

READING THE IMAGE: Visual Literacy And The Films Of Jean Rouch.

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Abstract

In this paper I will address the visual cinematic style and approach of the ethnographer and filmmaker Jean Rouch (1917-2004). Throughout six decades of making films, the majority in West Africa, Rouch understood the power of the visual image to represent the complex reality of the lives of the people he filmed. At the time of his death he had made well over one hundred films, and between the first and the last film, Rouch's approach disrupted conventional methods and theories about representing reality in documentary film. His films countered predominant colonial representations and brought forth the political and poetic possibilities of the visual image. Overall, his filmmaking practice enabled an understanding of the complexities of colonialism and representation.

My presentation will focus on reading Rouch's filmic style through a discussion of *The Human Pyramid* (*La pyramide humaine*) made in 1959. This collaborative and experimental documentary deals with the relationships between white and black students in an Ivory Coast High School on the eve of independence. The film has a reflexive structure and incorporates fictional elements and improvised scenes. I consider how this filmmaking approach invites a heightened reading of the image and thus a deeper understanding of the colonial situation. In *The Human Pyramid* the visual style serves to support, enrich, and importantly, to complicate the narrative. This is a critical point given the colonial context and repressive censorship laws.

As a filmmaker and ethnographer Rouch privileged visual cultures and a re-view of his films highlights the ongoing importance of exploring critical issues in terms of reading the image. In this paper I will illustrate how the significance of Rouch's contribution to filmmaking is clearly understood when reading the visual cinematic style of the film. Overall, we shall see a cine-literacy at work.

Jean Rouch first studied to be an engineer in Paris. However, the outbreak of WWII and the occupation of France saw him leave to undertake work in the African colonies. This move marked the beginning of a new career as an ethnographer and filmmaker and in this paper I will be focusing on his approach and visual style. Throughout six decades of making films, the majority in West Africa, Rouch understood the power of the visual image to represent the complex reality of the lives of the people he filmed. At the time of his death in 2004, he had made well over one hundred films, and between the first and the last film, Rouch's approach disrupted conventional methods and theories about representing reality in documentary film. This disruption can be read in his visual style and shortly, we will consider his 1959 film, *The Human Pyramid* (*La pyramide humaine*) in this respect.

To begin with I will briefly refer to conventional ideas of ethnographic and documentary representations so that we may appreciate the ways in which Rouch challenged traditional methods. Anthropologist Susan Slyomovics defines the classical model of ethnography as being based on dividing the life of the subject, a tribe, into specific topics which included 'life cycle, economics, land tenure, social organization of the village notables as opposed to the various classes. In the appendix you would put a section on folk tales.'¹ Importantly, the account was encoded in such a way that the presence of the ethnographer was not stated. The traditional model of ethnographic film followed suit. In 1972, Walter Goldschmidt defined ethnographic film as that 'which endeavors to interpret the behavior of people of one culture to persons of another culture by using shots of people doing precisely what they would have been doing if the camera were not there.'²

Rouch dismissed the idea that any ethnographic examination can be objective, and rejected the conventional approach whereby the means by which the film is made are rendered invisible along with the filmmaker. He understood the camera's complicit relationship in the representation of reality and the seemingly non-objective qualities that it called forth.³ Rouch saw filmmaking as a disruptive process. From the beginning he acknowledged that there was a destructive side to anthropological investigation: 'The fundamental problem in all social sciences is that the facts are always distorted by the presence of the person who asks the questions. You distort the answer simply by asking the question.'⁴

Rouch was more invested in the notion of a shared anthropology which sees the filmed participants share power with the director. This is a participatory cinema in which lies an important exchange. David MacDougall notes: 'Here the filmmaker acknowledges his entry upon the world of his subjects and yet asks them to imprint directly upon the film their own culture ... Through such an exchange a film can begin to reflect the ways in which its subjects perceive the world'.⁵

Having briefly set-up Rouch's ideas as an ethnographic filmmaker I will focus on his filmmaking in terms of approach and visual style with reference to *The Human Pyramid*. In 1958, Rouch directed *Me, a Black* (*Moi, un noir*) an innovative film set in the poorer suburbs of Abidjan which follows a young and poor migrant, Oumarou Ganda, looking for work in the city. It greatly impressed and influenced members of the French New Wave, but was criticised by local government for filming the slum areas and focusing on the poverty. Rouch responded to this criticism with his next film: 'I decided to shoot a new film in

the same place, Abidjan, but I chose this time the young elite: the senior class of the Cocodi High School.' This film became *The Human Pyramid*.⁶ The *Lycee* of Abidjan was considered an ideal institution as it was 'one of the only schools not discriminating between genders or origins for its students'.⁷ This is a collaborative and experimental documentary that deals with developing relationships between white (expat Europeans) and black, male and female, senior students in their final year of study, at an Ivory Coast High School on the eve of independence.⁸

Rouch advised that this film 'will be constructed in a very specific manner, as a cinematographic experiment taking place on screen'.⁹ A key component of its experimental nature concerns the principles of documentary filmmaking itself. *The Human Pyramid* begins and ends as a documentary. However, the majority of the film itself is a fiction film that was created by Rouch and the students and the camera. It has a reflexive structure and incorporates fictional elements and improvised scenes: all elements that marked a different approach and attitude to documentary filmmaking in the late 1950s. I am interested in how this filmmaking approach invites a heightened reading of the image which encourages a deeper understanding of the colonial situation.

Rouch began filming *The Human Pyramid* in June 1959 during the three-week school holiday period. He notes that it was during this time he realised that besides the classroom there was little contact between all these students and he proposed to develop the fiction around the notion of what interracial relationships might be like if they existed. To this end, the story is about Nadine, a white French girl who enrolls in an Ivory Coast high school and is surprised to find that the black and white students don't socialise at all. She sets about trying to change this situation and a number of love interests develop – complete with frustrated desires and misunderstandings. Its title, *The Human Pyramid*, is taken from the Paul Éluard poem which is read aloud in a classroom scene.¹⁰ In total *The Human Pyramid* is 88 minutes long. Its brief opening and closing scenes take place in the streets of Paris and are set in the present day. The main part of the film takes place in the Ivory Coast and runs just over an hour. [SHOW CLIP – 2 mins: 30 secs]

The film begins with an inter-title on a black screen: 'This film is an experiment made with some black and white teenagers. Once it began, the director simply filmed it'. Although brief it addresses three points. First, the film is an experiment. Second, it deals with race. Third, once underway, the film took shape as it unfolded as opposed to being directed or constructed. The film's formal qualities, issues of race and the role of improvisation are all key elements in *The Human Pyramid*. They are the means by which the film counters predominant colonial representations and brings forth the political and poetic possibilities of the visual image. Furthermore, Rouch's development of a self-reflexive cinematic practice is a significant contribution to addressing the disruptive and complicit role of the camera and the one behind it.

Rouch appears on screen and is filmed explaining the process and answering questions from the participants thus making its reflexive quality visible from the beginning. He appears as part of the framework and acknowledges his role in the creation of this filmmaking experiment and the role of the camera. It is a method that documents the lives of the students as impacted by the filmmaking process which invites and allows a fictional filmic world to emerge. It enables new relationships to be realised cinematically.

Within the fiction of this film, the young people are preoccupied with love interests and jealousies. They also talk about their thoughts on the future for Africans and Europeans, and they directly address problems of colonialism, racial prejudice, and the possibility of inter-racial relationships – all issues avoided by filmmakers during the Franco-African colonial period. Constructions privileged the concept of the white French man or woman over darker skinned Africans or Arabic men and women. The representation of the superiority of the French depended on this distinction. As Dina Sherzer notes, gender and interracial sexual relations in French film had shown that ultimately when it came to relationships between French and the other, 'it is race that matters most'.¹¹

Early in the film two discussions take place regarding race (there are more throughout the film). The first is between the white students, the second between the black students. At approximately 14 minutes into the film, Nadine decides to get all of her new white school friends together and suggest that they mix with the black students. They gather at a house and sit around and drink and smoke while discussing the pros and cons of mixing with the African students. After filming Rouch said:

These two improvised scenes may be the best in the movie. After shooting for twenty minutes, the discussions became real and everybody expressed their opinion or sometimes the opinions of friends, sometimes racist opinions.¹²

In addition, the representations and discussions concerning inter-racial relationships in the film that deal with social, romantic and sexual possibilities are bold. As the story progresses, the African and French students mix socially, and become entangled with competing love interests and desires. Sherzer writing in the 1990's observes with regard to contemporary French film that possibly 'the time has come when images of colonial times are helping France to come to terms with its past and with the issues of diversity and difference'.¹³ *The Human Pyramid* [and *Moi, un noir*] are unique and important in this respect. The film depicts interracial relationships which appear natural - an ordinary occurrence in the day-to-day lives of young people. This is significant when we consider that relationships were not represented on the screen. Its daring nature equally relates to form and content – together they define the film ahead of its time. Rouch was one of the first filmmakers to seriously address issues of race and colonialism. This contribution has received little critical attention so far. Before I conclude I'll show a clip from the film for you to consider in this light.

Improvisation plays a key role in generating the fiction in *The Human*. While fiction and the imagination occupy a privileged place in a number of Rouch's films, for example, a fictional framework forms *Jaguar* and fictional scenes emerge in *Moi, un noir*, the place of fiction is more pronounced in *La pyramide humaine*. Instigated by Rouch, embraced by the students (who appear as themselves) and inspired and guided by poetry and dreams, improvisation determines the course taken by *The Human Pyramid*.

In 1978, when asked by Dan Yakir if he thought political considerations are less valid than social ones, Rouch replied: 'No, I think the two are important but one must have imagination.'¹⁴ In *La pyramide humaine*, the imagination is an intrinsic part of the film's structure and design. Rouch's engagement with imagination opens doors to address key themes of race, and interracial relationships between the students. Imagination provides the means by which more comprehensive representation is realised.

The most experimental of Rouch's films at the time, *The Human Pyramid* raises important questions about the relationship between reality and fiction in cinematic and documentary representations. It manages to establish a foundation from which race relations in the Ivory Coast toward the end of colonial rule can be raised and explored through direct yet subtle, playful yet subversive, ways. It is an approach that not only values the role of the imagination in filmic representations of reality, but also is imaginative in its own right. Remarkably, it enables a way to explore prohibited and neglected topics during censored times.¹⁵

Before concluding I will show a brief clip of a dream-like sequence in the film. I have selected it because I think it will be interesting for you to see and discuss.¹⁶ The scene follows a big party with all the students at Nadine's house. A number of the young men have tried to woo Nadine and two have ended up in a fight. One of the African students, Raymond, speaks to Nadine about it and they leave the party and go for a walk. [SHOW CLIP – 2 mins: 30 secs]

In 1962 Rouch wrote an essay entitled 'The Cinema of the Future'. In the passage below there is a poetic and allusive quality in the way Rouch thinks and writes about this film. And a similar quality is woven throughout *The Human Pyramid*.

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* that is much more like the film finally realized than any 'plans' I might have written.¹⁷

Rouch's writing is caught up in the spirit of the place. The visual image evokes the poetry which will find its voice in cinematic expression. In *The Human Pyramid* the visual style serves to support, enrich, and importantly, to complicate the narrative. As a filmmaker and ethnographer Rouch privileged visual cultures and a re-view of his films highlights the ongoing importance of exploring critical issues in terms of reading the image.

Notes

- ¹ Susan Slyomovics, 'An Interview with Gayatri Spivak', ed. Judy Burns, *Women & Performance: a Journal of Feminist Theory* 5, no. 1.9 (1990): 82, cited in Fatimah Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), pp. 6-7.
- ² Walter Goldschmidt, 'Ethnographic Film: definition and exegesis, *PIEF Newsletter of the American Anthropological Association*, 3, 2 (1972) cited in David MacDougall, 'Beyond Observational Cinema' in *Movies and Methods*, Vol. 2, Bill Nichols, ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985. p. 278.
- ³ Two filmmakers greatly influenced Rouch in this regard: Robert Flaherty, 'a geographer-explorer who was doing ethnography without knowing it,' and Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov, 'a futurist poet who was doing sociology, equally without knowing it.' And it's very interesting to see how Rouch incorporates the different approaches and style of these filmmakers (but time does not permit). Jean Rouch, 'The Camera and the Man' in *Ciné-Ethnography: Jean Rouch*, Steven Feld, ed. & trans. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 31
- ⁴ Jean Rouch, 'The Politics of Visual Anthropology: An Interview with Jean Rouch' by Dan Georgakas, Udayan Gupta and Judy Janda, in *Cineaste*, Vol. VIII, No. 4. Summer, 1978.
- ⁵ David MacDougall, 'Beyond Observational Cinema', pp. 282-3.
- ⁶ Jean Rouch with Enrico Fulchignoni, 'Ciné-Anthropology' in *Ciné-Ethnography: Jean Rouch*, p. 166.
- ⁷ The Lycee was also one of the best-equipped schools in Africa for preparing students for University.
- ⁸ Rouch noted that: 'In fact, the sociological study did not take place, following the discovery that there were almost no existing relationships between white and black students in the Lycee.' Although the students were in mixed classes there was very little contact between black and white students and while there was no formal segregation, the students avoided each other. 'Scenario'.
- ⁹ Jean Rouch, 'Scenario'.
- ¹⁰ The full title is *Les dessous d'une vie, ou la pyramide humaine* (*The Underpinnings of a life, or The Human Pyramid*). It is also known (more generally it appears) as *La dame de carreau* (*The Queen of Diamonds*). Rouch was very fond of the French poet Paul Éluard (1895-1952), who was one of the founders of the Surrealist movement. Henri Peyre 'La dame de carreau' in *The Poem Itself*, Stanley Burnshaw (ed), (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1964), p. 105.
- ¹¹ Dina Sherzer, 'Race Matters and Matters of Race' in *Cinema, Colonialism, Postcolonialism: Perspectives from the French and Francophone Worlds*, Dina Sherzer, ed., (Austin: University of Texas, 1996), p. 246.
- ¹² Jean Rouch, 'Scenario: *La pyramide humaine*' in *Cahiers du cinema*, No. 112, 1960 (translated by Olivier Strobel, 2009).
- ¹³ Dina Sherzer 'Introduction' in *Cinema, Colonialism, Postcolonialism: Perspectives from the French and Francophone Worlds*, pp. 15-16.
- ¹⁴ Jean Rouch and Dan Yakir, *Cine-trance: The Vision of Jean Rouch* Film Quarterly vol XXI n. 3. 1978.
- ¹⁵ *La pyramide humaine* was banned as were *Les maîtres fous* and *Moi, un noir* before it. It was banned in Ivory Coast and in all French territories and was difficult to distribute in France. Rouch recalled that they were threatened and his flat in Paris was attacked by people who had broken the door and the windows. Rouch thought it 'a strange way to make a political statement' but observed that 'maybe fiction is a stronger than documentary.' *Chronicles of African Modernities: A retrospective of Jean Rouch's films* (NYU, 2000)
- ¹⁶ Sherzer notes that in novels and films during the colonial era white men could have love affairs with indigenous women but there was no suggestion that an indigenous man may be loved by a white woman. Also note the British Government's attempts in 1948 to prevent a London secretary Ruth Williams marrying the Oxford law student Seretse Khama who was heir to the chieftainship of the Bamangwato clan in the British protectorate of Bechuanaland (now Botswana). Dina Sherzer, 'Race Matters and Matters of Race' p. 235.
- ¹⁷ Jean Rouch, 'The Cinema of the Future?' translated from the 1962 French version (1962) by Anny Ewing and Steven Feld (1985) and reprinted in *Ciné-Ethnography: Jean Rouch*, p. 266.

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