



**A KNOWLEDGE BEYOND TEXT
LOOKING AT EACH OTHER, SHARING INTERROGATIONS**

**INTERNATIONAL JEAN ROUCH SYMPOSIUM
14-20 NOVEMBER 2009**

The *Comité du Film Ethnographique* (CFE), associated with *Musée de l'Homme*, CNRS, *Bibliothèque de France*, the CNC's *Archives Françaises du Film*, and in partnership with other institutions (*Ville de Paris*, the *Île de France* Region, The Ministry of Higher Education and Research) is organizing an international symposium to pay tribute to the scientific and cinematographic works of its founder and coordinator. Throughout one week, anthropologists, sociologists, academics, students, film directors, producers, actors, and cinema critics will come to testify, comment on, analyze and discuss (through round tables, debates, speeches, screenings, etc.) the pioneering, original, and sometimes unconventional role of Jean Rouch, both in France and abroad.

Objectives

The main purpose of the symposium will be to identify Jean Rouch's innovative trends, which will be confronted with the contemporary context. The questions arising from Jean Rouch's proposals, embodied in his research and films, will be reviewed by today's researchers and film directors, who will endeavor to summarize his achievements and deviations, as well as possible deadlocks and further developments.

The meeting should make the best possible use of audiovisual languages, questioning both the "Rouchian" film production and that of his contemporaries, and of those who pursued the path of shared anthropology or an attempted reciprocity of visions. Possible or impossible reciprocity of questions, self-examination of anthropological challenges, putting language and cultural encounters into perspective, the emergence and confrontations of the "I" between differences and similarities, masking and unveiling realities constantly invented, constructed, demonstrated, directions which are more significant than a stroke of improvisation, unmasked masks of realistic temptations, reversals of visions that are more or less conventional, uncertain provocations of forms and techniques... Rouch's proposals are still there, often barely hinted at, sometimes concealed under words that are no doubt circumstantial, or intentions henceforth futile. We will have to choose some of his words, to question his most obvious positions and the means implemented to pursue the game of encounters and words.

Each day of the symposium will begin with significant films or film excerpts by Rouch, clearly evoking certain themes. The proposed approach makes no claim of being exhaustive, but rather initiates, based on some of Jean Rouch's breakthroughs, a longer-term reflection on the dynamics of audiovisual anthropology, or in a greater sense, non-text-based anthropology. These are the trends that will indicate the direction for the proposed approach. Whatever the cinematographic and anthropologic achievements of the "Rouchian" proposals, their true value lies in the fact that they continue to question and provoke us. The idea is therefore to continue adjusting the audiovisual language to the realities of difference and to the particular elements of time, space, body, and emotion.

Themes and Films

Jean-Luc Godard used to think that Jean Rouch had paved the way for the French New Wave: he broke the rules, invented a new way of filming, and introduced narration on the foreground. He also broke away from conventional considerations on Africa, thus allowing us to find out that African men and women lived and thought *today*.

He kept repeating that he was neither an ethnologist nor a film director, but combined both functions. Extraordinarily diverse, surprisingly unusual, the decent man *par excellence*, crossing through the looking glass, a pale fox straight out of Dogon mythology, the hunted-hunter of an impossible doppelganger that he finally came to face on that last night in Niger, on February 18, 2004, elusive and yet present, yesterday or tomorrow, forever...

Between surrealism and knowledge of Africa, Jean Rouch found the magic lantern of cinema. It reveals the self in the other, and the other in ourselves, between which the anthropologist attempted to initiate dialogue. He wrote that "cinema, the art of the double, is already a transition from the real world to the imaginary world, while ethnography, the science of others' systems of thought, is a permanent crossing from one conceptual universe into another, a form of gymnastics where going out of one's depth is the least of the risks involved."¹

- *The colonial struggle and contemporary ethnology. Maîtres fous (The Mad Masters) – La Goumbé des Jeunes Noceurs*

He was one of those rare pioneers in France and in the last century, who introduced complex and industrial societies to anthropology, a domain that had been reserved for sociology up until then. As early as in the late 1940s, with his first investigations, Jean Rouch renewed the French ethnographic establishment, which was then preoccupied with societies that were claimed not to have a history, and whose "traditions," if not *the tradition*, should have been systemized. His first articles introduced historic temporality and population dynamics with their movements. Taking contemporaneity into account, his works on migrations, like most of his films in the 1950s, deal with an African continent in the midst of economic and political transformation.

In Accra, the capital of the Gold Coast which in 1957 would become Ghana, the first African colony to gain independence, he directed *Les Maîtres Fous*², a foundational film with immigrant workers from Niger and Mali, now a cult film for both cinema *and* anthropology. Possession, migrations, and colonial alienation are the dominant themes in the film: migrant workers are not simply victims; they react, defend themselves, they reorganize their beliefs and their systems of belonging, thus linking the present and its transformations to earlier practices. Religion is *actual*, integrated into the course of a history to which it responds.

- *The imaginary is real, fiction tells the story of the world: Dionysos – la Pyramide Humaine (The Human Pyramid)*

Rouch, like Homer, stages men and gods interacting with one another. Greek mythology expresses circumstances, phases, events, productions of dialogue between people and their environment: for a long time, Jean Rouch contemplated doing a film that would borrow its characters from the Pantheon. Despite the masks, this is probably the film that he has put the most of himself into. It will always be one of those strange, elusive, unclassifiable, unfinished, hybrid objects, through which the surrealists hoped that the clarity and order of the world would be endlessly questioned. *Dionysos*³, remarkable and thumbing its nose at all

¹ Jean Rouch, *une rétrospective*, 1981, : 31.

² Jean Rouch, *Les Maîtres Fous*, Paris, Films de la Pléiade, 16mm, 33min., 1954.

³ J.R., *Dionysos*, Paris, Les Films de la Pléiade, 1984.

known forms of film-making, demonstrates undying loyalty to the marvelous adventure of the gods from his childhood, which was illuminated by this solar story.

If, as Pasolini said, cinema is a language that expresses reality with reality, it is not a simple matter of reproduction, but a transfer of meaning, a profound transformation, during which a certain vision emerges. It involves a specific elaboration of the real, particularly taking into account the expression and interpretation of feelings. Even if *la Pyramide humaine* stages an organized sociodrama, it is also a film where Rouch directs his gaze, chooses the speakers, and invents a scenario that could easily be a game of truth. The encounters shown are played out in front of the spectators, but primarily through the eyes of Rouch.

- *A shared anthropology: Moi un noir – Petit à petit (Little by Little)*

In filming and observing, Rouch is demonstrating his approach, both to the people he was working with, whose commentary, remarks, and questioning he included, and to us, the spectators-questioners of otherness. This attitude leads to what I would call a *phenomenological support*, an effort constantly underway and called into question in order to understand the difference by approaching so close to the Other that one can feel him living.

This "shared anthropology" is not a mere method of emotional participation; it creates awareness of the insurmountable paradox of otherness that anthropology assumes: how to show and grasp the difference without rendering it irreducible nor reduce it to the identical.

The "ethnologized" Other is henceforth recognized as a subject and is given the possibility of addressing those who are watching him! We will even have to answer his questions, and not only arrogate the preeminent right of asking the questions and interpreting the answers for ourselves!

This is one of the strongest proposals that the film *Moi un Noir*⁴ has to offer: the actors tell their lives and their dreams themselves, but they also look beyond the screen toward the future viewer. When the main character, Oumarou Ganda alias Edward G. Robinson, presents Abidjan and its suburb of Treichville at the very beginning of the film, it is a warning to us that our knowledge is not independent of its conditions of investigation and reconstitution. In one move, with feigned innocence, Rouch gives his characters the chance to speak. These words abruptly cross the space-time continuum of colonization, and a revolution is underway. Images are no longer flowing in one direction only.

- *Direct cinema and construction of the real: Chronique d'un été (Chronicle of a Summer) – Veuves de 15 ans (15-year-old Widows)*

Across all his manners of "acting" as both an ethnologist and director, Jean Rouch brings into play a true philosophy of action. This unrepentant trickster, this smiling magician, this intriguing charmer, this dream hunter, this smuggler of genres, never stopped inventing Africa – has he not invented anthropology as well, in making his films?

One response to this question appears clearly through his collaboration with Edgar Morin for the film *Chronique d'un été*⁵.

Not only is the film a token of the advent of direct cinema in France, it is also a real action film showing real situations and relations between characters that are more or less artificially brought together. Rouch and Morin's cleverness lies in allowing the spectator to follow the meanderings of the actors' and directors' involvement with each other, thus offering a dynamic anthropological study about the formation of a group, the emergence of a society. The director is no longer a demiurge or a learned portrayer of shadows, but a mediator who is

⁴ J.R., *Moi un Noir*, Paris, Films de La Pléiade, 16mm, 80 min., 1959.

⁵ J.R., E.M., *Chronique d'un été*, Paris, Argos Films, 16mm, 90min., 1960.

implicated in the effects of his work. The meaning of the film belongs to the spectator in the end, and thus renews itself from viewing to viewing.⁶

- *A new anthropology, an anthropology of the living: Bataille sur le grand fleuve (Hippopotamus Hunt) – Cimetière dans la falaise*

“Rouchian” anthropology teaches us a double lesson: proximity and continuity allow us not only to see, but also to explore the meaning of difference, to exchange points of view, and as such, to possibly *change* and most of all *decenter* the analysis. Shared anthropology puts into perspective the anthropologist whose method is included in the questioning. The interviewer and his subject are both *incorporated* in a situation that eludes them as they define it.

From his very first films, Rouch presented his images to the people that they were showing. In *Bataille sur le grand fleuve*⁷, Rouch overlaid music onto images of a hippopotamus hunt. This music, authentic and recorded on the spot, was indeed intended for fisher-hunters. What more could one wish for? However, when the film was shown to the actors, they protested: music is never played during a hunt, it would make the prey run away! This lesson in ethnography was immediately accepted by Jean Rouch. From then on, sound and image would be precisely matched, and the films would become collective productions involving the participation of actor-subjects, some of whom would progressively become co-authors.

Anthropological investigation becomes a concrete situation: it is the meeting of people who openly question their belonging, their desires, their pleasures and their obligations. The description that is the foundation of anthropology is thus narration, avoiding the risks of hasty explanations that Marcel Mauss proscribed by enjoining anthropologists to first observe without drawing any conclusions. The Rouchian lesson follows in the same direction as that of Dziga Vertov, the “armed gaze”, that of the director and to an even greater extent, that of the ethnologist: it is important to overcome the prior organization of seeing, which leads only to cursory examination, if not reducing it to a mere resemblance of itself.

Rouch suggests increasing the number of observation paths and locations. He directs his anthropological questioning toward putting the approach itself into perspective. Perceptive attention must rediscover its capacity for surprise, astonishment, and thus intimate questioning, which questions itself before questioning the legitimacy the other.

On the paths covered by Jean Rouch, the urgent lesson that he leaves behind is to always find new paths to endlessly question accepted truths and “continue the fight!” In *Jean Rouch et Germaine Dieterlen "l'Avenir du Souvenir,"* a film directed by Philippe Costantini, Jean Rouch bids an emotional farewell to a young Dogon and says to him: “I am going to tell you a beautiful French phrase: what is the future of memory?”

Constantly renewing our questions, intriguing our imaginations, escaping our rules and our classifications, impertinent, always ahead of us despite all the delays, Jean Rouch is simply present!

Marc Henri Piault
Chairman of Comité du Film Ethnographique

⁶ A more comprehensive film approach would show an impressive foreshadowing of today’s questions and lines of questioning on work, the appearance of the first cracks in the grand ideologies which were so successful then, and the emerging identity crises and uncertainties of individuals.

⁷ J.R., *Bataille sur le Grand Fleuve*, Paris, CFE/CNRS, 16mm, color, 25min., 1951.

Schedule

Weekend: “as if cinema were life...”

Sessions from 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m., 2:00 to 6:00 p.m., and 8:00 p.m. to midnight.

Projections of films by Jean Rouch.

Monday through Friday: symposium.

Morning 10:00 a.m.–1:00 p.m.: screening and lectures.

Afternoon 2:30 p.m.–7:00 p.m.: lectures and round table discussion.

Evenings at 8:30 p.m.: screenings and cocktails.

Target Audience

Researchers – academics – students – producers – directors – film critics – film editors