The traders asked Jean Rouch about his experiences in Niger. The warmth of the conversation soon dissipated the chill in the air. We joked, laughed, and told stories of Africa and of Africa in New York City.

“This reminds me of the old days in Ghana,” Jean Rouch said, “when traders made so much from so little. This is Jaguar in New York City.” By now the effects of the blustery wind were beginning to fatigue the 82-year-old filmmaker and anthropologist. We decided to return to the Rouch 2000 festival. Just before leaving the market, however, Jean Rouch grabbed my arm, looked around the market, and said: “This would make such a wonderful film. Someone should do it. The work must go on.”

Jean Rouch’s greatest contribution was to have created a body of work in which the limits of the ethnographic are the limits of the imagination. In Jean Rouch’s universe, ethnographers participated fully in the lives of their others. Dreams became films; films became dreams. Feeling was fused with thought and action. Fusing poetry and science, Jean Rouch showed us the path of wise ancestors and guided us into a wondrous world where we not only encounter others but also ourselves. As the West African trader in New York City said, Jean Rouch was ultimately a griot who told the story of African social life so well that his words and images have enabled the young to uncover their past and discover their future.

Adieu, Jean. The work will go on.

Remembering Rouch

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I first encountered Jean Rouch’s films in 1972 and was deeply moved by the complex layers of the Africa I saw represented in Les Maîtres Fous, The Lion Hunters, and Jaguar. I wanted to know more. If these were the kinds of films and ethnography Rouch did in the 1950s and 1960s, what could he possibly be doing in the 1970s? I decided to devote a year to filmic anthropology. That was how I ultimately arrived at the Musée de l’Homme in January 1974.

“Yes! Yes! Your passport is stamped!” With a grin, those were Rouch’s first words to me, overlapping my clumsy attempt to say something formal in French when we were first introduced on the stairwell to his office, poetically, a converted fire escape. Before I could recover, Rouch disappeared, and with that I learned just how much he was on the move. Exuberant and enigmatic, he could be quite difficult to pin down for even a few moments. During the following semester, I attended his Saturday morning classes at the Cinématheque and the Thursday film séances that he held in the Musée de l’Homme’s screening room.

What I most absorbed during those months was Rouch’s passion for cinema, his conviction that it was a particularly rich way to do reflexive, shared, engaged anthropology, whether the filmic means were more descriptive, narrative, or fictional. In every setting—from classroom to screening room, editing room to lunch table, or park walks to chance encounters—Rouch oozed the conviction that film could be a centerpiece in a truly creative and alternative anthropology. The anthropology he preached was a borderless one—one that could bend genres, excite participation, rupture expectations, create surprises, and explore every point of conjuncture between ethnography and fiction, between meticulously close observation and the capacity to dream.

Paul Stoller has aptly evoked this passion by calling Rouch “the cinematic griot” (Stoller 1992). Indeed, that was really Rouch’s strongest claim: that a life in anthropology first means the desire to live an experimental and intercultural story, to follow it wherever it leads, and to use every means at one’s disposal to tell the tale. A gifted verbal wordsmith, not to mention an adept and subtle writer of everything from symbolic to poststructural to prepostmodern ethnography, Rouch insisted, instead, that cinema was his real and complete voice, his full self. Indeed, his infectious smile, wicked humor, childlike mugging, anarchic juxtapositions, and stern provocations, as well as his tremendous focus and discipline, stare back at me the more I watch his films.

Although the word auteur translates awkwardly into English, it was just this—a sense of distinctive authorship—that most marks his oeuvre. Cinema was Rouch’s personality: from his technical skill and pride to his filmic mannerisms, innuendoes, nuances, and attitude present in all his work. He always made his own voice and image part of the filmic voice and image of his stories. The legacy of this authorship is clear: Rouch’s cinema exhibits an endlessly restless sense of experimental play, mixed with an uncommon mastery of film’s realist and nonrealist history and genres.

He was driven and could be hard to pin down: in equal measures fun, even hilarious, and completely exhausting. In the space of exasperating questions, or the desire to just forget talk and dim the lights for the next viewing, he often resorted to one of his favorite aphorisms from Dziga Vertov: “Films must give birth to films.” And that is the phrase I will most remember him by.

In fact, in the years following my first encounters with Rouch in the 1970s, we were less and less in contact, and my work moved from Africa to New Guinea, and from film to sound. But we met again, after more than ten years, at
the New York University’s Rouch 2000—at the Chronicles of African Modernities Retrospective (see Figure 11). It was a lovely time, full of good feeling, and just after he left New York, I sent him the poem below as a small souvenir of our reenounter.

The enthusiasm so evident at the NYU retrospective led me to dust off some earlier translations I had done and edit a collection of Rouch’s essays, interviews, and ephemera. Jean Rouch, Ciné-Ethnography was published in April 2003, and when I sent it to him he responded by inviting me to come to Paris to serve with him on the jury of the next Bilan du Film Ethnographique. I was greatly looking forward to that next encounter, but it did not happen. Three weeks before the Bilan, I was in Greece, filming again, for the first time in many years. After the first day of shooting the Skyros Carnival, I received a late night phone call from the United States telling me of his death in a car accident in Niger. As Marc Piault so aptly reminisced, Rouch was characteristically late. Alas, this last time, with a kick of the pale fox, he was early.

To Jean Rouch, NYC, April 10, 2000

At the Village Vanguard
we listened to Lou Donaldson play the blues
and later you said it was funerary music for the procession of Germaine Dieterlen’s soul.
Then you told me, “We are lucky, we know that love is stronger than death.”

When I didn’t respond you persisted:
“Is music stronger than death Steve, is anything stronger than death, besides love?”

I told you that in New Guinea memory, only memory was stronger than death.

“So, yes,” you said, “music too is stronger than death;” and just then I could see that your eyes, so blue, so clear, were absolutely twinkling.

With each word and gesture this time I realized how much you embrace the blur, how much your own home has become the place you’ve claimed so often in film—where a border between fiction and actuality is necessarily vague, free; where your exact science is sure to find its surrealist double.

It was on my mind, but abstractly, all those days with you how much that double now finds you precisely in your own poetics of remembrance.

But it wasn’t real until you kissed me, four times, before getting into the car for the airport.

I was so surprised by the affection, and so touched to meet you at the crossroads.