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Proceedings from the Document Academy

University of Akron Press Managed

November 2014

# Documentary Borders: Reality or Illusion

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## Recommended Citation

Roux, Sabine and Courbières, Caroline (2014) "Documentary Borders: Reality or Illusion," *Proceedings from the Document Academy*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 11.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.35492/docam/1/1/11

Available at: https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/docam/vol1/iss1/11

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Since Paul Otlet, a document is defined as any object composed of signs and support (Otlet, 1934). This semiotic object exists only when it is actualized within a communication process in which the moment of its interpretation is emphasized over that of its production. It materializes only through the recognition of its semiological horizon (Courbières, 2012). And it is this interpretative course that determines the informational value of the object. Its signifying reach may depend on a purely documentary regime or on a fictional regime. But if sometimes the border between those two regimes of meaning seems to fade inside some documentary or artistic objects, one of the scientific issues is to go beyond the relatively modern opposition between documentary and fictional plans. In our study, we will try to examine the slides of this border analyzing plans of expression and the content of the plural work of the writer and ethnologist Jocelyn Bonnerave.

Bonnerave's doctoral thesis is about the anthropology of performing arts and more specifically about improvised musical performance (Bonnerave, 2008). This study had a profound influence on his theatrical work and also on his literary writing marked by orality, rhythm and the effect of spontaneity. He used his notebooks of field observations to write his thesis, scientific articles (Bonnerave, 2004, 2010), and also his first novel (Bonnerave, 2009). He also used them to produce performing arts: a compact disc which is a musical setting of the novel, and a radio drama. This paper will first examine the qualities of a document in order to deploy its semiological and communicational characteristics. Then the ambiguous status of the notebook will be studied before examining the process by which one document appears within another analyzing its destabilizing potential, like a curveball « mise en abyme ». Finally, we will focus on the aesthetics of the document which constitutes a new perspective in the study of the document.

#### The Values of the Document

According to the ordinary understanding of a document as bearing factual evidence, a documentary system activates a pure informational value. This documentary value can arise at different times in the construction of a document, starting in its production and continuing in its interpretation. We can then distinguish two documentary intentions based on the distinction posed by Jean Meyriat between the document by intention and the document by attribution. Meyriat took up the idea of the plurisemiotic nature of the document set forth by Suzanne Briet and he developed theoretical reflection on information and the document. He makes the link between the information content and the role of the producer and of the user: a document may have been produced as such (intended as a document) but it only functions as a document if the user recognizes it as such (document by assignment or attribution). He makes a distinction between "non-activated information" and "activated information", between production and reception. Jean Meyriat

distinguishes the document by intention (produced to inform) from the document by attribution constituted by the receiver: any object can become a document, and conversely, "an object intentionally produced to be a document can cease to be one if it is not received as such<sup>1</sup>" (Meyriat, 1981). He specifies that any object is a document, or has the possibility of becoming a document, if it transmits information that is a message which makes sense both for the transmitter and for the receiver. The document may have been produced to give information but it gets value from the fact that the one who uses it is looking for information. The receiver reconstructs a meaning in the document and so confers on it the status of a message which makes sense. Here, the notion of a document approaches that of a sign (Roux, 2012).

If we extend this conceptual distinction, we can determine two basic semiotic terms: from the production of the document, there is an intention to inform ("vouloir informer") and, at the moment of the reception of the document, an intention to inform oneself ("vouloir s'informer"). Based on this distinction between an object produced to inform and an object constituted by the receiver in a search for information, we find the notion of virtuality as the basis of the documentary object. This semiotic notion is based on a Saussure distinction which articulates system and process: the existence of a document could be conceptualized from the paradigmatic axis (where the document is "in absentia" or virtual) independently of its actualization on the syntagmatic axis (where the document is then "in praesentia"). Apprehending information and constructing the document depends on what we have called the documentary horizon (Courbières, 2002, 2004). The concept of documentary horizon allows us to go further than the distinction posed by Jean Meyriat.

The documentary horizon embraces the context of production that situates information and the context of interpretation that elaborates the documentary object. A document must be considered inside a semiological process within a particular communication situation. Documentary potential relates to the dual conception of information: information could be treated as a simple datum or as signifying content. This qualitative difference was suggested by Robert Escarpit who distinguishes the notion of information from the notion of knowledge (Escarpit, 1991) and was made by Yves Jeanneret when he opposes mathematical information and social information (Jeanneret, 2007). We can connect this distinction with the couple information-as-thing versus information-as-process (Buckland, 1991). The notion of document can be considered according to these two types of information. And in this regard, the document does not exist, but remains a potential (Courbières, 2004, 2008).

Stating of the documentary horizon thus makes it possible to consider other

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<sup>&</sup>quot;Un objet produit intentionnellement pour être un document peut cesser de l'être s'il n'est pas reçu comme tel. »

meaning values of the documentary object: from the production of the document, there is an intention to signify ("vouloir exprimer"), and at the moment of the reception of the document, the intention to reconstruct the meaning ("vouloir interpréter"). These two values can be understood as dependent on a metadocumentary dimension that relates to the created regime of meaning. The documentary borders emerge between documentary value and metadocumentary value. Those borders can then be traced through the document's relationship to reality. This perspective requires us to deepen our analysis of the documentary representation of reality, which can take different forms of expression. From the different documentary values posed previously, we can thus examine the relationship between the document and the reality (Roux, 2010), and detail what Roland Barthes called the referential illusion ("l'illusion référentielle") caused by "the direct collusion between a referent and a signifier", between documentary intentions (Barthes, 1968). We can also analyze what could be a desired aesthetic effect (metadocumentary intentions). However these two significant functions are sometimes completely intermingled one with another, whether it is a deliberate choice on the part of the author of the document or an effect of the meaning constructed by the receiver.

If a scientific object can have an aesthetic dimension, a fictional work might be about to produce realistic discourse. The two types of document create in a certain way this so-called reality effect ("effet de réel"), even if their respective documentary values differ. That is why the definition of the documentary object remains paradoxical and could be made in parallel with Jean Baudrillard's definition of consumer object (Courbières, 2013): "But the object is nothing. It is nothing but the different types of relations and significations that converge, contradict themselves, and twist around it, as such - the hidden logic that not only arranges this bundle of relations, but directs the manifest discourse and occludes it." (Baudrillard, 1981: 63). The question is about whether a border persists unchanged as regimes of meanings are updated. Now, we are going to examine the slippage of this border in the varied work of the writer and ethnologist Jocelyn Bonnerave.

# The Ambiguous Status of the Notebook

At first glance, it seems very simple to distinguish a fictional regime and a documentary regime in order to define and categorize Jocelyn Bonnervave's productions. Thus, in the fictional regime we find a novel, artistic performances of the novel set to music and voice, and a radio play broadcast on France Culture. On the documentary side are the thesis and scientific articles constituting scientific documents.

<sup>«</sup> la collusion *directe* d'un référent et d'un signifiant »

<sup>«</sup> l'objet n'est *rien*. Il n'est rien que les différents types de relation et de significations qui viennent converger, se contredire, se nouer sur lui en tant que tel. »

For example, the observations in the ethnologist's notebook is, at first sight, a documentary regime. It is indeed a document that preserves traces of ethnologist's fieldwork observations. It is perceived as a material document that is the raw material of scientific monograph to come. But is it that simple?

Behind the apparent objectivity of the scientific writing of the notebook, the writing subject who takes notes on a series of unique observations reveals himself. Here we can draw a parallel with the study of Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar on the production of scientific facts in a biology laboratory: « "In a fundamental sense, our account is no more than *fiction*. But this does not make it inferior to the activity of laboratory members: they too were busy constructing accounts to be launched in the agnostic field, and loaded with various sources of credibility in such a way that once convinced, others would incorporate them as givens, or as matters of fact, in their own construction of reality." (Latour and Woolgar, 1986: 257).

Thus, after the first observation of Fred Frith's improvisation and musical composition seminar session, Jocelyn Bonnerave wrote in his notebook:

« At the exit, waiting for the bus, I finally talk with the musicians: Marie-Claire (flute), Eli and violinist Marie + ride with her. »<sup>4</sup>

and in the novel after the first session of Frank Firth's improvisation and musical composition seminar :

« Bus. Clare and Mary-Teresa take the same bus as me »<sup>5</sup>

The real musician Fred Frith become Frank Firth in the novel. Objectivity of the notebook and objectivity of the novel corresponds to each other. The chronology of the notebook and chronology of the novel overlap, blurring documentary borders.

Some passages of the notebook could be confused with an extract from the novel. Thus at the beginning of notebook:

« 21/09

I have an appointment with Fred to observe him leading his musical band. I arrive on time 7:00 pm, impatient, I hear music in the Mills "Concert Hall", I'm finally here ... and I scan people looking for his face ... nobody. I'm leaving - It may be wrong date, place, country - I see a student: "Fred is sick." No

Clare et Mary-Teresa prennent le même bus que moi » Nouveaux Indiens p. 29

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<sup>«</sup> A la sortie, en attendant le bus, je discute enfin avec les musiciens : Marie-Claire (flûte), Eli + trajet avec elle et la violoniste Marie » Carnet p.6

<sup>«</sup> Bus

news this morning in my e-mail box. I stay. I listen to Fred's musical band without Fred. »<sup>6</sup>

And conversely this excerpt from the novel could be included in the notebook:

« In essence, the documentary overlaps the thesis of Pierre Clastres's book, I've read in Berkeley: some groups called primitives are not as societies without a State, retarded, unable to form a pyramidal and central administration, than societies against the State.

The Guayaki live in small communities where the only hierarchical position is one of the leader. For the rest, absolute equality between adult members. (p.101).

Pierre Clastres is a real French anthropologist who has studied the Guayaki Indians, these remarks could therefore be included in scientific notebooks and yet it is an extract from the novel that plays with the documentary regime to create an effect of realism and also give information on Guayaki people who play a key role in the police investigation which combines with ethnographic investigation. The borders between fictional characters and real people are less obvious than they could appear at first sight.

#### The Observer Observed or the Curveball Process (« mise en abyme »)

So at the beginning of the novel, it is not as easy to distinguish author, narrator and anthropology student.

« I come to observe Frank Firth, the musician, who teaches his Mills College students how we learn to play music when we are together » <sup>8</sup>

But the thesis in social anthropology is precisely about how musicians play

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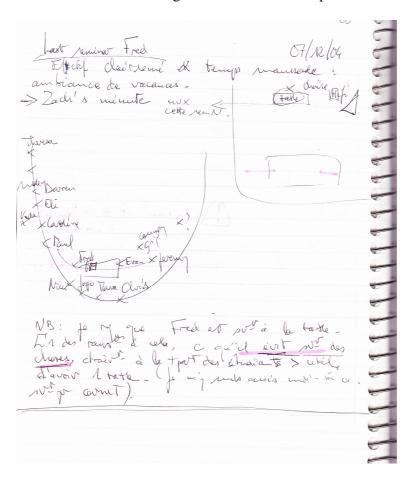
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<sup>«</sup> J'ai rendez-vous avec Fred pour le voir diriger son « ensemble ». J'arrive à l'heure 7:00 PM, impatient, j'entends de la musique dans le « Concert Hall » de Mills, je suis enfin là... et je scrute les gens à la recherche de son visage...personne. Je ressors. Je me suis peut-être trompé de jour, de lieu, de pays. Je croise une élève : « Fred is sick ». Pas de nouvelles ce matin dans ma boîte mail. Je reste. J'écoute l'ensemble de Fred sans Fred. » Carnet p. 5

<sup>«</sup> Pour l'essentiel, le docu recoupe la thèse du bouquin de Pierre Clastres que j'ai parcouru à Berkeley : certains groupes dits primitifs ne sont pas tant des sociétés sans Etat, attardées, incapables de constituer une administration centrale et pyramidale, que des sociétés *contre* l'Etat. Les Guayaki vivent en petites communautés où la seule position hiérarchique est celle du chef. Pour le reste, égalité absolue entre les membres adultes. » *Nouveaux Indiens*, p. 101.

<sup>«</sup> Je suis venu observer Frank Firth, le musicien, qui apprend à ses étudiants de Mills College comment on fait pour être ensemble quand on joue de la musique. » *Nouveaux Indiens*, p. 12

together and contains observations of the workshops of the musician Fred Frith who truly teaches improvisation and composition at the Music Department of Mills College in Oakland since 1999. The title of the thesis is: « When sounds make a show of it: Jazz and improvised music. Steps to an anthropology of musical performance ». The narrator of the novel could also be the « real » student observing jazz musicians. In the notebooks we find, of course, notes taken while observing Fred Frith's workshops.



Borders between reality and fictional illusion are not so easy to draw. The narrator of the novel introduces himself as an anthropologist:

« My name is A the anthropologist. In the past anthropologists studied savages villages but today it doesn't exist anymore (I take my best accent to tell them). So, we study original people, artists, you see (I pronounce ârtists: everybody laugh), so my savage is Frank in the Mills College campus. » 9

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<sup>&</sup>quot;« Je m'appelle A. l'anthropologue. Avant les anthropologues étudiaient les villages de sauvages mais aujourd'hui ça n'existe plus (je prends mon meilleur accent pour leur dire). Du coup, on se rabat sur les originaux, les artistes vous voyez (je prononce ârtists: tout le monde rigole), donc moi mon sauvage c'est Frank sur le campus de Mills College. » Nouveaux Indiens, p.18.

A the anthropologist explains his aim in that way:

« I would like to know how these people manage to tell each others things while they're playing, and so while they can't talk to each other. What is done and who decides for example. »<sup>10</sup>

So the fictional characters and the real people are not so easily distinguished. The fictional regime and the documentary regime mix together to build a novel that can be then considered as a heterogeneous document that mixes fiction and documentary which, of course, calls into question the status of literature. As the sociologist and novelist Edouard Louis says about Bourdieu and the status of literature:

« Why do we spontaneously associate the novel with fiction? There is no historical or semiotic necessity linking the novel with the fiction. The novel is a work of literary construction that can afford to approach the truth. It might be necessary to write a "non-fiction novel" or a "scientific novel" » <sup>11</sup> (Louis, 2013).

The ethnological observation of Fred Frith's workshops is found repeatedly in the novel making the reader an observer who observes an anthropologist doing his observations (doing his work).

« "Frank Firth, the musician who plays sold out in Tokyo, sits in the circle and not in the center. Without instruments, just his voice. For any music score, a book of images: photos, tree rings, barbed wires, windows through which light passes taken at a railways station.

« Ok, strain exercise, do as the picture, who wants to make the first circle?. Clare, ok « Clare blowing her flute, gutter, acne, sneakers, chinese cat size 1: 15: » put the last notes loop » in my notebook I write stump exercise I designed the first flute circle. » 12

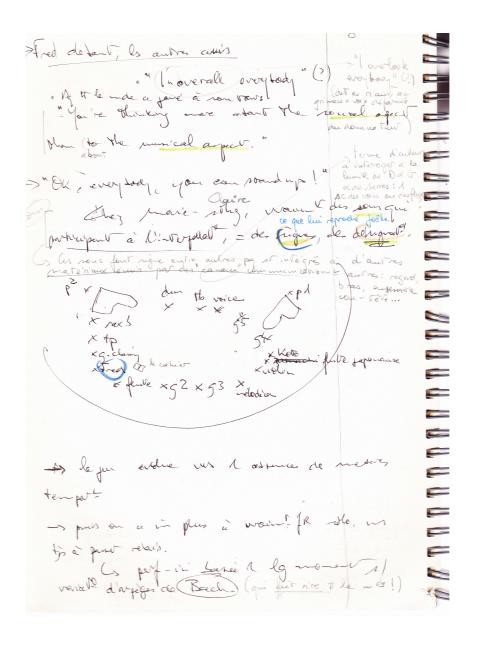
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<sup>«</sup> Je voudrais savoir comment font ces gens pour se dire des choses quand ils jouent, donc quand ils ne peuvent pas se parler. Qu'est-ce qu'on fait et qui décide, par exemple. »Nouveaux Indiens, p. 58.

<sup>«</sup> Pourquoi associe-t-on spontanément le roman à la fiction ? Il n'y a aucune nécessité historique ou sémiologique qui relierait le roman à la fiction. Le roman est un travail de construction littéraire qui peut justement permettre d'approcher la vérité. Il aurait peut-être fallu écrire « roman non fictionnel » ou « roman scientifique » »

<sup>«</sup> Frank Firth, le musicien qui joue sold out à Tokyo, s'assied dans le cercle et pas au centre. Sans instrument, juste sa voix. Pour toute partition : un livre d'images : des photos, troncs d'arbres tranchés, fils de fer barbelés, verrières à contre-jour prises dans les gares de passage.

<sup>«</sup> Ok, exercice de la souche, on fait comme sur la photo, qui veut faire le premier cercle ? Clare, ok » Clare souffle dans sa flûte, rigole, acné, baskets de chat pointure chinoise 1:15: « mets les dernières notes en boucle » sur mon carnet j'écris *stump exercice* je



The use of the book of images as a method for learning how to improvise is written in the notebook while the ethnologist responds to his observation to Fred Frith's first workshop

« The day's exercises are always introduced obliquely through a notebook of images, an object with an ambiguous status. This notebook contains colored photocopies of photos all taken outdoors:

a section of wall with the bricks visible a tree stump viewed from above (so

dessine le premier cercle de flûte. » Nouveaux Indiens, p.25.

that the multiple tree rings appear nested. windows through which light passes and which cut it into rectangles, and so on.» (p.14)<sup>13</sup>

The «boot method» of learning how to improvise goes through into thesis and into the novel.

« From the meeting of 5 October, F. Frith established a series of trios by assigning musicians at random. To do this, he used a curious green boots in which he mingled the names of the participants before picking: the strangeness of the object and its misuse was a great success. Each trio was also charged with making a written description of the progress of its collaboration.

The draw was also an incidental opportunity to learn about the artistic process of F. Frith. Once trios formed, he said in effect about the boot, « an everyday object that becomes a magical object: it is a metaphor for my work. » This brief remark also illuminates the use of photographs and copies of seemingly mundane things and landscapes (...) and is very representative of how the observation of the pedagogical framework allowed me to better understand my investigation about musicians as creators. » <sup>14</sup>

The passage of the thesis that echoes this excerpt from the novel where we find the boot, this everyday object that is magic, is:

- « It was a sort of green boot woven with red floral patterns, the kind of boot for which Jimi Hendrix might have been willing to pay expensively.
- Ok, so we'll also make small elections. Today, we must go home knowing exactly who will play with who in that concert season. You know you were

<sup>«</sup> Les exercices du jour sont tous introduits par le biais d'un cahier d'images, objet au statut ambigu. Ce cahier contient des photocopies en couleur de photos prises essentiellement à l'extérieur : un pan de mur dont les briques sont apparentes, une souche prise du dessus (de telle sorte que les multiples couches de l'écorce sont perçues comme l'emboîtement), des verrières à travers lesquelles passe la lumière, et qui la découpent en rectangles, etc... » *Notebook* p.14

Dès la séance du 5 octobre, Fred Frith établit une série de trios en confiant au hasard le choix des collaborateurs. Pour ce faire, il utilisa une curieuse bottine verte où se mélangèrent les noms des participants avant le tirage au sort : la bizarrerie de l'objet et son usage détourné rencontrèrent un franc succès. Chaque trio fut en outre chargé de formuler par écrit un descriptif du déroulement de la collaboration.

Ce tirage au sort fut aussi une occasion incidente d'en apprendre davantage sur la démarche artistique de F. Frith. Une fois les trios formés, il déclara en effet à propos de la bottine : « un objet quotidien qui devient un objet magique : c'est une métaphore de mon travail. » Cette brève remarque, qui éclaire d'ailleurs l'utilisation des photographies reproduisant choses et paysages (...) est très représentative de la manière dont l'observation du cadre pédagogique me permit de mieux cerner les musiciens de mon enquête en tant que créateurs. » *Thèse* p. 301-302.

asked to play as a trio or quartet before the orchestra itself. »<sup>15</sup>

So, the novel can be seen as a document, a curveball of ethnological observation. With A the anthropologist, the reader leads a field investigation in ethnomusicology (a documentary regime) and also conducting in the same time a police investigation into the disappearance of a student (a fictional regime which includes the conventions of the detective novel). The reader of the novel follows the observations and methodological paths of A the anthropologist. So, a form of heterogeneous knowledge (Roux, 2011) circulates from the notebook through the thesis and into the novel.

#### **Toward Aesthetics of the Document**

Knowledge circulating in artistic forms questions that cross documentary fields: how to play together, to live together, questioning the hierarchy and the need for a leader in musical training but also in society, can we communicate without the traditional language? Aesthetic issues and political issues are intertwined in various Jocelyn Bonnerave's productions. If traditional borders between documentary and fictional forms are insufficient to define what a document is, many artistic mediations devices contribute to the constituting of documentary objects.

Videos allow to the fixing of artistic experiences as recorded performances, based on the novel, which took place in museums, in media library. Such videos are material resources that question the nature of the document. The performance (the artistic and ephemeral nature of the performance at one point in time) seems to be in opposition with the definition of a document and yet a performance can become a document.

In libraries, performing art (voicing and set to music) is another way to promote reading or a way for users of the site to perceive reading. The act of reading becomes a live performance. The novelist turns into a performer. Excerpts from the novel are set to music and spoken to allow the literary text to be seen and heard. Jocelyn Bonnerave created artistic performances from the novel and in this way questions the status of performance as an aesthetic document. The literary production and the collections of the museum are linked by providing an artistic performance. It is to combine the aesthetic of the novel and that of the museum's collection.

<sup>«</sup> C'était une manière de bottine verte tissée de motifs floraux rouges, le genre de chaussure que Jimi Hendrix aurait été sans doute prêt à payer très cher.

<sup>-</sup>Ok, nous aussi nous allons faire de petites élections. Aujourd'hui il faut qu'on reparte en sachant exactement qui jouera avec qui au concert de fin d'année. Vous savez qu'on vous demande de jouer en trio ou en quatuor avant la pièce d'orchestre elle-même. » *Nouveaux Indiens*, p.127

Performance may merge with a museum visit by stopping in front of selected museum objects in order to evaluate them in value. It is interesting to note that the relationship between the museum collection and the performance is often ethnographic as it was in Paris at the Maison Rouge (a private foundation www.lamaisonrouge.org) where the performance called "New Indians 3D" allowed a visit to the «All Cannibals» exhibition of contemporary art. Cannibalism at the heart of the novel allowed a link with the theme of the exhibition.

Jocelyn Bonnerave also produced a «Radio drama» broadcast live on France Culture (and also available in podcast) as part of a radio show «Workshop Fiction». Actors from the Theatre of Strasbourg and jazz musicians play live a series of excerpts from the novel.

So we can analyse Jocelyn Bonnerave as having multiple personas (academic, novelist, dramatist, performance artist) who makes circulate multi-faceted objects that contain a kind of knowledge with ambiguous status. As Latour and Woolgar write:

« Nor is there any difference in the sources of credibility upon which they and we can draw on so as to force people to drop modalities from proposal statements » (Latour and Woolgar, 1986)

Our study, which is part of a broader perspective on the document as a semiotic mediation attempted to show the complexity of these objects and to their uncertain status (Roux, 2012). So, a document can be regarded as an element of "triviality" defined by Yves Jeanneret (2008) as a descriptive category to understand culture as "the fact that objects and representations do not remain closed on themselves but circulate and move between the hands and minds of men" A document remains a project founded by the articulation between its virtual nature and its actualization inside a specific communicational process (Courbières, 2008, 2012). If a document is still a construction of reality, the concept of border allows us here to observe the metamorphosis of all those objects which oscillate between an informational value and an aesthetic value in function of interpretative courses realized.

The multiplicity of the document is like a rhizome (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) without its latest production. A new node is always added and modifies the apparent organization of the whole. As noted by Deleuze and Guattari, the rhizome is "very different from the tree or root which plots a point, fixes an order." (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 7). Indeed it is not a question of prioritization or measuring the level of knowledge they contain, but simply to

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<sup>«</sup> le fait que les objets et les représentations ne restent pas fermés sur eux-mêmes mais circulent et passent entre les mains et les esprits des hommes. »

note that knowledge flows in this network of rhizomorph documents. « A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, *intermezzo*. The tree is filiation, but the rhizome is alliance. » (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 25). The metaphor of the rhizome is presented as an alternative to the continuum model.

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