THE ADVENTURE OF THE REAL

JEAN ROUCH AND THE CRAFT OF ETHNOGRAPHIC CINEMA

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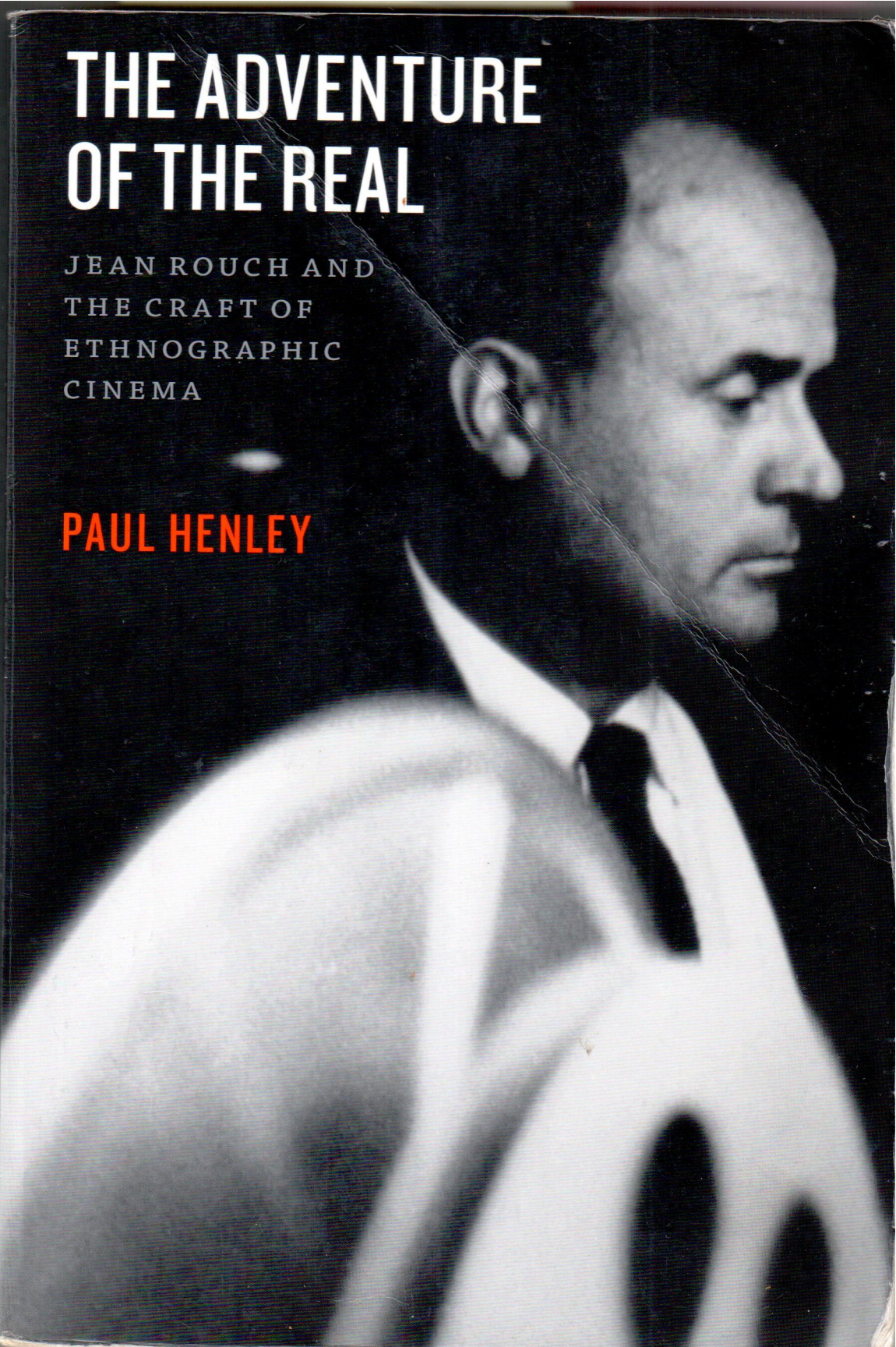

Of all the many legends that surround the life of Jean Rouch, one of the most frequently told, including in chapter 7 of this book, concerns the highly negative reaction of his closest friends and colleagues to the screening of a preliminary version *Les Maîtres fous* in the cinema of the Musée de l'Homme. His supervisor and mentor, Marcel Griaule, even told him that he should destroy the material.[13] The less frequently told coda to this story is that while Rouch was still wondering what to do after this distressing experience, Pierre Braunberger took him to show the film to the Hollywood film noir director Jules Dassin who was then living in France. (This was the height of the McCarthy era and Dassin had been hounded out of the United States on account of his leftist sympathies). Dassin not only strongly encouraged Rouch to defy his critics and preserve the film, but even suggested that it should be blown up to 35mm and prepared for general cinema release. Much encouraged by this response, Braunberger brought in Suzanne Baron to work on the film.[14]

Les Maîtres fous is perhaps the most tightly edited of Rouch's films and features a number of editorial devices that are highly unusual in his work, and which it is tempting therefore to attribute to the influence of Baron. These include particular individual cuts that have given rise to much comment in the literature on this film and to which I shall return when considering the more technical aspects of Rouch's editing praxis in the following chapter. What is not in doubt is Baron's role in improving the sound track of *Les Maîtres fous*. On location, the sound track had been recorded by Rouch's regular associates, Damouré Zika and Lam Ibrahim Dia, employing a tape recorder that, like his Bell & Howell camera, operated with a clockwork mechanism. Whereas the camera would run for only twenty-five seconds, the tape recorder ran for up to thirty minutes. Yet it was far from synchronous and although it was considered "portable," it actually weighed over thirty kilograms, so for most of the time, it remained in a single place with the microphone placed in a conveniently located tree.[15] This recording of live performance in the field was considered very advanced for the time, but the sound quality of the film remains poor by modern standards. Particularly poor was the quality of the sound recorded at the moments when Rouch was actually shooting since he had no sound-proofing for the camera, and the mechanism whirring away sounded like a "coffee-grinder." In order to overcome this problem, Baron cut out these passages of synchronous sound and replaced them with passages of nonsynchronous wild track recorded either just before or just after any particular shot.[16]

The quality of the sound editing in Rouch's films would take another big step forward under the influence of Marie-Josèphe Yoyotte who cut *Moi, un Noir* and *La Pyramide humaine*. At around the same time, she was

also cutting *Les Quatre Cents Coups* (1959) for François Truffaut and Jean Cocteau's last film, *Le Testament d'Orphée* (1960). Later, Yoyotte would go on to work with a number of leading New Wave directors as well as on Rouch's own ill-starred feature, *Dionysos* (1984), though even her great skill was not sufficient to save this film from critical opprobrium. Indeed, of all the editors with whom Rouch worked, Yoyotte has probably been the most prolific, and she continues to be active as an editor of major feature films, with various highly distinguished awards to her name.[17]

Yoyotte encouraged Rouch to take an active interest in sound editing, and their first project together, *Moi, un Noir*, was certainly Rouch's most ambitious film up until that point in terms of the sound track. This film was shot by Rouch himself on his spring-wound Bell & Howell, so recording synchronous sound on location was impossible. Instead, as he had previously done with Damouré and Lam in the making of *Jaguar*, Rouch arranged for the actors playing the principal characters, Oumarou Ganda and Petit Touré, to improvise a commentary over the silent projection of a preliminary assembly of the film. The sound track was then built up through a complex mix of these improvised actors' commentaries, Rouch's own commentary voice, wild tracks of various kinds, plus a number of special sound effects and a broad variety of musical tracks.[18]

Rouch very much admired Yoyotte's inventiveness and as an example of this, he would tell the story of how they composed the sound track for the famous fight scene toward the end of *Moi, un Noir.* This takes place early one morning in the mud and the rain and involves the principal character, Robinson, and an Italian sailor whom Robinson discovers has spent the night with his girlfriend, Dorothy Lamour. Rouch had himself experienced how, when American B movies were screened in African cinemas, the spectators liked to accompany the fight sequences with cries and shouts that followed the rhythm of the punches being thrown by the actors. So when Yoyotte and he came to cut this scene, they covered the first part of the fight with music intended to encourage these responses.[19]

After he returned to work in Paris in the 1960s, Rouch continued to have the benefit of working with editors who were also working with the most celebrated feature film directors of the day. One of these was Jean Ravel, also one of the few male editors with whom Rouch worked in the course of his career. In addition to editing two of Rouch's less well-known ethnographic works, *Moro Naba* (1958–1960) and *Monsieur Albert, prophète* (1963), Ravel was primarily responsible for resolving the many editorial challenges posed by the innovative *cinéma-vérité* methods used in making *Chronicle of a Summer*. Rouch said of Ravel that he was an editor who could resolve transition problems that anyone else would