

CINÉ-
ETHNOGRAPHY
JEAN ROUCH



edited and translated by *Steven Feld*

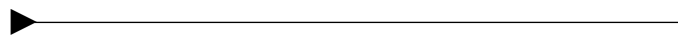


Ciné-Ethnography

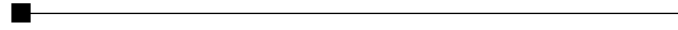
VISIBLE EVIDENCE

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Ciné-Ethnography



Jean Rouch

Edited and Translated by Steven Feld



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Acknowledgments

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Jay and Sol deserve a very special thanks for encouraging and enthusiastically publishing my original translations of Rouch's work in the journals they edited, as does Faye, for encouraging publication of this collection in the Visible Evidence series.

I am neither a professional translator nor a fluent French speaker, much less an anthropologist of West Africa. Thus the translations would not have been possible without a great deal of aid. The early ones benefited from the help of Marielle Delorme, and the later ones from the collaboration of Shari Robertson, Anny Ewing, and Catherine Mazière. The historical, ethnographic, and linguistic knowledge of James Clifford, Jean-Paul Colleyn, and Paul Stoller was also invaluable.

For help assembling the collection, I am grateful to Jay Ruby, who prepared the collection of photographs; to Françoise Foucault of the Comité du Film Ethnographique, who coordinated texts, images, and permissions; and especially to Ruti Talmor and Jennifer Soroko, who tackled numerous editorial details with skill and patience.

Over the years, Jean Rouch has always helped unpack his mysteries, even when producing new and bigger ones and acknowledging that he prefers ideas to fall more toward the poetic side of complication than the precise side of determination. In a spirit of warm friendship and solidarity

with this mad master and pale fox (or is it mad fox and pale master? All, no doubt), it has been a great pleasure to translate and edit this collection of his work.

S. F.

STEVEN FELD

Editor's Introduction

▶ **Chronicle of a Book**

I first encountered Jean Rouch's films in 1972, at a National Science Foundation Summer Institute in Visual Anthropology organized by Jay Ruby, Sol Worth, Karl Heider, and Carroll Williams. I had just finished my first year of graduate school in African studies and anthropology, and I was deeply moved by the complex layers of the Africa I saw represented in *Les maîtres fous*, *The Lion Hunters*, and *Jaguar*. I wanted to know more. If these were the kinds of films and ethnography Rouch had done in the 1950s and 1960s, what could he possibly be doing in the 1970s? I decided to devote a year to filmic anthropology.

That's how I ultimately arrived at the Musée de l'Homme in January 1974. As promised for the season, the Parisian light was as crisp as the air. By instant contrast, the dark cases and heavy displays I encountered at the Musée de l'Homme seemed of a piece with the ones I knew well from New York's American Museum of Natural History, where I'd spent so much time in the African collection as an undergraduate. There I had learned that museums were places where virtually every corner, closet, and passageway held important things, which must be why I was hardly surprised to find the Comité du Film Ethnographique located on a converted fire escape.

"Yes! Yes! Your passport is stamped!" Punctuated by a grin, those were Rouch's first words to me, overlapping my clumsy attempt to say something formal in French when Marielle Delorme first introduced us on the stairwell. Before I could recover, Rouch disappeared, and Françoise Foucault ushered me away to the editing room down the hall, with cans of film to occupy me for the rest of the afternoon. With that I learned how much Rouch was on the move. Exuberant and enigmatic, he could be quite

difficult to pin down for even a few moments. But during the following semester I attended his Saturday morning classes at the Cinémathèque, and the Thursday film séances he convened in the Musée de l'Homme's screening room. And thanks to the familiar generosity of Marielle and Françoise, I got to spend a great many afternoons, whenever the editing table was free, looking shot by shot at numerous films from the Comité's collection.

I came home saturated with French ethnographic film, especially cinema about and occasionally by Africans, and with a notebook crammed with sketches and details about the hundred films I'd seen. These included some thirty films by Rouch. I had studied most of them closely, from his earliest films, made silently with a twenty-five-second-per-shot spring-wound camera, to the later ones made in ten-minute-long sync-sound shot sequences.

I also returned with a rough translation of an essay Rouch had recently written. When I showed it to Sol Worth at the Annenberg School of Communication, he instantly suggested that *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication*, the new journal he was editing with Jay Ruby, would be a perfect venue to publish translations of Rouch's key essays on ethnographic cinema. So "The Camera and Man" appeared in the journal's first issue in 1974, followed by "The Situation and Tendencies of the Cinema in Africa," in two installments in 1975.

Then, by way of detour from Africa and film, I ended up in Papua New Guinea. When I returned home in fall 1977, I hardly had time for culture shock; the real shock that greeted me was the news of Sol Worth's recent death. Within days I met up with Rouch again; he was appearing as the guest of honor at the first Margaret Mead Film Festival at the American Museum of Natural History. At the reunion, it was Jay Ruby who insisted that we continue the plan of publishing Rouch's key essays in the journal, and so "On the Vicissitudes of the Self" appeared in 1978. Jay was also excited by the possibility of publishing *Chronique d'un été (Chronicle of a Summer)*, the innovative and provocative book about the film that Rouch produced with Edgar Morin. I drafted translations of several of the sections, but it wasn't until 1985 that the project was finally realized as an entire issue of *Studies in Visual Communication*, the successor journal that Jay edited with Larry Gross.

A few years later, it was again Jay who took the initiative, as editor of the journal *Visual Anthropology*, with the idea of a Festschrift issue in Rouch's honor. When it appeared, in 1989, as both a complete journal issue and a book, it featured my translation from the longest retrospective interview Rouch had given about his work. It also included an expanded edition of the complete filmography, translated from the 1981 catalog *Jean Rouch: Une rétrospective*, still the most comprehensive work on Rouch by Rouch.

During all this time, many of my connections with film and Africa slipped away, overcome by work in music and Papua New Guinea. In fact, I wasn't in much contact with Rouch or his films from the late 1980s through the late 1990s. But in April 2000, Faye Ginsburg, director of New York University's Center for Media, Culture, and History, produced Rouch 2000, a weeklong film retrospective at NYU. I was inspired by a reunion, after twelve years, with Jean Rouch. And the chance to see some of the films again with Françoise Foucault, Jay Ruby, and other friends led to several enjoyable dialogues. But what excited me most was seeing a new generation of film and anthropology students respond so deeply to the stimulus of Rouch's cinema. And with that it seemed obvious that despite the continued annoyance of having so few of Rouch's films in North American distribution, the time was right to publish a Rouch dossier to bring together all of my out-of-print translations with some other key documents.

At the NYU retrospective, Rouch himself was in mourning for his friend and colleague Germaine Dieterlen. In her honor and memory, he devoted the first night of the festival to a screening of *Le Dama d'Ambara*, their 1974 film collaboration about Dogon funerary rituals. That suggested adding an additional essay, the one he had written in 1978 as the introduction to a collection in Dieterlen's honor. Rouch was most pleased by the thought. With the book plan then in place, a translation was drafted, the filmography updated, all the translations reviewed, and the manuscript assembled.

It should be clear now that the idea all along has been for this to be a book in Rouch's voice. The varied dates and contexts of the essays and interviews certainly make it possible for his stories to emerge. From his personal biography to his intellectual history, from his convictions and methods to his politics and aesthetics, the texts map his passion for uniting cinema and ethnography, for linking documentary and drama, for bridging empirical science and surrealist dreams.

Given the breadth and depth of Rouch's works included here, not to mention the existence of several recent studies and films about him—Paul Stoller's *The Cinematic Griot: The Ethnography of Jean Rouch* (1992); the *Cinema of Jean Rouch* Festschrift issue of *Visual Anthropology* (1989); Manthia Diawara's film *Rouch in Reverse* (1995); Steef Meyknecht, Dirk Nijland, and Joost Verhey's film *Rouch's Gang* (1993)—a long introduction may seem quite unnecessary. Nonetheless, I'd like to review some of the basic biographical matters and themes in Rouch's work, and cite some of the relevant historical and parallel texts for the benefit of those approaching this remarkable career and array of films for the first time.

Jean Rouch was born in Paris in 1917. After studies in mathematics and engineering, he went to West Africa during the war, in 1941, as a bridge and causeway engineer. He became interested in local cultures during this time and, when he found himself in Dakar, Senegal, began spending time at the library of l'Institut Français d'Afrique Noir (IFAN), where Théodore Monod encouraged him to study African ethnography and write up his observations. When Rouch returned to France, he decided to take a doctorate in anthropology under the supervision of Marcel Griaule. In 1946 Rouch returned to Africa with some friends from his engineering days; they spent nine months descending the Niger River by canoe. Before his return, Rouch purchased a wartime Bell and Howell 16 mm spring-wound camera at a flea market in Paris. During his voyage he shot black-and-white footage and continued taking ethnographic notes (see "The Mad Fox and the Pale Master" and "A Life on the Edge of Film and Anthropology," in this volume, for Rouch's narratives of this early history).

This trip marked the real beginnings of Rouch's intertwined career as an ethnographer and a filmmaker. With his notes, he completed a dissertation in anthropology (Rouch 1953). With his films, he was able to do much less. Sixteen millimeter was still an amateur medium, editing equipment was not available, and there was no way to make prints for distribution. Rouch used his films to experiment with editing and screened them publicly only at lectures where he would speak an on-the-spot commentary for a sound track. Actualités Françaises became interested in the material, and some of it was blown up to 35 mm.

Shortly thereafter Rouch returned to Niger to do more ethnography and film, this time in color. He made three short films in the course of his work: *La circoncision*, *Les magiciens de Wanzerbé*, and *Initiation a la danse des possédés*. When these films were completed (a term used loosely, as 16 mm editing was still crudely done with a projector and hand splices, and sound tracks were unwedded to film), Rouch got his first break, a showing at the Festival of Biarritz. During the screening to an audience that included directors such as Clement and Cocteau, Rouch was shocked to realize that the films held the attention of sophisticated viewers. Later, the three shorts were reedited into a single film, *Les fils de l'eau*; it was the first color film blown up from 16 mm to 35 mm in France.

During the late 1940s and early 1950s, Rouch continued his ethnographic trips, working with the Sorko and Songhay peoples of Niger. He

began to concentrate on the topics of migration and religion and collaborated with Roger Rosfelder on several short films on these themes.

At the beginning of the 1950s, Rouch became one of the first to experiment extensively with the early “portable” field sound recorders (again, a loose notion, as they were tremendously heavy and difficult to use compared to technologies from the 1960s onward). He recorded West African music and also recorded sounds at the same time as images, for pseudo-synchronous filming, as no method of synchronization existed then for portable equipment. Also during this period, Rouch made his first film among the Dogon in Mali (a group he had not studied but who, since 1931, had been the subject of many periods of research by Marcel Griaule and his collaborators).

Both the endorsement of Griaule and growing recognition of Rouch’s own ethnographic and film work in Niger helped establish Rouch and ethnographic film in France. In 1952, with the backing of André Leroi-Gourhan, the Comité du Film Ethnographique was formed as a department at the Musée de l’Homme, with Rouch as secretary-general. Shortly afterward, at the Fourth International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences in Vienna, Rouch was instrumental in the formation of the Comité International du Film Ethnographique et Sociologique (CIFES), an organization devoted to the production, compilation, conservation, and distribution of ethnographic films on an international scale.

In the mid-1950s, Rouch’s continuing research on migrations led him to follow Songhay men from Niger to large West African cities such as Accra and Abidjan. In Ghana he made the films *Madame l’eau* and *Les maîtres fous* and also began filming *Jaguar* about these migrations.

Les maîtres fous was his first departure from purely descriptive cinema into a more synthetic approach to event structures. Having observed a ritual several times, he realized that he could break down the crucial aspects and approach them as theatrical narrative. Using montage to create contexting boundaries and making the most of the technical limitation of twenty-five-second shots (he was still using a spring-wound 16 mm camera), Rouch was able to make a short film with more explicative depth and synthesis than his previous ethnographic studies.

Les maîtres fous is about the Hauka, a possession cult among the Songhay that reached full expression in Ghana, where migrants from Niger brought it. The film shows cult members working at menial tasks in the city during the week, then in possession trances during the weekend, then back in the city context. Hauka members become possessed by colonial and technological masters. Because the actual ritual depicted in the film is

violent, and is disturbing to many viewers, Rouch was urged by friends to destroy the film; he refused on the grounds that the participants in the film had themselves requested it be made.¹

During the late 1950s, Rouch devoted the major part of his field-work to research on Songhay religion; this culminated in the completion of his *doctorat d'état*, published as *La religion et la magie Songhay* (Rouch 1960a, 1989). This remains his major ethnographic publication, of enduring value both in relation to the films that he has made about Songhay religion and cosmology and in relation to continuing studies of Songhay society and magic.²

While Rouch continued to make shorter film studies of topics close to his research, colonial Africa was increasingly turbulent in the late 1950s. This led him to experiment with more overtly dramatic forms, choosing subject matter that, like *Les maîtres fous*, could have a more direct impact on a wide audience.

The first of these, *Moi, un Noir*, shows a group of Africans in an Ivory Coast slum, Treichville, playing out a psychodrama about themselves. It was filmed silently, and then Rouch asked the principal player, Oumarou Ganda, to improvise a narration as he saw a rough cut of the film. Ganda's commentary consists of referencing his actions to the war in Indochina, from which he returned bitter and sad. This device made the film very dreamlike and confused many audiences. Rouch himself felt that the success of the film was in its deliberate attempt to be subjective and let Africans portray their own imaginary world and their own fantasies while being filmed in the context of their actual situation. The movements back and forth from the immediate reality of the players to their dramatic fantasies were taken by some to indicate that *Moi, un Noir* was the first film that actually gave a voice to Africans and allowed them to present the realities of their world. Indeed, its protagonist, Oumarou Ganda, went on to become a filmmaker. Nonetheless, the film was censored in Ivory Coast, and Rouch's defense that "fiction is the only way to penetrate reality" was slow to gain sympathetic response, either from anthropologists or from African viewers.³

The next film that emerged in the context of both Rouch's interest in psychodrama and his desire to chronicle the intercultural politics of African modernities was *La pyramide humaine*. This film was an attempt to develop the method of improvised ethnographic fiction. It was acted out by a group of people who were given a general story line by Rouch, who in turn catalyzed the action by filming and interrupting the filming according to how he felt the group was progressing.

The actors are two sets of high school students from Abidjan, one

group white, the other group black. They had previously not socialized. Rouch proposed that they collectively act out a story on the topic of what would happen if they all newly met each other and decided to be friends and overcome racial prejudices. The film was shot silently, like the preceding one, with the plan of using postsynchronization: the players making up a sound track as they saw the edited film. This was done, then supplemented by bringing in blimped 16 mm synchronous-sound equipment and shooting several sync-sound sequences, with Rouch and the players in front of the camera. This makes it possible for Rouch to add to the self-conscious dimension of the film; indeed, the film begins with a sequence where he proposes his idea of a collectively improvised story. There is also a similar sequence in the middle of the film. The action breaks off, and all the actors comment on what they have been trying to do up until that point.⁴

The making of these two films involved major technical obstacles to the kind of improvised spontaneity Rouch sought. At this time there were no noiseless portable 16 mm cameras for shooting synchronized sound; noiseless sync could only be accomplished by housing the camera in an enormous blimp. The films attempted to overcome the technical limitations of the medium at the time in part through experiments with reflexivity and narrative realism.

Continuing reflection on the question of how one films what is subjectively real about and for people and their cultural situation led to what is Rouch's best-known film. Significantly, it was also his first film in his own society, *Chronicle of a Summer*, made in Paris in 1960 in collaboration with sociologist Edgar Morin. Rouch was responsible for organizing the filming, Morin for the fieldwork and organizing the participants. The film is presented as an inquiry into the lives of a group of Parisians in the summer of 1960. It combines the techniques of drama, fiction, provocation, and reflexive critique that Rouch developed from previous films. It was during this film that the prototype Eclair lightweight 16 mm camera was used for the first time with the Nagra recorder to achieve truly portable handheld synchronous sound.

This film is associated with the origins of the term "*cinéma-vérité*" to refer to a process, visual aesthetic, and technology of cinema. Additionally some took it as an ideology of authenticity, as well. But in the context of the experimental gestures in *Chronicle of a Summer*, *cinéma-vérité* came to mean four things: (1) films composed of first-take, nonstaged, non-theatrical, nonscripted material; (2) nonactors doing what they do in natural, spontaneous settings; (3) use of lightweight, handheld portable synchronous-sound equipment; and (4) handheld on-the-go interactive filming and recording techniques with little if any artificial lighting.⁵ Rouch

summed it up more directly, simply claiming that *Chronicle* was the first film to show that “you can film anything anywhere” (“Ciné-Anthropology,” this volume).

Immediately after *Chronicle of a Summer*, Rouch made *La punition* and *Rose et Landry*; the former appeared on French television and the latter on Canadian television. *La punition* was largely a response to the problem of editing *Chronicle*, for which there were twenty-two hours of rushes. *La punition* was made in two days, with Rouch again, in the fashion of *La pyramide humaine*, provoking a situation (a woman wanders through Paris and meets three different men, a student, an African, a middle-aged engineer, and . . .). It was filmed with single takes, no location setups, and hand-held camera. *La punition* and *Rose et Landry* reflect very much of a concern with revisiting issues raised by *Les maîtres fous* and *Moi, un Noir*, namely, the impact of European racism on Africans, as well as African responses to European colonialism. Not surprisingly, these films were made at the height of both African independence movements and political debates about the psychological impact of colonialism, racism, and lingering European anti-Semitism. From this standpoint, the films can be seen as merging filmic experimentalism with engaged antiracist politics.

Rouch’s developing interest in filming in his own society and in the interplay of drama and reality led to another production in Paris during this period. In 1966 he participated (along with Eric Rohmer, Jean-Luc Godard, Claude Chabrol, Daniel Pollet, and Jean Douchet) in a film entitled *Paris vu par . . .*, in which each of the six directors contributed a short sequence on a different section of Paris. Rouch’s episode, *Gare du nord*, was a drama about a marital quarrel and suicide. The scene was improvised and simply provoked by Rouch, who told the participants the themes and what he generally had in mind (they were not professional actors). The film further gives the illusion of *cinéma-vérité* by its filmic style. It was done entirely in two shots, each the length of a camera magazine. The film magazine was changed in an elevator, between a shot of the closing and opening of the doors; thus the film presents the illusion that it consists of only one shot, of about twenty minutes’ duration. This film was yet another indication of the relevance of Rouch’s technical and narrative innovations to the French Nouvelle Vague film movement.

In 1964 *The Lion Hunters* was released. This is a feature-length ethnographic study that Rouch had been working on for eight years in between the series of films in Paris. It was immediately followed by *Un lion nommé “l’Américain,”* which tells the story of the capture of the lion that eluded the hunters in the first film. The two films indicate another synthetic turn

in Rouch's approach, combining the older style of ethnographic reportage with a much more developed sense of plot and narrative structure, very much as in more dramatic films. In making these films, and a few shorter ethnographic studies in the early 1960s, Rouch experimented extensively with the new portable sync-sound equipment in Africa.⁶

Jaguar, begun in the mid-1950s, was finished in 1965. At the ethnographic level, this film is a distillation of Rouch's research on migrations (Rouch 1956, 1960c). At the narrative level, it was also a distillation of his experiences with drama and fiction. In the film, three men, Lam, Damouré, and Illo, take a trip from Niger to the coast of Ghana (then Gold Coast). The film attempts to capture the spirit of preindependence West Africa, when borders were not difficult to cross, and when considerable adventure and possibility, as well as risk, were associated with going to large cities. The film was shot silently in the 1950s, when Rouch was still using a small 100-foot-load spring-wound camera. In finishing the film, Rouch maintained the continuity of that style and made it like the earlier fiction films. During a screening of the rough cut, the actors improvised a sound track with dialogue.⁷

Also in the mid-1960s, Rouch began working again with the Dogon in Mali, this time in collaboration with the ethnographer Germaine Dieterlen, a member of the original Griaule research team. Between 1966 and 1973, Rouch filmed the Sigui ceremony. In the Dogon ceremonial cycle, Sigui occurs every sixty years for seven years.⁸ With ethnomusicologist Gilbert Rouget, also a collaborator on one of the *Sigui* films, Rouch also made *Batteries Dogon*, a study of Dogon drumming (Rouget 1965), and some shorter films among the Dogon, such as *Funérailles du Hogon*, an interesting contrast with his early 1951 Dogon funerary film *Cimetière dans la falaise*. But perhaps the most developed sense of ritual, history, and cinematic poetics comes together in two longer Dogon funeral ritual studies completed in the early 1970s: *Funérailles à Bongo: Le vieil Anai, 1848–1971* (1972), and *Le Dama d'Ambara* (1974).

Also in the late 1960s and into the 1970s, Rouch continued to film with the Songhay, concentrating on studies of rituals and religion, specifically rainmaking rites, possession dances, and divination (Stoller 1992, 48–62). Many of these rituals are described both in Rouch's book and in earlier films. But here they begin to be filmed in a very different way, due both to the use of direct cinema techniques (handheld sync sound, long takes) and to the depth of sophisticated observing gained from having seen so many of these ceremonies over a period approaching thirty years. Films such as *Horendi*, *Yenendi de Gangel*, and *Tourou et Bitti* are made in the

style of continuous ten-minute shots, filmed while Rouch is walking among the participants in the events. Rouch calls these “shot sequence” (*plan sequence*) films.

In the verbal introduction to the sound track of *Tourou et Bitti*, he describes what is to come as “ethnography in the first person” because he plays the roles of both participant and catalyst as he films. The purpose of these films is not to break down and explicate events into component structures and sequences. Rather, they show how the familiar observer authors a subjectively experiential and interactive account of them at the moment he films. This style of shooting long sequences with a single focal-length lens (frequently wide angle, 10 mm) and extensive walking is also considered by Rouch to be an answer to the problem of editing; namely, to edit everything in the camera as it is being shot and then string the shot sequences together. The film is thus imaged as a way of seeing in the moment. It is at once a temporal index of observational experience and a spacial icon resembling the participatory dialectic of scanning and focusing.⁹

Alongside this evolution in field filming, Rouch concentrated in the late 1960s and onward to the 1990s on producing feature-length ethnographic fiction films that descend directly from *Jaguar*, but also show the influence of *Moi, un Noir*, and *La pyramide humaine*. All are improvised and filmed directly by Rouch and jointly conceived by him, Damouré Zika, and Lam Ibrahim Dia (hence the name Films Dalarou, in some cases Dalarouta, to indicate the participation of Tallou Mouzourane, another longtime collaborator). These men have been in numerous Rouch films and have also worked as close field assistants. In this series of films are *Petit à Petit*, *Cocorico*, *Monsieur Poulet*, and *Madame l'eau*. Very broadly, the subject of these films is post- and neocolonialism and its effects on the lives of Africans, and their relations to a changing Africa and a changing Europe. There is a particular emphasis on dramatic storytelling, and on ironies of cross-cultural (mis)communication. In these films, Rouch continually works to refine a way of crossing lines and expectations; fantasy, absurdity, and surrealist scenarios are constantly juxtaposed with, or blended into, mundane everyday experiences of political and economic realities.

In *Petit à Petit*, for example, Rouch was responding directly to the changed political climate in France after May 1968, as well as the complexities of postcolonial African modernities and desires. Damouré, Lam, and Illo play the roles of African businessmen who go to Paris to investigate how people live in high-rise buildings so that they might build one themselves in Niger. In the course of the Parisian visit, Rouch provokes his actors to act out a reverse—some would say perverse—anthropology: measuring heads of Europeans with calipers in front of the Musée de l'Homme,

asking to inspect French mouths and count teeth, interviewing passersby on the street about their color categories. Through these absurdities, Rouch directly confronts the power positions of anthropologists and Africans. De-centering stereotypical subject/object relationships is particularly poignant in these fictions, as is the way the story unfolds, when the crew of expatriate Africans and French bohemians return to Africa and things fall apart.¹⁰

The second film, *Cocorico, Monsieur Poulet*, is much more of an attempt to deal with the subtleties of colonial response, namely, the development of a subculture of African marginals. This collective improvisation on a popular fable from Niger features Damouré, Lam, and Lam's little Citroën 2 CV on a yearlong expedition that shifts from mundane peddling, to supernatural adventures with sorcery, to the allegory of how a car crosses a river (see "Ciné-Anthropology" and "The Politics of Visual Anthropology," in this volume).

These fictions reach their most playfully ironic heights in *Madame l'eau*. Damouré, Lam, and Tallou visit Holland, the land of windmills, in search of a way to irrigate their lands in Niger, which have been ravaged by drought. Encounters with Holland, and friendships with Dutch people, some quite comical, some quite bizarre, lead to the realization that a wooden windmill can be built on the banks of the Niger. And indeed, in time, one is (the Dutch film *Rouch's Gang* chronicles the making of *Madame l'eau*).

Among other central features—particularly a preoccupation with dreams—these films are an attempt to develop a visual poetic of African storytelling. Yet in all cases, Rouch eschews a film structure precisely parallel to African epics, deprivileging any single narrative and often developing an underlying tone that is extremely cynical about the self-serving nature of historical accounts. His concentration on the connection between desires for modernity and marginals, whom he occasionally refers to as a "populist avant-garde," involves a perception of both the injustices and ironies of postcolonial Africa that tends to provoke strong responses from critics and audiences in both Africa and Europe.

Throughout the later 1970s and through the 1980s and 1990s, Rouch continued on several tracks in addition to ethnographic fiction. One involved continuing fieldwork in Niger on Songhay ritual and everyday life and producing new film studies in the "shot sequence" style. An additional series of films begun in the late seventies includes ciné-portraits; subjects include Margaret Mead, Germaine Dieterlen, Taro Okamoto, and Paul Levy.

At the time of this writing there are more than one hundred finished films, and at least another twenty-five in various stages of completion (see annotated filmography, this volume). Of this extraordinary output, it is remarkable—in the extreme negative, that is—that only five films, *Les*

mâtres fous, *The Lion Hunters*, *Jaguar*, *Chronicle of a Summer*, and *Paris vu par . . .* (*Paris Seen by . . .*), are available in the United States. Indeed, until the mid-1970s, Rouch's other films were rarely been seen outside of Europe and Africa, and it was only in the 1970s and 1980s that his basic publications on ethnographic film and African cinema were translated and substantial interviews published in English.

Beginning in the late 1970s, Rouch's appearances at U.S. film festivals, summer seminars, and retrospectives brought considerably more U.S. attention to his work. Around this time as well, anthropologists and filmmakers began to more regularly discuss the specifically theoretical implications of Rouch's film style for a more participatory and reflexive ethnographic cinema.¹¹ In recent years, however, Rouch's work has been the subject of considerably more attention in different quarters of the anthropological and film communities.¹²

►

Thematics of Rouch's Ciné-Ethnography

To further situate this general overview of Rouch's career and films, it is useful to review the four key themes that are revealed in his films and writings. These are an attempt to synthesize and elaborate the key documentary impacts of Robert Flaherty and Dziga Vertov; the refinement of the concepts of cinema verité and direct cinema; the development of the ethnographic fiction genre; and the preoccupation with filmic conventions of reflexivity, authorship, autocritique, and "shared anthropology."

In published interviews and writings, as well as public discussions, Rouch has continually cited his esteem for Robert Flaherty and Dziga Vertov.¹³ For Rouch, Flaherty and Vertov "invented" a new discipline of filmmaking by "experimenting with cinema in real life" ("Vicissitudes"). In doing so, they "discovered the essential questions that we still ask ourselves today: must one 'stage' reality (the staging of real life) as did Flaherty, or should one, like Vertov, film 'without awareness' (seizing improvised life)?" ("The Camera and Man"). To understand why Rouch finds these the "essential" questions, one must examine their relation to ethnography.

Rouch sees Flaherty—specifically the Flaherty of *Nanook of the North*—as the unconscious originator of filmic equivalents of the most basic ethnographic field methods, participant observation and feedback. Specifically, Rouch views the film as a celebration of a relationship; it combines the familiarity that accrues from observation with the sense of contact and spontaneity that comes from rapport and participation. By developing and printing rushes on location and screening them with Nanook

and other Inuit, Flaherty initiated filmic feedback as a form of stimulation and rapport.

Moreover, Rouch takes it as critical that Flaherty was able to teach Nanook that in order to make a film, actions could not take place as they normally do. Flaherty was not interested in simply recording things as they happened, nor was he technically able to do so. He instead solicited Nanook's help to get people to enact themselves, but with the understanding that such enactments could only take place at the point when he was ready to film them. Citing the phrase of Luc de Heusch (1962, 35), Rouch applauds this achievement of the "participating camera," and its connection to the "staging" of reality.¹⁴

Rouch's debt to Dziga Vertov seems less romantic and mythologizing, as well as more specifically filmic. It concerns the development of a cinematic realism in which the theory of realism was not confused with "reality." Vertov was concerned with the structures of film realism and the methods of filming real life, as opposed to theatrical enactment. He articulated his theory and method in ways that showed that cinema was different from lived reality and that the camera was not a human eye but a specifically mediated mechanical one. For Vertov, film realism was thematic and structural, built up from tiny units of observation of real people doing real things. These units were always organized by the filmmaker to express his version or statement of the content.

For Rouch, Vertov's importance rests in the break from cinema realism that was confined to isolated observations and the espousal of a cinema realism that had an explicit notion of editing and organizing these "crumbs," as Vertov called them, into a thematic reality. Although Vertov insisted on filming improvised life (no actors, no scripts, no costumes) to seize reality, he both stressed and resorted to extensive montage and metaphoric juxtapositions to "decipher" reality, that is, to elaborate it from the "crumbs" of the footage.

The key factor here is that Vertov described the kino-eye not as a model for seeing the truth but as a new kind of seeing that created its own peculiar truth. Rouch writes that Vertov "called the entirety of this discipline kinopravda (*cinéma-vérité*, film truth), an ambiguous or self-contradictory expression, since, fundamentally, film truncates, accelerates, and slows down actions, thus distorting the truth. For me, however, 'kinopravda' (*cinéma-vérité*) is a precise term, on the same order as 'kinok' (ciné-eye), and it designates not 'pure truth' but the particular truth of the recorded images and sounds—a filmic truth, *ciné-vérité*" ("Vicissitudes," this volume). Describing Vertov's impact on *Chronicle of a Summer*, years later, he continues, "With the ciné-eye and the ciné-ear we recorded in sound and image a

ciné-vérité, Vertov's kinopravda. This does not mean the cinema of truth, but the truth of cinema" ("Ciné-Anthropology," this volume).

In this regard, Rouch's use of Vertov goes beyond his use of Flaherty. This is because with Vertov, the camera gains consciousness, and the mediating work of the filmmaker is itself put on the screen as a way of making a work process explicit. It is this self-consciousness of process, the idea that the truth or the reality of a film is always a socially constructed one, that Rouch derives from Vertov (Sadoul 1971; Sauzier 1985).

Of these concerns raised by Flaherty and Vertov—participant observation, feedback, staging reality, seizing improvised life, editing for thematic subjective truth, *ciné-vérité*, making the camera the principal actor, revealing the process of making and the authorship of the director—Rouch is heir. His claim, all told, is that film and anthropology share the same essential concerns with the nature of intersubjectivity.

From Vertov, Rouch focused on a cinema concerned with exposing its own process of seizing improvised life and simultaneously commenting on its own form of seeing, hearing, and organizing. It was with this in mind that the term "*cinéma-vérité*" was actually first used in an article by Morin reporting on the Florence International Ethnographic Film Festival of 1960 (see Morin's essay, this volume). Morin was on the jury with Rouch and after the festival wrote a newspaper article for *France-Observateur* titled "Pour un nouveau cinéma-vérité." His intention was to pay homage to Vertov. The same phrase was used on the publicity flyer when *Chronicle of a Summer* premiered at Cannes in 1961. At the time, both Morin and Rouch held that the important word in the phrase was "nouveau." They stressed the realization of a combined ciné-eye and ear, the development of portable synchronous sound, the new potential for the role of speech in the cinema, and the closeness and contact of direct filming without the intervention of a large crew. In short, they stressed both the arrival of the technical means that Vertov lacked and its role in realizing, with new sophistication, the self-revelatory and self-critical process kinopravda promised.

Like many other filmmakers, however, Rouch dropped the term "*cinéma-vérité*" as the generic name for the film style in which he was engaged, fearing that it was tainted by the pretension of an absolutist notion of truth. Instead, he adopted the term "*cinéma-direct*" (direct cinema, as it was immediately termed in English), first suggested by Mario Ruspoli (Marsolais 1974, 21–25). Gilles Marsolais presents a consensus definition of *cinéma-direct* as "a cinema that records directly in the field, not the studio, words and gestures through the use of synchronous camera and tape recorder that is lightweight and flexible to handle. This, in other words, is

a cinema that establishes direct contact with people, trying to ‘paste together reality’ as best as possible while always taking into account that the enterprise is mediated” (1974, 22). Since 1963 Rouch has used this term to denote both a set of attitudes and a set of techniques; the two are felt to be mutually interdependent and are not concerned with “truth” in any positivist sense. Karel Reisz and Gavin Millar, in the classic manual on documentary film editing, stress this intersection of the technical and processual in the editing of *Chronicle of a Summer*: “It has as its aim not ‘truth’ but the many truths out of which some picture of reality can be built” (1968, 303).

Direct cinema brought together the technical breakthroughs that took place at the Canadian Film Board, in France, and in the United States between 1958 and 1960 (Issari 1971; Mamber 1974). These developments centered on portability. The possibility to film with cameras quieted by their own material casing (called “self-blimped”) developed simultaneously with techniques of synchronization between the camera and an independent portable recorder. These developments were also accompanied by the manufacture of faster film stocks and laboratory forced processing (“pushing”) of film stocks to higher speeds so that heavy lighting equipment could be minimized.

These innovations came together considerably during the making of *Chronicle of a Summer*, during which Coutant developed the prototype Eclair 16 mm self-blimped camera (which became known as the NPR, or “noiseless portable reflex”). With feedback from Rouch on design, this camera was used with a portable Nagra tape recorder with a neopilot system for synchronizing image and sound. At the same time, a new wide-angle lens that had considerably less distortion problems than earlier models was introduced. Simultaneously, two additional aspects of portability were brought from Canada by Michel Brault of the Canadian Film Board. These were the lavalier microphone and the technique of walking with the handheld camera.¹⁵

The basic spirit of a new cinema, of a direct cinema, was quickly established. This meant reliance on synchronous sound, avoidance of voice-over and narration associated with classical documentary, and insistence on “live” natural settings and “first takes” with no repetition of what really happened (so that the camera could film it from another angle for match cutting, for example). Rouch insisted that this approach make no abstract claims for truthfulness, only for the necessity of contact, and the hope that it will play a catalytic role in the film process. This is the sense in which Rouch prefers “direct cinema” to either “observational cinema,”

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