A Unique Life in Film
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Jean Rouch, anthropologist-filmmaker, is an enigma. For anyone interested in ethnographic film, he is undoubtedly the producer of many masterworks. In France, his reputation is even more grand in that he is considered one of the most important of their filmmakers, in league with the likes of Godard and Truffaut. Godard wrote several glowing critiques even more grand in that he is considered one of the most producer of many masterworks. In France, his reputation is one interested in ethnographic film, he is undoubtedly the of Godard and Truffaut. Godard wrote several glowing critiques of Rouch’s films in the influential journal Cahiers du cinema and used Raoul Coutard, cinematographer for Rouch’s Breathless. Rouch’s influence can easily be seen in Godard’s films, and Roberto Rossellini, Italian neorealist filmmaker, has noted how impressed he was with Rouch’s films, particularly Jaguar.

There is a large body of critical and popular literature about Rouch in French, and several of his films have had theatrical releases in Europe. In the United States and the United Kingdom, most of his 100+ films are not available, and the scholarly literature about him is scarce and recent. Steven Feld’s translation of Rouch’s Ciné-Ethnography (2003) provides us with translations of some of Rouch’s writings and reprints of articles by others about him. Paul Stoller’s The Cinematic Griot (1992) examines some of Rouch’s West African films from the perspective of French anthropology.

We now have a much-needed addition to this rather short list with the publication of Paul Henley’s masterful study, The Adventure of the Real. Henley, the director of Manchester’s Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology, has had access to most of Rouch’s films as well as to the French literature that is seldom translated into English. This is the definitive English-language study and will remain so for a long time. As film distribution companies like Documentary Educational Resources (Watertown, MA) are expanding their offerings of Rouch’s work, those of us in the English-speaking world will be able to view the films and make good use of Henley’s thorough and extensive scholarship.

Because Rouch was employed as a researcher at Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), he had few responsibilities other than to pursue his anthropological and filmmaking interests. He seldom needed outside funding except when a film was blown up to 35 mm and theatrically released. As a consequence, he had about a half-century to make films and produce written studies of West African ritual life. Beginning immediately after World War II, Rouch, a self-taught filmmaker, examined the ritual life of several West African societies. Some of these films are straightforward records of ceremonial life that are mainly useful for other scholars’ examination. But he soon became interested in blurring the boundaries of what constituted an ethnographic film. Perhaps because Rouch was profoundly influenced by the surrealists, he was able to step outside the confines of academic anthropology (then called ethnology in France) to produce films such as Moi, Un Noir (1957) and Jaguar (1955)—“ethnofictions” in which the subjects and the filmmaker were in what Rouch called a “ciné-trance,” with Rouch functioning as provocateur, causing the subjects to reveal their culture or “to improvise their own lives” (p. 86). As Henley points out, “Rouch thought of the subjects’ camera-induced performances as drawing on the unconscious conceived in the Surrealist manner” (p. 152). Decades before George Marcus and others were proposing that anthropologists should become reflexive and should collaborate with their subjects; Rouch was making his films in this fashion. The fact that James Clifford, Marcus, and their colleagues associated with “the interpretative turn in anthropology” (Clifford and Marcus 1986) were apparently unaware of Rouch’s involvement with these ideas is, sadly, a good example of how marginalized ethnographic film has been among many cultural anthropologists. Rouch continued to be interested in experimentaton, chance, and spontaneity for the remainder of his long career, even though his work has continued to remain outside the mainstream of academic anthropology in the United States—at least until recent times.

In the early 1960s, Rouch coproduced with sociologist Edgar Morin the groundbreaking Chronicle of a Summer, in which a technology that radically altered how documentary films could be made was, more or less, invented. Morin coined the term “cinema verité” to describe their approach—a term borrowed from the Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov. From the 1970s, Rouch became more interested in experimenting with this new technology and the principles of cinema verité in a series of fiction films shot and edited in the style of a cinema verité documentary. As Henley suggests that all of his films—fiction or not—were shot in the same manner, “with no script, no second takes, and in chronological order” (p. 289).

Rouch’s reputation and legacy transcend a number of fields. His written work and early ethnographic films are considered to be important contributions to an understanding of the ceremonial life of several West African groups. His film Les Maitres Fous (Mad Masters, 1954) is regarded as one of the best examples of a surrealist film and “clearly established Rouch’s international renown” (p. 101).

French playwright Jean Genet is said to have been inspired by this film in the writing of his play Les Negres (p. 105). His involvement with sound and camera technicians during the
making of *Chronicle of a Summer* resulted in the development of 16-mm sync-sound portable film equipment that radically altered not only the documentary but also feature fiction film production. While Henley does not discuss it in much detail, Rouch’s work with the Comité du Film Ethnographique and many film festivals and his somewhat unorthodox teaching methods have had a fundamental impact on the development of ethnographic film and African cinema during the last 25 years.

Henley is to be congratulated on the depth of his scholarship. When he was doing the research for this book, Rouch’s archive—film and written—was not in some disarray. If one wanted to see his more obscure or unfinished films, it took a monumental amount of patience to succeed. What impressed me the most about this book is how Henley demonstrates again and again Rouch’s refusal to recognize traditional disciplinary boundaries. I hope this book will inspire young ethnographic filmmakers to follow in the footsteps of Rouch, to push the boundaries and even ignore these self-imposed limitations. All cultural anthropologists can learn a lot from Rouch. Henley’s masterful analysis makes this process much easier.

References Cited


QUERIES TO THE AUTHOR

q1. The significance of the use of Coutard wasn’t clear, I thought, so I added Rouch’s name and the full title for *Chronicle*. OK?

q2. I changed “some 100 plus films” to “100+ films.” Is this OK? If not, how about “most of his approximately 100 films”?

q3. Will your readers understand what you mean by “these self-imposed limitations”?  
