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Editing: A Concerto for Two Ways of Seeing and Four Hands

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For many years, Danièle Tessier edited the films of Jean Rouch. She describes, analyzes, and theorizes her work here, emphasizing its interest and originality, as well as its difficulties.

Rouch begins watching his rushes as soon as he returns from filming, usually by himself. After that, the images are fixed in his memory and the date the editing starts doesn't really matter.

The editing rarely happens right away, unless the production is a short documentary on a very specific subject. In this case, long takes make the editing much easier since the film is essentially completed at the shooting stage. Here, I am thinking of films such as *The Drums of Yesteryear: Tourou and Bitti* (1972), *Dongo Hori* (1973), or the portraits he produced for his series honoring Marcel Mauss: *Germaine Dieterlen*, *Taro-Mauss*, and *Lévy-Mauss*.¹

Rouch is always present for the editing and we use the original film. The cuts must therefore be very precise since they are definitive.² The "cut-away" has been banished from my editing for a long time, and particularly from the films I work on with Rouch, where each shot must carry meaning, must affirm a certain atmosphere. His long takes, which sometimes last a whole camera reel, are rarely preserved in their entirety: the match between the cuts is then made "as best as possible," using movement, for example. Rouch's camera being essentially "mobile," we need to transform what is *a priori* the default setting of his style. The work of editing takes place above all on the level of "rhythm": the rhythm of shots and sequences is imposed by the internal rhythm of the image. It is the image which drives the editing.

Rouch knows the technique of editing very well since he does the sound mixing on his films himself. (His background in engineering has left him with a taste for the technical.) He knows just how far he can go when he "demands" something, but that doesn't mean it all happens peacefully! Rouch likes to say that he is the first viewer of the film when he is behind the camera, and the editor is the second. But this second one doesn't always have the same vision of events, especially since he³ was not present during the shoot. Moreover, he needs to hold on to his critical eye. As a result, everything does not always go smoothly. The "labor" of bringing the film into the world is sometimes quite intense: the film is born of violent discussions.

¹ Tessier is referring to *Germaine Dieterlen: Homage to Marcel Mauss* (1977), *Taro Okamoto: Homage to Marcel Mauss* (1973 or 1974) and *Paul Lévy: Homage to Marcel Mauss* (1977)

² "definitive"—If you cut with the original film, you cannot undo a cut without losing the frame that's used when making the overlap in the splice.

³ Tessier uses the male pronoun throughout, consistent with how "he" and "man" have traditionally been used in many cases without regard for the gender of the person.

Sometimes, the tension is so palpable that no one dares to go into the editing room! Confrontation? It is inevitable. But there are also moments of complicity, where the ideas spring forth and everything comes together naturally. The construction takes place in mutual agreement, with a complicity based on the mutual knowledge of each person's priorities.

Rouch speaks all the time in order to think ("I think out loud," he says), but also to inform me about the state of the scholarship on the film's topic. All of this is equally true for his feature-length, "ethnographic" films. The only difference is that the montage might then take place over several years (*Taro-Mauss* was edited in two hours; *Old Anai* in two years...). There are essentially two reasons for this:

- The first is a practical one: Rouch travels a great deal abroad and, when in Paris, is always working on a number of projects at once. Yet for him, as for me, it is imperative that he be present for the editing.
- The second, more important reason, is an intellectual ⁴ one: the footage he brings back is, above all, working footage. ⁵ One therefore needs to look at it again and again: each viewing contributes new information which is then integrated with current knowledge on the subject or, occasionally, complemented with further fieldwork. This is done by presenting the participants with a copy of the film whose sound has been placed on a layered, magnetic track; the participants of the film are thus able to participate directly in this filmed research. Sometimes, new information would require additional filming (that of *Drought at Simiri* (1973) took place over eight years). The film becomes at once the material support and the principal instrument of research: one must record an event whose course one cannot predict with any exactitude, as well as study an action out of context—an action to which one has been but an ephemeral witness.

So then, of course:

- There is an interpretation of the event: the "camera eye" chooses one axis within the limits of a rather limited "observational" space. The editing, in turn, interprets that initial interpretation on a number of levels, taking in the image, the choices, the construction;
- Footage is chosen for the final film based on a variety of reasons, sometimes technical (blurry images, movement, exposure), sometimes aesthetic, and sometimes intellectual. The most difficult thing sometimes is to make the filmic document correspond to the filmic spectacle. Each time we tried to somehow alter the way an action is presented in space or time, the editing, at first quite seductive, turned out to be unusable. The essential value, for me, of this kind of film is its authenticity, all the while trying to make that visible to a broader public, one beyond that of the already "initiated";
- There is the arbitrariness of the additional sequences chosen (or at least so one thinks) to bring clarity to an event, to affirm a certain atmosphere. Their importance, their place in the story, and the way in which they are constructed can all be questioned, but they cannot place in doubt the filmed testimony.

⁴ The literal translation would be "scientific." This makes sense when considering that Rouch was a trained anthropologist, but in the context of film editing it seemed misleading. The idea is simply that the footage had to be closely analyzed for the ways in which it did or didn't convey precise "scientific" information about the people and events being depicted.

⁵ "documents de travail" — footage that would be made by a note-taker doing research, as compared to footage that was carefully planned out ahead of time.

And then, there is the voice-over which comes together piece by piece as the central questions are articulated and new details added.

The voice-over can be:

- A support for the image: for example, the sequence in *Old Anaï* which illustrates the locations mentioned in the proverb.⁶
- A complement to that which remains inexpressible in the image: Griaule's texts on the appearance of the masks during Dama, for example;
- Information which is not evident in the shot: this is often the case of voice-over accompanying possession rituals (the Yérendi, for example);
- A pirouette which smooths over a difficult moment in the editing, like the transition from the presentation of the masks on the first day to the interior of the cavern in the Dama;
- A translation of synchronous texts, such as the chants of the Anaï or Dongo.

Here again, the editor is also the first auditor and the first critic. Is the text too long, too brief, too rich, too scientific, too abstract? Everything seems obvious, the names are familiar: Olubaru, Kanaga, Kyirey....But after about six years, do I still have the virgin ears necessary to be a trustworthy critic?

It has often been suggested that Rouch was no to the way certain scenes unfolded. But then—bravo to that funeral sequence in *Bongo* (1972) which retraces the warrior episode in the life of Anaï Dolo. We find the spirit of ancient theater. What *mise en scène*! Unfortunately, here I think the genius comes from the Dogon, and Rouch had the talent to help us relive it.

Reality is sometimes more extraordinary than fiction. But one needs to know how to discover it, how to understand it, how also...to make people dream.

But can one dream all one's life in the chiaroscuro of editing rooms? It happens sometimes that the passions grow dim there. The collaboration of the shadows exhausts the creative energies, mollifies the emotions, rubs out the vision. Discovery is no longer magical.

Then, the time has come to shift passions, to play another concerto, or to become the conductor in one's own right. For he is always the one who sets the tone. Editing as a duo is only an illusion, a seductive illusion, necessary for the creation of the work, but dangerous, for one remains always an anonymous partner, no matter how intensely one participates in the process.

Perhaps editing is only a step in our progressive knowledge of the cinema! It is, in any case, a privileged moment during which one learns to observe, to listen, to see, to be attentive, receptive, available.

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Translated by Masha Shpolberg in 2019 for the "Seventeen Editors" section of the EDITED BY website

<http://womenfilmeditors.princeton.edu/cut-to-09-intro-to-the-seventeen-editors-and-jean-rouch/>

⁶ N.b. "...qui illustre les lieux-dits mentionnés dans les devises, a été montée sur le texte"—"devise" is an old word which means money or proverb.