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Jean Rouch during the
filming of *La Chasse au
lion à l'arc*, in Africa, 1957

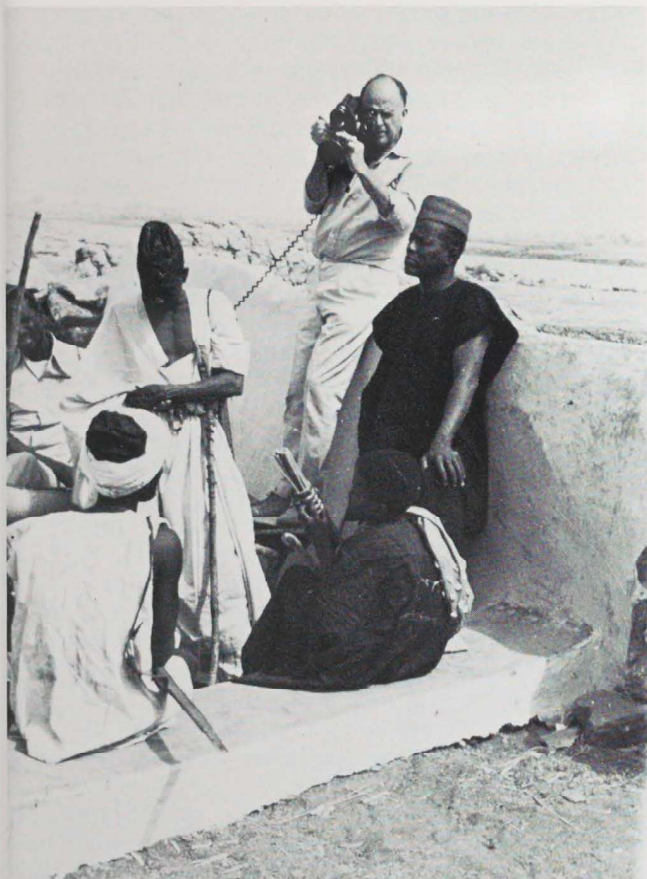


Jean Rouch recording
sound at the Renault
factory, for *Chronique*,
1960



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Jean Rouch filming *Babatou* in Africa, 1977

Making a film is such a personal thing for me that the only implicit techniques are the very techniques of cinematography; sight and sound recording, editing the images and recordings. It is also very difficult for me to talk about it and, above all, to write about it. I have never written anything before starting a film, and when, for administrative or financial reasons, I've been obligated to compose a scenario, some continuity plans, or a synopsis, I have never ended up making the corresponding film.

A film is an idea, flashing out or slowly elaborated, but one which cannot be escaped, whose expression can only be cinematographic. On the road from Accra to Abidjan, the sun plays in the leaves of the trees, kilometers follow upon miles, corrugated iron replaces the meandering asphalt. I've passed by here twenty times. I am driving; next to me someone has fallen asleep. And so, in the ever-changing, ever-renewed scenery, other scenes appear, other characters. Thus in a few hours of fatigue and dust I have seen and heard a draft of *La Pyramide humaine* which is much more like the film finally realized than any "plans" I might have written.

Or else it's in a bar, in Treichville, a Sunday night; a friend and I have wandered in, in pursuit of the splendid festivities only the people of these parts know how to put on, in the middle of the sordid streets, in the middle of the slums. The contrast between the ephemeral Sunday gaiety and the daily misfortune is so strong that I know it will haunt me until the very moment when I am able to express it. How? Go out of this bar and shout in the streets? Write a general book for the public on this investigation we are now doing on the migrations in Ivory Coast and which, otherwise, if it ever sees the light of day, will only interest a few specialists? The only solution was to make a film about it, where it would not be me crying out my joy or my revolt, but one of these people for whom Treichville was both heaven and hell. So in this bar ambience on a lugubrious evening in January 1957, *Moi, un noir* appeared to me as a necessity.

And all the other films, coming upon me suddenly, on the roads of Africa or on the rivers, baptized in that strange contact with the countryside or climates, where the lone voyager discovers what he was looking for with such insistence, that dialogue with himself, with his own dreams, that faculty of "intimate distance" with the world and with mankind, that faculty which anthropologists and poets know so well and which allowed me to be both "entomologist" observer and friend of the *Maîtres fous*, the game leader and primary spectator of *Jaguar*, but always on the condition that I not determine the limits of the game whose only rule is to film when you and the others really feel like it.

The camera (and for a few years now the tape recorder) have thus become indispensable tools for me, as indispensable as a note pad and pencil, each having its specialty, its time for use, its limit (I spent several months without filming anything in Africa, because nothing was happening, then one day either something "happened" or else I was unable to escape certain ideas which I had to express).

This almost insurmountable difficulty which I have verbally expressing what a film will be before it is made is without doubt, the cruelest of trials for those around me and those who collaborate with me. Each time I have found myself in these situations, conflicts have exploded, and I have not known how to stop them, caught between the desire to remain faithful (perhaps too superstitiously) to a method which has proved itself and the desire not to play the tyrant with collaborators who were and could be nothing other than friends. And each time I recommenced the same impossible dialogue between the incommunicable and those to whom I had to communicate it. So as an introduction to *Chronique* I don't know how to do anything here but to set up a sort of ledger of a certain cinema that one could call ethnographic.

It may seem presumptuous to write about an experience which is not yet finished, an experience which is still in progress, but I think it is necessary to make the point. In fact ethnographic cinema was born at the same time as the cinema with Marey's chronophotographic rifle, among whose first users was an anthropologist, Dr. Regnault, who used it to study the comparative behavior of Europeans and Africans.

After this the cinema was directed along other routes, and it is certain that documentary film remained, in spite of everything, a separate category. I must here salute the father of ethnographic cinema, Robert Flaherty, who made the first ethnographic film in the world, *Nanook of the North*, in extremely difficult conditions. Thus at the very beginning, Flaherty undertook an endeavor which was not, unfortunately, much followed thereafter. He thought that to film men who belong to a foreign culture, it was first necessary to get to know them. He therefore spent a year at Hudson's Bay among the Eskimos before filming them. He also experimented with something which we are only beginning to apply methodically: showing the finished film to those who appear in it. At that time laboratory work was an extremely delicate process. Flaherty did not hesitate to build a laboratory right in his little cabin by Hudson's Bay, where he developed his own films. According to his own account, he dried them by running in the wind. As he did not have a sufficient source of light (at that time copies required a considerable light source), he pierced a hole in the wall of his cabin and used sunlight to print copies of the film. Thus he was able to project the first version

of *Nanook of the North* for Nanook and his family. But this first version was seen by no one else because, as you may know, a fire ravaged the cabin and the film was completely destroyed. At that time, Flaherty was an engineer-geologist. He did not hesitate to start over (he was of Irish origin and therefore particularly tenacious), and with backing from Révillon furs, he was able to set up another experiment and realize for the second time the *Nanook of the North* with which we are familiar today. Five years later, Flaherty made *Moana of the South Seas*. *Nanook* had been a considerable commercial success, and Flaherty found himself encouraged by American production companies to go make a film in the South Pacific. He went to the Samoan Islands, spent a year there without filming, and, at the end of a year, having learned the language, he began to film the daily life of the inhabitants of the Samoan Islands. He applied the same method: he developed the films on the spot, edited them, and then showed them to the people he had filmed, as they were developed. *Moana*, unlike *Nanook*, was an absolutely complete commercial failure, and most of Flaherty's later films had only modest commercial success. Flaherty died a couple of years ago on an extremely modest small farm in Vermont where his wife, Frances, still lives. At the time of his death he was preparing for a film expedition to sub-Saharan Africa.

During the same period, the 1920s, another team of enthusiastic filmmakers was trying to use the camera to the limits of its possibilities in the Soviet Union. This was Dziga Vertov's group, and sometime around 1929 they wrote a manifesto: "the camera-eye." The camera was an eye, a new eye open on the world, which allowed anything to be seen. Dziga Vertov's endeavors were severely condemned by the Soviet Union at that time, but his films nonetheless spread throughout the entire world. They carried a new banner: kino-pravda, or "cinéma-vérité." It was an absolutely crazy endeavor, but a fascinating experiment, and Vertov's film *The Man with a Movie Camera* will remain the first attempt to put the camera in the street, to make the camera the principal actor, the object of this new cult of total cinema where the knicker-clad priest is the cameraman.

Some people thought this experiment was a failure because the people in the street looked at the camera, because the camera was a far too heavy object, and because simultaneous film sound was not yet invented. Georges Sadoul recently told me that Vertov had foreseen, in his unpublished manuscripts, the possibility of recording synchronous sound with the arrival of talking movies. This would open a new chapter of the "ciné-eye," the "ciné-eye-and-ear." This is in fact what we are trying today.

I must add a third master to this preamble. During the same period, in France, Jean Vigo was also trying to use the free camera to simply show the behavior of his contemporaries through their culture in his film *À propos de Nice*.

Out of these three efforts ethnographic cinema was born. But this birth was difficult. Once the technique had progressed, cinema was divided in two branches. On the one side, under the influence of Flaherty, and in spite of him, "exotic" cinema was born, a cinema based on the sensational and on the foreignness of foreign people, a racist cinema which was ignorant of itself. On the other side, that of ethnography, under the impetus of Marcel Mauss, cinema was engaged in an equally strange course, that of the total research investigation. Mauss recommended to his students that they use the camera to record everything that went on around them. They should not move it, it was a sure witness and it was only by shooting these films that one could study certain gestures, behaviors, and techniques. During this period Marcel Griaule nonetheless brought back from Dogon the first French ethnographic films, followed by those of P. O'Reilly, oceanographer and cinematographer. Unfortunately, the war interrupted these projects, and it was not until after the war that there was a new evolution.

It was a revolution, the revolution of 16mm. During the war, news cameramen used 16mm cameras with great success, and their films could then be enlarged to standard format 35mm. From that point on, the camera was no longer that cumbersome object which Vertov's friends could not parade in the streets without its being noticed. It became a small tool, as easy to manage as a Leica, or as a pen, to recall the model of the "prophet" Alexandre Astruc. The use of color also permitted the filmmaker to stop worrying about questions of lighting: no matter what angle on the shot, with color, all shot perspectives came out right.

At this time a certain number of young ethnologists decided to use the camera, and, strangely enough, at the same moment in France, in Belgium, in the United States, in Great Britain, and in Switzerland, these ethnologists all had the same idea in mind: to capture the most authentic images possible, while respecting the rules of cinematographic language. It was thus noticed that there was little difference between ethnography and cinema. I have stressed this countless times: when the filmmaker records on film the actions or deeds which surround him, he behaves just like an ethnologist who records his observations in a notebook; when he then edits the film, he is like an ethnologist editing his report; when he distributes his film, he does the same as the ethnologist who gives his book to be published and distributed. Here there are very similar techniques, and ethnographic film has

truly found its course in them. The possibility of easily recording sound also brought a new element. Around 1949, manufacturers were perfecting autonomous tape recorders, allowing, in principle, for an ethnographer to portably record image and sound.

In France, at the Musée de l'Homme, my colleague Roger Morillère has been giving a course in cinematographic initiation to students in ethnology for the past ten years. Sound-cinema has become one of the techniques taught to future researchers just as they are taught to study kinship or prehistory, or to collect objects. Already we have successes which must be hailed: the French films of Morillère, of Monique Gessain, of Father Pairaut, of Igor de Garine, of Daribehaude, of Guy le Moal; the Belgian films of Luc de Heusch, the Swiss films of Henri Brandt, the Canadian films of the marvelous team of the National Film Board, the American films of Marshall and Gardner, the films of the Italian sociological school, etc.

It must be said with a certain pride that these films made on a miniscule budget (an ethnographic film in 16mm costs 1½ million old francs and 200,000 francs in the filming) nonetheless succeeded in having an influence on two levels. On the level of ethnography itself, I remember that in the beginning, when my friends and I had just started to handle the cameras, where here or in Belgium or in Switzerland or in Great Britain or in the United States, a certain number of classical ethnologists felt as though we had introduced a "magic lantern" into our discipline, a sort of toy, and that film could at best serve to illustrate lectures or seminar talks. But by making films we showed the skeptics that the cinema was an irreplaceable tool of inquiry, not only for its ability to reproduce indefinitely what had been observed, but also in rediscovering the old Flaherty technique, for the possibility of screening the reported document for the people who had been observed, and to study their behavior in the images with them.

At the level of commercial cinema, our influence was also important. First of all, we were responsible for the decline of a certain number of cinematographic enterprises which were monumental swindles, such as those of the "Lost Continent" series, "Green Magic," Walt Disney films, etc. I think that this purge was very efficient because no one has the right to exploit lies in order to make money. One might say that cinema is an art of lying, but then it should be made clear: it's fine to make a "Tarzan" series (I like Tarzan films quite a bit) without claiming to make a documentary film.

But there is another effect: we have indirectly contributed to the birth of what has been called in France the "Nouvelle Vague." What was going on in the nouvelle vague? It was almost entirely a question of the economic liberation of commercial cinema and of the traditional norms of the cinematographic industry. We had predecessors in this domain. Melville, for example, was able to shoot *The Silence of the Sea* by using expired film stock. In fact, around 1949-50, it was impossible to shoot a film in 35mm without having a filming authorization, without having a minimum crew, without having a permit to purchase the film. To make a film at that time required a budget of around sixty to one hundred million old francs. We showed that with ridiculously small means we could make films which were perhaps not of an extraordinary class, nor of remarkable quality, but which cost infinitely less.

To give you an example, a film like *Moi, un noir* came to about four hundred thousand francs in the filming. The interest in this technique of 16mm enlarged in color was that it permitted a two-stage financing. You make a 16mm film. If it is no good, you have only lost one half million. If it is good, there is still time to invest money in enlarging it, and you then know what you are investing money in and what you are taking a risk on.

But in all of this something was lacking: direct synchronous sound recording.

We were working on this problem, in France and abroad, for a great many years, and it seemed insoluble for two reasons. The first was the need to film synchronous sound in the studio because the microphones are sensitive to wind, to atmospheric conditions, and to outside noises. The second was the weight of the equipment. With 16mm we were freed of the weight problem, but the camera made a noise like a coffee grinder, and it was impossible to film and record sound at the same time. For example, in *La Pyramide humaine* we used a "blimped" 16mm camera, enclosed in an enormous case weighing about forty kilos, and we did as many sound and picture takes as possible indoors so as to avoid the outside noises. When we were in Abidjan I remember well that all we had to do was start shooting a scene for a truck to pass 100 meters away and for the sound engineer to shout "Stop! This is impossible!" We did, however, find a system: the camera was set on a tripod at an equal distance from the principal protagonists, and when a dialogue started we did not interrupt the filming but simply asked the actors to wait until the camera was on them before responding to the question or statement pronounced by another, but this staidness itself was paralyzing.

During this same period in Canada and in the United States people sought the solution to the same problem. Last year in August this solution appeared in three countries at the same time: in Canada, in the United States, and in France.

In France the inventor André Coutant specialized in building lightweight cameras for rocket flights. He had the idea of using one of these light electric cameras to make a soundproof camera. He presented us with a prototype of a camera which was not yet perfectly soundproof but which weighed 1.5 kilos, which had a 120m magazine (ten minutes of autonomy), and which, thanks to a housing constructed by my friends Morillère and Boucher, made little enough noise to be used outside, even very close to a microphone. Our friend Michel Brault, a Canadian cameraman, came to Paris at that time and brought the small, clip-on lavalier microphones used by Canadian and American television. These microphones are not visible. We had resolved Dziga Vertov's problem: we were able, with the camera housing, to walk around anywhere, to film with synchronous sound in the subway, in a bus, in the street. Michel Brault also brought us a technique which he had perfected some time earlier in Canada: the walking camera. He had been practicing for a year to walk forward, backward, and sideways so well that the camera in his hands became absolutely mobile. Another advantage: the camera in its housing was miniscule. We could film in the middle of the street and no one knew we were shooting except the technicians and the actors: this is how *Chronique d'un été* was technically possible.

From this point on, ethnologists and sociologists will be able to go to any part of the world and bring back images such as have never before been seen, images in which there will be this complete union of sound and image, of action, of setting, and of language. We have at our disposal a fantastic tool in perpetual progress (wireless microphones, cameras with automatic focus and aperture setting, etc.).

For the moment (I am, of course, addressing ethnographers now) we must be able to use it as rapidly as possible before certain manifestations of threatened cultures have completely disappeared. Thus I think it is necessary to accentuate our effort. It will be necessary at this school directed by Morillère at the Musée de l'Homme for us to train ethnographers and perhaps even filmmakers, in order to teach them these new cinema techniques.

Where are we going? I must admit that I have no idea. But I think that from now on, right next to industrial and commercial cinema and intimately linked to the latter, there exists a "certain cinema" which is above all art and research.¹⁸



From Jean Rouch's *La Pyramide humaine*. At left is Nadine, who later appeared in *Chronique* and other Rouch films.

I have said very little about *Chronique d'un été* in this essay, leaving this task to Edgar Morin, whose meticulous testimony could only be done by him, because, returning to what I said at the beginning, the film is a means of total expression for me, and I do not see the necessity for me to write before, during, or after filming.

18. The "certain cinema" that Rouch speaks of is elaborated in detail in two of his later articles: *The Camera and Man*, *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication*, 1(1):37-44, 1974; *On the vicissitudes of the self: the possessed dancer, the magician, the sorcerer, the ethnographer, and the filmmaker*, *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication* 5(1):2-8, 1978.—Ed.



Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin at Saint Tropez; in the background are Jean-Pierre, Marceline, and Landry

Jean Rouch films his longtime collaborators Damouré and Lam for *Petit à petit*, 1969





Jean Rouch filming a divination for the *Sigui*, in Mali with the Dogon, 1971