

## 9 THE REAL IN-BALANCE IN JEAN ROUCH'S *LA PYRAMIDE HUMAINE*

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In 1959, the *annus mirabilis* of the *nouvelle vague*, yet another film about adolescents tested the limits of realism.<sup>1</sup> *La Pyramide humaine* (1959) is Jean Rouch's experiment in racial integration. Without making any reference to the Ivory Coast's colonial relationship to France just prior to independence, the film addresses the alienation between Europeans and Africans in a high school in Abidjan. The project is simple: get black and white students from the graduating class to meet each other outside the classroom. Following a loose scenario Rouch instructs the students to play themselves, and in search of fruitful psychodrama he warns that some of them will have to play racists.

*La Pyramide humaine* was filmed during the school holidays in a classroom made of film set boards in a construction site by the Abidjan lagoon and in a studio in Paris. With no teacher present and desks and a blackboard as the only real props, the film presents, a year before the famous screening scene in *Chronique d'un été* (1960) the film projector as signifier and transformer of reality.

This didactic film seeks to extend interracial relations beyond the classroom, and then beyond the film itself. It matters very little, therefore, if Rouch's social modifiers – flimsy fictional ploys and forced performances – cannot produce a seamless spectacle. That these students are graduating and about to move into their adult lives is much more relevant for the filmmaker who conceives of film as a liminal stage propitious to change.

Like *Chronique d'un été* and *Moi, un noir* (1958), *La Pyramide humaine* advocates filming as a process of performative revision. Screenings and even dubbing can promote self-knowledge through a revisitation of one's image in film. In *Moi, un noir* Oumarou Ganda records his dialogue and comments on the scenes, performing a poignant meditation on his social place and the condition

of migrant workers. This reflective dimension of the films is only possible because of the temporal lag between filmed scene and recorded commentary.

The lack of synchronised sound defines, however, a problematic of particular significance to *La Pyramide humaine*.<sup>2</sup> In his application for funds to complete his project Rouch explained that the first, silent shooting had taken place during the July vacations, necessitating two extra shootings for dubbing (see Rouch 1960: 16–18). At these occasions the students were at a different stage in their knowledge of each other and of themselves. Passages of the film contradict others. Some of the students became fascinated by contemporary problems of Africa, and grew progressively more articulate about it. 'In July,' said Rouch, 'they spoke like Tintin, at Christmas they sound like a *Figaro* editorial and by Easter, they felt like contributors to *L'Express*, or *France Observateur*' (1960: 18). This difference in tone was frustrating for the author who confirmed his opinion that this kind of film had to be shot in sequence and only once (*ibid.*).

Rouch's ideal was to install a pure continuum between a pro-filmic reality which, charged with made-up scenarios and role playing, would then bring about an improved social reality. Because it depends fully on performance this humanist cinema is haunted by its potential insincerity. To counter the effects of theatricality, immediacy and presence are called to the rescue: 'It seemed to me that the only way not to lie was to film very fast a single subject in real time' (*ibid.*).

Still, technical difficulties are not the sole reason for the film's broken texture. The film is, in Michel Delahaye's words, 'its own motor, its own means' (1961: 8). It is pure scaffolding. Unravelling in continual self-deconstruction, the film has five different beginnings. It is held up by an excess of explanatory frames at both of its ends. And this unwarranted propping up results in eroding the film at the same time that it justifies its goals. Rouch's anxiety regarding the film's status intimates a persistent awareness that this activist film can do very little to address the irresolvable banality and residual racism between the two groups.

I am interested in *La Pyramide humaine*'s fault lines. It is when the film changes gears from activist documentary to poetic reverie, from creating images of a willed, exemplary future and back to exposing impossible, difficult relationships, when it is at its most contradictory and untenable, that it is most exciting.

'What matters if a film is born or not,' asks Rouch at the film's close. 'What really matters happens around the camera.' 'This small film,' he says, 'accomplished in its daily improvisations what years of being in the same classroom could not' – namely the friendships it sparked between blacks and whites. Even before the credits roll, three separate caveats are issued: firstly, an inter-title announces the film is an experience 'provoked on' a group of adolescents and that once started, the director simply filmed it. Secondly, two parallel scenes with black and white

students present Rouch answering their initial hesitations related to acting and plot. Finally, a commentary over images of Jean Claude and Elola (white and black, respectively) strolling together completes this lengthy introduction to the film: 'Instead of mirroring reality the film created another reality. This story did not happen but the actors made up their lines and reactions during shooting. Spontaneous improvisation was the only rule,' says Rouch in the film.

Immediately after the credits, to prove the film's success, Denise, an African student, and Nadine, a European woman, are shown as friends in Paris. Rouch intimates that a year ago it was not so. For the beautiful Nadine, Rouch creates the pivotal role of initiator. Her recent arrival from France makes it plausible for her to question the limited social integration between black and white students. Denise assumes a matching role as a sympathetic black student, in part, because we have access to her thoughts. They become Rouch's emissaries. Both Nadine and Denise introduce the other characters. Through an affectionate verbal description of their friends the two women portray with a precise ethnographic texture the two worlds inhabited by Europeans and Africans: loose images of Alain and Nadine (a European couple) on a motorbike against the striking background of the Abidjan port and scenes of going to the club's swimming pool are inter-cut with Elola and Dominique (an African couple) strolling through the Treichville market meeting Natalie and at night in the dance hall. These parallel depictions indicate, in their symmetry, the equality Rouch wants to establish.

The film's plot mimics the alternate rhythms of leisure and homework that govern these students' lives. Opportunities are never missed to raise the issue of racial integration. A long discussion is occasioned by Denise's outrage at being referred to with *tu*, a misplaced intimacy lacking in respect. Elola and Denise are adamant about this expression of racism in Abidjan. At this point, and for the first time, the film's exemplary purpose is announced when Dominique suggests that by being together they will create a model for change.

The mixing of Africans and Europeans is visually enacted as they play soccer together, as they race and embrace. Grand topics are introduced. But the filmmaker obviously relishes scenes that pair a looser camera movement to a musical soundtrack. As Nadine comes to ask Denise what she means by the term 'apartheid', Alain stands up and runs towards his new black friends, followed by the camera's parallel sweep. The pairing of the camera movement to Alain springing into a mixed-race grouping under an African guitar tune conveys a sense of ease and pleasure that matches Rouch's ideals for a new community.<sup>3</sup> Such scenes seem to hastily bypass conflict, creating, almost too soon, idyllic pocket-images of co-existence.

Split between providing an actual forum for discussion and freely plotting scenes of integrated relationships, the film seems as uncomfortable as its ac-

tors are in their performances. Each step in the students' relations is preceded by group discussions, scenes that serve their conventional function in activist documentaries representing a collective perspective. Rouch uses role-playing in loose variations of socio-drama.

In an effort to generate conflict, Jacqueline, one of the white girls, overdoes her character's racist opinions, making them vehement and simplistic: she talks about the blacks' lack of traditional culture, how dumb they are. Here role-playing backfires. Her hammy performance hints at an insincerity that is hard to place. If one associates her over-acting with the crude and biased views she spouts one would tend to assume by default that these could never be Jacqueline's own opinions but only available racist clichés ready for appropriation in a schematic characterisation. Instead of provoking the likelihood of real debate, the exaggerated acting represents an extreme position that can be safely distanced both by the group of students and by the film's audience. The nuanced and unspoken racism they live amongst remains untouched.

Poor acting is particularly revealing of the film's quandary. The phoniness of the acting amplifies the awkwardness of relations to such a degree that the film seems to create through its wooden acting the very stiffness in these relations it supposedly addresses. When actors exert themselves in their roles, or when flimsy pretexts generate repetitive arguments, the project's malaise is exposed.

As if to awaken its dormant psycho-dramatic potential, a sequence begins in the film that could be called 'Le Caprices de Nadine', following the famed source of Jean Renoir's *La Règle du jeu* (*The Rules of the Game*, 1939). The film's second part is headed by a reading of a poem by Paul Éluard, *Les Dessous d'une vie ou la pyramide humaine* (1926). As Jean Claude reads on youth, on loving love itself and women replacing each other endlessly, the camera solemnly crosses each of the students' faces registering a pensive expectation: 'It was after the Human Pyramid that all changed, poetry infected us as poison, love entered our lives.'

Éluard is an obvious choice for a switch into enchanted territory as Rouch had associated his own entranced verbal commentaries in *Les Maîtres fous* with the poet's voice and Surrealism in general.<sup>4</sup> Poems, anchored or not to homework scenes, float over the bright blue and white images of a ship, while a beached old cargo is reinvented as their favourite playground and Alain's haunt. Rouch positions his characters in magical childish spaces. Jean Claude, for instance, plays music and confides in Nadine in a ruined house. A dream scene showing Raymond, one of the African classmates, and Nadine getting married in a syncretic religion church cuts between close-ups of statues and Nadine's coquettish masking of her face with her long hair.

The sequence's motif becomes Nadine's flirtatious manner and the frustration arising from her familiarity with everyone. From now on almost every scene

pivots around her and one of the male characters – Alain, Baka (another African participant), Jean Claude, Dominique – who, infatuated, will either argue or physically fight about her. A series of contrived gossiping and small disputes is set in motion when the young men interchangeably claim Nadine, Nathalie (one of the Europeans) or Denise's attentions. Each dialogue scene relays the same information – she loves me, not you – in multiple character permutations.

Even if these infatuation scenarios are understood as generated by a limited adolescent imagination, ultimately they have a structural function. Their common denominator – Nadine – becomes less innocent as a flirt as her narrative role becomes clearer. She is, after all, Rouch's surrogate provocatrice. The consequence of Nadine's inconsequential actions is quite dramatic. After a beach outing and some dancing on the cargo boat, Alain starts a fight with Jean Claude over Nadine and, in a show of bravado, jumps into the water and is drowned.<sup>5</sup>

The violence of this rupture deserves pause. How does Alain's death and its surplus of fiction aid the narrative of progress towards interracial friendship? Up to this point the film has developed in the realm of compatibility between representation and reality. The friendship between the two groups poses no real questions to a more insidious racism, as it does not disturb the film's calm navigation of its documentary course.

Like the former passage from activist docu-drama to Nadine love story, this move into dramatic fiction is a pedal pressed to step up the dynamic between these students. The casual love innuendos introduce interracial sex and marriage as their thematic undercurrent. As imperturbably as Nadine's serial flirtation, these scenes up the stakes of the film, forcing a recognition of the unspoken racism in the Ivory Coast. But the incredible length to which Rouch takes the theme of Nadine's flirtation leads ultimately to a confrontation with another taboo, the sudden and radical dip into dramatic fiction.

In *Gare du Nord* (1966), his only strictly fictive film, one can see with greater acuity the mechanics of the Rouchian drama. A wife, played by the same Nadine, nags her husband about his eating manners, his lack of imagination and the view about to be blocked from their apartment's kitchen window. The speedy crescendo of complaints and the leaps in reasoning suggest the pressure to accommodate the plot to the film's short length. This time constraint generates an interesting dramatic curve reproduced formally in the film's use of a mobile camera and a long take following Nadine until her exit into the street.<sup>6</sup> The resolution of Rouch's little story is both concrete and conceptual. In a chance encounter, a man appears in answer to Nadine's fantasies. But the formulation of his desires in the exact same terms as hers qualifies him as a dream, a bracket in reality. When Nadine refuses to follow him he kills himself, jumping onto the Gare du Nord's rails.

An equally unmotivated approach to drama is evident in *La Pyramide humaine*. Drama has a conceptual import for Rouch and like a *deus ex machina* Alain's leap into the sea is supposed to open a magical door of sorts. Alain's death in the story precipitates the film's end, as his action provokes the two groups to resume their former segregation, the blacks accusing the whites of being superficial. The function of Alain's death in the film's texture, however, is much more complex. Before setting up the boy's disappearance, Rouch applies the brakes twice. Two scenes are clearly wedged in between the serial flirtation and Alain's drowning scene, thus denaturalising their fated link.

The first scene takes place in the classroom. After their final exams, the group naturally gathers around Denise who, pointing at a newspaper, initiates a discussion around France and Britain's duty to make a statement concerning South Africa. Dominique states that he understands why France would want to resist meddling in South Africa's internal affairs, since other countries would then bring up the matter of Algeria. The scene corresponds to the group's developing sophistication and engagement with African and apartheid questions, when Rouch ironically commented that after eight months they sounded like *L'Express*. But this scene is also the film's most explicit positioning of the French group's ambivalence *vis-à-vis* Africa, and of the Africans *vis-à-vis* France.

A cut from Alain centrally framed defending France's neutrality introduces the next shot, his face now close to a film projector. The camera pans over a group of students watching a screening. Rouch re-introduces each student through their identifiable personas. 'These roles are now a part of their reality' states Rouch, who proposes to push the experiment to its limits: 'Why not test their reality with a tragedy, a fiction that once filmed becomes reality, freeing those who believe too seriously in their role?' Alain's death had been decided by the group because he had become too identified with his character. The screening scene seemed crucial to the author to remind all involved, including us, that the film is only fictional. But this insistence on the film's fictional status is itself problematic in a film that has flirted so emphatically with its potential to effect actual changes in an extra-textual reality.

Why does the film stress this precise and deadly disjunction? The significance of this interruption becomes clear if we see the reflexive screening scene not as a preparation for the next scene, the leap into dramatic artifice, but related instead to the prior discussion scene. In the long classroom conversation all seem even more ingrained in their differences than before. Baka's reference to Algeria as France's Achilles heel, Alain's use of the phrase 'it is normal' to justify France's reluctance in taking positions against apartheid suggest a level of discord that belies the humanist fraternity Rouch hoped the film would affirm. The screening scene and Rouch's insistence that the students needed to free themselves from

believing too seriously in their roles is actually an attempt to contain the difference of opinion that emerges in the discussion.

Catherine Russell's notion of narrative mortality helps explain Rouch's invocation and dismissal of closure through a death scene. Like other filmic practices 'moving beyond formalist categories of open and closed endings as well as mythic categories of fate and romance' (1995: 2), *La Pyramide humaine* uses a death scene to open up the question of cinematic realism. But the film's restless reframing of its reality cannot be seen separately from the problematic of European and African racism, a topic to which the film returns.

The discussion scene and real conflicts represent possibilities that had been deflected by the light *ronde*-like sequence of adolescent caprice. These three scenes – the discussion, the screening and Alain's death – equate the complex and unresolved state of racism between the French and Africans to the equally suspended status of the real in cinema. By grafting his obsession – the confusion of real and fiction – onto the genre of consciousness-raising film, Rouch can only exacerbate the paradox proper of activist films. Poised between promoting process and creating evidence of progress, the film's narrative continually halts. The demand to represent both the fluidity of changeable living relations and to provide a quotable image for the film's accomplishment creates for its agents and improvised actors an unstable resting point. *La Pyramide humaine* acts out this restlessness through a series of breaks and impossible endings.<sup>7</sup>

The framing of Alain's death raises questions not easily solved by the film's final optimistic message. For Rouch's struggle to shape reality to the measure of his fantasy depends not only on sudden reversals but on a resurrection. In the film's very last image, alternating by race and gender, two couples – Alain and Denise; Nadine and Baka – move together in a purposive frontal stride towards the camera. This Family-of-Man image follows a close-up of Denise who, in voice-over, says, after Rouch's self-congratulatory remarks: 'Our story is both simple and complex, it is up to us to make it.' Alain's presence in this picture-perfect poster for integration revives the film's main questions. He is the white student who had 'died' in the film's most arbitrary directorial decision. His first appearance after 'drowning at sea', his resurrection, is yet another reminder of the film's fictive nature. But when he reappears just for the last shot he taints this model image of success with a phantasmal dimension. His re-emergence exposes the film's strain in trying to create out of its meandering plots and stilted conflicts an exemplary ending.

I want to rewind to a slightly earlier moment, before Rouch's dutiful return to a humanist and exemplary agenda. The surreal beauty of the rollercoaster of realities traversed during *La Pyramide humaine* is condensed in an image seen from above, from a plane. After Nadine leaves for Paris and before Rouch dis-

misses the film's failure as irrelevant when compared with the actual friendships it successfully created, we see again, from the air, the beached cargo ship. First slanted to the right and then slanted to the left it occupies the full frame. It floats as if redesigning the ground, sand, sea and sky. Instead of the Family-of-Man tableau that means to suspend the issue of racism, I end my *Pyramide Humaine* with this unhinged image. Its romantic evocation of Neverland and a permanent state of play is, I believe, as essential to Rouch's humanist aesthetics.

## NOTES

- 1 The *nouvelle vague* filmmakers enacted their rite of passage into feature filmmaking with films about growing up or young adult life as in, for instance, François Truffaut's *Les Quatre cents coups* (*The 400 Blows*, 1959) and Claude Chabrol's *Les Cousins* (*The Cousins*, 1959).
- 2 Trying to synchronise the speech of non-actors in *La Pyramide humaine*, Rouch mentioned it was not possible to repeat what he had done in his prior film *Moi, un noir*. He explained that the words spoken by Oumarou Ganda (Edward G. Robinson) were autobiographical, and that he relived directly and completely the scenes during the dubbing projection. In *La Pyramide humaine* the relationships created were ultimately fictional, and the people involved never felt directly concerned with their screen images. Only when there was a conflict did they feel that their acting abilities were called for (See Rouch 1960: 17, n.8; this text consists of Rouch's script of the film for the most part already shot, as he applied for extra shooting funds from the Centre National de Cinématographie. The footnotes establish what subsists of the project in the final print of the film).
- 3 On Rouch's predilection for images of play see Morin 2003: 241, 262.
- 4 Rouch is quoted as saying that while speaking the commentary for *Les Maitres fous* 'he heard himself speaking in a singular voice (the toneless voice of Éluard or Jean-Louis Barrault reading surrealist poems in the Theater of Champs Élysées in 1937)' (in Piault 1996: 142).
- 5 Rouch's sequence of misguided love functions structurally in the same way as Renoir's mobilisation of the lengthy sequence of Christine's directionless flirtations. Both are meant as distractions from the serious matters that hover in the background. In *La Pyramide humaine* this sequence of inconsequential flirtations demands, as in *La Règle du jeu*, a tragic consequence. But the film does not finally confront racism. Serge Daney has remarked how modern narratives resort to a logic of permutation and vicariousness, as they avoid psychological motivation. He cites Renoir and criticises Rouch's humanist manoeuvres to have blacks and whites exchange positions, 'to preserve rhythm and symmetry' (2003: 38).



- 6 The long take is broken once she enters the lift.
- 7 I discuss the uses of *cinéma vérité* to circumvent an image of authority (see Margulies 2004). The extended dialogue between Morin and Rouch at the end of the film, as well as the innumerable post-film publications, exemplify this difficulty of ending on a note of dissidence.

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