The very nature of ethnographic cinema – how it is practised, how it is talked about, where its limits are deemed to lie – has been profoundly shaped by the work of Jean Rouch. Through his personal example, he established the métier of ethnographic film-making as a creative activity of potentially broad horizons whose practitioners could engage in a lively exchange of ideas and methods with film-makers from many other backgrounds and with very different agendas. Moreover, he showed that it was not necessary for anthropologists to rely on professional technicians to help them make films. Rather, they themselves could use a camera, not as some sort of scientific instrument for gathering data in an objective fashion, as had previously been the orthodox view, but rather as a means of representation that could go far beyond the mere recording of social and cultural life, and could even embrace fiction (figure 8.1).

Most important of all, Rouch established that an ethnographic film-making praxis based on a collaborative relationship between film-maker and subjects could afford a much more profound understanding of the subjects’ world than one posited, in the name of science, on a radical separation between observer and observed. This idea of a ‘shared anthropology’, realised through all the different stages of making an ethnographic film, was the ethical cornerstone of his own practice and has since been widely adopted by ethnographic film-makers all over the world.1

An ocean to be discovered

In the period prior to the Second World War, as described in Chapter 1, a number of leading anthropologists had made films, including Jean Rouch’s own doctoral supervisor, Marcel Griaule.2 However, these films were not only very limited both in number and quality, but were peripheral to their makers’ principal identities as anthropologists. Meanwhile, among Rouch’s contemporaries, there were a number of ethnographic film-makers, such
Part II: Authors

as John Marshall and Robert Gardner, who had some engagement with academic anthropology but who then developed their careers largely outside academic life. Rouch was unique in that, having studied anthropology to the doctoral level, he then held an academic post throughout his career and made film-making central to his professional identity. This was something that no leading anthropologist had done before, nor, for that matter, have many been able to do since, either in France or in the English-speaking world, at least not to anything like the same degree.

Rouch was a person of great energy and imagination, but his ability to dedicate so much of his time to film-making was made possible by a particular set of institutional circumstances. Early on in his career, in 1948, when he was 30 and still a doctoral student, he was appointed to a position at the principal academic research institute in France, the CNRS. By this time, he was already closely associated with the Musée de l’Homme, which, in 1952, became the seat of the newly created Comité du film ethnographique. Rouch was appointed its general secretary, a position that he would retain for the rest of his life: the Comité would become the principal vehicle through which he would conduct his professional affairs, including the production of most of his films. Apart from a brief interlude in 1951–53, when he was temporarily expelled for failing to complete his doctoral thesis

8.1 Jean Rouch in 1954 on the Gold Coast (now Ghana), aged 36. He is using the Bell & Howell Filmo 70 that he bought in the Paris Flea Market in 1946.
on time, largely due to the call of competing film-making activities, Rouch’s position at the CNRS gave him the freedom, throughout his career, to pursue his film-making interests more or less as he saw fit. This enabled him to spend part of every year on a film-making expedition, mostly to West Africa, untroubled by any major teaching obligations.

But even given these advantageous circumstances, the sheer volume of Rouch’s oeuvre is truly remarkable. In the course of a film-making career that spanned more than fifty years, beginning with *Au pays des mages noir* (In the Country of the Black Wizards), a short expedition film that he made with some war-time comrades as they travelled down the Niger river by canoe in 1946, and ending with his last film, poignantly entitled *Le Rêve plus fort que la mort* (The Dream more Powerful than Death), and released in 2002, Rouch completed just over a hundred films. In addition, at the time of his death in 2004, aged 86, in a road accident in rural Niger where he had shot most of his films, he left perhaps as many as seventy further films unfinished. This vast corpus of work contains within it an invaluable and irreplaceable record not only of traditional customs and practices in West Africa, many of which have now been all but abandoned, but also of the period of transition from the European colonial regime to the era of independence.

An excellent catalogue of Rouch’s films has recently been produced by the CNC, the French national film institute. As this catalogue makes clear, not all Rouch’s films were ethnographic films. A considerable proportion were of limited ethnographicness and some were not ethnographic at all. These other films were on a wide variety of subjects and were mostly relatively short. They included films about economic or social development projects, films on a broad variety of political and cultural events, even three promotional films for a West African car dealer. In the latter part of his career, he also made a dozen short interview-based portrait films, mostly of close friends or associates, and produced a number of ‘ciné-poems’ and ‘promenades inspirées’ about Paris and elsewhere. More substantial were his seventeen fiction films, mostly of feature length, which he began to make in the early 1950s. Although dealing in many cases with the same themes as his ethnographic films, only about half were linked to his ethnographic research.

When all these other films are subtracted from the Rouchian filmography, one is left with a corpus of around a hundred films that could be described as substantially ethnographic. Of these, about half remain incomplete: while some have been subject to a certain degree of editing, others consist of little more than titles given to a set of synchronised rushes. Yet even if all these incomplete works are also removed from the list, one still remains with a final tally of around fifty completed ethnographic films, making Rouch by far the most productive of all ethnographic film-makers, past or present.
Rouch’s textual publications also numbered around a hundred and were just as eclectic as his films. His most substantial publication was his doctoral thesis, which concerned religion and magic among the Songhay, an ethnic group distributed widely across West Africa, but particularly in Niger, where Rouch conducted his doctoral fieldwork. This thesis, which he defended in 1952, was first published in 1960 and then republished in an extensively annotated second edition in 1989. Also based on his doctoral research among the Songhay were a historical memoir of about hundred pages published in a French colonial journal in 1953, and a more general monograph of a similar length published in 1954.

Otherwise, Rouch’s most significant published work was a detailed report on his post-doctoral research into migration from the edge of Sahel to the cities on the coast of West Africa. This ran to almost two hundred pages and appeared in 1956 in a French academic journal, directly complementing the films that he was making at the same time. But he also published a considerable number of other articles and reports on migration, and an even greater quantity of articles about ethnographic film-making and cinema more generally. At the same time, as an editor, he oversaw the production of two catalogues of ethnographic film for UNESCO, one about films made in sub-Saharan Africa, the other, co-edited with Monique Salzmann, about films made in the Pacific region. In addition to all these texts that he himself authored, he gave a great many interviews to journals, magazines and newspapers, particularly in the latter phase of his life, and was himself the subject of over twenty films. He also made regular appearances on television.5

While a small part of this oeuvre has been widely distributed and has had an influence far beyond the confines of academic anthropology, the vast majority remains – to borrow a phrase from the CNC catalogue – ‘an ocean to be discovered’.6

A shooting star with a long trail

Jean Rouch was, famously, an entirely autodidact film-maker. As he himself put it, he learned to operate ‘le cinématographe à la Cinémathèque’, that is, by simply watching films at the cinema.7 He shot the great majority of his ethnographic films himself, usually with a non-professional local person acting as the sound recordist. With the exception of one or two fiction films, which were shot on 35 mm film, all his films were shot on 16 mm. While initially welcoming the democratisation made possible by the appearance of cheap portable video cameras in the 1970s, he later rejected video completely, in part on grounds of its suspect longevity, but more importantly because, in his view, it encouraged sloppy film-making habits.
Rouch first taught himself to shoot using a US Army newsreel camera, a spring-wound Bell & Howell Filmo 70 (shown in figure 8.1), which he came across in the Paris flea market in 1946. Shortly afterwards, on the plane to West Africa to begin his expedition down the Niger with his war-time friends, Edmond Séchan, a professional cameraman who happened to be on the same plane, showed him how to load the magazine. As Rouch liked to relate, he then lost his tripod, supposedly as the expedition went over some rapids, and contrary to accepted wisdom, he learned that it was perfectly possible, indeed preferable, to shoot handheld. He would go on using the Filmo 70 for the next ten years, by which time he had already become one of the leading film-makers in France.

The films that Rouch made in the early part of his career, especially those made between the early 1950s and the early 1960s, established a new benchmark in ethnographic film-making. Among many others, these films include the classically ethnographic works Bataille sur le grand fleuve (Battle on the Great River) and Yenendi: les hommes qui font la pluie (Yenendi: the Men who Make the Rain), both shot in 1951 and released in 1952. These were concerned respectively with hippopotamus hunting on the river Niger, and with rain-making and spirit possession in Simiri, a drought-afflicted village on the edge of the Sahelian desert. Both hunting and spirit-possession would be recurrent topics of his work.

These early films were followed by a further series that he made while carrying out his migration research. The first to be released, in 1955, was Les Maîtres fous (The Mad Masters) which concerned spirit possession among Nigerien migrants to Accra, in what was then the British colony of the Gold Coast and today is Ghana. This was the film that first brought Rouch widespread international recognition, though it also caused a scandal since some of the spirits by whom the subjects become possessed take the form of colonial authority figures who, in this guise, slaughter and eat a dog. The film had the dubious distinction of being banned by the colonial authorities in Ghana while also being simultaneously denounced by anti-colonial African intellectuals in Paris and by Rouch’s former doctoral supervisor, Marcel Griaule, for showing Africans behaving in a ‘savage’ way.

Two other well-known films arising from Rouch’s research into migration would later come to be known as ‘ethnofictions’, that is, films that were fictional in the sense that the subjects were asked by Rouch to act out – on an improvisational basis, without a script – a series of scenes based either on their own lives or the lives of people very like them. One of these was Jaguar, shot on the Gold Coast around the same time as Les Maîtres fous in 1954–55, but not completed in its definitive form for budgetary reasons until 1968. The other was Moi, un Noir (Me, a Black Man), which was shot in Abidjan, capital of the Ivory Coast in 1957, though not released in its definitive form until 1960 (figure 8.2).
This highly productive period culminated with the release in 1961 of another ethnofiction, *La Pyramide humaine* (*The Human Pyramid*), this time about the relationships between African and European pupils at an elite high school in Abidjan, and then Rouch’s first film in France, *Chronicle of a Summer*, which he co-directed with the sociologist-philosopher Edgar Morin. This latter film, ground-breaking both in form and in technique, and without doubt Rouch’s best-known film, particularly outside anthropology, offered a portrait of Paris in the summer of 1960, at the height of Algerian war, as mediated through the experiences in work and at leisure of a small group of young people.

It was around this time that Rouch’s reputation as a film-maker was at its peak in France. In 1959, he was awarded the Prix Louis-Delluc, arguably the most prestigious of all French film prizes for *Moi, un Noir*. Writing in the fashionable film journal, *Cahiers du Cinéma*, Jean-Luc Godard wrote a eulogistic review, praising this film for simultaneously revolutionising French cinema and giving a voice to Africa for the first time. Godard was but one of the tyros of the emergent New Wave who admired Rouch’s work. In the early 1960s, Rouch himself made a number of short fiction films in Paris that were in similar in both style and subject matter to those of the New Wave directors. By contrast, his work was virtually unknown at this time in what the French like to call the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ world. Although *Chronicle of a Summer* attracted the attention of reviewers from the world of documentary film-making, it had no impact whatsoever on English-language ethnographic film-making at the time of its release.

Through the 1960s, Rouch’s film work underwent a sort of bifurcation. On the one hand, he continued to make fiction films, some set in Paris, others in West Africa, all highly authored, and increasingly imaginary and detached
from his ethnographic field research. On the other hand, he continued to return annually to West Africa to make highly observational films of ethnographic documentation. Many of these films were straightforwardly descriptive accounts of religious ceremonies, mostly among the Songhay in Niger and mostly involving spirit possession. He would shoot several such films in a given year: in the later 1960s and early 1970s, he was shooting five or more a year. In 1967, he shot a remarkable eleven films. As one might expect, given the sheer volume of production, not every one of these films was a masterpiece. A considerable number, perhaps as many as a third, remained unfinished.

From the mid-1960s through the early 1970s, Rouch also dedicated a couple of months every year to shooting a series of films about the Sigui, a world renewal ceremonial cycle that every sixty years is celebrated by the Dogon of eastern Mali over the course of seven consecutive years. These films were made in collaboration with Germaine Dieterlen, the long-term partner – in both life and work – of Rouch’s mentor, Marcel Griaule, from the 1930s until the latter’s death in 1956. Eventually, in 1981, Rouch gathered all these Sigui films together into a single major compilation, *Sigui synthèse (1967–1973) – L’invention de la parole et de la mort* (*Sigui Synthesis, 1967–73 – The Invention of Language and Death*).

As if this were not enough, during this same period, Rouch and Dieterlen also collaborated on a number of films about Dogon funerals as well as on a film about the *dama*, an elaborate ceremony that the Dogon hold a number of years later to bid a final farewell to the deceased and to bring the period of mourning to an end. Shot in 1974 but not edited until 1980, *Le Dama d’Ambara* concerns the *dama* held for Ambara, who had been one of Griaule and Dieterlen’s main informants since the 1930s. Arguably the most accomplished of all Rouch’s films about the Dogon, this film can be read not only as a *dama* for Ambara, but also as an *hommage* on Rouch’s part to Griaule, whose texts he performs verbatim and at some length in the voice-over commentary on the soundtrack (figure 8.3).

Despite this continuing productivity, Rouch’s star was gradually waning in France over this period, though leaving behind it a very long trail. His name, once ubiquitous in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, became scarce. The Dogon films appear to have been too specialised to have the same impact on the general public as his earlier work. Although he would continue to shoot minor ethnographic films in West Africa over the coming years, many were left unedited. Never again would he take on a major ethnographic film project. Instead, he threw his energies into other genres, such as portrait films, ciné-poems in Paris and elsewhere, and fiction films, some with only a tangential relationship to his ethnographic research. But with only a few exceptions, these did not feature prominently in the pages of *Cahiers du Cinéma* either.
Ironically, it was precisely around this time, at the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s, that Rouch was ‘discovered’ by English-language visual anthropologists, since his views about anthropology and cinema, particularly his reflexive, participatory methods, struck a chord with the postmodernist tendencies that were then sweeping through English-language anthropology, particularly on the US side of the Atlantic. Yet although Rouch may have been hailed as a prophet of postmodernism in English-language anthropology – very much to his surprise and amusement – his particular mode of ethnographic film authorship was deeply rooted in a number of intellectual and artistic traditions that were arguably more modernist than postmodernist, and certainly very distinctively French.  

8.3 *Le Dama d’Ambara* (1980). The *kanaga* masks, left, evoke the Pale Fox, a trickster demiurge, while the longer *serige* masks, right, represent vertical snakes, creatures associated with immortality because they can change their skins.

**The Surreal Encounter**

One of the most important of these traditions was Surrealism, which was very much in vogue in Paris in the 1930s when Rouch was still a teenager. Indeed, it was through a prior interest in Surrealism that Rouch first encountered anthropology.
Rouch liked to tell the story of that first encounter, which took place one spring afternoon in 1934, when, as a 17-year-old, he stopped in front of a bookshop in the Montparnasse quartier of Paris, close to his parental home. There in the window, in a pool of light cast by the setting sun, was a display of double-paged spreads from two different volumes of *Minotaure*, a recently founded journal which featured an eclectic mix of articles by Surrealist poets and artists, along with more conventional contributions by art historians, archaeologists and anthropologists.

One of those spreads, from the second volume, showed some photographs of masked dancers performing at a Dogon funeral in front of some tower-like adobe structures, the typical houses and granaries of the Dogon. These images formed part of the main feature of that volume, which was a special report on the Dakar-Djibouti expedition of 1931–33, written by its leader, Marcel Griaule. The other two-page spread showed the frontispiece of the most recent volume of *Minotaure*, which consisted of a colour reproduction of a painting by Giorgio de Chirico, an artist much admired by the Surrealists. This painting was *The Duo*, which features two masked mannequins standing in a dream-like landscape, with a pink tower and other structures in the background, not dissimilar to the structures in the Dogon funeral images.

In the mind of the young Rouch, as a *coup de foudre*, these images suddenly became inextricably entangled. The masked characters common to both sets of images seemed to him to offer a privileged means of access to the innermost recesses of the unconscious. The West African landscape took on the character of a fabulous terrain to which Rouch felt the urgent need to travel. In due course of time, not only would he seek out the photographer, Marcel Griaule, to be his teacher, but he would indeed travel to West Africa and would spend most of his life working there as both film-maker and anthropologist.9

The many connections in 1930s Paris between ethnology (as the study of social or cultural anthropology was then known in France), Surrealism and *l’art nègre* – the latter embracing everything from traditional African masks to African-American jazz, the exotic dancer Josephine Baker and even professional boxers – have been extensively commented upon, including by Rouch himself.10 The distinguished historian of anthropology in France, Jean Jamin, has suggested that the association between ethnology and Surrealism at this time was more a question of two activities occupying adjacent intellectual spaces rather than being involved in a genuine exchange: while the ethnologists were committed to detached observation and rigorous analysis, the Surrealists sought a subjective immersion in other cultural realities, hoping to tap into the creative life forces that they imagined to be inherent in such cultures, particularly those of Africa. According to Jamin, although there may have been certain ‘complicities and affinities’ between
ethnology and Surrealism, there was no long-term or systematic transfer of methods and concepts. But while this may have been generally true, it certainly does not apply to Jean Rouch, whose work continued to be influenced by Surrealist methods and concepts throughout his career, long after they had fallen out of fashion in the visual arts and poetry.

Rouch was particularly attracted to the Surrealist notion of the *rencontre*, the chance encounter between strangers or between disparate objects that produces unexpected manifestations of beauty or sources of inspiration. The account of Rouch’s own *rencontre* with the juxtaposed images of Dogon masks and the dreamscape of the de Chirico painting – a sort of *rencontre* with a *rencontre* – was but one of many stories that Rouch liked to tell about his own life in which an unexpected encounter had produced a positive outcome. These stories also included his discovery of a camera in the Paris flea market (a place much frequented by the Surrealists also) and the serendipitous subsequent meeting with Edmond Séchan on the flight to West Africa. The moral of these stories was invariably the importance of responding spontaneously to such opportunities.

However, the impact of Surrealism on Rouch’s work is only occasionally evident in so far as the specific visual content of his films is concerned. Although Rouch liked to allude to René Magritte and Salvador Dalí in interviews, and he remained an admirer of de Chirico throughout his life, for the most part the visual style of his films remained resolutely realist and naturalistic. There are few flights of visual fantasy in Rouch’s films, even in the dream sequences that occur in his ethnofictions. Indeed, Surrealist poetry had arguably a somewhat greater impact on the content of his films than did Surrealist visual art: Rouch often referred in interviews to Surrealist poets, particularly André Breton and Paul Eluard, and across his total film oeuvre, there are many different references to, and even direct citations of, the works of Surrealist poets or of their precursors, Arthur Rimbaud and Charles Baudelaire.

But the influence of Surrealism on Rouch’s film authorship is most marked in relation to the actual practical processes of film-making. Although Rouch would sometimes stress the importance of being well-prepared through careful prior research, inspired by the example of the Surrealists he considered that spontaneity and the ability to improvise in the actual moment of shooting were what counted above all in making a film. In this way, in the manner of the Surrealist technique of automatic writing, a film-maker could draw upon the creativity hidden within their unconscious. It was for this reason that Rouch would never ask his documentary subjects to repeat any actions, and even in his fictions, he tried to restrict himself and the actors to a single take. If any action had to be rehearsed or repeated, he believed that the quality of both the performance of the subject and the performance of the film-maker would suffer.
Jean Rouch: sharing anthropology

For a shot to turn out really well, Rouch believed that there should be improvised performances on both sides of the lens, in harmony with one another. Over the years, Rouch used many different analogies to describe this ideal situation. Sometimes he compared it to a ballet, at other times to a matador improvising his passes before the bull. But in an interview published in 1981, he proposed that these totally harmonised performances are so rare and so exquisite that they can only be compared to ‘those exceptional moments of a jam session between the piano of Duke Ellington and the trumpet of Louis Armstrong, or the electrifying encounters between strangers as described for us on occasion by André Breton’.12

As this remark shows, even some fifty years after they had been at the height of intellectual fashion in Paris, the associations between l’art nègre, Surrealist poetry and ethnography continued to be of central importance to way in which Rouch conceived of his film-making practice.

THE JOKING RELATIONSHIP

Although Rouch may have been entirely self-taught as a film-maker, he did receive a formal anthropological training. In the academic year 1940–41, still inspired by his rencontre with the Dogon images in the Montparnasse bookshop window, Rouch enrolled on an extramural course at the Musée de l’Homme given by the creator of those images, Marcel Griaule. These were supported by ‘magic lantern’ slide shows managed by Germaine Dieterlen. At the time, Rouch was in his final year as an engineering student at the elite grande école, Ponts et Chausées, and had no formal connection with either anthropology or film-making. But with Paris already under the German occupation, he considered these lectures in the darkened basement of the Musée as one of the few available windows on to the outside world. The relationships that he formed with Griaule and Dieterlen through this extramural course would be of crucial importance in shaping his future career.

Shortly afterwards, to fulfil his dream of travelling to West Africa as well as to escape from wartime France, Rouch took a job as a road-building engineer in Niamey, capital of the then French colony of Niger. Here he came across spirit possession among his labourers at first hand and began his first ethnographic researches of the phenomenon. Later, in 1944–45, after a couple of years combining engineering work with private study in the Institut français d’Afrique noire (IFAN) in Dakar, the capital of Senegal, he joined the Free French forces in Africa and participated in the liberation of France and the invasion of Germany. But immediately after the war, even before he had been formally demobilised, he returned to France and enrolled at the Sorbonne to study for a doctorate in anthropology under the supervision of Marcel Griaule.
In the immediate post-war period, Griaule was under something of a cloud. Unlike many leading anthropologists, he had not taken refuge abroad during the war. Instead he had chosen to remain behind and collaborate with the Vichy government, even accepting a chair at the Sorbonne during this period. But despite his deep personal aversion to everything associated with the Vichy regime, Rouch elected to study under Griaule because, he claimed, Griaule and his group simply ‘had more fun’ than the other leading Africanists with whom he might have worked. There were probably some more pragmatic considerations too: Griaule was the leading French authority on the middle Niger where Rouch wanted to work and, with Dieterlen, he had supported Rouch’s first amateur ethnographic research during the war years.13

Yet for all that he chose Griaule to be his teacher, there remained a certain ambiguity in Rouch’s attitudes towards his mentor, involving a curious mixture of disdain and respect. Rouch liked to present this as an extrapolation of the traditional joking relationship between the cliff-dwelling Dogon, whom Griaule had studied, and the Songhay and the other peoples of the lowland fluvial plains of the Niger with whom he himself mostly worked. This seems to have proved an effective way of both masking and managing the differences in their political views, not only in relation to collaboration with the Vichy government during the war years, but also with regard to the French colonial presence in Africa.

In contrast to the ambiguity in his relationship with Griaule, Rouch always retained the highest regard for Germaine Dieterlen. Not only did they collaborate on a large number of Dogon film projects in the 1960s and 1970s, but in the latter part of his career Rouch made no less than four ‘ciné-portraits’ of Dieterlen. When they were both in Paris, they spent a great deal of time in one another’s company, particularly after Rouch’s first wife, Jane, died in 1987. When Dieterlen herself died in 1999 at the age of 95, Rouch’s closest associates report that he was cast into a deep depression and never quite recaptured his celebrated \textit{joie de vivre} again.

Griaule passed on to Rouch his particular take on the intellectual inheritance that he had received from his own mentor, Marcel Mauss. From a methodological point of view, this involved a clear differentiation between the process of ethnographic description and the process of theoretical explanation. The first stage of a research project should consist of the systematic accumulation of large numbers of ‘documents’, that is particular bodies of ethnographic data, equivalent to what today might be called ‘files’. Only once these have been assembled and rigorously analysed should one aspire to draw any theoretical conclusions.

Although some of the theoretical conclusions that Mauss drew from the detailed analysis of ethnographic ‘documents’ have been the source of great inspiration to subsequent generations of anthropologists – notably his theory...
of the gift and its relationship to other forms of exchange – contemporary accounts of his lectures suggest that Mauss often got so immersed in the ethnographic detail that he never quite arrived at the theoretical conclusions. Rouch’s recollection of Griaule’s lectures as a series of disaggregated ethnographic titbits suggests that they may have suffered from the same shortcoming. One can also discern something of this tendency to accumulate the data first and ask questions later in a certain strand of Rouch’s filmmaking praxis too, notably in his accumulation of large quantities of observational rushes about spirit-possession ceremonies, the great majority of which remained unedited when he died.

If Rouch’s general intellectual formation can be traced ultimately to Mauss, his ideas about fieldwork were more directly influenced by Marcel Griaule. For although Mauss actively advocated fieldwork, his own investigations were entirely bibliographic. Griaule, by contrast, was highly committed to fieldwork in practice as well as in principle and his ideas about how to conduct fieldwork are laid out very explicitly in a slim handbook, *Méthode de l’ethnographie*. This was not published until 1957, the year after his death, but it drew upon his experience of working with the Dogon since the 1930s.

The approach to fieldwork advocated by Griaule in this book is quite unlike the one developed around the same time by English-language anthropologists. In the ideal ‘Anglo-Saxon’ model, the fieldworker, working alone, would take up residence in the community being studied, learn the language and aim to become a discreet observer of day-to-day life. Griaule, by contrast, advocated the formation of teams of fieldworkers, organised along quasi-military lines. The advantage of these teams, he argued, was that they would not only maximise the collection of data within any given time period, but they could also triangulate their results. Griaule’s methods were also highly proactive in the sense that they involved intensive interviews based on systematic questionnaires. Far from discreetly observing the subjects interacting among themselves, Griaule preferred to work with a select group of elite informants, using bilingual intermediaries rather than the indigenous language.

In certain regards, the fieldwork methods adopted by Jean Rouch were similar to those of his mentor. Like Griaule, he returned faithfully to the same field sites in West Africa year after year: he was fond of quoting Griaule and Dieterlen’s view that one needed at least twenty years of first-hand experience of a given society before one could begin to achieve a ‘deep knowledge’ of its systems of thought. However, this ‘deep knowledge’ did not presuppose a profound competence in the subjects’ language for, like Griaule, Rouch tended to rely on a key group of informants with whom he worked through the medium of French. Also like Griaule, Rouch tended to focus his attention on the public as opposed to the domestic domain. The great majority of his films are about public ceremonial performances.
of one kind or another, and there is very little emphasis on domestic life and the routines of the everyday. As a result, his films mainly concern the world of men while the more domestic world of women remains relatively neglected.17

In his camera-less fieldwork in West Africa, like his mentor, Rouch often conducted interviews using formal questionnaires. Although he very rarely used interviews of any kind in his African ethnographic films, one may also detect, as James Clifford has done, a certain continuity between Griaule’s method of using an interrogatory schedule of questions to provoke his subjects into revealing answers and Rouch’s use of the camera to provoke his subjects into revelatory performances.18 Indeed, one could take the analogy further and say that in the same way that Griaule’s proactive fieldwork methods contrasted with the more passive methods of his English-language contemporaries in anthropology, so too did Rouch’s proactive cinematographic methods contrast with the more low-key methods of Direct Cinema and Observational Cinema as practised by his English-language film-making contemporaries.19

**Shared anthropology**

If Rouch’s film-making praxis was based on a methodology that was in some ways similar to that of his mentor, in other respects it was radically different. This applies particularly to the key Rouchian concept of ‘shared anthropology’.

Griaule’s fieldwork method may have involved a form of dialogue with his subjects, but it was essentially antagonistic, being based on the assumption, stated repeatedly in *Méthode de l’ethnographie*, that his informants were lying. In an extended legal analogy, Griaule suggests that an informant should be considered the equivalent to the ‘guilty party’ in a court of law, while the remainder of the society should be considered his ‘accomplices’. In order to combat an informant’s congenital tendency to mislead, Griaule recommended that the researcher – compared variously to a prosecution lawyer, judge and even a bloodhound – should use whatever trick or stratagem was necessary to circumvent the informant’s defences. Although Griaule may have developed a profound respect for African culture, coming to regard Dogon cosmology as the equal of that of Ancient Greece, his methodological recommendations suggest that he had no respect for the Africans themselves as individuals.20

Griaule’s unscrupulous attitudes, self-evidently the product of a colonial mentality, could not be further from those of Rouch. Whereas Griaule turned to the police sniffer dog as a metaphor for the process whereby anthropological knowledge is to be achieved, Rouch thought of the
relationship between researcher and subjects as being, in the ideal case, like
the improvised harmonisation of performances between jazz musicians.

Shortly after his arrival in Niger in December 1941, and in defiance of
the Vichy governor’s disapproval of familiarity with Africans, Rouch became
friendly with a young local man, Damouré Zika, and appointed him as his
assistant. Damouré was a member of the Sorko subgroup of the Songhay,
known for their expertise in fishing the waters of the Niger. It was he who
first introduced Rouch to spirit possession cults through his grandmother,
Kalia, a priestess of one of the local cults. Damouré was the first and most
important of a group of Nigeriens whom Rouch subsequently gathered
around him and who accompanied him whenever he went to Africa. Later
additions to this group included Lam Ibrahim Dia, a Fulani cattle-herder,
Illo Gaoudel, also a Sorko fisherman, and Tallou Mouzourane, a Bella orphan
without a family to support him. Somewhat later, Moussa Hamidou, who
belonged to the Zerma ethnic group, also joined this inner circle of Rouch’s
confidants (figure 8.4).

These men helped Rouch in a variety of different ways: they conducted
surveys for his migration studies, crewed on his documentaries and took a
leading part as actors in his ethnofictions. They also drove his Land Rover,
carried his equipment and generally acted as his local fixers. In return,
Rouch not only paid them salaries while they worked for him, but shared
the profits of his films on a 50/50 basis. He also supported them in many
other ways too: he arranged for Damouré to be trained as a medical auxiliary
and later as a pharmacist, which allowed him, in local terms, to achieve
great wealth and status; Lam learned to drive with Rouch and became a
professional driver, using his income from the films to buy vehicles; through
his cinema work with Rouch, Moussa was able to pay for all his sons to be educated as professionals; when Rouch met Tallou, he was suffering from leprosy, so Rouch arranged for him to be cured and then took him under his wing, supporting him for the rest of his life. When Rouch died in the tragic road accident in February 2004, travelling in the same car with him, though fortunately not seriously hurt, was Damouré, still accompanying Rouch more than sixty years after they had first met.21

These attitudes of respect for his subjects were made manifest in a variety of ways in Rouch’s film-making praxis. One of the most important was his practice of screening back his films to the subjects. Rouch liked to trace this practice back to the example set by Robert Flaherty, who, during the making of *Nanook of the North* in the early 1920s, had screened his rushes to his subjects in order to decide what they should film the next day.22 But Rouch went very much further than this, giving his African collaborators a much greater role in contributing to his films than Flaherty ever gave to the Inuit. Flaherty asked the Inuit to adjust their house constructions, subsistence activities, their costumes and even their personal identities to the requirements of his film. In contrast, Rouch was reluctant to ask his subjects to dress up or behave in any special way. Instead he would simply ask them to improvise along whatever lines they themselves thought fit. Rouch’s feedback procedures were also very much more elaborate. He did not merely screen his rushes to his subjects in order to plan the next day’s shooting: often he would return, months or years later, not with the rushes, but with the completed film and screen that to his subjects.

Rouch readily acknowledged that there were certain pragmatic advantages to be derived from such feedback screenings. At first, he had tried giving his written works to the Songhay, but had quickly discovered that they had no use for them. On the other hand, when he started screening his films, not only did the Songhay understand his objectives more clearly, they became his active collaborators. At the simplest level, this consisted of merely commenting on the ethnographic content of the films. But this was only the start of a longer-term process. More important than the feedback per se was the collaboration that followed thereafter. For Rouch discovered that at the end of a feedback screening, members of the audience would often come up to him and suggest an idea for a new film. These could be people who had been directly involved in the first film, or other members of the audience who had concluded that a film about their activities would be even more interesting than the film that Rouch had just shown. In this way, the screening of one film could lead to the making of another in which the subjects who proposed the idea were not merely protagonists, but stakeholders in the making of a new film.

But Rouch thought of feedback screenings primarily in ethical terms, describing them as a form of ‘audiovisual countergift’ – a very Maussian
Jean Rouch: sharing anthropology

term – offered in exchange for the support he had received from the subjects during the production process. By this means, the making of an ethnographic film could form the basis for promoting mutual understanding and respect between observer and observed:

This is the start of what some of us are already calling ‘shared anthropology.’ The observer is finally coming down from his ivory tower; his camera, tape recorder, and his projector have led him – by way of a strange initiation path – to the very heart of knowledge and, for the first time, his work is not being judged by a thesis committee but by the very people whom he came to observe.23

**Postcards at the service of the Imaginary**

This commitment to the idea of a shared anthropology which Rouch formulated as far back as the early 1950s (even if he did not give it precisely this name until the early 1970s) anticipated by more than two decades the ‘dialogical anthropology’ that, under the influence of postmodernism, became fashionable in English-language anthropology from the late 1970s onwards. This was one of the aspects of Rouch’s authorial praxis that led to his work being warmly embraced by English-speaking ethnographic film-makers at that time. But although Rouch’s methodology was certainly marked by this and a number of other apparently postmodern traits – including his rejection of the great twentieth-century metanarratives of Marxism and psychoanalysis – he had arrived at these positions, not through antipathy to modernism as such, but by a series of quite different routes.24

As far as the technology of film-making was concerned, Rouch was certainly very modernist in his ideas, believing enthusiastically in the potential of technological advance to transform human experience for the better. In the early 1960s, drawing on his engineering background, Rouch collaborated actively with camera and sound-recording engineers in the development of a system of portable lip-synchronous sound. Experiments with this new technology were taking place on both sides of the Atlantic at this time, and there was considerable exchange of technical ideas and equipment between Rouch’s group in France and both the Direct Cinema group on the east coast of the USA and a group of mostly francophone film-makers working for the Canadian National Film Board. One of the latter, Michel Brault, came across to Paris at Rouch’s invitation and played a major role as a camera operator in the making of *Chronicle of a Summer*.

However, although there might have been a considerable degree of transatlantic cross-fertilisation in a technical sense, it soon became clear that there were major differences in ideas about how this new technology should be used. In North America, the Direct Cinema group sought to use the
new portable technology to maximise their own effacement while shooting, interfering as little as possible in the behaviour of their subjects. In this way, they hoped that they would be able to film their subjects going about their lives just as they would have done had the camera not been there. Rouch’s attitude to the new technology was very different: he believed that the presence of the camera would inevitably affect the performance of the subjects, however discreetly it was operated. But far from devaluing the quality of the material that was filmed, he thought that this provocation of extraordinary behaviour increased its value. This was because, in putting on a special performance for the camera, the subjects would reveal more about themselves, and particularly about their inner thoughts, dreams and fantasies. ‘What has always seemed very strange to me’, he commented in an interview in 1964, ‘is that contrary to what one might think, when people are being recorded, the reactions that they have are always infinitely more sincere than those they have when they are not being recorded.’

Although the new technological advances greatly increased the fidelity of the copy of the world rendered by the cinematographic apparatus, it was rather its enhanced capacity to bring to the surface that which was normally hidden that was most appreciated by Rouch. This, for him, was the ultimate objective of film-making. As he put it in a 1967 interview:

For me, cinema, making a film, is like Surrealist painting: the use of the most real processes of reproduction, the most photographic, but at the service of the unreal, of the bringing into being of elements of the irrational (as in Magritte, Dali). The postcard at the service of the Imaginary.

The greater capacity of the new technology to provoke revelatory performances on the part of the subjects derived in large part from its portability, which allowed much greater immersion on the part of the film-maker in the subjects’ world. In this connection, Rouch enthusiastically endorsed the analogy drawn by the co-director of Chronicle of a Summer, Edgar Morin, who proposed that with the aid of the new technology, Rouch could become a sort of ‘film-maker-diver’ who, unencumbered by equipment, could ‘plunge into real-life situations’. But for Rouch, this immersion in the world of the subjects entailed more than just a pragmatic technical strategy: in the ideal case, it also enabled the film-maker to enter a particular state of mind, one that he referred to as the ‘ciné-trance’.

**The ciné-trance and ‘la barbarie de l’invention’**

Rouch’s most systematic discussion in print of the notion of the ciné-trance is in an article that he wrote shortly after completing one of his most frequently cited films, Les Tambours d’avant: Tourou et Bitti. This is a very
short film, consisting almost entirely of a single sequence-shot, that is, an unbroken take lasting approximately 11 minutes, which is the full duration of a 16 mm film magazine of 400 feet. The subject of this film is a spirit possession ceremony in Simiri, the Zerma village in northwest Niger where he made many of his films on this subject. On this occasion, the villagers were asking the spirits to prevent locusts from destroying their millet crop. A number of different strands of Rouch’s authorial praxis come together in this film, so I shall describe it here in some detail.28

After a couple of preliminary shots outside the village, Rouch begins the sequence-shot on the sun and then pans down to enter the village with a tracking shot, passing a herd of tethered sacrificial goats on the left and, on the right, a disconsolate male medium, Sambou Albeybu, still awaiting inspiration. He then crosses the small plaza and approaches the orchestra composed of two or three drummers and a monochord violinist. The musicians redouble their efforts as the camera glides over them, revealing their various instruments one by one. At this point, the music begins to peter out and the camera starts to withdraw, when suddenly there is a cry of ‘Meat!’ and Sambou goes into trance as he is possessed by the spirit of Kure the Hyena. The priests of the cult, the zima, then engage Sambou–Kure in a bantering dialogue, offering him ‘meat’, in the form of sacrificial animals, in exchange for ‘grass’, a good harvest. At this point, with the camera still turning, an old woman, Tusinye Wazi, hops across the plaza, shivering all over because she has been possessed by the spirit of Hadyo the Fulani Slave. The zima continue their negotiations with Kure, who is now threatening to leave unless he gets ‘blood’. But as Rouch could tell from the rattle of the film in the magazine that he was nearing the end of the roll, he withdraws at this point to the edge of the plaza. From here, he ends on a wide shot showing the young people looking on, before finally panning up to the now-setting sun.

Rouch would frequently refer to this film as a prime example of the way in which the presence of a camera can provoke a revelatory change in reality. For, he claimed, it was his shooting that led the mediums to go into a trance state, at least indirectly: in the middle of the shot, as the drum music began to peter out, the violinist noticed that Rouch was still shooting and presuming that this must be because he could see the spirits with his camera, the violinist began to play more energetically, which encouraged the drummers to start again, which in turn sent the mediums into trance (figure 8.5).

This film also exemplifies Rouch’s understanding of the play between subjectivity and objectivity that is involved in making a film. Over an opening pre-title shot, Rouch comments that the film is ‘an attempt to practise ethnographic cinema in the first person’. This is then followed by a cut to black with the title and ‘un film de Jean Rouch’, discreetly displayed
Part II: Authors

8.5 The ciné-trance in *Les Tambours d'avant* (1972). When the musicians, left, saw that Rouch was still shooting, they started to play with renewed vigour, sending the spirit medium, right, into trance.

in one corner. Then the sequence-shot begins, with Rouch commenting over it, ‘To enter into a film is to plunge into reality, and to be, at once, both present and invisible’. Thus the film is presented as a direct ‘plunge into reality’ (possibly a reference to the metaphor of the ‘film-maker-diver’) but at the same time as a view of this reality that is both subjective (‘ethnographic cinema in the first person’) and authored (‘un film de Jean Rouch’).

This authorship is evident also in the narrative structure of the film, which conforms to a series of highly conventional tropes, exemplified particularly by the framing of the entire sequence-shot by a shot panning down from the sun at the beginning and another panning up to the sun at the end. The tracking movement entering the village is balanced by a similar tracking movement towards the end of the sequence-shot as the camera withdraws to the edge of the circle where the action is taking place. Before the final pan back up to the sun, there is a shot of the children metaphorically looking into the future, a very common trope of narrative closure. It is not clear quite how conscious Rouch was of this process of narrativisation, but his observation on the commentary track, as the camera is withdrawing, that he would have liked to have continued amidst the dancers but wanted ‘to return to the beginning of my story’ suggests that at some level of consciousness, it was entirely intentional.

However, for Rouch, the most important feature of this film was the example that it offered of the ciné-trance. He later described how, when he and the sound recordist, Moussa Hamidou, put down their equipment at the end of the sequence-shot, they were both trembling. Rouch attributed this to the fact that the insistent rhythm of the music had not merely sent the two mediums into trance, but the two film-makers as well. This trance he characterised as a sort of ‘enthusiasm’ that was ‘essential to poetic creativity’
and comparable to the German concept of *Stimmung*, a term which literally means ‘a frame of mind’ or ‘a tuning’, as of a musical instrument, but which, in Rouch’s view, defies translation in this more poetic sense. Rouch claimed that when he entered this state, he felt liberated from the weight of anthropological and cinematographic theory and became free to rediscover what he called ‘*la barbarie de l’invention*’ – a phrase that also defies a simple translation but which one might render as ‘raw creativity’.29

**Cinéma-vérité**

There was also another, very different ingredient to Rouch’s notion of the ciné-trance. The fact that he refers to this trance-like state not just as a trance, but as a ciné-trance is a sign of the influence of the Polish-Russian Soviet film-maker, Dziga Vertov. Along with Flaherty, Rouch considered Vertov as his filmic ‘totemic ancestor’, claiming that everything that he himself had tried to do as a film-maker could be traced to these two predecessors.30 Best known for his 1929 film *The Man with the Movie Camera*, Vertov’s work was an enthusiasm that Rouch first took up around the time that he was making *Chronicle of a Summer* in 1960–61. Though Vertov had died – relatively young – only in 1954, by the 1960s he was a largely forgotten figure in the Soviet Union. However, the promotion of his ideas in France by the Marxist cinema historian Georges Sadoul, and also by Edgar Morin, Rouch’s co-director on *Chronicle of a Summer*, had served to maintain an interest in his work among French film-makers.

Rouch found in Vertov’s work an endorsement of his own very modernist view that the cinematographic apparatus offered a new and privileged way of representing the world:

> Dziga Vertov … understood that the cinematographic way of looking was highly distinctive, employing a new organ of perception, the camera, which bore little relation to the human eye, and which he called the ‘ciné-eye.’ Later, with the appearance of sound, he identified a ‘radio-ear’ in the same way, as an organ specific to recorded sound … Taken as a whole, he called this discipline cinéma-vérité (cinema-truth), which is an ambiguous expression since, fundamentally, cinema cuts up, speeds up, slows down, thereby distorting the truth. For me, however, ‘cinema-truth’ has a specific meaning in the same way that ‘ciné-eye’ does, designating not pure truth, but the truth particular to recorded images and sounds: ‘ciné-truth’.31

The term cinéma-vérité – a direct translation into French of Vertov’s original compound Russian term *kino-pravda* – has had a chequered history in non-fiction film-making. For a period, in North America particularly, it was understood to denote a documentary-making practice that aimed to reveal an entirely objective truth about the world. As such, it came to be
used to refer to the work of the Direct Cinema film-makers, who, as described earlier, aspired to use the new portable synchronous sound technology to maximise their self-effacement and thereby provide an account of the world that was as objective as possible. For Rouch, on the other hand, as the passage quoted above makes clear, cinéma-vérité did not denote some chimerical objective truth, but rather a distinctive form of truth that was particular to the cinema.

Yet while Rouch and Vertov may have shared this general view about the nature of cinematographic reality, at the level of actual practice they shared little in common. Whereas the visual aesthetic of Rouch’s films was generally realist and, once the technology allowed, was based as much as possible on the extended sequence-shot, Vertov’s praxis involved the extensive use of montage and special effects, and a complete disregard for any naturalistic conception of realism.

Another fundamental difference concerned the circumstances of shooting. Both Rouch and Vertov laid great emphasis on recording life sur le vif, that is, not in a studio but directly as it is lived, out on the streets or in the countryside. But as Edgar Morin pointed out, there is a certain voyeuristic quality to Vertov’s work, with the camera often intruding clandestinely on the privacy of its subjects.32 By contrast, in Rouch’s work, the process of filming normally took place within a well-established prior relationship with the subjects. In order to realise his shots, Rouch did not place himself in extraordinary physical situations, as Vertov’s cameraman is shown doing in The Man with the Movie Camera, but sought instead to harmonise his performance as a cameraperson with the performance of his subjects.

But perhaps the most fundamental difference of all concerned the precise nature of the truth that Vertov and Rouch respectively believed was made possible by cinema. For Vertov, the term cinéma-vérité referred to the process of perceiving the world: the ciné-eye could go anywhere and see anything. It could fly in the air with aeroplanes, watch from beneath as a train thundered overhead, pry into a woman’s boudoir. The images captured by this roving ciné-eye could then be transformed in all manner of ways in the edit suite: they could be cut up, speeded up or slowed down. In this way, humanity’s vision of the world was transformed. By this means, as Vertov put it, ‘life-facts’ were turned into ‘film-facts’.33

For Rouch, on the other hand, cinéma-vérité was achieved not by the transformation of the perception of the world by means of the camera but rather by the transformation of the world itself, as the camera, by its mere presence, provoked film subjects into performances that were different from their everyday behaviour, and which could thereby reveal their innermost thoughts and dreams. Once back in the edit suite, in total contrast to Vertov, Rouch sought to keep the further transformation of these revelatory epiphanies to
a minimum. In fact, for him, the ideal was to make the process of editing in the edit suite completely unnecessary by shooting the entire film in a single unbroken sequence-shot, as in *Les Tambours d’avant*. But Rouch seems never to have acknowledged these fundamental differences between his own authorial praxes and those of Vertov, and he continued to invoke him as a ‘totemic ancestor’ until the end of his life.

In attempting to theorise his concept of the ciné-trance, Rouch draws directly on the ideas of his ‘totemic ancestor’ in proposing an analogy between the condition of Songhay mediums and film-makers immersed in the ciné-trance. Whereas the medium’s body is taken over by a spirit, the film-maker is taken over by *Stimmung*, poetic creativity. In the same way that the Songhay mediums possessed by a spirit imagine themselves to be entering a world that differs from everyday experience, so too do ‘possessed’ film-makers cross the threshold of a different reality when turning on the camera and entering the ciné-trance. This different reality is the world where truths particular to the cinema hold sway, the world of *cinéma-vérité*.³⁴

When film-makers are in the ciné-trance, Rouch suggests that everything they do is determined by this condition. In describing his own actions while in a state of ciné-trance, Rouch attaches Vertovian prefixes to all the verbs. Thus when he films, he ‘ciné-looks’, when he records sound, he ‘ciné-listens’, and while editing, he ‘ciné-thinks’ as he ‘ciné-cuts’. In fact, he becomes totally identified with this ciné-persona:

> With a ciné-eye and a ciné-ear, I am ciné-Rouch in a state of ciné-trance engaged in ciné-filming … That then is ciné-pleasure, the joy of filming.³⁵

Moreover, as this ideal state can only be achieved if there are effective performances on both sides of the lens, his film subjects too should become involved in this world. Rouch claimed that since they understood perfectly well what he was doing as a result of his many feedback screenings, his subjects reacted to his film-making as they would do to those who are possessed by spirits, namely by lending themselves to the performance on its own terms. Thus as he ‘ciné-observes’, they allow themselves to be ‘ciné-observed’.³⁶ And in the most extreme case — as he suggests may have happened in the filming of *Les Tambours d’avant* — in response to the film-makers’ ciné-trance, the subjects may go into their own kind of trance.

This attempt by Rouch to theorise the ciné-trance as a means of gaining access to the domain of *cinéma-vérité* through the yoking together of Songhay and Vertovian ideas has attracted much comment. Whether it is convincing is another matter. For the fact that one can draw certain analogies between the conditions of the immersed film-maker and the possessed medium does not mean that these conditions are, in any genuinely meaningful sense, the same.
The film-maker immersed in a ciné-trance may come to see and understand the world in a distinctive manner, which, moreover, might seem to them to emanate from outside their conscious mind. While in this state, they may be able to produce a representation of the world that could be considered an example of cinéma-vérité in that it communicates a truth about the world in a way that only cinema can do. But even in Rouch’s most enthusiastic formulation of the concept of the ciné-trance, there is no sense that in the course of generating this cinéma-vérité representation, the filmmaker has been invaded by a foreign being. By contrast, for the Songhay mediums, the spirits by whom they become possessed and whose known typical behaviours they enact when under their influence, are understood to be an extraneous form of being that has taken up residence inside their bodies. In view of this fundamental ontological difference, rather than burden the concept of the ciné-trance with the notion that it represents a portal to cinéma-vérité construed as some privileged domain of reality that is equivalent to the world of Songhay spirits, it would be more appropriate, I suggest, to regard it simply as an instructive metaphor based on certain functional parallels between the state of mind of a cinematographer totally immersed in their work, and that of a spirit medium.

One of the most interesting of these parallels, though one that Rouch himself does not seem to have been aware of, is the fact that although the immersed cinematographer and the possessed medium may both be drawing on the unconscious mind, their performances remain structured by culturally specific codes. Thus, just as Songhay mediums possessed by spirits in Les Tambours d’avant reveal the identity of those spirits to onlookers by acting in particular conventional ways, so too Rouch, the film-maker-diver, even though immersed within the ciné-trance, still shoots his sequence-shot according to the most conventional of narrative tropes. Even Rouch, it seems, for all his virtuosity and despite his sense of being in contact with la barbarie de l’invention when in the ciné-trance, could not entirely escape from the ‘prison-house of language’.

**The master’s voice**

One of the most distinctive features of Rouch’s authorial praxis concerns the role of language, though his pronouncements on this matter could be rather contradictory. Although he played a leading part in the technical development of lip-synchronous portable sound technology in the early 1960s, he could be very dismissive of films that relied on conversational exchanges between the subjects, once observing that the films of the Direct Cinema group were ‘spoiled by incredible regard for the chatting of the people filmed, as if oral testimony were more sacred than the visual sort’.
He confidently predicted that this ‘archaic habit’, which he believed had
derived from radio, would ‘disappear quite soon’.37

However, Rouch himself made abundant use of language in his films,
and in a variety of ways, depending on the genre in which he was working.
But whatever the genre, the language employed was almost invariably
French (or very occasionally English). The sharing of anthropology may
have been the cornerstone of his authorial praxis, but it was a sharing that
almost always took place in Rouch’s own language rather than that of
his subjects.

In addition to all his other skills, Rouch was a very able verbal performer,
as he demonstrates in his African documentaries, in which his voice pre-
dominates in the form of a voice-over commentary that typically runs from
beginning to end. He not only speaks about the subjects, but he also speaks
for them, paraphrasing what they are saying in a variety of tones of voice,
speeds, and styles of delivery, according to the subject matter and circumstances.
But while his declamatory and poetic commentary style worked well enough
when it came to paraphrasing speech that was itself declamatory and poetic,
as in the chanting that might take place during a ritual event, it was less
successful stylistically when it came to paraphrasing everyday conversation,
and more or less unworkable in situations in which several different voices
were involved.

Rouch could have overcome this problem if he had been prepared to
use subtitles when these first became technically possible in the 1960s. But
Rouch consistently refused to take advantage of this possibility, offering a
whole range of arguments against them. He would claim that they ‘mutilate’
the visual images of a film and to no avail, because they give only a very
poor translation of what is being said. He argued that subtitles could slow
up a film too much, since one often found oneself waiting for a statement
to be completed before one could cut. Yet another reason was that he
wanted his films to be watched in West Africa, and for these audiences, he
claimed, voice-over was preferable to subtitling because literacy rates were
very low.38 But whether these various practical problems were the most
fundamental reason why Rouch was unwilling to employ subtites is debatable.
At least equally important, one suspects, is that the technique of poetically
paraphrasing his African subjects’ speech had become such an integral part
of his cinematographic écriture in the pre-synchronous sound era that he
was unwilling to give it up in favour of the more puritanical disciplines of
subtitling.

What is certainly the case is that when the language employed by the
subjects is French, the role that language plays in Rouch’s films is very
different. Among the various genres of Rouch’s film-making in which the
subjects speak French are his ethnofictions, even though the subjects of
these ethnofictions are mostly African. The language component of his
earliest ethnofictions (Jaguar and Moi, un Noir) consists primarily of a voice-over improvised by the subjects in response to a projection of an assembly of the film rushes. In sharp contrast to his conventional ethnographic documentaries, Rouch’s voice is heard only briefly and intermittently. In the later ethnofictions, starting with La Pyramide humaine, released in 1961, by which time lip-synchronous sound had become possible, these improvised voice-overs are displaced as the principal linguistic device by interactive dialogues between the subjects, though these too were mostly improvised rather than scripted. These dialogues are entirely in French, though in the case of La Pyramide humaine, it is less artificial than in the earlier ethnofictions in the sense that many of the subjects are the children of colonial personnel, whose first language would have been French. But even when the Africans are speaking to one another in this film, they also always speak in French.

Of all Rouch’s films, the one demonstrating the greatest elaboration of linguistic devices is Chronicle of a Summer. As it is set in Paris and the south of France, this film is, of course, also in French. But in other respects, this film is very different in its use of language both from Rouch’s African documentaries and from his ethnofictional works. Although there is a very limited amount of voice-over spoken by Rouch at the beginning of the film and a certain amount of informal dialogue between the subjects that they themselves have apparently initiated, the predominant linguistic mode of Chronicle of a Summer consists of dialogues between the subjects and the film-makers, or alternatively, dialogues between the subjects that have been set up by the film-makers.

These exchanges between film-makers and subjects, direct or indirect, take a variety of forms. They include highly formal, interrogational interviews conducted by Morin, who often appears in shot, and proxy interviews of one subject by another. They also include vox pops conducted by two of the subjects around the streets of Paris and also various examples of what one might now call ‘focus groups’. The latter involve not only the subjects, but also both Rouch and Morin and even the production crew, and are often disguised in a charmingly French way as postprandial discussions around tables laden with evidence of a good meal and many bottles of wine recently consumed. Towards the end of the film, there is another type of focus group scene in which most of the principal subjects are gathered together in a small cinema and asked for their feedback on a preliminary assembly of the film. This is then followed by a sequence of Rouch and Morin walking up and down among the display cases of the Musée de l’Homme in which they engage in a reflexive conversation about what the feedback from the subjects has revealed about the nature of the truth that can be achieved through film (figure 8.6).

There is also a soliloquy in Chronicle, one that is often commented upon and which has Surrealist improvisational resonances, though to the best of
my knowledge, it is the only time in the whole of his oeuvre that Rouch used this device. It is performed by one of the leading subjects, the late Marceline Loridan, who was given a microphone linked to a tape-recorder hidden in a shoulder bag and invited to walk through Paris saying whatever came into her head. Yet although the soliloquy was spontaneous in this sense, the circumstances were set up by the film-makers – by agreement with Marceline, who seems to have had the idea in the first place – so that

8.6 Language in *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961). Top left, the interrogational interview of Marilou; centre left, mutual proxy interview between Angelo and Landry; bottom left, vox pop interviews by Nadine and Marceline. Top right, a focus group in the form of a meal at *Le Totem* restaurant; centre right, the film-makers in reflexive conversation at the *Musée de l’Homme*; bottom right, Marceline’s soliloquy on the Place de la Concorde.
she would have a very particular kind of thought, namely, a reflection on her experiences of deportation to a Nazi concentration camp during the Second World War. To this end, the film-makers took Marceline to the Place de la Concorde in the centre of Paris, which had recently been the location for the making of a feature film about the German occupation. By the time they arrived, all the German army signs had been taken down, and the uniformed extras were no longer to be seen, but the location had the desired effect anyway. Later in the same sequence, they transferred her to the old Les Halles market where the architecture reminded her of the railway station at which she had boarded the train to Germany, provoking further reflections on her heart-rending experiences.

Although *Chronicle of a Summer* may be Rouch’s best-known film, there are many ways in which, in terms of its praxis, it is atypical of his work as a whole, the use of language being one of the most salient. However, what is distinctive about the use of language in the making of this film is not so much the fact of the dialogues between film-makers and subjects, as the fact that these dialogues are presented on screen. Interviews, informal conversation and focus groups had all been a regular part of Rouch’s participatory methodology earlier in his career in Africa, as had the screening back of rushes to the subjects. But with the exception of some brief passages in *La Pyramide humaine*, Rouch had not previously shown himself in his films actually using these methods. What we are offered in *Chronicle of a Summer* then, in an almost uniquely reflexive way within Rouch’s oeuvre as a whole, is the opportunity to see some of the practical principles underlying his concept of shared anthropology being played out in front of us.

**Jean Rouch as Author: The Legacy of Shared Anthropology**

Feedback screenings and the ciné-trance represent two poles of sharing anthropology as Rouch conceived it, the ciné-trance constituting the most active, performative form, with feedback screenings being more passive. While there was some common ground between the more passive forms of Rouchian shared anthropology and the collaborative ‘dialogical’ approaches to anthropology that English-language anthropologists began to advocate in the 1970s, there was an extra, performative dimension to the Rouchian conception of shared anthropology. Whereas English-language dialogical anthropology typically consisted of a merely verbal exchange between researcher and subjects, in the most active form of Rouchian shared anthropology, the parties to the exchange are conceived as undergoing a radical transformation as each puts on an almost theatrical performance for the
other, thereby jointly creating a form of knowledge that is a direct result of the encounter itself. In Rouch’s view, this knowledge, far from being dismissed as false because it is an artifice of the encounter, should be considered, if anything, more valuable than any form of objective, detached observation that reveals only the surface of things.

Whatever reservations one might have about some of the more ambitious theoretical ramifications of Rouch’s concept of the ciné-trance, one can still recognise the value of the proposition that is inherent to it, namely that the production of knowledge about the world cinematographically involves a process of exchange and mutual accommodation between filmmaker and subjects. This was an idea that carried both methodological and ethical implications and Rouch deserves particular credit for having had the originality and independence of mind to develop such an idea, particularly since he spent his formative years working under the restrictive conditions of colonial West Africa.

However, some African film-makers and scholars have been critical of Rouch’s work, considering it irredeemably colonialist, even if in a largely benign paternalist manner. These critical voices should be understood within the complex entanglements of the late colonial and postcolonial period and in particular, of the effects of the Laval Decree which, in place since the 1930s, prevented any form of film-making by Africans in French colonial Africa until after independence. In the circumstances, it cannot have been anything other than profoundly galling for Africans to see Rouch fêted, by the likes of Jean-Luc Godard and others, for having given a voice to Africa.39

These critical voices should make one cautious about laying too great a burden of expectation on the Rouchian notion of shared anthropology. In the last analysis, although his subjects and his local collaborators may have played a highly active part in creating his films, Rouch remained the overall author: they may have received screen credits and also considerable material benefits, but the films still bore the legend ‘un film de Jean Rouch’. As Jean-Paul Colleyn commented in his obituary for Rouch, within the inequalities of North–South relationships, the idea of an entirely shared anthropology, based on a genuinely collective authorship of equals, was always going to be something of a fiction and it continues to be so, even under present circumstances, some fifty years after the end of European colonialism in West Africa.40

But even while we should recognise all this in more sober moments, we should not be too ‘presentist’ in our assessment of Jean Rouch’s work. We should not underestimate the hurdles of both a cultural and political nature that Rouch had to vault in order to make collaborative films with Africans of socially and politically marginal status in the still-colonial era of the 1940s and 1950s. Nor should we forget that the idea of surrendering any degree of authorship to the subjects of study was far in advance of
the practice of the great majority of even the most progressive of his contemporaries, in both French- and English-language anthropology. Even if Rouch’s ability to practise a fully shared anthropology was limited by the particular conjuncture of historical conditions under which he himself was working, this does not diminish the challenge and inspiration that his participatory authorial praxis continues to offer to ethnographic film-makers working today.

Notes

1 This chapter draws extensively on my previous monograph on Jean Rouch, which has recently been republished in French in a substantially revised form (Henley 2009; 2020). Essential reading in any serious study of the films of Jean Rouch is the earlier monograph by Paul Stoller, The Cinematic Griot (1992). Two valuable additions to the literature on Jean Rouch’s film-making have recently been published under the editorship of Luc Pequet (2017) and Rina Sherman (2018).

2 See the discussion of Griaule’s work, pp. 46–8.

3 de Pastre (2017).

4 Rouch was also a prolific photographer, particularly in the early stages of his career. Very few of his photographs have been published, but in 2000 the Comité du film ethnographique put on an exhibition which led the distinguished photojournalist and film-maker Raymond Depardon to place Rouch, as a photographer, on a par with Pierre Verger and Cartier-Bresson (Gauthier and Pellé 2000, 4). A selection of Rouch’s photographs is discussed at www.comitedufilmethnographique.com/jean-rouch/photothèque/.

5 For the film catalogues, see Rouch (1967a) and Rouch and Salzmann (1970). More generally regarding Rouch’s publications, see Henley (2009), 465–7, while for the films about Rouch, see ibid., pp. 431–2. See also www.comitedufilmethnographique.com/jean-rouch/bibliographie/.


7 Rouch (1955), 147.


9 Rouch (1995c), 410. See also Henley (2009), 19–23.


11 Jamin (1991), 84.


15 See Mary Douglas (1975), who contrasts the Griaulian approach with the Malinowski-inspired approach of British social anthropologists of the same period.

16 Rouch (2003b), 111.

17 When challenged about the relative absence of women in his African films, Rouch explained that he had found it quite impossible as a European man to film African women, since this would not have been permitted by local people (Georgakas et al. 2003, 217). While this may have been true to a certain extent, it is not an entirely
convincing explanation as he did, on occasion, manage to film women’s lives, as did Griaule also. Later in his career, Rouch encouraged anthropologist-film-maker Nadine Wanono to work with the Dogon with the explicit objective of presenting a female perspective on Dogon society (Wanono 1987; 2006).

18 Clifford (1988a), 77.
19 On Observational Cinema, see Chapter 10.
20 See particularly Griaule (1957), 59.
21 Rouch also supported the careers of many of his other African associates, including Oumarou Ganda, Moustapha Allasane and Safi Faye, all of whom became significant figures in West African cinema.
22 See Chapter 2, p. 106.
23 Rouch (1993a), 96.
24 Rouch disdained both Marx and Freud on the grounds that they were thinkers who exploited other peoples’ dreams rather than being dreamers themselves (Taylor 2003), 132.
26 Fieschi and Téchiné (1967), 19.
27 Morin (2003), 230–1, 264, n. 3.
28 The article inspired by Les Tambours d’avant has been republished several times, most recently in a collection of Rouch’s articles edited by Jean-Paul Colleyn (Rouch 2009). It has also been translated into English by Steven Feld (Rouch 2003a).
29 See Rouch (1989), 186n; Rouch (2003a), 100. I suspect that Rouch borrowed the phrase ‘la barbarie de l’invention’ from one of his Surrealist poet-heroes, but I have not been able to identify the precise source.
31 Rouch (2009), 151.
32 Morin (2003), 230.
34 See particularly Fulchignoni (2003), 185.
35 Fulchignoni (2003), 150.
36 Rouch (2009), 152. See also Rouch (2003), 99.
37 See Rouch (1995a), 94.
39 For critical voices, see Cervoni (1982), Gabriel (1982), 74–7, Haffner (1996). But see also Jamie Berthe’s recent finessing of these criticisms (2018).
40 Colleyn (2005).