Introduction

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DESPITE THE INCLUSION OF ACCOMPLISHED documentary filmmakers in so many university film faculties, film study has tended to treat documentaries as if they were marginal to its concerns. In the past few years, of course, a number of documentaries have attained such an unprecedented degree of popularity that the field has belatedly taken notice of documentary's political, social and cultural influence. Even today, however, there remains a dearth of serious critical studies of documentary films and filmmakers.

Ten years ago, I argued in the preface to *Documentary Film Classics* (1997) that the scarcity of critical studies of documentary films was indicative of film study's more general neglect of criticism, a consequence of the revolution the field underwent when it began to accord precedence to what it called theory. As I pointed out, there was also a special animus in film study's resistance to devoting sympathetic critical attention even to the most significant works within the documentary tradition. It derived from the claim sometimes made on behalf of documentaries—less often by their makers than by their detractors—that documentaries are capable of capturing unmediated reality, or "truth."

From the standpoint of the film theories that dominated the field for many years—theories that take reality to be an illusory ideological construct—such a claim seems intolerably naive or disingenuous and in any case pernicious. Now that those theories have loosened their grip over film study, it has become clear to most scholars and students in the field that, although documentaries are not inherently more direct or truthful than other kinds of films, it does not follow that they must repudiate and

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subvert the traditional documentarian's aspiration of revealing reality. Of course, great documentary films—great fiction films too, for that matter—are capable of revealing truths about the world. What revelations documentaries are capable of achieving and what means are available to them for achieving their revelations are questions to be addressed by acts of criticism, not settled a priori by theoretical fiat. Therefore, what critical approaches, what terms of criticism, do documentary films call for? How are we to acknowledge what separates what we call "documentaries" from what we call "fiction films" without denying what they have in common? (What they have in common, first and foremost, is their medium: film.)

The papers in *Three Documentary Filmmakers* demonstrate, singly and collectively, that the films of Errol Morris, Ross McElwee, and Jean Rouch call for, and reward, criticism of the sort that is invited and expected by serious works in any medium. They are works in which, as the philosopher Stanley Cavell puts it, "an audience's passionate interest, or disinterest, is rewarded with an articulation of the conditions of the interest that illuminates it and expands self-awareness" (Cavell 2005, 335).

As these essays also demonstrate, documentary films pose special challenges to serious criticism. Critical methods that enable one to illuminate what makes *Citizen Kane* a great film may not be adequate for articulating what it is about, say, Morris's *The Thin Blue Line* or *The Fog of War*, McElwee's *Time Indefinite* or *Bright Leaves*, or Rouch's *Les maîtres fous* or *Funeral at Bongo: The Old Anaï (1848–1971)* that makes them—each in its own way—great films as well. It is a challenge to find terms of criticism capable of illuminating such works. The writings in *Three Documentary Filmmakers*—each, too, in its own way—aspire to rise to that challenge.

The American documentary filmmakers Morris and McElwee, although contemporaries, differ strikingly from each other in their styles and their approach to filming. And they both differ in almost every imaginable way from Rouch, a trained anthropologist whose ideas were formed in the intellectual ferment of post–World War II Paris and in West Africa. Because of the magnitude of their differences, the films of Morris, McElwee, and Rouch pose different, if related, challenges for criticism. They also have affinities so deep as to make it fruitful to devote to the three filmmakers a single volume of criticism, even though, as this volume illustrates, their films call for modes of critical writing no less different in tone, mood, and approach than are the films themselves.

I find a key to these affinities in the eloquent remark by the anthropologist Paul Stoller, who observes, in "Jean Rouch and the Power of the Between," that Rouch's greatest contribution was to have created a

body of work in which "the limits of the ethnographic are the limits of the imagination. In Rouch's universe ethnographers participated fully in the lives of their others. Dreams became films; films became dreams. Feeling was fused with thought and action. Fusing poetry and science, Jean Rouch showed us the path of wise ancestors and guided us into a wondrous world where we not only encounter others, but also encounter ourselves."

Of course, Morris and McElwee are not—or are not exactly—ethnographers. In their films, it is not—or not exactly—*science* that is fused with poetry. But their films, too, meditate—in very different ways!—on the impossibility of knowing with certainty where the imagination ends and the world begins. They, too, explore the ambiguous and paradoxical relationships between fantasy and reality, self and world, fiction and documentary, dreams and films, filming and living. Their films, too, are both philosophical and deeply personal. And their films, too, are preoccupied with the lengths to which human beings go in our efforts to transcend or overcome—or simply deny—our fear of death.

Errol Morris: The Fog of Film

Errol Morris gained fame when his third film, *The Thin Blue Line* (1988), was submitted in court as evidence to secure the retrial and eventual release of the man who, the film reveals, had wrongfully been convicted of murder. Morris won the Academy Award for Documentary Feature in 2004 for *The Fog of War: Eleven Lessons from the Life of Robert S. McNamara*, his eighth film, which revolves around an extended interview, if we can call it that, with the Vietnam-era Secretary of Defense.

Breaking with the conventions of American direct cinema, Morris places interviews at the heart of his films. As he proudly avers, "No hand-held camera, no available light, no nothing of that sort. A camera planted on a tripod in front of people speaking. Breaking stylistic conventions but still pursuing truth" (Morris 2005a). From the beginning, he attempted to film interviews in such a way as to convey the illusion—if it is an illusion—that the camera's subjects are speaking to us, not to him. When they look directly into the camera, it feels as if they are making eye contact with us.

To achieve this effect, Morris invented a machine he calls the Interrotron. In Morris's words:

> Teleprompters are used to project an image on a two-way mirror. Politicians and newscasters use them so that they can read text and look into the lens of the camera at the same time. What interests

me is that nobody thought of using them for anything other than to display text: read a speech or read the news and look into the lens of the camera. I changed that. I put my face on the Teleprompter or, strictly speaking, my live video image. For the first time, I could be talking to someone, and they could be talking to me and at the same time looking directly into the lens of the camera. Now, there was no looking off slightly to the side. No more faux first person. This was the true first person. (Morris 2004)

The films of McElwee and Rouch are in the first person as well insofar as each narrates as well as shoots his films, with the filmmaker's distinctive voice, combined with the handheld camera, serving to make us mindful of the author behind the camera. By contrast, the Interrotron enables Morris to efface himself completely, it would seem, enabling him to become one with the camera as long as he remains silent.

But the Interrotron also enables—or compels—us to become one with the filmmaker. As Gilberto Perez shrewdly observes in "Errol Morris's Irony," because the interviewees look straight into the camera as if there were no interviewer, and because Morris gives them center stage and allows them to talk on and on, they "cease being mere interviewees and become full-fledged storytellers." And yet behind them "we sense an ironic author, an author who asks few questions and yet is felt all the while as questioning."

As the people he is filming pursue or avoid truths about the world and about themselves, at times intending to deceive their interlocutor and/or themselves, Morris must entertain the possibility that he is being deceived or deceiving himself. And we, too, must entertain that possibility about ourselves. However transparent, even laughable, we may find the deceptions or self-deceptions of these interviewees or storytellers, Morris provides us—and himself—no secure position from which to assume our own superiority to them. "Morris's storytellers may be considered unreliable narrators," Perez writes, "not because they're liars, not because they're crazy, but because we can't be sure how far to trust them, because the ground on which to credit them or discredit them has been pulled out from under us. Morris may not endorse them but neither does he disparage them. His irony is not at their expense. Rather, it's directed at us in the audience, and it leaves us unsettled, in suspension."

Carl Plantinga argues in his chapter "The Philosophy of Errol Morris: Ten Lessons" that Morris doesn't merely find and tell good human stories, "but stories that raise philosophical questions or through which Morris explores human nature." The first of the philosophical lessons Plantinga draws from Morris's films is "that objective truth exists; that truth can be known; that truth is difficult to know."

"My view is that the truth is knowable," Morris has said, "but that we often have a vested interest in not knowing, not seeing it, disregarding it, avoiding it. Consequently, my interest in truth has two parts—an interest in the pursuit of truth and an interest in examining how people manage to avoid the truth in one way or another—how we turn evidence into a form that's palatable to us, even if it means accepting untruth" (Morris 2005a). When Morris adds, "Who is the one truly self-deceived?" and answers, "You should always entertain the possibility that it is yourself," he gives us a clue to his filmmaking method.

The second of Morris's philosophical principles, as Plantinga understands them, is that "as an epistemology, philosophical realism [the view that reality exists independent of observers] is to be preferred to postmodernism." And yet what Plantinga calls "mental landscapes"—the myths and fictions human beings construct, individually and collectively, to make sense of our lives and our world—are part of the reality whose existence Morris believes in. Indeed, as becomes clear from "Errol Morris's Forms of Control," Ira Jaffe's rich and detailed analysis of Morris's innovative and controversial cinematic style, subjective reality—the reality of subjectivity—is what most fascinates Morris as a filmmaker, what drives him to film.

Ross McElwee: I Film, Therefore I Am

For almost three decades, Ross McElwee has been making quirky, highly enjoyable documentaries that, as eloquent chapters in this book demonstrate, deftly mingle the personal, the historical, the cultural, the political, and the philosophical (indeed, even the metaphysical).

McElwee's films, like Morris's, are in the first person. Unlike Morris, however, McElwee narrates as well as shoots his films. These are not impersonal "voice of God" narrations that impute omniscience, hence absolute authority, to the speaker. In his narrations, McElwee is speaking as his merely human self. The distinctiveness of his voice on the soundtrack, combined with a handheld camera that seems to be an extension of his body, makes us ever mindful of who was behind the camera when these shots were taken, the reality of the filmmaker's own subjectivity.

Unlike Morris, McElwee is a leading character—indeed, the protagonist—in his films. When McElwee is filming, he feels free to speak and be spoken to and even on occasion to step in front of the camera to let others film him. In this practice, he was influenced and inspired by Edward Pincus's monumental *Diaries: 1971–1976* (1982). McElwee received his filmmaking training in the 1980s at the MIT Film Video Section, which was presided over jointly by the already legendary Richard Leacock and his younger colleague, philosophy graduate student–turned–filmmaker

Pincus, who encouraged his students, in a countercultural spirit, to break with Leacock's strict direct-cinema discipline, which dictated that the filmmaker had to become the proverbial fly on the wall.

Influenced and inspired by his reading of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, Pincus's aspiration was to film the world without withdrawing from the world, to overcome or transcend the inhuman aspect of the role of the direct-cinema filmmaker by filming his own everyday life and thereby transforming filming itself into an everyday activity. And yet in *Diaries* conflicts inevitably emerge between the filmmaker's commitment to filming and the demands of others (wife, children, parents, lovers, friends, fellow teachers, students) who call upon him to acknowledge them as human beings separate from him—and from his film.

In McElwee's films conflicts also emerge between filming and living. Especially in *Sherman's March* (1986), McElwee's own grand epic begun a full decade after Pincus finished shooting *Diaries*, the film's droll narration is strikingly reminiscent of *A Happy Mother's Day* (1963), a signature work of his other great teacher, Leacock. In McElwee's *Sherman's March* and its sequels *Time Indefinite* (1993), *Six O'Clock News* (1996) and *Bright Leaves* (2003), however, the filmmaker speaks his own narration. And that narration asserts a comical perspective not primarily on the people he filmed but on himself and the role filming plays in his life, a perspective that the film reveals him to have lacked when he was living and filming the events we are viewing. In McElwee's films, as in Leacock's *A Happy Mother's Day*, the comical narration is itself undercut, or transcended, by the flashes of breathtaking beauty, and of emotional or spiritual depth, his camera reveals—or provokes—in the men and women he films.

The mysteries and paradoxes attending the act of filming and the at times vexing conflicts between the exigencies of filming and the demands of everyday life are among McElwee's abiding subjects. In the face of such conflicts, as the essays in this volume remind us, he rarely loses his light touch or his sense of humor, and yet there are serious undercurrents that give McElwee's films their unfathomable depth. In McElwee's films, for example, the fear of death is a pervasive theme; it is a key to the narcotic-like pleasure of filming ("When I look through a viewfinder," he says in *Bright Leaves*, "time seems to stop; a kind of timelessness is momentarily achieved").

Like Errol Morris, McElwee finds and tells good human stories that explore human nature and raise philosophical questions. That he finds his stories by filming his life as he lives it is part of the story a McElwee film tells. And in the telling he proves himself to be a true *writer*. All the book's essays on McElwee share this insight. Diane Stevenson, for example, suggests that McElwee belongs to the rich tradition of South-

ern writers (Erskine Caldwell, Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers, William Faulkner) for whom comedy and the gothic belong together, adding that his stories, like those of the modernist Faulkner, are also "stories about how stories are told." Equally fruitfully, Marian Keane links McElwee with Walt Whitman; Jim Lane, with modern autobiographical writers; Charles Warren, with essayists like Montaigne. For my part, I dwell at length on the way McElwee's narrations are written and, in a broader sense, on the way he "writes" his films cinematically, the way he composes them from the footage he has filmed. And in writing about McElwee's films, we all felt the need for prose capable of evoking their ever-shifting moods and emotions, and capable, at the same time, of acknowledging what remains fixed in the physiognomy of the world on film, what Cavell in *The World Viewed* calls "the reality of the unsayable" (Cavell 1979, 148).

Jean Rouch: The Filmmaker as Provocateur

Ross McElwee teaches at Harvard and lives with his family in Boston, but the world he is drawn to film is the American South, the world he left, his original home, which continues to cast its seductive spell over him. Like McElwee, Jean Rouch found himself divided between two worlds. His native France was the world Rouch called home, although he felt alienated there, while West Africa was the seductive world he was drawn to film. Whereas McElwee's films envision the South, where the Civil War is a living memory, as at once a higher and lower order of civilization than the North, in Rouch's films Africa emerges as a world unambiguously superior to his native France. In any case, Rouch's Africa, like McElwee's South, is a world cut to the measure of a filmmaker whose works meditate deeply on the camera's power to capture the enchanting life force of its subjects, and on its affinity with death.

Understanding Errol Morris to share his own preference for Anglo-American analytical philosophy, Carl Plantinga cites approvingly Morris's quip that one of the good things about living in Cambridge, Massachusetts, is that "Baudrillard isn't in the phone book." From Alan Cholodenko's reading of *Les maîtres fous* (1955), it is clear that Rouch was, or should have been, in *Baudrillard's* phone book. It would seem that Plantinga's Morris and Cholodenko's Rouch are on a collision course. Yet for all their philosophical differences, and despite the radically different formal strategies they developed, the challenge faced by Rouch *as a filmmaker*—and by McElwee too, for that matter—is precisely the challenge Plantinga understands Morris to have faced: How to convey, in the medium of film, the invisible in the visible, the reality of the unsayable?

Of the three filmmakers addressed in this volume, Rouch is at once the most famous and the most unknown. Within film studies, it is widely recognized that he occupies a unique and important place in the history of cinema. Yet most in the field have seen few if any of his films. Rouch's significance is generally taken to reside not in the artistic value of his films, but in the influence of *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961) on generations of documentary filmmakers—Errol Morris and Ross McElwee among them—and especially in his role as a missing link, as Richard Peña puts it, between the postwar Italian neorealists and the directors of the French New Wave, for whom his "ethno-fictions" were an inspiration and a major influence. Jean-Luc Godard once called *Moi, un noir* (1958) the greatest French film since the Liberation (see Rothman 2007, 13). It is in the mid- to late 1950s and early 1960s that Rouch had his greatest influence on the course of world cinema, and it is his films from that period—especially *Les maîtres fous* and *Chronicle of a Summer*—that have received most attention within film studies. Yet even those films have rarely been accorded serious *criticism*. Indeed, most of the best writings about Rouch's work have been by anthropologists, not by film critics or theorists. And they assess his films primarily as visual ethnography, not as cinema—as science, not as art.

For the likes of François Truffaut, Eric Rohmer, Claude Chabrol, Jacques Rivette, and Jean-Luc Godard, cinema was a religion. They aspired to follow the path of exemplary men of cinema like Alfred Hitchcock, Jean Renoir, Kenji Mizoguchi, and Roberto Rossellini. Except for the films of Robert Flaherty, Dziga Vertov, and the other documentary filmmakers he considered his cinematic ancestors, Rouch rarely if ever talked about films or filmmakers. His ambitions seemed incommensurate with those of the New Wave directors he inspired and influenced. And yet, for all his reluctance to claim to be an auteur, he was no less a *cinéaste* than they were. It is at once a premise and conclusion of Michael Laramee's essay on Rouch in this volume, and my own as well, that he strove to make immortal films, works of art of enduring value in and of themselves.

For a half-century, Rouch developed his cinematic practice primarily by filming the Songhay of Niger, whose possession rituals were the subject of his own ethnographic publications, and the Dogon of Mali—the people studied by Marcel Griaule and Germaine Dieterlen, his mentors in ethnography—whose rituals are spectacular triumphs of mise-en-scène. Rouch's work among the Dogon culminated in a series of films documenting the epic *Sigui* ritual staged every sixty years to commemorate the origin of death among human beings, and two feature-length films, arguably his cinematic masterpieces, *Funeral at Bongo: The Old Anaï* (1848-1971) (1972) and *Ambara Dama (To Enchant*

Death) (1974). The latter of these closes a circle: Rouch films the mask dance first filmed by Griaule in the 1930s, and in the narration Rouch speaks his teacher's words.

In "Jean Rouch as Film Artist," I argue that Rouch's films are philosophical, and they are personal and poetic, as surely as they are ethnographic. Their art is in pursuit of self-knowledge no less than ethnographic knowledge. Indeed, it is a main thrust of all five of this volume's essays on Rouch that within his films science, philosophy, and poetry cannot be separated. If Rouch's films quest for knowledge, they also aspire to transform our understanding of what knowledge is. They do so by demonstrating what becomes of the science of ethnography, and what becomes of the art of cinema, when they provoke each other to acknowledge that there are no fences that separate them. Rouch's films transform ethnography, with its claims or pretensions to know others with scientific objectivity, into an artistic practice no less rigorous for acknowledging the unknowable, the unsayable, the value of abandonment.

The aspiration of Rouch's art is to break down the fences—there are no such fences, he believed, in the African societies he filmed—separating what we know from the way we live. Rouch's way of filming, which he devoutly wished others to emulate, was also a way of thinking and living, one which embraced the magical, the strange, the fantastic and the fabulous and promised freedom from the alienation, the joylessness, to which Western society threatens to consign us. As I put it in *Documentary Film Classics*, "No less than Buñuel, Rouch believed that our way of life in the West has to change, that our lives cannot change unless we change, and that we cannot change unless we change our way of thinking. We have to awaken to, awaken from, the horror to which we have condemned ourselves and our world. We have to tear down the fences we have built, the fences we continue to build, to deny that nature exists within us as we exist within nature" (Rothman 1997, 101).

The new world his films herald is also an ancient world, Rouch believed, a world older than Western civilization. As his films envision them, the Dogon and Songhay villagers who perform the rituals he films are dwellers within that world. Transcending or overcoming the fear of death, their every gesture expresses what can be known, and acknowledges what cannot be known, about being human. How Rouch's films enable us to enter a world so different from our own is the question Daniel Morgan addresses in "The Pause of the World."

Of course, the ideal societies Rouch's films envision may themselves be dreams, myths, or fictions, as would be claimed by those anthropologists who impugn Griaule's methodology. However, the scientific validity of Griaule's findings is moot as far as Rouch's films are concerned. If

the Songhay and Dogon societies his films envision are fictions, they are fictions that are "more real than the real," as Mick Eaton paraphrases Rouch, resulting in the revelation of a new truth "which is not the 'truth' of the pro-filmic event but the 'truth' of cinema itself" (Eaton 1979, 51). The idea that the world created or re-created on film is "more real than the real" leads Alan Cholodenko to invoke Jean Baudrillard's concept of the hyperreal in exploring the radical implications of Rouch's work.

No less than Errol Morris and Ross McElwee, Jean Rouch understood that the world on film always has an aspect of fiction, myth, or dream. The world on film is always transformed or transfigured by the medium of film itself. In Rouch's words, "Cinema is the creation of a new reality" (Eaton 1979, 52).

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