

## Workshop on Ethnofictions

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This text has grown out of an abstract for a “Workshop on Ethnofiction” that I presented at the 24th Nordic Anthropological Filmmakers’ Association Film Festival in 2004 at the Estonian National Museum in Tartu, within the framework of the Visual Culture Week. After my participation at NAFA 2004 I would continue do a practice-based PhD in Drama at the University of Manchester, asking what the ethnofiction is and how I could develop aspects of Rouch’s approach into a generic methodology. The research would form the basis for ethnographic fieldwork research conducted during fifteen months among transgendered Brazilians living in São Paulo. The fieldwork resulted in one ethnographic documentary short and one ethnofiction focusing on identity and discrimination among Brazilian *travestis*<sup>1</sup> and transsexuals. This text will primarily be concerned with the preceding theoretical research were I tried to separate and define aspects of Rouch’s practice in ethnofictions to be able to apply them in my own filmmaking.

Ethnofiction is an experimental ethnographic film approach, where the practitioner asks the subjects of his fieldwork to act out aspects of their life-experience in front of the camera in improvisations as exemplified in Jean Rouch’s classic films *Jaguar* (1967), *Moi, un noir* (1957) and *La pyramide humaine* (1961). Jean Rouch was constantly inventing and reinventing terms to describe his work as a social anthropologist and ethnographic filmmaker, but he also showed a tendency to disagree with anyone trying to label his work from a theoretic view point. Rouch has referred to these films as “*science-fictions*” instead of ethnofictions, which was a term originally used by French film critics describing Rouch’s first fiction films. (Stoller 1992; 143) One of the main reasons for Rouch resisting any definition of these films was that they were not developed from any preconceived theories about ethnographic filmmaking. Most of his approaches emerged as a response to the practical challenges that he confronted during his filmmaking, and also as a part of the “*cine-pleasure*” - the pleasure of the surrealist games that he shared with his friends and informants that participated in the filmmaking. (Rouch 2003; 150, 187) Rouch let his films rise out of the moment to describe a “*cinematic truth*” inspired by Vertov’s “*kino-pravda*” and he would not let any social scientific demands on objectivity stop him from crossing the line between fact and fiction in his ethnographic project. (Yakir 1978; 7)

Rouch’s work would play an important role for the future of documentary filmmaking, and as an inspiration for the narrative filmmakers of the French New Wave. Even though Rouch’s work remained at the periphery of contemporary and mainstream theories of anthropology, his ethnographic approach would pave the road for future theories of social anthropology emerging at the end of the 60’s with the interpretative paradigm, and by the 90’s Rouch’s inter-subjective attitude to fieldwork relationships were more of a convention than an anomaly, and many other anthropologist were now conducting postmodernist experiments with fiction in their written ethnographies. (Stoller, 1992: 199-201)

Rouch never showed any ambition to develop his use of improvised acting and filmmaking into an ethnographic research method, he was on the contrary reluctant to theorise over his films: *‘If you start making theories about my films you are losing. You should just follow the movement. If there is a theory, there are no longer improvisation and creativity. [---] I prefer to speak*

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<sup>1</sup> Brazilian transsexuals (males-females) and *travestis* have been males that have adopted a female appearance. Male-female transsexuals identify as women, but while some Brazilian *travestis* identify as homosexual men, others identify nor as men nor as women, but simply as a *travesti*. Brazilian transsexuals and *travestis* often work as prostitutes and suffer from intolerance.

*about cine-trance. When I have a camera, I'm someone completely different, so don't ask me why I did what I did.*' (Yakir 1978; 10) Considering his importance to visual anthropology and his contribution to anthropological research, especially in the Sahel region of West Africa, it is fair to ask if his approach in ethnofictions could be developed into a generic method to be used by other ethnographic filmmakers and visual anthropologists.

Rouch was not the first filmmaker to apply documentary production techniques to film improvised dramas on-location with non-professional actors, showing aspects of their own life. Robert Flaherty, whose films had made a strong impression on Rouch, asked the Inuit Alakarialak to re-enact aspects of his life in front of the camera in *Nanook of the North* (1922) which was the first film Rouch would watch as a young child. Even though *Nanook of the North* was a heavily constructed drama giving a romantic portrayal of Inuit life and Alakarialak's struggle against the forces of nature, than a factual account of Inuit culture, his film would have an important influence on ethnographic filmmaking and documentary filmmaking in general. (Barnouw, 1993: 3-51; Barsam, 1988: 1-27; Rothman, 1998: 23-39)

Another tradition of filmmaking, contemporary to Rouch's own work would use similar techniques to create influential narrative films. Italian Neorealist film directors such as Rossellini, De Sica and Visconti would cast actors without any prior experience of film or theatre for their films. The main criteria was that the actors had the appropriate physical appearance and that they could draw on their own personal experiences when acting in these often political films concerned with poverty and oppression. These films were also filmed on-location and sometimes in a documentary style, often out of necessity rather than out of conscious choice due to the difficult life in Italy at the end of the WWII. (Bondanella, 1983: 31-73).

Even though these traditions would influence Rouch's work to different degrees, their filmmaking had different aims. Flaherty and the Italian Neorealists first and foremost produced their films for a paying audience while Rouch made his films out of his own joy and for friends and informants participating in the films. (Eaton, 1979; 44, 45) Besides his own personal passion for surrealist filmmaking, fun and adventure, Rouch also had the ethnographic aim to analyse and describe other cultures; he was employed as an ethnologist with a monthly salary from the French National Centre for Scientific Research for many years. (Naficy 1972; 342) The ethnographic aim is also what most distinguishes Rouch's ethnofictions from modern films inspired by Flaherty's filmmaking such as *The Story of the Weeping Camel* (2003), and television dramas like *Tina Goes Shopping* (1999), continuing the legacy of the Italian Neorealists.

### **Directing Ethnofictions**

I have separated three aspects of Rouch's directing that distinguishes his ethnofictions from Neorealist dramas and films inspired by Flaherty as well as docudramas produced in a similar manner. Rouch's ethnofictions are based on *ethnographic filmmaking methods* and they are produced as *shared anthropology* in a collaborative spirit using certain traits of *improvised filmmaking*.

Being a social anthropologist, Rouch applied ethnographic research methods in his filmmaking; he conducted participant observation during an extended period of fieldwork research, often filming alone. As a documentary filmmaker Rouch was one of the first directors to abandon the tripod, and to start using the new lightweight cameras and sound equipment of the 1950's with synchronous sound. This development would make him and Edgar Morin launch Cinéma Vérité

at the beginning of the 60's, introducing a less didactic documentary filmmaking, produced outside the studio environment and providing the spectators with the illusion of being witnesses to 'real' events. (Barnouw, 1993: 231-262) Unlike the large documentary film teams recording for the television, Rouch worked in a smaller scale and sometimes with the help of his informants that he taught audio techniques to help him record the sound. This method has become a convention in ethnographic filmmaking since the small scale of the production and the extended fieldwork period help the director/anthropologist to reach an intimacy with the informants that would be difficult to achieve for a large film team that might have to limit their shooting to couple of weeks due to the high costs. For the ethnographic filmmaker losses in technical quality are compensated with more opportunities to gain an unforced access to the daily lives of the informants, a process that Rouch referred to as "*the art of patience, and the art of time.*" (Rouch, 2003: 151)

Rouch used the term "*shared anthropology*" (Rouch, 2003: 87-101; Stoller, 1992: 46-47, 170-173 and 193) to describe his collaboration with the informants during the fieldwork and filmmaking. This approach was quite radical for contemporary anthropology that was governed by positivistic ideas about objectivity that still regarded the fieldwork as social scientific laboratory where the anthropologists should remain neutral and detached as he observed his informants. Taking an opposite position, Rouch developed a long lasting mutual friendship with his informants, basing his ethnographic research and ethnofictions on their ideas and encouraging them to travel to France with him to conduct "*reverse anthropology*" (Petit à petit 1971) The shared anthropology of Rouch's filmmaking made him invent such devices as "*screen back*" and "*informant feedback*" - the informants, whether they were from the Sahel region or from France, had the opportunity to watch the films they had participated in and provide their opinion on the ethnographic research. The strong presence of reflexivity in Rouch's filmmaking often became the expression of the shared anthropology in his work, allowing for informant feedback and making aspects of the process transparent to the spectators.

The improvised filmmaking in Rouch's films seems to have many traits in common with the surrealist practices that first had attracted his interest in Paris at the beginning of the 30's. Like surrealist artists he used improvisation to draw on the subconscious as a source of creativity. Rouch sometimes compared his filmic approach to the arctic explorer "*Pourquoi pas?*" [Why not?] a ship where his father had worked as a meteorologist. (Rouch 2003; 129) Driven by the impulse of the moment the improvised filmmaking could lead anywhere: "why not?" Rouch said that he reached a state of "*ciné-trance*" during successful moments of filmmaking, like the possessed participants of the possession ritual that he had studied during his research on Songhay religion. While filming in *ciné-trance* he would no longer distinguish between himself, the camera and his environment, reminding us of Rouch's legacy to Vertov, as he demonstrated the super human capacities of the "*kino-eye*" through his films. (Rouch, 2003: 32)

Another important aspect of improvised filmmaking in ethnofictions was that Rouch regarded himself as an actor in the ethnofictions, even if he remained behind the camera. Unlike contemporary Anglo-Saxon filmmakers who tended to take their role as detached observers more seriously than Rouch, he would enter the stage of his ethnofictions with his camera, provoking actions that he hoped would reveal "hidden" aspects of the culture. In *La pyramide humaine* (1961) Rouch makes use of his "cine-provocation" to bring black and white students together in a Lycée in Abidjan to discuss racial segregation and discrimination through their improvisations. The camera became a catalyst and a story about racism in colonial Africa would evolve around a subject matter that would have been difficult to approach in any other way. (Eaton 1979, 12, 50-53)

### Acting in Ethnofictions

Unlike Rouch's extensive descriptions of his role as a director, the acting in his ethnofictions often had more of an obscure role in the interviews with him. This is most probably due to his approach to the improvised acting which, as an intrinsic part of the filmmaking, was a surrealist game that happened at the spur of the moment. The actors of his ethnofictions, were scarcely ever directed in a conventional sense. The protagonists would often suggest ideas for different scenes to film and Rouch would set off a series of events through his "cine-provocation" and if successful the god Dionysus would then (according to Rouch, 2003: 150) descend upon the participants and make the improvisation work with "grace". The protagonists of his films would sometimes be more of themselves and sometimes more of a character, sometimes self-conscious and hammy and sometimes sincere and moving. The protagonists' awareness of the camera, that would haunt Anglo-Saxon observational filmmakers during years to come, was never a problem for Rouch who lacked all social scientific shame in relation to his own subjectivity and interference with the lives of his informants. For Rouch, people became more sincere when he pointed his camera at them, sharing their 'cinematic truth' and 'reality' with him. (Eaton, 1979: 40-53)

When studying aspects of the acting in Rouch's ethnofictions I have focused on three functions of the improvisations: their *descriptive* and their *projective* function and finally their function as *empowerment*. Even though Rouch emphasised the pleasure of improvising a film with his friends and informants above everything else, the improvised acting was also a very pragmatic choice motivated by the very same reason that makes other documentary filmmakers dramatise their films and use re-enactments: there was simply no other way to film the story. During his doctoral research Rouch had examined the economic activities of migrant groups and how they created their own social institutions in the Ivory Coast. In *Jaguar* (1967), three Nigerian men with different ethnical background travel from the market of Ayoro to meet their different destinies in the Gold Coast. The film became an extension of the research he conducted on migration in the early 50's, and the improvised acting allowed Rouch and his friends to create a composite of improvised events providing a complex illustration of seasonal migration.

Besides this descriptive use of improvised acting in *Jaguar*, Rouch would also use "*projective improvisation*" (Loizos, 1993: 46) to reveal the personal feelings, dreams and desires of his protagonists. *Moi, un noir* (1958) was recorded during the same period as *Jaguar*, but *Moi, un noir* was more of an autobiographical account than an ethnographic description, focusing on Oumarou Ganda's life as a migrant worker in the harbour of Abidjan. Taking on different characters inspired by American and French popular culture, Ganda and his friends used the improvisations to project aspects of their lives and emotions through fiction.

After the making of *Chronique d'un été* (1961), which generally is regarded as a documentary and not an ethnofiction, Rouch and co-director Edgar Morin compared their approach to the socio- and psychodrama of Jacob Levy Moreno, who conducted therapy through improvisations and staged enactments. The therapeutic use of improvised acting was predominantly supported by Edgar Morin who saw it as a form of communication. (Rouch 2003; 229-265) Rouch also referred to psychodrama (Blue, 1967: 83), but he would become increasingly hesitant about applying Moreno's methods in his filmmaking since he was not prepared to shoulder the therapeutic responsibility to support his protagonists after the project. He grew aware that his surrealist games could become "*dangerous games*" (Blue, 1967: 85) through psychodrama, and in future films like *Petit à petit* (1971), a sequel to *Jaguar*, he would return to lighter forms of improvisations and role-playing. Rouch had never intended improvisation as a way to gain

access to his protagonists' subconscious in a Freudian sense. For Rouch, the subconscious was a positive source for surrealist creativity<sup>2</sup> generating improvisations which were juxtaposed in an ethnographic collage, similar to the practice of earlier practitioners of surrealist ethnography in France, described by James Clifford (1988). Even though Breton partly had developed his surrealist manifesto from Freudian ideas about the consciousness, Rouch would reject Freud as exploiting other people's dreams. (Rouch, 2003: 132) Interestingly, Jacob Moreno also criticised Freud; unlike him Moreno intended to use people's dreams to help them in their life through psychodrama. Rouch did neither exploit nor use people's dreams through the improvisations. For him the improvised filmmaking and acting were surrealist dreams in themselves: an "*art of the double*" (Rouch, 2003: 185), a fictive, poetic and surreal, but yet valid, representation of reality, inspired by Songhay religion and possession rituals.

Besides these surrealist traits, the improvised acting in Rouch's films also had the ethical and political function of empowerment. The protagonists of the ethnofictions were empowered through the actual filmmaking process where the improvised acting gave them the narrative control and a freedom to tell their own stories in collaboration with the director. The improvisations would also guarantee their "*informant feedback*", especially in the early ethnofictions where the protagonists improvised a narration to the rushes in a sound studio since they lacked synchronous sound.

Some of the ethnofictions partly also aimed to empower the protagonists in their 'real' life. Like the Italian Neorealist films, Rouch's ethnofictions were often political and concerned with different forms of injustice. The films provided a platform for the protagonists to express their concerns, a 'speaker's corner' where they could air questions of concern to themselves and most probably of importance to the audience as well since these statements caused some of the ethnofictions to be banned in certain English colonies in Africa. During the 50's black actors usually lacked any opportunity to be casted in leading roles or to get any role outside the major black stereotypes (Bogle, 1994: 4-18). After the release of *Moi, un noir* in 1958 *Sight and Sound* suggested that this was probably the first feature in which the "African Negro" had been allowed to speak for himself. (Sandall, 1961: 57)

### **Transfiction**

When I eventually had the chance to put my theoretical conclusions about the methodology of ethnofictions into practice during my own fieldwork and filmmaking in Brazil, I realised that my own ethnofiction never would be the same as any of Rouch's films, however meticulously I would try to apply his approaches. *Transfiction* was produced during the second half of my fieldwork focusing on transgendered Brazilians living in São Paulo. As I worked with Fabia Mirassos and Savana 'Bibi' Meirelles and about twenty other Brazilian *travestis* and transsexuals to realise the project, it became increasingly clear that this film would have less of Rouch's surrealism and more of the Brazilian *telenovela* (soap opera). Stylistically, my film was completely different from Rouch's.

I would apply all of the aspects of Rouch's directing that I had distinguished prior to the fieldwork, developing a friendship with Fabia and Bibi during an extended period of fieldwork leading to a mutual exchange of shared anthropology as I followed them with the camera through their improvisations. We would come up with ideas for scenes that used more of a descriptive approach to the improvised acting as well as projective improvisations inspired by psychodrama, to provide Fabia and Bibi with the freedom to express their own concerns about

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<sup>2</sup> Seminar with Professor Paul Henley at the Granada Centre for Visual Anthropology at the University of Manchester, in February 2007.

transgender identity and discrimination through their improvisations. But even so, I realised that *Transfiction* would stay in a very different world from *Jaguar*, *Moi, un noir* and *La pyramide humaine*.

Towards the end of the fieldwork and filmmaking this was a great disappointment to me, but as the film started to unreel in the editing suite when I had returned home, I realised that this was the strength of ethnofiction: by granting the protagonists of the film the freedom to tell their own stories in their own way, no ethnofiction could ever be the same however generic the methods might be.

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