Knowing Images: Jean Rouch's Ethnography

Entre l'éthique et l'esthétique, il faut choisir. C'est bien entendu. Mais il est non moins entendu que chaque mot comporte une partie de l'autre. Et qui opte à fond pour l'un trouve nécessairementi l'autre au bout du chemin.

- JEAN-LUC GODARD , 'L'Afrique vous parle de la fin et des moyens'

With no formal training in film-making, it is perhaps unsurprising that Jean Rouch was to emerge as an unwitting rule-breaker in the film world, and was highly revered in the 1950s and 1960s by the avant-garde directors of the Nouvelle Vague. His ethnographic films of the 1950s helped to pave the way for this reputation, two of the most significant from this period being *Les Maîtres fous* (1955) and *Moi, un noir* (1958). These will be the focus of this chapter. Recorded through the camera lens of a western male, Rouch's ethnography is attentive to the positioning of the subject of vision when filming and, in this, his concerns are central to my study. *Les Maîtres fous* and *Moi, un noir*, were made in colonial West Africa just prior to the independence of Ghana (the Gold Coast until 1957) and the Ivory Coast (1960) respectively. The stakes of Rouch's ethnographic gaze are thus high, since he is contributing to the manifold ways in which the west sought to know, to represent and to continue to dominate politically by means of representation. However, while Rouch's work chimes to an extent with Jay Ruby's claim that the primary goal of ethnographic film 'has to be communicating ethnographic knowledge', [1] it also creates a space for acknowledging what cannot be known. Indeed, Rouch challenges any possibility of knowing others fully by means of the filmic image: on this basis, his ethnographic ethics is Levinasian in its failure to possess those he films in visual and epistemological terms. Here, the Levinasian underpinnings of my study come into contact with the cultural and historical specificity of colonial Africa, as the ethical space created by Rouch's approach takes his films beyond imitation of the colonial framework that otherwise contains them.

Rouch was born on 31 May 1917 in Paris and died in a road accident in Africa in February 2004. He trained first as an engineer, working in Niger and Senegal between 1941 and 1944. He was to carry out ethnographic enquiries in Africa before following a formal course in the discipline from 1945 to 1946. Marcel Griaule supervised Rouch's doctoral thesis, and Rouch was inevitably to be influenced by Griaule's style of ethnography. In particular, he learned from his mentor the importance of spending a painstaking amount of time in the field, and of familiarizing himself as fully as possible with people in their context. He made over one hundred short and feature-length films, turning his camera as readily on France as he did towards Africa. On a practical level, Rouch's own ethical concerns are bound up with notions of respect for the veracity of the image in relation to the reality filmed; he is attentive to the dual importance of neither making things up nor stealing images. He is also concerned with the fair treatment of those he films. There are plenty of instances in which he relies upon their views as a kind of final verdict, either including their observations in

the film, or modifying his work as a result of what is said. For example, *Chronique d'un été* (1960) and *La Pyramide humaine* (1961) are show to those who took part, their comments featuring in the final versions of each film. Furthermore, after listening to responses to *La Chasse à l'hippopotame* (1950), he uses the feed back to change the final product in line with criticisms - his first spectators, the hunters, said that the hunt has to take place in silence, a comment that caused him to remove the original music soundtrack. He has also helped numerous people who feature in his films, suggesting an on-going relationship with them. Some of his protagonists are invited to feature in successive films; he helped others to launch careers in the industry. Marceline Loridan of *Chronique*, who married Joris Ivens, co-produced countless documentaries and now makes her own films, and Oumarou Ganda of *Moi, un noir* are just two examples of 'actors' who eventually became film-makers in their own right. With reference to the two films under consideration here, it is the way in which relations between Africa and the west emerge that interests me with regard to ethical considerations and questions of representation.

The participants in *Les Maîtres fous* and *Moi, un noir*, although coming from different African countries, share a heritage that divides them between African traditions and colonialism, and reveal a split in identity that surfaces throughout the many and varied performances of each film. Rouch's responsibility to his subjects is evident, irrespective of their racial or geo-political location; but this is not to suggest that it is the same in each case, since the historical specificity of the suffering or the problems of each culture is registered unequivocally. Sketching relations between a more recent and a more distant past, each film reflects on these people who are born of clashing encounters. Possession rituals played a crucial role in Rouch's ethnography and film-making in the 1950s and 1960s, and *Les Maîtres fous* was one of his key films in this respect. Although *Moi, un noir* differs from this earlier documentary, both formally and thematically, in the absence of focus on possession, the two are connected through their staging of mimetic relations between Africa and the west, relations that take on contradictory guises in the colonial setting. Rouch's representation of the reality of African life under colonialist rule shows how both critical and uncritical mimesis are entrenched in these cultures, and brings out the place of western culture within the African settings, while simultaneously challenging it. Rouch's own position is similarly complex, as he carries with him his own western geo-political history, even as this is submitted to critical revision through the filming process. Initially, however, Africa appears to be utterly recuperated by the western film-maker in more ways the one, in the films as in critical discourse surrounding them. It will be necessary first to explore how this occurs, since it seems to place his work in conflicting relation to the overall ethical thrust of this study.

Of Mimesis and Mirrors

On its first screening in 1954 at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, Rouch's *Les Maîtres fous* met with an outraged response from its select audience. [2] Striking images of black men foaming at the mouth, engaging in acts of ritual sacrifice and licking up the fresh blood of a slaughtered dog led the African spectators to feel that they were being presented with a racist view of blacks as crazed savages. The European viewers found the film insulting for different reasons, since the participants act out their ceremony in the guise of figures belonging to the then British colonial administration of the Gold Coast. Fittingly, perhaps, for a documentary that went on to win the Prix de Venise, and has since become a controversial classic within the realm of ethnography and beyond, these fiery reactions from its first respondents have continued to fuel polemical debate among subsequent commentators. [3] The relationships established within the ceremony between colonizer and colonized have led critics, following Rouch's commentary, to focus on the imitative, reflective aspects of the performance. In the written introduction to the film that scrolls up on the screen before the visual images commence, the ritual we are about to witness is described as a game that plays itself out as 'le reflet de notre civilisation'. With this in mind, we need to ask what is at stake in designating the serious play of *Les Maîtres fous* the 'reflection' of 'our' civilization. While the metaphor of reflection

suggests parity between the poles of this relationship, it also implies an elision of difference in which self and other come together in a mirror image. If the relationship between self and other is solely reflective within this film, the link to my overriding Levinasian frame of reference disappears, since the other is thus readily absorbed into the sphere of the self-same.

Les Maîtres fous was made at the request of those who appeared in it. They formed part of the audience when Rouch screened *La Chasse à l'hippopotame* in 1950, and they asked whether he would film one of the major Hauka ceremonies that took place annually on the Gold Coast. Rouch's documentary, shot in colour in 16mm on a handheld Bell & Howell camera, shows the rituals in which the Hauka spirits take possession of their human mediums. Rouch presents their ceremony as harmless but curative for those involved, while recognizing its explosive potential. The Hauka spirits possess their mediums, causing them to act out a ceremony that still bears a direct relation to their everyday lives as colonial subjects. The documentary is framed with scenes of the Hauka at work in their daily lives in Accra, the capital of the Gold Coast, and the closing scenes of the film establish links between the ritual and their day-to-day existence by featuring flashbacks to the performance of the day before. These otherwise ordinary people have, in Rouch's view, found a way of dealing wit the psychoses that accompany the colonial situation: a way that westerners, according to Rouch, are far from able to understand. At the end of the film he asserts: 'On ne peut s'empêcher de se demander si ces hommes d'Afrique ne connaissent pas certains remèdes qui leur permettent de ne pas être des anormaux, mais d'être parfaitement intégrés à leur milieu: des remèdes que nous ne connaissons pas encore'. Rouch has subsequently criticized this ending, which figures the ceremony as a form of normative therapy; [4] however, this focus on what cannot be known is important to the overall ethics of this film in ways that we will return to later. For the time being, suffice it to recognize that the concluding lines of Rouch's commentary assimilate the performance of the Hauka to their colonial environment, in his claim that it helps their human mediums to deal with the realities of colonization. Furthermore, his commentary raises the question of who precisely 'nous'/'we' are in the preceding quotation and beyond, adding to the sense of fusion, and indeed confusion, between 'us' and 'them' suggested through the description of the spectacle in terms of reflection at the outset of the film.

The ceremony of *Les Maîtres fous* is, as the film commentary asserts, open to all those who wish to watch; Rouch's camera performs the task of widening the circle of spectators, but this circle cannot be broadened without raising the question of positioning in spectatorship. There is an opposition within the film - set up to be broken down - between the performers and the 'nous' designated in the commentary. The countries more directly implicated in the dominant position of the colonizer are Britain and France. From the seventeenth century onwards, Accra witnessed several conflicts between rival colonial powers until the British influence became the stronger. The Gold Coast was primarily a British colonial administrative area, a fact that is emphasized in *Les Maîtres fous* as the film cuts between the Hauka ritual and the Trooping of the Colour in Accra, performed by a British force before their Governor. But, as the history of the Hauka and the special language used at their ceremony suggests, France is as deeply implicated in the questioning of colonialism in this film as is Britain. The birthplace of the Hauka spirit possession was the Republic of Niger in the 1920s. The Hauka appropriated Europeanized behavior in order to challenge the colonial order, but, given the steep penalties for defying the French, thousands of young men migrated to the Gold Coast, continuing a migratory trend that had begun in the nineteenth century. The Hauka arrived in a British administrative area, bringing with them the vestiges of their French colonial past; hence the pidgin language that mixes French and English in their ceremony, which is more directly critical of the British in Accra. [5] Thus, with this complex history in mind (most of which is omitted from the film itself), even when it is understood as the most specific of colonial groupings, 'nous' is difficult to position categorically. The 'nous' of the written introduction to the film and of Rouch's commentary presumably refers to a European audience, if not a western audience more generally. Some positions are, however, always going to be more implicated in what is shown than others, and some viewing

positions carry a greater weight of responsibility than others do, especially when the content of the film is so inflammatory. It soon becomes clear that the reflective metaphor Rouch uses to interrogate the relation between 'us' and 'them' does not allow for such difference between viewing positions on the basis of the positioning explored in the film. Therefore, the film commentary invites an initial reading in which Africa mirrors the west through distorted images that reiterate colonial hierarchies. Before we explore how the images of the film might be understood to exceed this framework, we need first to turn to Moi, un noir. For, this film offers a different closure of the gap between Africa and the west that is nonetheless related to what we have just explored in *Les Maîtres fou*s.

Moi, un noir won the Prix Louis-Delluc in 1958 (against Chris Marker's *Lettre de Sibérie* and Claude Chabrol's *Le Beau Serg*e, among others), and drew high praise from Jean-Luc Godard in particular. Classified by the anthropologist and critic Paul Stoller as an ethnographic film and by the writer Gilles Marsolais as a psychological documentary, Rouch's preferred term is 'ethno-fiction'. This is the name he gives those of his films that fictionalize on the basis of fact, crossing the boundaries of ethnographic documentary into the fictional realm, but never moving away entirely from the real. Rouch explains:

La fiction est le seul moyen de pénétrer une realité (...) Dans Moi, un noir, je voulais montrer une ville africaine, Abidjan. J'aurais pu faire un documentaire nourri de chiffres et d'observations objectives. Cela aurait été mortellement ennuyeux. Eh bien! j'ai raconté une histoire avec des personages, leurs aventures, leurs rêves. Et je n'ai pas hésité à introduire la dimension de l'imaginaire, de l'irréel. [6]

The film focuses on a group of migrant workers who have left behind their lives in Niamey, Niger, to find work in Treichville, a suburb of Abidjan on the Ivory Coast. At the time of filming, the Ivory Coast was still a French colony. The goal of French colonization was to stimulate production of exports: the official image was of French West Africa's most prosperous country, which contributed over forty percent of the region's exports. Rouch's film provides a different view, one that focuses on the financial impoverishment of the migrant workers who see nothing of the wealth generated through the exports they help to dispatch. Rouch shows us the poor standard of living of these uprooted country dwellers now that they have come to the city to obtain temporary work as dockers and taxi drivers (to name but two of the jobs on offer to the men). Women seemingly fare even less well, since only prostitution is cited in the film as a way for them to earn money. [7]

Rouch still provides a commentary in voice-over form in *Moi, un noir* but it is far more intermittent than that of *Les Maîtres fous*, giving way to the voice-over of the main protagonist, Oumarou Ganda, who goes by the nickname of Edward G. Robinson. It allows an ethnographic gaze to cohabit with a view of the life of migrant workers from within. The voice-over suggests familiarity but distance, while the camera is at one with those filmed, not calling attention to its presence other than in the scenes where people look and smile into it directly. Documentary images of Treichville and its inhabitants feature alongside more visibly staged scenes between Robinson and his friends. Rouch introduces the film saying that young people, like the ones we are about to see, arrive regularly in Abidjan looking for work. His interjections serve to introduce the days of the week and provide an overview of each segment. This then opens to the protagonists whose actions are glossed by the narrative, which Ganda and his friends provide on the soundtrack.

It was Ganda who challenged Rouch to make a film that used real migrant workers like himself, having watched a screening of Rouch's *Jaguar* (1967) in which migrant workers are played by friends of Rouch who act out their roles, rather than live them on a daily basis. At the opening Rouch describes the film as 'le miroir où il [Edward G. Robinson] se decouvrait lui-même', and the film follows Robinson's daily existence, as it does that of his friend 'Eddie Constantine - Lemmy Caution'. In the post-synchronized commentary Robinson, interspersed with comments from Eddie Constantine, lays bare his hopes, dreams and disappointments, revealing how the discourse of colonialism has affected people like him. The protagonists improvise throughout, and the

commentary is also of their own making, with Rouch largely at their service, following them with his camera, depending on what they decide to do. They are portrayed as lacking in economic terms that affect their happiness, but this is largely on the basis of a western model already well established in their urban environment. Both Robinson and Rouch, in his occasional interventions, stress the harsh reality of life in Abidjan, money being the main concern for someone who confesses to wanting a wife, a house and a car (Robinson reiterates the fact that he is broke numerous times in the commentary). It is American culture that furnishes their model; we are told that we are in 'Le Chicago de l'Afrique Noire', the bars and restaurants bearing out this relation through some of their names, while French names serve as a more immediate reminder of the actual colonial presence. Torn, as Rouch says, between Islam and alcohol, the unemployed migrant youth turns to the new idols of boxing and cinema. The film highlights the difficulty of confronting western industrial culture for people like Robinson, Constantine and their friends, among whom feature the likes of 'Tarzan' and 'Dorothy Lamour', nicknames assumed from American culture, notably film. While giving them idols that enable them to dream of a life beyond their current situations, film is a facet of the broader western colonialism responsible for the situation they are in. The fact that these idols are also white reinforces their divided identity that seeks nonetheless to mirror the Americans.

In filming Robinson and his friends acting as Americans, Rouch is using a medium that has been an integral part of the colonization process to allow them to act out their fantasies of being rich and having what they want on the basis of a western model. The participants of the film are willfully complicit in assuming the names and roles of their idols, identifying with them without undercutting the authority of colonial and racist structures that maintain them at a very real distance from what they claim to desire. An interior colony is established psychically by means of this form of identification which Frantz Fanon speaks of in an Antillean context that is nevertheless relevant here. Fanon explains how colonization functions internally via the seemingly innocuous routes of the motion picture: 'le jeune Noire s'identifie de facto à Tarzan contre les nègres'. [8] If *Moi, un noir* is the mirror in which Robinson discovers himself, cinema itself becomes a mirror that permits identification with an image that alienates the African subjects from themselves. Through their uncritical identifications Robinson and his friends bring out a connection to American culture that is admittedly different from a direct relation to the French colonial presence: this contrasts with the relationship set up between the British administrators and the participants on which *Les Maîtres fous* depends. Yet the participants of each film, as we have seen, stage relations to the west that are imitative of the latter, thereby confirming the power of those whose positions they approximate. If this were the only tale that both films told, Rouch's work would stand as a rather uncritical illustration of how colonization is lived. However, each film gives rise to a more critical discourse that has its roots in, but is not limited to, the imitations and identifications that have been the subject of this discussion so far. The move beyond imitating, or identifying with, the image of the other is fundamental to a Levinasian ethics. In this context, such an ethics allows us to emphasize instead that the other's image is irreducible to the filming or viewing self. In both films, this irreducible aspect is made apparent through ritual celebrations and performances, that of *Les Maîtres fous* occupying the entire length of the film.

Between Mimesis and Mockery

The Hauka ritual of *Les Maîtres fous* lasts an entire day, which Rouch's film condenses into twenty-four minutes. The participants leave Accra itself in order to perform the ceremony far away form the government center. One by one, the spirits possesses the men (along with one woman), who become figures of the colonial hierarchy as well as of its cultural artifacts; the spirits, for the most part, take the form of members of the British administration. Suspended over the sacrificial altar, which is used to kill a ram, a chicken and a dog during the proceedings, is some coloured chiffon material that they call the Union Jack. They also erect a stature of the Governor (who stands in front of a shelter that represents his palace) over whom they crack an egg at one point in the ritual. The

sacrifices take place on the stone altar in front of the Governor's effigy. The killing of the dog is particularly significant, since their religion forbids them to kill and eat dogs. This sacrifice is deemed to prove that the Hauka have acquired power by transgressing mere human taboos, since they no longer conform to the behaviour required of them in society. The Hauka ceremony attempts to move beyond the binary structure of colonialism and racial distinction altogether. Their superhuman status is exemplified further when they touch naked flames and plunge their hands into boiling vats of water without harming themselves. Through these performances, the Hauka enact a move beyond the human frame. However, in spite of their debt to mimesis, their performances are also critical of this very process. To view *Les Maîtres fous* on the basis of its reflective mechanisms, authorized as we have seen by Rouch's commentary, is to ignore the interaction of different processes that distort rather than support such relations between Africa and the west. As the dual reading of the film's title suggests, *Les Maîtres fous* is a double-edged portrayal of master madmen and mad masters in which neither blacks nor whites occupy a comfortable position of mastery, least of all over one another.

A focus on mimicry has generated some of the most cogent responses to this film. Critics such as Paul Stoller and Michael T. Taussig have explored in sophisticated terms the ways in which mimesis operates here in relation to the colonial situation. Taussig concentrates on the position of the spectator who views this film from an ostensibly dominant viewing position (in particular, that of the white western male), and focuses on the guilt that this film could inspire in such a viewer. [9] Stoller, on the other hand, considers the mimicry quite apart from its relation to western guilt, and views it as a means of mastering whiteness, which critically subverts the system through its connection to a broader history of performances of Hauka bodily system through its connection to a broader history of performances of Hauka bodily possession. [10] In both readings, the relation between colonizer and colonized within the film is viewed as parodic; but as we know from the fundamental place that studies of mimicry occupy in postcolonial theory, this parody is as likely to confirm hierarchies as it is to subvert them. Homi K. Bhabha has written on the ambivalence of such a mimetic relationship, undermining the possibility that it is more likely to inculcate norms of behaviour rather than throw them into question. [11] Similarly, Fanon's work on identification underscores the colonial history of this process, suggesting that the aspects of mimesis within identification are responsible from an early age for the formation of a colonized psyche, with all its attendant psychological disturbances. [12] The parody at work in *Les Maîtres fous* is of a slightly different order, since it is carried out in a space beyond that of their everyday working lives and it is not solely a matter of exploring and showing how they themselves have been formed. Rather, having already been possessed by the Hauka, it involves adopting the persona of the colonial other: given the unflattering portrayal of the people they mime, there can be no doubt that this mimesis is critical. Yet mimesis and mockery cohabit to create a space for something that bears only a tangential relation to these processes. In Bhabha's words: '[w]hat emerges between mimesis and mimicry is a writing, a mode of representation, that marginalizes the monumentality of history, quite simply mocks its power to be a model, that power which supposedly makes it imitable'. [13] What Bhabha labels 'writing' takes on an explicitly visual form in Rouch's aesthetic, but one that does not rely on resemblance.

When the Hauka act out their roles, Africa and the west do indeed come together, but the result of this encounter is not one in which positions merge or supplant one another. For example, the stature of the Governor which has an egg broken over it at one stage of the proceedings, relates directly to the head attire worn by the Governor at the Trooping of the Colour: a helmet with a white feather on it. We are shown the statue of the Governor before the film cuts to the Trooping of the Colour at Accra. By association, the feather and the egg link the two Governors together, but this is through an associative relationship rather than a mirror image or its distortion. The Union Jack flag too has no direct visual correlation to the actual British flag; it is the name only that confers its status. Visual mimesis in the form of a mirror image is absent, and this is crucial to the challenge to colonialism that this film enacts. But we need to pause momentarily before exploring this further, since there is a

way in which this can still be recuperated by and reduced to a western model on the basis of an aesthetic parallel that is visible in *Moi, un noir*, too.

The protagonists of *Moi, un noir* act out their western identification sometimes too well: 'Eddie Constantine' was jailed for three months during filming as a result of his playing Federal Agent Lemmy Caution in his everyday life - a performance that apparently did not impress the local police. The identifications are acted out in a more contained space, however, at a meeting of a youth society, 'La Goumbé'. Rouch introduces this celebration that takes place on a Sunday, saying that those he has been filming go there to be 'soi-même parmi les siens' in a space in which dreams of the Far West meet African traditions. At the outset this 'soi-même' is Americanized through dress and performance. Young dancers dress as cowboys and perform to a surrounding crowd. This is followed by a rodeo in which the participants, still dressed as cowboys, ride bikes. In the dance of the bikes, these machines replace horses, and if we read this in terms of imitation, it is surreal. The French poet Guillaume Apolliniare's definition of Surrealism when he described man's desire to imitate walking was based on the wheel: '[q]uand l'homme à voulu imiter la marche, il a créé la roue qui ne ressemble pas à une jambe. Il a fait ainsi du surréalisme sans le savoir.' [14] Here the four legs of the horses, as opposed to the two legs of man, are represented by two wheels to form a surreal image in motion, based on imitation but eschewing literal visual resemblance, as do the aspects of imitation singled out above in *Les Maîtres fous*. Catherine Russell speaks of the jarring relation between egg and plume in the earlier film with reference to Surrealism on the basis of a debasement of authority. She understands Rouch to offer the surreal as a parallel politics to the Hauka ritual. [15] And my own association here brings this out in a different sense: it leads me to ask whether perhaps what draws Rouch to these cultural performances is an unconscious resemblance to a western aesthetic after all, and whether the western critic, myself included, always explains what s/he sees in terms of structures with which s/he is most familiar. Yet the performances, in their figuring and possession of the west, gesture beyond even this form of recuperation by a western aesthetic. However much of his style exudes narrative authority, Rouch and his vision are not entirely in possession of his films. Between subject positions within the film and between film, film-maker and viewer, all are engaged in a transformative process that questions hierarchies.

These ethnographic films do not widen the divide between Africa and the west, since each is interwoven with the other in such a way as to block the gaze of the colonizer, encouraging it too to become other than itself. While we have seen this on the level of the participants, this challenge to dichotomous thinking is only possible because the film-maker himself is not engaged in reiterating hierarchies. Although Rouch has been criticized for the different way in which he films French and African subjects, [16] one aspect of the filming of the latter in the two films under consideration, is their decentering of the position of Rouch the ethnographer. The west is a dominant force in both of the films but is something that, importantly, is also open to destabilization. This leads one commentator to observe parallels between what Rouch achieves (in *Moi, un noir* in particular) and what Michel Leiris and Claude Levi-Strauss do in the written realm:

Ainsi l'ethnologue est-il devenu peu à peu conscient de ceci: qu'il ne peut pas ne pas se mettre en question dans celui qu'il observe. *Moi, un noir* constitute un moment de cette prise de conscience, comme le sont, sur d'autres plans *L'Afrique fantôme* de Michel Leiris et *Tristes tropiques* de Claude Lévy-Strauss [sic]. [17]

In *Les Maîtres fous* Rouch locates himself in geo-political and historical terms, while simultaneously questioning this position tacitly through the film itself. The voice-over, which Rouch claims was improvised, is assertive and unfaltering, corresponding to the kind of voice-of-god narrative that is associated with traditional expository documentary. Paying attention to this alone, along with Suzanne Baron's smooth editing, leaves us with a rather conventional sense of documentary form; it is sensational because of the ceremony it films, rather than because of the manner in which it does so. But there is an intriguing difference between the shooting of the Hauka ceremony in which

Rouch and his camera are among the participants and the aerial shots of the Trooping of the Colour at Accra in which the camera has a bird's eye view of the scene. In the latter case, the camera is never placed on a level with the participants of this ceremony, from which the Hauka were said to have gained the inspiration for their ritual. Although still an outsider to the Hauka ceremony he is filming, his camera position places him far closer to them and the protocol of their ritual than it does to the pomp and circumstance of the British administrative parade. This suggests an implicit challenge to the geo-political alignment of the voice-over, along with its authority.

In *Moi, un noir* the voice-over, as we have already suggested, is initially more complex in its interweaving of the post-synchronized words of Ganda and the other actors with Rouch's unmistakable expository style. The narrative point of view from which the explanation of the film emerges is thus split from the outset, and is to be divided still further through Ganda's role as Robinson. The images follow a similar change in visual point of view when it comes to moving between filming the African friends and a rare cut to the American culture they mime. Ganda dresses up as Sugar Ray Robinson a third of the way through the film and fights a bout in a boxing ring with an opponent. We then see the kind of match that has been taken as the model for this. Moving between a mixture of aerial shots and close-ups, the difference between the two matches is, however, ambiguous. Rouch's camera alignment is utterly in keeping with the adulatory relation to American culture evident throughout the Africans' acting in *Moi, un noir*. Although differing from *Les Maîtres fous* in its creation of a less critical relationship to the culture mimed, Rouch is still closer to his African subjects than to his initial geo-political positioning as a result. In this way, visually enacted, Rouch and the protagonists of both films exceed their assigned symbolic positions to become other than themselves. Such a combination of 'becoming' and 'othering' constitutes, in Peter Ian Crawford's view, the crux of the anthropological process. Crawford understands the first part of this process - the ethnographic fieldwork - to be a matter of the anthropologist's 'becoming' the other by distancing him/herself from his/her own culture, while the second part - the final anthropological product - involves distancing him/herself from the culture under study. [18] A focus on how the film-maker and his protagonists change through the film-making process also characterizes Deleuze's reading of Rouch's cinema, [19] but the term takes on a quite different sense from Crawford's use of it. In Deleuze's philosophy, 'becoming' has a particular meaning that reinforces the reading of Rouch's films that I am seeking to make here, which takes us beyond the mechanisms of imitation and identification in a manner that appears initially, at least, to be compatible with our Levinasian perspective.

Beyond Imitation

In Deleuze's work, 'becoming'/'devenir' is an abstract process that relates to the effects of an encounter between two entities, a wasp and an orchid being two among many things that he uses to illustrate this. They come together momentarily and unavoidably, their encounter creating something new for each of them but allowing them to continue in directions common to neither. Each is changed through its relation to the other but neither becomes the other or a mirror image of that other as a result of their coming together. 'Becoming' is non-imitative in this sense: thereby, it bears an interrogative relationship to the original-copy logic of mimesis, which, as I have already argued, Rouch's films engage with, in order then to throw it into question. Deleuze is also interested in how Rouch's films allow film-maker and filmed subjects to 'become' other than themselves. Observing how Rouch's position is one that the film-maker himself seeks to decolonize through the film-making process, by making himself increasingly less dominant in relation to his filmed subjects, Deleuze concentrates on this process of transformation. He ties this in with a transformation in documentary itself and then speaks explicitly about *Moi, un noir*:

La formule célèbre: 'ce qui est commode avec le documentaire, ce'st qu'on sait qui on est et qui on filme', cesse d'être valable. La forme d'identité Moi=Moi (ou sa forme dégénérée, eux=eux) cesse de valoir pour les personages et pour le cinéaste, dans le réel aussi bien que dans la fiction. Ce qui se

laisse deviner plutot, à des degrées profonds, c'est le 'Je est un autre' de Rimbaud. Godard le disait à propos de Rouch: non seulement pour les personages eux-mêmes, mais pour le cinéaste qui 'blanc tout comme Rimbaud, déclare lui aussi que Je est un autre', c'est-à-dire moi un Noir. [20]

With recourse to Arthur Rimbaud's poetic dictum, Deleuze notes a slippage of the positions 'Moi' and 'eux' in Rouch's cinema. Deleuze sees 'becoming' at work in Rouch's films, and in other documentaries of the same era, precisely where they explore the intertwining of fact and fiction. Deleuze explores the 'becoming other' of the real in the documentary mode, and he describes this process as non-imitative. He thereby offers a useful way out of a potentially interminable debate that binds the film we have been discussing to mimesis and to the dual subversion and reiteration of the hierarchies of the colonial status quo. However, in spite of the usefulness of Deleuze's reading, his notion of 'becoming' raises questions that he does not answer: this is because it depends on an overlap between the positions of observer and observed, without accounting for the all-important distance that Rouch's work also introduces through this encounter. It is Levinas, rather than Deleuze, who enables us to register this difference. Mimesis, like its antithesis, 'becoming', thrives on proximity, moving us away from the mirror image; but it does not remove the risk of appropriation and recuperation of images of Africa within a western aesthetic, or of documentary by fiction. And this takes us back to the heart of the ethical dilemma which runs throughout my study. By giving Ganda and his friends the opportunity to make cinema work for them, Rouch can be taken as the other self to whom the title '*Moi, un noi*r' refers, as Godard's comments indicate. Yet such reference is only possible if we reduce *Moi, un noir* to its fiction aspect, since it is legitimately in this realm that a film-maker can make such a claim without being thought to invade the positions of his subjects. If the film-maker is identified with/as his subjects, we lose sight of the ways in which he is not they. This film's resistance to such a loss of distance between the two lies in its documentary element that is, of course, all the more resonant in *Les Maîtres fous*. A documentary ethics of separation is apparent here that does not reinforce a problematic ethnographic distance between Rouch and his subjects, or drive a wedge between documentary and fiction, but nor does it erase the differences between them. His filming is concerned with the creating of shifting distances between colonizer and colonized, observer and observed. This works in line with a Levinasian sense of non-identification with an image of others, and the preservation of difference between self and other, but it also refuses to fix such an ethics in static terms.

Rouch's reference in *Les Maîtres fou*s to what westerners do not yet know and, thus also, cannot yet see, is instructive, for it implies that the film responds to colonial oppression in ways that exceed the representation of that response. It offers a move beyond the visible within this filmic space in which the documentary image furnishes ethnographic knowledge that is always incomplete. Rouch thus becomes an important forerunner to the epistemological shift that Bill Nichols has posited more recently in documentary making: incompleteness and uncertainty have become the order of the day, and the possibility of knowing anything or anyone completely is thrown into question. [21] My study locates this documentary questioning of epistemological mastery and its accompanying challenge to mastery through vision in the broader ethical context of Levina's work. We have noted the way Rouch's camera positioning marks his alignments which question the stability of the all-seeing eye of commentary, thereby disputing the perceiving subject's mastery of its field. Rouch does not employ other formal film techniques to question an ability to see what he sees. But if we consider the ritual he is filming, we have a visual challenge to mimesis instigated by the Hauka that cannot fail to challenge Rouch's capacity to contain their performance in his filmic images: this is because their possession lies beyond representation. The divided colonial subject whose image and subjectivity are already at odds with one another, as Fanon and Bhabha make clear, has, in this context, entered a realm in which this is dramatized, criticized and exceeded. Colonization via the conscious and the unconscious is no longer appropriable and an uncolonized subjectivity performs a different relation to the real for the length of the ceremony. The only access viewers have to this is in the form of images of the body and audible sounds that require translation, both of which divide us

from the subjectivity of those filmed but in such a way as to suggest that there is more to this than meets the filming eye/I. This is not a denial of African subjectivity, but a record of the fact that documentary cannot access this through the images and sounds it records. Rouch's reference to the unknowable thus becomes a function of the film's exceeding his attempts to possess its subject matter. Neither Rouch, nor by implication the 'nous' he includes with him, can step into the body or mind of his African subjects to know what they know, see what they see, or feel what they feel. Russell argues that 'the African unconscious remains unknown and invisible'; [22] however, unlike her, I do not read Rouch's filming as part of a general utopian drive in the filming of possession rituals 'to penetrate the mind of the Other' [23] and therefore falling short of its aims. Rather, the western film-maker is acknowledging his position outside the events he films from a position of utter proximity. But his transformation through filming still registers his difference and distance from those he films: it records the fact that this is as close as he can get to knowing the consciousness - and the unconscious - of these African performers on film.

Moi, un noir's attempt to go beyond what is knowable through the ethnographic documentary image passes, as Rouch suggests, into the fictional realm. It gets closer to the subjectivity of those who participate, but allows them simultaneously to move further away by taking on assumed identities that bind each actor to western culture, especially cinema. Therefore, cinema gives way to cinema here, as Rouch records the place of American film idols in the acting of his subjects. As we have observed, Rouch manifests his alignment with his African subjects through the positioning of his camera, and thus questions his own locus. But he still marks out his distance from them, and allows us to see how *Moi, un noir* is both his film and also says more about the protagonists than himself. Ultimately, this film is no more effective in penetrating reality of what is filmed than is *Les Maîtres fous*, since 'reality' has cinema at its origin in the form of the protagonists' desires. Offering us images and commentary on a culture from the position of an accepted ethnographer and the culture itself, it melds the two into one film without collapsing them into one undifferentiated position.

Les Maîtres fous and *Moi, un noir* thus perform a different relation between Africa and the west from that indicated in the many readings which focus principally on the blurring of boundaries between the two through the varied performances of the films' protagonists. Having argued that there is more to Rouch's work than the mimesis and mockery of colonial relations through which both films become mirrors (both in Rouch's description of the ceremony in the earlier film, and in his description of Robinson's self-discovery in the second), one final point still remains to be addressed. As I have already stressed, my challenge to seeing images of resemblance within Rouch's cinema is aimed at bringing out the differences that the mimetic reading occludes without then setting up such differences as intractable. The problems of this become more apparent if we return briefly to Fanon's work. When Fanon reworks the Lacanian mirror stage in order to introduce the particularity of black subjectivity, he writes that 'pour le Blanc, Autrui est percu sur le plan de l'image corporelle, absolument comme le non-moi, c'est-à-dire le non-identifiable, le non-assimilable.' [24] Racial difference is thus instituted hierarchically, and the recognition of what cannot be fully identified, assimilated or known takes on wholly negative connotations. It is not in this sense that Rouch's films constitute his subjects as unknowable in their specificity, since they break down such hierarchical subordination. And it is important to stress in conclusion that Rouch's ethnography sets up anti-specular relations in which the excess of the image that prevents reduction of the African subjects to the western self is not the product of the racial denigration of the black. Hence the value of introducing theoretical writings such as Fanon's to the Levinasian foundations of this study in order better to emphasize the specificity of those who are filmed. From within the very process of challenging racial and colonial hierarchy there emerges a recognition of difference which is not complicit with its incommensurable racist counterpart. In this, it is possible to equate Rouch's practice with what Sara Ahmed terms the 'ethnography of failure,' [25] whereby the ethnographer learns to know what s/he fails to know of those s/he studies. In the visual sphere, this incapacity

fully to know the culture studied pivots on a gap between seeing and knowing that enables the ethnographic subject to escape possession by filmic means. While never seeking to stage or acknowledge any such inability to know his subjects, Rouch's film reveal this subtly and implicitly, even unconsciously. This allows us then to glimpse the ways in which his subjects remain necessarily beyond himself and a western aesthetic, in spite of the proximity to these western elements that his filming (and his filmed subjects) rely upon. This represents a positive form of resistance to appropriation, and furnishes visual knowledge beyond the looking-glass that does not dominate what is seen and shown, or construct its subjects as unknowable per se. Engendering an ethics that relies on distance within proximity, the Rouchian aesthetic allows us finally to sense the paradox of the Levinasian face, as image and commentary combine to point up the limits of knowledge and vision. Herein lays the success of his filmic ethnography of failure.

[1] Jay Ruby, *Picturing Culture: Explorations of Film and Anthropology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 38

[2] The ensuring discussion of *Les Maîtres fous* is based on a modified rendering of ideas first published in article form. See Sarah Cooper, 'Otherwise than becoming: Jean Rouch and the ethics of *Les Maîtres fous*', French Studies, LVI/4 (2002), 483-94.

[3] For a brief but useful discussion of the controversy surrounding *Les Maîtres fous*, see 'La Polémique autour des '*Maîtres Fous*'', in Jean Rouch ou le ciné-plaisir, special edition of *CinémAction* (1996), ed. By Réné Prédal, 80-88. The film is also reputed to have had a far wider influence beyond the ethnographic sphere, Jean Genet's theatrical aesthetic in *Les Nègres* being one of the most famous examples of this wider reception.

[4] Catherine Russell comments on Rouch's rejection of the ending, saying that, in spite of its problematic status, it reflects the relation between psychoanalysis and ethnography in the representation of possession in the mid-twentieth century. Russell comments also on the film's relation to twentieth-century Surrealist politics: see Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography: the Work of Film in the Age of Video* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), especially pp. 221-29. For a useful volume of essays on the relationship between Surrealism and ethnography, which pays specific attention to ethnographic film generally and Rouch's work in particular, see *L'Autre et le sacré: surréalisme, cinéma, ethnologie,* ed. by C.W. Thompson (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1995).

[5] For a hugely informative and more detailed discussion of this historical background, see Paul Stoller, *Embodying Colonial Memories: Spirit Possession, Power, and the Hauka in West Africa* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

[6] Quoted in Gilles Marsolais, *Jean Rouch* (Quebec: Cinématheque Québécoise, janvier 1973).

[7] On the subject of Rouch's treatment of sexual difference, Catherine Russell provides a sensitive critical reading (of *Les Maîtres fous*) that touches on the problems of terming his work sexist. See *Experimental Ethnography*, pp. 225-28. For Rouch's convincing defense of his focus on men rather than women in his ethnographic work, see Jean Rouch with Dan Georgakas, Udayan Gupta, and Judy Janda, 'The politics of visual anthropology', in *Ciné-Ethnography*, ed. By Steven Feld (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 217.

[8] Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Seuile, 1952), p. 124, footnote.

[9] See Michael T. Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

[10] See Stoller, *Embodying Colonial Memories*.

[11] See Homi K. Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and man: the ambivalence of colonial discourse', in *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 85-92.

[12] See Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs*.

[13] Bhabha, 'Of mimcry and man', p. 88

[14] Guillaume Apollinaire, *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* (Paris: Editions du Bélier, 1946), p. 10.

[15] Russell, *Experimental Ethnography*, p. 225.

[16] Feld, *Ciné-Ethnography*, pp. 214-15

[17] Micel Delahaye, 'La Règle du Rouch', *Cahiers du Cinéma*, 120 (juin 1961), 1-11 (p. 4).

[18] See Peter Ian Crawford, 'Film as discourse: the invention of anthropological realities', in F*ilm as Ethnography*, ed. By Peter Ian Crawford and David Turton (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), pp. 66-82.

[19] See Deleuze, 'Les Puissances du faux', in *L'image-temps*, pp. 165-202, and esp. pp. 192-202.

[20] Ibid, p. 199.

[21] See Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries*, p. 1.

[22] Russell, *Experimental Ethnography*, p. 229

[23] Ibid, p. 228.

[24] Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs*, p. 131

[25] Sara Ahmed, S*trange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 72.

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Dr. Sara Cooper teaches at King's College in London. Her principal research interests are in film theory and continental philosophy; ethics and film, especially documentary; and modern critical theory, especially feminist theory, queer theory, and psychoanalysis. She has written books on queer theory and French documentary, and is working currently on three projects: a monograph on the films of Chris Marker for Manchester University Press; an edited volume of essays on the work of Emmanuel Levinas and cinema; and a monograph on the figure of the father in contemporary world cinema and theory.