

Jean Rouch: The semiotics of ethnographic film

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Abstract. Jean Rouch (1917–2004) is considered to be the greatest ethnographic filmmaker in the world. His films, which focus primarily on the Songhay of the Upper Niger in Africa, have fundamentally changed the spirit, goals, and methods of ethnographic filmmaking. I ask how Rouch established contact with those he filmed, how his invented semio-ethnic terms and his understanding of twoness and the other informed his practice, and in what sense his films were “shared anthropology” (his term).

Keywords: film, ethno-time, ethno-fiction, ethno-truth, twoness

Among many problems seen by Charles Sanders Peirce with a much greater sagacity than by his contemporaries were the substance and pertinence of the inner dialogues between the silent sayer and the very same man as he will be a second after. The verbal intercourse which bridges the spatial discontinuity of its participants is supplemented by the temporal aspect of verbal communication which insures the continuity of one’s past, present, and future. (Jakobson 1971: 698)

All existence is in twoness. (Jakobson 1977: 1029)

While I do not know that Jean Rouch, who was born in 1917 and died in 2004, read Roman Jakobson or Charles Sanders Peirce, he seemed to share many aspects of their world view. Rouch began his life as an engineer but became interested in rural culture in Africa and returned to Paris to take a doctorate in anthropology. In 1946 he returned to Africa and spent nine months descending the Niger River. He began taking

notes and shooting black and white footage with a camera bought in a flea market in Paris, which marked the beginning of his career; he also completed a dissertation in anthropology. Rouch was always an adventurer and a critic (Rouch 2003).

Rouch believed that the German conquest traumatized the French: “It was horrible. We discovered that what we learned at school – the invincibility of the French army – was false. There was not a real battle. In just one month the whole of France was occupied. We were ashamed to have lost the war” (Stoller 1992: 27). As a student of civil engineering, Rouch spent the first months of the occupation travelling around by bicycle from the Marne River to the Massif Central, blowing up bridges to slow the German advance.

Rouch’s early life tells us something about the person he was to become. As revealed in an interview with Lucien Taylor (1991), Rouch had a very active life with a constantly travelling family. They were interested in research as well as painting and photography. The roots of Rouch’s inventive filmmaking can be traced to his early years. The first film he saw was Robert Flaherty’s documentary, *Nanook of the North*, and soon after that he saw his first fictional film, *Robin Hood*. The scenes of dying in this film upset him, and his mother tried to explain to him that those dying were only actors. He asked whether the same was true for *Nanook*. Thus, the first two films he saw as a child were a documentary and a fictional film.

He attended a *lycée* in Paris. Because his father was a naval attaché, he also lived in the Balkans, Greece, and Turkey, but he remained in Paris in the end to complete his education. There he discovered the Musée de l’Homme, and became interested in the Surrealists. He also discovered jazz, dance, theatre, cinema, commenting that “in those days, Paris was a kind of paradise” (Taylor 1991: 92). He was always questioning fascism and Marxism, and as for religion, he reports being disappointed when he first took communion and no miracles followed. He knew Rimbaud by heart, and learned how to write poetry by starting backwards. He always edited film backwards as well. He entered the *École des Ponts et Chaussées* and felt that he would never have to worry about having a job and having financial problems, even though his family was not rich. And he began to paint watercolours.

Rouch was inspired by the two early masters, Robert Flaherty and Dziga Vertov. Robert Flaherty, an American explorer, was one of the cinema’s great geniuses and has been hailed by many film historians as the creator of the documentary. Rouch met him in France, where Flaherty’s three great films – *Nanook of the North* (1922), *Moana* (1926), and *Man of Aran* (1934) – had been shown. Flaherty was a very patient filmmaker. For Rouch, *Nanook of the North* is a celebration of relationship, a celebration of the familiarity that accrues from observation with a sense of contact and spontaneity brought by participation. Flaherty not only asked Nanook for feedback, but he also taught him how to make films. It became a joint

enterprise, narrowing the gulf between filmmakers and the people who were being filmed. Rouch said that *Nanook* was never constructed of detached images of anonymous actors; instead Flaherty made deliberate selections based on both observation of everyday routines, and on the ability of *Nanook* to create stage representative versions. This is what Rouch called the “staging of reality”. This experience of “shared cinema” was for Rouch a major event in his initiation as a filmmaker.

In Africa, Rouch became interested in the Songhay, and this became a life-long occupation. Rouch sensed that the life of the Songhay world would not reveal its vitality to the dead space of the printed page. He wanted to make films to bring life to Songhay truths. During the decades of filming in Africa, while Rouch began as a traditional anthropologist, he developed a semiotics of the ethnographic film not by any conscious effort but a growing realization of what he was creating: the dialogic process between Rouch and his natural actors became a way to reach an *ethno-fiction* and *ethno-truth* – a narration in this case with the Songhay people. His methods became a new approach. He rejected the tripod for a handheld camera, nor did he employ any costumes or sets. Rouch disregarded chronological time for *ethno-time* of memories and dreams of the participants, which enabled him to discover the norms, desires and beliefs of these people and how far his presence influenced the Songhay, and how much they influenced him. This was a natural and spontaneous process, an exciting and continuing evolution.

***Pam Kuso Kar* and transformation**

Rouch’s film *Pam Kuso Kar* (1974) was first shown in 1986 and 1987 at Niamey in Niger (Stoller 1992). He was then seventy years old and had already made seventy films. Pam was one of the principal *zima*, which means “possession priest”, and the *zima* taught Rouch much about Songhay possession. When a *zima* dies, his life and death are celebrated during a ceremony called *kuso kar*, meaning “breaking the jars”. During that ceremony, all the dead *zima*’s initiates go to the bush for water and powdered tree bark which they put into a large jar. They give each initiate a portion of the medium’s work. The filth of death is washed away. Then the elders return to the dead *zima*’s compound where his possessions and objects are cared for. The elders take milk and spray it over the objects to cleanse them. So cleansed, the compound is ready to receive the dead *zima*. His spirits will seek new mediums to house their power. The air fills with the wail of the monochord violin and the pulsing clacks of the gourd drum. Then the spirits come. They may name a new *zima* to replace the one who has so carefully led them down their ancestors’ path.

After the discussion of the film, a young man approached Rouch, shook his hand and said, “Thank you, Jean. I am Abdu, Pam’s son”. He had been so moved

that he could say nothing else, but the next morning he gave Rouch a poem that he had written that night:

Niamey, 27 December 1987

Oh haunted night!
 Oh haunted night!
 Such as the night of 24 December 1974,
 That night will stay engraved in my memory.
 That severe night took away my father.
 Oh death, mortal enemy of joy! That took away from me papa.
 And so papa is far from us, far from this region where he will never return.
 Papa is so far away from his friends and from these people who loved him so.
 Nothing but this memory of the old zima remains...
 I had this kind of nostalgia in my memories,
 It is in this way that Jean Rouch enabled me to see my father again,
 smiling on a chair amid his friends in the Holey community; a rich and powerful
 community that this community sees again in the film, *Pam kuso kar!*
 Jean opened for me the path of the past, a path that is filled with sadness.

I was so moved by this film that I don't know how to thank Jean, for this joyous gift he offered me.

But a little later my joy transformed itself.

I am becoming nervous before this impotence, this weakness... weakness because I could no longer relive reality with papa. A few minutes later, I got a grip on myself, held back my tears, and listened to the music that Toukou, Garba, and Arba played on the gourd drums, this music to which the Old Man consecrated almost his entire life, which for me is an unforgettable memory... I thank you for this film, Jean, but mostly for having given me the will that night, 27 December, 1987, to taste my reality, that is to say, my heritage that I left due to modern influences, due to Western science that had demonstrated to me its power.
 Abdu Sambo Zima (Rouch 1989: 351–52, cited in Stoller 1992: xv–xvi)

As Rouch comments, on seeing the past of his father, shame became pride for the son. Abdu, interestingly enough, holds an advanced degree in physics. He is a man who solved problems in two ways. Jean Rouch was very moved by what this young man wrote about him and he felt that all of his work over the many years “seemed to me like an ‘alternative’ bullfight when I passed my cape and sword to an ambitious and determined young matador”. He felt that he had fulfilled his greatest responsibility to pass on his knowledge to the next generation (Rouch 1989: 352, cited in Stoller 1992: xvi).

Rouch's conceptualized approach

The first *coup d'état* in Africa was against Nkrumah, and Rouch recognized the danger of power. In reaction, he felt that the only solution was to go back to the traditional way of life and way of thinking. And thus he filmed the Dogun, stating, "So in a sense my films have returned to a more traditional form of anthropology. But I have retained my own approach, which I characterize as intervening to provoke a certain reality" (Taylor 1991: 90).

Taylor (1991) noted that Rouch's films were provoked rather than recorded, as opposed to the English method, where the reality was considered to be objectively out there, and you have to silently record it. The camera was, as far as possible, invisible. Rouch told the interviewer that he prefers not to be a scientist, but to participate. When scenes were particularly horrifying, for example, killing a lion, Rouch stopped filming them. He commented that there seemed to be no ethics in television. In an interview, Lucien Taylor asked if Rouch's film *Noir* was influenced by Buñuel's film *Los Olvidados*. Rouch said that he was influenced by the portrait of despair and desperation, but that he hated cruelty. He was upset by the blind man in the Buñuel film, but nevertheless he commended Buñuel's ability to cross the barrier between dream and reality. Rouch also tried to cross the barrier between dream and reality in his films *Noir* and *La Pyramide Humaine*.

Rouch the *Griot*, the double and possession

Rouch's Songhay friends called him a *Griot*. The word *Griot* was an old one, traced in various forms among various groups in Africa. It seemed to mean "the masters of speech" in the Western Sahara. The *Griot* is above all a bard, a person who sings praises to the ancestors, to the life of the past. He is also the custodian of the society's tradition and the one who maintains and reinforces the links between the present and the past. He is an artist, and music and oral art are his very definition (Rouch 2003: xvii). Rouch felt that his *ciné-eye* led him beyond the visible to the self.

Rouch's (2003) work with the Songhay reflects his approach to the dialogue he is writing. He was inspired by the idea of doubleness, and he wrote that a common factor with possession cinema is twoness. All Songhay have a double; the closest translation might be 'the soul'. The notion of the *personne*, or the self, is effectively one of the key religious factors involved in trance, in possession, in dance, and in sorcery. The question of 'self' pertains to not only the observer who attends to these phenomena, but also the people who are being photographed. This is especially so when the observer records and plays back the sounds and visible images for the subjects of these trances; those filmed consider these images to be a reflection of themselves and of their divinity; that is, part of the 'self' of both men and gods.

Exemplifying the concept of the self among the Songhay are the following factors. First, there is the possession dance, which reveals the character of the possessed person in trance and the possessing spirit. Second, magic evokes the character of the magician and of clairvoyant states. Third is sorcery, the character of the *tyarkaw* (eater of souls) and the character of his victim is revealed.

Rouch points out that, while recording these phenomena, the filmmaker-observer unconsciously modifies them and is himself changed by them. When he returns and plays back the images, a strange dialogue takes place in which the film's "truth" rejoins its mythic representation. Rouch believes that the demonstration of the active, involuntary role played by the observer will lead to a closer understanding of the situation of the ethnographer in the field (Rouch 2003: 88).

Considering the possession cult, Rouch tells us that we do not have an exact typology of trances. Why? Well, because we have not reached that point in research. Nevertheless, we do have a baseline of examples of complex information about different manifestations of possession in the world, and particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. In Rouch's words,

It now appears that the phenomenon of trance (whether wild or controlled) is one of the essential features in the momentum behind great religious movements, and, perhaps, behind great movements in artistic creativity. [...] In the Niger Valley, possession is a means of special reciprocal communication between people and their gods. The possessed, which have the form of the 'horses of the spirits', are largely women and are specialists who enter into a recognized group after a long and difficult initiation. After that, they are involved in 'wild trances', which treat the sick excluded from the society. These trances are run by priests (*zimas*) and take place only during public ceremonies regularly organized by and for the entire society. (Rouch 2003: 88)

The beliefs around such rituals are quite complex. For example, there are several hundred divinities that reveal themselves in enactments of possession. These gods are invisible but they appear as men, and they are special "masters" (of water, wind, bush, thunder, rainbow, etc.) from complicated legends that make up the mythology of these people, which is constantly enlarged with each ritual and revelation.

After an initiation, each dancer is a "horse", reserved for several "horsemen", who will mount her (or, sometimes, a man) during the trance and "operate" the body and speak through the mouth of the horse for minutes or hours. In Rouch's (2003: 89) words, "It is this dialogue with the gods that is the essential aim of possession ceremonies. There is thus a profound metamorphosis of the self of the horse, who gives up a part of herself to be a part of the self of the god who is now incarnated in her body." And "[a]fter the possession ceremony the possessed person does not theoretically at least have any memory of the trance, and resists all illusion to the possessing god" (Rouch 2003: 89).

According to Rouch (2003: 89), “The most widespread theory propounded by the *zimas* is that during the possession the “double” (*bia*) of the god has taken the place of the double of the horse”. It is this exchange that he talks about. The notion of *bia* (double) really means ‘shadow’ or ‘somber’, a ‘reflection’ in a mirror, or in a pool of water, or ‘soul’ (the spiritual principle of all animate beings). The *bia* is tied to the body throughout life; it can temporarily leave the body during sleep, or during a state of imagination, reflection or possession, and it leaves the body at the moment of death. The *bia* is located on the left side of the body, and that is why one should sleep on the right side of the body, and the possessing god comes to place himself there.

Each man has a *bia*, who lives in a parallel world, i.e., the world of doubles, the home of the spirits, the masters of forces of nature. It is the home of imaginary dreams, reveries, and so on, as well as the temporary home of magicians and sorcerers. This reflection world seems to go beyond the limits of the earthly world.

Rouch (2003: 90) observed such possession rites and described them in the following way:

It begins with the apparent loss of consciousness and is followed by the slow appearance of a new character, first trembling and howling, then becoming calm. Then the behavior takes on another manner, manifested by speaking in another voice and sometimes in another language. Once one is accustomed to the repertoire of personages, immediate identification is possible: it is Dongo, the spirit of thunder, or Zatao, the captive of the Peul people.

Rouch suggests that Songhay myths reflect the continuous fusion of the spirit and social worlds. Human beings are never far from the domain of the spirits, and the spirits often intervene in the social affairs of human beings. Humans may even be married to a spirit. In many ritual incantations, humans may ask the spirit for something.

Participatory cinema

Rouch’s films are a testament to a “participatory cinema”, pioneered by Flaherty, and also pay homage to the Vertovian legacy of what Rouch calls “*cinéma vérité*”, the filming of truth (Stoller 1993). *The Lion Hunters* is an important film about the Songhay. For the Songhay, every power has its incantation. The hunters need to know the words of the hunt, because, for instance, if a hunter kills a hyena, which is the familiar of Songhay witches, the witch might kill his son or daughter. If a hunter kills a young lion, the soul of the lion might make him so delirious that he would not

know, as the Songhay say, his front side from his back side. The bush kills the hunter who does not know the words of the hunt.

The hunters in this film sit on a palm mat in a dimly lit mud-brick house, and we hear the sounds of the monochord violin. The men, who are armed with bows and arrows, are brave as they face the lions. They are now in an uninhabited space, instead of the inhabited space where they live. They cross the Niger River until they get to the bush, and then to trackless plains. Once hunters lived on this land, and they knew how to fight these animals, and knew the pathways. For instance, the Fulan herded cattle, sheep, and goats. The Bella transported salt. The harmony of this area where the early hunters used to live is gone, having been shattered by the lions looking for an easy meal who have been attacking the Fulan cattle.

In 1964 *The Lion Hunters* was greatly acclaimed, and Rouch was then considered the greatest French filmmaker. It shows the film crew, the trucks, and all Rouch's assistants, everybody working together – this is what Rouch calls “*ciné reality*”. There are scenes that show the power of magic: the chief pretends to die, as though he had been wounded, and they also reenact the whole drama of shooting the animal, reciting incantations when the animal dies, and protecting themselves from the animal's soul by tapping its head three times, and filling its orifices with special powders. These scenes illustrate how powerful words are, because words contain meanings, forces that can alter a substance and change behaviour. Rouch becomes a *ciné-poet*, who demonstrates the veracity of the Songhay proverb “Every power has its incantation”.

Migrations to a modern world, *ciné-fiction*

In the film *Jaguar*, we see how Rouch transforms the findings of migrations to Ghana into a transcendental narrative of *ethno-fiction* (Rouch 2003). Rouch probes the inner cultural and psychological dimensions of these voyages of discovery. In this sense, the film is something like Lévi-Strauss's *Tristes Tropiques*. There are three protagonists who are introduced in this film. One is a Fulan herder, another is a Niger River fisherman, and the third is a Zerma “bandit” tax collector, riding his horse. All three have the desire to seek the unknown. In Songhay, a journey away from one's village is always fraught with peril. They travel through the bush, and then through the savannah of tall elephant grass. When they get to the mountainous Somba country, they, according to the author, experience the “other” for the first time. These “other” are the Somba, carrying spears, adorned with only penis sheaths. The Somba men present themselves in an unembarrassed natural state; the three travellers are very astonished at their unclothed state, and at learning that they eat bushmeat and dogs. They even ask if they are really men. They are apparently gentle

people, but, of course, the travellers cannot communicate with them. The travellers finally come to the ocean, but the Niger river goes on. And they come to the Gold Coast where they need amulets to identify themselves. At the border, they separate. They all find jobs – one in the lumber yard, carrying sacks, and one herding cattle. And they see many new sights – a bar, all kinds of markets, food, and so forth. At the end of each day, they return to their traditions and stage a possession ritual. They decide to play and act out the film.

The Jaguar is what Rouch calls “*ciné-fiction*”, a fictitious story based on years of facts and ethnographic research, showing how this kind of migration transforms people from young men and adolescents into world-wise travellers, adults, with all kinds of experiences. Their stories become a foundation for contemporary myth.

The self and ethno-dialogue

In Rouch’s words:

In the field, the observer modifies himself; in doing his work, he is no longer someone who greets the elders at the edge of the village, but – to go back to Vertovian terminology – he *ethno-looks*, *ethno-observes*, *ethno-thinks*. And those with whom he deals are similarly modified; in giving their confidence to the habitual foreign visitor, they *ethno-show*, *ethno-speak*. These are three terms of the many that are very important in understanding Rouch’s methodology and of shared anthropology [...]. This is a permanent *ethno-dialogue* that appears to be one of the most interesting angles in the current progress of ethnography. Knowledge is no longer a stolen secret, devoured in the Western temples of knowledge; it is the result of an endless quest, where ethnographers and those whom they study meet on a path that some of us call ‘shared anthropology’.
(Rouch 2003: 100–101)

Rouch’s singular philosophy of the “*ciné-eye*” initiated a revolutionary approach, in which he is part of the ceremony and still he is part ethnographer. Emotionally and physically and every other way, he communicates with the actors he is filming, within their world and in their language.

Rouch’s comments:

Most people do not realize that any anthropologist must destroy what he investigates [...]. [I]n all social science [...] the facts are always distorted by the presence of the person who asks questions. You distort the answer by simply posing the question. [...] I don’t even wear a watch. I wish to have the kind of perspective that the actors have. I try to capture that in the film. (Rouch 2003: 220, 284)

Rouch as a Surrealist

DeBouzek (1989) examines Rouch as a Surrealist. Rouch states that cinema is exactly like surrealist painting, “*l’utilisation des procédés de reproduction les plus réels, les plus photographiques, mais au service de l’irréel, de la mise en présence d’éléments irrationnels [...]. La carte postale au service de l’imaginaire*” (DeBouzek 1989: 305).

Rouch writes, “I think it was (the surrealist poets) André Breton and Paul Éluard who once wrote something making a comparison between the journey of a poet who, when he starts to write, doesn’t know where he is going. He is in another state of being, *dans un autre état*, which is very close to the *état* of possession. And they tried to provoke that state in writing, in their “automatic writing” (*l’écriture automatique*)”. (DeBouzek 1989: 307)

Rouch also comments, “When I saw my first possession ritual, I saw a dialogue between human beings and spirits. And I thought of the ‘possession’ experiment of Breton and Éluard. And from the very beginning, I said, ‘There’s only one way to study that, it’s to make a film’” (DeBouzek 1989: 307).

In conclusion, I consider some general features that pertain to these times. The Songhay area is one where there is famine and scant rain, rats and locusts and insects ravage the crops. Therefore possession ceremonies are offerings to spirits and involve long dances and spirits demand goat blood. To Rouch, this possession is an enactment of life and death. Rouch joins a circle and actually dances with the spirits. The people call Rouch the “one who follows the spirits”. They feel that Rouch has been initiated.

As I have noted, the possession mediums are invisible. They displace the double, that is, the *bia* (the other, the soul of its mediums). The *bia* is also the same as the shadow, a reflection in the water. The soul leaves the body during sleep, and then the *bia* is displaced during the possession ceremony. The dancer sees the spirit, or something like that, and puts a bloody skin of an animal over the dancer’s head. “In this way the spirit captures the double and enters the dancer’s body” (Rouch 2003: 168).

Rouch wonders if his own act of filmmaking, his *ciné-trance*, precipitated the possession trance of the dancers. Rouch explains how he enters another world through his camera. Through his camera he enters a *ciné-trance*, and then Rouch comments on the term *shared anthropology* (Rouch 2003: 172). You’re sharing with the other, and the result is respect between the ethnographer and the other. Rouch (2003: 95) writes, “The field changes the simple observer. He *ethno-thinks*, *ethno-looks*, and *ethno-observes* and those in contact *ethno-show*, and *ethno-speak*, and *ethno-think*”. Rouch continues, “It is a kind of a permanent *ethno-dialogue*”. Knowledge is a result of an endless quest in which ethnographers walk a path

which Rouch calls shared anthropology. This means *shared participatory anthropology*. This poetic truth is not that he should lose himself – it is a new amalgamation under a new experience. The *Griot's* task is to sing the praise of the past, to replace *shame* with pride.

Rouch commented that for him there was almost “no boundary between documentary film and film of fiction. The cinema, art of the double, is already a transition from the real world to imagination and ethnography. The science of the thought systems of others is a permanent crossing point from one conceptual universe to another, a kind of acrobatic gymnastics where losing one’s footing is the least of the risks” (Rouch 2003: 185).

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Жан Руш: семиотика этнографического фильма

Жан Руш (1917–2004) является одним из самых известных авторов этнографических фильмов. Его фильмы, которые прежде всего были посвящены сонгай (племя Верхнего Нигера в Африке), коренным образом изменили дух, цели и методы этнографического кино. В статье рассматривается, как Руш добивался контакта с теми, кого он снимал, и как его теоретические взгляды (изобретенные им семио-этнические термины, его понимание двойственности и Другого) влияли на его практику, а также вопрос о том, в каком смысле можно его фильмы рассматривать как пример “разделенной антропологии” (“shared anthropology”, термин Руша).

Jean Rouch: etnograafilise filmi semiootika

Jean Rouch'i (1917–2004) peetakse üheks maailma suurimaks etnograafiliste filmide loojaks. Tema filmid, mis keskenduvad peamiselt Aafrikas Nigeris elavatele songaidele, on põhjanevalt muutnud etnograafilise filmi loomise vaimsust, eesmärke ja meetodeid. Artiklis küsin, kuidas Rouch saavutas kontakti filmitavatega, kuidas tema leiutatud semio-etnilised terminid ning see, kuidas ta tõlgendas kahetisuse ja Teise mõisteid, tema praktikad mõjutasid ning millises tähenduses oli tema filmide näol tegu (tema terminid kasutades) “jagatud antropoloogiaga”.