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# [Review] *Knots and Holes*

## Michael Jackson

There may be no better introduction to Mattijs van de Port's books, essays and films than the opening scene in *Knots and Holes*. On the beach of a broad river in Bahia, Brazil, the anthropologist muses on the ethical dilemmas and epistemological absurdities of his profession, all of which are, ironically, brought home to us by the fact that he is talking with a fisherman called Tico at the same time as he is talking to himself.

'I found myself in this awkward situation,' he says. 'Tico and I are going to perform this anthropological scene in front of the camera. I would be the anthropologist asking clueless questions. He would be the local explaining his fishing techniques.'

After a pause, we hear Tico speaking of the uncertainties he has to live with. 'There is the day of the prey and the day of the hunter,' he says. 'There is the day of the fish and the day of the fisherman. Same thing.'

But is Tico saying that a fisherman must accept the unpredictable cycle of scarcity and plenty, or that the anthropologist's situation is similar to his own?

Mattijs proceeds to tell us that his immediate situation is awkward because he told Tico he was making a film about fishing when, in fact, he was making a film 'on the geometric figure of the net, and the way that figure plays itself out in human modes of world-making.' There is 'something dishonest,' he continues, 'about anthropologists and their undisclosed theoretical agendas.' Ironically, however, for this anthropologist theory makes his fieldwork exciting, since it offers the perennial promise that there may be more to Tico's net than just the net.

These opening scenes come to a close with Mattijs sharing with us some comments he wrote in his notebook that day concerning the difference between the world qua world, which is 'completely indifferent to what we human want from it' (sweeping away several wedding guests in a flash flood, producing an earthquake on the day of the World Cup Final) and the world as we perceive it, interpret it, name it, shape it, experience it, sing about it, write about it, and think about it. The gap between the extra-human world and the human world is therefore like the gap between the uncer-

tainties of Tiko's livelihood and the uncertainties of Mattijs's fieldwork. In both cases, one comes up against forces that lie beyond one's comprehension and control, and this can be a source of wonderment or despair.

The patterns we discern in the world may provide consolation, but like the arguments we make for underlying order and meaning, they are full of holes. No matter how hard we labor to amend and improve them, life itself will tear our handiwork apart. Whether we speak of the web of kinship, the internet, social network theory, or the nets of fishermen, these descriptions are as artificial as they are tenuous. Whatever they make tangible and visible, there is a wealth of experience they leave to the imagination. For Mattijs, even 'the act of writing is to create frames: word-frames, sentence-frames, paragraph-frames, chapter-frames, book-frames. It is to punctuate the flow of being with full stops. The act of writing, I would say, is an act of closure' (van de Port, 2015).

In the third film in Mattijs's Bahian Trilogy, *The Body Won't Close*, this theme is reiterated in the experiences of Bahian men struggling to close their bodies and become invulnerable, even as they throw caution to the winds and open themselves up to spiritual powers and ecstatic encounters. Completed only weeks before the Covid-19 Pandemic overwhelmed the world, Mattijs's film provides compelling images of how, in perilous times, panic and paranoia will drive people to extreme measures in defending themselves from invisible viruses and imaginary enemies. Yet even as they separate and isolate themselves, a countervailing imperative is felt – to break out, discard the masks, join the throngs in the street, and narcissistically assert one's freedom from constraint.

That there is something existentially fundamental about this dialectic was fully recognized by Sigmund Freud, who observed that all organisms, from the lowly amoeba to human beings, need to *both* absorb elements of the world beyond their boundaries *and* protect these boundaries from invasive and life-threatening forces. Filtering, monitoring and controlling traffic across body boundaries, either through practical or imaginative strategies, is crucial to the life of any organism and gives rise to the recurring human dilemma of how to be open to others yet retain one's own integrity (Freud, 1989: 30-35). One expression of this quandary is what Vincent Crapanzano has called Hermes' dilemma – the *epistemological* tension between wanting to regard one's interpretations as definitive and allowing that they are always relative and provisional (Crapananzo, 1992: 43-44). But it is always on the boundary between the familiar and the foreign that our anxieties arise – whether epistemological, ethical, personal or political. Moreover, people have such different thresholds of tolerance for openness that we are constantly surprised by individuals who seem completely fearless, and by others who react defensively when they really have nothing to fear. At the same time, it is easier to be open-minded and to espouse liberal views when one's life is not at risk. Thus, in Mattijs's riveting essay on reading Bruno Latour in Bahia, he compares an academic being open to a new interpretation of a text to a Candomblé adept risking madness by physically and emotionally opening himself up to the spirits.

Mattijs himself is familiar with this tug-of-war between openness and closure. From his earliest fieldwork in Serbia, he has favored direct experience (*épreuve*) over

disinterested inquiry (enquête), and has even been prepared to put his own life on the line in deepening his understanding of what our conceptual nets cannot capture and our words cannot express. Fascinated by what he calls 'the rest of what is,' he echoes Bataille's celebration of limit-experiences, Bakhtin's work on the carnivalesque (with its ritual inversions of fixed ascriptions of status and role), and Bergson's vision of organic life as an *élan vital* that resists the mechanistic routines of everyday life. Mattijs describes the Bacchanalian exuberance and excess of Serb townsmen's forays to Gypsy bars where frenzied music, obscene songs, drunkenness, surrender, extravagance and the complete rejection of Novi Sad's renowned bourgeois respectability suggest 'that though Gypsies are stigmatized as unclean, uncouth and unmarried they also provide a refuge from lives claustrophobically encased 'in the rules, conventions and standard of decency prescribed by the bourgeois ideals of civilization. Within the European social imaginary, the 'Gypsy camp was an erogenous zone, the closest wildness, invested with unfulfilled desires, impossible yearnings and unsatisfied passions' (van de Port, 1998: 5,7).

Mattijs's contribution to the phenomenology of religion lies in his skill in getting behind the vocabularies and concepts with which we by turns cast a net over reality, blind ourselves to its complexity, and defend ourselves against its challenges. Religion, in this view, becomes a manner of speaking rather than a *sui generis* phenomenon, which is why Hent de Vries advocates that we avoid defining religion in terms of 'an irreducible realm of being called divine' or as 'belief in certain articles of faith, let alone obedience to some ecclesiastical or scriptural authority.' Rather, he argues, religion is a semantic strategy for signaling what lies beyond logos ('reason', 'word', 'rational principle') – things that cannot be directly thought, said, or seen (de Vries, 1999: x, 5-6)<sup>1</sup>. For Mattijs, this is 'the-rest-of-what-is': 'the 'surplus' of our reality definitions, the 'beyond' of our horizons of meaning, that which needs to be excluded as 'impossible', 'unknown', 'mere fantasy', or 'absurd' for our worldview to make sense' (van de Port, 2011:18).

Among the many things I find admirable in Mattijs's essays and films is the presence of real people, and the visibility of the ethnographer's engagement with them. It is axiomatic for me that the quality of one's interactions and conversations in the field determines the quality of what one writes and the tenor of how one thinks. Not only do Mattijs's social skills complement his intellectual acuity; his reflections on his friendships in the field are intimately connected to his reflections on anthropology, as the opening scenes in *Knots and Holes* clearly show.

At the heart of existential-phenomenological anthropology is a commitment to making human subjects and human intersubjectivity the subject matter of our reflections and our writings. This involves a resistance to the reduction of lived reality to culturally or socially constructed representations of it, and an acceptance of the changeability of human consciousness, wavering between certainty and doubt, fixity and fluidity, closure and openness, passivity and activity, thought and feeling, self-centeredness and social engagement. But these transitive and fugitive processes remain like holes in a net unless we know how to point them out. Like all artists, Mattijs knows that can only be achieved obliquely, approximately, and provisionally, which is why he has recourse to imagery as well as ideas, pictures and stories as well as explanatory mod-

els. And he gives the reader of his books and the audience of his films space to respond and reciprocate. As a frayed banana frond dances in the wind, or a river slips by in the middle distance, or a shadow moves across a wall, we take stock of what we have heard and felt and seen. *Knots and Holes* strikes a subtle balance between telling and showing. In this sense it is simultaneously a documentary and a work of the imagination. And it is a compelling demonstration of the bountiful harvest anthropology stands to reap when it opens itself up to poetry, film, art, music, and dance.

In closing, I will imitate one of Mattijs's signature lists, naming some of the minor miracles that make life worthwhile – the sharing of a glass of wine, the body of one's beloved, the smell of parched earth after rain, an exchange of smiles, a gesture of care, the offering of a gift, and those moments when a pattern is discernible in the turbulence of water, cloud, or the social world in which one is tossed about like a leaf in the wind.

## Notes

1. De Vries acknowledges his debt to Derrida's critique of a 'globalatinized', Greco-Roman bias in our thinking about religion. See, for example, Jacques Derrida, 'Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason, in Religion, ed. Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 4, 30.

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**Michael Jackson** is internationally renowned for his work in the field of existential anthropology and has been widely praised for his innovations in ethnographic writing. Jackson has done extensive fieldwork in Sierra Leone since 1969, and also carried out anthropological research in Aboriginal Australia, Europe, and New Zealand. He has taught in universities in New Zealand, Australia, the United States and is currently Distinguished Professor of World Religions at Harvard Divinity School. His most recent books include *The Varieties of Temporal Experience* (2018), *Selected Poems* (2017), and *The Paper Nautilus: A Trilogy* (2019). Web: [Scholar.harvard.edu/michaeljackson/biocv](http://Scholar.harvard.edu/michaeljackson/biocv)