

French Filmmaker of Human Exuberance

Jean Rouch, who turned to films in lieu of a career in civil engineering, has spent most of his working life in West Africa where he began filming in 1946. He began filming because he believed that the only effective ethnological research is that to which the group being studied also contributes. Significantly, Rouch's work has had reverberations in the film world as well as among ethnographers. He has always been willing to experiment with new equipment. Since 1961, he has used easily portable lightweight cameras with synchronous sound. This pioneering work in cinéma-vérité influenced New Wave directors like Truffaut and Godard, who has devoted a chapter of his next book to Rouch.

One early Rouch film to be shown at the museum is *Jaguar*, which he began in 1953, but which was not released until 1967. An improvisational portrait of West African migrations, *Jaguar* is an example of Rouch's participatory anthropology. Three young Africans—a fisherman, a cowherd, and a horseman and general roustabout—travel from their home in Niger to the great market of Accra in Ghana. Since synchronous sound was not available to Rouch at the time, he showed the film to the three principals, and the soundtrack consists of

their voices describing their wanderings.

They find a sorcerer to bless their journey and to determine the best departure date. Even before they leave Niger, they meet members of other tribes whom they find just as peculiar as many Westerners find Africans. One traveler admonishes his companion, "A country changes you; you don't change the country." They exclaim over the sea—"We've heard about the sea, now we see it"—and the fact that there is no dust in Accra, where the streets are tarred.

Rouch brought the same collaborative spirit to *Chronique d'un Été* (1961) on which he worked with the French sociologist Edgar Morin. This film, which explores the state of mind of a group of students and intellectuals in Paris during the summer of 1960, is an experiment in contemporary urban anthropology. Discussions center around the difficulties of political involvement and personal relationships, and the Algerian War preoccupies the characters much as the Vietnam war troubled many Americans in the late 1960s.

Far from remaining invisible presences behind the camera, Rouch and Morin appear in the film and make no secret of their differences. "Rouch thinks life is fun," Morin tells one interviewee, "I don't." Using portable synchronous sound cameras for the first time, Rouch and Morin caught one moving sequence by following a former concentration camp inmate,

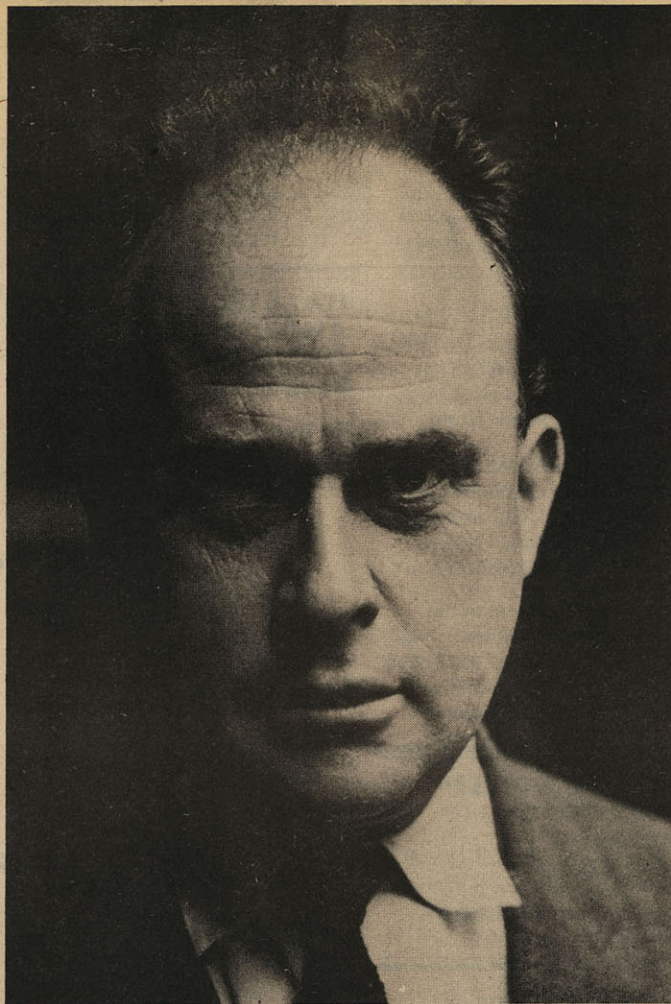


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reliving her war memories while wandering from the Place de la Concorde to Les Halles, near Paris' Jewish quarter.

The only way to film, according to Rouch, is to imitate a bull-fighter's technique with a bull:

"to walk with the camera, taking it where it is most effective, and improvising."

Morin and Rouch conclude the film by showing it to the participants—and find that some disown the images of themselves

on film or criticize others for telling the camera too much. At the end, Morin and Rouch walk away from the camera, reflecting on the pitfalls of self-revelation in film.

Les Maitres Fous (1955) is a strange and impressive film set in Accra—then the capital of the British colony of the Gold Coast—of the ceremonies of the Hauka, an emergent sect. Rouch uses visual images to describe these Africans' adjustment to colonialism. During their rites, the Hauka, some foaming at the mouth, sacrifice a dog, drink its blood, and are taken over by the spirits of British colonial officers whose mannerisms they mock and exaggerate. Concluding by shooting the same men back at work, some digging ditches in the streets of Accra, Rouch draws the unspoken conclusion that these rituals enable Africans to endure colonial rule with some dignity.

These three films in addition to four others by Rouch, will be shown during the Festival. The high point of the Rouch retrospective will be the New York premiere of his latest film *Cocoricol Monsieur Poulet*. This improvisational film, based on a Niger folk tale, stars non-professional actors who have worked with Rouch since he began *Jaguar* in 1953. Since a subtitled version is not available, Rouch himself will narrate and translate, and will comment and answer questions afterwards. A voluble and energetic man, he will prove a master at communicating his infectious enthusiasm for his subject. A.M.C.