Avant Propos: Jean Rouch

Steve Feld

Recommended Citation

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. https://repository.upenn.edu/svc/vol1/iss1/5
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.
AVANT PROPOS: JEAN ROUCH

STEVE FELD

In its first four issues, *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication* will publish my translations of articles by the French ethnographer and filmmaker, Jean Rouch. Owing to the fact that Rouch may be unfamiliar to the readers of this journal who are not involved in the anthropology filmmaking field, Sol Worth has asked me to provide a short introduction to these papers.

I should begin by noting what will be published. Rouch has had a varied career; his contribution to visual anthropology is apparent in four areas of involvement with film. The history and theory of anthropology film is the subject of "The Camera and Man," the initial piece in the series. In it (Rouch outlines his beliefs in a "shared" anthropology, achieved by using the camera to catalyze the process of mutual understanding, within and across cultures. The second article, on the situation of the African cinema, reviews the social dimensions of the ways Europeans and Africans have imaged Africa on film. The article is both a contribution to the history of world cinema, as well as an ideological critique of the document film in the colonial period. A third piece, stemming from the time of *Chronique d'un été* (1960), the classic cinéma-vérité film that Rouch made in collaboration with Edgar Morin, deals with the notions of cinéma-vérité, cinéma-direct, and the issues of "staging" and "reality" in the cinema. Finally, there will be a piece concerning the unique brand of feature length ethnographic "fiction" films that Rouch has created with *Moi, Un Noir* (1957), *La Pyramide Humaine* (1959), *Jaguar* (1954-67), and *Petit à Petit* (1971).

If we try to fit Rouch into the context of anthropology film that is familiar to American readers, the initial issue is that of training and skills. We are generally familiar with three ways that the disciplines of anthropology and filmmaking articulate to produce films. One way is when professional filmmakers become interested in ethnographic subject matter (i.e., filming non-Western cultures). Another way is when field working ethnographers take up an interest in film technology for recording and presenting their work. A third possibility is when there is a collaboration between two professionals with specifically different skills, ethnographic and cinematic. There is obviously no consensus on the best way to resolve this issue (if indeed there is one way), as clearly indicated by the different types of training programs found at the Anthropology Film Center, Annenberg School of Communications, Brandeis University, San Francisco State College, Temple University, University of California at Los Angeles, or University of Illinois at Chicago Circle.

Rouch presents another alternative. He is a skilled and experienced ethnographer and filmmaker simultaneously, and his presence in the field constitutes a strong argument that the uniquely combined skills of the ethnographic filmmaker can and should be packaged in a single person.

Two things support the feasibility of Rouch's position. First, multidisciplinary training is hardly new to anthropology. If we consider, for instance, the field of anthropological linguistics, it is immediately clear that the skills involved create a unique synthesis of the two disciplines in a way that contributes both to culture theory (e.g., cognitive anthropology today) and autonomous linguistics proper (e.g., aspects of the semantics and sociolinguistics counter-revolution). In the same fashion it is certainly reasonable to think of the anthropological filmmaker as a person whose dual competence creates the kind of unique synthesis that is significant both ethnographically and filmically.

The second supporting factor, not theoretical but concrete, is the singular synthesis that Rouch has created in the last 25 years. The ethnographic depth, sophistication, and rapport obvious in his films (e.g., *Les Maitres Fous*) makes many ethnographic films, by comparison, seem as superficial as adventure stories do when compared to ethnographic monograph studies. Moreover, he is the only practitioner of anthropology film whose name is consistently associated with critical theoretical issues in filmmaking (viz. cinéma-vérité and cinéma-direct) that have origins in anthropological thinking but have ramifications far beyond the use of film as a collecting, presentation, and teaching device for anthropology.

Rouch's cinema is neither sophomoric anthropology tacked onto pretty pictures nor clumsy attempts to make visual illustrations of ethnographic facts—two kinds of films that many of us have become so familiar and so dissatisfied with. Rather, it is an attempt to create a cinematic language appropriate to the tasks of ethnographic description and explication, in other words, a cinematic language that goes beyond pretty pictures to the heart of making ethnography cinematic. The assumption here is that the trained ethnographer-filmmaker is in fact the only person who knows the appropriate way to use the film perception-translation-communication process to image an event in a truly explication way.

A further aspect of Rouch's work attitude that is significant is the insistence on authorship and personal up-frontness that marks his filmic style. For Rouch the camera is not a voyeur through which one culture may peer at another; it is a catalyst through which the ethnographer-filmmaker, as author, creates a statement about the human interaction that is the basis of the ethnographic experience. When Rouch uses narrations, they are personal, subjective, self-reflexive. On a recent track (*Tourou et Bitti*) he

---

Steve Feld is an ethnomusicologist and anthropology-filmmaker. A Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Anthropology at Indiana University, he was a participant in the Summer Institute in Visual Anthropology, and has studied at the Anthropology Film Center in Santa Fe. He has written on music semiotics, African cinema, and starred as "BaNaNa" in *The Spirit of Ethnography*. In 1974 he spent a semester at the Département d’ethnomusicologie and the Comité du Film Ethnographique of the Musée de l’Homme in Paris.
introduces what is to follow as a film in the “first person.” He never relies on crews, but prefers direct contact, walking into the action with his eye behind the camera. In films that he is not shooting, he frequently appears on the screen, talking to the actors, stimulating the action, explaining what the film is becoming (e.g., *La Pyramide Humaine, Chronique d'un été, Rose et Landry*). His films are authored: the ethnographer attempts not to hide his involvement but, rather, insists on directly claiming responsibility for what the viewer is seeing/hearing, and the interpretative choices and selective perceptions that make the film the unique statement that it is.

Two consequences of Rouch’s authorship directly affect his use of film language. At present, Rouch has evolved a shooting style which resolves for him the question of editing. Recent films including *Yenendi de Gange!, Funerailles du Hogon, Architectes Ayourou,* and *Tourou et Bitti,* are shot in the style of continuous take shot-sequences that are sometimes as long as an entire 400-foot magazine. The most exciting example is *Tourou et Bitti,* a 12-minute one-shot film, in which Rouch penetrates a village possession dance, walking continuously with the action, using only a fixed focal length lens. The synchronized film and sound, edited as it was shot, is a complete statement, showing us exactly how the author chose to see the event and explicate it at the moment of its occurrence.

A second consequence is the creation of a largely improvised fictional cinema, based on ethnographic realities (e.g., *Jaguar,* based on Rouch’s early ethnographic studies of West African migrations). All of these films involve the personal touch and spirited style that emerges when Rouch films his friends, however their techniques vary from direct sync improvised shooting (*Petit à Petit*) to Rouch’s old pre-sync style of having the actors improvise a commentary as they view the edited version of the silent footage (*Moi, Un Noir, Jaguar*). In addition to raising the question of alternate ways of presenting ethnography, these films are extremely important because of their potential in the theatrical feature film area not usually tapped by ethnographic subject matter.

A final aspect of Rouch’s work, concerning film analysis, needs to be explicitly stated. Rouch does not generate film for micro-cultural analysis (e.g., kinesics, proxemics, choreometrics), nor has he been concerned with traditional film research areas, like culture and personality or childrearing. He stands strongly behind the position that “ethnographic films must be films” and is thus not interested in the single frame analysis of short out of context film clips, or in the mythology of “completely objective” filmmaking (locked-off cameras behind one-way mirrors). But this is not to say that he is not interested in the potential of ethnographic film for research. In fact, two recent films made in collaboration with ethnomusicologist Gilbert Rouget illustrate the importance of sync filming for the cross-cultural study of music and dance pattern in context. *Batteries Dogon* (see Rouget 1965), a study of Dogon drumming, breaks down and reconstructs several Dogon rhythm patterns, so that the motor organization and articulation of multipart rhythms can be studied. More recently, *Danses des Reines à Porto-Novo* (see Rouget 1971) includes slow motion sync sequences of music and dance together, using a process whereby the music is kept at pitch, while the image is accelerated to 48 frames per second. Thus while Rouch never attempts to justify his work on “scientific” grounds, he clearly understands the importance of film for creating basic data for analysis.

“The Camera and Man” was written in March 1973 as “Le Camera et les Hommes” and presented the following September to the IX International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences, in Chicago. A volume of Congress papers, *Principles of Visual Anthropology,* which Paul Hockings is editing for Mouton, will also contain an English version. In Paris, in May 1974, I read this translation in galleys, and feeling that it was weak, gave the Comité du Film Ethnographique a copy of my own informally prepared translation. That version, slightly revised and kindly reviewed for me by Ms. Marielle Delorme, the Comité’s administrative secretary, is what appears here. Notes have been added to explicate translation matters, or to place films in context.

Finally, I should note that I am an anthropology filmmaker and not a professional translator, and have thus paid more attention to what Rouch is saying than to word to word correspondences. I have tried to bring out as much as possible of the witty and acute style that marks Rouch’s original.

**REFERENCES CITED**

Rouget, Gilbert
