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“Exchanging Glances”: The Inherent Tensions in Rouch’s Opus as a Metonymy for the Evolving Prism in French Ethnology

Catherine Papanicolaou

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I had wished Africa to take some distance from our Civilization, and I drifted to the study of those transformations by which Black societies “Westernize themselves.” I have endeavored to keep the balance between these two tendencies; I found there, in the experience, a condition favorable to a rigorous objectivity (Georges Balandier, 1957)

Anthropology will have to be transformed in its very nature, and confess that there is, as it turns out, a certain impossibility of a logical as well as of a moral nature, maintaining as scientific objects (of which the scientist could even wish that the identity was preserved) societies that assert themselves as *an aggregate of individuals*, and who, as such, claim the right to change (Claude Lévi-Strauss, 1961)

On the eve of independence of the states of West Africa in the mid-1950s, the ethnologist and filmmaker Jean Rouch (1917-2004) embarked on a highly innovative approach embodied in the filming of the urbanization of young black Africans. The result was unlike the exotic representations of colonial movies and of American movies of that time in which Black actors were confined to subaltern roles. Within his opus, however, there is a contrast between these films, exemplified by *Jaguar* (filmed in 1954 and edited in 1967) and *Moi, un Noir* (1959), and his ethnographic films such as those filmed among a Dogon population in the cliffs of Bandiagara in Mali (former French Soudan). Following in the footsteps and respecting the tenets of the school of Marcel Griaule and his disciples, Rouch encountered and dramatized peoples who appeared to preserve their ancient rites, customs and mythology, uninterested in the dynamics of their society.

If the ethnographic filmmaker is not a mere explorer but also an author, he must return home with not only a faithful restitution or proof of his travels, of what he has seen and learned about the confessed traditions of an *exotic* people, but also a reconstruction to be recounted, ie a story to be told. Rouch’s work invites reflection about the risks inherent in this exercise, the distortion of an immediate reality by the projection of an imagined, idealized society set in ancestral ways and customs. However, in the films that narrate the movement of the surrounding society, where the focus is about the present and the

staging of contemporary African customs, the question is no longer about the legacy or the archiving and contextualization of ritualized, mythical traditions as perpetuated through to modern times but on how to capture, to make intelligible, the voices of this changing Africa, to testify on behalf of its dynamism.

These are in summary the two sides of the corpus of Jean Rouch: the pioneering new documentary style as a first-hand account of pre-decolonized Africa, focusing on migrations among African youth by introducing a change in sociological perspective, and the visual scribe, albeit director, of the guardians of Dogon cosmogony, a follower of the hermeneutics of a *griaulienne school* that had transcribed and interpreted in successive waves the rituals and complex structures of an oral society, emphasizing the esoteric dimension rather than the social aspects. The contextualization of ethnographic writings of the time by Georges Balandier, Michel Leiris, Marcel Griaule and Germaine Dieterlen should help to show how Rouch's films are indeed at the crossroads of two ethnologies.¹

Rouch's Itinerary

Throughout his career, Rouch's fields of research were limited to West Africa, during and after the colonial period.² He had traveled as a child and had spent his adolescence in an intellectual and artistic Parisian environment between the Wars, had been influenced by the surrealist movement and jazz, from which, as he liked to tell the story, he drew his *taste* for Africa. He visited the continent for the first time in 1941. After becoming an ethnologist, Jean Rouch's most visited fields, with frequent return trips during stays of several weeks, were Niger, a French colony until 1960, Ghana (former Gold Coast), a neighboring British colony and the first state to win its independence in 1957, and the Bandiagara region of Mali (former French Soudan, independent in 1960). His limited written ethnographic work deals mainly with possession rituals and with migration phenomena, in particular their socio-economic, religious and historical dimensions.³ In the mid-1960's, Rouch completed his surveys on migrations and their analysis. From that point onwards he wrote little and

¹ This article takes an historical and ethnographic view of Jean Rouch's films and includes a re-examination some fifty years later by Georges Balandier (2009). The well-documented works of Alice Gallois, "La caméra et les hommes. Un chercheur-cinéaste face à son temps : Jean Rouch," mémoire de Master 2 d'histoire (Université de Toulouse-le-Mirail, 2007) falls under a related historical approach.

² At the time of the national independence movements in the early 1960s, Rouch spent more time in France where he shot movies that would become influential among the filmmakers of the New Wave (*Chronique d'un été* en 1961 ; *la Punition* ou *les Mauvaises Rencontres* en 1962 ; *Gare du Nord* un épisode de *Paris vu par...* en 1965).

³ Alice Gallois, 2007, *op. cit.*

concentrated on making films. Embarking on a prolonged collaboration with Germaine Dieterlen (1903-1999), Griaule's former student and collaborator, to document the Dogon *Signi* ceremonies. Rouch shot his first film on the *Signi* in 1966. Photography seems to have been mostly used for location scouting before filming but not only; some photographs reflect traditional and village practices while others bear witness to the industrialization, urban growth, religious practices and political demonstrations of that period, for example showing the Gold Coast on the eve of its independence. Only occasionally to my knowledge did Rouch include the use of photographs or film stills in his written works as support material or as subject matter.⁴ His films, until the end of the 1980s, mainly documented traditional practices and rituals (possession in Niger, funerals, masks dances and related to the cosmogony in Mali, etc.) but some dealt with Africa's early urban areas. In the mid-1960s, Rouch concluded his surveys on migration and their analysis. From that moment on, he focused on making of films that are, like those of his early experiences, marked by a spirit of *salvage ethnography*.⁵ Taking advantage of technical progress in synchronous sound and lightweight camera, he chose for example to document the *Signi* ceremonies of the Dogon of Mali,⁶ ceremonies occurring every sixty years facing the advance of Islam in the region of Bandiagara⁷ and the dances of masks, on the occasion of the celebration of the mourning of Ambara Dolo, the main informant and Dogon translator of the Griaule / Dieterlen missions (*le Dama d'Ambara, enchanter la mort*, 1974). Rouch and Dieterlen signed together *Funérailles à Bongo, le vieil Anäi* (reworked several times between 1972 and 1979) that would end the film production of Rouch in Dogon country.

⁴ Jean Rouch, "Migrations au Ghana," *Journal de la société des Africanistes*, tome 26, 1956, pp. 33-196.

⁵ Salvage ethnography aims to preserve traces of cultures doomed to disappear. Rouch had written his film *La chasse au lion à l'arc* explicitly in this perspective and he has throughout his life insisted on the need to save images of traditions that were vanishing.

⁶ The series of *Signi* was shot between 1966 and 1974 with 8 medium-length films (about 30 minutes per episode). Rouch later edited these *Signi* films along with other films on the Dogon, in a two-hour long compilation entitled *Signi 1967-1973: L'invention de la parole et de la mort* (1981). During these same years he also returned to film rituals of rain in the surroundings of Niamey, thus demonstrating that these rituals were not confined to rural areas, in a series known under the name of *Yenendi* (cult to the genius of water) started in 1951 with the *Yenendi, les hommes qui font la pluie* to end with the *Yenendi of Gamkalle* (in 1972).

⁷ Cf. Paul Henley, *The Adventure of the Real. Jean Rouch and the Craft of Ethnographic Cinema* (Chicago-Londres, University of Chicago Press, 2009). This is one of the reasons why the last *Signi*, that of 1973, could not be filmed and was reconstructed the following year. The famine that ravaged the region was also blamed for the postponement.

From tradition to modernity, interests of ethnology displaced on the verge of independence in West Africa

The Dogon country was the earliest experimental field of academic French ethnology, where Marcel Griaule (1898-1956) would lay the conceptual foundations of what would become his school. Griaule, an ethnologist who had trained with Marcel Mauss participated in his first mission in Ethiopia in 1927. He went on to direct the famous Dakar-Djibouti mission, between 1931 and 1933, that crossed 15 countries and led to the “capture of 3,500 objects that enriched the collections of the *Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro*,”⁸ as well as shorter occasional and interrupted missions throughout West Africa.

As James Clifford described it,⁹ several approaches were in fact brought together under the general moniker of “Griaule school”. This project lasted more than half a century (Dieterlen's last publication on the subject was in 1989),¹⁰ and can be divided into two main periods, before and after the encounter with Ogotemmêli, a Dogon sage. The first ten years of research at Sanga had, indeed, an essentially documentary character and had been the subject of numerous publications including *Masques Dogon* (1938), resulting from the doctoral thesis of Griaule. In 1947, during a series of thirty-three interviews, Ogotemmêli revealed to Griaule “the deep wisdom of his people.” James Clifford analyses further:

[...] with access to this knowledge [through progressive oral revelations]¹¹ from Ogotemmêli and other qualified informants, the task became exegetical. Ogotemmêli's elaborate knowledge - reinforced and extended by other sources – appeared to provide a potent “key” to Dogon culture.¹² Seen as a lived mythology, it provided a framework for grasping the Dogon world as an integrated whole. This immanent – a “metaphysic,” as Griaule liked to call it – offered a purely indigenous organization of the complex total social facts of Dogon life. Full compilations of this *sagesse*, an enormously detailed system of symbolic and narrative correspondences, appeared only after Griaule's death in 1956.¹³

The two major works of the second era of the school of Griaule were *le Renard pâle*, of which Germaine Dieterlen assured the publication in 1965 and whose

⁸ De L’Estoile, *Le goût des autres. De l’exposition coloniale aux arts premiers*, Paris, Flammarion, 2007.

⁹ James Clifford, “Power and dialogue in ethnography: the initiation of Marcel Griaule,” *The Predicament of Culture. Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1988.

¹⁰ Germaine Dieterlen, “Mythologie, histoire et masques,” *Journal des Africanistes*, 1989, 59-1-2, 7-38. The volume 2 of *Le renard pâle* that had been announced in the first volume (*Le renard pâle. T.1: Le mythe cosmogonique, fasc. 1: La création du monde*, Paris, Institut d’Ethnologie, 1965) and which was to be devoted to the initiatory graphic signs of the Dogon was never published, possibly because of a renewed approach to the Dogon country.

¹¹ Author’s note.

¹² Marcel Griaule, *Dieu d’eau: Entretiens avec Ogotemmêli*. Editions du Chêne, Paris, 1948. Trans. R. Butler and A. Richards as *Conversations with Ogotemmêli*. Oxford University Press for the International African Institute, London, 1965.

¹³ James Clifford, 1988, *Ibid.*

film Gilbert Rouget, *Batteries Dogon, études pour des éléments de rythmes*, co-produced in 1964 with Rouch and Dieterlen, inaugurated the inscription in a larger project of cinematographic replica which was never completed (Rouget, 1965)¹⁴ and *Ethnologie et langage: la parole chez les Dogon* (1965) of the ethnolinguist Geneviève Calame-Griaule, daughter of Griaule. According to James Clifford, we have in these works both “a mythic explanation of the cosmos and a native theory of language and expressivity. More than just native explanations or theories, these superb compendia present themselves as coherent arts of life, sociomythic landscapes of physiology and personality, symbolic networks incarnated in an infinity of daily details.”

Clifford defends further the epistemological qualities of the method in the following terms:

It is simplistic to tax Griaule with projecting onto the Dogon a subjective vision, with developing a research method for eliciting essentially what he was looking for. Even the more credible claim that Griaule overstressed certain parts of Dogon reality at the expense of others assumes the existence of a natural entity called Dogon culture apart from its ethnographic inventions. Even if it is true that key informants became “Griaulized,” that Griaule himself was “Dogonized,” that Ogotemmêli’s wisdom was that of an individual “theologian,” and that the “secret,” initiatory nature of the revealed knowledge was systematically exaggerated, even if other priorities and methods would certainly have produced a different ethnography, it does not follow that Griaule’s version of the Dogon is false. His writings and those of his associates express a Dogon truth – a complex, negotiated, historically contingent truth specific to certain relations of textual production. The historian asks *what kind* of truth Griaule and the Dogon he worked with produced, in what dialogical conditions, within what political limits, in what historical climate.¹⁵

The Griaule school, and especially its constructions of the second period, had indeed been the subject of many controversies and criticisms from different

¹⁴ Gilbert Rouget (1916), an ethnomusicologist specialist in music and trance, remained a great friend of Rouch throughout his life. He had directed with him *le laboratoire audiovisuel de l’Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes (5ème Section)* founded in 1964 under the leadership of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Germaine Dieterlen (Gallois, *op.cit.*). In an interview that he was kind enough to grant me (April 6, 2006), Gilbert Rouget said he was not behind this interpretative project. It is the raw data, sound and imagery, collected at the time of filming that interested him in the first place and he admitted to regret that they could not, for lack of resources, be studied in the laboratory *a posteriori*. The study of Brice Gérard (“Gilbert Rouget et la mission Ogooué-Congo (1946): Institution et épistémologie dans l’histoire de l’ethnomusicologie en France,” *Gradhiva*, n°16, 2012, pp. 192-215) devoted to the Ogooué-Congo mission, the first major expedition of the post-war period in Africa and first mission of Rouget in 1946 within the group Liotard (which inspired Jacques Becker his film *Rendez-vous de Juillet*, 1949), pinpoints a desire, claimed throughout his career, to privilege the descriptive dimension (“collect facts first”), while characterizing this mission “by a form of paradoxical modernity that lies in the articulation between the positivism of a classical ethnography [...] and the heuristic virtue of the use of recent sound recording techniques.” The three films Rouget shot with Rouch are exemplary of this scientific stance and no other Rouch film belongs to this category.

¹⁵ James Clifford, 1988, *Ibid.* Henley in his work (2009, *op.cit.*) retains from the dense chapter by Clifford only the reservations on Griaule, while the analysis is much more nuanced. Note that Ciarcia (see next reference) offers a very enlightening interpretation of this text too.

sides (methodological, ideological, political) from the 1950s.¹⁶ At opposite extremes, there were those who praised the recognition of a complex system of African thought,¹⁷ while others noted the expression of real contempt for Africans. Aimé Césaire, in 1955, in his *Discours sur le colonialisme*, thus radically designated as “enemies” the “metaphysical and dogonesque ethnographers”. In 1959, Georges Balandier (1920-2016) described Marcel Griaule's Africanist school in more measured terms:

This Africanist school has contributed, in original ways, to the elucidation of some mythological and symbolic systems of West Africa, while providing new insights into the problem of so-called primitive thought. This observation underlines its efficaciousness, but also suggests its limitations. It tells us more about how social reality is understood and justified (for certain social groups and certain privileged “insiders”) than about this reality itself. The “depth” that it strives to reach requires initially an act of total faith in the explanation offered by the “native.” One can appreciate the risks involved in particular by noticing: a. The insufficient reference to the “material” context and the social frameworks objectively examined; b. The overly systematic approach that values the neat and organized and well integrated appearance of the society (through reference to “ideologies” that are associated with it), which neglects the contradictions and conflicts inherent in any social system; c. The lack of adaptability of a method that assesses facts from the perspective of mythical time and never from the perspective of historical time, even when studying people who had a decisive role in Western Africa.¹⁸

And he concluded:

French-speaking ethnology and ethno-sociology [...] are in the midst of a changing world that imposes an effort to renew themselves. The “Primitives” disappeared and traditional societies have acquired a powerful momentum that no longer allows one to ignore the vicissitudes owed to history (Balandier, 1959).

After the death of Griaule, Germaine Dieterlen was one of the school's standard-bearers and would later become a guide for Rouch in the Dogon country. She published an article in the same issue of the *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie* in which she defended the rigorous and exhaustive methodology of the Griaule school, claiming its lineage from Marcel Mauss and Emile Durkheim, to re-assert the legitimacy of the school's approach (Dieterlen, 1959).¹⁹ According to Griaule, the ethnographer had “to establish, in the field, archives of the studied society built on observations of the facts, analyses of all social groups and collection of all existing objects.” However, Dieterlen argued

¹⁶ Gaetano Ciarcia, *De la mémoire ethnographique. L'exotisme du pays dogon*, Paris, EHESS, 2003 ; Andrew Apter, “Griaule's Legacy : Rethinking “la parole claire” in Dogon studies,” *Cahiers d'études africaines*, n°177, 2005, pp. 95-129.

¹⁷ See, for example, the defense of Griaule by Gerard Leclerc in his thesis work of the late 1960s under the direction of Balandier (*Anthropology and colonialism*, Paris, Fayard, 1972).

¹⁸ Georges Balandier, “Tendances de l'ethnologie française,” *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*, n°27, 1959, pp. 11-22.

¹⁹ Germaine Dieterlen, “Tendances de l'ethnologie française II,” *Ibid.*, pp. 23-26.

that the school's methods had indeed greatly evolved over time and had even been transformed following their group's discovery in 1946 of the complex Dogon cosmogony. Following this discovery and their recognition of its importance came the time for interpretation, which had to take into account the "awareness system" of the societies (in West Africa) being studied, "taught by successive *steps* or *words*, which were both increasingly explicit and complex." Germaine Dieterlen refuted the criticism from Balandier that what was expected of the ethnologist was an act of total faith in the explanation offered by the native. She argued that the ethnographer's documentation was to be based not only on the study of individual acts or statements or collective rituals but also on an understanding of the significance of symbolic objects such as cave drawings, texts of prayers and incantations, or coins, all of which could only be apprehended through the native's commentary.

Dieterlen, on the observations of the successive Griaule missions in French Soudan, asserted:

It became obvious that the Black people of Africa had, like other peoples, given thought to their own customs, that these customs were the reflection of their own particular norms but these were norms all the same, and that it was indispensable for the ethnographer to know them. The investigation, while enriched, had also become more complex, as it was not easy for minds formatted by Western logic to penetrate systems of thought in which analogy and acute awareness of symbols are as solid as facts.²⁰

Thus, while Dieterlen explained the developments within the Griaule school as well as her conception of the ethnographer's role in providing hermeneutic context, including the studied society's own interpretation and dynamic exegesis of its rituals and traditions, she never confronted the call of Balandier for ethnographers to take into account the role of the external environment and the social and historical context.

The French Africanists, rooted in the tradition of their sociological school, had until the late 1940s been especially interested in what was "primitive" in African societies and had therefore favored the study of villages and peasants rather than urban societies. In a founding text, "L'ethnologue devant le colonialisme," published in 1950 in *Les Temps Modernes*²¹ (nine years before the texts of Balandier and Dieterlen), Michel Leiris questioned an ethnology of the past, more willing to describe societies as distant and frozen, in the terms:

We must react - and warn students - against a frequent trend among ethnographers, at least in France: one that tends to preferentially deal with

²⁰ Germaine Dieterlen, "Les résultats des Missions Griaule au Soudan français (1931-1956)," Archives de sociologie des religions, n°3, 1957, pp. 137-142, cited *in Ibid.*

²¹ This publication had been preceded by a conference, followed by a discussion (on 7 March 1950) at the *Association des Travailleurs Scientifiques (Section Sciences Humaines)*, attended by many intellectuals and researchers. It was later included in *Cinq études d'ethnologie* (1951).

people one can consider more intact, due to a taste for a certain “primitivism” or because such people compared to others seem more exotic. In so doing, one risks - this must be emphasized - to neglect burning issues, much like the colonial administrators (such as those one can hear in Black Africa) who praise the “good guy in the bush” while contrasting him with the “evolved” one in the cities and judge the latter with much greater severity as he is, compared with the modern representative of the “noble savage” of eighteenth century authors, more difficult to govern (Leiris, 1950, 1969).²²

In this same text Leiris also called, “in an original and courageous enterprise,” to take into account the colonial status of the studied societies, which ethnologists working on Black Africa hardly acknowledged.²³ The notion of a “colonial situation” germinating in Leiris' mind and writings was going to be developed by Balandier.²⁴

Balandier's work would subsequently constitute a break in the field of Africanist research by illustrating that societies in a state of flux could be of just as much interest to the ethnologist as static societies (or those considered as such), and that the contact between cultures, in particular in the major African cities, was of paramount importance for our understanding of the present and readiness for the future.

The confrontation of these two conceptual approaches in French ethnology of the 1950s resonates with the tensions within Rouch's work in Africa.

A reassessment of Rouch's work

Rouch, Leiris and Balandier were contemporaries and their paths did on occasions cross. Fifty years after calling for a change in French ethnology, Georges Balandier returned to the topic at the Jean Rouch International Colloquium in Paris (2009): “Vers une connaissance hors texte, croiser les regards, partager les interrogations” at which he offered his re-assessment of Rouch's work.²⁵ If Balandier saw himself more as a “combatant of anticolonialism” than Rouch had been “at the beginning” (he simply evoked their “encounters” and their “separations” in a “near-contemporary path”), he credited Rouch with decisively establishing a rupture in ethnographic films and for producing work “that was at the time incomparable to any

²² Michel Leiris, “L'ethnologue devant le colonialisme,” *les Temps Modernes*, n°58, 1950, pp. 357-374 ; *Cinq études d'ethnologie*, Paris, Gallimard, 1951 (rééd. Denoël-Gonthier, 1969 et Gallimard “Tel,” 1988).

²³ Claude Ardit, “Michel Leiris devant le colonialisme,” *Journal des anthropologues*, vol. 42, n°1, 1990, pp. 95-99.

²⁴ Jean Jamin, “L'ethnologue devant le colonialisme” in Agnès de la Baumelle, Marie-Laure Bernadac, Denis Hollier (dir.), *Leiris & Co*, Paris-Metz, Gallimard/Centre Pompidou, 2015.

²⁵ Georges Balandier, “Épreuve coloniale et ethnologie du contemporain,” *Vers une connaissance hors texte, croiser les regards, partager les interrogations*, Colloque international Jean Rouch, Paris, 2009 : Enregistrement : http://www.canalu.tv/video/cerimes/projet_jean_rouch_j1_5_debat_version_francaise.5987.

other.” Balandier recognized the significance of *Les Maîtres fous*, shot in 1954 and released in movie theaters in 1957, about Nigerian migrants who came to Gold Coast for work. In the outskirts of Accra, they would congregate to worship the modern genies of the Hauka, incarnating symbols of the British colonial power. Balandier considered the film a “pivotal moment in the history of ethnological film.” It was indeed emblematic of contemporary ethnology in the sense that it dealt with possession rites but, at the same time, represented a turning point because the real subject for Rouch was the fate of the migrants and the workers themselves, who, through ritualized behavior, confronted and compensated for their state of confusion, embodying in a state of trance characters from the colonial administration. For Balandier, the point of view adopted by Rouch was radical for that time. Ethnography certainly recognized these civilizations as “beautiful;” however, out of “laissez-faire” rather than “complaisance,” it paid little heed to their history and “Colonial situation.”²⁶ Rouch introduced an “undoubted” change in perspective with *les Maîtres fous*: “it is no longer about presenting cultural eternity, if I may say so, eternal difference,” but rather “to show how men in Africa, with their heritage, struggle within the conditions that are their own.”

During the projection at the *Musée de l’Homme*, the film was reported to have greatly embarrassed the audience; it was a disturbing and non-conventional documentary. There were violent scenes (foaming at the mouth, ritualized dog sacrifice, etc.). The film was a watershed, according to Balandier, “the passage from let’s call it a documentary ethnography in search of additional truths to an ethnography (or rather a cinematography) that bears witness and makes a commitment itself.”

In *Sociologie des Brazzavilles noires*, the publication of which was contemporaneous with the making of *les Maîtres fous*, Balandier analyzed the effects of the rural exodus and urban migration on the inhabitants of the districts outside the Congolese capital, from the vantage point of labor, social and political organization. Balandier jostled disciplines by breaking the barriers that separated Sociology from Ethnology, and he made use of Psychology when asserting that the urban experience was an individual experience giving birth to new, fragmented personalities. In his book, Balandier argued that African cities were becoming unstable and pointed out that the cultural uprooting of people of rural origin, whose traditional social fabric was being frayed by urban life, was partly compensated for by cultural innovation, with the proliferation of fraternities and guilds addressing various recreational,

²⁶ Georges Balandier, “La situation coloniale: approche théorique,” *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*, n°11, 1951, pp. 44-79.

economic, religious and political needs.²⁷ Rouch's film and Balandier's book thus addressed similar themes, revolving around the late colonial period in West Africa, during its unprecedented urban development, renewal of social norms, reconciliations with the old colonial power and new conflicts. Both works broke with the conventions of the anthropology of the day.

The publication by Balandier a few years earlier of "La situation coloniale: approches théoriques"²⁸ had already, in its own way, made a stir, he recalled, "at a time when the colonial situation was not called into question." Balandier insisted that these distant civilizations were in a history, a context, that had to be taken into account: "What are the effects of domination, how does the dominated react, how does he eschew the domination or overcome it on his own?" This was an open field, which the predominant ethnology, the one of the Griaule school, did not address because it was more concerned with "an ethnology that expresses the deepest knowledge, the most robust, and the least sensitive to vicissitudes of history."

Rouch from traditional to modern, in the footsteps of Leiris and Balandier

Rouch never referred to the writings of Balandier or Leiris and did not discuss their relationship to his own works, but there is no doubt that he was familiar with them (indeed, Rouch carried with him *l'Afrique fantôme*²⁹ during his first trip to Niger).³⁰

²⁷ Georges Balandier, *Sociologie des Brazzavilles noires*, Paris, Armand Colin, 1955 (reprinted by Presses de la Fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 1985) (Recension by J. V. in *Politique étrangère*, vol.21, No. 3, June 1956). Jean Copans calls this text "precursor" rather than "founder" in that it did not have, in contrast to *Sociologie actuelle de l'Afrique Noire* (Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 1963) a direct posterity. He describes it in an interesting way, and one thinks of the genesis of *Moi, un Noir*, as "the most convincing of this double simultaneous confrontation of the researcher with the sociological urban novelty (which involves tinkering and assembling original and not very ethnological methodologies), on the one hand, and the insidious appearance of the famous dangerous classes on the other, that seems to lead to uncontrolled urbanization which preoccupies/concerns the colonial administration" (Jean Copans, *Georges Balandier, un anthropologue en première ligne*, Paris, PUF, 2014). It may be noted that there are many examples of such fraternities and guilds in Rouch's films (in *Jaguar*, in *Moi, un Noir*), even if they are only stealthily shown. One is even the subject of *la Goumbé des Jeunes Noceurs*, shot in 1964 among young migrants from Upper Volta, settled in Ivory Coast. Alice Gallois, in her presentation of the film on behalf of the CNC which indexes all the films (or drafts of films) of Rouch then known (Béatrice de Pastre dir., *Découvrir les films de Jean Rouch - collecte d'archives, inventaire et partage*, Paris, CNC, 2010), reports an additional film on the same theme, never mounted by Rouch and shot in 1957, *la Royale Goumbé*, name of a fraternity for which there were several images shown in *Moi, un Noir*.

²⁸ Georges Balandier, "La situation coloniale: approche théorique," *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie*, n°11, 1951, pp. 44-79.

²⁹ Michel Leiris, *l'Afrique fantôme. De Dakar à Djibouti (1931-1933)*, Paris, Gallimard, "Les Documents bleus," 1934 (Gallimard, « Tel », 1988 and in *Miroir de l'Afrique*, Gallimard, "Quarto," 1996).

³⁰ Conversely there are to my knowledge no texts by Leiris or Balandier discussing Rouch's films. Note that in general, there are very few critical comments of these films by Africanists at the time they are shown. This could be explained in part by the distrust that the new and original use of the

Rouch's first film, *Au Pays des mages noirs* (1946 to 1947), was produced by *les Actualités françaises* and edited with inserts of wild animals (a practice totally unknown to Rouch) and, with a voiceover and narration with which Rouch would deny having had any involvement. His subsequent films progressively diverged from the exoticism and sensationalism that characterized the films of "image hunters conquering the world."³¹ This trend was already evident in *les Magiciens de Wanzerbé* and *Initiation à la danse des possédés* (1949), in which Rouch introduced the protagonists by their names. Rouch offered the characters if not an identity then at least a form of individualization, anchoring them albeit timidly in the contemporary World, while filming them in a "strange" possession ritual.

With *les Maîtres fous* Rouch had consummated the rupture, and this was followed on by additional innovations and further disruptions, as Balandier observed. *Moi, un Noir* presents a group of young Nigeriens who had migrated to Ivory Coast, seeking employment in Treichville, a district in Abidjan. Individual characters were shown through the lens of their "fantasy roles,"³² inspired by Hollywood movie stars. Rouch used post-synchronization to create a polyphonic soundtrack, mixing characters' voices and abundant free indirect discourse to "translate" characters' thoughts onto the screen. The "banality of the portrait" of scenes of everyday life, as Balandier put it, makes *Moi, un Noir* "less spectacular" than *les Maîtres fous*. Yet the fictionalization of the characters' personages in *Moi, un Noir* actually strengthens the sense of reality. The most banal scenes in this movie were accompanied by narration in imagery fiction in a deeply original way (as discussed by Jean-Luc Godard, Gilles Deleuze, Jean-André Fieschi and others), with irony, humor and imagination. In *Chronique d'un été* (1961) and later in *Petit à Petit* (1969), Balandier saw the foundation of a method of *regards croisés* that was analogous to "what presented itself as the *méthode du détour*, that is to say, if one is to know oneself at home, one must know oneself by others."

Balandier drew the conclusion that Rouch had shown "a path that starts from an ethnology still affected and still weighed down by colonialism to go towards a mode of seeking the truth through the image which liberates and gives the present things a different meaning."

cinematographic tool such as Rouch proposed in the ethnographic field was entitled to provoke then. The CNRS, which had recruited Rouch, however, contributed with its funding to the implementation of Rouch missions in Africa and therefore to the realization of his films.

³¹ Pierre Leprohon, *L'exotisme et le cinéma : les chasseurs d'images à la conquête du monde*, Paris, Susse, 1945.

³² Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma 2. L'image-temps*, Paris, Minuit, 1985.

Back to the traditional and to Griaule

It should be kept in mind that Rouch never lost interest in traditional African societies. Indeed, after the disruption (in *les Maîtres fous*, *Jaguar* and *Moi, un Noir*), Rouch, still marked by his encounter with Griaule, promptly returned to Niger in 1965 to resume the filming of the Yenendi rain rituals that he followed in total over a period of about thirty years. He also embarked, ten years after Marcel Griaule's death in 1956, on a long collaboration with Dieterlen in the region of Sanga in Dogon country. Dieterlen was continuing the project she had begun with Griaule of collecting and annotating documents about Dogon customs as well as on the exegesis of the Dogon mythology. Rouch was mainly responsible for the images.

Balandier reflected on the deep and long-lasting influence Griaule had exerted on Rouch. He evoked a “complicity” between teacher and student, “one of those complicities related to colonial relations as they were established in the course of the 1950s.” Balandier ironically suggested that Griaule and Rouch were made to understand each other, Griaule the former aviation officer familiar with seeing the world from up above, and Rouch the former civil engineer studying things from the perspective of “sites, landscapes, environments.”³³ The two men, pursued Balandier, had not had “the same use of the image, the still image and the moving image,” each having pursued his career “according to his taste, to his training, and according to the air he wanted to give Africanism.”

For Griaule, as Balandier observed, the visual image was important but not essential. Griaule was above all a man of letters, trained in classical ethnology, who wanted to reveal - it was the formula of the Griaule school - “the deep truth” as evidenced by the book *Dieu d'eau*,³⁴ centered on the venerable Ogotemméli. The visual image, the moving image in particular, came after the research, the interrogation, “in the appearance of a confirmation of the ethnological truth” rendered by the text. It was not an image that would bring immediacy to what it was showing, as would happen later with *les Maîtres fous*. It was a time when the scientific documentary film only was to accompany the observation and its the description, hence the films dedicated to masks, and more generally to rituals. The school of Griaule, while aspiring to gain full access to the deep truth of Dogon society, at the expense of its history and experience, offered, according to Balandier, a kind of eternity to its “difference.”

³³ Rouch had indeed in 1942, as an engineer of the Ponts et Chaussées, overseen public works carried out by black Africans under colonial domination in Niger.

³⁴ Marcel Griaule, 1948, *op. cit.*

Rouch never sought to disguise his work in political terms. Although in private he was critical of colonial attitude, he did not claim to be a politically engaged author, and none of his films had for example the force of indictment of *Afrique 50* by René Vautier,³⁵ released in 1950, or *les Statues meurent aussi* by Chris Marker and Alain Resnais, released three years later. Rouch remained remote, somewhat in awe and in a relationship of sympathy with Africa, like his friend Gilbert Rouget,³⁶ critical of the overarching attitudes of the colonial administration (he expressed his disgust on several occasions), and with which he nevertheless had to collaborate at times.³⁷ He could not escape the sirens of a “certain Rousseauism stemming in part from the “indigenophile” tradition” of the 1930s, for which Sembène Ousmane criticized him in 1965, comparing his observations (and those of other Africanists) to those of an “insect collector.”³⁸ At times Rouch seems to subdue his anti-colonialist impulses, for example by proposing an ethno-psychiatric interpretation at the end of *les Maîtres fous*³⁹ or by letting the spectator of *Jaguar* or *Baby Ghana* (a less well-known film of 1957, which depicts celebrations upon the Gold Coast’s newly declared independence), unaware of the political and social context of the events, struggle to decipher the atmosphere of derision, absurdity and farce. In *Baby Ghana*, the narrator’s commentary is particularly crude and provocative. In *Jaguar*, with what is seemingly the irreverent treatment of Kwame Nkrumah at the time of the legislative elections he won in 1954, Rouch appears to have exploited the time that lapsed between the shooting (1954) and the post-synchronization done in several steps between the first improvisation of the characters over the images in 1957 and the release of the film ten years later, to adulterate scenes of a triumphant politician who had by February 1966 been deposed in a military coup, subjecting the footage to the comic satire of Rouch's actors (“It's the government of Kwame Nkrumah isn't it? He's the one wearing a loincloth. He has a big neck, he is well fed for sure, he is fat. And all his ministers are fat too”). However, the film’s documentation of those

³⁵ Vautier acknowledged in an interview that he had not forgiven Rouch for his criticism that he was not helping Africa “by making films that drive people to revolt” but had later recognized that Rouch's work, despite his lack of political criticism, was nonetheless “a search for African dignity in collaboration with Africans, which was complementary to what we were doing on our side” (in Maria Loftus, “Entretien avec René Vautier,” *Présence africaine*, vol. 2, n°170, “Cinquante ans de cinéma africain. Hommage à Paulin Soumanou Vieyra,” 2004).

³⁶ Brice Gérard, “Gilbert Rouget et la mission Ogooué-Congo,” *art. cit.*

³⁷ Pierre Cros, personal communication, Chatenay-Malabry, 29 novembre 2016. See Philippe Dewitte, “Regards blancs et colères noires,” *Hommes et migrations*, n°1132, 1990, pp. 3-14.

³⁸ Voir Philippe Dewitte, “Regards blancs et colères noires,” *Hommes et migrations*, n°1132, 1990, pp. 3-14.

³⁹ Peter Bloom, *French Colonial Documentary: Mythologies of Humanitarianism*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

events is rich in lessons for the historian⁴⁰ and encourages today's spectator to seek more information. Rouch did not pretend to deliver a message of political significance but introduced his doubts while occasionally stumbling onto something of an uncontrollable exuberance that spilled over into his narration.

Henley also addresses the paradox, "for a filmmaker who celebrated positively cultural hybridization and innovation in his films on the "great adventure of African cities" during the period of his migration films," to return to "salvage" ethnography. For Henley, "although Rouch was certainly interested in the emerging world of late colonial Africa, his initial and perhaps primary interest lay in the traditional cultural worlds of the peoples living around the middle reaches of the Niger River." According to Henley [who cites two Rouch's interviews of Rouch by Enrico Fulchignoni]⁴¹ "it was for this reason that when fully synchronous-sound technology became available in the mid 1960s, Rouch resolved to give up making films about urban migrants and returned to the middle Niger to make films [the Yenendi series in Niger and the Sigui series in Mali]⁴² about cultural traditions that were either disappearing or being radically transformed."⁴³

⁴⁰ Alice Gallois (2007, *op.cit.*) addresses the way in which Rouch's two films, *Baby Ghana* and *Fêtes de l'indépendance du Niger* (1962), of which she offers a detailed analysis, are likely to "become sources of history."

⁴¹ Author's note.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Henley (in *The Adventure of the Real, op.cit.*) questions what he sees as a handicap of Rouch, that would have been purely technical, and suggests an inability for Rouch to take advantage of the new processes on ethnographic fields. Henley criticizes severely *Un lion nommé l'Américain*, a sequel to the famous *la Chasse au lion à l'arc* shot in 1968 with a synchronous and autonomous camera, saying the sequel had lost all the charm of its predecessor. It is likely that Henley based his judgment on one of the versions of the film, published by Éditions Montparnasse, in the original language sound track without commentary, rather than another version with a comment by Rouch on the synchronous voices of African performers that brings him closer to the epic dimension of *la Chasse au lion à l'arc*. One could imagine that Rouch, who had invented means in his films on "Africa in Motion" to overcome the lack of synchronous sound to "give voice" to his protagonists, might have found it difficult when synchronous sound became accessible to really listen to (and understand of course, but that would have required subtitles which Rouch always refused to use. It should not be forgotten that Rouch did not master any of the Dogon languages/dialects and, like Griaule and Dieterlen, had to rely on local translators) the voices of Africans and that these difficulties led him to fall back on Africa of the tradition, where, even if he left in the voices, allowed him (like other documentary directors of the time) to let us not understand (neither subtitles, nor often comments). It is certainly necessary to question - and some have denounced it obviously - the distance that Rouch then adopts in ethnographic field with respect to his subjects and how for example he "covers" what the Dogon say: "It is Jean Rouch who, in the imperial position of the anthropologist who knows and provides the explanation, combining interpretations by Griaule, native stories and his own poetic impulses: it is impossible to know who is speaking. The sixty year cycle ritual unfolds like a closed object, dissected from the categories of the long questioned *griaulienne* culturalist school. In this case, the comment rather than a guide becomes a drag: once reality has been sealed off one can no longer enter" (Eliane de Latour, "La scène invisible : à propos du documentaire," in Jacques Aumont dir., *la Mise en scène*, Bruxelles, de Boeck Université, 2000). Note that in *Petit à petit* also, an "ethno-fiction" typical of this "shared anthropology" that Rouch liked to defend, we can sometimes be tempted to hear Rouch's voice more than those of his characters (there are documents in the archives that testify to the writing of parts of the dialogues, possibly with the complicity of its actors) but a wide space remains open to the poetic force of improvisation.

Rouch, although full of admiration and a loyal disciple of the legacy of Griaule, was never dogmatic. The confrontation of the two perspectives on French ethnology, highlighted by the argument and highlighted by the debate between Dieterlen/Balandier, forms the backdrop to the body of Rouch's work in Africa. Even if it was not theorized as such it was mirrored by the filmed representations of the motion-less Dogon myths versus the “time and motion” capsules of Africa undergoing rapid pre-decolonial changes. Indeed, Rouch’s body of work recapitulates the movements and conflicts within the French anthropology of Africa, exhibiting both a dominant, colonial perspective (of the centre), and a reciprocal anthropology for the modern, “shared” world (of the periphery). However, it is important to bear in mind that this was not a linear trajectory from traditional to modern. For example, *Jaguar* and several of the Dogon films, even if Rouch filmed at different times, were edited during roughly the same years.

Jean Rouch never appeared to question Griaule’s emphasis on the mythological aspects of the Dogon culture, and he undoubtedly contributed to widening its dissemination through his films. Although Rouch never wrote about Dogon traditions, he was fascinated by the complexity of their belief systems. Through his films, he contributed to their diffusion to a broader, unspecialized audience (albeit limited as Rouch's Dogon films were not among his best known), It would be interesting to find out if these films are (and if so how), like the production of Griaule, hijacked by to what Jolly was to call a “Dogon world-culture” that froze Dogon society into a largely fantasized past.⁴⁴ Rouch had to be aware of the limitations of an approach neglecting the contemporary context. Indeed, elsewhere and during the same period, he was the innovative film director who gave cinematic life and voice to what he saw around him, witnessing and capturing perhaps uniquely a world in upheaval, a time of radical change and transition. Rouch, caught between two poles, created an extremely original body of work. This dialectic in Rouch’s films anticipated in a certain way the current and future mutations of the postcolonial critique of the exclusivity of the *Western-centered perspective*. For Balandier in 2009, anthropology has become “an anthropology of mutual observation (*regards croisés*), [...] of the image and the visual which is done in exchanges [...], in the exchanging of glances” which abolished the privilege to look at “the other” by claiming to see the truth for him.

⁴⁴ Éric Jolly, “Dogon virtuels et contre-cultures,” *l’Homme*, n°3, 2014, pp. 41-74.

Perspectives

Paul Henley (2009) had reported that “within modern French anthropology [Rouch] is regarded by some with a relative indifference, as yesterday’s man, a former “pope” of ethnographic cinema perhaps, but one who has little of relevance to say to anthropologists today.” Such an assessment would probably not have bothered Rouch. Aware of the difficult legacy of ethnological films, including his own, he willfully left his work open to multiple interpretations. It is therefore a matter of speculation as to what uses may ultimately be made of his films by anthropologists or how Rouch’s work may come to be understood by African scholars in the future and referred to by African film-makers.⁴⁵ The same may be said for the re-examination of the school of Griaule by African philosophers.

The films made during Rouch’s “return to Griaule,” characterized a certain faithfulness to the tenets of this school of anthropology through its narrations and commentaries, were of a markedly different style from those of the great films on mutations within West Africa. However, by analyzing these films, without rejecting them outright on the sole basis of this very “return,” it can be seen that Rouch did not try to hide from his field traces of contemporary life which were to present themselves, inevitably, as visual anachronisms. Due to his camera framing, sense of rhythm, and proximity, as well as his deep respect and perhaps gratitude for the images that were rendered by “others,” he never succumbed to voyeurism or sought an epiphany. Rouch never seems to “steal” a photo, his camera doesn’t follow where it isn’t welcome or when characters are evidently trying to escape from the frame. In Rouch’s films, these tensions actually demonstrate the originality and singularity of his work. While aligning his commentary on the source of the Griaulian constructions, Rouch filmed among the Dogon without blocking our vision of that “imaginary space” between his subjects and us as observers, as though pulling him – and us along with him - to a safe place where he could eschew the dangers inherent in his

⁴⁵ Valentin Yves Mudimbe who refers to the work by Griaule and Dieterlen as “knowledgeable sources” and states that “the work of Griaule and his disciples in Dogon country has demonstrated the complexity of Dogon astronomical knowledge and its symbolism” (*The Invention of Africa. Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1988), however questions, with Paulin Hountondji, the ethnophilosophy which, according to them, underlies his work. Martian Towa, cited and criticized by Hountondji, pointed out, on the contrary, in 1971, that the production of Western Africanists on African thought systems could be appreciated “for its contribution to a global challenge of Eurocentrism” (Paulin J. Hountondji, « Ethnophilosophie : le mot et la chose », 2008, <http://docslide.fr/documents/ethnophilosophie-le-mot-et-la-chose-pjhountondji.html>). Griaule himself wrote in 1951 in a radical way that “the Western knowledge of African cultures was wrongly based on a Western tradition of ignorance of others, of self-superiority, and, calling things by their name, inability to imagine a mind-set in which our way of thinking would not be natural, indispensable, the only one rational, the only one possible.”

project of anthropological representation, of obscuring the horizon with his own fantasies.

ABSTRACT

“Exchanging Glances”: The Inherent Tensions in Rouch’s Opus as a Metonymy for the Evolving Prism in French Ethnology⁴⁶

Jean Rouch made important, innovative ethnographic films in West Africa from the late 1940s to the 1970s. There is an evident contrast – in subject and style – between his films about young Africans in the years prior to national independences and the more traditional ethnographic films, in the wake of Griaule, largely focused on the “primitive” and on the “profound Truth” assumed to reside in the Dogon cosmogony. This dualism, which reflects the evolution underway in French ethnography, is a source of tension in Rouch’s corpus of film. In the footsteps of Leiris and Balandier, post-War French ethnography was, at that time, apprehending the rapid changes that Africa was experiencing and was attempting to reconfigure its own theoretical foundations. Rouch may have seemed to be at odds with this new paradigm when filming the Dogon, but at the same time he made films which gave voice and personal identity to their protagonists, foreseeing novel forms of intercultural reflections, akin to the concept of “regards croisés” that certain post-Modern analysts would later prone. In the films about societal shifts in Africa, Rouch mixed as it suited him fiction with the most vital subjects: de-colonialization, modernization, politics, the sociology of population migrations from rural to urban. The watershed work of Balandier, his *Sociologie des Brazzavilles noires* in particular, and those of Rouch, with *les Maîtres fous*, *Moi, un noir* and *Jaguar*, echoed each other, offering a dynamic approach to African culture. However, the tangible dichotomy in Rouch’s work, with respect to subjects traditional or modern, is not a quirk but rather a trademark reflecting Rouch’s unique itinerary, woven through a transformational period in French ethnology, representing a source of tension within his works, begging to be further explored and contextualized.

⁴⁶ This paper was translated, revised and adapted from an article in French which was published with photographs: Catherine Papanicolaou, “Tensions dans l’oeuvre cinématographique de Jean Rouch entre représentation visionnaire d’une Afrique en mutation et restitution de l’imaginaire d’une Afrique traditionnelle,” *1895 Revue d’Histoire du Cinéma*, 2017, n°83, pp. 78-97.