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Evergreen Ethnographies

Abstract: The article promotes the argument that anthropological or ethnological knowledge is primarily produced through ethnographies that present fieldwork experience. As publications that appear after returning home, they provide the social sciences with the most recent information about the present reality. Moreover, that is where we can find new methodological approaches and new theoretical concepts. Our contemporary experience in such a fast-changing world shows the uselessness of the formerly applied analytical notions, forcing us to search for a new form of description and new interpretative categories.

The article is actually a survey of the best known fieldwork monographs presented through theories, schools and trends in cultural and social anthropology that have been constituted or overcome by these very monographs, which are milestones in over a century of ethnological/anthropological research. As the last ones are from the 21st century, they present not only the newest research results, but also the most up-to-date methodologies.

Keywords: Fieldwork, ethnography, methodological approaches in ethnology and cultural anthropology.

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As a teacher who over the span of many years now has been concerned with introducing students to the most important issues in the field of ethnology/cultural anthropology, I have inevitably observed that when discussing different approaches, their assumptions and understandings, the enthusiasm expressed by students is mediocre to say the least. However, the moment I introduce excerpts from fieldwork monographs, the situation is completely different. Even the oldest ones, after a hundred years, have lost nothing of their original charm both for students and their teachers. Those fragments of classical anthropological texts have for the former the attraction of a novelty, while for the latter it is usually yet one more reading that reveals something new, a dimension not observed before. In the face of such observations, there appears the following question: why do fieldwork monographs better withstand the test of time than theoretical solutions?

At this point it is worth mentioning that in English-language works the term *ethnog-raphy* implies both fieldwork and the effects of this activity, that is a publication. Such a publication is thus always linked with "the central ritual of the tribe of anthropologists" (Hastrup 1995: 20) because, as James Clifford wrote, "the community [of anthropologists] does not simply use (define) the term 'fieldwork', it is materially used (defined) by it" (1997: 55). Moreover, anthropology is "a subject whose central rite of passage is fieldwork" (Gupta, Ferguson 1992: 6). In noticing the significance of

research experience for the identity of the academic discipline defined by the name of ethnology or cultural anthropology, it is necessary to acknowledge that fieldwork monographs, i.e. texts directly concerned with research practice, are the very core of this discipline. In theoretical reflections and works of different kinds, including textbooks, monographs are summarized and commented on, with what is known as anthropological knowledge being, in this way, as if a commentary to them (Clifford 1988, Herzfeld 2001, Kuper 1999, Lewellen 2003, and many others). Observing the significance of works recounting ethnographic research, it is ironic to see that many Polish libraries prefer to buy English-language textbooks or dictionaries rather than monographs. The reasons for this are probably financial, but may also be due to the librarians' own views on which books will be most often read. The library of the Institute of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology is one of the few exceptions to this rule.

So as to fully appreciate the importance of fieldwork publications for the development of anthropology, it is worth tracing, albeit in brief and somewhat selectively, their development from the first published works of this type until contemporary times. Monographs, together with fieldwork as such, appeared at the beginning of the 20th century but if we were to take into consideration Lewis Henry Morgan's *The League of the Ho-dé-no-sau-nee or Iroquois*, published in 1851, we would have to say even earlier. It is necessary to stress, however, that in the first decades of the existence of cultural anthropology as an academic discipline, the necessity of undertaking methodical fieldwork was anything but the norm. Both Edward B. Taylor, the first Professor of Anthropology at Oxford University, as well as George Frazer, the author of *The Golden Bough*, worked from their own desks. However, it was not long till travelling into the interior became a requirement for the sanctioning of anthropological knowledge.

As a turning-point here it is possible to acknowledge the famous British expedition in the vicinity of the Torres Strait undertaken in 1898, during which research was conducted according to the instructions found in *Notes and Queries on Anthropology* (with the subtitle: For the Use of Travelers and Residents in Uncivilized Lands) and which had been prepared by the Royal Anthropological Institute in 1874. The research conducted in the Torres Strait was an experience that proved to be of primary importance in the careers of its participants and specialists in different fields. Many of them decided to continue their anthropological studies: Dr W. H. Rivers left for southern India in 1901, which resulted in his work *The Todas*, published in 1906; the pathologist Charles Seligman continued his research in New Guinea, on the basis of which he wrote *The Melanesians of British New Guinea* in 1910. Fascinated with his fieldwork experiences, Seligman and his wife conducted further studies, first in Ceylon (a book published in 1911) and then in Sudan (resulting in another publication in 1932).

Although at the time *Notes and Queries* was *the* guide for conducting fieldwork, how the description was to be actually constructed had to be worked out by the researchers themselves, in part intuitively, in part according to their common sense, sometimes referring to knowledge, e.g. medical, they had previously acquired. An example here may be Rivers' 'genealogical method' that was primarily concerned

with issues of kinship. Narratives were built in a similar way in many other works from the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, among which it is worth mentioning Franz Boas' publication about Eskimos and the Kwakiutl, the works of Alfred Howitt and Lorimer Fison on Australians, John Layard's on the inhabitants of the Wanatu islands, and many others.

What is, however, considered a turning point in how research was conducted and descriptions construed are the studies of Bronislaw Malinowski who, after receiving his Ph.D. from the University in Krakow, took part in a British expedition to Australia. The outbreak of World War I and his Austrian passport were the reasons why Malinowski had to remain on the Melanesian Trobriand Islands (Kuper 1999). This extended visit gave Malinowski the opportunity to undertake systematic fieldwork lasting many months, which he later described in his works from the 1920s. The experience let him formulate principles for conducting fieldwork that are still followed at many universities today.

The advice he put forward also included the researcher's preparations: an anthropological education and knowledge of the native language. These requirements were supplemented by the conviction that long field trips were essential, preferably embracing a whole vegetative cycle. Malinowski called the anthropologist's activity participatory observation, at the same time stressing the necessity of personal involvement. Observations were to be accompanied by dialogues with the natives in order to learn about their point of view. In using his notes from his fieldwork for the creation of material that was to serve him in his further theoretical reflections, Malinowski accorded them a very significant status. Making sure that nothing would be forgotten, he advised researchers to write a diary. Of interest here is the fact that his own: *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* (1967) revealed too many shameful aspects of research practice to be published in the 1920s.

When reading Malinowski's best known Trobriand works (*Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, published in 1922, or *Coral Gardens and their Magic* from 1935), one sees very clearly that ethnographic authority is established through the experience of 'being there'. It was thanks to him that later anthropologists came to believe that fieldwork is "a disciplining process and an ambiguous legacy" (Clifford 1997: 64). According to contemporaneous principles, an anthropologist was perceived as the subject of the research process whose subjects in turn were the natives.

Malinowski not only created a model for research practice, but also tried to work out a method for constructing a description. His functional model presented the Trobriand community as a system of institutions functioning together, understood as a set of activities undertaken by groups of people for the sake of satisfying their needs. Such a formulation was to emphasize the fact that the activities of the natives were pragmatic and made sense. There was a description model of a culture defined as a system of activities, a model generating a synchronic picture of community life which was quite different from those works appearing within an evolution or diffusion framework. As has been emphasized by contemporary commentators of works written at that time, such an approach, which was relevant to writing about the life of an isolated community, omitted the broader colonial context of the described reality. If we are to believe Ted Lewellen (2003), notwithstanding Malinowski's adopted method, the manner in which he constructed the description was not as popular as his advice concerning how to conduct one's research. British researchers more often followed the model proposed by Reginald Radcliffe-Brown in the 1920s, which was adopted in many publications appearing in the following decades. This model of describing community life, which in some aspects was similar to that proposed by Malinowski, would be compared to a photograph taken from an airplane, presenting reality from the air—from a distance, and was then assessed positively, making it possible to grasp the system as a whole. In describing the structural form of a given community, Radcliffe-Brown concentrated on certain patterns of social relationships, speaking about what in that system was typical and regular, emphasizing inner harmony. It was in this way, among others, that he constructed his most famous work *The Andaman Islanders*, published in 1922.

World War II brought about some fundamental changes. The colonial project was first badly shaken to finally undergo total disintegration. In Europe there were new divisions which were the consequence of decisions taken by the leaders of the most powerful countries. The processes that were then inaugurated did away with the old forms of isolation, opening up traditional and native communities to new trends. In the following decades the old colonies became independent states, their models being European nation states. Technological developments and the spread of capitalism (or socialism) brought with them new economic solutions. Political and economic changes were linked with modernization generally understood, and which was concerned with all areas of life.

All these changes had a great influence on the way cultural anthropology was practised. Fieldwork publications, which appeared during the war years, e.g. those of Edward Evans-Pritchard, were constructed according the the Radcliffe-Brown model which then was already anything but perfect. Placing emphasis on presenting a system that functioned harmoniously, it was not of much use in describing a community in the throes of conflict. In his work *The Nuer* (1940), Evans-Pritchard proposed a new attitude towards conflicts when describing this African community according to the old model. This publication was a turning point in moving the reader's attention from the principles of a harmonious community life to issues of conflict, the significance of which was perceived ever more clearly. At the same time, emphasis was placed on their role in integrating societies and showing how the process of change takes place through conflicts.

The notion of change became the key analytical tool in the trend that took shape after the war and was to become the new model of description appropriate for communities that were changing fast and were open to influence. One of the first fieldwork publications that proposed this new type of description was that of Edmund Leach, *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, published in 1954. It showed the changes of what Radcliffe-Brown called a structural form taking place within one community, that of the Burmese Katchin, whose social system was changing very quickly between the more egalitarian form of *gumsa* and the hierarchical form *gumlao*.

Not all publications appearing within the framework of this model were about the life of communities as a whole. *Schism and Continuity in an African Village* by Victor Turner, published in 1947, was innovatory in the way in which the description was constructed. In describing the African Ndembu, Turner resigned from the perspective of a bird's eye view for the sake of concentrating on the micro-scale conflicts between different individuals—arguments, during which, among others, negotiations and victories took place over succession. Such an approach showed that it was not structural form but a contest between definite groups, such as the Kahali and Sandombu, that decided who would be chief. Such a contest was described by Turner as *social drama* (Turner 1974).

The description of social life within the model of a game or rather entertainment also appears in *Political Leadership among Swat Pathans* by Frederic Barth (1959), in which rivalry over political leadership among the Afghan Swat Pathans is described with the use of the transaction category. In this context, the notion of transaction describes dynamic interactions among humans that are based on gains and losses. The game category, meaning something quite different than Turner's *social drama*, also appears in George Bailey's works. They analyze the rules of the game in the battle for authority among the Swat Pathans and in the structures of the Italian mafia based in the USA.

The relatively quick move from the functional and structural approach to that of process and action proves that the models adopted in the fieldwork publications reacted in a very competent manner to the described changes of reality. The new, post-war reality and the researchers' new experiences connected with it forced a modification in the way they described phenomena and brought about the appearance of new notions that became tools for analysis. When writing up his findings as a result of long-term fieldwork, the author faces the challenge of how best to describe his experiences. In constructing the description of the reality in which he was immersed, he looks for adequate means of expression, at the same time coming to important theoretical solutions. It often happens that he has to change the model within whose framework the study project had initially appeared. As a result, there often appears a new type of description as well as new, more adequate analytical categories. Thus, we may say that new trends first appear as solutions forced upon us through experience and it is only later, when they are elaborated upon and undergo in-depth study, do they become the binding theory, school or trend in ethnology, and find their due place in textbooks. Fieldwork publications are thus not only building-material for anthropological knowledge, but are also milestones that mark changes in paradigms that had till then been compulsory.

In post-war cultural anthropology, next to the process and action approach, there appeared a trend concerned with finding the meaning of symbols, understanding rituals and searching for the sense of myths. This became known as symbolic anthropology. These two ways in which anthropology developed was characterized by Abner Cohen in his work significantly entitled *Two-Dimensional Man* (1974), in which he stressed that in research practice the two dimensions are inseparable. Symbolic anthropology was based on the assumption that culture is a system of signs whose

meaning should be decoded by the ethnologist. The centre of gravity was moved from observing activities or social relationships to symbols and the understanding of them resulted in posing a new research question. Instead of asking how it works, there appeared: What does it mean? In order to solve the problem, it was not enough to be involved only in observation. The researcher had to concentrate more on explaining his informants than on simply observing their activities. A superficial knowledge of the language was no longer enough to fully understand hidden meanings. This made fieldwork a much bigger challenge than during the times of Malinowski.

Also the form of narration constructed by anthropologists underwent change. Instead of fieldwork publications there often appeared collections of essays reflecting on the meaning of symbols appearing in research experience and having already often appeared in earlier written sources. The works were concerned more with different symbolic areas than with communities or tribes. Although the early work of the French structuralist Claude Lévi-Strauss Tristes Tropiques (1955) was still an attempt to describe different Brazilian tribes that he had visited, it was already written within structural and symbolic categories. He resigned from a full description of their social structure in favor of reflections on the symbolic interpretation of the key aspect of their culture: the make-up of the Kadiueo Indians or the village plan of the Bororo Indians. The arrangement of the huts in the village was treated by Lévi-Strauss as a sign, the symbolic understanding of which facilitated the recapitulation of the Bororo's knowledge about their own society and, in the wider context, of the whole universe. The symbolic and structural approach was also adopted by British anthropologists, e.g. Edmund Leach, Mary Douglas and Victor Turner. Reflections of this kind were continued by such Soviet semioticians as Uspensky, Mieletinski, Lotman, Toporov and Ivanov. In the USA, symbolic anthropology was consolidated in the post-war years thanks to Talcott Parsons' project that suggested cultural anthropologists should concentrate on the symbolic and belief sphere instead of describing social structures, systems of activities and interactions. These were to be taken up by other fields of study (after Kuper 1999). Parsons' project, later to be supplemented by the influence of European hermeneutic ideas, shaped the basis from which there developed interpretive anthropology, the American proposition within the symbolic trend. Clifford James, the creator and leading representative of this area of study, conducted fieldwork in the 1950s in Java and Bali, and then, after the political destabilization of Indonesia, in Morocco in the years 1965–1971. The fruit of these studies was such works as Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth Century Bali or The Religion of Java (1960) as well as The Interpretation of Cultures, published in 1973, and Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology, that came out ten years later and was also based on fieldwork materials collected earlier.

Geertz proposed a new model for describing fieldwork experience, which he presented in his essay *Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight*. This new model, called a thick description, was a type of bridge between a description of activities (the case in point was illegal cockfights) and their interpretation. The description of subsequently undertaken activities was thickened with comments from the researcher who made use of the natives' interpretations to give the reader as many meanings as possible of the situation experienced. Theorizing on the basis of his own research experiences, Geertz wrote: "The culture of the people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of those to whom they properly belong" (Geertz 1973: 452). In this way, Geertz's proposition put into practice the advice put forward by hermeneutics that did away with the division into subsequent stages of cognition: a description and then an analysis, but suggested the interpretation of data. Geertz's descriptions were also interpretations. In this way, the barrier dividing these two steps of research activity was demolished.

Geertz's research also weakened another established opposition in ethnology. In accordance with how hermeneutics perceived the research process in the categories of conversation, Geertz and others following in his footsteps, such as James Clifford for example, presented fieldwork as "dialogical encounter" (Clifford 1988: 41). They were described as conversations between the culturally situated researcher and those being researched, who, from the position of the subject of the studies conducted were moved into the position of partners in the dialogue. Fieldwork experience was described in categories of "a constructive negotiation involving at least two, and usually more, conscious, politically significant subjects," "dialogue where interlocutors, actively negotiate a shared vision of reality" (Clifford 1988: 41, 43). The researcher-subject and the native-object dichotomy of the studies was shaken, bringing significant changes in the way fieldwork publications came into existence in the 1980s. Nisa. The Life and Words of !Kung Woman by Marjorie Shostak, published in 1981, takes the form of a monologue delivered by the main character; Moroccan Dialogues by Kevin Dweyer, published in 1982, are dialogues conducted with a group of informants; Tuhami. Portrait of a Moroccan by Vincent Crapanzano (1980) is a recapitulation of dialogues that took place between the author and his chosen interlocutor, the title Tuhami.

Parallel to the symbolic-interpretive trend, there was a development in ethnographic studies inspired by the theory presented by Emanuel Wallerstein (1974–1987), describing how traditional economic as well as cultural and social forms were being supplanted by the spread of capitalism on a global scale. An anthropological answer to this historical and economic proposition was fieldwork publications presenting the process of changes seen from the local perspective. The most famous work written within this line of thought was James Scott's book *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (1985) which sums up his research in the Malaysian village of Sedeka that was trying to cope with market forces and the influence they were having on traditional farming. Scott described the local strategies of resistance and presented the local ways of perceiving the processes of economic modernization. The latter found expression, among others, in what Scott in his later works called *hidden transcript*, having in mind the discourse of the weak, being a form of discursive resistance to dominance.

Books like Scott's *Hidden Transcript* (2000) present a new trend in descriptions. They were works in which discourse became the field of studies. Inspired by Antonio Gramsci and Michel Foucault, they presented social debates written in different voices. One of the more interesting examples of such an approach was the book *Village Voices* by Perle Møhl that came out in 1991. It is a work presenting a debate taking place in a French rural community on the modernization changes occurring at that time. A similar approach may be found in the monographs and articles of Nigel Rapport.

Accepting the assumption that the studied anthropological community may be a community of discourse paved the way for a constructivist approach. Constructivism (Kubik 2009) was based on perceiving that what had been presented as cultural reality was in fact a construct. The description of another culture is not its reflection but an image constructed by the researcher on the basis of his observations while "being there," interpreted through categories of his own culture and the participation of local interpretations, but only those which the researcher was able to grasp in the intercultural dialogue. A seminal publication showing the constructivist nature of knowledge about other cultures was Edward Said's Orientalism (1978). Then there appeared works showing the process of symbolically construing identities on various levels, from the national communities described by Benedict Anderson to the regional groups presented by Richard Fardon, ending with the small local community, about which Anthony Cohen wrote that "whether or not its structural boundaries remain intact, the reality of community lies in its members' perception of the vitality of its culture. People construct community symbolically, making it a source and repository of meaning and a referent of their identity" (Cohen 1998: 118).

Moving fieldwork from the village onto the plane of discourse or imagined communities may seem to be its deterritorialization. However, if we were to accept the argumentation of Akhila Gupta and James Ferguson, we would actually be confronted with reterritorialization as "the irony of these times, however, is that as actual places and localities become ever more blurred and indeterminate, ideas of culturally and ethnically distinct places become perhaps even more salient" (Gupta, Ferguson 1992: 10), hence identities still have their roots in a definite place even if that place is in one's imagination or memory.

From these observations we can see that the end of the twentieth century brought some new challenges for fieldwork researchers and their publications. In A Passage to Anthropology: Between Experience and Theory, published in English in 1995, Kirsten Hastrup advises the model anthropologist to share in the experience of the people among whom she is conducting her fieldwork. The suggested co-experience appears to be a much more demanding form of research than Malinowski's participatory observation. This can be seen on the basis of the example of the author working as a milkmaid for the sake of her studies. The sense behind these practices was not to look at the world through the eyes of those studied, or through any other form of what Sperber called entering into the heads of those studied, as fieldwork is not "a mechanical process of translation, but a highly complex process of understanding and re-enactment" (Hastrup 1995: 23). In describing the anthropologist's position, Hastrup writes that he is not the translator of a different culture into the language of European academics, but a prophet. Explaining why she has used such a comparison, which may seem shocking in the context of an academic text, she says that "[t]he unspeakable becomes spoken and that language expands on both sides of the dialogue. Whereas translation presupposes two separate discourses, one of which is the object of the other, philosophy implies intersubjectivity or intertextuality affecting both worlds" (1995: 25). Here the researcher is faced with challenges that are not only much greater than what Malinowski required, but also what Lévi-Strauss or even Geertz believed to be their goal.

Another contemporary concept of anthropological research is the multisited ethnography proposed by George Marcus (1998). He suggests that a researcher should be mobile, that he should not remain in one place, but should follow people, things, metaphors, gossips, allegories, stories and biographies used in discourse, and the conflict that may be taking place. Working in this way, his advise was, among others, to describe different "voices" in order to reconstruct the polyphonic whole of the discourse (1998: 66).

The newest proposition for ethnographers comes from Michael Burawoy's Global Ethnography (2000). His advice is to start with a local problem and to see what its links are on a regional, national and, finally, global scale. Building up a narration from research, it is necessary to start with the local micro-processes or local situation so as to then look at the external, global macro-powers that influence them. An excellent example of a fieldwork publication that has put this advice into practice is Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection by Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2005). The fieldwork conducted in the second half of the 1990s in the Meratus Mountains in Borneo (Indonesia) is a return to territory well known to the author. However, she is shocked with what she finds. The familiar landscape is marked by an ecological catastrophe which is the consequence of the cutting-down of the rainforests. The main character of her previous work (Tsing 2003) forecasts the total annihilation of the world of the Meratus and gives Anna Tsing the names of all the plants and animals living in that region threatened with extinction as a result of the advancing degradation of the environment. A list of these names fill up the margins of the book. Tsing meets some Javanese people equipped with a chain saw and an ox, making it possible to haul the cut-down tree to the place where it will be taken away by a timber company which is working illegally in South Kalimantan. There also appear other participants of the debate: members of an ecological organization protecting the environment and representatives of the local authorities. These meetings and conversations turn out to be a starting point. So as to understand the different voices in the local discourse, Tsing must investigate the history of the economic and political changes in Indonesia. The changes taking place both in the government as well as among the local authorities are synonymous with the appearance and disappearance of subsequent voices in the dispute over the rainforests. In order to understand the voice of the international firms trading in timber the author must learn about neoliberal ideology and global capitalism. In order to present the voice of the green activists, she has to introduce the ideas and organizational structures of the world environmentalist movement. The global references are supplemented with references to the past-understanding the point of view of the inhabitants of the Meratus Mountains requires a reference to earlier studies conducted by Tsing as well as to older publications on the Dayaks.

This example of a new type of fieldwork monograph shows what a great challenge contemporary ethnographic research actually is. It is no longer enough for an anthropologist to be a good observer, to be able to communicate with the natives, to be able to understand their interpretations, and want to negotiate with them the understanding of shared experience as well as of shared space. In order to understand what fieldwork experience involves, the contemporary researcher must make distant trips into branches of knowledge that may be more or less foreign to him. He must be able to cope with economic and political issues, he must become well acquainted with history, and keep track of the different conflicting ideas and ideologies.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century there have appeared monographs on issues connected with the introduction of neoliberal capitalism and liberal democracy in societies, i.e. post-communist states, for which these systems were completely new in the 1990s. An excellent example of such fieldwork was Elisabeth C. Dunn's project carried out in Poland in 1995–1997, and described in her book Privatizing Poland. Baby Food, Big Business, and the Remaking of Labour (2004). In describing how a former state-owned fruit processing factory was being turned into a business concern belonging to Gerber, the American baby-food-making company, Dunn shows how the new models of organizing work had nothing in common with those found by the Gerber reformers. This also concerned how totally different were the ontological assumptions, how differently the category of work and that of a human being were understood. She shows how moral discourse clashes with technological discourse. Her conclusions are of an exceptional humanist nature. The author of Privatizing Poland presents the high ethical potential of the Polish workers who, when subjected to a procedural and technical assessment carried out according to western models, did not seem to be 'human resources' of high quality. This monograph does not only contribute a great deal to our knowledge about post-communist countries, about the transformations taking place in the political systems, and the global export of western models and procedures, but also is an important critical voice pointing to the fact that neoliberal capitalism is not an ideal economic system and that adapting it to the local context may actually serve its improvement. Dunn's work proves that research conducted according to the fieldwork method may lead to significant economic and political conclusions. It shows that the ethnographic approach may complement the studies conducted by economists and sociologists, contributing a viewpoint to the debate on political transformation that is much closer to how people experience the world, to people who are actually experiencing that transformation.

When comparing the works written at the beginning of the 21st century with those from the beginning of the 20th, it has to be said that despite the fact that travelling has become so much easier and we have so many technological facilities at our disposal, the task facing anthropologists today is anything but easy. The ethnologist/anthropologist must have extensive knowledge in order to cope with the reality experienced locally, which is impossible to understand without references to what transcends the local. He also must be extremely flexible when moving through the jungle of ambiguous and constantly discussed notions about worlds that have been constructed by means of discourse.

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