



Chronicle of a summer

Directors: Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin

Country: France

Date: 1961



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A review by Joseph Jon Lanthier for *Slant Magazine*:

The most famous passage from Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin's self-proclaimed "experiment in film-truth" (i.e., cinema vérité, a term the directors coined) involves a young woman prowling the streets of Paris with a microphone and a simple question: "Are you happy?" This was a bold prompt to put to any face in 1960, let alone a working-class one; "quality of life" wouldn't become a quantifiable concept in the social sciences for another decade. But what precedes this vox-pop set piece enhances its ambition even further; in a brief, seldom-discussed scene, the young woman glances bashfully at the camera while the directors determine her willingness to participate in their film. "If we sent you out into the street to ask people if they're happy," they inquire, "would you do it?"

Within this context, the question "Are you happy?" becomes as much of a litmus test for the interrogator as for the respondents; the flitting attention paid by the impromptu interviewer toward the fourth wall also continually distracts us from the casual confessions offered by the everyday people she accosts. (A mechanic, for instance, laconically admits his "life would be impossible if [he] didn't fiddle with the books".) Despite the sequence's emotionally authentic surface, we're never less than conscious of what behavior the camera is inciting as well as cataloguing throughout it.



Discovering how photography alters the reality it captures is in one sense the implicit premise of every documentary (maybe even every film) in existence; only *Chronicle of a Summer*, however, attempts to measure this shift so explicitly and precisely. The movie purports to be a kind of playbook that imbricates the aspirations and sentiments of a specific time and place back and over one another, like the layers of an over-creased newspaper. But Rouch and Morin more valuably attempt to arrive at a representation of "real" experience by highlighting, whenever possible, the imprint of contrivance the camera leaves behind. In that sense, vérité might be more accurately translated as "honesty" rather than "truth."

After posing the "question du jour" to various pedestrians and professionals, the film delves into the lives of a selection of blue-collar citizens and students, becoming a kind of game wherein the object is to hunt down any potential theatricality. Dramatic shifts in visual style and timbre (fluid tracking shots are followed by plain-jane talking heads, and so forth) also invite formal scrutiny through which reality and artifice might be discernibly compartmentalized—though things are never quite so simple. Bull sessions between native undergraduates and visiting ones from the Ivory Coast regarding the time period's violent Algerian War are so slipperily edited that we question whether the conversations truly unfolded in the real time evinced by the footage; another very clearly staged but sympathy-provoking scene renders the predawn ritual of a manufacturing peon who scurries off to work after being rattled awake by an alarm clock.

The most convincing of these stylistic approaches is also the most deceptively bald: A camera fixes closely on a face as it seems to leak intimate details, while occasional cutaways to the expressions of a "listener" ambiguate the speaker's trustworthiness. (Even more disorienting is the fact that these reaction shots so frequently show Morin's swarthy, widely grinning face; his fussily bourgeois looks constantly call into question his experiment's "democratic" ideals, maybe intentionally.) The movie's final section, wherein

participants critique footage of themselves and one another, suggests that these stirring “raw” monologues are nevertheless delivered through a prism of theatricality—especially one in which a recent Italian emigré quivers her way through a narrative of spiritual as well as financial desperation. But even if these moments do contain performances of a kind, the camera’s insistent concentration on facial expression drives toward a kind of ontologically topographical truth. The ethnic diversity of the film’s participants likely reflects Rouch and Morin’s desire to corral as representative a cross-section of Parisian life as possible, but visually this inclusiveness produces a shapely smear of bulbousness, gauntness, paleness, and darkness. During one scene, the lip and cheek curves of a white factory worker and a black student sensually bob and weave through the shadows surrounding them, slicing and refracting their cold environment’s strips of dimness.



That we feel the camera’s presence—and that of those who manipulate it—so resolutely gives the film an intermittently academic tone; as there’s nothing being obfuscated to provoke or delight us as a narrative would, the movie becomes an exercise, a study. There are also, however, displays of such affective immediacy that they seem to wage wars of independence against both the camera and the directors’ media-philosophical inquiries. Two African exchange students first scoff at a woman who insists that her lack of attraction toward blacks isn’t rooted in

racism; hearing of the woman’s internment at a concentration camp for her Jewish blood, however, vacuums up their jejune smugness. The two weakly recover: “I’ve seen a film about [the camps],” one says. “Night and Fog.” And so the scene insidiously returns to Rouch and Morin’s meta-filmic thesis by implying that the camera’s obstructions of truth are at least two-fold: After the lens first originates as much content as it absorbs, it then convinces those who observe its products that seeing is the same as experiencing.

A good chunk of *Chronicle of a Summer* was shot on 16mm reversal film, presumably so Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin wouldn't have to develop any negatives before focus-group testing pieces of their study before its participants; it's jarring how pristine Criterion's 1080p transfer of the movie manages to be despite this. One has to resist the urge to credit Raoul Coutard entirely for the movie's numinous black-and-white cinematography (he's one of five listed camera operators, along with handheld pioneer Michel Brault), but the nimble use of natural light (and, of course, shadow) is never less than poetic throughout. There's a good deal of visible film grain, some of it grungy, but this offers a thematically relevant mosaic texture while showing off the complete contours of the movie's existing prints. Truthful or not, the film is undeniably beautiful in high-def—and what was it that John Keats wrote with regards to those two abstracts? The sound mix is also clear and strong, while the spanking new English language translation offers a boost in linguistic clarity.

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