

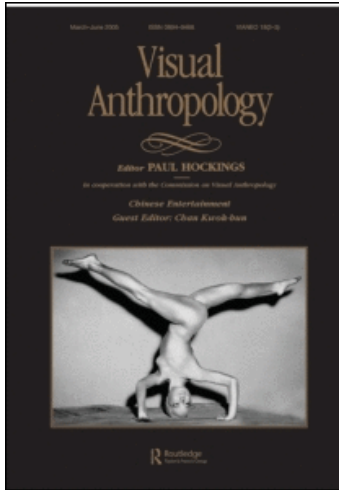
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## Meaning and Sense in Images and Texts

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# Meaning and Sense in Images and Texts

*Andréa Barbosa*

Text and image, silence and sound: different ways that express equally different facets of humankind's understanding of the world, and that also express our anthropological reflection of these human processes which give meaning to experience. This article focuses specifically on the kind of depth offered by considering other forms of understanding than conceptual forms and that, through cinematographic anthropology, open up an under-explored field that is very fruitful in analyzing various topics related to this discipline, such as the processes of constructing identity and memory.

Being in the world is a sensory, emotional and reflective experience. It would be difficult to categorize hierarchically whether sense, emotion or reflection is most central, since they intertwine as they permeate the forms in which we relate socially, build and live in space and by which we know and organize time. As Clifford Geertz [1973] says, the individual is tied to the cultural webs he himself weaves, and these webs, for their part, are composed of all the experiences that both the individual and the collective live, feel and attribute meaning to. Contemporary anthropology has developed in such a way as to emphasize the relevance of the senses in the study of culturally constructed meanings. Nevertheless, the study of perceptive characteristics that are specific to a culture or to the social role of privilege attributed to some sentiments is not a novelty; indeed, we need only remember the works of Anthony Seeger [1980] with the Suyá in the 1970s. Recently however this discussion has taken on greater significance and has advanced to incorporate reflections on various subfields of anthropology, together with visual anthropology. On the one hand, we see the expansion of this discussion leading to new problems for anthropology, which in itself is interesting as regards the discipline's epistemological questioning; on the other hand, it is impossible not to see a possible perverse effect of these new approaches. David MacDougall, in a book of essays [2006: 60], points out one such effect: the fragmentation of understanding human relationships instead of the integration thereof in terms of social complexity. MacDougall's argument is exactly that

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the interest in giving special attention to sentiment in studying societies and cultures is that this approach allows us to know another depth, as compared with studies that emphasize a purely conceptual form of knowledge: a depth that falls within the possible realm of dealing with the complexity of human relationships from the integration of relationships' various facets. Reason and sensitivity go hand in hand, and dealing with them in conjunction seems to be the most interesting path for anthropology.

The problems raised in this article concern exactly this proposal of integration, and I propose to reflect on the exchange between memory, image and experience, using for this a specific situation that the production of images can bring to the research field: the question of the unsaid. I argue that the images that compose the fieldwork figure as a form both to inspire and to express the research, a situation that in some cases would be impossible in writing alone. In these situations text and image are absolutely complementary, not because of a belief that the text controls the polysemy of images and thus attributes an explanatory character to them, but because they allow differing entries and constructs within the themes being discussed.

#### FILMING AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Film is not a closed system; on the contrary, relationships arise that are, in MacDougall's [2006: 42] terms, *co-presented* in various ways: in the presence of filmed subjects in relation to one another; in the presence of an environment that allows for relationships and that is built socially by relationships; in establishing relationships among gestures, words, sounds, spaces and objects; and finally in offering this whole gamut of possibilities to us simultaneously. Following MacDougall's cue, when he discussed this idea initially raised by Michel Chion, we can extend the notion of co-presentation to the very syntax of audiovisual language that avails itself of the composition of the frame and of montage sequences of various related and simultaneous elements: objects, people, times, and spaces (planes with deep depth of field and parallel montage sequences, for example). Just as our experiences in life stimulate simultaneously, audiovisual language gives us an equally complex experience, in which perception of space, time and relationships overlap. There are many gaps in time, space and actions when choosing the composition of a plane and the montage sequences, and these gaps give anthropology, as well as interlocutors and viewers, creative mobility with respect to film. Thus film establishes itself as an open space for exercising the imagination and creating meaning.

The film and prior to that the very act of filming provoke the senses and emotions. Film expands our vision as it represents not just an act of seeing but a sensory and equally emotional experience. And this conjunction helps us perceive how and why characters act, and how conversations are modulated by gestures, looks, postures and movements.

An interesting research situation where we note this expansion of sight is when we consider the use of an image in comprehending the unsaid. This concern has been present in anthropological research at least since the research done by

Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson in Bali in the 1930s. They turned to photography and film in an attempt to respond to the specificity of their questions *vis-à-vis* relationships and behaviors established by cultural norms expressed by nonverbal communication, such as gestural and corporeal behavior, in family relationships and in relationships guided by respect and hierarchy. In the field they took hundreds of photos and shot numerous reels of film that were later systematized in the book *Balinese Character*, originally published in 1942, and in seven films.<sup>1</sup> However, Mead's and Bateson's beautiful and seminal work bears the ambiguity of considering the unsaid as superimposed with conceptual discourse. This tension is clear primarily in the films, where Mead provides a narrative voice-over in the attempt to close off possibilities for interpreting in the behavioral field and loses the potential to consider the unsaid through other means, such as gaps between gestures and looks that are present in the image (its polysemy) and that allow for the construction of multiple senses beyond those established by an anthropologist.

This expansion of sight to a more synesthetic and affective experience provided by cinema creates a new possibility to build knowledge not based on verbal discourse. A knowledge where silence is filled by looks, gestures and movements can in fact be considered an important element in reflecting on the relationships in which these elements create meaning. An approach from this perspective perhaps can lead us to understand a different depth to some anthropological problems.

And what manner of understanding would this be? What would be the other depth that filming could add to the more traditional manner of systematizing anthropological knowledge and understanding, and written ethnography?

#### DIFFERENT LANGUAGES, DIFFERENT WAYS OF THINKING

The way a society "is organized," human communication occurs, pure and simple speech happens, writing is implemented or other modern means of communication is not the same as how we "conceive the world." In other words, logical operations (organizing, listing, classifying, selecting, simplifying, abstracting, analyzing, synthesizing, completing, readjusting, resolving difficulties, combining, memorizing...) embedded and suggested through each of these means of communication not only vary... They are singular. [Samain 1994: 291, my trans.]

In the wake of Lévi-Strauss's analysis in *The Savage Mind* [1962] and Jack Goody's in *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* [1977], Samain underscores that there are different ways of thinking, and these different means of communication available for human communication provoke these different ways of thinking, these different "cognitive styles." Agreeing in principle with this analysis, I would nonetheless argue that languages and not the means of communication are what provoke the emergence of various "cognitive styles." Languages allow for the creation of means, and thus both language and means play a fundamental role in the formation of new "cognitive styles." We "think" differently, for example, if we mobilize images or words.

Returning to the question of the unsaid, our corporeal being in this world allows us a specific comprehension of this place. The natural senses like sight, tactile feeling, smell and hearing provide us with a specific relationship with the world. This relationship is not conceptual, but rather another form that permits us to understand the social experience from a series of elements that constitute social relationships like, for example, the unsaid.

Animals are divided into: a) belonging to the Emperor, b) embalmed, c) tame, d) sucking pigs, e) sirens, f) fabulous, g) stray dogs, h) included in the present classification, i) frenzied, j) innumerable, k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, l) *et cetera*, m) having just broken the water pitcher, n) that from a long way off look like flies. [Foucault 1994: xv]

Foucault, in the preface to *The Order of Things*, wherein he refers to Borges' "Chinese taxonomy," posits that this classification leads us to a classification without space, to words and categories without time or space. He talks of places and experiences that possess a manner of ordering that apparently has no logic or order. Nonetheless, Foucault continues, "[o]rder is, at one and the same time, that which is given in things as their inner law, the hidden network that determines the way they confront one another, and also that which has no existence except in the grid created by a glance, an examination, a language; and it is only in the blank spaces of this grid that order manifests itself in depth as though already there, waiting in silence for the moment of its expression." [*idem*: xx].

Filmmaking exudes a certain anteriority to appraising, which is looking at the world with interest and desire: a glance that seeks a manner of understanding in the white space of the checkered language of cinematography. We compose frames and choose camera movements to record this or that moment, and this view contains something that is prior to an ordering governed by reason—the vivacious presence of bodies interacting. Foucault's reflection on the fantastic texts takes us decisively to the image with its polysemic gaps, which also approaches Barthes' idea of *punctum* [2000: 27]—the moment when the photograph becomes white, transparent, offering itself not to the intellect but to affection—and, in this moment, it is the embodiment that acts and reacts. I see that it is exactly this gap opened by the sensorial and affective experience provided by the image that allows anthropology to deal with what man leaves unsaid in his social relationships. The unsaid is not an absence; rather it is a dark part, the other side of understanding provided by rational appraisal. The unsaid is like a set of sounds outside the frame in film (the voice that calls out from a distance though we do not know whose voice calls, or the sound of a car that never appears on screen but that is nevertheless present); the set of sounds is recognized by mobilizing the imagination. Imagination here is used in its most interesting sense, which is the ability to articulate various references in constructing a new sense.

Thus we should consider the difference between the form of knowledge that we can produce by filming and that which we can obtain from producing text. Film and text require different sensitivities and different approaches. What is normally cumulative and successive in writing appears simultaneously in film [MacDougall 2006]. In this sense, as they provide us different possibilities in

constructing and understanding of social realities, as the research example in this paper highlights, text and film are absolutely complementary. In organizing research, the full weight of both text and film are taken into consideration: text with its conceptual arguments and film with its synesthetic and affective approach to the relationships in question.

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC EXAMPLE: THE CITY'S MEANINGS AND THE UNSAID IN  
*NO CANTO DOS OLHOS (OUT OF THE CORNER OF HIS EYES)*

Film is about something whereas reality is not. [Vaughan 1999: 21]

Between 2004 and 2006 I conducted research in which a fundamental part was the production of a documentary. I was interested in the significant and affective relationship that individuals develop with the city of São Paulo, Brazil, and was intrigued by the movement present in the flow among inhabitants' images, memories and experiences in that flow. My research resulted in two articles and the film *Out of the Corner of His Eyes*.<sup>2</sup>

Earlier, I affirmed that film is an open space for exercising imagination and creating meaning; in the case of the film I made for this research, both imagination and creation are exercised out of very concrete relationships. *Out of the Corner of His Eyes* does not speak of generic social actors but rather of Valmir and Péricles in their concrete relationship with the city. In this project memory, walking through the city, gestures, and visual, olfactory and other relationships paved the way for, on the one hand, a sensory, corporeal and affective comprehension of each protagonist's place in this world and, on the other hand, an understanding of the place that the world and, in this specific case, the city occupies in the protagonists' history.

The life experience that Valmir narrated during our encounters was always an experience connected to the route he had taken through the city and through life. Valmir is a young journalist who was born and raised in a poor neighborhood on the east side of the city and who is now living in a middle-class neighborhood on the west side of the city. The youngest of nine brothers, Valmir listens to those older than he, as they describe his childhood as the shy boy who hid in the corners; a quiet observer. Based on the idea that talking about one's experience of the city takes on another dimension in association with the experience of being in the city, I suggested to Valmir that our conversations take place while he moved about the city. This was one option that Valmir accepted enthusiastically and that I assumed, knowing of the difficulties involved in filming while constantly moving. While the camera is relatively lightweight and portable, its weight and volume become noticeable after a few hours recording images without the aid of a tripod. Despite the difficulty in maintaining minimum camera stability for film while in movement (in the bus or walking along the city's pot-holed sidewalks), Valmir and I developed a bond and, while he told his stories, he paid attention to my plans, warning me of pot-holes and suggesting film frames. During these daily movements about the city with me, Valmir

was concerned about properly explaining a series of memories and sensations that places in the city evoked in him. At other times, he remained silent. During these moments, the need to communicate his experience verbally yielded to the need for the experience *per se*. These moments of silence as well as his speech were extremely valuable for my understanding of both the sense of creating images and part of the research. The experience Valmir expressed was a special experience and also an existential experience made explicit not only through words but through Valmir's way of walking, looking, interacting and remaining silent, which I captured on camera.

The moments of silence were interrupted by an indication that I look at some section of the path we were taking, to take note of a person or scene that normally would be outside the frame of the people in the city of São Paulo. The routes we took were abundantly filled with very clear references, such as advertisements, cars, buses and other more abstract references like hurriedness and fear. Valmir seemed to pause in these pseudo-scenes of the movement of the people in the city and chose to place himself just at the edge. Just as he did as a boy, watching family scenes from the corner of the room, he chose the margin as his focus to see the city. It is in this sense that what is in the corners becomes the center of his view and his experience. Memories of the city are thus built from the stones of the city and from this peripheral point of view. Valmir, the individual who criticizes as he walks along and participates in the city, but also Valmir, the individual who creates an alternative, his own city, the city of corners.

It is important to emphasize the corporeal strength of the experience of conducting this research with video since the entire question of perceiving the nuances of memory's experience that are in the sphere of the unsaid filter through this corporeal experience. Various bodies relate in the context of the field: those of characters and interlocutors; that of the anthropologist-filmmaker; and even those of the viewers whose bodies, while only physically manifest when the film is shown, are present as an allusion the whole time the film is being created.

Thus constructed, the film is not only a text but also an embodiment. These types of film explore living experience as registered through bodies, gestures, appearances, words and silences. They are not geared only towards the visual since they accord equal weight to what is visible and to what is not. "Whether a film is capable of generating more complex statements seems to depend upon the filmmaker's ability to make the film more than merely a report on a cultural encounter and, instead, embody it" [MacDougall 1998: 163].

This is a lesson imparted to us by Leacock and Rouch (and I would add David MacDougall), according to Comolli [2002], when viewers no longer bring the question of framing to the film but the question of embodiment. The challenge shifts from the question of viewing to the question of bringing the embodiment of the filmmaker to the image, and it does so in a different manner than, but in equal proportion to, the embodied image of the filmed subject. From this bodily presence, the focus of the work is placed on the relationship built during the filming. In this sense, the critique raised by Bill Nichols [1994] when he identifies a pornographic quality to ethnographic videos, due to the filmmaker's voyeuristic distance with respect to the intimate life of the subject(s), is not applicable. The

anthropological films to which I refer here are indices of the encounter among the subjects involved, the confrontation of their subjectivities. If they are together in this film for cinematographic anthropology, ethics and aesthetics, then it is because aesthetics is nothing more than the expression of the filmmaker's ethics. When I speak of the filmmaker's embodiment being inserted in the film, I do not speak of the anthropologist's figure necessarily being included in the scene. While in the 1960s and 1970s the filmmaker's presence seemed fundamental to establish the dialogue of reflection with the viewer, today that same presence is more subtle and looms large in the manner of filming, in the camera's movements, in the exchange of glances, and in the careful editing which is not necessarily bound to naturalism.<sup>3</sup>

Greatly inspired by Dziga Vertov, Jean Rouch constructs the act of reflection by seeking to look within, using the camera as an internal eye. Like Vertov, his camera is not static, bound to a tripod in open and evasive frames. His camera is mobile as is the world he seeks to understand. In this double movement (the camera and the world), he explores the interchanging relationships between the subjective and the objective. The camera seeing itself and, at the same time, seeing the world from the inside and building on the outside—a movement that is an act of reflection that is part of the world. In films such as *Les maîtres fous* (*The Crazy Masters*) and *Chronique d'un été* (*Chronicle of a Summer*), Rouch's reflexive moment is exactly that of trying to integrate his own subjective complexity to his anthropological and cinematographic explorations of social life. The reflection of these films evokes an experience through the co-presentation of the experience lived by the subjects involved in the filmmaking.

The movement of looking within and looking without is also interesting in Valmir's experience in the city, present in the film. In it we accompany his movement of interiorizing when he speaks of his experience in the city. In this process, my interaction moved towards trying to reinvent in images some of the sensations and feelings involved in this experience of this two-faceted movement: looking at the city and looking from the city. We exchanged glances. I experienced the strength of the camera as the element that set off the consciousness of certain processes and certain sentiments with respect to memory.

There, where each is a potential intruder on the other, the risk of the other's gaze forces a consciousness of the self. [Bellavance 1997: 19, my trans.]

Is it possible to recreate life's experiences cinematographically? What is the place for cinematic ideas in this reflexive search to reconstruct, in images, sensitive ways of understanding the world? Once again, I look to the work of MacDougall for inspiration and reference, trying to appropriate the image as a form of understanding the world, creator of connections, relationships among subjects in movement. The images in our film *Out of the Corner of His Eyes* are not representations of the generic entity of "São Paulo," nor of Valmir's city, nor of Andréa's city. They are the images of São Paulo in this convergence: glances exchanged in experiencing a city. In creating these images, I was conscious of the anthropological and also the cinematographic challenge of "safe distance." As MacDougall says, this implies "acknowledg[ment that] the



subject's story if often more important than the filmmaker's" [1998: 156], that despite this we have eyes, bodies, thoughts and feelings, a fact that is ethically impossible to omit, and that all that is small, trivial and dream-like is significantly interesting for a cinematographic anthropologist. In this sense, that person must "approach filmmaking instead as a way of creating the circumstances in which new knowledge can take us by surprise." [*idem*: 163]. I must admit I was taken by surprise.

#### THE SENTIMENTS OF MEMORY OF AND IN THE CITY

In our dialogues about Valmir's memory of the city, Valmir and I lived memories associated with specific spaces that I, inspired by Ecléa Bosi [1994], have termed memory rocks: Praça da República, the small dirt soccer field, Rua Olho D'água, Avenida Radial Leste. More than physical descriptions of these spaces, his memories evoke moments lived in these spaces, as if the memory were composing a scene [see also Arantes Neto, 2000]. The spaces were always important in the narrative, as if the occurrence would not have meaning in Valmir's life were it not related to the place. What was at play was memory *in* the city and not *of* the city. "Every witness to an experience puts into play not only memory but also a reflection of him/herself. For this reason, witnesses should be considered the true instruments of identity reconstruction and not just as providers of factual description limited to offering information" [Pollak 1986: 4, my trans.].

Michael Pollak made this statement in the context of research in which he was working with Nazi concentration camp survivors. This is an extreme situation whose memory and memoir are raised as constant questions throughout this sociologist's work. For our research it is interesting to refer to Pollak's work because of this reflection on the possible relationships between individual experiences and collective memories. For the author, the witness results from the encounter between a subject's disposition to talk and his being heard. *Ergo*, every witness places himself within the social possibilities of speaking about his experience, and these possibilities vary over time and according to the social context. The witnessing thus would be a privileged moment in the narrator's construction of identity. In this sense, it is important to be aware of what is spoken and what remains silent in these narratives. Form and content are equally important in perceiving the meaning of the memory that is constructed. The silence, contrary to being a sign of forgetting, is usually a visible sign of managing individual memory in accordance with the possibilities of communicating the experience. Biography falls within what Pollak and Heinich call "variations of individual social histories" [1986: 31, my trans.], and it is always constructed within a context. Through this work of (re)constructing oneself, the individual tends to define his social place and his relationships with others. In this manner, even on the individual level, the work of memory cannot be dissociated from life's social organization [Pollak 1989].

Despite the context of very specific research, Pollak's more general reflections are extremely rich and support an extrapolation to less extreme contexts of the human experience.

In our conversations, Valmir, whose narration was explicitly placed in a context of dialogue, demonstrates a certain consciousness of the statements he makes with his memories of the city. He seems to know that this is the general procedure, but he often appears surprised with the very results of his own statements. Phrases like “I never thought in this way I’m talking to you now” or “talking about all this is new to me” seem to indicate that he is conscious of the individual processes of choosing memories that make sense in constructing a narrative today of his life experience in the city: not everything is so obvious or as voluntary as it seems. The moments of silence are voluntary. It is these silent moments that are clear demonstrations, as Pollak argues, of managing memories in the form of a memoir of experiences that can be narrated in a public context like conducting research, and even more in filmmaking. In Valmir’s experience, a life project is implicit;<sup>4</sup> a project that makes sense today and that mobilizes the construction of a memoir in the perspective of a desired future. The silence here contains the project; it also contains the voluntary act of tying oneself to the experience of remembering life. And thus the announcing gesture of choosing within the context of a life narrative. Managing memories is not necessarily guided by reason, and I return here to David MacDougall when he states that our conscious experience, much more so than conceptual thought, is indeed made of ideas but also of emotions, sensory responses, sounds, silences and images from our imagination. Evoking the memoir is guided by memories, and yet it is also guided by sensations and images that are very difficult to say in words but that often have visible significance: a distant look, a lowered head, a smile.

We return to film to affirm that filmmaking in this context generates an ambivalence inherent in the fact that a film always deals with something or other; there is always a subject matter and that subject is the result of a choice [Vaughan 1999: 21]. On the one hand, we renounce certain connections outside the interests that presently concern us; in other words, we stop looking and just see. On the other hand, and specifically because we are focused on an interest that can bring us nearer to and deeper into some detail of life, we can make visible and conscious certain occasionally unclear connections. We can let ourselves see what cannot be said.

## PARADOXES OF CINEMATOGRAPHIC ANTHROPOLOGY

The lesson of surrealism, however, is that the experience of paradox is in itself significant and must be grasped to generate new perceptions. [MacDougall 1997: 151–152]

Anthropology is frequently seen in paradoxes. In the research that I propose to conduct through film I walk through various paradoxes, like that between text and image, between the individual and society, between memory and experience, between concept and sense or sentiment. On this risky path, I see the possibility to create new perspectives and, like all effort to break barriers, to deal with our very limits.

The choice to work with the individual experience falls within a reflexive proposal. The act of reflection present in producing a documentary like this is

exactly in the perception that Valmir's experience is representative to the extent he shares a common experience with innumerable inhabitants in the city (and I include myself). Its representative nature also plays a part in the idea that, just as when producing the video *Out of the Corner of His Eyes*, our watching it can also evoke other memories, can provoke restatement of the memoir in the viewers as we are not dealing with Valmir as a social type but as an individual from a specific social context.

His life history, like a "variation of individual social histories," gathers its strength specifically from the singularity that it brings to us, on the one hand, of recognizing another experience in the city and, on the other hand, of building a common path: a São Paulo of images and memories, inter-subjectivities creating intertextualities.

As viewers, the film allows us to construct an experience based on recognition of the experience of the Other who is on screen and based on the experience of the anthropologist-filmmaker who is present the entire time, and full embodiment, not just with a glance, and not always visible on screen. Research in these terms becomes pertinent in seeking this attention to the senses as a way towards accessing anthropological understanding of another depth. Thinking is thus inspired by the lesson imparted by the masters, that in anthropological cinema, ethics and aesthetics are two aspects of the same experience. These reflections have no place in the film, and the experience of filming and watching the film also do not fit onto these pages. Images and texts cannot be reduced in this research experience which presupposes film as an evocation, but also as a co-presentation of these bodies in relation to and with the world in the search to produce the aesthetic integration of the social experience.

## NOTES

1. The seven films (*A Balinese Family*, *Karba's First Years*, *First Days in the Life of a New Guinea Baby*, *Childhood Rivalry in Bali and New Guinea*, *Bathing Babies in Three Cultures*, *Trance and Dance in Bali* and *Learning to Dance in Bali*) were edited and assembled without Bateson's participation more than ten years after the research had been conducted, due to differences between the two about the place of images in anthropological analyses. For a deeper analysis regarding Mead's and Bateson's work, see the riveting introduction by Étienne Samain to the book *Os Argonautas do Mangue* (Argonauts of the Mangrove) [Alves 2004].
2. The article "Imagens e memórias na construção de uma experiência da e na cidade de São Paulo" (Images and Memories in Constructing an Experience of and in the City of São Paulo) [Barbosa 2007] and the film were produced as part of my postdoctoral research developed together with USP's Anthropology Department and with the support of FAPESP, as part of the thematic project entitled "Alteridade, expressões culturais do mundo sensível e construções da realidade: velhas questões, novas inquietações" [Otherness, Cultural Expressions of the Sensitive World and Constructs of Reality: Old Questions, New Concerns].
3. In the case of Jean Rouch's work, this subtlety was always present; perhaps it is for this reason that, in the 1960s, he was more appropriated and debated by filmmakers than by anthropologists.

4. Regarding this question, see my article on “Images and Memories in Constructing an Experience of and in the City of São Paulo” [Barbosa 2007; unofficial, unpublished translation].

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