RePLITO

“I knew the Africans did not comprehend”: Cinema Vérité, Holocaust Memory, and Minority Management on Screen

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Edgar Morin and Jean Rouch’s documentary *Chronicle of a Summer* premiered in France to critical acclaim on October 20, 1961, having won the Critics’ Prize at the Cannes Festival earlier that year. As the foundational film of *cinéma vérité*, *Chronicle* occupies a critical and innovative role in the history of cinema: as a stylistic, philosophical, and methodological bridge between video-ethnography and documentary, as a vital experiment in audiovisual recording technologies, and as a source-text for the techniques and theories of *Nouvelle Vague* auteurs. *Chronicle* also marks the return of video-ethnographer Jean Rouch and his anthropological cinema from the decolonizing cities and countrysides of West Africa—where he had produced already some ten ethnographic films—to his metropolitan home in a post-Vichy and becoming postcolonial France. The confluence of *cinéma vérité*’s emergence, on the one hand, and Rouch’s ethnographic pivot (from documenting the colony to documenting the metropole), on the other, signals a remarkable interplay between *cinéma vérité*’s stylistic innovations, the techniques and problematics of documentation generated by colonial ethnography, and *Chronicle*’s early, public articulation of Jewish Holocaust memory in France.

In the course of their experimental attempt to capture “the authenticity of life as it is lived” in the Paris of summer 1960, Morin and Rouch directed a curious encounter between documentary participants Marceline, a Jewish Holocaust survivor, and Landry and Raymond, both students from the Ivory Coast. The shape of this encounter and its uneven, on-screen management by Rouch organizes its white European and Black African players into a complex hierarchy. Put simply, Rouch stages the Black African students’ ignorance of (Nazi) antisemitism, which in turn facilitates the articulation of Marceline’s Jewish Holocaust survivor testimony. This hierarchy outlines an emergent pattern in which white European knowledge of antisemitism is authorized by a denial of a colonial gaze on Europe. Michael Rothberg has suggested that the scene’s play between the actuality of decolonization and memory of the Holocaust illustrates a postwar site of “multidirectional memory,” in which transfers across memories and discourses link the seemingly separate events. The analysis here will emphasize how structures of power nonetheless persist at such sites of multidirectional memory, governing these transfers between events and establishing new hierarchies of knowledge.

In critical dialogue with the realisms of Soviet documentarian Dziga Vertov and French film theorist André Bazin, Rouch developed, together with sociologist and militant Edgar Morin, the style of documentary filmmaking known as *cinéma vérité*. For Rouch

and Morin, *cinéma vérité* named both an ideological and technical intervention. With the experimental use of lightweight cameras and portable, synchronous sound recording equipment, Rouch and Morin would engage non-actor participants in improvised interrogations about life, love, and work. These research films would attempt to overcome positivist, non-interventionist methods of ethnography by acknowledging reality's co-constructed nature and by reflexively exposing the interactive presence of the camera and director-ethnographers.

Chronicle comes in roughly three acts: the first introduces and follows the film's participants as they engage in amateur video-ethnography on the streets of Paris, participate in generative encounters and conversations, and divulge their quotidian desires and troubles. The second act of the film opens with a group meeting of participants at the Musée de l'Homme restaurant, a meeting that includes, significantly, Rouch and Morin. Following the group meeting in *Chronicle*, during which Rouch coaxes Marceline to reveal she is a Jewish survivor of Auschwitz, the film introduces a psychodramatic segment in which Marceline wanders listlessly through place de la Concorde and Les Halles while recalling memories of her deportation and of the camp. The final act follows some of the participants on vacation to St. Tropez and the film ends with an unsettling, provocative epilogue: after Rouch and Morin show the participants a cut of the documentary, the participants challenge the filmmakers' intentions by declaring the inauthenticity of each others' performances.

Rouch originally ventured to Niger in 1941 as a young civil engineer, overseeing roughly 20,000 native Nigerien laborers at the age of twenty-four; it was in this capacity that Rouch first observed Zarma and Sorko rituals among the colonized laborers and was inspired to document them. In a 1978 interview, Rouch described his surrealist desire to adventure to Africa as a response to the Nazi occupation. The Musée de l'Homme first provided Rouch an escape, furnishing him with fantasies of a mysterious African otherworld. He admitted that in reality “colonial Africa” was “more Vichyist than Pétain, more Germanophilic than Doriot, more militaristic than in the First World War, more Anglophobic than Darlan, more racist than Montandon.” But the allure of “phantom Africa” won out. In 1944, after the liberation of France, Rouch returned to Paris and signed up to study for a doctorate under Marcel Griaule.

Griaule was an idiosyncratic ethnographer who during the Nazi occupation, and the related flights of colleagues Paul Rivet and Marcel Mauss, had been awarded a chair of ethnology at the Sorbonne. As a former air force pilot, Griaule experimented with aerial cinema and photography, combining imperial surveillance and video-

ethnography to map social groups in Mali, and organized a number of expeditions to the Dogon people. Eventually synthesizing his method, Griaule described working with informants in the terms of a detective interrogating a guilty party for "social facts" (i.e. the crime). As such, in his view, the ethnographic work required strategic direction in order to out-maneuver the informant's avoidance and dissimulation. This interventionist strategy of extracting "social facts," an idiosyncratic and aggressive form of Africanist video-ethnography, is evident in *cinéma vérité*'s interactive camera work and choreography. Stefanos Geroulanos explains that "Griaule's prosecutorial dramaturgy of the ethnographic encounter was central to Rouch's design of situations that would bring forth a measure of ethnographic truth."

Rouch was also a student of Michel Leiris, author of the surrealist ethnography *Phantom Africa* and a participant in Griaule's Dakar-Djibouti Mission. Rouch attended his pivotal 1950 lecture "Ethnography Faced with Colonialism," in which Leiris bemoaned the "unilateral" direction of the ethnographic discipline and lack of an "inverse" to the European study of other peoples. Leiris's lecture attempted to address the constitutive power imbalances that defined the discipline of ethnography in order to make it compatible with a humanist agenda. He acknowledged the unilateral direction of observer and observed, lamenting the lack of an inverse movement that placed Europeans under African gazes. However, he sometimes seemed to naturalize this lack by suggesting the undeveloped state of African capabilities. Leiris's influence on Rouch is apparent in the latter's attempt to invert ethnographic unilateralism by documenting the metropolitan capital in *Chronicle*. By rotating the ethnographic gaze toward metropolitan French society, Rouch resolved Leiris's criticism. In a conversation with Lucien Taylor in 1990, Rouch candidly recounted, "in 1960 the sociologist Edgar Morin said...I should turn my gaze onto the Parisians and do anthropological research about my own tribe."

At the same time, unlike in Leiris's ideal, Rouch maintained his role as ethnographer, armed with Griaule's aggressive method. In observing, documenting, and provoking *Chronicle*'s non-actor participants, the white ethnographer's turn (and return) to the metropole sufficed for an inversion of ethnographic power relations. As a Parisian, why shouldn't he participate in the study of his "own tribe," just as Oumarou Ganda did in Rouch's *Moi, un Noir* (1958)? Indeed, Rouch had often involved his African participants in the staging of encounters and even extended control of the camera to them. By the time he made *Chronicle*, Rouch had become well-regarded as a provocative video-ethnographer of West African ritual and everyday life, whose technical experiments—in *Les maîtres fous* (1958) and *Moi, un Noir*, for example—had

attempted to complicate and even invert the normatively objective positioning of the ethnographer and his observational camera. It is all the more salient that in the *Chronicle* scene under discussion, in which the actuality of anti-colonial violence appears to instigate the memory of antisemitism, in Rothberg’s terms, Rouch denies the Ivorian Landry and Raymond an ethnographic gaze.

While anti-colonial revolts reverberated across the French Empire, metropolitan France continued to recover from the devastation of World War II with bellicose commemorations of resistance alongside enforced silence on complicity. Rothberg notes that *Chronicle* lies at the precipice of a new international era of Holocaust memory defined by the figure of the survivor/witness and her testimony. *Chronicle* thus provides a companion and counter-text to the much-publicized, monumental event of the 1961 Eichmann trial and its televised staging of some 111 witnesses. The summer of 1960, when the film was made—and the October of 1961, when the film was released—were tempestuous and overlaid times for the imperial French Republic. The Algerian War had been raging for six years and public opinion was increasingly tilting in favor of the anti-colonial revolutionaries. Four nights before *Chronicle* was released, a massacre of Algerians protesting in Paris was executed on orders of head of the Parisian police chief Maurice Papon, a former senior police official in the Vichy regime. Rouch has described the importance of this submerged context to the documentary’s making, including the participants’ own involvement in pro-revolutionary activity. In a 1977 interview, Rouch explained that their safety required avoiding a direct discussion of the Algerian War in the film. The emergence of Jewish Holocaust survivor testimony in *Chronicle*, Rothberg argues, thus reveals the presence in 1960 Paris of two forms of encounter: “the traumatic encounter with memory of genocide and the unsettling encounter with colonial legacies.”

Morin and Rouch staged the encounters at the Totem restaurant of Paris’s Musée de l’Homme, a site that exemplifies the ambivalent transfer of traumatic memories. An ethnographic museum founded in 1937 by Paul Rivet, the Musée housed, among other objects, the Dogon artifacts expropriated by Rouch’s teachers Marcel Griaule and Michel Leiris, and others, on the celebrated Dakar-Djibouti Mission. At the same time, the Musée was also an early location of resistance organizing during the Nazi occupation. Such a spatial palimpsest of complicity in colonialism and resistance to Nazism frames the scene in *Chronicle*, during which Rouch choreographs the improvised encounter between Marceline and Landry and Raymond. In the course of this encounter, a dialogue between Jewish and pan-African senses of diasporic solidarity is eclipsed by the solemn revelation of Marceline’s persecuted past: more

specifically, by a focalized and inquisitorial gaze on her tattoo—a gaze that effectively gags Landry and Raymond.

The scene opens, somewhat strangely, as Marceline disclaims any sexual desire for Black people: “Personally, I would never marry a black man... I’m not racist. I understand perfectly that one can love a black man...It’s not racism...It’s a question of desire.” Marceline’s uncomfortable equivocations attempt to anticipate and disavow the charge of racism while naturalizing a self-consciously racialized libidinal economy. The inclusion of this dialogue as the scene’s opening implicitly establishes Marceline as a white European woman in contrast to the Black African Landry and Raymond. It does so not through a gesture of postwar white European inclusion but through Marceline’s own personalized expression of anti-Black sexual segregation. How Rouch and Morin instigated such a conversation is not included.

Still from Morin and Rouch, *Chronique d'un été* (1961)

Morin interrupts this uncomfortable moment and explains that they have assembled to discuss the “Congo issue” with “our African friends.” The so-called “Congo issue” referred to the mutiny of the Congolese National Army against Belgian control and the subsequent Belgian intervention, violence, and collapse that followed. Morin’s attention to the Congo, a Belgian colony, ostensibly opened space for addressing a context of colonial and anti-colonial violence without antagonizing French colonialism

and its accomplices. Morin asks if Parisians are truly concerned about news from the Congo, underscoring the film’s effort to expose metropolitan reality. Eventually, one of the white French students asks Landry if he feels any racial solidarity with Congolese Black people. The camera shifts to a close-up of Landry as he launches into an animated political discourse explaining the production of pan-African solidarity in the face of white colonial violence. The film then cuts to a close-up of Marceline, creating a formal parallel with Landry, as she interjects that she agrees, comparing his explanation to her feelings of Jewish solidarity against antisemitism in “any country in the world.”

Still from Morin and Rouch, *Chronique d'un été* (1961)

Suddenly, Rouch interrupts. As Marceline begins to discuss antisemitism in global and comparative terms, in response to Landry’s indictment of white colonialists, the film cuts to a close-up of Rouch: “We’re going to ask Landry a question.” Pointing to the tattooed numbers on Marceline’s forearm, Rouch asks Landry what they mean. For Landry’s response, the camera reluctantly pans to fit Landry into Rouch’s close-up. Rouch is prosecutor-ethnographer and protagonist; and Landry his useful foil. Landry gently admits he has no idea. And Marceline subsequently testifies to her experience as a concentration camp survivor. Rothberg notes the “odd displacement” from actuality to memory as attention shifts from discussing ongoing events to the Holocaust. Rothberg also identifies the “disturbing hierarchy of knowledge” that

ensues, in which the white ethnographer is positioned as the one who possesses knowledge, Landry and Raymond are positioned as ones upon whom the white ethnographer bestows knowledge, and Marceline becomes the embodied knowledge the ethnographer, as sleuth, strategically exposes.

Rothberg’s analysis of *Chronicle* demonstrates both how the social and political context of decolonization created public space for memories of Nazi violence to emerge and how audiovisual technology and the testimonial form of *cinéma vérité* gave these memories the authenticity and gravitas we now habitually ascribe to the figure of the Holocaust survivor. Yet, as he also suggests, this scene demonstrates that such transfers between the discourses and practices of decolonization and Holocaust memory were often arranged into complex hierarchical relations, relations buried perhaps under the documentary’s own claims to authenticity and transparency. As such, one notices the fundamental ambivalence of sites of multidirectional memory, in which transfers between events might indicate a productive cross-pollination yet might also indicate emerging hierarchies of knowledge production governing postcolonial and multicultural arrangements of representation and recognition. (Ari Joskowitz noticed a similar possibility in his analysis of how Jewish archives of suffering both enabled the emergence of Romani ones while also constrained and sometimes undermined them.)

Still from Morin and Rouch, *Chronique d'un été* (1961)

Rouch's twisted inversion, in which he coaxes the unknowing Landry to extract the secret of Marceline's body, appears to gesture toward the bilateralism for which Leiris had hoped: African ethnographers interpreting Europeans. But Rouch himself evades Landry's gaze, directing it onto Marceline. At the same time, in addition to his question, Rouch reconstitutes his knowing position by retaining control over the camera's gaze on an unknowing Landry (and over the editing of the scene thereafter). After Marceline reveals the tragic meaning of the tattooed numbers, the camera whip-pans over Rouch to Landry's downward-looking face; the normally effusive participant stunningly muted. Raymond does offer timidly that he has seen Alain Resnais's 1955 documentary *Night and Fog*. The inclusion of this reference seems to simulate Raymond's knowledge of Nazi internment, although not necessarily of antisemitism; it mainly indicates that any knowledge Raymond has is mediated by a white French documentarian, like Rouch.

The camera's whip pan from Marceline to Landry, designed to emphasize the immediacy of Landry's speechlessness, interestingly captures the mediating presence of Rouch. Rouch's self-exposure to the camera's gaze, no doubt a cinematographic attempt at ethnographic self-reflexivity, reinforces his mediating role as the expert white ethnographer in control of the encounter. Geroulanos suggests that *Chronicle* shows "how film could be a medium that might only *pretend* to efface itself. In the

failure of this effacement...lay the fiction of *cinéma vérité* as the degree zero of representation." In this scene, the much-debated transparency of *cinéma vérité* ultimately makes Rouch's control transparent. He silences Landry's interpretations of white colonialists and uses Marceline's body to authorize his superior knowledge of European society, including the postwar legacies of antisemitism and the Holocaust.

Rouch himself later meditated on his unsettling behavior, recognizing the paternalistic pleasure of enlisting Landry in his ethnographic game:

When I first saw the film, I noticed that I was smiling a very cruel smile when I intervened. That smile sometimes embarrasses me even now...As soon as it began, I knew I would ask the question about the tattoo the Nazis had put on Marceline's wrist because I knew the Africans did not comprehend our concern about anti-Semitism. When I posed the question, the isolation and assumptions of cultures emerged dramatically...Suddenly the Europeans began to cry, and the Africans were totally perplexed. They had thought the tattoo was an adornment of some kind...Now, is this a 'truthful' moment or a 'staged' moment? Does it matter?

Rouch disclosed his assumption that Landry and Raymond quite simply did not understand "our concern" about antisemitism. Translated into Griaule's terms, the Holocaust was the secret of European society in the scene, and it was accessed not through Leiris's ideal of an inverted ethnography but through the performed denial of one. The closest Landry comes to enacting the ethnographic inversion is through Rouch's performative extension of sleuth-work to him, a move that ultimately reinstates Rouch's authority as director of the courtroom drama.

Rouch's retrospective dismissal of concerns over truth and staging attempt to neutralize his active management of minorities on screen while in search of metropolitan postwar reality and its relation to past and actual violence. To be sure, the subsequent scene of Marceline's dreamlike testimony represents a critical breakthrough in Holocaust memory, in France especially (although it must be stated that Marceline herself subsequently insisted on the performativity of this filmed testimony). But it is equally significant that Rouch first introduced Marceline's testimony through the denial of a Black African gaze on European Jewish suffering, a denial that maintained the superiority of the white European ethnographer in the study of "his own tribe." Through their (preordained) failure to decipher the Holocaust, Landry and Raymond are provisionally disqualified from surveilling and interpreting the metropolis. True, Landry's role in *Chronicle* extends far beyond this scene. However, it is in this crucial encounter, in which the memory of antisemitic violence

and the actuality of colonial violence intersect, that Landry is silenced so dramatically and so unusually, his ethnographic abilities so starkly questioned. Sites of multidirectional memory can disrupt competitive investments in uniqueness and singularity but do not necessarily bypass structures of power. Such structures persist by governing the transfers between events at these sites and can, in turn, lead to the defanged recuperation of their multidirectional relations into hierarchies of knowledge that merely maintain the status quo.

Further Reading:

Geroulanos, Stefanos. *Transparency in Postwar France: A Critical History of the Present*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017.

Joskowicz, Ari. "Separate Suffering, Shared Archives: Jewish and Romani Histories of Nazi Persecution." *History & Memory* 28, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2016): 110-140.

Rothberg, Michael. *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019.

Rouch, Jean. *Ciné-Ethnography*. Translated and edited by Steven Feld. Minneapolis: U. Of Minnesota Press, 2003.

The full movie in French with English subtitles is available here: <https://youtu.be/ct-49TYmzMg>