with the 15 years old widows

The Fifteen-year-old widows is a film by Jean Rouch, a short fiction film. "Presented as an essay on adolescents in Paris in the summer of 1964, this film stigmatizes the lightness and futility of the bourgeois youth of the 1960s." (French dictionary).

It is a commissioned film, one of four episodes of the feature The Flower of Age (Fleur de l'âge) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YHlMBXcA65A trailer, a 1964 co-production between Canada, France, Italy and Japan, which should represent the lives of adolescents chosen from among the most representative of each of these countries, in times of turmoil, following the post-war period.

The commission is the result of an initiative of the NFB (National Film Board of Canada), a public organization for the production and distribution of films. The organizers have thus justified themselves: "Besides the peculiarities of the style of the filmmakers, we find in each of them the desire to affirm nothing, to judge nothing, but simply to show."

Four directors in vogue are invited, "at a time when youth seems to occupy the most advanced position on the world stage". They are Michel Brault (episode Geneviève, Canada) (01), Jean Rouch (episode Marie-France and Véronique, France) (02), Gian Vittorio Baldi (episode Fiammetta, Italy) (03) and Hiroshi Teshigahara (episode Ako, Japan) (04). An ambitious and complex project, it soon ends in failure, due to mismanagements between co-producers. In the case of Rouch, due to the conflicts with Pierre Braunberger, producer of his film, of whom he is a friend (5).

This happens in a decisive moment in the history of France. Jean Rouch refers to this moment in these words: "When I was filming, I found myself in the midst of a fantastic group that truly represented those who were preparing May 68 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/May_1968_events_in_France" (6), a youth without hope, who had lost everything. In this group were the widows of fifteen. "They were widows, they had known everything," a subject at once desperate and wonderful, he said.
He also told Berger he was forced to work in 35mm, with a heavy camera, on a tripod, with artificial lighting and not without detailed planning. Berger does not disarm. In anger, Rouch sends a telegram to the person with decision-making authority in the process on 27 May saying "As for me, anyway, with or without him, I will shoot the film in 16mm because the subject is worth it. Long live freedom!" (07). All was said. Berger answers on August 27th. He declares that he can't lose money and makes this recommendation: "It is essential that you come out of the happy age of childhood and finally enter the sad age of adolescence" (08).

Ethnologist by profession, using the cinema as a tool, Rouch films in 16mm, with light equipment, to make an essay on ethnographic film. This is the right technique, the one that should be used, the most suitable for him. With it, one’s gaze extends in the search for its object of study in order to extract something from the reality it seeks to discern. That’s to say "cinema vérité", a fiction in search of reality, a fiction which, to be real, to realize what it seeks, must necessarily be documentary, a genre used in the discovery of truth. Rouch, in addition, prefers to film in sequence shot (continuous shot with no interruption, holding the camera by hand, focused on action in travelling or panorama) (09). The 15 Years old Widows will be one in two of his first and pure fiction films.

Sequence shot is the "faithful friend" whom the ethnologist shouldn’t ignore in his work. The faithful friend is also, by analogy, documentary itself, and also the character one sees on the other side of the mirror, the revealing image, the inverted reflection of one's own face: both in truth and in falsehood. He never dispenses with this tool, the expedient he deems indispensable in the search for what he is searching: "the truth of cinema." (A sequence shot example: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=otXrMXD2z0)

Making a false documentary on teenage widows, Jean Rouch lies. But he does not deceive anyone with such a lie: he is faithful to truth giving it the form of fiction by using, like Georges Méliès, magician tricks to delight the audience, something forbidden to an ethnologist. And so far he goes in this game that he films with the whole ostentation of cinema: with
beautiful actresses, beautiful actors, beautiful sets, beautiful music, wonderful shots. And there he comes out with a joke... He, who has always said that there is no ethnography in things of such a nature, that "beautiful image" is a narcissistic detour of the one who films, a mortal sin ... He always said things like that, but now he contradicts himself, he lets himself be carried away by temptation ... Besides, he feels happy to do that ...

Being stuck between the sword and the wall will be for him the best pretext to turn fiction into pure documentary and to overwhelm the producer with goodies, something that he really needs (5). But that’s not enough. Facing the imbroglio, which is getting worse from day to day, he needs to be seen. In order to be seen as far as he intends in the confrontation in which he got involved, he makes a joke: a pirouette. He makes a somersault and falls, his feet firmly posing on the ground, in the midst of his colleagues of the features, his competitors in the trade. Such talents come from the past, from the bohemian cellars of Saint-Germain-des-Pres, in that memorable post-war...

It all begins with a Jean’s wing trail in the year number zero of the decade of sixty. This basic pulsion leads him to write a script to which he gave the title "Punition", a film about the "bad encounters" of his good friend Chris Marker. Then, forced by the nature of the argument, he puts Nadine in the cast, with himself side by side with her. Such weaknesses leads Jean, without further delay, to fall in love with Marie-France, now her favorite actress in real life, who also plays the role of Veronica. Some of his qualities lead Jean to have enough strength to win the bet, but that does not go very well with futile things. Bewitched by her cooing, Nadine will not marry him while Marie-France de Chabaneix, the beautiful actress with a beautiful name, although seeming more conventional, will do the same. The episode is released in Paris, in the of spring 1967, under the title Les Veuves de 15 ans, but the movie will be refused at the Venice Film Festival because it is a French work. It will not be able to appear officially as a co-production. In short, it will not be screened by strange reasons (12).
Rouch reacts with these words: "A private projection in Venice will have no interest whatsoever" (13) (14). And final point.

The feature film is released in New York by Pathé Contemporary Films on April 13, 1967, in a truncated version with the title That Tender Age (80 min.), which excludes the Japanese episode but will not be displayed in France, where only the film of Jean Rouch will be submitted to the verdict of art film devoted audiences. Jean-Luc Godard – who proclaims that there would never have been a New Wave without Jean Rouch – says he influenced a lot the "young Turks" of the Cahiers du Cinéma. Godard arises in this story in two ways: because of the scene of his film Femme mariée, in which Veronique plays and, by feedback, as a result of what he himself inherited from Rouch, certain ingenious parameters which, as he said, are the founding elements of the Nouvelle Vague avant la lettre (15).

Aware of this and of his paternity, which distinguishes him, Jean Rouch uses the essay – a laboratory practice – to bring the experiment to the extreme. He calculates everything well enough, develops his tool and traces the profile of the New Wave. He makes us see it according to the image it had, has and will have, in the service of truth, art and science, anticipating the portrait, unveiling the invisible, making us to discern what is hidden and what, for some reason, will sooner or later interest us: by making us understand what is waiting for us in future, by imperative reasons. So, like some of his peers, he is a "transporter of the memory of the worlds", such as the soothsayers (16).
Once all this is said, it is silence that falls, that’s to say, everything that has not been said but which will interest us now. In addition, if it is no fiction saying that *The 15 Year Old Widows* is a masterpiece, why has this never been said? Strange phenomena ...

The images that nourish the memory of the world, like those that give life to affections (which have a certain charge), can undergo minor or major changes, induced by external agents, a vulnerability that can reinforce them in defense or weak them in attack, on a small or large scale, in certain areas of our body or our soul. By experience we know that, as Jean Rouch well knew: if silence prevails, it is because there are no signs of life. Even stranger will be the phenomenon if silence persists, if nothing is said about the quality of the created matter.

It looks like, in his final boldness, Jean took a secret with him into the grave, knowing in advance that, if we wish, can ask him to talk. All we need is starting the ritual. And soon there he is: smile from one ear to the other, small naughty eyes (**17**). He hesitates for a second, and suddenly says a nonsense that makes us laugh with him. To understand him, all we need is to guess the answer. We may as well imagine what the answer will be without having to ask the question.
Terrible year, that of 2017, year of the centenary of the birth of Jean Rouch, year when this article was written. The relationship between a fact and the other, occasional, may only be explained as such, but the fact of being casual explains nothing of what actually happens, nothing that will happen with the realities that are waiting for us. Widows fifteen years old are not only typical of the mid-twentieth century. They are also typical of its end, of a "trendy" style. They will also be typical of the coming years of the new century, more and more complex, in more advanced styles, as progress advances. More and more surprises await us, in an era that Rouch could not have imagined any way. Although he was a scientist, he was not interested in science fiction. His knowledge was another. His most remembered face is that of flesh and bone, lit by a smile. Less remembered is the inverted image on the other side of the mirror, foggy and carnal, the one that most bothers him: Dionysus, the god of feast and wine. Certain accuse Rouch of falling into belief, and that is not entirely false. There is no lack of good reasons for choosing the madness of transgression.

He does not drink too much, but he moves well in dance. He has arts, he has talents and he has no choice. He has green years and he lets himself go. There are things that prevail when he least expects. He also does not lose a chance to take us together with him. He loves taking us to watch movies side by side with him on the first row of the French Cinematheque, out of which he usually comes with his eternal smile. The light of the screen, for a mysterious reason, accentuates the wrinkles and scars on his face, sometimes softens them. Each of the films he watches in this theater leaves bodily marks on him.

What else can one say? One thing is certain: the 15-year-old widows are not an extinct species. They will emerge in another world, cloned with the ingredients of a new era. However, in this world, in today's world or
in any other, the new one, more word less word, the conversation will always be about the same:

MARIE-FRANCE
- Do you like making love?

VÉRONIQUE
- Once that was quite good ... but I can't remember with whom...

MARIE-FRANCE
- Do you just know what you must do to avoid getting pregnant?

VÉRONIQUE
- You know, today a 17-year-old girl has an abortion as easily as she goes to the hairdresser.

MARIE-FRANCE
- Do you like adventure? And if you have a baby?...

VÉRONIQUE keeps silent.

MARIE-FRANCE
- Don't say bullshit, Veronique!

This dialogue was written to help us understand the Parisian yé-yé society of the sixties, the way of being of two girls, one who is serious and another who is not. Rouch talks about that in these terms: "Braunberger was suspicious of my films, where I was going to make a two-minute shooting and from where I would come with three hours of it." He complained of his friend ironically, the caustic Braunberger, who quickly reacted, disappointed: "You did not understand that by entering the system, you had the obligations of the system. In fact, you have not played the game".

Being the author's defense one of the French New Wave standards, being the director and ethnologist the author of the work, Rouch derails and sends him a telex on May 27: "I was very much annoyed with your cable for several reasons. You should know that none of my films is similar to the planned script. I'm ready to shoot on Monday a very difficult film and this is really the deadline, from all points of view. I understand your apprehension about the dialogues. I myself, repeating together with
the girls, reduced them to a minimum. If you prefer the Camargue, who are the most adulterous guys of the French cinema of nowadays, there you may find many directors who would be delighted to make this film with you. (26)

Seeing things well, as far as they are the same as those of today, we conclude that they can’t be forgotten. We’ll clearly understand that they have to be recalled, and that implies a duty and an effort. We also see that forgetfulness, a mere usury caused by the passage of time, joins with the indifference of many who, due to duty, should act but have not acted, doing nothing to give a new life to something that would have deserved it. Nothing was made. And the risk remains.

The risk remains, and it will not be small. What is at stake are bizarre issues in film history. There is not only what Jean Rouch represents, but also what is associated with him, everything that is linked together. And even more: everything that such a body, such as it is, will be able to create.

IMAGINE ! ...

© Ricardo Costa, Lisbon, 11 Setember 2017

I dedicate this text to my good friend Jean Rouch, in the year in which we celebrate the centenary of his birth.

© Ricardo Costa http://ricardocosta.net mail@ricardocosta.net
NOTES

02 – Jean Rouch https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jean_Rouch (episode Marie-France et Véronique, France) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Our6OUDg8_ms film online
07 – Article at the magazine Telarama which describes with humor a "putsch in the French cinematheque", May 68, a "docking of the revolution" at the Venice Festival. The coup is described as an act of well-known anarchists. Among them are Jean-Luc Godard and Jean Rouch. This attack is a brazen reaction against the compulsive demission of André Langlois of the presidency of the cinematheque by the minister of culture, André Malraux, who accuses him of insanity without realizing that it is rather a question of symptoms of something different, of another disease: Langlois’s passion for cinema, the safeguarding of films of all kinds at risk of being lost, the ones he discovered where he least expected. An authoritarian gesture intending the annihilation of a devotee, someone who spent all his life fighting for memories of unavoidable testimonies and for remarkable acts that can’t be forgotten. All that was too bad and, facing such unworthiness, Rouch reacted as expected...
In addition, a loss of time caused by futile motives deemed necessary, worms temperaments, friction increases, damage as well. One of these reasons would be a comment by Braunberger to a certain Junot, in connection with trivial matter on the press, in these words: “ Haven’t you read on Paris- Presse the stupid statements of Jeane?”. He was referring to Jean’s wife, who was no less audacious than her husband. She would embark with him in the wars of the cinematheque and loved to be noticed on these occasions. They win the war. Langlois returns to his cinematheque, the first in the world, and the earth trembles. Such a shake, among others of lower amplitude – so it is said – is the genesis of May 68 and of all that this movement would leave.
Precisely for this reason, the feat can’t be forgotten. We must add to its memory what is already known, and take a step forward: approaching what we need, progressing, improving human condition, condition sine qua non of life itself.
08 – Citation of one of the topics of the Pierre Braunberger Archives, concerning the relations between the producer and the director.
Nadine met Jean in 1961 when he was filming *Chronicle of a Sumer*. She is the young student in this movie, one of the many people he interviewed in the streets of Paris, asking them "What are you doing?". Spontaneously, she tells him everything she does in her life and insinuates others. Jean will not lose sight of her. She will be for the first time an actress in the film he will make shortly after this meeting, *La Gare du Nord*, a short film 15 minutes long, one of the sketches of the film *Paris seen*, finished in 1965 by six well-known filmmakers. In this same year, she will play in *Les Veuves de 15 ans*, face to face with Marie-France, the unknown superstar of *Les Veuves de 15 ans* http://www.unifrance.org/annuaires/persone/390807/marie-france-de-chabaneix, one of the bizarre figures who his beloved director discovered in the streets of Paris. She was 27 and he was 29. They were made for each other.

Braunberger complains of Rouch with this eloquence: "I do not know if you realized the serious difficulties that your film causes me." It refers to ambiguous acts of censure of those who make the selection of films for the Venice Festival (Pierre Braunberger Archives, subjects 27 to 31).

"For years, in this National Film Board, founded by a Scottish idealist lost in the international chain of film spectacle, young French-Canadian filmmakers, who claim to be Quebecers, are sitting at the table. They work. They make movies. They are a small group – but they were already entrepreneurs – at a time when this formidable cultural brochure called the "Quiet Revolution" is boiling: that of making, with cinema, an international chain of film spectacle, young French-Canadian filmmakers, who claim to be Quebecers, are sitting at the table. They work. They make movies. They are a small group – but they were already entrepreneurs – at a time when this formidable cultural broth is ready to be served, as a suitable matter for a new production at the NFB", n° 14, July 1984:

In this case, that has no roots in earth. It drifts inside the cauldron, where nothing is still. Inside there – in its habitat – the thing comes alive as it warms. It will boil as much as it needs. Suddenly, everything calms down and starts cooling until the broth is ready to be served. The thing does not grow like a tree. It moves like the eye of the hurricane. It boils for a while until being ready to be served, as a suitable matter for a new creation. The broth is everywhere on Earth and, from one side to the other, has and will have common traits.

Maybe this has nothing to do with our conversation …
16 – News about memory transmitters in the heart of France, who announce what they decided to transmit, at ARCADI, early 2016  
http://www.arcadi.fr/presentation

Jean Rouch is one of those who more worked to leave us certain images of the world. He loved the people who helped him, often by helping them. Once, he taught everything to a young student from Benin, Brice Ahounou, who became his right hand in the activities of the Musée de l’homme. See: “Brice Haounou, passenger of images necessary to the memories of the worlds”, article by Stéphane Aubouard, newspaper L’Humanité, 20 July 2017  

Plunged in the dark, we watch images projected on the screen. Surprised, we often see many that make us blush. What can we do? Trying to convince the good people with tabloid headers? One thing is certain, Jean knew it well: that’s worth it. We get tired but are well amused. And that is good for Mankind ...

17 – One of the friends of Jean Rouch, Jean-Michel Arnold, responsible for the creation of the CNRS audiovisual laboratory)  
https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Centre_of_Scientific_Search, when Rouch was a young ethnologist, once said: "Jean was a happy man". He laughed in speaking about his script, he laughed in shooting, he laughed in editing. The clearest laugh was that of Jean. Another curiosity: he said he could not stand the "regard sans caméra", the "camera-free look"... He could not exist without this prosthesis. But he had the good fortune, after creating the visual anthropology, to see it become "one of the great disciplines of the university, which attracts many students full of enthusiasm" – text by Antoinette Delafin  
http://www.rfi.fr/auteur/antoinette-Delafin, RFI 27 Janvier, 2017  
http://www.rfi.fr/hebdo/20170127-centenaire-naisance-jean-rouch-
2017-celebrera-le-cinema-nouveau).

FILM ONLINE
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IOv9OUD6_m4

Article in French
JEAN ROUCH à l’envers  

Article in English
JEAN ROUCH in reverse  