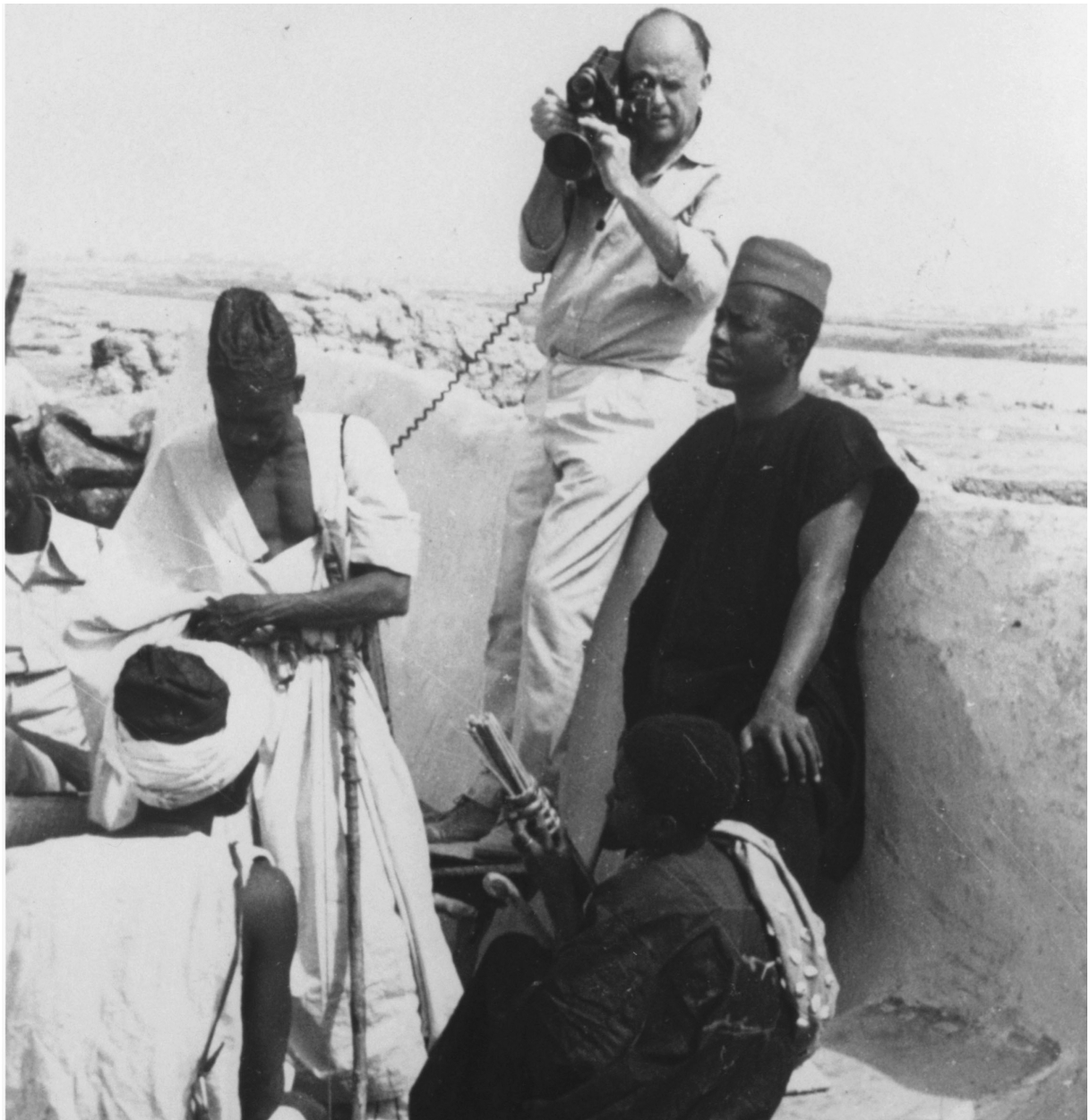




**Visual Anthropology**

## **CINÉ-TRANCE: A TRIBUTE TO JEAN ROUCH (1917–2004)**

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**FIGURE 1.** Jean Rouch filming Damouré Zika and Lam Ibrahim Dia (*Babatou les trois conseils* 1975). Photo courtesy of Faye Ginsburg.

**ABSTRACT** This issue's Visual Anthropology Section is a tribute to anthropologist and ethnographic filmmaker Jean Rouch (1917–2004). In nine brief articles, authors discuss the impact of Rouch's pathbreaking career on ethnographic and documentary filmmaking and his contributions to our knowledge of postcolonial Africa. The authors demonstrate the significance of his work for the larger discipline of anthropology, and commemorate Rouch with personal reflections of their time working with and learning from him. [Keywords: Jean Rouch, visual anthropology, postcolonial Africa]

# Dans le bain avec Rouch: A Reminiscence

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PARIS, Feb. 19—Jean Rouch, a French explorer, ethnologist and film director who played a significant role in forging the *cinéma-verité* style, died on Wednesday night in a car crash in the west central African nation of Niger, the French Embassy there said. He was 86. Mr. Rouch (pronounced *roosh*) was attending a film festival in Niger where he first worked as a civil engineer more than 60 years ago. . . . He will be buried in Niger.

Alan Riding, the *New York Times*, February 20, 2004

For those of us whose lives were touched and inspired by the distinguished and iconoclastic French anthropologist and filmmaker Jean Rouch, his death last February was not unexpected: He was 86 years old and had been showing signs of his age. Nonetheless, the news of what actually happened was stunning and, for many, the encounter with it is remembered vividly—a flashbulb memory, as often happens with significant losses. I was on a train on my way to Vassar College to give a lecture—it opened with a quote from Rouch—when my cell phone rang with the news; my husband knew I would want to know right away. Jean had been the teacher, in 1979, who turned me toward anthropology and made me understand the intellectual, aesthetic, and moral creativity the field promised. This, despite my frustration at the time that, in a seminar or screening, he never seemed to answer the question that was asked. Steve Feld, for whom Rouch had also been a foundational mentor early in his career, told me that he heard of Rouch's passing while in Greece, the day after he had picked up a camera to shoot a film for the first time in over a decade.

When I talked to my New York University (NYU) colleague Manthia Diawara—the Malian film scholar and documentary maker who was very close to Jean—he articulated the eerie sense that many of us shared: that Jean had scripted his own death. A car crash seemed the fitting final scene for a life that valorized the antic and unexpected discoveries of the *journal de route*, the genre that distinguishes so many of Jean's *ethnofictions*. The place where the accident occurred, north of Niamey, Manthia explained, was known to be dangerous. It is not far from the location of a scene in his famous film *Jaguar* (1954–67)—as the travelers are setting out, they encounter overturned cars and trucks on the road and congratulate themselves (somewhat ironically) for avoiding the dangers of automobiles by making their long journey on foot. Jean would have known of this risk, but he never played it safe. As anyone familiar with his work

knows, he was always testing the boundaries and creating new stories in the process. He had been declining physically in the years before his death. The man we all knew as someone with boundless energy, constantly on the move, always ready for watching (or making) another film or taking another swim, was finding it increasingly difficult to walk, let alone travel. Indeed, it was surprising that he had made it to the film festival in Niger at all. It seemed right that Jean's life ended in Africa, the place he loved so dearly, riding in a car with his lifelong friends—Damouré Zika, who worked with Rouch on one of his first films and on almost every one thereafter, as well as the cineast Moustapha Allasane, also from Niger. Allasane, like his fellow filmmakers Omarou Ganda and Safi Faye, had worked with Jean on films before starting his own career as one of the key players in the generation that launched African cinema.

A few years earlier, in April of 2000, Jean made his final appearance in the United States for the last of three retrospectives of his work, which I had organized at NYU, through the Department of Anthropology and the Center for Media, Culture, and History. The first, held in 1988, had focused on his work with the Dogon and was held in conjunction with a show of Dogon art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The second, held in 1994, focused on his contribution to ethnographic film and was in conjunction with the Margaret Mead Film Festival at the American Museum of Natural History.

In 2000, I was fortunate to work with Steve Feld, a colleague at NYU at the time. Together, we organized the last of these events: A three-day retrospective of what we called Rouch's "Chronicles of African Modernities." It featured screenings of his major feature-length *ethnofictions*, followed by discussions with Jean and African, French, and U.S. scholars of his work, three of whom are represented in this special section of the *American Anthropologist*: the French ethnographer and filmmaker Jean Paul Colley, and the U.S. anthropologists Steve Feld and Paul Stoller. The event provided New Yorkers a rare opportunity to see six of Rouch's most important works. Most of them had not been seen publicly in the United States for over two decades and, with the exception of *Jaguar*, are not in circulation outside of France. These feature-length works, made from the late 1950s through the 1990s, address the emergence of a distinctive West African modernity—from the end of the colonial period, through the heady period of independence, and on into the complexities and contradictions of the post-colonial era. The acting in all of them is improvised with nonprofessional actors, beginning with his groundbreaking



**FIGURE 2.** Jean Rouch in an antic moment en route to his retrospective, New York, April 2000. Photo by Francoise Foucault.

works *Moi, un Noir* (1959) and *La pyramide humaine* (1961). Both films are set in Abidjan. The first film is set among migrants from Niger working in the slums of Treichville. The second is a drama created with black and white students in a fictional integrated high school class (a film credited as the precursor to his cinema verité classic, *Chronique d'un Été* [1961]).

These films were followed by the quartet of works made by "Dalarouta," an acronym comprising the first syllables of the names of Rouch and his longtime African collaborators from Niger: Damouré Zika, Lam Ibrahim Dia, and Tallou Mouzourane. The films he made with them, for over three decades, provide an almost surreal perspective on the nature of cross-cultural encounters in the postcolonial period, refusing a separation of Africans from Europeans, of modernity from everyday life in the African bush. In a wonderful moment of meta commentary in the last of these films, *Madame L'Eau*, Rouch explains:

When you make a film with Damouré, Lam and Tallou, it's a permanent challenge. We invent situations leading nowhere, we create unsolvable enigmas. So we enter the unknown and the camera is obliged to follow us and improvise, for better or for worse.

The films began with *Jaguar*. Shot in the preindependence 1950s and edited in the 1960s, it chronicles the seasonal migration of young African men from Niger to the

African "Gold Coast" (now Ghana). Next, *Petit à Petit* (1971) shows a reverse ethnographic gaze, as offered by Africans in Paris and Parisians in Africa. *Cocorico, Monsieur Poulet* (1974) is the modern day version of a Niger folk tale. And, finally, *Madame L'Eau* (1993) interweaves the vagaries of development schemes, drought, postcolonial dreams, and encounters between Europeans and Africans.<sup>1</sup>

Although we were confident about the film program we had organized, several other concerns surfaced, creating some anxiety prior to the event at NYU. The French anthropologist of Dogon life, Germaine Dieterlen—Jean's close friend and colleague, whom he saw almost daily—had died six months earlier at the age of 96. This cast a shadow over Jean's usual ebullience. Some of the prints of the films with English subtitles were so difficult to find that Françoise Foucault, Rouch's friend and associate at the Comité du Film Ethnographique (Committee of Ethnographic Film), told me, only half-jokingly, that it was all right if Jean missed the flight home, but that the films could not. Veronique Godard, the cultural liaison from the French Embassy, which provided partial support, worried that Jean would not attract the audiences he once did during the peak of interest in New Wave Cinema. Despite all that, the films arrived (although some just moments before their screening time), and Jean was in wonderful form (See figure 2). The screenings were packed, not only with those who had known Jean's work for many years but also with young

people in their 20s—people who, for the first time, were encountering the man, the remarkable films, and his refreshing engagement with anthropology. They seemed just as inspired by the work as I had been two decades earlier. And in the spirit of generativity that shaped Jean's aphorism that "films should give birth to films," the retrospective spurred Steve Feld to produce the excellent collection of writings by, and interviews with, Jean under the title *Ciné-Ethnography: Jean Rouch* (2003).<sup>2</sup>

Shortly after Jean's departure in April 2000, I talked with my colleague, the anthropologist and Africanist, T. O. Beidelman, about the event. He was impressed, he said, with how Jean seemed to pay close attention to questions asked of him, but almost always gave an answer to a far more interesting query than the one that actually had been made. "Do you think that this is because his hearing is diminished?" he asked. And then I remembered my frustration and annoyance 21 years earlier during my first seminar with Jean. He never seemed to answer the questions put to him, but the replies he gave were what inspired me to pursue anthropology. It takes a long time, I finally understood, to learn to ask the right questions.

Far in advance of contemporary rethinking of both anthropology and filmmaking, Jean was developing an entirely new kind of ethnographic and documentary film practice that blurred the boundaries between producer and subject, fiction and "reality," Europe and Africa, the practical and the poetic, the mundane and the magical, and the audience and the social worlds of film. He understood the necessity of an *anthropologie partagée* before dialogical

anthropology became fashionable. He saw the dialogue as extending far beyond the text and created an anthropology in which "informants" are recognized as friends, colleagues, cultural experts, and primary audiences for work about them. Jean has left us an extraordinary legacy that will help keep the conversation going.

In the final scene from *Chronique d'un Été*, as Rouch and his collaborator on that film, Edgar Morin, pace the halls of the Musée de l'Homme, assessing the results of their film experiment, Morin turns to Rouch and says, as they part, "Nous sommes dans le bain."<sup>3</sup> And thanks to Rouch, we are.

## NOTES

1. For a full discussion of this film, see Ginsburg 1996.
2. A video archive of all the postscreening dialogues during the event at NYU is available in the research collection of the Program in Culture and Media, Department of Anthropology, NYU.
3. A footnote to the script of the film republished in *Ciné-Ethnography* explains, "The idiom means to have one's hands in things, to be implicated, to be complicit. The English-subtitled print translates this phrase as "We're in trouble," thus closing the film on a considerably less nuanced note (Feld 2003:329).

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# Jean Rouch: Hidden and Revealed

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The death of Jean Rouch left a void in visual anthropology that is unlikely to be easily filled. He was at once a respected cultural anthropologist contributing to our knowledge of African ritual life and an important filmmaker who influenced the development of the French New Wave and fundamentally altered the history of documentary and ethnographic film. As Paul Stoller correctly noted, Rouch was a "premature postmodernist" (1992:200). In the 1950s, when anthropology in the United States was still laboring under the fallacies of positivism and objectivity, Rouch was experimenting with sharing authorship with those in his films (*Les Maîtres Fous* 1955), exploring issues of reflexivity that came to a boiling point with *Chronicle of a Summer* (Rouch and Morin 1961), and pioneering in an exploration of what is now called "blurred genres" with ethnographic fiction films like *Jaguar* (1967).

*Chronicle* is perhaps the best of example of Rouch's profound involvement with the world of film (see figure 3).

After exposing himself to a new way of making documentaries, Rouch invited Edgar Morin—a French sociologist interested in media—to explore the possibility of conducting research with a camera while involving the active participation of the subjects. At the same time, he also invited Jean-Luc Godard's cinematographer, Raul Coutard, and French-Canadian filmmaker Michael Brault, along with others, to join him in an experiment with a new kind of film technology: handheld portable, synchronous sound, 16mm filmmaking. Using the prototype of Éclair's NPR camera, they combined Rouch and Morin's experiment in filmic research with an experiment in a different way of making films. Rouch saw the film as combining the field methods of Robert Flaherty—in his film *Nanook of the North*, where the Inuit actively participated in the creation of their own image—with Dziga Vertov's ideas of reflexivity and the construction of a filmic truth, which he called "Kino Pravda." Rouch called this combination cinema vérité. It is only a slight overstatement to say that the history of film can be divided into the period before and after *Chronicle*.

Out of the making of this film came Rouch's ideas about film and anthropology. Borrowing from Vertov, he