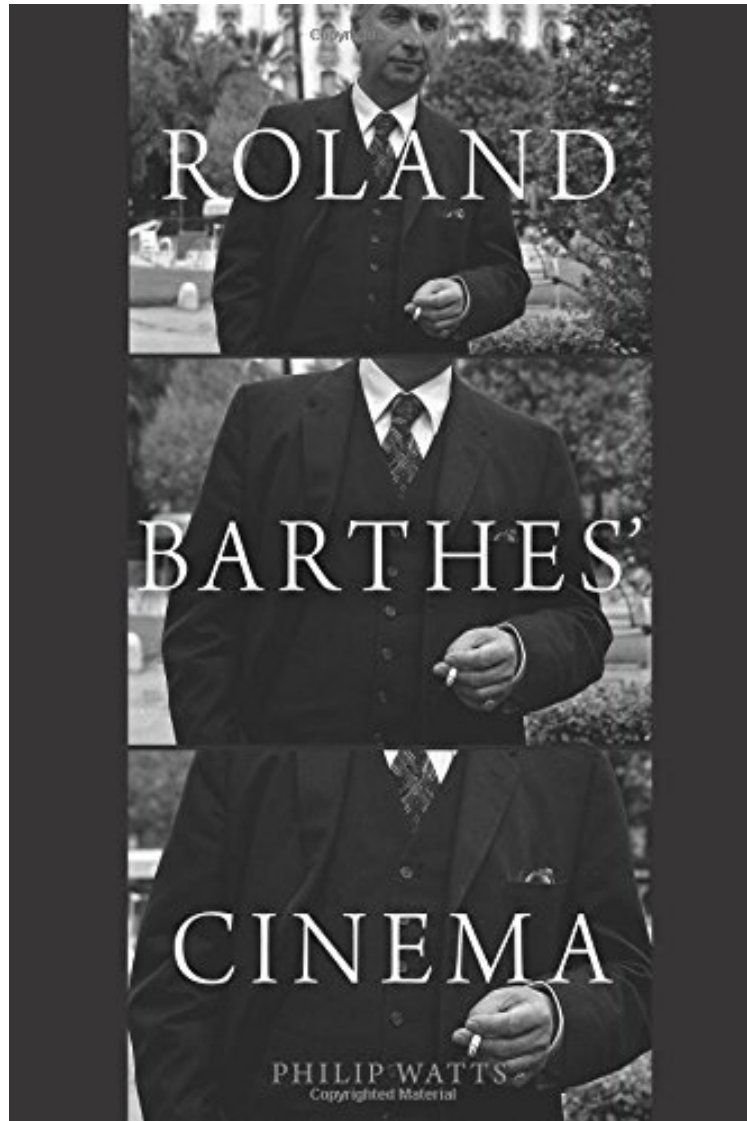


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Roland Barthes' Cinema

Philip Watts

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Philip Watts : Roland Barthes' Cinema before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Roland Barthes' Cinema:

5 of 8 people found the following review helpful. The Literary Supplement to the Journey of the EthnographerBy Etienne RPWhen the French anthropologist returns from the field, he usually writes not one, but two books. The first is an academic monograph that rigorously presents his observations gathered in the field and the interpretation he derives from them. The second book is a first-person narrative that is more literary in style: it is a personal essay that recreates the life-world of a distant community for its cultivated readers in search of exoticism. The first book is aimed

at academic peers and ends in obscurity; the second targets the general public and brings fame and recognition to the anthropologist. The archetypal example of the literary travelogue is *Tristes Tropiques* by Claude Lévi-Strauss, a book written fifteen years after his return from Brazil and seven years after his monograph on social life among the Nambikwara. But this is by no means an exception, and examples of these second books abound. In fact, all the major figures of French anthropology, from Marcel Griaule and Alfred Métraux to Pierre Clastres and Philippe Descola, have written such a literary supplement to their journey to the field. A whole book collection, *Terre Humaine*, founded by Jean Malaurie and published by Editions Plon, has been built around that tradition. Based on this simple but often overlooked fact, Vincent Debaene, a literature scholar with a fine grasp of intellectual history, develops a fascinating enquiry into the texts that have marked French anthropology from the 1920s to the beginning of the 1970s. In doing so, he raises many fundamental questions. How to explain this literary impulse among French anthropologists? Do the literary accounts published after the scholarly essays have an influence over the construction of theory and the general orientation of the discipline? Can they explain why French anthropologists are more prone to raising philosophical questions and using formal language in comparison with their peers from the English-speaking world, who have a more empirical and pragmatic mindset? Are general readers drawn only by the lure of exoticism and the literary quality of the books, or do the literary readings contribute to the dissemination of scientific facts and the sharing of a general attitude towards human diversity? How to explain the strong influence that ethnographers have exerted upon avant-garde artists like Picasso or Man Ray and artistic movements like surrealism? What explains the success of structuralism, first formulated in linguistics and in anthropology, that became for a time the dominant paradigm in the social sciences? Do structuralism's successors, from post-structuralism to post-modernism, develop a similar relationship to anthropology as a discipline? Anthropologists and avant-garde artists are united by a common hatred of *les littérateurs*: the polygraphs who court the favor of the public by producing insipid texts and who, by trusting positions of power and peddling their influence, give a bad name to science and to literature. For the anthropologist, this detested figure takes the form of the public lecturer at the *salle Pleyel* in Paris: a self-appointed adventurer who, by the sole virtue of a short stay in a faraway place, introduces middle-aged ladies and respectable patrons to the exotic mores of distant tribes, illustrated by picturesque photographs or short movies. Many anthropologists confess that the narratives of explorers and adventurers were at the origin of their vocation. But they strongly reject the lure of the travel literature to the distant memory of childhood, when their critical sense was not yet developed. If they refer to a literary genre, it is to quote the philosophical essays of the early observers of human nature that they claim as the ancestors of the discipline: Montaigne, Rousseau, Montesquieu, Chateaubriand. It is to these timeless models of wisdom and philosophy that our modern analysts look up to, and to the classicism of their writing style that they secretly aspire. Debaene reminds us that the modern opposition to literature was a constitutive moment for French anthropology as a science. Starting in the 1920s, anthropologists had to differentiate themselves from the picturesque accounts of travelers, journalists, and colonial administrators, who by then had the favors of the public. They did so by stressing the scientific value of their writings. The model, shared with history and sociology, is the academic monograph built upon the collection of documents and observations. Stylistic figures, rhetoric ornament, and narration, had to be excluded from the text. On the other hand, the concern with precision and accuracy, the importance of short formula and well-defined chapters, the necessity to translate words and concepts that have no equivalent in our languages, all these constraints of a science that is condemned to produce meaning with ordinary language make the anthropologist very aware of the importance of the written style. The convention that differentiates scientific memoirs from literary essays has more to deal with the position of the subject of enunciation. Literary works display the subject as narrator, they use the first person and introduce us to the subjectivity of the author. Scholarly texts are identified by their author as he figures on the book cover or journal table of content, but the conventions of academic writing have him disappear from the text. By banning all reference to subjectivity, anthropology may elude what puts it apart from other social sciences. Anthropological knowledge is based on a sustained personal relation of one individual person with other persons, subject to the specific circumstances in which this experience took place, but that nonetheless produces a form of valid truth. Historians quote archives and written sources in footnotes and bibliographies so that others may crosscheck facts or offer their own different interpretation of the same material. Sociologists describe the questionnaires and statistical procedures that support their conclusions and may open them to criticism. Behavioral scientists make long descriptions of the laboratory protocols and experiments that others may reproduce in similar conditions. Only anthropologists keep their scientific work in the dark. They do not explain what procedural steps and thought processes made them reach their conclusions that they present as universally valid. The laboratory of the anthropologist is his experience in the field: his relation with a given community, the information he gets through social interactions and participatory observation, the roles and positions he is made to assume as an outsider who may be mobilized and utilized for local causes and personal strategies; his personal reactions of frustration, anger, despair, attraction, fascination, adherence and understanding; all these details and circumstances that give fieldwork its particular hue and are a constitutive part of anthropological knowledge. The literary supplement therefore acts as the return of the repressed: what couldn't enter the scholarly monograph finds its way into the literary essay. Books like *Tristes Tropiques* are highly subjective. From its opening sentence, I hate traveling and explorers, to

its closing page, with its adieu to savages and travels, the author strips his heart naked and presents his travel to ia as a voyage of self-discovery. Beyond his personal itinerary, the anthropologist appears as a whole person, having reached the Age of Man (L'Age d'homme, Michel Leiris) at a time when the figure of mankind was put into question. After the bloodshed of the First World War, many thinkers and essayists were calling for a new humanism that would reconcile society with itself. They were convinced that Western societies had lost contact with an essential dimension of the social, led astray by the dehumanization of labor and the compartmentation of modern life. In this context, the anthropologist emerges as a modern hero, reconciling in his person experience and knowledge, action and reflection, science and the arts. He responds to a calling that summons him to enlarge his experience and broaden his sensibility in contact with cultures that are radically other. The stay among savage tribes is an act of rejuvenation, a rite of passage that often follows the earlier abandonment of a literary career. It redeems the anthropologist from the sins of the modern world. In this context, ethnology is invested with high hopes by writers and intellectuals who nonetheless compete with ethnographers on similar grounds. The 1920s and 1930s, with its many literary and artistic movements, was a time when writers and artists tried to reconquer the intellectual high ground lost to the human and social sciences. Literature once had a monopoly over the description of social mores and the analysis of the human psyche. Through travel narratives and exotic novels, it was also the sole window opened to foreign cultures and alien customs. The interwar years in France saw an explosion of essayism as a literary genre, conjugating literary ambitions with a claim of intellectual relevance. In the border disputes between literature and science, the Republic of Letters was again on the offensive. The writing conventions of anthropology was an act of resistance against literature, emphasizing science and professionalism, but also a surrender to its power, manifested in the publication of the second book of the ethnographer. This tradition of the second book still lives on, even though anthropology in the postwar period evolved into an academic discipline based on an impressive body of accumulated knowledge and increasingly complex theories. The purpose of anthropology is now to construct social facts and treat them as knowledge objects, not to depict the whole of a society's culture. Therefore the need to mobilize literature, or to use rhetoric, vanishes from the anthropologist's professional horizon. If French anthropologists write essays, it may be out of an identification with past figures and models. Georges Balandier, moving to anthropology after having published a first novel, and writing *Afrique ambiguë* after his thesis on urban Africa, clearly follows the footsteps of Michel Leiris. It is also the expression of a psychological urge to reflect on the experience of fieldwork, in its transformative and sometimes traumatic dimension, and to organize field notes into a more coherent whole in order to save them from oblivion. Anthropologists also often mention the need to educate the public, to give back to society what they have acquired at public money's expense. And indeed, there is a learned public in France for anthropological books. Starting with *Tristes Tropiques*, the books surveyed by Vincent Debaene have often attained best seller status. Vincent Debaene's *Far Field* is a valuable addition to the library of the literature scholar and to the anthropologist's reading list. The author patrols the shifting border between social science and literature, showing that the two disciplines have always defined themselves in relation to each other. This diagnosis has already been made from the 1970s onward by Frederic Jameson or other literary critics often put under the banner of postmodernism. But they did so with highly charged words, in order to denounce anthropology's pretension to science and to expose its ideological biases. Vincent Debaene takes a different approach: he never questions the scientific nature of anthropological knowledge. On the contrary, he insists on its distinctive nature, and highlights its differences with more literary forms of inquiry. He is more interested in the emergence of literary conventions, and in the genealogy of disciplines, than in the petty infighting between academic faculties. The opposition between the two books of the ethnographer is a valid point of entry into the history of anthropology in the twentieth century. It is also a window into France's intellectual history, and a contribution to the sociology of literature movements.² of 3 people found the following review helpful. A different history

By Maureen Molloy
Fascinating and elegant exegesis of the culture of French anthropology

The most famous name in French literary circles from the late 1950s till his death in 1981, Roland Barthes maintained a contradictory rapport with the cinema. As a cultural critic, he warned of its surreptitious ability to lead the enthralled spectator toward an acceptance of a pre-given world. As a leftist, he understood that spectacle could be turned against itself and provoke deep questioning of that pre-given world. And as an extraordinarily sensitive human being, he relished the beauty of images and the community they could bring together.

"Philip Watts' probing of Barthes' advance-retreat relationship to the movies is wise, sensitive and stimulating—in fact, brilliant. Even rarer is the warmth, clarity and goodwill he expresses toward the often antagonistic figures who championed French theory. The addition of several previously unavailable pieces by Barthes makes this an irresistible volume." --Philip Lopate, author of *To Show and To Tell: The Craft of Literary Nonfiction*

"Philip Watts' groundbreaking work on Roland Barthes and cinema is a gift to film studies, to literary studies, and to theory. No other critic could match Watts in combining close textual analysis with historical insight. His encounter with Barthes' resistance to cinema shows a deep and refined critical vision, leavened by wit that Barthes would have appreciated." --Alice Kaplan, author of *Dreaming in French: The Paris Years of Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, Susan Sontag, and Angela*

Davis "Watts saw another Barthes besides the semiologist, the structuralist, the demystifier and the Brechtian Barthes, a Barthes who had always been in love with the image and with a particular aesthetics of daily life...." --Jacques Rancire "this is a rich and nuanced intervention which changes how we see Roland Barthes and film." --Times Literary Supplement "[A] series of playfully investigative essays... Roland Barthes' Cinema is an intriguing invitation to examine Barthes's work in greater detail." --Choice "this is a rich and nuanced intervention which changes how we see Roland Barthes and film." --Neil Badmington, Times Literary Supplement "[A] thoughtful book... Watts' approach uncovers unexpected riches in what have seemed to be minor moments in Barthes' work. The book has chapters on film and myth, on film and perception, on Barthes and Bazin, on film and utopian politics, on film theory, on melodrama... Roland Barthes' Cinema also includes new translations (by Deborah Glassman) of nine of Barthes' less well-known articles on film." -- Barthes Studies About the Author Philip Watts was Professor of French at Columbia University and Chair of the department from 2008 to 2012.