

## THE ETHNOGRAPHIC CINEMA OF JEAN ROUCH

### *O CINEMA ETNOGRÁFICO DE JEAN ROUCH*

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**ABSTRACT:** Jean Rouch developed in his film-ethnographic work a new way of making cinema and anthropology, providing possibilities for both fields. This article aims, through a study in visual anthropology, to present the ways in which the documentary films by Robert Flaherty and Dziga Vertov influenced the work of Jean Rouch, in addition to demonstrating the main characteristics and films of Jean Rouch, and the concepts developed in his works. Therefore, this work is intended to be an introduction to Rouchian ethnographic cinema, to provide a first contact with the work this anthropologist-filmmaker.

**KEYWORDS:** Visual anthropology. Ethnographic cinema. Jean Rouch.

**RESUMO:** Jean Rouch desenvolveu em sua obra filmico-etnográfica um novo modo de se fazer cinema e antropologia, fornecendo possibilidades para ambos os campos. Este artigo busca, através de um estudo em antropologia visual, apresentar os modos como os filmes documentários de Robert Flaherty e Dziga Vertov influenciaram o trabalho de Jean Rouch, além de demonstrar as principais características e filmes de Jean Rouch e os conceitos desenvolvidos em sua obra. Portanto, este trabalho tem a intenção de ser uma introdução ao cinema etnográfico rouchiano, de modo a possibilitar um primeiro contato com a obra deste antropólogo-cineasta.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Antropologia visual. Cinema etnográfico. Jean Rouch.

**RESUMEN:** Jean Rouch desarrolló en su trabajo cine etnográfico una nueva forma de hacer cine y antropología, proveyendo posibilidades para los dos campos. Este artículo busca, mediante un estudio en antropología visual, presentar las formas en que los documentales de Robert Flaherty y Dziga Vertov influenciaron en la obra de Jean Rouch, además de demostrar las principales características, películas y los conceptos desarrollados en su obra. De tal modo, este trabajo pretende ser una introducción al cine etnográfico rouchiano, con el fin de posibilitar un primer contacto con la obra de este antropólogo-cineasta.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Antropologia visual. Cine etnográfico. Jean Rouch.

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## Introduction

The development of anthropology occurred in parallel to that of cinema, with points of contact between the two being established. However, anthropology, from the 1930s, moves away from the use of visual content, considering them permeated by subjectivities, which moved them away from scientific objectivity. Therefore, until the 1950s, ethnographic cinema presented few academically productive works. As Novaes shows (2009, p. 47, our translation), “The only anthropologist to innovate effectively from the use of the camera was Jean Rouch”. The anthropologist-filmmaker develops a series of concepts, which are impossible to understand without first having in mind that Rouch was an anthropologist, but there is no Rouchian anthropology without considering the practice of cinema, the two being intrinsically linked. His most well-known concepts are: shared anthropology, cinema-truth and ethnofiction.

However, in order to understand the Rouchian work, we need to carry out a survey based on filmmakers who had an influence on Jean Rouch: Robert Flaherty and Dziga Vertov. In addition, some of his more classic films should also be brought into the discussion, such as 'The mad masters' (*Les maîtres fous*, 1955), 'I, a black' (*Moi, un noir*, 1958) and 'Chronicle of a summer' (*Chronique d'un été*, 1961). Thus, this article seeks to present an introduction to the ethnographic cinema developed by Jean Rouch and the main concepts engendered within his work.

## The influences of Flaherty and Vertov in Rouchian cinema

Two filmmakers who exerted influence on the Rouchian film-ethnographic mode were the American Robert Flaherty (1884-1951), director of 'Nanook of the North' (1922), and the Soviet Dziga Vertov (1896- 1954), director of 'A man with a camera' (1929).

Flaherty's influence is perceived in the use of the participant camera, a practice that enables the relationship between those who film and those who are filmed, that is, the director “taking part not only in recorded events but also seeking to reflect the records from the perspective of the natives - something that Rouch will even later take as one of his main aesthetic paradigms” (LESSA, 2014, p. 93, our translation). The natives' perspective on the filmed images, in view of the possibility that Flaherty could display scenes from the film while on the field, allows an approximation with the idea of shared anthropology developed later by Rouch himself.

However, there is a marked difference between Rouchian cinema and Flaherty's cinema. The American, as can be seen in 'Nanook', has a still and fixed camera, a technological limitation imposed during the time of making the film. In the case of Rouch, technological innovations are carried out, such as the possibility of filming without the use of a tripod, as shown by Sztutman (2004, p. 54, our translation): "With Rouch, the participant camera of Flaherty, strange in the day to day of those filmed, gains movement and manipulation, making it possible to build a discourse associated with the experience".

In addition, Flaherty's influence is also found in the development of a cinema that films the improvised, in which the native interprets himself and participates in the construction of the film. This last characteristic, as can be seen, is something very noticeable in the Rouchian ethnofiction films. Flaherty also demonstrated the impossibility of filming the real, making a film that sought to demonstrate how the Inuit lived in the remote past, something that can be demonstrated by the hunting scenes, in which hand weapons are used, such as spears, even if the subjects of the film already had access to firearms.

Vertov's presence is perceived mainly when working with the question of the truth of cinema. In Vertov, cinema was thought of as a way of building, as a language, and of obtaining new truths, which would demonstrate the impossibility of filming the real. Therefore, for Rouch "It is no longer a question of the ethnographic gift inscribed in the plan obtained by the still and fixed camera, as sought by Flaherty, but of cine-montage as the creation of a situation and a cut, as Vertov would have recommended" (SZTUTMAN, 2004, p. 54, our translation). Furthermore, this is clear in a quote made by Sztutman (2004, p. 53) in his article 'Jean Rouch: an anthropologist-filmmaker', in which he reproduces an interview by Jean Rouch, contained in the 'Anthropology and Image Notebooks':

*The expression truth-cinema came from a play on words to translate the name of Pravda's cinematographic supplement, the newspaper of truth [...]. But he [Vertov] got into the game and made a sentence that, for us, became the answer to this question: "the truth cinema is not the truth in cinema, it is the truth of cinema". Particular truth! (Interview with Jean-Paul Colleyn, 1995, p. 68, our translation).*

The Soviet director also presents a cinematographic thought in which there is no opposition between fiction and documentary, without these two categories. He defended an art form that moved away from literature and theater, proposing that cinema was a language in itself, independent of other art forms:

For Vertov, all true cinema was under the motto of the cine-eye and the *kinopravda*; every other cinema remained an extension of novels and plays. Vertov did not need to coin a term like “documentary”, since, for him, his films materialized the essence of cinema, not the traces of a genre. Ironically, the term *kinopravda* would be used in the homage made to Vertov by Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin, when they christened their new form of cinema documentary *verité* (*kinopravda* in French), as a type (or mode) of documentary, rather than a comprehensive category. The term, which started with Vertov as the definition of all true cinema, was associated not only with the most delimited area of a genre, the documentary, but also with the even more delimited subgenre of participatory documentary! (NICHOLS, 2012, p. 184, author’s highlights, our translation).

Even if this homage of Rouch and Morin can be attributed to Vertov, Rouchian cinema-truth is also influenced by Flaherty himself, as shown by Henley (2010), since, for Rouch, the truth of cinema represented a truth that would be constructed at the time of filming, through the actions of the subject of the film, in view of the presence of the camera, which would alter the behavior of individuals, going beyond the cine-montage.

### **Jean Rouch's ethnographic cinema**

Jean Rouch, after graduating in engineering, traveled to the African continent to perform this function. However, while working during the 1940s in the construction of roads, he fell in love with the diverse cultures he found there, initially having an interest in the themes of possession, magic and witchcraft, an interest that ended up being shown in some of his films, such as 'The Mad Masters'. He received his doctorate in ethnography under the guidance of the French ethnographer Marcel Griaule (1898-1956) with the thesis '*La religion et la magie Songhay*'.

However, at the same time that he carried out his ethnographic research and developed his thesis, he also made cinema, since his anthropology was linked to cinema from the beginning, making it impossible to study one without considering the other: “This anthropology is revealed through cinematic practice, he never finds it dissociated and intends to compose an ethical program with it - hence the necessary overlap, for Rouch, between a 'visual anthropology' and a 'shared anthropology'” (SZTUTMAN, 2004, p. 50, our translation).

Thus, Rouch was, in the first place, an anthropologist who made cinema, that is, an anthropologist-filmmaker: “[...] anthropology is his true profession, whereas cinema persists as a necessary task” (SZTUTMAN, 2004, p. 50, our translation).

Jean Rouch was an anthropologist responsible for bringing several innovations from the use of the camera in the field. Sylvia Caiuby Novaes shows some of these innovations, in addition to mentioning filmmakers influenced by this new way of making cinema:

He innovated by suggesting technological changes in the film camera that would allow its use without the tripod and, therefore, closer to its focus of attention, in addition to being one of the main filmmakers to make use of synchronized sound. But Jean Rouch's great innovation for anthropology was to propose the so-called shared anthropology, in which the research subjects actively participated in the filming and editing process. His "cine trance" ended up having more influence on filmmakers like Truffaut and Godard than on anthropologists who made ethnographic films. (NOVAES, 2009, p. 47-48, our translation).

It is necessary to characterize more deeply this filmic style developed by Jean Rouch, which would develop the main characteristics claimed by the authors of the '*Nouvelle Vague*': filming in external settings, without using studios; absence of a previously written script and screenwriter; presence of ordinary individuals as actors; improvisation and spontaneity in the making of the scenes; small teams; among others.

The tripod-free footage cited by Novaes, for example, is something introduced by Rouch that made it possible for the camera to follow the actors. Filming without the tripod allows the filmmaker to get closer to the subjects, both in the case of research and in the case of art. In this way, the camera itself participates in the film, and thus, at least regarding documentary and ethnographic cinema, the presence of the one who films becomes essential for the construction of the narrative. The moving camera will, after Rouch, be used by Jean-Luc Godard, for example in '*Breathless*' ('*À bout de souffle*', 1960).

Another possibility presented by Rouch's ethnographic cinema, in the case of anthropology as cited by Novaes, was the emergence of the concept of shared anthropology, an anthropology in which the research subjects would have an active role in the construction of anthropological knowledge. However, the realization of this type of ethnographic work was only possible through the combination of anthropology and cinema:

The ethnographic practice associated with cinema would favor the establishment of a shared anthropology, an important target of the work developed by Jean Rouch, in times of revision and criticism of colonialism, and, in the specific case of the Rouch field, of the decolonization and emancipation of the nascent African nations. (BARBOSA; CUNHA, 2006, p. 36, our translation).

Therefore, from the realization of a shared anthropology, from the realization of a film together with the researched subjects, it results that "the films are progressively becoming a

collective production in which the subject-actors actively participate, some of whom will become co-authors” (HIKIJ, 2011, p. 116, our translation) and, therefore, the subject-actors also become co-authors of the anthropological knowledge produced.

This idea is evident in the film 'Chronicle of a summer', a manifesto of cinema-truth, made by Rouch in partnership with the sociologist Edgar Morin, a film in which we sought to demonstrate cinema-truth as a cinema in which the truth would be constructed by presence of the camera, which would cause the filmed individuals to act in a certain way, which would not happen if it were not for the filming. Therefore, it was the truth of cinema, and not, as people used to believe, a truth in cinema. It was not about the reproduction of the real, but of a reality constructed by the film, and therefore of cinema as a form of language, capable of producing its own truth, based on the presence of the camera in the field and, after that, in the cinema-montage. As evidenced, the idea of a Rouchian cinema-truth demonstrates Jean Rouch's affiliation with a tradition of documentary cinema represented by the figures of Robert Flaherty and Dziga Vertov.

In such a film it is possible to see the filmed material being shown to the subjects who participated in the film, at the same time that it is possible to have access to what they thought about their performances according to the filmed images. In this scene in question, the actors discuss whether they would be acting normally or if they would be acting, in view of the presence of the camera. Thus, what comes into question would be the very idea of truth and its status in the cinematographic product.

This devolution of the images, which became an essential part of his ethics in the field, started in Jean Rouch's cinema with the filming of '*Bataille sur le grand fleuve*' (1950), a film that shows a hunt for hippos in the Niger River, carried out during a doctoral expedition of Rouch himself. Therefore, for Rouch, it was not a matter of going to Africa to 'steal' information about different cultures, but of developing a form of anthropological knowledge that could be accessed by the natives themselves, something made possible by filmic images. Therefore, in view of the context of decolonization and formation of African national states in which Rouch made some of his main films:

[...] for him [Rouch], it is necessary first of all to transform this discipline that he identifies as “eldest daughter of colonialism”, so that the knowledge acquired can guarantee not the subjection of the studied populations to the hegemonic system, but the liberation, the possibility of perpetuation of differences despite the movement of homogenization (SZTUTMAN, 2004, p. 52-53, our translation).

This issue of shared anthropology also made it possible to access the voices of the natives and their opinions about the images in the films. Two examples of this practice are the ethnofiction films “I, a Negro” and “Jaguar” (1967), films in which Rouch accompanied groups of Nigerian migrants in the Ivory Coast and the Gold Coast, respectively. In such films, audio subversion was carried out, that is, after filming, the natives improvised a narrative, which is present in the film, while watching the images recorded on the editing table, describing their lives, their dreams, and enabling access to their imaginary. Paul Henley gives a brief account of the impact of this, specifically in the case of the film 'I, a Negro', in Godard:

But what also impressed Godard, in common with the majority of other critics, was not only technical and stylistic effects that Rouch had managed to achieve by his informal, improvisational methods but also the fact that this was the first time – given that Jaguar remained unfinished and had only been shown in public in the Cinemathèque - that a feature film had provided general French audiences with the opportunity to hear Africans describing their life experiences in their own voices (HENLEY, 2009, p. 91)

Rouch still innovates in relation to his attitude towards the natives, that is, the subjects of the film, who become his friends, as pointed out by Marco Antonio Gonçalves (2008).

The natives were left, during filming, free to do and say whatever they wanted, resorting to improvisation, something that is repeated in other of his films like ‘Jaguar’ and ‘Chronicle of a summer’. It is worth remembering here that the camera closely followed each action during the film, in view of the filming without the tripod. In this way, greater proximity is possible between the audience and the film, as well as between the audience and the actions portrayed.

The use of improvisation is one of the main characteristics of films known as ethnofiction. Ethnofiction inserts fictional elements in the ethnographic film, allowing the subjects of the film to create and recreate themselves in front of the camera. In addition, the subversion of audios adds greater complexity to this category, allowing greater access to the natives' imaginations, fantasies and dreams, as well as their own perspectives on films. Thus, as Marco Antonio Gonçalves puts it when analyzing ‘I, a Negro’:

It was what Rouch wanted to show, this plane of people's thinking, of their dramas, of how they lived that reality from deliberate fiction. And in his film people build by the word what they are or what they think or imagine to be, building a world from these imaginative universes that seems as real as the day-to-day work in the port carrying bags. Thus, Rouch can ethnographically imagine the fictions and imaginations of these characters without necessarily



putting fiction into dispute with reality (GONÇALVES, 2008, p. 114-115, our translation).

It is necessary to say that this film represents the closest approximation between Rouch and the film style of *Nouvelle Vague*, presenting the initial model for the filmmakers of the new generation, providing all the characteristics mentioned above:

The initial model is embodied in the films of Jean Rouch after *I, a Negro* (1958). Rouch will be the most faithful to this procedure throughout the 1960s, with films such as *La Pyramide Humaine* (1959) and *La chasse au lion à l'arc* (1965). This logic leads to an experimental medium-length film, *La Punition*, with a very limited audience, but which will have a considerable influence on Rohmer's films of the 1970s and 1980s. *Gare du Nord*, short film made by Jean Rouch for the collective manifest *Paris vu par...* in 1965 (MARIE, 2011, p. 66).

Thus, after the realization of 'I, a Negro', the approximation between Jean Rouch and the film model embodied and defended by the authors of the '*Nouvelle Vague*' becomes clear, even though the characteristics of such a model did not all occur simultaneously in the directors' films. French.

In addition, it is also necessary to say that, in view of the subversion of the boundaries between fiction and reality, Rouchian cinema, more specifically regarding the spontaneous performances of individuals in 'The mad masters', a film that shows a ritual of possession Hauka carried out by Nigerian migrants on the Gold Coast, caused certain misunderstandings, as can be seen from the perspective of Claude Chabrol, one of the main authors of '*Nouvelle Vague*', about the performances of film subjects:

Rouch's famous phrase that states that "fiction is the only way to penetrate reality" summarizes the way in which ethnography itself was thought, which led to misunderstandings such as what happened to the French filmmaker Claude Chabrol who sought the distributor from the movie *The Mad Masters* and told him: "I want to meet Jean Rouch because he is a fantastic filmmaker. Amazing! How was he able to direct actors that way?". Chabrol thought that *The Mad Masters* was a fiction and not a documentary (ROUCH; MARSHALL; ADAMS, 2003, p. 192; CAIXETA DE QUEIROZ, 2004, p. 123 *apud* GONÇALVES, 2008, p. 76, our translation).

This film ended up showing the limitation of the control that the director had over the images of the film, since Rouch himself did not control the way those images would be received. This is clear when one considers what happened after the first screening of the film, even without Rouch's voice elucidating the ritual in question:



The lights come on in the projection room of the Museum of Man. The audience is astonished after watching just twenty-seven minutes of the film. Some Africans present state that the images seen are an affront to their dignity, that they present the natives as savages. Marcel Griaule (Rouch's advisor) then asks Rouch to destroy the film: those images could not be aired, since they were too dangerous (SZTUTMAN, 2009, p. 232, our translation).

Therefore, what was possible to realize was that those images could be interpreted in different ways according to the experiences, memories and subjectivities of the most diverse viewers.

After this first screening, the film was restricted to certain cinema circuits. In addition, another interpretation, which justifies this restriction on the film, refers to the use of images for racist purposes, so that they could be used to demonstrate that the African peoples were savages, something totally opposite to the thought of Jean Rouch. The film also features images that may shock those who watch them, such as the climax scene in which the natives sacrifice a dog and eat it.

From these characteristics and concepts developed in his film-ethnographic work, Jean Rouch ended up bringing epistemological questions into the discussion. Such questions refer to the subversion of borders referring to the categories usually used by anthropology: reality/fiction; objectivity/subjectivity; between others.

Such categories are present in the history of ethnographic cinema even before Rouch, since anthropology, in search of its consolidation as a science and in search of scientific objectivity, sought to move away from film content, considering it to be very subjective and fictional, which would run counter to the principles of scientific thinking.

However, Rouch moves away from this dualistic view of the world. For him, fiction and reality, as well as objectivity and subjectivity, are not antagonistic categories, but they are part of the world, coexisting, which can be exemplified by the fact that Rouch considers fiction as the only way to penetrate reality. Thus, the insertion of fictional elements in their ethnographic films, and even subjective elements, does not make them less scientific, nor does it make objectivity disappear, but it allows access to the voice of the other, the voice of the African and his imaginary, their dreams and anxieties, in addition to providing access to a reality that would not exist had it not been for the cinematographic exercise.

## Final considerations

Jean Rouch's filmic-ethnographic work ends up enabling paradigm shifts for anthropological thought, which may lead to the overcoming of the discipline's colonial character, as shown by Hikiji:

Marco Antonio Gonçalves opposes two views of anthropology - that of Marcel Griaule and that of his stubborn student. Knowledge, for Rouch, can no longer be a stolen secret [as it was for Griaule] to be later consumed in Western temples of knowledge. “It is the result of an endless search where ethnographers and ethnographed are on a path that some of us already call “shared anthropology”, Rouch would say (GONÇALVES, 2008, p. 157 *apud* HIKIJI, 2013, p. 116, our translation).

Thus, in the case of Rouch, the other studied stops being just an object of research to become a subject “and, first of all, a potential friend” (GONÇALVES, 2008, p. 21, our translation), having the camera to film as mediator of this relationship established between researcher and researched, between director and character.

Diving into Rouch's films allows us to really get closer to some of his African friends. In ethnofiction, their dreams, ideas and questions sometimes seem so familiar. In the “ethnomusicological” films, some of them made in partnership with Gilbert Rouget, the initial sensation of strangeness - musical shuffling of a polyrhythm so dense for our ears - is being replaced by an almost understanding of small structures, overlaps; we perceive Dogon music through Rouch's eyes, ears and body. In his approaches to possession, we have the “strength” of the image that Luc de Heusch mentioned - images that are sometimes “dangerous”, as thought by Renato Sztutman (2009) (HIKIJ, 2013, p. 118-119, our translation).

Furthermore, it is important to emphasize that, in addition to the ideas of shared anthropology and ethnofiction, Rouch presents a new perspective, influenced by Flaherty and Vertov, on the status of truth, dealing not with a truth in cinema, but with a truth of cinema, which can only be achieved by this means. For a better understanding of this idea, it is necessary to consider the use of subversion of audios and the insertion of fictional elements, which, for Rouch, are not in antagonism with the notion of reality.

What Jean Rouch sought to show in his films was Africa in a context in which individuals were caught between tradition and modernization, which is exemplified, for example, by 'The mad masters' and by his ethnofiction films. In this context, he developed an innovative cinema and ethnography for his time, which sought to show the dreams of the subjects of the film, in addition to building through chance and improvisation, without the use

of scripts, a narrative that would represent the construction of a reality that it would not exist if it were not through the camera.

However, the innovations offered by Rouch ended up attracting the attention of the young filmmakers of 'Nouvelle Vague' more than of the academy and, consequently, of anthropologists, which can be explained by the distance maintained by the academy in relation to imagery content. In relation to his reception by the new French directors, Jean-Luc Godard, a great admirer of Rouchian works, came to consider Rouch as responsible for saving French cinema:

Godard was particularly struck by the effects that Rouch had managed to achieve simply by relying on improvisation by nonprofessional actors. Whereas others, such as the Italian Neorealists, Pirandello, and Stanislavsky had sought to achieve such effects by careful calculation, Rouch had achieved them by trusting to chance. Playing on the fact that in French the name of Joan of Arc is written as Jeanne, the female form of Jean, Godard declared that like the national heroine, Rouch would come to the rescue, not of France perhaps, but certainly of French cinema, by opening the door on a completely new way of making films (HENLEY, 2009, p. 91)

Therefore, Jean Rouch presented, with his ethnographic cinema, possibilities for anthropology, both in relation to aesthetic issues as well as epistemological and ethical issues, which remain unknown to many and that could be applied to establish dialogues and relationships with the other, with the diverse, enabling them to be seen and heard. In addition, he also presented opportunities for cinema, providing subsidies for a new way of making cinema, as said by Godard.

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