icon of the Holy Trinity by Andrei Roublev), Sibiu, Deisis.

CRAWFORD Peter Ian and TURTON David (eds.), 1992, *Film as Ethnography*, Manchester, Manchester University Press.

FLORENSKI Pavel, 1997 (romanian edition), *Perspectiva inversă și alte scrieri* (The Inverse Perspective and Other Works), București, Humanitas.

HOCKINGS Paul (ed.), 1975, *Principles of Visual Anthropology*, The Hague, Mouton.

LOIZOS Peter, 1993, *Innovation in Ethnographic Film*, Manchester, Manchester University Press.

MARITAIN Jacques, 1965, 'Religion and Culture' in *The Social and Political Philosophy of Jacques Maritain*, Garden City, Doubleday.

NICHOLS Bill, 1991, *Ideology and the Image. Social Representation in the Cinema and Other Media*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.

SCHRADER Paul, 1988, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*, New York, Da Capo Press.