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CHRONIQUE D'UN ÉTÉ

(France, Rouch and Marin, 1960)

From its opening sequence, *Chronique d'un été* (*Chronicle of a Summer*) self-consciously proclaimed its novelty: "this film was not played by actors, but lived by men and women who have given a few moments of their lives to a new experiment in cinema vérité." The film has since been celebrated as a turning point in the history of documentary film.

A joint project of sociologist Edgar Morin and filmmaker Jean Rouch, *Chronique d'un été* was conceived as a query into how Parisians lived their lives. Taking advantage of a newly portable synch-sound technology that made it possible to film people speaking spontaneously, the filmmakers took to the street, stopping Parisians with the question: "Are you happy?" The film gradually comes to focus on a handful of characters: a worker, two immigrants, and a concentration camp survivor. Following them through the summer of 1960, the film achieved an unforgettable portrait of its times and breached a new way of filmmaking—cinema vérité. Despite the confusion generated by this term, *Chronique d'un été* did not make simplistic claims to truthfulness. A self-reflexive film if ever there was one, it articulated the question of what truth means in the cinema, with unprecedented force and sophistication.

This experiment certainly did not arise in a void. The name *cinéma vérité*, a translation of the Russian *kino pravda*, was meant to honour a predecessor, Dziga Vertov, who had done away with actors and gone out into the city in an attempt "to catch life unawares" in the 1920s. Another often-mentioned predecessor was Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*. The last scenes of *Chronique d'un été* directly mirrored Flaherty's practice of showing the film subjects rough cuts and recording their reactions.

The experiment was also deeply rooted in its own times. For those documentary filmmakers who were becoming weary of "showing life in its Sunday best" (Morin, 1985: 4), the new portable synch-sound equipment opened the way to unprecedented explorations of the everyday. In its attempt to go beyond "the official and the ritualised," the *cinéma*

vérité introduced by *Chronique d'un été* shared many affinities with its American contemporary, direct cinema (Rothman, 1997: 87).

The classic distinction between *cinéma vérité* and kindred experiments like direct cinema is that "cinéma vérité provokes and participates, whereas direct cinema observes" (Rothman, 1997: 87). In Erik Barnouw's memorable formulation, the filmmaker acts as a "catalyst" for the action of its subjects (Barnouw, 1993: 253). Rouch insisted that "he did not film reality as it was but reality as it was provoked in the act of filmmaking. It is this new reality, which would not exist apart from the making of the film, that the filming 'documents' revealing a new truth, a cinema truth" (Rothman, 1997: 87). Insofar as his subjects were concerned, Rouch did not try to play down or disguise the presence of the camera. Assuming "the disjunction caused by the very presence of the camera," he expected "that people will act, will lie, will be uncomfortable," and regarded "this manifestation of this side of themselves as the most profound revelation that anything a 'candid' camera or 'living cinema' could reveal" (Eaton, 1979: 51). In other words, *cinéma vérité* is based on the premise



Chronique d'un été, 1960.
[Still courtesy of the British Film Institute]

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that the masks that people choose for themselves, and the way they wear them on screen, can be more telling than a soul-baring confession.

The truth that cinema verité hopes to reveal is thus akin to "psychoanalytic truth, that is, precisely that which is hidden or repressed comes to the surface in these roles" that people play in front of the camera (Morin, 1985: 5). From the very beginning, Morin envisioned replacing the interviews and dialogue of traditional documentary film with a "psychodrama carried out collectively among authors and characters" (Morin, 1985: 6). He believed that this intersection between psychoanalysis and film was "one of the richest and least exploited universes of cinematographic expression" (Morin, 1985: 6). The response of the characters to this psychoanalytic side of the cinema verité experiment varied widely. These differences are polemically articulated in the last scene of the film, as the participants openly discuss their impressions of the rough cut. They are largely divided into two camps that reproach each other for having been either "too real," or "not real enough." This polemic crystallizes around the two women protagonists, Marceline and Marilou. Marilou argues that "to have a tiny spark of truth the character has to be . . . alone and on the verge of a nervous breakdown" (Feld, 1985: 68). This is, of course, exactly how she is throughout the film, baring her soul in tete-à-tete with Morin. In her confession she attempts to communicate her extreme alienation from the world and from herself. Her success in communicating her alienation, that is, her inability to communicate to Morin and, through the camera, to the world would have de facto cured her alienation. But this talking cinema cure fails and Marilou falls helplessly, desperately silent in front of the camera in a gesture that Rothman interprets as an on-stage suicide (Rothman, 1997: 77-78). Unable to express and thus vanquish her alienation, Marilou is condemned to poignantly reenact it in front of the camera.

While Marilou's confessions are considered by some of the characters/viewers to be the most moving part of the film, other characters openly attack them as "indecent and exhibitionistic." The starkest critic is Marceline, who opposes Marilou's confessional mode with a careful direction of her own stage persona. Marceline revisits her most intimate and traumatic memories in front of the camera: memories of her time in the concentration camps, her relationship to her father who was also deported, and to the family she had left behind. But Marceline insists that the heartrending scene of her walking alone through a deserted Paris and reminiscing about her past was a thoroughly controlled and crafted performance that she had care-

fully planned in advance. What we see in the film, Marceline claims, is just one of many possible "characters of Marceline" that she created for the medium of film (Morin and Rouch, 1985: 77). Marceline's self-creation testifies to her sophisticated understanding of film as a specific medium with certain expressive possibilities and limitations. (Marceline also notes that during her performance she consciously thought of *Hiroshima Mon Amour* and also of Michelangelo Antonioni's films). Marceline's insistence on her acting is also a reminder of the existence of a part of her that is not on display in the film, a part of her that is not public and not accessible through this particular medium. While exposing a most vulnerable part of herself, Marceline also lays claim to her ability to control that exposure, not only by acting but also by directing her performance. (Thus her displeasure when the directors of the film override her self-direction and manipulate her character [Morin and Rouch, 1985: 77]). Of all the characters, Marceline appears most aware of the politics and power dynamics of the film, and most invested in controlling her own representation.

The debate between Marceline and Marilou's modes of self-presentation throws new light on the initial psychoanalytic ambitions of the film. In the course of the filming, it is clear that Morin's idea of a communal psychodrama openly played between actors and authors remains utopian. The direction of the psychoanalytic exploration is marked by strong power dynamics. There is no psychoanalyzing of the directors by the characters. And among the characters, it is the women who are the choice subjects of analysis. Marceline accepts the premise of the game, that is, that the roles that one plays in front of the camera may reveal a deep part of oneself, but she is intent on carefully directing what gets revealed. In carefully constructing a persona or mask that expresses her, she guards herself against those privileged moments in *cinema verité* where the director and spectator see, through the cracks and slippages of hasty masks, parts of the character that she is unaware of or would rather repress. Unlike Marilou, who has little control over her persona and helplessly lays herself bare in front of the camera, Marceline usurps the position of power that the *cinema verité* director, spectator, and the psychoanalyst traditionally share.

If *Chronique d'un été* uses a psychoanalytic lens to approach some of its characters, its overall scope is much wider. In Edgar Morin's words, the film was conceived as an ethnographic study "in the strong sense of the term: it studie[d] humanity" (Morin, 1985: 6). The film was to participate in

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forging a new direction in ethnographic filmmaking "by emphasizing kinship rather than exotic foreignness" (Morin, 1985: 5). Having made his name directing ethnographic films in Africa, Rouch intended to turn his ethnographic lens toward "his own tribe." One of the most interesting aspects of this ethnographic project is contributed by Laundry, a student from Cote d'Ivoire. The film's casting of Laundry in the role of "African explorer of a France on vacation" (Morin, 1985: 13) attempts to reverse the traditional ethnographic relationship between white observer and colonized subject. Laundry catalyzes some of the most revelatory discussions of the film, revealing a rich spectrum of contemporary French attitudes towards colonization, race, and racism. At the same time, this casting of Laundry in the role of explorer is limiting. The film is interested in Laundry in as much as he can shed light on French society, and less in him as a new member of that society. For example, as Laundry remarked, in the discussion on interracial marriage, the film gave airtime only to the white women's attitudes toward marrying blacks, while excluding his and other black students' ideas about marrying whites.

Chronique d'un été's ethnographic project was planned as a survey of contemporary France taken "at three levels: the level of private life, internal and subjective; the level of work and social relations; and finally the level of present history, dominated by the war in Algeria" (Morin, 1985: 10). The two directors disagreed, however, on the method of bringing this project into being. Rouch was interested in organizing the film chronologically and focusing it tightly on just a few characters (Morin, 1985: 24). Morin wished for a less individualized, "mosaic-like montage of sequences" sustained by the question "How do you live?" (Morin, 1985: 24). As a result, the film often vacillates between these two main approaches, sometimes further divided by the diverging approaches of the characters. Nowhere is this more evident than in the representation of the worker's plight in contemporary France. The film starts by formally interviewing a group of workers who sharply express their dissatisfaction with the conditions of their work. Then, in one of its most innovative moves, the film focuses on one worker, Angelou, following him from the moment his eyes open in the morning throughout his workday and leisure hours to bedtime. This sequence suggestively shows the alienation that the workers had openly articulated in the previous scenes. Once again changing registers, the camera descends into the factory where it films people at work. This factory scene briefly flirts with another

movie genre, what a worker calls "a film about work in the twentieth century," a film that Angelou wishes would record life in the factory, with an emphasis on relationships among workers, unions, and management (Morin and Rouch, 1985: 76-77). This oscillation between different cinematic registers is representative of the experimental, searching quality of the film. At times this experimentation might threaten the unity of the film, but it also allows for a plurality of approaches to the worker's problem to coexist.

As Edgar Morin modestly put it: "The film is a hybrid, and this hybridness is as much the cause of its infirmity as of its interrogative virtue" (Morin, 1985: 26). *Chronique d'un été* relinquished the authority of the traditional voice-over and instead allowed its subjects to speak spontaneously. As the debate between Marceline and Marilou shows, the ensuing dialogue was not always free of tension or of problematic power dynamics. Furthermore, allowing a plurality of voices to be heard assumed the risk of creating a cacophony. And still, this imperfect plurality is one of the path-breaking achievements of the film. It gave the film its experimental novelty and complexity, which has made *Chronique d'un été* an inspiration for the upcoming documentary and Nouvelle Vague cinema.

CRISTINA VAULESCU

See also Morin, Edgar; Rouch, Jean

Chronique d'un été / *Chronicle of a Summer* (France, 1961, 90 min.) Directed by Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin. Production: Argos Film (Anatole Dauman and Philippe Lifchitz). Production Director: André Heineich. Production Secretary: Annette Blamont. Photography by Roger Morillère, Raoul Coutard, Jean-Jacques Tarbès, Michel Brault. Assistants: Claude Beausoleil and Louis Bocher. Lighting by Moineau and Crétaux. Sound by Guy Rophé, Michel Fano, Barthélémy. Editing by Jean Ravel, Nina Baratier, Françoise Colm. Filmed in Paris and Saint Tropez.

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CHULAS FRONTERAS

(US. Blank, 1976)

Les Blank's *Chulas Fronteras* holds a prominent place in this documentary director's notable body of work, many of the films dealing with the folk music of communities on the fringes of mainstream America or with the specific delights of particular foods. It is a loving ode to the *conjunto* music of the Texas-Mexico frontier. (A *conjunto* is a small group including an accordion, a twelve-string guitar, a bass, and drums.) The solid research was provided by producer and writer Chris Strachwitz, founder of Arhoolie Records. When *Chulas Fronteras* was made (in 1976), the music was little known outside the Chicano world, but Blank's film contributed to its wider dissemination and was to inspire later, enthusiastically appreciative documentary treatments. The title means "Beautiful Borderlands" and it suggests the considerable strengths but also the limits of *Chulas Fronteras*. It is above all a presentation and celebration through music of a simplified, occasionally sentimentalized version of Tex-Mex life (in general outside the big cities) and only "a selective" exploration of the more complex experience, emotions, and society behind the music.

The Rio Grande (for Mexicans the Rio Bravo) passes behind the credits as water and a blue curve on the map along with a song of yearning for the Mexico left behind. The beauty of Texas-Mexican women is sung and soon after, the camera roams through a barbecue and later, in the kitchen of singer Lydia Mendoza, another mouth-watering abundance of food as she and other women prepare tamales. We hear Mendoza's rendition of *Mal Hombre*, about a woman enchanted and deceived in her youth by an unfaithful man. The song plus the food (and other songs about women performed by male *conjunto* singers) add up to a traditional depiction of the role of the woman in an essentially conservative and seemingly static society. There is no presentation of the extended impact of machismo or of possibly more independent roles for women in a society of immigrants. Even for its time, the film tends toward a nostalgic vision rooted in the past. And it also ignores the darker, more stoically tragic side of the northern Mexican sensibility in general. There are no songs (common in *norteño* music) about the defense of honor or a man's reckless or heroic embracing of death.