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Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin, *Chronicle of a Summer*, (*Chronique d'un été*.) First Run/Icarus Films, VHS, 2003 [1961], 84 minutes.

Jean Rouch, *Ciné-Ethnography*, ed. and trans., Steven Feld, Series "Visible Evidence" No. 13, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003, viii + 448 p. \$25.95 U.S. (pb) ISBN 0-81-664104-8.

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Film as Ethnography: A Tribute to Jean Rouch (1917-2004)

Abstract:

This essay is meant to be a tribute to the late Jean Rouch (1917-2004), who died in a car accident on 18 February 2004 in Niger. I wish to acknowledge his unique contribution to film history and illustrate his personal approach in two ways: with an analysis of his most famous film, *Chronique d'un été* (*Chronicle of a Summer*, 1960), and a highlighting of his lesser-known written works. These numerous texts about ethnographic cinema and visual anthropology have been collected and translated into English in an almost complete edition in 2003, thanks to Steven Feld. A discussion about the innovative aspects of Rouch's approach in the early 1960s will prompt a wider reflection about anthropological cinema and perhaps reality television.

Résumé:

Cet article en forme d'hommage illustre l'approche du cinéma documentaire préconisée par le cinéaste Jean Rouch (1917-2004), décédé dans un accident de voiture, le 18 Février 2004, au Niger. Centré sur son plus célèbre film, *Chronique d'un été* (1960), notre analyse sera basée sur les textes réunis par Steven Feld dans son recueil, le plus complet sur Rouch en langue anglaise (2003). Notre réflexion insistera sur l'aspect innovateur des films de Rouch, et par extension, sur son influence sur le film anthropologique en général et sur la télé-réalité.

A Pioneer in Film History

When he released his documentary *Moi, un Noir* (1958), filmmaker Jean Rouch tried to bring a new narrative form into film making. He was well aware of the participatory methods of anthropologists and wanted a new approach to documentary, which in his view was not meant to be a film *about* persons, but rather *with* individuals. Rouch's most original contribution was no doubt his film project about happiness in the modern world, entitled *Chronique d'un été*. That film was re-issued on video in the U.S.A. by First Run/Icarus Films in an English sub-titled version under the title *Chronicle of a Summer*. In this first part, I will explain why this film remains exceptional in all senses.

A documentary of a standard length (eighty-four minutes), *Chronique d'un été*, was one of the most commented upon and discussed films of the early sixties. That film won the International Critics Prize at the 1961 Cannes Film Festival, at a time when it really meant something to be successful at Cannes. As its title indicates, *Chronique d'un été* was filmed during the summer of 1960 in France, mostly in Paris, but also in the Parisian suburbs and in St. Tropez. It was co-directed by Rouch with the help and inspiration of French sociologist Edgar Morin. Both men appear in the film.

There are two main reasons to consider this film as exceptional and seminal. First, it is one of the first instances of urban anthropology in film that uses the approach of "Cinéma-vérité" or "Cinéma direct", which means that people seen on the screen are interviewed and talk about themselves. Until then, most documentaries included stock shots of images with a commentary often written by "someone from the outside" (the director, a scriptwriter, an "expert") and read in the studio by the voice-over of a narrator. That formal approach was not bad *per se*; it was just less spontaneous and did not include the actual words used by the interviewed persons. The second innovative aspect of *Chronique d'un été* was the fact it was a documentary shot (mostly) in Paris, and nowhere in Africa or any other "primitive" location; it confirmed that the anthropological method could be used as an ethnographic tool to investigate individuals living in an urban area in an industrialized country.

This history of what was labelled as "Cinéma-vérité" has been told many times in various books. Although it was not the first one of a new genre, *Chronique d'un été* helped to create a new aesthetic approach to documentary film making. People were filming other persons and sometimes themselves in an improvised way in various scenes from real life. One of them was to ask any person met on the street if they were happy or not. Another experience was to film a man as he awakened in his single bed, during the first minutes of his day: eating a biscuit in his coffee bowl and smoking his first cigarette of the day. This illustrates perhaps one of the goals of *Chronique d'un été*: to document the everyday life of the "ordinary people" in their most common gestures. The result could take different meanings, according to the members of the audience: it could show the fundamental routine of an average man, or it could highlight the alienation of the worker, who spent nine hours a day at the factory.

I think that whole approach derived from Edgar Morin's previous research and publications, particularly his two influential books about the sociology of film (*Le cinéma ou l'Homme imaginaire*, 1956), followed by *Les Stars* (1957). Most Anglophone scholars might not be familiar with Morin's forty-five books; I believe his interdisciplinary method could sometimes be compared to that of Roland Barthes. This is clear in Morin's book titled *L'Esprit du temps* (1962), which was released the year after *Chronique d'un été*.

Chronique d'un été was quite thin at the beginning; it sometimes seems that the film could become a simple game, an exercise, especially when in a scene two women try to ask questions about happiness without getting any answers from apathetic pedestrians on the street. However, the film really begins when we follow a worker at the Renault factory. The film addresses the main issues in France during that summer of 1960, like the war in Algeria (at that time, some people only said "les événements en Algérie" without using the word "war"). But the film reaches its climax when Marceline expresses her deepest emotions and memories about her beloved father, who died in Auschwitz where she was a prisoner. That moving scene is shown in a beautiful way in unforgettable images: early in the morning, we follow Marceline walking on her own on the Place de la Concorde, which is usually one of the busiest place in Paris, at the beginning of the Champs-Élysées. She brings a magnetophone and talks about her sad memories of World War II. The strength of that scene comes from many aspects added to the tragic, true story itself. The narrative is set into a moving "mise en scène", even though this is truly a documentary. First, she is alone on the street, and that position increases the feeling of loneliness and the confident tone of her sentences: she does not talk to a companion but only to herself, addressing her words to her father. Second, we feel that this intimate monologue, almost a "confession", has not been told very often. Later, in another part of Paris known as "Les Halles", she whispers a few words to her late father, and we feel this secret is so deep, almost like her deepest thoughts, that she could not have expressed them in a different way (p. 312). Both scenes are filmed in a similar manner, each in a continuous one shot movement, avoiding the close-up in order to adopt a very large framing.

In the last scene, all participants gather for a private screening of the unfinished film, followed by a discussion about their appearance on screen and about the other persons seen in other scenes. This is

the time for criticisms, comments, "mea-culpas", and even remarks towards another "character." We sometimes see this technique of commenting upon a previous appearance or performance in reality shows. This occurs in the final scene of *Chronique d'un été*, which consists of an "auto-critique" by the two directors about what they wanted to do and the tentative results of their experience.

Jean Rouch's Theoretical Writings

In Jean Rouch's book *Ciné-Ethnography*, we find among many essays and collected texts a transcription of the dialogues from *Chronique d'un été*. This anthology is a very useful tool for understanding what the two directors wanted to express, before and after the shooting. We also see that the film could have been quite different, since many elements were cut or edited. In fact, we find here the dialogues of two versions of *Chronique d'un été*. For example, the place of the scene when Marceline reveals her true story about her Holocaust past remains a central moment in the film, right in the middle of the narration. However, in a longer sequence that was not included in the final editing but instead appeared in the first minutes of *Chronique d'un été*, Edgar Morin asked Marceline to explain why she had a number tattooed on her arm (p. 275); in the actual version of the film, it is only in the second half that this tragic element is brought up for the first time (p. 311). The removal of this scene explains why Marceline is so nervous about being filmed in the opening sequence, when she discusses the film project with Edgar Morin and Jean Rouch: her disquietude probably arose because they were about to discuss what was her most intimate secret related to her Holocaust past.

Despite its numerous qualities, Steven Feld's *Ciné-Ethnography* does not pretend to include all the interviews given by Rouch. For instance, I thought of the long, fascinating conversation that Jean Rouch had with reporter René Lévesque that was aired by Radio-Canada in the early 1960's, entitled "Premier plan--Entretien de René Lévesque avec Jean Rouch, anthropologue et cinéaste" (a program directed by Claude Sylvestre, 1960). Nevertheless, Steven Feld's *Ciné-Ethnography* remains an essential book for any research on Jean Rouch, especially for students and scholars who have no understanding of French. Even the transcription of the *Chronique d'un été* contains many more elements and information about locations and situations, not to mention the texts of many deleted scenes. In the book's other chapters, we find four interviews, six essays by Jean Rouch, and a full section on *Chronique d'un été*. Although the distinction is not always made clear, the final filmography not only indicates all of Rouch's films as a director, but it also includes the films in which he took part as an adviser for Claude Jutra, among others.

It is quite fascinating to witness in the film (and read in the book) the final reactions of some of the people chosen to take part in the *Chronique d'un été*, because their feelings at that moment are comparable to those who reject reality television. In fact, the two motives that are given to criticize the "confession" of Marilou are her "lack of sincerity" and her "exhibitionism."

In an important but overlooked book that was translated in French, film theoretician William Gynnn reminds us that Jean Rouch has always argued that the ethnographic film remains the product of a "mise en scène" and must be seen as such.^[1] In other words, the director and the camera create a theatrical relationship that eludes the truth of any moment that is filmed. Even when ethnographers observe any culture in a "scientific" approach, there is still an intersubjective praxis between the film maker and his/her subject. According to that theoretical perspective, "Realism", "truth" do not come from the characters or from the situations; the impression of reality only emerge from the film making process, and that includes the screening of documentary images. Of course, this is a controversial position that could be challenged.

In fact, William Guynn's book presents all major theoretical approaches in the study of documentary. The films of Jean Rouch are central in Guynn's demonstrations. We find a whole transcript of three scenes taken from Rouch's documentary "Les maîtres fous".^[2] William Guynn's analysis is inspired by the major French theorists from the 1970's (Christian Metz, Jean-Louis Comolli, Roland Barthes) in order to understand the dynamics in which the imagery, the symbolic and the real are mixed into a film.^[3]

Jean Rouch died at eighty six while working on a new film; Rouch's filmography as edited by Steven Feld includes more than a dozen unfinished film projects. It is now time to rediscover these and other Rouch films that span over half a century. Those works, including *Chronique d'un été*, can be seen as a fundamental contribution to world film history.

NOTES

[1] William Guynn, *Un cinéma de non-fiction. Le documentaire classique à l'épreuve de la théorie*. Traduit de l'américain par Jean-Luc Lioult. (Aix-en-Provence: Publications de l'Université de Provence, 2001), p. 44.

[2] Guynn, pp. 152-157

[3] Guynn, p. 196.

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