

Review of *Building Bridges: The Cinema of Jean Rouch*, Joram ten Brink, ed.
Wallflower Press, London & New York, 2007

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Jean who? In the English-speaking world the name Jean Rouch rings few bells, despite a career remarkable for its length (nearly 60 years), inventiveness, productivity (nearly 100 films), and impact.

This is our loss, for his life illuminates a period that saw both the triumph of film as its dominant medium and the collision of Africa with the twentieth century. Rouch's contribution to film was immense. He was the precursor of the French *nouvelle vague*, admired by Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut and the launching of West African cinema. For documentary filmmakers he invented *cinéma vérité* and was a technical pioneer who contributed to the design of the robust, portable Nagra tape recorder favored by the industry for decades. He was also involved in the development of two of the prime cameras of the age: the Éclair, a quiet, 16 mm portable camera, and the Aaton, its rival. While Rouch's place in the history of cinema is secure as a founding father, less is known about his part in a parallel adventure—the surrealist revolution. *Building Bridges* is welcome, therefore, not only because it gives the English-speaking reader a new way into Rouch's work, but because it also sheds light on the relationship between the Surrealists and the world.

Rouch's breakthrough as a filmmaker occurred in Niger in 1946 while filming *Àu Pays des Mages Noirs (In the Land of Black Prophets)*. The film records a journey down the River Niger during which his tripod broke and led to the discovery of the effects of hand-held filming, which became his lifelong practice. Thereafter he worked relentlessly in Africa until his death in a car accident in Niger in 2004. Throughout those years, he also held a variety of posts in Paris, at the heart of the French ethnographic establishment, which he used effectively to fund his African projects. Rouch was an international networker who made francophone Africa his subject, recording both its modern cities and ancient rituals. He was that rare creature, an ethnographic-observational-documentary filmmaker and a feature-film director, that the various contributors to this study reveal.

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What also emerges from this book is the need for a separate study of Rouch and Surrealism in light of French exploration and ethnographic expeditions organized in Paris in the middle decades of the twentieth century. The serious travellers among the Surrealists like Michel Leiris (Africa), Paul Eluard and Max Ernst (Southeast Asia); and the clutch of others in the Americas, including Benjamin Péret in Brazil, mixed with many of Rouch's colleagues. Through the lens of Rouch's work and from his biography, we get an enhanced view of the shared climate of mid-century Paris: its miasma of ideas, so hard to pin down but without which there was no culture. Rouch's life confirms "the coincidence between the rise of Modernism and the appearance of the founding works of social anthropology."¹ This observation is what binds him to the surrealists, but it is an elusive intersection.

His story refers us to the background of the unexpected voyages that the surrealists made in the Americas. It locates them both in the same Parisian scene. Rouch's work also locates the documentary films of Paul Painlevé, Eli Lotar, and Luis Buñuel, so we can see them as individual tributaries forming a distinct current—the body of surrealist documentary film. Treated as ethnographic documentaries, films like Buñuel and Lotar's *Las Hurdes: tierra sin pan* (1933), or Lotar's *Aubervilliers* (1947), have a surrealist intent that absorbed the new interest in ethnography that was "in the air," and actively imposed on the ethnographic documentary, the values of which were agreed upon through surrealist debate.

Rouch himself said, "For me (the cinema, filming) are like surrealist painting: the use of the most realistic and photographic methods of reproduction, but in the service of the unreal, the presentation of irrational elements (Magritte, Dalí). The postcard in the service of the imagination."²

Rouch made a point of using his own voice for the commentary track of some of his films. He found that it echoed Paul Eluard's toneless reading, as heard by Rouch at a surrealist poetry reading in 1937.³ The title of one his films, *La Pyramide Humaine* (1959), is itself taken from a 1926 poem by Eluard that described the poet's despair at the failure of his marriage to Gala upon his return from Indochina.

The center of gravity of the Rouch-surrealist axis was the Musée de l'Homme in Paris. Rouch had been a student there under the ethnographer Marcel Griaule, leader of the iconic 1931-1933 trans-Africa expedition to which the Surrealists promptly devoted a special issue of their luxurious periodical *Minotaure*.⁴ One of the expedition members had been Surrealist Michel Leiris. This is characteristic of links that we must now explore between Rouch and the Surrealists that shed light on their mutual interest in ethnographic filmmaking and long-distance expeditions.

An unexpected aspect of this is a taste for fieldwork shared, for example, by Breton and Rouch, visible in Breton's journal of the voyage he made to Arizona and New Mexico in 1945, and in Rouch's extensive photo archive of African subjects. In Philo Bregstein's memoir of filming in Africa, Rouch's Surrealism-inflected temperament comes across

clearly in his taste for chance-driven or “automatic” camerawork—an approach invented as a literary form twenty years earlier by the Surrealists.⁵ In the first surrealist text, *Les Champs Magnétiques* (1919) by Breton and Philippe Soupault, their aim had not been to disgorge any old stuff and saddle the reader with unreadable “automatic” chance-driven verbiage. Despite their claim to let the subconscious rip uncontrolled, poets of their caliber adjusted verse in advance, since to hit your target, even “automatically,” takes mental preparation before the camera or the pen can roll involuntarily. Bregstein reminds us this was true of Rouch: “Contrary to the myth of Rouch as the father of *cinéma vérité* who improvised all the time, it appears that the script phase for Rouch was always an intensive one.”

However, “True to oral tradition, a pen was never set to paper.” With his small longstanding African crew Rouch would talk over the storyline, select locations and performers, chose camera angles and only then start filming—and generally do it in a chancey one-take—having waited for favorable light, which in Africa was between four and six in the afternoon. This is the stuff of surrealist practice. Rouch’s “refusal to lock himself into any system of thought or procedure liable to blind him to accidental revelations” reminds us of Breton.⁶

Accidental revelation is the subject of one of Rouch’s favorite films, an example of what he called *ciné trance*—that state of mind when filmmaker and subject are in unusual harmony. *Les Tambours d’avant* (1971) is composed of a single take lasting 11 minutes, recording the spirit possession or trance of two drummers, an event Rouch’s own camera echoed in its entranced footage of their performance. A 16mm film roll lasts 11 minutes, so by chance (?) his magazine ran out in time with the ritual.

Through Rouch’s work at the Musée de l’Homme and his contact with eminent museum directors and ethnographers like Paul Rivet (founder of the Musée de l’Homme) and Georges Henri Rivière—themselves independently in contact with the Surrealists—we catch a glimpse of the *esprit de corps* that made Paris an extended mental family, a kind of cultural village. This is one of the mysterious conditions of its triumph as the capital of world culture, for it was the linkage between scholars, artists and filmmakers in an interdisciplinary synthetic scene that led Surrealists thereafter to explore new horizons across the Atlantic. This took Wolfgang Paalen to Mexico, Max Ernst to the Hopi mesas of Arizona, and Kurt Seligmann to British Columbia, among others. Rouch’s remarkable life can tell us as much about the origins of this fabulous diaspora as his work does about the extent of Surrealism’s cultural influence and reach.

1 Ian Christie, “Disbelieving Documentary: Rouch Viewed through the Binoculars of Marker and

Ruiz,” in *Building Bridges: The Cinema of Jean Rouch* (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2007), 268.

2 Réda Bensmaïa, “A Cinema of Cruelty,” in *Building Bridges*, 83, n 7.

3 Ivone Marguilies, “The Real In-Balance in Jean Rouch’s *La Pyramide Humaine*,” in *Building Bridges*, 132, n 4.

4 “Mission Dakar-Djibouti. 1931-1933,” *Minotaure* 2 (1933). Contributors included Paul Rivet, Georges Henri Rivière and Marcel Griaule.

5 Philo Bregstein, “Jean Rouch, Fiction Film Pioneer: A Personal Account,” in *Building Bridges*, 165-177.

6 Christopher Thompson, “Chance and Adventure in the Cinema and Ethnography of Jean Rouch,” in *Building Bridges*, 182.