IN MEMORY of Marc Henri Piault

We are in one of our beloved anthropological film festivals: at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, or at the Costume Museum of Regional Ethnographic Institute in Nuoro. Projections upon projections, marathons that go late into the evening. The lights turn on, a hand goes up. It has happened many times. The hand has a beautiful silver ring on its ring finger, with a black stone, perhaps obsidian. One hears a warm voice, in a somehow sophisticated French, but never snobbish. In Nuoro, the excellent simultaneous translators render his sentences masterfully, but sometimes it is difficult to translate his eloquence. At first, he makes some very witty comments on the film he has just seen; then he asks a revealing question, never pedantic, but often a little ironic. It is not a formal question, to which he thinks he knows the answer. It is a chess-playing question, where the answer is truly awaited with curiosity, to allow him to think “beyond” what we have been told. His analysis are complex, and characterized by a systemic spirit: they tune, bind, postpone, free and are never purely flattering or arrogant. These are comments that allow the author, often standing near the screen, with a microphone placed on her chest as in a ritual, to listen carefully, to add, articulate, postpone, elucidate, discover together. In other words, the comments of this refined spectator help the authors of the anthropological films just seen to continue to do anthropology in the theatre. It is also a form of "anthropologie partagée" that of viewing and discussing certain films.

For him, visual anthropology is not synonymous with the old ethnographic cinema with a positivist character, a description of a presumably objective reality. Reality cannot be essentialized. It proceeds from a gaze that is constituted in constant becoming; there are rather "orders" of reality and "orders" of discourse. The philosophical ground is very solid in his
analyses. He has an old-fashioned scientific background, without that professorial tone that many show off on such occasions. It is with dismay and nostalgia that I announce the recent death of Marc-Henri Piault, a French professor of cultural, social and visual anthropology. He is the refined spectator described above. A young pupil of Jean Rouch, from whom he rarely left, remaining by his side for decades and inheriting without paternalism the leadership of the Comité du Film Ethnographique after the death of his great friend and teacher. Marc was very often in Sardinia, a guest of the Istitute Superiore Regionale Ethnografico, as member of the selection committee of the SIEFF ethnographic film festival, and present at all the festivals in which he had been a selector, alongside David MacDougall, Antonio Marazzi and Paolo Piquereddu.

Marc Henri Piault, Nuoro. For kind concession of ISRE, photographed by Virgilio Piras.
Marc Henri Piault was a filmmaker, teacher and writer of important anthropological essays and articles (more than one hundred publications in various languages) including the well-known "Anthropologie et Cinéma: passage à l'image, passage par l'Image", Nathan 2000, not to be confused with Cinéma et Anthropologie, CNRS, 1982, by his colleague Claudine de France, also an acolyte of Jean Rouch and founder professor and filmmaker of the Nanterre school.

He graduated from Paris IV, Sorbonne in 1955 and obtained his doctorate from the same university in 1966. Marc-Henri Piault taught at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, in Paris X Nanterre and Paris I La Sorbonne. He was research director at the CNRS (French Scientific Research Council), president of the Ethnographic Film Committee of France (between 2004-2010), chief editor of the Journal des Africanistes, and of the Journal des Anthropologues. He also taught until 2017 in various universities in Brazil.

After an involvement in regional identity studies in his country of origin, then in West Africa with the study of pre-colonial policies, some cults of possession and internal migrations, he became passionate about Brazil, where he resided for several months each year, in Rio de Janeiro. He continued to film and write on the issues of identity and conflict in his new adopted land.


We will miss him very much. The hand that was raised after each screening, the curiosity, the touch, the slightly sly smile, and many passionate conversations, until the night, when the
doors of all the museums close, a group of last spectators remains to discuss under the stars, and will be the first in the screening room the following morning.

Rossella Ragazzi
rossella.ragazzi@uit.no