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**Chris. Marker and French documentary filmmaking: 1962–1982**

**Van Cauwenberge, Geneviève Daphne, Ph.D.**

**New York University, 1992**

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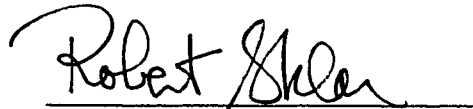


**CHRIS. MARKER AND FRENCH DOCUMENTARY  
FILMMAKING: 1962-1982**

by

**Geneviève Van Cauwenberge**

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
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A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Robert Sklar", written over a horizontal line.

Approved

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	iv
Introduction	1
Chapter I: Toward a Redefinition of Documentary	9
Chapter II: Le joli mai	49
Chapter III: A bientôt j'espère	146
Chapter IV: Le fond de l'air est rouge	181
Chapter V: Sans soleil	212
Conclusion	236
Filmography	242
Bibliography	245

## **INTRODUCTION**

This thesis revolves around four films by Chris. Marker: *Le joli mai*, *A bientôt j'espère*, *Le fond de l'air est rouge* and *Sans soleil*.

Though it concentrates on a single filmmaker, it does not take an auteurist approach. The specificity of Marker's film is not its aim. Instead, it will review how the French intelligentsia within a twenty-year period defined its responsibilities to society and politics and, in parallel, will examine: the evolution of French leftist thought regarding the political role of cinema, the Left's appropriation of film as a tool for political action in the early Sixties and its subsequent withdrawal in the Seventies and Eighties. Within this timeframe Marker's work in documentary film will be positioned and analyzed for the changes in his documentary style. The latter must be seen in light of the period's accompanying technological innovations (lightweight camera, video, computer-generated images) and the intellectual discourse they sparked toward the media, from the glowing expectations about the potential of lightweight equipment to promote individuals' mediatic access to speech, thereby improving communication across society as a whole, to the pessimism of contemporary theorists about the "loss of reality" in our post-modern, media-saturated society.

This work hopes to widen our perspective on French cultural history and, as a work of film criticism, should offer a contribution to the study of documentary film. Given that the styles of documentary change according to both the historical context of a work's production and the goals assigned to each film, my thesis will define the shifts in strategy that characterized French documentary during the two decades under study. Due to the limited corpus of such an undertaking, no airtight conclusions, of course, can be drawn. One can only lay out a blueprint for further studies grounded in a much wider sampling of French documentary film from the same era.

The literature on formal analysis of documentary--a field of study that has been overlooked--is thin. Such neglect, observes Bill Nichols, "is not accidental. It stems in part from the ideological smokescreen thrown up by apologists for documentary, many of them leftist in their politics, which has clouded formal or structural issues in order to cover the advance of arguments about the social purpose of film or its privileged relation to reality compared to the other arts."<sup>1</sup> Moreover, a survey of the available writings on documentary reveals a disturbing carelessness on the part of many researchers, who have often drawn broad or inaccurate generalizations about selected films. Even Nichols has occasionally ambled in this direction. For example, his article,

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Nichols, *Ideology and the Image*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1981.

"The Voice of Documentary,"<sup>2</sup> whose attempt to define a diachronical classification of documentary styles partially inspired this research, reveals insufficient analysis of some of the films used to support his argument. The definition he puts forward of *cinéma vérité* as a strategy that "promised an increase in the 'reality effect' with its directness, immediacy, and impression of capturing untampered events in the everyday life of people," is problematical because it lacks precision. It cannot be applied to *Le joli mai*, which Nichols cites as exemplifying *cinéma vérité*. This film, in fact, represents a good illustration of a tendency in documentary scholarship to posit views about one work or another without having properly examined the film beforehand. Though a certain number of critics pursues serious research on documentary,<sup>3</sup> it is still an area of study begging further development.

An understanding of documentary as a form of discourse distinct from the fictional one is the point of departure for my project. The first chapter will thus frame this definition. Relying on the pragmatics of communication, it contends that documentary film involves a contract between filmmaker and viewer, according to

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<sup>2</sup> Bill Nichols, "The Voice of Documentary", in *Movies and Methods*, Vol. II, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1985, pp. 258-273.

<sup>3</sup> Magazines such as *Cineaste*, *Film Quarterly* and *Jump Cut* are among the few sources where documentary is regularly analyzed. (See also William Guynn's book, *A Cinema of Nonfiction*, Cranbury, NJ, Associated University Press, 1990.)

which the first commits himself to present as truthful a rendering of events as possible. Abiding by this definition, each of the following four chapters will address a set of questions to each film it analyses. First, how is the film presented to the viewer? Is there a clear documentary contract or not? Second, what is the film's purpose? This requires placing the work in relation to the social, cultural and political conditions that prevailed at the moment of its production. Third, what are the film's various documentary strategies? That is, which material does the film use? What is its shooting style and what is the interviewing method, if it resorts to interviews? (This question implies a study of the relationship established between filmmaker and subject.) Is there a voice-over commentary and what is its status? How is the film edited and what are the respective roles assigned to image and sound in the film's structure? Fourth and lastly, what is the film's effect on the viewer?<sup>4</sup>

The choice of Chris. Marker is relevant for this study for his many years of documentary filmmaking experience and his long involvement in the French left-wing intellectual world, particularly in the major ideological debates that shaped its understanding of documentary's purpose. Marker has constantly revised his filmic strategy according to these currents, often pioneering the way for others. (For example, Jean-Luc Godard credits Marker with the

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<sup>4</sup> These questions were inspired by the last chapter of David Bordwell's book, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1989).



idea of making "ciné-tracts" to fit the needs of counter-information during the May '68 uprising in Paris.<sup>5</sup>) However, by no means were they beyond his criticism: Marker is always compellingly reflective about his work as a filmmaker. For example, he did not--as many filmmakers would subsequently do--naively embrace the notion of granting access to speech to workers, but instead foresaw the problems this could raise, which informed his mode of approach in *A bientôt j'espère*.

Marker certainly enjoys recognition as a renowned filmmaker. He has been praised by some of the most illustrious authorities in the French cultural world. Indeed, it is almost a cliché to speak about his incisive intelligence. (One of the most flattering compliments paid to Marker came from the poet Henri Michaux, who said one should "tear down the Sorbonne and put Marker in its place.") The filmmaker's 1962 work, *La jetée*, assured his international reputation and is still the object of academic study today. Yet, the rest of his work has been astonishingly neglected. No book to my knowledge has focused solely on Marker, and most writings on his films have appeared only in the form of short magazines articles. Marker has something to do with this.

Systematically refusing to grant interviews, be photographed or attend film festivals, he has always kept a low profile, envelopping himself (with the help of friends) in a halo of

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<sup>5</sup> See Jean-Paul Fargier and Bernard Sizaire, "Deux Heures avec Jean-Luc Godard", in *Tribune Socialiste*, January 23, 1969, reprinted in Alain Bergala (edited by), *Jean-Luc Godard par Jean-Luc Godard*, Paris, Etoile, Cahiers du cinéma, 1985, p. 332.

mystery. For example, Marker has methodically promulgated legends about his birthplace (cfr. Resnais's joke: "Marker is an extra-terrestrial") and has even conjured up his provenance (supposedly corroborated with "evidence" of yellowing photographs) from an exotic family, "the Krasnapolski."<sup>6</sup> Though the author's name is a pseudonym, he was born in the familiar environs of Paris (Neuilly) and of unexotic French extraction.

Restricted access to certain Marker films (ie., the Slon productions) and the translation difficulties posed by some of his works such as *Le fond de l'air est rouge* may also explain why he has never been studied extensively, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon world. *Sans soleil* has, notably, been more widely viewed by English-speaking audiences, due perhaps to the fact that its commentary exists in English version. Whatever the reasons, there is a lacuna to fill.

Marker's output is voluminous.<sup>7</sup> However, this thesis restricts itself to selective, in-depth analysis versus wide survey. Choices had to be made, a time period delineated. *Le joli mai* was chosen as a chronological starting point because the moment of its making, in the early Sixties, corresponds to a key turning point, in both the development of French documentary film and in the intellectual history of France: the winding down of the eight-year long Algerian War. The end to that conflict saw a vivid debate

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<sup>6</sup> See Anatole Dauman, "Chris. Marker", in Jacques Gerber, *Souvenir-Ecran*, Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou, 1989, pp. 149-151.

<sup>7</sup> See filmography in appendix.

erupt over the intellectual's political responsibilities in society, as well as those of the filmmaker and critic. Interestingly, this same era also witnessed the spreading use of lightweight equipment, whose consequences for the documentary approach to reality are well known. Each of the other three films corresponds to a watershed in Marker's work. *A bientôt j'espère* characterizes the beginning of his collaborative involvement in collective militant filmmaking which gave birth to the Slon group, whose goal of extending cinematic voice to an overlooked minority (factory workers) opened the way to counter-informational experimentation in cinema--a phenomenon that would expand greatly in the following years. *Le fond de l'air est rouge*'s realization corresponded to a widespread retreat of radical filmmaking in France and was, ideologically, a reverse-course for Marker in that it indicated the beginning of his withdrawal from militant cinema after many years devoted to the endeavor. Finally, *Sans soleil* confirmed Marker's rupture with militantism and signalled a new preoccupation: the relationship of film to the "new" visual technology images...computerized imagery and its tentative promise, for the distant future, of enriching human consciousness and memory.

##

**CHAPTER I:  
TOWARD A REDEFINITION OF DOCUMENTARY**

Documentary has by tradition been characterized by negation in its opposition to fiction films. As proof, for instance, there is the title of one of the principal reference books on documentary, Eric Barnouw's "Documentary: A History of the Non-fiction Film"<sup>1</sup> or this statement by Noël Burch: "A documentary is a film which is identifiably not a 'fiction.'"<sup>2</sup>

At least since the mid-70s film scholars have expressed their dissatisfaction with this definition. Its problem is that the notion of fiction itself is no more clearly defined than that of documentary. It is often by intuition or common sense that the basic dichotomy thus established has usually been explained, dissected into a series of subordinate oppositions. Fiction: subjectivity, representation, lies, extraordinary events, staging, stylistic concerns. Documentary: objectivity, projection of reality, truth, ordinary events, refusal of staging, lack of stylistic prerogatives.

As each of these subsidiary terms is, in its turn, rather ill-defined (What does one mean by "objectivity": that of the apparatus or that of the filmmaker's voice?), this whole approach leads to a loose, woolly definition of documentary that ends up, as

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the Non-fiction Film*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1979.

<sup>2</sup> Noel Burch, "Two Recent British Films and the Documentary Ideology", in *Screen*, 1978, Vol. 19, no. 2, p. 122.

has often been observed, being inoperative. Indeed, it allows too many extremist points of view to be held simultaneously. On the one hand, there is the claim that every film is a fiction as it involves a process of representation (Christian Metz).<sup>3</sup> On the other, we have the assertion that each and every film is a documentary since it carries information about the time and place of its setting, about its actors and its creator. Faced with this lack of solid criteria to distinguish fiction from documentary, several film scholars in the post-structuralist debate throughout the Eighties, drew conclusions about the uselessness of this categorization. Irritated by the endless and apparently insoluble confrontation during which the same arguments have been rehashed over and over again, a majority opinion has emerged about the issue's non-pertinence: every film in some way partakes of both realms, fiction and documentary.<sup>4</sup>

Only a few scholars have argued that the distinction should be maintained. Though acknowledging the weakness of the

<sup>3</sup> Christian Metz, "Le signifiant imaginaire", in *Communications*, no. 23, 1975, p. 31.

<sup>4</sup> It is, for example, the dominant position of the papers presented at the 1983 colloquium held in Saint-Etienne, which brought together scholars such as Jacques Aumont, Michel Marie, Guy Gauthier, Gianfranco Bettetini, Jean-Louis Leutrat and Gilles Marsolais (see Jean-Charles Lyant and Roger Odin, *Cinéma et Réalités*, Université de Saint-Etienne, CIEREC, 1984). This is also the stand taken by Marc Vernet in one chapter, where Metz's influence is strongly felt, in the collective introduction to film studies he co-authored with Jacques Aumont, Alain Bergala and Michel Marie, *L'esthétique du film*, Paris, Nathan, 1983, pp. 70-72. See also, François Niney, "Prises de vues réelles et images factices", in *Ni vrai, ni faux*, in *Traverses*, no. 47, November 1989, pp. 151-158, as well as Claire Devarieux and Marie-Christine De Navacelle, *Cinéma du réel*, Paris, Autrement, 1988.

concept's classic definition, they have striven for alternative criteria,<sup>5</sup> a position this thesis supports. The distinction between fiction and documentary is a useful one but it needs further theorizing. In this present chapter I will offer some elements to redefine it. Yet, beforehand, I shall briefly review the main interpretations of the notion of documentary that have been more or less clearly formulated within the fiction/documentary debate. I am aware that critical synthesis of this kind has already been done. Among others, for example, there is Brian Winston's historical survey of the successive understanding of the documentary idea from Grierson and the British documentary school to the "cinéma vérité" movement and the crisis of the concept, which led to an article titled, significantly, "Documentary: I think we are in trouble."<sup>6</sup> Taking a more theoretical approach, there is Noel Carroll's paper, "From real to reel."<sup>7</sup> Despite their existence, it is important nevertheless to offer at the beginning of this thesis--at the risk of being repetitive--some clarification in order to avoid the imprecision that appears in so many previous studies on documentary film.

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<sup>5</sup> Among them: Bill Nichols, Noel Carroll, Roger Odin and Carl Plantinga. Bill Nichols, *Ideology and the Image*, op. cit., pp. 170-207; Noel Carroll, "From Real to Reel: Entangled in the Nonfiction Film", in *Philosophic Exchange*, no. 14, 1983; Roger Odin, "Film documentaire, lecture documentarisante", in *Cinémas et Réalités*, op. cit., pp. 263-278. Carl Plantinga, "Defining Documentary: Fiction, Non-Fiction, and Projected Worlds", in *Persistence of Vision*, no. 5, Spring 1985, pp. 44-54.

<sup>6</sup> Brian Winston's, "Documentary: I Think We Are in Trouble", in *Sight and Sound*, vol. 48, no. 1, 1978-1979, pp. 2-7.

<sup>7</sup> Noel Carroll, "From Real to Reel: Entangled in the Nonfiction Film", op. cit.

In several of his films Marker continuously broaches the documentary issue, reflecting on the relationship between reality and the filmic image. To minimize ambiguities while discussing his position, it is necessary to provide from the very start as precise as possible a delineation of the arguments which the debate over the documentary issue has fathered.

I propose to distinguish within these established arguments four main criteria of the definition for documentary: an ethical one, an ontological one, a semiological one and a pragmatic one.

#### ETHICAL APPROACH TO DOCUMENTARY

This definition places documentary on the side of science. It is assigned serious goals, in opposition to a work of fiction that is created for the sake of "entertainment." Documentary film is expected to offer a truthful account of events that would have transpired even in the absence of the filmmaker. It is an objective testimony of an untampered social or historical reality. This, for example, is how the World Union of Documentary at its 1948 meeting summed it up:

... all methods of recording on celluloid any aspect of reality interpreted either by factual shooting or by sincere and justifiable reconstruction, so as to appeal either to reason or emotion, for the purpose of stimulating the desire for, and the widening of human knowledge and understanding, and of truthfully posing



problems and their solutions in the spheres of economics, culture, and human relations. <sup>8</sup>

According to this definition, the documentary value of films such as Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* should be contested since the filmmaker, as has been well documented,<sup>9</sup> fiddled with the facts, urging his subjects to dress and act in ways to fit his romantic conception of their way of life. As it offers an unfaithful account of a reality transformed by the filmmaker's subjectivity, "adapted" to fit the latter's view of the "Innuits," it is often argued that Flaherty's work belongs to the realm of fiction rather than documentary filmmaking.<sup>10</sup>

This definition of documentary is modelled after the classic, nineteenth-century definition of historical writing and journalistic reporting. It takes over the historian's ideal as envisioned by Thiers, "To simply be truthful, to represent what things are, nothing more, to simply exist through them, like them, as much as they exist."<sup>11</sup> This view of history as the untrammelled pursuit of truth, implying a supremely neutral writer is, as we know, quite problematic.

Recent works in historical criticism have raised objections about its attainability. These call into question a historical text's

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<sup>8</sup> Paul Rotha, *Documentary Film*, New York, Hastings House, 1956, pp. 30-31.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Nathalie Canavor, "Robert Flaherty's Eskimos", in *Popular Photography*, October 1980, pp. 88-89, 148-149 and 178.

<sup>10</sup> See Gianfranco Bettetini, "Nanook of the North (Robert Flaherty): analyse de deux séquences", in *Cinémas et Réalités*, op. cit., pp. 125-152.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted by Roland Barthes in "Le discours de l'histoire" in *Poétique*, no. 49, February 1982, p. 20.

pretension to objectivity, arguing that its claim is based on an obliteration of the praxis which organizes the past as viewed from the present.

Historical writing does not present the reader with reality but with a representation of reality. A historian's outlook on a given set of facts is determined by social and economic factors and it can't be neutral.<sup>12</sup> But beyond the ideological ether that surrounds the historian's position, critics also voice concern for the problematical status of language: "Historians," Hayden White observes,

tend to treat language as a transparent vehicle of representation that brings no cognitive baggage of its own into the discourse. What they fail to recognize is that ordinary language itself has its own forms of terminological determinism represented by figures of speech without which discourse itself is impossible.<sup>13</sup>

The days of historical positivism are over. History is viewed as a construction, which, in the case of classical history, disguises the process of its own making and tends to pass itself off as the referential reality that it expresses.

The theoretical reflection pursued in the field of historical criticism revealed the complexity of the notions of objectivity, reality and truth. Deconstructive studies in cinema have also

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<sup>12</sup> See Michel de Certeau, "La fiction de l'histoire", in *L'écriture de l'histoire*, Paris, Gallimard, Bibliothèque des histoires, 1984 and "L'histoire, science et fiction", in *Histoire et psychanalyse entre science et fiction*, Paris, Gallimard, coll. Folio, 1987.

<sup>13</sup> Hayden White, "The Fictions of Factual Representation", in *Tropics of Discourse. Essays in Cultural Criticism*, Baltimore and London, The John Hopkins University Press, 1975, p. 134.

paralleled their conclusions. For several years it has fallen to Cinématique and the Cahiers du cinéma to illuminate both the ideological overdetermination of film production and the mechanisms--at work in every film, even documentaries--often referred to as the "writing process" (a phrase borrowed from linguistics and whose adequacy in the field of cinema has been questioned by recent studies).<sup>14</sup> Yet within the field of cinema, the issue of the film-text relationship to reality has taken on a specific dimension not only because of the peculiarity of its process of production, but also due to the fact that the filmic image is a mechanical one, that it is "sine manu facta."

#### ONTOLOGICAL APPROACH TO DOCUMENTARY

A constant in the body of writing on the documentary issue is the claim that documentary filmmaking fulfills the destiny of the camera as objective-and-scientific-instrument for observing reality.

At least as early as Dziga Vertov's writings, stress is placed on the mechanical quality of the "Ciné-eye," in statements such as the following, inspired by the Futurist faith in scientific progress to improve the state of the world:

Our eyes see very little and very badly--so  
people dreamed up the microscope, to let them  
see invisible phenomena; they invented the

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<sup>14</sup> David Rodowick gives a thorough and critical account of these studies in *The crisis of political modernism*. Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1988.

telescope, to see and explore distant and unknown worlds; now they have perfected the cinerama, to penetrate more deeply into the visible world, to explore and record visual phenomena, so that what is happening now, which will have to be taken into account in the future, is not forgotten.<sup>15</sup>

Fiction thus appears to Vertov as a bourgeois perversion of cinema's natural destiny, which is to discover the world and unveil social mechanisms, an obligation better accomplished by documentary film. There are basic differences between Vertov's and Grierson's views on documentary but they do share a conception of the camera as an instrument of progress tending to overcome the limits of human vision and capable of reaching a more truthful and profound knowledge of reality. There is the same belief in a documentary vocation of cinema, grounded in its mechanical process of production:

When Lumière turned his first historic strip he did so with the fine careless rapture which attends the amateur effort today. The new moving camera was still, for him, a camera and an instrument to focus on the life about him. He shot his own workmen filing out of the factory and this first film was a "documentary." He went on as naturally to shoot the Lumière family, child complete. The cinema, it seemed for a moment was about to fulfill its natural destiny of discovering mankind.<sup>16</sup>

The camera-eye is in effect a magical instrument. It can see a thousand things in a thousand places at different times, and the cunning cutter can string them together for a review of the

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<sup>15</sup> Dziga Vertov in Christopher Williams, *Realism and the Cinema*, London, Routledge and Kegan, 1980, p. 23.

<sup>16</sup> John Grierson in Forsyth Hardy (edited by), *Grierson on Documentary*, London and Boston, Faber and Faber, 1979, p. 70.

world. Or he can piece them together--a more difficult task--for a review of a subject or situation more intricate and more intimate than any mortal eye can hope to match. But its magic is even more than this. It lies also in the manner of its observation, in the strange innocence with which, in a mind-tangled world, it sees things for what they are.<sup>17</sup>

Because it is automatically produced, Grierson views the filmic image as a pure perception, preclusive of preconceived thinking. He switches from the idea of mechanical objectivity to that of the innocence of the camera and posits as his ideal of cinema Lumière's films, which, he feels, conform to the natural purpose of cinema: to simply record real life. American cinema direct filmmakers took over this concept of a neutral camera and the claim for the objectivity of the filmic process: our films are a process of discovery; they have to relate to science.<sup>18</sup>

Like Grierson, they leapt from claiming that the camera is an objective instrument of observation of reality to the assumption that it excludes subjectivity. As we know, they formulated for their filmmaking exercises a series of principles that they felt would respect the essential objectivity of the filmic device. They defined a film style considered as the appropriate aesthetic direction for the film medium (refusal of interviews and montage, as well as *mise en scène* and voice-over commentary). All this they defended

<sup>17</sup> John Grierson, *ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Leacock in James Blue, "One Man's Truth: An interview with Richard Leacock", in *Film Comment*, Vol. III, no. 2, Spring 1965, p. 19.

in numerous statements on the "purely observational quality" of the depiction of the world that their work offered.

The claim for an essential objectivity of the cinematographic image as linked to the scientificity of the camera poses problems since its premises (among them, the very scientific nature of the camera) are highly debatable. More interesting is the argument referring to the photochemical process of making a cinematographic image to assert its ontological objectivity. Because it is a trace, an imprint of an object, because to exist the photographic image implies that the object represented was once there in front of the lens, it is conferred a special weight of reality and is considered more objective than other images such as drawings and paintings. Among the most famous texts stating this position is Bazin's essay, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image."<sup>19</sup> It can be found as well in the writing of many other critics and theoreticians such as Walter Benjamin, Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes.

#### IDEOLOGICAL AND SEMIOLOGICAL APPROACH TO DOCUMENTARY

This proposition, needless to say, was at the core of a heated and now outdated debate from the Seventies. The most

<sup>19</sup> André Bazin, "Ontologie de l'image photographique", in *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?*, Paris, Cerf, 1975. English translation, "Ontology of the Photographic Image", in *What is cinema?*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1967, pp. 9-16.

famous theoretical text devoted to an exposé of the pseudo-objectivity of the "camera obscura" is, undoubtedly, Jean-Louis Baudry's article: "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus."<sup>20</sup> This text is so well known that one need not linger on its arguments except to say that if ideological criticism peaked in the ferment of events in Paris of 1968, some works actually far preceded this time frame, notably Hubert Damisch's article, which, already in 1963, recognized that the camera obscura is not neutral, that its structure is not impartial, but that its construction is based on principles of perspective dating from the Renaissance:

The adventure of photography begins with man's first attempt to retain that image he had long known how to make. This long familiarity with an image so produced, and the completely objective, that is to say automatic or in any case strictly mechanical appearance of the recording process, explains how the photographic representation generally appeared as a matter of course, and why one ignores its highly elaborated, arbitrary character. One forgets, in the process, that the images the first photographers were hoping to seize, and the very latent image which they were able to reveal and develop were in no sense naturally given; the principle of construction of the photographic camera and the camera obscura before it were tied to a conventional notion of space and objectivity whose development preceded the invention of photography and to which the great majority of photographers only conformed. The lens itself which has been carefully corrected for "distortions" and adjusted for "errors" is scarcely as objective as it seems. In its structure and in the ordered image of the world it achieves, it complies with an especially familiar though very old and dilapidated system of spatial

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<sup>20</sup> Jean-Louis Baudry, "Effets idéologiques produits par l'appareil de base", in *Cinéthique* 7/8, 1970, reprinted in *L'effet cinéma*, Paris, Albatros, coll. Ça cinéma, 1978.

construction, to which photography belatedly brought an unexpected revival of current interests.<sup>21</sup>

The idea of the neutrality of the photographic image is shown to be a mistake. The camera obscura is not a neutral agent of reproduction but a device with intentional effects. As with language it is an instrument for the interpretation of reality.

Actually, a demonstration of the non-objectivity of the cinematographic apparatus wasn't really necessary to refute the claims, such as those of Grierson, supporting the notion that cinema was in its essence documentary. Indeed in that very case, the issue of the camera's objectivity or its absence is a false one since such objectivity offers no guarantee to the viewer of the objectivity of the film it produces. Those who adhere to the basic documentary nature of film as grounded in the apparatus have ignored the film-making process with all the arbitrary choices and manipulations (deliberate or not) that it implies. Yet, of course, the making of a film necessarily involves selection of a point of view on reality, a selection that is often determined by the effects it can be expected to produce on the viewer. Bazin was well aware of this as evidenced by his reference to documentary as a genre conducive to the manipulations of reality. For example, in considering travel films, he notices a "deplorable" tendency to

<sup>21</sup> Hubert Damisch, "Cinq notes pour une phénoménologie de l'image photographique", in *L'Arc*, no. 21, *La Photographie*, Aix-en-Provence, Spring 1963, pp. 34-37. English translation by Rosalind Krauss in *October*, no. 5, *Photography: A Special Issue*, New York, MIT, 1978.



heighten their level of drama: "It isn't enough to show lions; they have to eat the natives as well."<sup>22</sup> Unavoidably, concerns for the viewer's perception weigh on documentary filmmaking, determining the choice of material and the way it is presented. (See the evolution of American direct cinema and its return to narrative form and a more reassuring esthetic after having experienced a withdrawal of viewers from the work of its authors.)

Lumière's films have been studied at length over the last decade in order to dispel the myth of their "innocence" and to reveal the aesthetic choices that underline the perception of reality which these works offer.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, countless other works have devoted themselves to demonstrating how the effects of the filmmaker's point of view--choice of angle of approach to the subject, angle of vision, distance from subject to camera, editing, etc.--influence the viewer's perception of the profilmic reality in documentary films. The Seventies were, as Daney put it in an untranslatable pun, the years of the "politique des ôteurs."<sup>24</sup> After having enjoyed high praise for decades, the masters of documentary were virtually put on trial and their works cursed for their hidden manipulation of reality (See, for example, Gianfranco Bettetini's analysis of *Nanook of the North* or Brian Winston's

<sup>22</sup> André Bazin, "Le cinéma et l'exploration", in *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma?*, op. cit., p. 27.

<sup>23</sup> See, notably, Jacques Aumont, "Lumière, le dernier peintre impressionniste", in *L'oeil interminable. Cinéma et Peinture*, Paris, Séguier, 1989, pp. 13-36.

<sup>24</sup> Serge Daney, *La rampe, Cahier critique 1970-1982*, Paris, Gallimard, Cahiers du cinéma, 1983, p. 15.

analysis of Wiseman's *Hospital*).<sup>25</sup> The purpose was to refute repeatedly that "representation is reality", to prove that no filmmaking style is able to present the viewer with an unadorned slice of the real world...rather that it can, at best, only produce an impression of reality.

Semiology-inspired studies thus approached documentary as a film style displaying specific codes that had to be defined in their interrelation. Among them, the black and white image, the voice-over commentary, interviews, the use of maps and graphics, the use of archival documents and grainy, badly lit images. Furthermore, an empiricist approach to the huge number of documentary films revealed a necessity to establish within the documentary ensemble certain subcategories such as didactic films, reportage, compilation films, etc.

Though useful, such a repertory of documentary codes based on the empirical study of a large corpus of films has been proven rather unsatisfying. Indeed, some films that resort to a set of documentary codes, such as interviews and voice-over commentaries, are still perceived as fiction films. Neo-realist films such as *Païsa*, certain new wave works (*Two or three things I know about her*), the extreme dabblings in pastiche (*Zelig*) or fake documentaries (*Watkins' Culloden*) all come to mind. There is, therefore, a need to determine what lies beyond mere stylistic features that enables the viewer to identify a film as documentary.

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<sup>25</sup> Gianfranco Bettetini, "Nanook of the North (Robert Flaherty): analyse de deux séquences", op. cit.

## PRAGMATIC APPROACH TO DOCUMENTARY

At this point, I would like to take a little detour through photographic theory and criticism. Some important texts were written within the field in recent years which have had repercussions on documentary film theory. A reaction to the understanding of the photographic image as only a coded one surfaced as early as 1976. Not long after publication of a special issue of *Les cahiers du cinéma*, entitled *Images de marques*,<sup>26</sup> Pascal Bonitzer set off a debate on the issue of reality as one existing beyond its codes. Turning back to Alain Bergala's analysis of a photograph of a Vietnamese man crying under an umbrella as a coded image, Bonitzer attempts to define the problems with such an interpretation:

It is true that "the wide angle works to the benefit of a whimpering humanism: it isolates the character, the victim, in his loneliness and in his suffering." But in this picture something unfailingly remains, something that resists analysis. It is because, beyond the description, "whimpering humanism," the fact nevertheless remains that this Vietnamese man is crying: despite the setting, despite the framing, despite the journalistic and photographic enunciation (disgusting sensationalism!), there is the evocation of tears (...) Unfailingly, the silent, enigmatic evocation of the photograph returns, the somber event's sadness caught by a commercial lens, the singularity of tears returns quietly to offer itself for our meditation. Another reading then arises from the same image.

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<sup>26</sup> *Cahiers du cinéma*, "Spécial: Images de marques", no. 268-269, July-August, 1976, p. 42.

(...) This is why, even if based on the same codes of representation (camera obscura) photography has nothing to do with painting: the way an object is caught is utterly different. It doesn't scream the same way on canvas as it does in a photograph. (...) Photography is, before all else, a direct sampling of reality that chemistry renders apparent. This changes everything.<sup>27</sup>

His intuition or immediate reaction as a viewer in front of a photograph leads Bonitzer to stake a claim in favor of the transcendence of the reference as unique and unforgettable-- beyond the codes and beyond any simplistic effects of mimesis. In the same way, Roland Barthes in his last work, *La Chambre claire*,<sup>28</sup> emphasizes the viewer's subjective point of view before a photograph. Throughout the book, he continually observes the presence of the referent in and through the photograph:

A specific photograph, in effect, is never distinguished from its referent.<sup>29</sup>

It is as if the photograph always carries its referent with itself.<sup>30</sup>

Myself, I saw only the referent, the desired object, the beloved body.<sup>31</sup>

The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Pascal Bonitzer, "La surimage", in *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 270, Sep.-Oct. 1976, pp. 30-31.

<sup>28</sup> Roland Barthes, *La chambre claire. Note sur la photographie*, Paris, Gallimard, *Cahiers du cinéma*, 1980. English translation, *Camera Lucida*, London, Fontana, 1984.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

I didn't yet know that this stubbornness of the Referent in always being there would produce the essence I was looking for.<sup>33</sup>

He conceptualizes this feeling of extreme referentiality by referring to the ontology of the photographic image:

I call "photographic referent" not the thing to which an image or a sign refers but the necessarily real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph. Painting can feign reality without having seen it. Discourse combines signs which have referents, of course, but these referents can be and are most often "chimeras." Contrary to these imitations, in Photography I can never deny that the thing has been there. There is a superimposition here: of reality and of the past. And since this constraint exists only for Photography, we must consider it, by reduction, as the very essence, the noème of Photography (...) The name of Photography's noème will therefore be: "That-has-been"....<sup>34</sup>

As a consequence of this definition of photography (in its way the peak of reference), Barthes establishes that photography must first fulfill its own essence by moving away from its artistic goals:

Photography can in fact be an art: when there is no longer any madness in it, when its noème is forgotten and when consequently its essence no longer acts on me; do you suppose that looking at Commander Puyo's strollers I am disturbed and exclaim "That-has-been"? Cinema partakes of this domestication of Photography, at least fictional cinema.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 117.

He also demonstrates that the realistic shock produced by the photograph is relative--not absolute--and always singular. It comes from the chance meeting of two subjectivities: that of the artist (preferably an amateur), and that of the viewer. In other words, the photograph's veracity is, for Barthes, the product of two subjective desires.

Barthes, with his past as a semiotician, was among the first to recognize that various codes interfere with the perception of a photographic image. This he had already noted in his first article in 1961, "The Photographic Message," which identified six prevailing codes of connotation: trick, pose, object, photogeny, estheticism and syntax. He comes back to this in *La chambre claire*: "Obviously, certain codes do inform our reading of the photograph."<sup>36</sup> Throughout his life, Barthes continued to hound clichés, stereotypes and cultural icons (See *Le système de la mode*, *Les mythologies*, and even *Le discours amoureux*), but it is precisely because of his knowledge of codes that Barthes can insist on the realism of the photograph. For Barthes, it is in its very essence that the photograph appears, beyond every code, as a referential marker. He interprets the purity of its denotation as a message without a code.

Naturally, in choosing to present things this way, Barthes is ensnared, not in mimesis but in referentialism. The danger camouflaged in such a conceptual approach is that the principle--

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

"transfer of reality"--will be generalized, "absolutized," by adopting a position that is exclusively subjective, with its ontological pretensions. Barthes unfortunately has not escaped the cult of reference for its own sake.

To avoid this danger, it is necessary to restrict the field of reference, taking it in a relative sense, since otherwise it is impossibly difficult to outline. Several contemporary analysts, inspired by the semiotic concepts of C.S. Peirce (particularly his notion of index) have moved in this direction.<sup>37</sup>

As early as 1895, Peirce mentioned in the notes he left to illustrate his classification of signs the status of photograph as index. Observing that photographs, especially snap shots, look like the object they represent, he attributed this resemblance to their conditions of production, which imply that photographs are obliged to correspond physically to nature point-by-point. He accordingly placed photography among the second category of signs, those established by physical connection (index).

Peirce's definition is not grounded in the complete iconic product but in its process of production. He thus foreshadows Bazin and his "automatic genesis." Unlike Bazin, however, he does not emphasize the ethical and aesthetic consequences of this genesis (neutrality, objectivity). Instead, he insists on the logical and semiotic consequences that lead to the notion of index. Rather than focus on the referent and the fact that a photograph's

<sup>37</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, "The Art of Reasoning", chap. II, in *Collected Papers*, vol. 2, Harvard University Press.

existence implies that the represented thing itself once existed, Peirce opened the way for a real analysis of the photographic image.

Its point of departure is the technical nature of the photographic process, the basic principle of the luminous "print" (mark) being governed by the laws of physics and chemistry. A photograph is first a trace, a mark, a deposit or, according to Denis Roche, "a deposit of knowledge and technique"<sup>38</sup> before anything else. In semiotic terms, this means that the photograph belongs to the same category as smoke (index of a fire), a shadow (index of a presence), a scar (index of a wound), a ruin (vestige of an ancient building), or a symptom (index of an illness). All these signs share the fact that they are actually linked to their objects,<sup>39</sup> that they are related to them by physical connection, and that they are thus completely different from icons (defined by a relation of similarity) or symbols (whose objects are defined by arbitrary convention, just like the words of a language).

Two remarks are in order about this definition of the semiotic status of the photograph. First, the definition of the photograph as a luminous mark does not imply either the use of a camera or the resemblance of the image to the thing it traces. Neither mimesis nor the perceptual coding of a camera obscura is a necessary element. These things may occur, but if they do, they

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<sup>38</sup> Denis Roche, *Dépôts de savoir et de technique*, Paris, Seuil, coll. Fiction & Cie, 1980.

<sup>39</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, *op. cit.*



are secondary. In this way, what in photography has been called a "photogram" since Moholy-Nagy (and which has nothing to do with the cinematic photogram) serves as a historical example of the minimal definition of a photograph: the photogram is a photochemical image obtained without a camera, depositing various opaque or translucent objects directly onto a sensitive surface, exposed to a luminous ray and then developed. The result is a pattern of light and dark that is purely aesthetic since it is difficult to identify the objects used. Only the principle that underlies such a deposit, trace or luminous mark is important.

Second, the principle of the trace, important as it is, constitutes only a fragment in the whole photographic process. Before and after this moment of natural inscription of the world onto a sensitive surface, there are cultural gestures, coded in a way entirely dependant on human choice and decision. (Before comes the choice of subject, camera, film, length of exposure, camera angle...everything, in other words, that prepares for and leads to the final decision to shoot. The "after" choices follow, once developing and printing the photograph. Finally, the photograph enters the circuit of distribution, which is always cultural and coded: press, art, fashion, porno, science, justice, family...) It is only between these series of codes, during that very short moment of exposure, that the photograph can be considered a pure act, a trace, a "message without a code." It is at this point, and this point only, that the human hand does not--

is not allowed to—interfere, under penalty of changing the basic essence of photography. Here there is a fissure, a moment of suspending the codes, that yields an almost pure index. It doesn't last for more than a fraction of second and will immediately be taken up again by codes (enough so to relativize the grip of the referent in photography); but it is not without important theoretical consequences, which I would like to briefly examine.

According to Peirce, the relation between the index sign and its referent can be characterized, in summary, as a relation of physical connection, of singularity, designation and certification. Consequently, the index image always refers to a single defined referent, the very referent from which it issues physically and chemically. The result is the extreme singularity of this relationship. At the same time, since a photograph is dynamically linked to an object, and this object alone, it gains a strong power of designation (Barthes: "Photography suggests a child's gesture whereby he points his finger at something, saying: 'There it is!' but nothing else ... ) Photography is nothing more than an antiphon of "look", "see" or "there it is." Thus it is an index finger as well as an index. Finally, the photograph is also a testimony. It testifies to the existence of a fact. (See the debate on the status of photographs as proof in judicial matters.)

The theoretical thinking on photography inspired by Peirce's theory reveals the weakness of the camera obscura argument, which does not take into account the differences between

photographic and cinematographic images and others such as paintings and drawings. While the latter are purely imaginary representations, the former involve a presence at some moment of the object represented. As Bonitzer puts it, there is always a "grain of reality" within the filmic image.<sup>40</sup> This is a fact which the camera obscura theorists have overlooked.

These refinements of the photographic image's specificity have had repercussions for the debate about the documentary concept in cinema. They have reintroduced a concern for the ontological relationship that film has to reality beyond the coding process at work in any production. Francois Jost's introduction to his latest book on film narrative, *Le récit cinématographique*, co-authored with André Gaudreault,<sup>41</sup> is exemplary of this concern. In the theoretical definition of his corpus (fictional films in regard to documentary films), Jost openly acknowledges the influence of recent research within the field of photography, especially that of Jean-Marie Schaeffer's book, *L'image précaire*.<sup>42</sup>

In order to describe the viewer's perception of the indexicality of the filmic image, Jost refers to the concept of "documentarity." His thesis is that every film, to a certain degree, partakes of both the realm of fiction and that of documentary. It lies with the viewer to determine a film's level of

<sup>40</sup> Pascal Bonitzer, "Le grain de réel", in *Décadrage. Peinture et cinéma*, 1985, pp. 12-28.

<sup>41</sup> François Jost et André Gaudreault, *Le récit cinématographique*, Paris, Nathan, 1990.

<sup>42</sup> Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *L'image précaire. Du dispositif photographique*, Paris, Seuil, 1987.

documentarity, according to how strongly he perceives its images to have been (here Jost paraphrases Schaeffer) "affected by the spatiality and the temporality of the object which is represented." In other words, a film's documentarity is linked to the perception the viewer has of the indexical relationship that the film's images hold vis-a-vis their referent. One can speak about a "documentarizing" reading of a film when "the viewer's attention is drawn to the real-time moment and place of 'the molding of the print,' that unique and fleeting moment when the film is exposed to the luminous ray refracted by the pro-filmic objects."<sup>43</sup>

The issue, then, is to determine the factors that induce the viewer to take a documentarizing standpoint toward a film or, to the contrary, that prevent him from doing so. Among the factors that induce this process are the traces and indications within a film of the circumstances--even the physical risks--that entail its making. Here, Jost subscribes to an argument developed at length by the *Cahiers du cinéma* in the Sixties, which repeatedly claimed that every major film was a documentary exposé of its own shooting. In this respect, the *Cahiers* is the heir of André Bazin, who expressed as early as 1957 his fascination with the blurred, shaky footage of *Kon Tiki*, the filming of a voyage by raft of a group of young Norwegian and Swedish scientists and their efforts to prove their hypothesis about maritime migrations of the Polynesian people. What strikes Bazin is the fabrication

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<sup>43</sup> François Jost, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

surrounding Kon Tiki's production. Its images are a conceit, a series of stunts...they are, he says, "the objective but reconstructed memory of the actors in the drama." Cinematographic testimony, he continues, "is what man is able to bring away from an event that, at the same time, demands his participation." <sup>44</sup>

It can hardly be refuted that footage which renders perceptible the cameraman's on-site presence--his physical involvement with a recorded action, particularly a precarious or life-threatening scene--will tend to be attributed the status of document by the viewer. It is as if the more dangerous its shooting conditions and the more inadequate the footage,<sup>45</sup> the more authentic a document appears to the viewer. An extreme example of this, of course, is footage that dangles evidence of mortality, such as *The Battle of Chile* or *Jean Lugo, June 4, 1982, Beirut: The Death of a Cameraman*, which received the award for best reportage at the 1982 Monte Carlo festival. No weightier proof of documentarity within a film than the death of one of its creators! On a more mundane level, television--at least the French-language version in Europe--often plays on the power of conviction of filmic material that strains to catch an event's essential moment "on the spot." Short news reports with poor images and barely audible over-the-telephone soundtracks, for example, are frequently

<sup>44</sup> André Bazin, "Le cinéma et l'exploration", *op. cit.*, p. 38.

<sup>45</sup> Out-of-focus, awkward footage is used as an index of realism in staged documentary-style films like Gillo Pontecorvo's *Battle of Algiers* (1966).

resorted to, not for their informational purpose (they usually don't say very much) but to lend credibility to the journalist's commentary, thus certifying that the events referred to really did happen. The reporter's role thus becomes not to report the facts but to point to the referent. Indeed, what does one focus on while watching these "objective" compositions, if not the actual circumstances and technical difficulties of their production?

More problematic is Jost's other criterion for separating films that elicit a documentary reading from those that suggest a fictional one. This criterion is the narrative form granted to, or withheld from, the film. Jost reiterates the assertion<sup>46</sup> that narration, because it involves a manipulation of the temporal succession and duration of the events recounted, fictionalizes their profilmic action.<sup>47</sup> He finds example of a "zéro degré" of documentarity in Lumière's film, "Les laveuses":

As the film starts, laundry women are busy beating their laundry, and as it draws to an end, the same action continues. This means that only a small fragment of a wider reality has been seized which isn't supposed to be so different from the one shown to us: it actually is the visual retention of an authentic spatio temporal moment (...). Of course, there is a discourse in the extent that a big "imagier" has entered reality by the placement of his camera, by his choice of framing, etc. But there is, properly speaking, no narration. In this sense, one can

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<sup>46</sup> This claim was made by Jean-François Lyotard in his analysis of the journalistic coverage of the death of Pierre Overney: "Petite économie libidinale d'un dispositif narratif: la Régie Renault raconte le meurtre de P. Overney", in *Des dispositifs pulsionnels*, Paris, U.G.E., coll. 10/18, 1973, pp. 179-224.

<sup>47</sup> François Jost, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

consider Lumière's film as the zero degree of documentarity.<sup>48</sup>

On the other hand, the documentarity of a film like *Nanook of the North* is shown to be compromised by its narrative strategies:

Robert Flaherty's famous film, *Nanook of the North* (1921), by building several of its sequences on alternating shots, transforms two successive elements of the filmic track into a simultaneity: one sees Nanook during the hunt waiting for a walrus to surface from the ice-hole. This way, he also turns the non-filmic event into a narrative which is based on a realistic, and not on a real, suspense.<sup>49</sup>

An even smaller degree of documentarity, according to Jost, characterizes TV news when subjects are structured in such a way that their commentary relies on a summarizing prologue to establish from the very start the premises that will shape reality and its interpretation. Jost makes a strong assertion in stressing the non-narrativity of certain Lumière films. This stands in sharp contrast with the excessive tendency in recent film studies to demonstrate that all of Lumière's work is narrative.<sup>50</sup> But this is subsidiary to our immediate purpose. As far as the non-fictional issue is concerned, one cannot follow Jost in assuming that the less narrative a film is, the higher its level of documentarity. Though Jost does acknowledge the inevitable mediation of reality by the filmmaker's eye, which frames the image, he nevertheless falls back

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> See, for example, Marshall Deutelbaum, "Structural Patterning in Lumière's films", in *Wide Angle*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1979, pp. 28-37.

into the search for stylistic features that will minimize the transformation of reality within the filmmaking process. Despite the experience of direct cinema, whose attempt to come up with a neutral film style has been largely discredited, the fact that one still finds in the work of serious film scholars the evaluation of a film's documentarity according to whether or not it resorts to narration shows how strong the impulse is to shift from an observation of the photographic image's indexicality to the (impossible) search for a film style capable of capturing "bare" reality.

Though it can't fully be embraced, a pragmatic approach such as Jost's is interesting. His notion of documentarity is useful, as it allows one to delineate the impression viewers might form of certain filmic images as documents. It identifies the limited effects of an emerging reality linked to the specificity of the medium. The resulting perception is fleeting and doesn't necessarily affect the whole film's spectatorial regime. Generalizations about a film's documentary status--based on the fact that certain sequences reveal the production process and thus underscore their status as document--are inaccurate and confusing, and should thus be discarded. The claim, for example, that Herzog's *Aguirre* is simultaneously a documentary, since one of its sequences reveals the film crew's presence on a raft, and also a fiction can thus be dismissed. Instead, one should speak about the high level of documentarity of that particular sequence within



Aguirre, which is otherwise characterized by its demand on the viewer for a fictionalizing attitude.

Any film will probably present to the viewer<sup>51</sup> a certain minimum level of "documentarity," but only a few of them can be regarded as true documentaries. It is the criteria that define the full documentary "ensemble" that I would like to lay out in the following pages.

I propose to rely on pragmatism to define it, focussing on the specificity of the documentary's speech act, on the peculiarity of the relationship it tends to establish between the addressor of the message and the addressee.<sup>52</sup> Documentary could therefore be defined as a discourse that implies an enunciator, identified as real and who addresses viewers as an "authentic" audience. This involves a pact between the addressor and the addressee, according to which the former commits himself to handle with a maximum of authenticity real facts and can thereby justifiably request that he be taken seriously by the viewer. It is important to stress that, though reference is made here to concepts such as reality and authenticity, I am not resorting to an "ethical" definition of documentary (whose problems I reviewed at the beginning of this chapter). It is the status of the voice, the reality of the enunciator and the relationship he establishes to the

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<sup>51</sup> Let us remember that the notion of documentarity focuses on spectatorship, on the viewer's reaction to the film.

<sup>52</sup> Roger Odin offers a similar definition of documentary, relying on the pragmatic. See "Film documentaire, lecture documentarisante", *op. cit.*

facts he pursues in the film--not the ultimate reality of the "énoncé"--that I propose to examine in order to judge whether a film should be classified as a documentary or not.

How the film is introduced is thus a key element. Coming back again to *Nanook of the North* it would be wrong (as the concept is understood in this thesis) to deny documentary status to the film under the pretext that it is a romantic vision of the life of the Eskimo that Flaherty offers. Indeed, what matters is the maker-viewer pact by which Flaherty, as the explorer who claims intimate familiarity with the Inuit, presumes to give us an insider's account of their living conditions. Flaherty spoke at length about the making of *Nanook* and about his in-depth knowledge of the Eskimos: "You forget, I grew up with primitive people, Indians and Eskimos; I was thirty before I knew much about civilization. Maybe I don't know it even now."<sup>53</sup> He was careful always to say that his goal was to reveal to the viewer who his subjects really were: "I wanted to show the Inuit. And I wanted to show them not from a civilized point of view, but as they saw themselves, as 'we the people.'"<sup>54</sup> In such statements the documentary contract is firmly established. Whether or not Flaherty actually offers a true portrayal of the Eskimo in *Nanook* does not alter its documentary status. Similarly, the documentary status of *Misère au Borinage* should not be questioned simply

<sup>53</sup> Robert Flaherty, quoted by Richard Griffith, in *The world of Robert Flaherty*, New York, Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1953, p. XIV.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

because, as has been demonstrated (and openly acknowledged by Henri Storck and Joris Ivens), some of its sequences were staged. Again, it is the pact that guides these two men in their attempt to proffer within the film an account of the social reality of a destitute area of Belgium in the '30s that counts, and not the ultimate accuracy of their depiction.

The devices through which the documentary contract is expressed are numerous. It can be established within the film itself, by its credits,<sup>55</sup> title or voice-over commentary or via the on-screen presence of a reporter engaged in interviews or presenting news footage. The latter's personality and professional reputation, in fact, carry considerable weight in establishing the documentary contract:

The term [network news anchorman] connotes weight and seriousness, symbolic figures who will keep us from going adrift on a stormy sea of significations. The anchors are authentic heroes, whose words have godlike efficacy (...).<sup>56</sup>

The CBS Evening News relies heavily on the persona of its anchorperson for ethical proof: in the mind of many, [former anchorman] Walter

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<sup>55</sup> Woody Allen subversively refers to this contract in Zelig's opening credits: "This documentary would like to thank..." His formula teases the viewer, who gradually learns from other clues that Allen's "presposterous tale about a lizardman" is an ersatz documentary. See Robert Stam's "From Dialogism to Zelig" in *Subversive Pleasures: Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism, and Film*, Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989, p. 204.

<sup>56</sup> Robert Stam, "Television News and Its Spectator", in E. Ann Kaplan (edited by), *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches--An Anthology*, Frederick, Maryland, University Publications of America, Inc., 1983, pp. 27-28. Stam describes the authority of the anchorman's persona as based on an "artful construct."

Cronkite is one of the most trustworthy public figures in America, certainly more so than many of the personalities who parade through each night's news items. Cronkite has the ability to command belief and thereby gain credibility for reportage to which we may otherwise attend with much less suspension of disbelief.<sup>57</sup>

But the documentary contract doesn't depend only on the film itself. Its previews, announcements, interviews of the filmmaker and producer as well as the film's distribution network all give cues about whether a film should be approached by the viewer as a documentary or as a fiction. Chances are high, for example, that a film produced by S.L.O.N. ("Société de Lancements des Oeuvres Nouvelles") and shown in a factory is going to be a documentary.

A definition of documentary that implies an accord between the enunciator, who is real, and the viewer, who is addressed as a real person, is theoretically coherent. But its application to contemporary film production poses problems. Indeed, if one considers a sampling of recent documentary films to include diaries, travelogue and self-portrayals, the apparent impossibility of their filmmakers to establish a documentary pact in a straightforward way is striking.

Glancing back to film production of the Seventies, one finds a plethora of works where filmmakers openly identify themselves as the subject, speaking in the first person, on-screen and commenting on his/her own personal life. This is the case, for example, of Amalie Rothschild's work, Nana, Mom and Me. From

<sup>57</sup> Bill Nichols, *Ideology and The Image*, op. cit., p. 175.

the beginning Rothschild presents her film as a quest for her own identity by exploring her relationship to family members, especially her grandmother and mother, as the title suggests. Such a clear-cut, unambiguous designation of the documentary voice seems very problematic today.<sup>58</sup> Although in several of Marker's films some ambiguity surrounds the documentary contract (to be examined in the course of this thesis) it reaches extreme proportions in his *Sans soleil*. Whereas Marker's *Lettre de Sibérie* (Letter from Siberia) opens with a first-person voice-over commentary--"I am writing to you from a faraway country"--and thus establishes a contract by which the French filmmaker directs the film's message from Siberia to his compatriots in France, *Sans soleil*'s voice-over commentary is, by contrast, in the third person: "He wrote to me." But it is a voice that is, from the very start, followed by conflicting indications over the identity of this third person, whose mental portrait the film circumscribes. Indeed, several elements tempt us to identify him as Marker, but still other clues, such as appearance in *Sans soleil*'s credits of a fictional filmmaker's name, contravene that tendency. The last chapter of this thesis, in fact, will examine more precisely the issue of enunciation in *Sans soleil*. What matters for the present is to point out the ambiguity of its status in the film. The voice that speaks in *Sans soleil* is

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<sup>58</sup> However, some films from the 1990s still establish a clear documentary contract, such as *Thank You and Goodnight* by Jan Oxenberg, a film that speaks in unambiguous terms (even when using literal cardboard cut-out figures to represent herself on screen) about the author's personal experience regarding the physical decline and death of her grandmother.

never clearly identified as that of a real person. The same indecisiveness of enunciation can be observed in Varda's *Mur Murs* (1984). The film's voice-over commentary that relates the impressions of a visitor's trip to Los Angeles and its city walls is recited by Varda, but she is never present on screen. Instead, we see an actress who walks through the city to spots where, according to the voice-over's timing and contents, one would have expected to see Agnès Varda herself.<sup>59</sup>

Elsewhere, Robert Kramer's latest film, *Route One*, is also characterized by this same refusal of straight self-portrayal by the filmmaker. After having spent several years abroad, Kramer returns to America to explore his country from east to west by following Highway Number 1, interviewing people he meets along the way. The film has a strong autobiographical slant to it, yet Kramer can't bring himself to speak in the first person within the film. Though he states at the beginning in voice-over commentary that the film retraces his own trip and his own experience of "getting back in touch with the States," he conjures up a fictional character, "the doctor" (who is actually a journalist in real life), as his alter ego on screen.

One could advance some psychological motif to explain these filmmakers' reluctance to identify themselves with the first person

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<sup>59</sup> A higher level of ambiguity is possible in film than in literature since film can play on a diversity of elements which can each refer to the instance of enunciation: the voice, the body represented on screen, the name of the author as it appears in the credits, and so on.

who speaks in the film. Modesty perhaps, but also the fact that, as Marker puts it in his book, *Le Dépays*, the subject never remains true to itself in time. Thus the necessity of demarcating this gap between the immediate persona and the past self. Literature offers many examples of such disguise, one of the most famous being Stendahl's autobiographical work carried out under the name of Henri Brulard. But I believe there is more to it simply than the desire for anonymity. Judging by its sheer recurrence in contemporary cinema, this semi-hidden voice of the narrator suggests a special significance. It reveals a distrust of reality. If today's filmmaker seems to have great difficulty in simply saying "My film will show you the way things are." that is because today there is widespread distrust in the world. As Gilles Deleuze notes:

The modern fact is that we no longer believe in this world. We do not even believe in the events which happen to us, love, death, as if they only half concerned us. It is not we who make cinema; it is the world which appears to us like a bad film.<sup>60</sup>

To describe today's world, Deleuze speaks about a regime of purely auditory and visual signs. His thesis about the visible world's loss of reality recurs in several contemporary analyses of post-modern society, especially those of Baudrillard. The doubt-inducing, ambiguous status of reality within contemporary society in the closing years of the 20th century has been a major

<sup>60</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, London, The Athlone Press, 1989, p. 171.

sociological and philosophical theme over the last few years. Paul Virilio is certainly one of its major proponents, with several of his books devoted to the issue. For example, in *Machine de vision*<sup>61</sup> he exposes the progressive substitution of images for their objects in the real world (ie., the use of video images to replace the actual presence of witnesses in court trials) and, as such, highlights the impact of the media on today's life. We continuously occupy, chez Virilio, a position as potential filmic subject. Where, then, is reality in a permanently "dramatized" world? For Virilio, documentary filmmaking altogether participates in and bears the effects of reality's projection-as-spectacle. Referring to the British documentary school's impact on the evolution of a collective "anthology" of visual memory, Virilio turns to the Spanish civil war to demonstrate the influence that previous films exerted on public behavior when the Internationalists found themselves in front of the camera:

Prior to the dawning of a second global conflict, the bloody mediatic epic of the Spanish Civil War would portray the power of this anthological cinema. Incredibly, the republicans even lost battles as they tried to re-create the heroism of the Russian Revolution as observed in the movies. Striking the same poses in front of the camera as their Soviet models, these volunteers against Fascism saw themselves, too, as participant-actors in the making of yet another great, historical revolutionary film.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Paul Virilio, *La machine de vision*, Paris, Galilée, 1988, p.62.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.



Jean Baudrillard treads down the same path in his analysis of the ways media shape our perception of the world. He ponders the inversion of the viewer-viewed relationship, for example, in the 1971 "TV vérité" experiment during which the household activity of the Loud family was recorded for seven months without interruption, following no script and no scenarios. It is not the people who watch TV, says Baudrillard, it is the television that observes them.

It has become impossible, says Baudrillard, to spot the original model, the who/whom gaze, the medium itself, since one is always "already on the other side." Gone is the subject, gone is the focal point. Gone, too, are the center and its periphery. In their place: pure flexion or, rather, circular inflection. The commingling of the medium with its message is the fundamental equation in this new era. There is no more medium in the literal sense: it is beyond our grasp--diffused and refracted within reality.<sup>63</sup>

One finds equivalent echoes of this indecipherability of reality in the statements of contemporary filmmakers. Marker broaches the issue in *Le fond de l'air est rouge* and *Sans soleil*, noting that in Japan, a country in a highly advanced state of technological development, the sensation of looking at--and being looked at by--television is overpowering. In another time it may have still been possible for a filmmaker such as Leacock to theorize

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<sup>63</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et simulation*, Paris, Galilée, 1981, p. 51.

that our conception of reality was molded by stereotypes--the result of ingesting too many fiction films--and that direct cinema would boundlessly reveal to us how things really were by simply recording events in a neutral, straightforward way. But today's filmmaker must confront the inescapable limits imposed on whatever framework he chooses to record reality. Jean-Louis Comolli draws the same conclusions during the filming of his *Tabarka*:

One no longer finds many people ignorant of the filmmaking process, and fewer still are those beyond the influence of mediatic representation: photography, journalism, film and television... No, that is finished. There is today a widespread awareness of the camera's recording process. Whoever you film already has an idea about filmmaking even if he has never been filmed. He constructs an image, preparing himself by relying on his imagination or what he thinks he knows... No matter where you turn, you can only film people who already know something about it. Photography and television together have granted each and everyone the promise of an image.<sup>64</sup>

What conclusion can be drawn from this? I think it readily renders evident the relativity of the documentary concept, one that is linked to a moment in the history of the thinking about media and their relationship to reality. The documentary contract implies a basic faith in reality's identification, which has been lost in our day. Thus, the documentary concept is inadequate to describe the bulk of today's film production.

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<sup>64</sup> Jean-Louis Comolli, "Ceux qu'on filme. Notes sur la mise en scène documentaire", in Micheline Créteur et Geneviève Van Cauwenberge (edited by), *Le documentaire en Europe*, special issue of *Videodoc*, April 1989, pp. 21-24.

In the course of this thesis, I will come back to these questions. By examining how Marker re-works the documentary issue over a period of 30 years, I intend to refine and strengthen this hypothesis of the historical relativity of the documentary concept.

**CHAPTER II:**

**LE JOLI MAI**

In one draft of his scenario for *Le joli mai*, Marker defines the film as a "fish-pond for those who would in the future cast about for the past." It falls to posterity, he notes, "to sort out the essential from the scum of insignificance."<sup>1</sup>

Marker's allusion to *Le joli mai*'s muddied, hodge-podge quality is appropriate. Appearing only a month after the signing of the Evian agreements, which put an end to France's war with Algeria, the film relies principally on interviews that probe, in haphazard fashion, the plethora of issues facing Paris in May of 1962. Some of these are merely hinted at, while others are more deeply examined, among them: the city's housing crisis, transformation of its urban landscape due to intensive construction of "modern" but spiritless apartment complexes skirting the rim of Paris, (Sarcelles, for example), invasion of the automobile, development of leisure time, the explosion of media--especially television, growth of a youth culture as the baby boom generation reached its teenage years, public and private rituals, festivities and modern dance, women and politics, religion, Communists, love and marriage, animals, demonstrations and railway employee strikes, old age and poverty, the conquest of space, the Third

<sup>1</sup> Unpublished document donated by Chris. Marker to the Belgian Royal Cinémathèque.

World's relationship to international capitalism, political activism, de Gaulle and the novelty of peace-time terrorism and, finally, the last quivers of resistance to Algeria's demand for independence from France.

Though by no means complete, this exhausting enumeration of the many subjects under consideration in *Le joli mai* illustrates the film's extreme explorative diversity and its wide outlook on Parisian society in the early '60s. Marker's urge to record, his need to document events as fully as possible for future generations accounts for *Le joli mai*'s unusual length. It is a double feature film.

While the work functions as a testimony to its time--tracing what its author considered a "stepping stone" in French political, social and cultural history for the benefit of future generations--Marker, true to himself, doesn't bother with didactic preoccupations. It is not the film's smallest paradox that, though self-consciously addressed to today's viewer, the full extent of its message is quite beyond the grasp of those who, three decades later, do not benefit from either personal experience or considerable prior knowledge of the cultural climate and political life in France in the early Sixties.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> As early as 1963 film critic Michel Aubriant called attention to the fact that, even at that point, people couldn't precisely remember what happened in May 1962, barely a year before: "It is now the past already, it is already enshrined in History," in "Autour du Joli Mai: cinéma-vérité ou cinéma engagé?", *La presse*, May 18, 1963, p. 8. Debate moderated by Guy Allombert (*La Cinématographie française*) and which gathered together Michel Aubriant (*Paris-Presse*), Henri Chapier (*La Presse*), Henri Colpi

This is especially pertinent to the Franco-Algerian war, whose references in the film are ever-present but muted. *Le joli mai* was one of the first films within the official French distribution network that dared to broach that conflict and thus challenge the French nation's widespread indifference toward it. But it does so, for reasons which I will later develop, in allusive ways that are likely to escape the uninformed viewer. For example, at one point the camera lingers momentarily on a name, "Francis Jeanson," that is etched in graffiti on a wall. This conveys nothing to a viewer ignorant of the era's "suitcases carriers," the underground network created by Jeanson in support of a liberated Algeria. In the same way, viewers would miss all significance of the statement Marker manages to obtain from a French paratrooper who declares his support for the French general, Raoul Salan, then on trial for treasonous involvement linked to the colonial war across the Mediterranean.

Though widely known in France at the time, these facts are obscure today for many viewers. Yet without some knowledge of their historical setting, one runs the risk of taking a reductive view of *Le joli mai*, such as that of Eric Barnouw, who described the film as a reflection of French optimism in the immediate post-Algerian war period!<sup>3</sup> Background information, as I will provide in the first part of this chapter, is an unavoidable requisite if one is

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(filmmaker), Samuel Lachize (*L'Humanité*) and Louis Marcorelles (*Cahiers du cinéma*).

<sup>3</sup> Eric Barnouw, *Documentary. A History of the Non-Fiction Film*, op. cit., p. 255.

to gain a clearer understanding of the film's deeper political and ideological currents. *Le joli mai* is not a neutral or "optimistic" account of the nature of French society in 1962 but, rather, the chronicle of one observer with definite political convictions and a concern for his country's pervasive political lethargy. I will establish a connection between Marker's point of view and that of progressive opinion of the early Sixties: many leftist film critics in France identified with the film. Louis Marcorelles accurately sensed this link when he claimed in 1963 that: "*Le joli mai* is an exceptional testimony for a French leftist intelligentsia desperately striving to get in touch with its own nation, to be a part of that nation, to understand it."<sup>4</sup>

Analysis of the film's depth of political commitment raises issues that transcend the film itself. Indeed, as an anti-establishment polemic, *Le joli mai* substantially weakens the argument that a radical break in the field of cinema occurred only starting with the events of 1968. The latter school tends to view '68 as the moment when political consciousness suddenly resurged in cinema after years of slumbering social indifference (with, of course, one brilliant exception--Godard). A closer look at film production and criticism of the early Sixties, however, reveals that a much more nuanced position is required.

It is not only on the basis of its political overtones that the film should be considered as premonitory of 1968, but also due to

<sup>4</sup> Louis Marcorelles in Guy Allombert et al., "*Autour du Joli Mai: cinéma-vérité ou cinéma engagé?*", op. cit.



its relationship to sociology. Cultural historians are quick to call our attention to the fact that students of sociology played a leading role in the 1968 student movement in France since they questioned the very methods, principles and reasons of this newly legitimized discipline within French academia. But Marker's film, indebted as it was to sociology for its critical outlook and investigation into the modernizing effects on society of economic growth, was already challenging the sociological inquiry and its approach to reality as early as 1962. This will be developed in the second part of this chapter. Finally, a third question that must be raised is that of the film's documentary approach. *Le joli mai* is often referred to as an example of French "cinema vérité," yet no in-depth analysis of its documentary standpoint exists. I will examine this aspect in the last part of this chapter, paying particular attention to the differences between *Le joli mai* and Morin and Rouch's *Chronicle of a Summer* (*Chronique d'un été*), two films that are often, if hastily, thrown together on the basis that their authors perform the role of catalyst by provoking subjects with questions rather than positioning themselves as neutral observers. However, these films are separated by some differences that must be explained.

#### POLITICAL COMMITMENT IN *LE JOLI MAI*

*Le joli mai* was, along with Resnais' *Muriel* and Alain Cavalier's *Le Combat dans l'Île*, one of the first films to consider

the Algerian war as "history rather than as news."<sup>5</sup> It was also, as mentioned earlier, one of the first films within the world of official French film distribution networks to openly explore the Franco-Algerian clash.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, this was a daring gesture; French media had been under the shackles of strong censorship for years. As has been thoroughly documented, numerous newspapers, magazines (*France-Observateur*, *L'Express*, *Témoignage Chrétien*, *Libération*, *Les Temps Modernes*) and books (notably those published by Maspéro and Minuit) were seized during the eight years of the Algerian war for having gone too far.<sup>7</sup> Films, too,

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<sup>5</sup> Marcel Martin, "La guerre d'Algérie au Cinéma", in *Cinéma* 63, no. 72, January 1963, p. 59. This article is a reference piece on the representation of the Algerian war in cinema. See also Michel Marie, "Contexte", in Claude Bailblé, Michel Marie and Marie-Claire Ropars, *Muriel, histoire d'une recherche*, Paris, Galilée, 1974, pp. 331-337. See also Jean-Pierre Jeancolas, "Le cinéma des guerres coloniales" in *Le cinéma des Français, la Vème république (1958-1978)*, Paris, Stock cinéma, 1979, pp. 156-165, and Freddy Buache, *Le cinéma français des années 60*, Renens, Hatier, 5 continents, 1987, pp. 9-14. See as well: Pierre Boulanger, *Le cinéma colonial*, Paris, Seghers, 1975. This book, which covers the years 1911-1962, reveals the utter indifference of cinema in French colonial North Africa to the social and political realities of the Maghreb region's indigenous peoples. The Algerian war, for example, was totally ignored, with one significant exception (according to Boulanger): James Blue's *Les oliviers de la justice*--a movie based on a novel by Pierre Pélégri.

<sup>6</sup> It wasn't until the Seventies that an increasing number of French commercial films began to probe the issue of the Algerian war. Among these: *La guerre d'Algérie* by Philippe Monnier and Yves Courrières (1972); *Avoir vingt ans dans les Aurès* by René Vautier (1973), Yves Boisset's *R.A.S. (Rien à signaler)* (1973), Laurent Heynemann's *La Question* (1977), Pascal Kané's *Liberty Belle* (1984), Philippe Garel's *Liberté la nuit* (1984) and Bertrand Tavernier and Patrick Rotman's *La guerre sans nom* (1992).

<sup>7</sup> See Michel Winock, *La république se meurt*, Paris, Seuil, 1985, p. 124. See also Anne Simonin, "Les éditions de Minuit et les éditions du Seuil. Deux stratégies face à la guerre d'Algérie", in Jean-Pierre Rioux and Jean-François Sirinelli, *La guerre d'Algérie*

came under the censor's heavy hand.<sup>8</sup> As Michel Marie noted in his 1974 essay, the slightest protest against the Algerian war, the slightest allusion to doubts or hesitations on the part of young draftees was prohibited. These were suppressed because of the traditional wartime argument that they were "detrimental to military morale."<sup>9</sup> For example, in one scene in Claude Bernard-Aubert's film, *Les lâches vivent d'espoir* (1960), a student attempts suicide just after having received his military draft notice for service in Algeria. Yet all dialogue or voice-over explanation referring to his act had to be excised from the film. One of the most notorious decisions of censorship under de Gaulle during the Algerian war was taken against Godard's fiction film, *Le petit soldat*, produced in 1959. Though largely unsympathetic to Algeria's independence movement, known as the F.L.N. (Front de libération nationale), it was nevertheless totally banned from the screen: the authorities viewed it as an apologia for desertion among French soldiers. It was only released for distribution four years later in 1963.

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et les intellectuels français, Bruxelles, Complexe, 1991, pp. 219-245.

<sup>8</sup> As explained by Jean-Pierre Jeancolas, a film could only be shown publicly during the Fifties and Sixties in France under condition that it was granted prior approval by a "control committee." The committee's membership consisted of government functionaries, representatives of professional cinema organizations and individuals deemed "qualified" to assess a film's effect on the public. The commission was even empowered to pass judgment on the basis of a scenario before its conversion into film: this was pre-censorship that carried considerable weight right up to the Seventies and led filmmakers (and film producers) to compromise with the threat of prohibition by spontaneously censoring themselves. Jean-Pierre Jeancolas, *Le cinéma des Français, la Vème république* (1958-1978), op. cit., p. 27.

<sup>9</sup> Michel Marie, "Contexte", op. cit., p. 331.

These interdictions exerted a proscriptive effect, nudging filmmakers and producers down the path of self-censorship. The official cinema spoke, if at all, only very reluctantly of the Algerian war, either minimizing its significance or only hinting that any conflict was taking place. For the most part, the film establishment found it easier to simply disregard the issue. Even in *Chronique d'un été* (1961), the war's existence and the French people's attitude toward it are accorded but the briefest exposure during a group discussion in a single sequence. Other films display similar critical lacunae, such as Jacques Rozier's *Adieu Philippine* (1961) or Agnès Varda's *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1961). Neither went beyond portraying soldiers on leave back in France or preparing for departure to North Africa. So rare, in fact, were references in officially approved cinema to this vicious war that the mere presence in the early '60s of a French soldier on screen was sufficient for a contemporary viewer to construe an Algerian connection. These allusions and evasive indicators were as far as commercial productions felt they could go.

It was therefore at the margins of the establishment that films (fewer in number and less influential, however, than their counterparts in dissident books and articles) that dealt directly with the Algerian war in all its physical and moral consequences were made. Though shown covertly, many people had access to them via film societies, among which Action Film Society should be mentioned as especially active. One of the more confrontational

alternative works was *October in Paris*, a feature-length film in 16 mm. made undercover in 1961-1962 by Jacques Panijel and produced by the Maurice Audin Committee and the magazine *Vérité-Liberté*.<sup>10</sup> The film is about two separate political demonstrations in Paris, the first occurring on October 17, 1961. Organized by the F.L.N., this gathering of Algerians was the first to take place on French soil against the colonial war. But though intended as a peaceful act of protest by its organizers, it is remembered as a shameful episode in French history. The police reacted with extreme and unprovoked brutality against the participants: for days afterwards North African bodies were fished out of the Seine and uncovered in nearby forests. Yet there were no prosecutions since "no evidence of any crime" was produced. "The police did their duty," declared Maurice Papon, head of police, before the municipal council of Paris. And the scandal was simply hushed up.<sup>11</sup> A few months later another demonstration took place on February 8, 1962, this time with participation by native Parisians. Leading the protest

<sup>10</sup> *Vérité-Liberté*, a magazine founded in 1960, had a policy of publishing documents shunned by the mainstream press in France. Maurice Audin was a young French assistant and leftist at the Faculty of Science in Algiers. Opposed to the Algerian war, he was arrested by the French army in Algeria and vanished mysteriously. A search committee was founded a few months after his disappearance in November 1957. Among the founding members were Pierre Vidal-Naquet and the mathematician Laurent Schwartz. Its objective was to protest against torture and the illegal pressure applied to opponents of the Algerian war.

<sup>11</sup> See Michel Winock, "Une nuit d'horreur et de honte", in *Chronique des années soixante*, 1986, pp. 32-35. See also Hervé Hamon and Patrick Rotman, *Génération: 1. Les années de rêve*, Paris, Seuil, 1987, p. 95. See also the book recently published about the event, Jean-Luc Einaudi's *La bataille de Paris. 17 octobre 1961*, Paris, Seuil, 1991.

were political and union organizers from the French left. Once again, the police responded with violent suppression. Eight demonstrators, a majority of them French Communists, were killed at the entrance of Paris's Charonne metro station as they sought refuge from an armed police charge. Both clashes were the focus of *October in Paris*, which circulated widely in the underground network. The print of this film was seized on October 9, 1962 during its first public screening at the Action film society and then banned for a decade until 1973. However, the work could still be viewed undercover after the autumn of '62.

As for other works that peered into the Algerian people's suffering during their country's violent confrontation with the "mother country," there are only a few. They include field coverage in the films of René Vautier and Pierre Clément (*Algérie en Flammes*; *Sakhiet-Sidi-Youssef*; *L'A.L.N. au combat*)--sterling exceptions to French cinema of the time--and Yann and Olga Le Masson's *J'ai huit ans*, which evokes the war through the drawings of Algerian children who took refuge in Tunisia.

Most films made in the parallel network, however, took a decidedly French angle to the war; their main concern centered almost exclusively on the repercussions of the Algerian war for French draftees and their friends and family. For example, Philippe Durand's *Secteur Postal 89.098* reveals the dissolution of a couple following the man's departure for Algeria. Not surprisingly, French censors banned the film, which they

interpreted as a potential incitement to military indiscipline. Similarly, 58-2/B, made by Guy Chalon and the Jean Vigo Group, tells the story of a former soldier unable to forget the horrors of war and incapable of re-adjusting to civilian life after his return to France. Elsewhere, both Daniel Goldenberg's *Le retour* and Jean Herman's *La quille* use similar scenarios to convey a message of despair and alienation among French veterans of the Algerian war. Finally, Paul Carpita's trio of films, *La récréation*, *Marseille sans soleil* and *Demain l'amour*, all rely on individual dramas linked to the Algerian war to illuminate the loss of friends and shattered relationships.

Is censorship alone sufficient to explain the paucity and timorousness of French film production vis-a-vis the Algerian war in the late Fifties and early Sixties? One can safely conclude that it was not. Such an oversimplifying hypothesis does not hold up to a serious examination of the facts. Censorship had something to do with it, but it was by no means the sole reason. The silence had deeper causes, related to the widespread indifference of the French majority to the Algerian issue. The era's prevailing attitude has been repeatedly deplored by journalists, historians and sociologists as, for example, these observations in 1962 of Morin in *Arguments*: "Every social class in French society acquiesced in a similar attitude of passivity toward the Algerian war." and "The mother country would have accepted a continuation of the Algerian

war as easily as its ending--whichever, in fact, as long as either did not disturb daily life in any way."<sup>12</sup>

Only a few individuals and minor groups actively agitated in favor of decolonization or condemned the war and its many injustices such as the torture of Algerian resistance fighters.<sup>13</sup> Among these were Henri Alleg, who exposed torture cases in his book, *La Question*; members of the Maurice Audin Committee; student groups; and intellectuals, among whom were such diverse notables as François Mauriac, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and the *Temps Modernes* writers group. But this diffuse protest essentially transpired in writing...in the form of books, manifestoes and petitions, including the famous "121 manifesto."<sup>14</sup> There were, however, a few exceptions to the "printed" protest. Francis Jeanson, author of the book, *L'Algérie hors la loi*, got

<sup>12</sup> Edgar Morin, in *Arguments politiques*, Paris, Seuil, 1965, p. 199. See also Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *La torture dans la république, Essai d'histoire et de politique contemporaines (1954-1962)*, Paris, Minuit, 1972. (English translation, *Torture: Cancer of Democracy; France and Algeria 1954-1962*, Harmondsworth, England, Penguin Books, 1963.)

<sup>13</sup> See Michel-Antoine Burnier, *Les existentialistes et la politique*, Paris, Gallimard, 1966; Jean-François Sirinelli, *Intellectuels et passions françaises. Manifestes et pétitions du XXème siècle*, Paris, Fayard, 1990, pp. 193-224; Jean-Pierre Rioux et Jean-François Sirinelli, *La guerre d'Algérie et les intellectuels français*, op. cit.; and Bernard-Henri Lévy, *Les aventures de la liberté*, Paris, Grasset, 1991.

<sup>14</sup> The 121 Manifesto was a proclamation of the civil right to dissent during the Algerian war. It was signed by 121 intellectuals and published in *Le Monde's* edition of September 6, 1960 in a short item. It sparked vivid reactions, including a counter-declaration signed by an opposing group, "The Manifesto of French Intellectuals." The importance of the former is that it forced intellectuals from across the political spectrum to position themselves vis-a-vis the war.



directly involved in the conflict by creating an F.L.N. underground support network in France.<sup>15</sup>

While the French people would eventually react against the war en masse, its presence--even if indirect--first had to spread to the Metropole before any stirrings of concern would materialize. Indeed, only when police repression and terrorists acts by paramilitary reactionaries in France were directed against French citizens did the latter begin to feel that their very own liberties were coming under threat. Large demonstrations finally occurred, beginning first at universities and spreading later to the entire French population by February 1962.

The unwitting detonator of this public protest against the continued imposition of French power in Algeria was the paramilitary group, the O.A.S. (Organisation de l'armée secrète). An underground organization formed in the winter of 1960-1961 by well-connected military personnel and right-wingers in France, it was opposed to any kind of negotiation with the F.L.N.<sup>16</sup> The O.A.S. believed in and supported the use of violence, in France as well as in Algeria, to get across its opposition--however futile--to Algerian independence. Sensing their growing possibility of failure, O.A.S. members turned to violence, stepping up their once-sporadic attacks into a campaign of terror across France

<sup>15</sup> On the suitcases carriers see Hervé Hamon and Patrick Rotman, *Les porteurs de valises. La résistance française à la guerre d'Algérie*, Paris, Seuil, 1982.

<sup>16</sup> On the history of the Algerian war see Bernard Droz and Evelyne Lever, *Histoire de la guerre d'Algérie, 1954-1962*, Paris, Seuil, 1984.

starting in January 1962. The homes of politicians, journalists and professors were a favorite and repeated target of bomb attacks. These earned the growing but still inactive disapproval of the French public. Finally, a powerful picture, published by the mass-circulation magazine, *Paris Match*, of a four-year old girl's bloodied face following a bomb attack February 7th against André Malraux catalyzed the body politic. Combined with violent police repression--once again--in Paris the next day during an anti-O.A.S. demonstration (causing the above-mentioned eight deaths at the Charonne metro station), the two events brought public indignation and anger to a peak. On February 13, funeral day for the Charonne dead, a crowd of several hundred thousand turned out to pay solemn tribute at Paris' Place de la République. It was the first spontaneous and massive protest by the French people against the Algerian war, a turning point whose scale and dignity acquired everlasting symbolic value for the political left as described by Maurice Blanchot:

In our day there has been no more powerful manifestation of the People in its boundless power than that which independently gathered to honor the Charonne dead... a stationary, silent multitude whose sheer size rendered meaningless the precisions of enumeration: it was there, neither as divisible sum or hermetic unit but simply as an integral whole surpassing all sense of summation, quietly transcending itself."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *La communauté inavouable*, Paris, Minuit, 1983, p. 55.

Marker chronicles this event during the second half of *Le joli mai*. And it is with no surprise that the same footage appears again in the prologue of *Le fond de l'air est rouge*, which brings together symbolic images of mankind's resistance to oppression.

After the long war of eight years was finally over, the failure to conclude a rapid peace treaty evoked feelings of guilt among the French intelligentsia, leading to a general crisis of consciousness. The French people, declared Sartre, "have been unable to speed up the cease-fire; the entire history of their time has passed over their head. They walk like somnambulists towards their faith."<sup>18</sup> Sartre and fellow intellectuals felt a growing sense of alienation from a nation that prided itself as the historical champion of human rights, but had meekly allowed their violation to take place so close to home. In their eyes, the failure to protect the sanctity of basic democratic freedoms brought the French state's very validity into question. "Is it possible that a country of liberal tradition could have its institutions corroded by torture, its Western faith in the human spirit masked by silence and lies in the space of a few years? Once the page has been turned, can things go on as if nothing had happened before?"<sup>19</sup> To this query by the leftist historian, Pierre Vidal-Naquet, many could only

<sup>18</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, "Les somnanbules", in *Les temps modernes*, April 1962, p. 1401.

<sup>19</sup> Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *La torture dans la république, Essai d'histoire et de politique contemporaines (1954-1962)*, op. cit., p. 141.

respond in the negative: "While Algerians have gained their freedom, the French have lost theirs."<sup>20</sup>

The Algerian war left a deep and lasting scar on the French soul, though it is still difficult to properly evaluate. But this much is evident: it had a sharp impact on a whole intellectual generation--that born in the Thirties--as Régis Debray confirmed:

The Algerian war was, for people my age, the firing element because we suddenly discovered the dark side to the Republic, the dark side to Democracy, and we started to question our "bourgeois" freedom and what was happening on the other side of the Mediterranean. Therefore, a moral revolt began against inhumanity and torture--against everything we blamed the Nazis for. We discovered that the French, too, can be Nazis.<sup>21</sup>

One of the catalysts of the intellectuals' crisis of conscience during the Algerian conflict was the trial of the French general, Raoul Salan. Salan was one of four co-conspirators in the failed "Generals' Putsch," whose members vehemently opposed any negotiations with the F.L.N. In April 1961 they tried to overthrow the French government and replace it with a military council. Badly coordinated, the coup attempt fell apart at the last minute, with Salan sliding into a new role as a leader of the O.A.S.

<sup>20</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, "Les somnambules", *op. cit.*, p. 1401.

<sup>21</sup> Régis Debray in *Génération*, a television documentary made by Hervé Hamon, Patrick Rotman and Daniel Edinger (based on *Génération*, vol. 1 & 2, Paris, Seuil, 1987 and 1988). See also, among other testimonies, Michel Winock, *La république se meurt*, *op. cit.*, a political chronicle that highlights the Algerian war's impact on Winock's generation (born in the 1930s).

Rallying behind him a corps of increasingly disaffected paramilitary members opposed to Algeria's freedom, he led several bloody terrorist acts, both before and after the official cease-fire between the two countries in March 1962. On April 29 of that year Salan was arrested and placed at the center of national attention in a spectacular trial whose conclusion took only a few days, from May 17 to May 23. It was a gripping moment for the French nation and received very wide press coverage. The verdict was lenient: to the outrage of many, Salan was spared the death sentence, due to "attenuating" circumstances. According to Vidal-Naquet, a majority of the French public interpreted the ruling as an officially-rigged vindication of Salan's innocence and felt shocked disbelief that the military tribunal could have exonerated someone who posed such an obvious threat to democracy: "The day after Salan's trial all agreed that the verdict was a severe defeat for the State."<sup>22</sup>

The Left's anguish as the Algerian war came to a close had repercussions for developments in cinema by sparking an impassioned debate about the medium's social and political responsibilities.<sup>23</sup> These are worth examining here in detail, particularly as regards *Le joli mai*'s key position within the issue.

In the spring of 1962, several filmmakers and film critics proclaimed collective guilt for the failure of cinema to fulfil its role

<sup>22</sup> After Salan was acquitted, France's Minister for Defense appealed for a second trial "in the interest of the law." See Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *La torture dans la république, Essai d'histoire et de politique contemporaines (1954-1962)*, op. cit., pp. 141-142.

<sup>23</sup> Michel Marie gives brief mention to this debate in his article, "Contexte," op. cit., p. 333.

as witness during the Algerian conflict. Among them was Raymond Borde, writing in *Positif* magazine:

There is always hope that the next colonial war, the next political strike, the next Suez expedition will be filmed by discerning witnesses. In this era of technical progress where audio-visual material is mass-produced, one believes that everything is captured, taped and kept for the tribunal of History. Eight years of Algerian war...far longer than that of '14... such a conflict is so hard to accept that one thinks, surely, there must be tons of film waiting in the closet for the moment of truth. But cinema is an ineffectual witness when the object of its testimony is too explosive. Hundreds of films and dozens of minor works were executed in France over the last eight years. Where is Algeria in all this? It has been ignored, denied....it is too disturbing. Yet, we hold some responsibility for it. We were all cowards not to have come down on the correct side...on the side of the Djebels [Algerian resistance fighters]. Cowards not to have filmed, at the very least, the Colonels' faces, the paratroopers in action, the hideous visage of domination (...). The dissident who did try, without benefit of money or experience, to film Algeria was alone, completely alone. That ought to be said, now that the cease-fire is underway.<sup>24</sup>

Different authors, in subsequent issues of the same publication, echoed Borde's sentiment.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, in the early Sixties, *Positif*, with its strong surrealist sympathies, appealed for a cinema daring to reflect reality. It set loose a long-lasting

<sup>24</sup> Raymond Borde, "Le cinéma marginal et la guerre d'Algérie", in *Positif*, no. 46, June 1962, pp. 15-17.

<sup>25</sup> "The manner by which ordinary 'acceptable' French cinema, the films made for the French public, have dealt with some of the major problems of our time deserves to be examined. This inquiry will offer little comfort, while its historical consequences--the appearance of the New Wave--even less." Marcel Oms, "Le grand mensonge", in *Positif*, no. 47, July 1962, p. 5.

polemic against the New Wave and the Cahiers du cinéma for their refusal to do so. The former, for example, was scorned for its failure to develop a true alternative to established cinema in the Fifties (ie., the scenarists' cinema). Made by the children of the bourgeoisie, said *Positif*, these films were as politically conservative and distant from the reality of their own time as those against which they pretended to react. As for the Cahiers du cinéma, the New Wave's principle admirer, *Positif* accused it of insipid "idealism."

Not only did French cinema's apathy toward the Algerian war elicit reactions of shame and indignation in many contemporary film magazines, it also led to the appearance toward the end of 1961 of new publications. Similar to *Positif*'s editorial line, these groups attacked the abdication of political commitment by the New Wave and the Cahiers du cinéma, and stressed cinema's new social responsibility, which, they maintained, had to offer more than mere leisure or formal experimentation. However, these periodicals, born out of the frustration and revolt of French youth against the Algerian war, took a much more aggressive and polemical tone in their attacks than did *Positif*, asserting more forcefully their desire to effect change in cinema by the vector of alternative criticism.

One of the newcomer magazines was *Miroir du Cinéma*, whose maiden issue cover (January 1962) bore the following declaration: "Fascism won't make it." *Miroir*'s spirit was deliberately anti-intellectual and very anti-institutional, that is, anti-clerical.

Composed on a manual typewriter, printed and stencilled on coarse yellow paper with text displayed between running political slogans--"Peace in Algeria"; "Action"; "Down with Political Censorship"--*Miroir du cinéma* in its debut looked more like a political tract than a film journal. Driven by a strong urge toward political activism, its writers called for the creation in France of "anti-bourgeois cinema" as a weapon at the disposal of political goals. *Miroir's* contributors lambasted contemporary film criticism as the servant of bourgeois establishment cinema. Their style was usually virulent, with little concern for rhetorical refinement (obviously not the product of an educated upper class):

We are not going to pick over the shit, quibbling and debating whether it stinks a lot or just a little. We will be very clear about it and we will say: 'Indisputably, it stinks like hell and we don't want to die. We are still too young.' When thrown rotten meat, the Potemkin's sailors revolted--and did so with such effect that a film was 'also' made about it--the supreme film of all time. Is the comparison too unsubtle, too pretentious? Well, maybe. But we greatly admire those who react.<sup>26</sup>

A month before *Miroir du cinéma* hit the stands, another magazine made its debut with a similar appeal. Of Marxist allegiance, *Contre-champ* also agitated in favor of a politically committed cinema but used a different tone...less anti-intellectual, less lampoonist in style. *Contre-champ* quoted the French critic,

<sup>26</sup> Jean-Louis Pays, in *Miroir du cinéma*, no. 1, January 1962, p. 2.



Leon Moussinac, whose approach to film seemed exemplary to the magazine of the successful alliance between aesthetic criticism and political commitment:

Cinema expresses the struggle by human beings and by nations to attain mastery over themselves and over nature. Thus, it should ultimately become an expression of the world's rebirth, wrought by men and their spilt blood, accomplished by their thoughts and actions: a new step for civilization. But cinema can only reach the summit of its power of discovery if people reach the peak of their freedom. Let me say it once more: Cinema in its final, finished form will express human unity. This is its destiny.<sup>27</sup>

If *Contre-champ* shared with other magazines a hostility to the *Cahiers du cinéma's* brand of criticism and a determination to promote an alternative political cinema, it nevertheless defined itself in opposition to all other critical rivals in France as well:

We have created *Contre-champ* because nothing satisfied us in French criticism, which, for the most part, has never been so weak. Too much is but glitter; it is dominated by specious arguments...desiccated and suffocating under the monthly weight of desperately shaky, superficial and sterile analysis. How many lines have been published in the last two or three years capable of exercising the slightest influence over production, that could take French cinema out of the deadlock in which it now finds itself? Moreover, how many lines await the birth of a film aesthetic worthy of its name?<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> "Léon Moussinac nous parle", in *Contre-champ*, no. 1, December 1961, p. 4.

<sup>28</sup> Gérard Guegan and Jean-Pierre Leonardini, "Editorial Positif?", in *Contre-champ*, no. 5, April 1963, p. 1.

Contrechamp reviled *Positif* for its "excessive" anti-Communism and, simultaneously, for its promulgation of an "ill-assimilated, transvestized and curtailed Marxist dogma." Elsewhere, it faulted the magazine for being too negative, for its "raving" tendency to overcriticize. As for itself, however, *Contre-champ* claimed to be animated by a positive desire to promote a cinema of high quality (*L'année dernière à Marienbad* and *Le Guépard*).

*Miroir du Cinéma* also came under fire from *Contre-champ*, which accused the magazine of falling for an idealist distinction between form and content, and thus focussing too much on a film's message to the neglect of form. In the process, said *Contre-champ*, it sacrificed aesthetics to political argumentation. Interestingly enough, *Contre-champ* identified from the start the limits of cinema's potential role in political struggle and blamed *Miroir du cinéma* for its excessive faith in film's ability to effect political action. Quoting Marx, *Contre-champ* insisted that "the critics' arms can't replace criticism by arms."<sup>29</sup>

Of course, debate in the early Sixties over cinema's political function never reached the theoretical levels of the discussion and work in the early Seventies on alternative cinema. Yet the importance of the post-Algerian war movement cannot be papered

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<sup>29</sup> *Contre-champ*, no. 6-7, p. 3.

over.<sup>30</sup> As shown above, the polemic was passionate and polarized, not only between the official and alternative film worlds in France, but also within the latter. Furthermore, it spilled out beyond the narrow confines of film magazines. One could, for example, read in the April 1962 issue of the magazine, *Partisans*, edited by François Maspero, a manifesto for "another cinema" produced and exhibited outside existing conventional networks as a funnel for ideas challenging officialdom.

As early as 1961-62 the call for alternative filmmaking began to coalesce in France--even if it was the product of a minority--with creation of a parallel network set up on a national scale. Though certain Anglo-Saxon historians of the '68 movement, such as Sylvia Harvey, would have us believe otherwise, the notion of parallel or marginal filmmaking did not take root only starting in the late Sixties. Harvey's reference point is skewed by the fact that she doesn't appear to have gone much beyond a reading of the *Cahiers du cinéma* and *Cinéthique*. Such a limited exposure to the literature on film in that decade can only lead to a misperception: *Cahiers du cinéma*, far from taking the leading role Harvey assigns it, actually lagged behind, as Serge Daney observes in his intellectual diary, *La rampe. Cahier critique 1970-1982*.<sup>31</sup> Only

<sup>30</sup> Aside from the review above, *Artsept* also deserves mention for its support for a committed cinema. See, notably, Raymond Bellour's editorial, "Un cinéma du réel", in *Artsept*, no. 1, January-March, 1963, pp. 5-27, and Marc Kravetz's article, "Cinéma politique", in the same periodical, no. 2, April-June 1963, pp. 121-124.

<sup>31</sup> Serge Daney, *La rampe. Cahier critique 1970-1982*, op. cit., p. 45.

much later, after many other periodicals, did the Cahiers begin supporting a politically committed cinema.

Marker's name was intimately linked to the debate over political cinema in the early 60s. The filmmaker, whose efforts had already twice felt the censor's scissors (*Les statues meurent aussi* and *Cuba si!* had both been forbidden), was seen as an exemplary figure in the cinema of his time. *Contre-champ* and *Miroir du cinéma* paid him passionate tribute as the "guardian angel" of the French nation's conscience.<sup>32</sup> In the debate about what cinema should or should not embody, his film, *Le joli mai*, was a major focal point, crystalizing the controversy then dividing contemporary film magazines: it was praised as a model of political-action-through-film by some (*Positif*, *Miroir du cinéma*, *Contre-champ*) and condemned by others (*Cahiers du cinéma*).

*Positif* rallied around the film for "the appeal to human conscience and solidarity with others" that it expressed.<sup>33</sup> *Contre-champ* described *Le joli mai* as "definitive proof of Marker's sense of responsibility. Directly or through the intervention of his collaborators, he gets close to his interviewees, trying to shake them out of their complacency, to coax out their confusions and

<sup>32</sup> See Pierre Rondière's passionate editorial on Chris. Marker and Armand Gatti, "They Are Worthy of Love", in *Miroir du cinéma*, no. 2, May 1962, p. 1. This issue, by the way, also contains one of the rare interviews ever granted by Marker; see Jean-Louis Pays, "Des humanistes agissant" (interview of Marker and Gatti), pp. 2-7.

<sup>33</sup> Paul-Louis Thirard, "Joli mai", in *Positif*, no. 54-55, August 1963, p. 113.

doubts rather than their satisfactions...a critical spirit, as opposed to intellectual comfort."<sup>34</sup>

On the other hand, *Le joli mai* charmed few of *Les cahiers du cinéma*'s critics. Marker's relationship to the film's interviewees, which *Contre-champ* admired as challenging, was castigated by its rival publication. In August 1963, for example, *Les cahiers* let loose a scathing critique of the film, accusing Marker not only of failing to respect his interviewees but of "lacking the skill to establish contact with those who are not intellectuals."<sup>35</sup> Later, in *Les cahiers*'s October issue, Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean-André Fieschi echoed similar attitudes:

A lot of powder in the eye; an intelligence, which, as we know, is affected enough to be noticed and, above all, skilled enough to convince the viewer that he, Marker, is always more subtle, more profound than his interlocutors.<sup>36</sup>

Contrary to the prevailing view of most critics, this film to me seems based neither on fraternity nor on sympathy (...). The dominant impression is one of derision, conservatism, vanity.<sup>37</sup>

The debate over *Le joli mai* actually went far beyond a conflict between magazines specializing in film: it infiltrated the

<sup>34</sup> Albert Cervoni, "Le Joli mai du cinéma-direct", in *Contre-champ*, no. 6-7, pp. 111-112.

<sup>35</sup> Michel Delahaye, "La chasse à l'I", in *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 146, August 1963, pp. 5-7.

<sup>36</sup> Jean-Louis Comolli, "Venise 63. 1.--Premières oeuvres", in *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 148, October 1963, p. 21.

<sup>37</sup> Jean-André Fieschi, "Le joli mai", in *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 148, op. cit., p. 24.

general press as well. The film got wide newspaper coverage, as evidenced by the fact that it was presented at the Cannes and Venice film festivals, which helped to broaden its audience even more. Once again, *Le joli mai* stirred the political passions of both right and left--but this time in the wider, lay press.<sup>38</sup>

Obviously, *Le joli mai* touched upon the public sensibilities of its time, evoking irritation or (often excessive) enthusiasm. For its supporters, it was at the very least a long awaited response, an echo on the screen of the era's lingering feeling of political and social unease. The warmth of *Le joli mai*'s reception from its admirers was directly proportional to their deep sense of dissatisfaction with contemporary film production.

But what were the elements that spurred a large portion of the French intelligentsia to identify so strongly with *Le joli mai*?

Firstly, the film constitutes an ingenious indictment of the French nation's social and political apathy in the early Sixties, especially its indifference toward the Algerian "problem." Reading *Le joli mai*'s scenario, it appears that Marker initially intended an accusatory tone by constructing an incrimination of this indifference. Originally he had planned to buttonhole a few of the people who might have prevented the Charonne metro station tragedy from occurring but who failed to act, ie. those living on the ground floor of Rue Saint Antoine, next to the subway's

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<sup>38</sup> Among them, *L'Express*, April 1963, and the May issues of *Le Monde*, *Témoignage Chrétien* and *Le Figaro Littéraire* of the same year.

entrance. But Marker dropped this blunt investigative approach for a much more subversive one. It is through seemingly innocuous questions that he manages to collect in *Le joli mai* a host of self-satisfied but morally incriminating statements...damning testimony to the pervasive indifference, parochialism and selfish preoccupation with personal well-being among the French. The overall impression is one of distressing political irresponsibility.

The interview, immediately following *Le joli mai*'s prologue, of a clothes salesman right away offers a powerful indicator of things to come. For the salesman, one thing counts in life: "To have a full cash register!" As far as the day's political issues are concerned, he casually asserts his detachment: "De Gaulle? Well, he hasn't done anything against me, has he?...You may call me selfish but what does that mean? If forty million Frenchmen are selfish, that too is a form of political policy."

Elsewhere in the film one sees a pair of 20-year olds whose interview brings the first part of *Le joli mai* to a close. As with the salesman, the young lovers unwittingly reveal a thoroughly selfish outlook. Though about to leave for military duty in Algeria, the man declares no willingness to ponder the historical meaning of the wider developments unfolding around him, preferring instead to "remain ignorant" about politics. Asked about their expectations for the future, the couple confirms the petit-bourgeois idea of materialistic comfort: new car, apartment, vacation. To the question--"The others don't count much for you,

do they?"--the young woman replies: "The others? What others?" In another scene a young man is asked what he expects from the future. "To get married and have children," is the answer. Marker then says, "Ah, a child! Do you think he would be happy in today's world?" His interviewee's response is equivocal. "Yes, as long as he steered clear of political issues...yes, he would be happy." By the example of these two interviews, Marker delineates a significant portion of French youth and its depoliticization in 1962.

Still later on we are shown an alarming display of political insouciance in the form of three sisters living in a bourgeois Parisian neighborhood. It finds its voice in one of them, who says: "A dictatorship can be very bearable as long as it is an intelligent one." Just as disturbing is the callousness of young students interviewed at a military school who confess to having shouted political slogans such as "Keep Algeria French!" during demonstrations "just for the fun of it." In one scene, while taking shots in a firing range, young men casually admit they never think that one day there could be a human being in place of their practice target. This prompts a response from Marker. "You get good military training," he says to them, "but you lack civic training." In addition to these longer interviews, Marker scatters throughout *Le joli mai* excerpts from his random survey of people in the street. These, too, confirm in the viewer a distinct impression that the French people were inured in extremis to their



fellow (non-French) mankind in the spring of 1962. Pressed to describe events during that "pleasant" May, most were prepared only to talk about the weather, which was unseasonably cold. As for opinion on the outcome of Salan's trial, Marker reaped a harvest of cynical commentary such as: "Remaining silent is the wisest choice under our Fifth Republic!"

Objecting to his countrymen's passivity, Marker offers in *Le joli mai* an example of personal commitment in cinema by confronting contemporary controversies. In fact, the film is, as Jeancolas points out, "the only political film consciously made about de Gaulle's France, produced and exhibited during the General's lifetime."<sup>39</sup>

In an interview with a middle-aged French professor just returned from Algeria, with whom Marker opens discussion about the use of torture by French forces, the professor makes a general statement: "We went there [to Algeria] with a certain ethic and this ethic broke down because it was unsuitable to the situation." Marker presses him to be more explicit. "At which point exactly did this morality break down?" He then reflects on the complexity of the issue of torture, and the gap between ethical values in peacetime and those that operate on the battlefield:

Some argue that one does not have the right to force a confession even when others' lives are at stake, even when you know that a detainee knows where the bombs will explode. But out in

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<sup>39</sup> Jean-Pierre Jeancolas, *Le cinéma des Français, la Vème république (1958-1978)*, op. cit., p. 165.

the field, you think: although there are basic rules, if you have to go against them there are good reasons for doing it in certain cases. People will say such reasoning is unacceptable because it will lead to excesses. Well, that is a position that is easy to defend as long as one hasn't been faced with these circumstances, as long as one hasn't lived the experience.

Marker then asks him about the difficulties facing repatriated French soldiers, among whom some--brutalized by their foreign experience--turn to brutality at home to justify what they committed abroad. He responds with the following:

Many will be tempted, and some already are, to justify what they did in circumstances which, as I said, are much less clear, much less defined than they may appear from a distance. Once back in France, some of these soldiers will carry on as they did before. Many will justify their past acts by changing nothing, as if nothing had changed. The behavior of their generation clashes with what we took to be established fact in France: her democratic heritage. For my generation, this is Voltaire's France...and the French Revolution...and the Dreyfus affair. All of these spawned similar ways of thinking in us: a collective behavior. But one must now recognize that this is no longer a given.

Considering the taboo that operated on the media in France regarding the subject of torture during the Algerian war, this interview and the professor's comments were quite provocative. However, other less direct allusions to the corruption of the French state are to be found throughout the film. For example, Marker includes statements of those who opposed Algerian independence as well as first-hand evidence of their resistance--

bombed cars and buildings in Paris--in order to throw light on the weakening resolve of a nation at loss to control the malevolent forces at work within its domain. Marker calls this malaise "the return of 'Fantomas'" and reminds his viewers that in early 1962 France felt itself at the edge of civil war. Pressing his interlocutors on terrorism in France, he homes in on the very question that preoccupied many leftists in the early 60s: "Do you feel we live under a democracy?" At several points in the film Marker alludes to his own views on the subject, and they are not positive. Indeed, *Le joli mai* functions as a paradigm of allusive statement to the French state's uglier, covert side. There is no innocence, for example, in Marker's evocation of the Charonne metro station drama, which is preceded in the film by a visit to a local firearms shop in the neighborhood where target galleries are located. Very casually, Marker inquires whether those who train there are gangsters or policemen. Though the answer he gets from a salesperson is "policemen," a presumed brutality on the part of French police is thus suggested before the film moves on to the Charonne metro station drama, whose outcome serves to confirm it. By contrast, Marker avoids any transparent allusion to the murder, described earlier, by French forces of Algerian detainees in Paris in October of the previous year. He couldn't go that far without risking serious trouble with the censor. Instead, Marker chose a more roundabout path to probe the subject of arbitrary police violence against Algerians in France. For instance, he interviews

at length a young North African political activist, the recipient of an unannounced "visit" at his home by French police, who explains how one of them, drunk, entered his room and ordered him imperiously to get up. The Algerian responded with a similarly insulting tone. His intruder then pulled out his official I.D. and, along with two companions, beat him in front of his father and mother--so badly that he required hospitalization. After listening to his testimony, Marker asks the young man about racism. "Well, after this event," he says, "I am close to becoming a racist myself."

Beyond this oblique criticism of official violence, Marker also uses unrelenting irony and sarcasm to ridicule the whole gamut of French authority. Not even de Gaulle, president of the republic, escapes the butt of Marker's subversion. In one memorable moment, while a military band pumps out "En passant par la Lorraine" in the background, "The General" is depicted moving down a row of government officials lined up for the day's ceremonies. Via rapid, controlled and rhythmic editing of a series of tight close-ups on de Gaulle's repetitive handshakes--accompanied by the president's mechanical, hushed salutation, "Happy to see you"--Marker very effectively conveys an unmistakable impression of motion-as-automatic-gesture, devoid of meaning. The General comes off as an ageing buffoon running the gauntlet of perfunction...in this case, a commemoration of the Feast of Jeanne d'Arc, a tiresome rite, in its own right, of French

nationalism. The resulting effect of this sequence and others is a palpable tone of insolence throughout the film, one that settled favorably on young anarchic critics in France, particularly those associated with *Miroir du cinéma*.

Despite its biting imagery, *Le joli mai* is not an unvarying exercise in negativism. Marker interacts, mostly in the second part of his film, with a collection of individuals he calls "free men," people who were "capable of asking questions, of resisting, of taking action, of thinking, or simply of loving." Thus in the film's structure, Marker sets up a dichotomy between the protoplasmic majority of the French people and a conscientious minority--a split, as noted earlier, that was a base of anxiety for the intellectual left. Few at this point would contest that the lingering attention accorded to these "free men" in his film functions as a compass for Marker's own political orientation. One of the most striking proofs is *Le joli mai*'s in-depth interview with a former "prêtre-ouvrier," or laborer-priest who, after a long struggle to accommodate two inimical cosmologies, finally chooses Communism over Catholicism. Marker uses his apostate "testimony" to reinforce a positive image of Communism.

This yields a peculiar resonance of omission in view of the period's political events. Given the timing of the film's post-war release, the former priest's ideological choice and Marker's inclusion of it in *Le joli mai* is pertinent because, after the Algerian conflict, the French Communist party (P.C.F.) came

under heavy criticism for failing to throw its weight uncompromisingly behind the anti-colonialist movement. But throughout *Le joli mai* there is no indication whatsoever of the P.C.F.'s complaisance or guilt, a silent lapse as revelatory of Marker's sympathies as any of the film's direct commentary.

Another vein of ideology running through *Le joli mai*'s interviews is Marker's strong Third World bias, a view shared at the time by many French leftists, whose long devotion to class struggle was starting to shift in the early 60s to an anti-imperialist one between the newly-emerging nations of the Third World and their former colonial masters.<sup>40</sup> Marker conducts a couple of long conversations with two individuals from different parts of this new world, one a young Moroccan man and the other a student from the West African state of Dahomey, which had only recently received its independence from France. Both men leave the viewer with a powerful sense of their people's new-found dignity and their condemnation of Europe's claim to cultural superiority and its concomitant exercise of cultural and religious domination. *Le joli mai*'s benevolent portrayal of the Third World is reinforced by other elements in the film such as the sequence depicting a theatrical piece in France interpreted amateurishly by North African immigrants. Marker's soundtrack includes a song from the play, which offers a romanticized image of the immigrants' plight:

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<sup>40</sup> On the issue see, notably, Gérard Chaliand, *Les Faubourgs de l'Histoire*, Paris, Calman-Lévy, 1984. See also Jean-Paul Sartre's preface to Frantz Fanon's book, *Les damnés de la terre*, Paris, Maspero, 1961.

their sudden uprooting from the "pure soil of the mother country" to the filth and dislocation of the Western city, where they toil in manual, demeaning jobs. While the song itself reflects a rather Rousseauian view of the immigrant as the good savage, it should be stressed that Marker does not indulge in romanticism in his approach to the Third World. He offers instead a concrete assessment of the immigrant's situation in France, referring at one point in the film, for instance, to demographic surveys by the French Ministry of Labor. These help Marker identify the problems of the immigrant's life in France, one of the film's principal strengths: desperate housing conditions, clash of cultural identity, exclusion from decent jobs due to French racism, lack of contact with the native population. "Do you have any white people as friends?" Marker asks a black student. "Yes," he answers, "some have occasionally invited me to their house out of sympathy, to prove to me that they weren't racists, that they were not prejudiced." Marker then asks: "Yes, but despite these noble sentiments, did you establish any friendship with white people?" The response: "No." Marker's line of questioning on these specific issues of race and alienation are remarkable, considering that one had to wait until the early Seventies before the "immigration question" in France commanded serious consideration and coverage by the country's media.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> See Olivier Milza, *Les Français devant l'immigration*, Bruxelles, Complexe, 1988.

Le joli mai ends with a long voice-over commentary as Marker glances back over his exploration of Paris and his encounter with "free" individuals and...the much greater number of those who, he felt, were not. The film's final words frame what in our time comes off as an unabashedly altruistic call for human solidarity:

As long as there is poverty, no one is rich; As long as there is sorrow, no one is happy; As long as there are jails, no one is free.

This appeal, with its strong Communist reverberations, was based on a faith in the future's promise of a harmonious human community where differences in race and culture would begin to disappear. Thirty years on, this may strike today's reader as indulgent naiveté. Yet Le joli mai's critical stance toward public apathy, its misgivings about the exercise of state authority in France, its identification of the responsibility of the individual and that of society at large--all suited the evolving political consciousness of the time. Thus, one can more readily understand why it was embraced by the French left with such enthusiasm. It constitutes today a valuable document for any historian of the intellectual left in France, prior to the latter's widespread call to arms five years later.



## LE JOLI MAI AND SOCIOLOGY

War or no Algerian war, the early Sixties in France are remembered today as the country's golden age of prosperity, marked by economic growth and a deep transformation of French society through rapid modernization.

Students of sociology, a newly emerging academic discipline in France, were a constant presence circling around this new world. Among the more obvious changes they monitored was arrival of the young as a large and unprecedented social force. Here was the seed of vast economic potential, the adolescent fruition of the "12 million beautiful babies" that de Gaulle patriotically demanded of his countrymen following liberation in 1945. Together, the maturing baby boom generation and the growing wave of "pieds noirs" (French colonialists returning from Algeria) forced a transformation of French cities: massive construction projects were begun to improve the housing conditions of the nation's bulging population.

As with their American counterparts, French sociologists had mixed feelings about progress linked to modernization and economic growth and the possibilities for individual happiness within a society increasingly structured around materialism.

This now-clichéd critique would spread throughout the decade to a point whereby Jean Baudrillard in 1970 could assert in his *Consumption Society* that "just as medieval society balanced its

equilibrium between God and the Devil, ours lies in the opposition between consumption and its denunciation."<sup>42</sup>

Marker, too, was swept up by this train of thought. His observations about life in Paris in the Sixties fell very much in line with the viewpoint of the era's reigning sociologists and their ambivalent feelings toward technology and rising consumption. He is particularly drawn in *Le joli mai* to the problems of urban life in the French capital. He probes the city's spiralling population (images of streets packed bumper-to-bumper with cars) and deplores the steady destructive intrusions of progress, as old familiar neighborhoods, such as "La Mouffe" in the 4th arrondissement, were "gentrified." More than one sequence reveals the dilapidated quarters that housed so much of Paris's poor...dwellings crying out for improvement. At the same time, however, Marker finds no joy in the soulless constructions built as their alternative. "Even if loneliness has a thousand windows, even if what is called the 'pathology' of big apartment complexes does not allow us to regret the slums they replaced, one knows that at least in those places there was room for happiness...but here in this other world one doesn't know," he says, as the film cuts from an image of poverty to one of sterile streets and mass public housing.

Other signs of the times in French society as captured by Marker include industrialization of daily life (one witty sequence

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<sup>42</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *La société de consommation*, Paris, Gallimard, 1970, p. 316.

unfolds in a salesroom displaying the "latest" household appliances) and the extension of leisure time (ordinary people, for instance, are asked how they occupy their free time). Elsewhere in *Le jolli mai* industrial planners discuss in great detail the economic implications of a shorter work week. Media get their due, too, especially television, whose pervasive influence, divines Marker, will be remembered as a principal emblem of the new decade, though not necessarily a negative one. Marker's portrayal of the tube resonated with the early Sixties' optimism about the medium's social potential as an educational tool: "For many Parisians, television is the only window open to the outside world, and it is all the more crucial the smaller their house," he says in voice-over commentary.

Such sympathy did not, however, extend to many other aspects of the emerging "good life." Marker goes to great length in *Le jolli mai* to document the lives of those who were not at the receiving end of its benefits. Unveiling the social and economic inequalities of life in Paris, in fact, is one of the film's primary objectives: the disparities between poor and rich, between men and women, between native and immigrant workers, between the elderly and all others. Here, Marker's political colors start to shimmer in the distance, as he elaborates in the following voice-over commentary his criticism of a society mired in consumption:

By breaking down the Parisian multitude into individual faces, one discovers its basic cell: loneliness. Happiness as something beyond the fulfillment of our basic needs has been a new

idea for the last two centuries, but we are still not used to the notion. Work only buys forgetfulness about work, emptiness is always crowded with myths--the myth of the automobile, the myth of television, and all kinds of diversions that are only the zombie-like products of happiness.

Meanwhile, accompanying these words, the viewer sees the downturned face of a solitary young woman visible through a glass window.

Marker's discourse unmistakably tags the film as a product of the Sixties, with its now-painfully outdated references to alienation in modern society. As is known, that concept first gained widespread coinage in the late Fifties, gathered momentum alongside the surge of economic growth in the next decade, peaked in May '68 and declined thereafter. As Pierre Nora observes about alienation in his contribution to the history of ideas in France between 1945 and 1988, "its emergence and disappearance prepared, accompanied and underscored the golden age of human sciences, especially in the domain most vulnerable to a critical analysis of the contemporary world: sociology."<sup>43</sup>

But since the expansion of sociology was also an important component of the intellectual scene in France--a cultural phenomenon deserving attention in any portrayal of Paris in the Sixties--Marker includes it as an object of analysis in his film.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Pierre Nora, "Aliénation", in *Les idées en France, 1945-1988. Une chronologie*, Paris, Gallimard, 1989, p. 499.

<sup>44</sup> One must remember that, unlike in America, it was only during this period that the discipline began to gain recognition. Only in 1958 did university studies in France lead to Master's and PH.D. degrees in sociology. France's *Sociology Review* (*la Revue*

However, he questions the methods and strategies of sociology, all the while ironizing some of its aspects. *Le joli mai* therefore takes on an epistemological dimension; a sociological film, it is simultaneously a film about sociology as well. With its critical inquiries into the field, *Le joli mai* anticipates by five years the May '68 movement that more fully examined and contested the discipline's usefulness as a tool of social analysis.

In the film's draft scenario, Marker poses the central question that all sociological studies must confront: how to define a corpus?

Among the millions of Parisians, who should be chosen? Of course, it is possible to establish a list of the various socio-professional categories, select the representatives and give each his chance to speak. This way to proceed would be perfectly arbitrary. But no more than to limit oneself to a representative of each social category or to elect "typical" characters or to limit oneself to artists or secretaries or typists. We, too, are going to make a choice (...) What we want to reveal are the men and woman secure in their social surroundings and who know what they would like to do with their lives, rather than those tossed about by chance and loneliness.

Marker's skepticism about the assumption in statistically-grounded sociology that its sampling process can be objective surfaces in his ironic treatment of the field's quantitative methods.

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française de sociologie) did not appear until 1960, and it was only three years before, in 1957, that Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* was published or that Levi-Strauss' work began to spread outside strictly specialized circles. Several important studies also appeared about the same time, such as books by Edgar Morin or Jean Duvignaux and Lucien Goldmann.

For example, in one image, near the film's end, street traffic races around the Arc de Triomphe in accelerated motion while the voice-over steadily recounts a stream of statistical facts that supposedly reflect Parisian reality in the month of May 1962. The accumulation produces an almost aesthetic effect--that of abstract poetry:

Thus was the month of May. The sun shone 185 hours, or 40 hours less than normal. The average temperature was 12.5 degrees Centigrade. The city consumed 50,000 tons of vegetables, 36,000 tons of fruit, 12,500 tons of potatoes, 21,000 tons of meat, 8000 tons of fish, 4000 tons of butter, 5000 tons of cheese. Parisians drank 918,000 hectolitres of wine and 37 million liters of milk and made 999,000,003 trips in the Metro. They burned 55,000 cubic meters of gasoline. The national savings bank persuaded them to save 8,476,813,000 billion Francs. Forty-three millimetres of rain fell, along with 600 tons of dust. Citroën made 26,044 cars in that month, Simca turned out 25,885, Renault 42,389 and Panhard made 2,788. The city celebrated 1,055 marriages, rejoiced in 3,762 births and mourned 2,037 deaths. It used up 263,000 kilowatt hours of electricity. Parisians smoked 600 tons of tobacco, 300 tons of regular cigarettes and 265 tons of Gitanes. They counted two deaths from flu, 215 cerebral lesions, 15 deaths by alcoholism, 14 suicides (10 men and 4 women), 132 deaths by accident, 54 tubercular cases, 590 cancer victims, 902 liver failures and 425 heart attacks...

The dizzy whirl of images--visual equivalent to the verbal torrent of numbers--overwhelms the viewer. Marker leaves little doubt about where he stands on the value of quantitative inventory as a method of social inquiry. While on the subject, it is interesting to observe that in *Le mystère Koumiko*, a film he made two years later, Marker comes back to this view of sociology.

Analyzing French radio commentary in the early 60s on Japan, Marker takes the opportunity in *Le mystère Koumiko* to attack once again the inanity of quantitative sociological studies in Western academia:

Peter Kassovitz, a Harvard student, has just begun a sociological study on the arrival of the telephone in Tokyo. The main chapters will be: how many telephones are there along the streets of Tokyo; how many people are making phone calls; and the hardest of all: to whom are they making phone calls from the streets of Tokyo?

and:

Student Catherine Winter, from Bloomington, has just started a sociological study on the phenomenon of photography in Japan. The main chapters will be ...<sup>45</sup>

In presenting the film's protagonist, Koumiko, Marker begins by establishing her deviation from the Japanese norm, later using her non-typical persona to refute the tendency in sociology to approach individuals as mere specimen from which broad generalizations can be drawn.

Koumiko is not the exemplary Japanese, granted that such an animal exists, nor is she the exemplary woman, nor even a modern woman. She is not a case or a cause. Nor a class, nor a species.<sup>46</sup>

Clearly, Marker stands against the easy classifications favored by vulgarized sociology. Characteristic of Marker's

<sup>45</sup> Chris. Marker, *Commentaires 2*, Paris, Seuil 1967, p. 13.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

repulsion of hasty typification in *Le joli mai* is his selection of setting in relation to interviewees. Choice of setting exercises a determinant influence on the viewer, as Pierre Dumayet has observed in his analysis, published in *Communications*, of the televised interview. Dumayet properly describes the role assigned to the image in most documentaries, which resorts to the following technique:

What is the importance of the image in the televised interview? There is an approach to the character, for example, in an interview's coverage where one discovers first the house where the interviewee lives, then his office, then himself.<sup>47</sup>

This strategy is typical. Before moving to the interview itself, the camera in most documentaries first explores the subject's quarters, picking out the signs of his background such that, even before he opens his mouth, the viewer will have already unconsciously analyzed, classified and pegged him on a social rung. Behind this approach, which betrays the legacy of Balzacian novelistic technique,<sup>48</sup> lurks a primitive social determinism, an attempt to explain people's behavior as preordained by their social origin, which has been the subject of several studies of the last decade.

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<sup>47</sup> Pierre Dumayet, "L'interview télévisuelle", in *Communications*, no. 7, 1966, p. 57.

<sup>48</sup> See Philippe Hamon, "Un discours contraint", in Genette, Gérard and Todorov, Tzvetan (edited by), *Littérature et réalité*, Paris, Seuil, coll. Points, 1982, pp. 119-181. Re-edition of a text published in *Poétique*, no. 16, 1973.



Marker rejects this fatalism and its dehumanizing methodology grounded in a mimetism between the individual and his social background. He shuns the allure of simplified classification. Though his camera may wander, as it does, in the impoverished but visually dramatic neighborhoods of the French capital's underside, Marker never manipulates his setting to "present" or define the human subjects he films. No slow travelling dissects their world before they are allowed to speak. Indeed, most of the time Marker either interviews people in neutral outdoor settings or before a white, abstract background. Such scrupulous effort to respect his subjects' individuality conforms to Marker's conception of the individual as one granted the freedom to act within a given social system; it corresponds with his appeal to citizens--referred to in the first part of this chapter--to speak and act as independent participants in their society in order to transform it.

Marker also puts some distance between himself and the purely theoretical speculations of technocrats, just as he does regarding debased sociology or blind devotion to the extreme empiricism of statistical sociology. If, for example, he sets aside time in *Le joli mai* for engineers and city planners to express their vision of the social ideal--that is, what they think needs doing to improve French society in the 60s--he then punctures their futurist ruminations by cross-cutting from time to time to whimsical images of cats accompanied by the tinkle of light music. Disrupting the

seriousness of the engineers' dialogue, these interludes reveal how dismissive Marker can be toward abstruse discourse.

At base, Marker's approach to the reality of Paris in *Le joli mai* is a "reasonably" empirical one; he places the emphasis on listening to his subjects. Meanwhile he observes Paris with an agile but well disciplined camera: "It is better to wait patiently for Paris to show itself rather than trying to trap it," he notes in the film's draft scenario. Instead of the struggle to circumscribe its globalism, *Le joli mai's* author homes in on the city's significant elements. He hunts out and isolates its signs of the current state of society, its indices. Marker proceeds, in other words, to a socio-semiological approach as established by Barthes, among others. For Marker, the indices of the current state of society are found in all forms of public and private communication: graffiti and advertisements, verbal expressions in vogue, individual behavior and public ritual as social language, including dance crazes (ie., the Twist).

If Marker devotes seemingly inordinate attention in one scene to a poor woman in a seedy urban neighborhood who cultivates with great patience and care the few flowers along her balcony and tiny garden, it is for their--the flowers'--symbolic value as representing the resurgence and opposition of nature in the city. (Significantly, the camera then pans from the garden to a pile of discarded and decaying flotsam.) Her garden is a heart-rending

attempt to nurture a small refuge of beauty within the confines of a dilapidated urban environment.

Elsewhere, Pierre L'Homme's camera in *Le joli mai* proceeds to a calculated deciphering of the city's walls, isolating murals, sign boards and graffiti rich in visual content. One sign dating back to the last world war, with instructions explaining what to do in case of falling bombs, indicates both its neighborhood's age and history, and how much history from an increasingly remote past the neighborhood carries. Later, an image of a notice that reads, "Furnished Hotel," is a potent, if subtle reminder of the daily hardship of a whole subset of Parisians who still lacked adequate living quarters in 1962. And then there is the film's odd juxtaposition of streetside plaques and signs that announce the ethnic composition of the city's quarters and their cultural disparities:

Public meeting at 8.45 P.M.  
"The Christian and his thirst for justice."  
Friday, May 11-12.

Reading classes for North Africans  
every Thursday afternoon at 3:00.

Much of the time *Marker* leaves it to the viewer to interpret the meaning of the many signs that float by the camera. Yet, at certain moments, he slips in clues as to how they should be read. For example, wandering about in the Parisian neighborhood, "La Mouffe," the camera moves in for a close-up of an art gallery poster. Simultaneously we hear the voice-over say:

Mouffetard street, whose character hasn't changed since the 17th century, rediscovers its patrician vocation... Some signs point it toward an indecipherable future. It has its cabarets, its art galleries, its theaters. These images will be more foreign to us in 10 years than those of the Paris of 1900 are to us today.

Marker's cynicism underlies the reservations he feels about the city's headstrong rush into change. In the same sequence, once again with images of the street market along Mouffetard, Marker broadens the significance of the changes he perceives:

The metamorphosis of Rue Mouffetard is affecting one half of Paris, the half that is certainly closest to the city's traditional past.

Through editing Marker brings together the relevant signs he detects in the city to yield patterns, configurations of signs that interact with one another. Such as this sequence, where the visual tracks show a rapid succession of shots: hands traced on a wall, a bombed car, a bombed apartment, headlines from the newspaper France Soir ("Paris--On the Defensive"), shots of tanks and military troops on the streets of Paris and, finally, shots of graffiti: "O.A.S.= S.S."; "Poujade was right: we are betrayed"; "Vive Jeanson"; "NON!" etc. Simultaneously, the voice-over calls attention to revealing shifts in the French language:

Over the last year, the French language has been enriched with the verb, 'plastiquer' [to bomb], while the German word 'putsch' has been recovering some of its lost ground as well. These interesting problems of linguistics disguise other issues on which the city's walls, if no one else, were at least taking a stand.

While this sequence's voice-over commentary falls far short of explaining the images, the overall effect is to draw the viewer into his own process of interpretation, to assemble signs in order to extract meaning from their interrelation.

Marker's evocation of meaningful elements is ever-present in *Le jolli mai* and, at times, imperceptibly subtle. For example, a sequence set in a poor immigrant home has the camera move from TV screen, which displays futurist images from a science fiction film, to an old-fashioned family photograph whose group portrait is ringed in a blurry halo, a favored stylistic touch among many Third World families. The contrast between TV image and photograph, the shock between two cultural worlds is blatant. Less direct, however, is Marker's message that underlies the two. Between the archaic portrait on the one hand--symbol of primitive aesthetic sensibility--and, on the other, the modern world of sci-fi images is Marker's understanding of television as an educational tool that can broaden one's view of the world.

This exploration of a city in search of its significant elements isn't without a sense of humor. Marker the cat lover can't resist lingering on a pictograph of a cat which he jokingly juxtaposes against a graffiti slogan: "Mean Dog." Nor can he resist showing a family's patronymic displayed on the front door of their house: "Gatti" (cats in Italian). There is more to these gestures than mere playfulness, though. Indeed, in selecting references to his own fetish with felines, Marker gently indicates the subjectivity of

the gaze. He reminds the viewer of the arbitrariness of the representation of the city as he encounters it. Quite simply, it reflects the filmmaker's--and exclusively the filmmaker's-- perception. This point will be developed in the third part of this chapter.

Along with graffiti, images and verbal language, Marker accords attention to official figures, traditions and public rituals as enlightening social signs and expressions of the body social. Here, Marker usually does more than merely select signs: they are reworked to either pervert or reinforce their meaning.

The treatment of the police uniform in *Le joli mai*, for example, is striking in this regard. This symbol of authority, universal to all organized cultures, is the butt of jocularly verging on ridicule in the film. Marker erects his assault on the uniform through a disjointed interplay between sound and image. Against a shot of policemen dressed for a cold winter day in their billowing dark cape--human ravens--Marker adds background noise of birds tweeting as if in full spring.

The same spirit of subversion exudes from his filming of a wedding ceremony, transmogrified by the camera into a maudlin masquerade. The faces of middle-aged guests seated at the table are shot in unflattering close-ups as they listen to the rhythm of a low-brow popular song from the Sixties, "Moonlight in Maubeuge." In passing, Marker also catches at close range the young bride's face, whose frown suggests she shares little of the forced hilarity

of her guests. This sequence circumscribes the disappearing, and increasingly empty, forms of collective celebration in modern urban society, a phenomenon Edgar Morin illuminates in his 1962 book, *L'esprit du temps*. Similarly *Le joli mai*'s aforementioned Feast-of-Jeanne-d'Arc sequence, whose framing and editing turns de Gaulle's gestures into meaningless motion, serves the same purpose. It is one more example of Marker stripping away the surface of public ritual to reveal its atrophy...pure form, empty, drained of content.

Against this perfunctory social language, Marker opposes other, more authentic gestures whose positive symbolic value he reinforces. There is, for instance, the public's silent presence at the funeral cortege for the victims of the Charrone massacre. "That day," says the voice-over commentary, "one could hear birds sing at noon on the Square de la République for the first time." Marker tails this with amplified bird song on the sound-track as a metaphor for the day's mass impulse, the wave of communal fraternity as expressed in the public's enormous outpouring.

Such manipulation at the level of signs is yet another device by which *Le joli mai* anticipates the Sixties movement. In reading, for example, Michel De Certeau's account of the May '68 student revolt in his *La prise de parole*, one begins to understand the degree of importance assigned during the era to social symbols:

The May demonstrators fought against black helmeted Martians--the apparition and sign of power in the streets--while, conversely, violence by the police was prompted less by the students

themselves or even their "fury" than by the color of their clothing and especially by the red flag (to the point whereby the police threw themselves at anything red). (...) Spiritual war, if one wants to call it that, or better-- ritual combat (though a very real one)-- contested a system by "demonstrating" signs that were opposed to other signs...before they were applied to political, social or even simply individual ends. At base, it was the credibility of a whole social language that was challenged.<sup>49</sup>

His scrutiny of public gestures for their symbolic value, such as the Charonne metro station event (participation in authentic ritual by a true community), and his subversion of established signs reveal in *Le joli mai* Marker's preoccupation with social language that comes very close to that pursued a few years later by the demonstrators of '68.

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<sup>49</sup> Michel De Certeau, *La prise de parole. Pour une nouvelle culture*, Paris, Desclée De Brouwer, 1968, p. 15.



## THE DOCUMENTARY POINT OF VIEW

Filmed using lightweight equipment (a Coutant camera), *Le joli mai* shares with direct cinema and cinema vérité productions of the same period certain stylistic features: fast or shaky hand-held travelling movements, zoom effects, occasional but abrupt transitions between shots, poor quality of sound and lighting in certain sequences, grainy images. It is a commonplace, at least in North American academia, to distinguish this film from direct cinema works by classifying it, along with *Chronique d'un été*, as exemplary of the cinéma vérité movement based on an open recognition of the effect of the observer on the observed.<sup>1</sup>

Some nuances should be brought to this established distinction. Indeed, it is not fully satisfying. First, it only partially accounts for the differences between Marker's approach to documentary and that of American direct cinema. At base, the two differ deeply in their understanding of what reality is and how a filmmaker should relate to his subject in order to depict it. Second, the assumed cinema verite affinities between *Le joli mai* and *Chronique d'un été* should be qualified. Though they both resort to the catalyzing power of the camera on the subject during the filming process, Morin and Rouch exploit its effects rather differently from Marker as a result of diverging concepts of the

<sup>1</sup> This, for example, is Eric Barnouw's stance in *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film*, op. cit., p. 255.

individual and the relationship between private and public personae, which the following pages intend to clarify.

In order to define how *Le joli mai* posits its relationship to its object, it is useful to examine its opening sequences. More than a few film theoreticians have indicated the importance of a film's beginning for determining the viewer's framework.<sup>2</sup> It is often in the first moments that a film establishes its relationship to its object--how it will approach the latter--and how it intends to orient the viewer toward a fictional or documentary mode of reception. The opening of *Le joli mai* offers a good example of such a "tuning" process.

Wryly dedicated, in English, to the "happy many" (a twist on Stendhal's cherished elitist address to the "happy few"), the film opens with a noticeably discordant, poetic sequence that precedes the credits. An aesthetic pleasure for the viewer, it is an affectionate reverie on Paris and a beautiful prologue, whose style sharply contrasts with subsequent *cinéma-vérité* asceticism throughout most of the remainder of the film. It begins with the chime of a church bell, as a solitary female figure climbs up a tall pyramidal-shaped glass structure. The piercing wail of an ambulance then mingles with the chimes, followed by the crescendo of a Gregorian chant. A voice-over, recited by Yves Montand, then begins: "Is this really the most beautiful city in the world?"

<sup>2</sup> See Roger Odin, "L'entrée du spectateur dans la fiction", in Jacques Aumont and Jean-Louis Leutrat (edited by), *La théorie du film*, Paris, Albatros, coll. Ça/cinéma, 1980, pp. 198-213.

A panoramic rooftop view of Paris in the early morning fog appears on screen and Montand continues: "Better to discover this city afresh at dawn, bringing to it no personal habits or memories." A closer shot of the rooftops replaces the panorama and Montand says: "Ah, to unravel Paris...by the bare tools of the private eye: the telescope and the microphone."

At this point the commentary subsides, giving way to a polyphony of city noises--sirens, radio voices and telephone conversation--whose components overlay each other in disjointed but just discernible snatches of speech and sound. Against these aural strata a montage of shots moves over the city's traditional and modern features. The voice-over then picks up its trail again: "One would like to enter Paris without benefit of memory, if only to see if old locks still open with the same key,<sup>3</sup> if the same swirl of light and fog and heartlessness and compassion exists, if an owl still hoots at dawn and a cat still lives within its self-contained isle and if one still calls by their allegorical names the locales of Paris: 'Le Val de Grâce', 'La Porte Dorée', 'Le Point du Jour.'" The image then returns to a succession of overviews of the city. The last shot, a view of La Defense, is the starting point for a long, slow, downward vertical travelling. The voice-over says: "Here is the most beautiful backdrop in the world. And before it eight million Parisians--acting out their play or

<sup>3</sup> As Robert Stam pointed out in the course of this thesis, the word "locks" coincides in the film with one shot of the L'Arc de Triomphe, while "key" corresponds to the Eiffel Tower, a kind of verbal-visual sight gag.

collectively hissing at it. In the end, they alone are the only ones who can tell us what Paris was in the month of May." The camera's slow descending movement leads to an overhead shot of a busy square filled with pedestrians, the film's first depiction of the city's inhabitants. Subsequent to this, there is a very high angle shot, almost vertical, of the same space. As people stroll by, their shadows stretched to Giacometti-like proportions, a popular tune strikes up. Only now do the credits begin to appear on screen.

Immediately afterward comes the caption: "This scene takes place in the month of May 1962, which some then called 'the first spring of peace.'" There is a brief moment of silence, disturbed only by a few city noises. Against an image of a Parisian street darkened by the Eiffel Tower's shadow, the voice-over says: "On May 1, 1923 Jean Giraudoux climbed up the Eiffel Tower in order to write." But a different narrative voice then recites Giraudoux's "Prayer From Atop the Eiffel Tower," which accompanies a very slow pan across a city street and a final series of wide-angle rooftop views of Paris that close the introduction:

So, I have before my eyes five thousand hectares, heir to the most thought, the most debate, the greatest volumes of writing in the world. The crossroads of the planet--the freest, the most elegant, the least hypocritical of all. This lightness and emptiness above me are the city's strata, its accumulation of intellect, reasoning and taste. Here every injury at work is a consequence of knowledge. It is more probable here than anywhere else in the world that Paris' bowed backs, the wrinkled brow of its

bourgeoisie and craftsmen, came at the price of reading, printing and binding the books of Descartes and Pascal. Over here is the hectare where the study of Watteau has fatigued so many eyes. Over there is the hectare where trips to carry Corneille, Racine and Hugo to the post office have caused so many varicose veins. Here is the house where the worker lives who broke his leg repairing a plaque commemorating Danton. There is the centiare along Voltaire's quay where so much gravel flew in the fight against despotism. Here is the decimeter where his blood flowed on the day of Molière's death.<sup>4</sup>

Thereafter begins the long succession of interviews that make up the bulk of *Le joli mai*.

In its lyrical prologue, the film places strong emphasis on the gaze. The panoramic view of Paris, over which bits of conversation are heard but whose origin we can't determine, offers a voyeuristic composition--distance from the object, barriers to the view<sup>5</sup> --whose intent is made clear by Montand's voiced desire to "unravel Paris." Furthermore, the succession of steady horizontal views, then slow downward travelling from rooftop to street level, and finally the near-vertical high angle shot on Parisian crowds suggests the presence of a gazing conscience. The overall effect of this first sequence assigns what is seen to an observing, vaguely spying subject; it establishes the framing and filming as the product of a gaze.

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<sup>4</sup> This quotation is an excerpt from Jean Giraudoux's novel, *Juliette au Pays des hommes*.

<sup>5</sup> On the devices of voyeuristic composition, see Marc Vernet, "L'en-deça", in *Figures de l'absence, de l'invisible au cinéma*, Paris, Cahiers du cinéma, 1988, p. 34.

But the prologue does not limit itself to assertion of the observer. It also foreshadows what the film's specific approach will be to the reality it confronts.

The point of view "from above" is not that of an invisible, abstract subject (Metz's "grand imagier") but ensues the ascent of the glass structure by the woman climber, described earlier, and is thus a humanized gaze. Yet this perspective of a "rise to the summit" can also be compared to the all-encompassing perception of the celestials...of angels and God. It offers a magnificent image of Paris. One could, for example, detect in this opening scene a reference to the 19th century pastime of climbing church towers which, as Jacques Aumont has noted, was contemporary to the era's pictorial tradition of urban panoramas.<sup>6</sup> The steadiness of the camera, gazing at the city of Paris from above, as well as the poor depth of field in the image, certainly suggest an association with painting, as do the lyrical quality of the commentary and the Gregorian music accompanying these first shots, which partake of the same level of high art. Indubitably, Marker alludes in the prologue's beginning to the mythic image of Paris as derived from classic representational tradition. Subsequently in the prologue, another representational tradition is conveyed: its modernist counterpart. The editing of shots of urban traffic and city noises, the mobilization of point of view that frees itself from the climbing figure's contemplating eye and the choice of unusual angle of vision

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Aumont, *L'oeil interminable. Cinéma et Peinture*, op. cit., p. 47.

on a city observed (ie., the extreme high angle shot) all refer to the modernist tradition.<sup>7</sup> More precisely, they evoke what could be called the city-symphony genre (as represented by Vigo, Vertov, Ruttmann, etc.), a vehicle to which Marker returns by the end of his film with his scene of cars racing frenetically around the city's Place de l'Etoile and with his extended roam in accelerated motion through the streets of Paris.

While underscoring the duality of a Paris weighed down simultaneously with memories of the past and prospects for the future, where classicism and modernism are intertwined, Marker's introduction in *Le joli mai* hints at the fascination Paris exerts on so many artists, whose embrace of the city as aesthetic object--beauty celebrated--has only added to its myth. Marker has thus created a filmic equivalent to the observation found in the film's scenario: "Paris is an object of legend as worn with use as Cinderella's shoe." He also attempts to distance himself from this mystifying approach to the city:

I recently saw an extraordinary documentary on Paris. Every one of its images is suffused with a pure, genuine love of the city but through what intermediaries! Empty lots; metro bridges in the morning rust; walls darkened with smoke; stores and hotel signs whose banality wrings your heart.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Jacques Aumont offers a study of the importance of the mobilization of point of view in modern art in a chapter from *L'œil interminable*: "The changing eye or the mobilization of the gaze", op. cit., pp. 37-72.

<sup>8</sup> Chris. Marker, *Giraudoux par lui-même*, Paris, Seuil, coll. *Ecrivains de toujours*, 1953, p. 25.

The goal of *Le joli mai* is already suggested in this observation, an excerpt from Marker's essay on Giraudoux. In place of the glittering capital praised by poets and painters, Marker prefers the ordinary Paris...its diurnal and prosaic rhythms devoid of glamor.<sup>9</sup> This choice is signalled in the film both by a change of music (switch from Gregorian cantata to popular melody) and by the camera's sharp downward movement, an abrupt "landing" on the street that ends the prologue and ushers in the film's core subject material. It is prefigured in the film's opening address to the "happy many" and in the commentary's observation that the commonfolk of Paris are "the only ones who can tell us what Paris was in the month of May."

There is no pretense in Marker's film to capture a bare level of reality which he would present as "authentic" in opposition to the city's mythic representation; simplistic dichotomies are, in general, not part of Marker's way of thinking. The filmmaker refutes the dualism between myth and reality by skillfully

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<sup>9</sup> A decision to shun the city of light's glamorous side is not specific to Marker; it is shared with many filmmakers of his generation. Rouch, Godard, Rohmer, Varda, Rozier, Chabrol, Truffaut have all attempted to offer a new outlook on Paris. They made it a point of moving away from picturesque representations of the city in order to play up its most banal, even harsh and inhospitable aspects. Leaving behind the studio and conventional settings, such as the bourgeois apartment and public plaza, they revealed places on screen chosen from daily surroundings: streets congested with cars, public parks, student cafés, squares still unknown and devoid of an imaginary dimension. See Michel Marie, "Les déambulations parisiennes de la Nouvelle Vague", in Prosper Hillairet, Christian Lebrat, Patrice Rollet, *Paris vu par le Cinéma d'Avant-garde, 1923-1983*, Paris, Catalogue of the Beaubourg film retrospective, November 14-December 15, 1985, pp. 51-55.



intimating in the film's prologue that Paris cannot be separated from its legendary past. This is accomplished through a subtle interplay between soundtrack and image. For example, while the voice-over expresses a wish to discover Paris anew, images simultaneously reveal views of the city that refer to previous representations of it, thus hinting at the impossibility of realizing such a desire. Paris cannot be studied as a tabula rasa; it is always, already connotated.

Marker uses the quotation from Giraudoux, which immediately succeeds the credits, to affirm his contention that both history and myth are an inextricable part of quotidian life in the French capital. In this way, Marker asserts his distance at the very beginning from the neo-naturalist ideology to which members of the American direct cinema school subscribe. The movement is too well known to linger on, but let us simply recall that there was, at its base, a determination to react against what was felt to be a tendency in contemporary media to absorb and uncritically promote cultural stereotypes.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Cinema direct filmmakers have made several statements in this sense. Here is Leacock's declaration, for example, in an interview with James Blue: "As the means of communication increased--especially with the advent of film and now the tremendous thing that television is--we invented a set of clichés. We think we know things but actually these are distorted or completely wrong or have the vital thought taken away from them. I have the deep feeling, for example, that I know what happens in a law court. Now this is absurd because I've never been in a law court. And my so-called deep feeling about what happens in a law court actually comes from the movies that I have seen that, in turn, were very likely made by people who had never been in a law court either. And what we are getting is the formation of self-perpetuated cultural myths, which can get more and more inaccurate." James

Though direct cinema filmmakers may have adhered, less naïvely than some observers assume, to the idea of a strictly innocent camera (many acknowledged the unavoidable intervention of the filmmaker's subjectivity within the filming process), they nevertheless hoped to reach a "zero level" of reality free from any culturally ingrained idea about what it should be. Thus they refused to study a subject beforehand in order to block preconceptions that might influence the filming process. Such a view presupposes belief in a "rough" reality, autonomous and antecedent to the images and words formed about it.

Marker, however, begins in *Le joli mai* by divorcing himself from this quest for authenticity, from the search for an ultimate representation of the real. "Paris," he says in the film's scenario, "has no keys; they've all been thrown in the River Seine." Here one finds rejection of the idea of an absolute authenticity of reality, one simply waiting to be revealed. Paris does not exist independently from the legends which define it. The multiple layers of descriptions and images constitute a decomposed and replicated object. In reference to Deleuze's classification of the regimes of the image, one could say that Marker's film leans toward the "crystalline regime," while the works of American direct cinema belong to the "organic" regime, an opposition that he, Deleuze, delineates as such:

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Blue, "One Man's Truth: An Interview with Richard Leacock", *op. cit.*, p. 18.

A description which assumes the independence of its object will be called organic. It is not a matter of knowing if the object is really independent, it is not a matter of knowing if these are exteriors or scenery. What counts is that, whether they are scenery or exteriors, the setting described is presented as independent of the description which the camera gives of it, and stands for a supposedly pre-existing reality. In contrast, what we call a crystalline description stands for its object, replaces it, both creates and erases it (...) In an organic description, the real that is assumed is recognizable by its continuity (...). It is clear that this system includes the unreal, the dream and the imaginary but as contrast.(...) The crystalline regime is completely different: (...) the real and the imaginary, the actual and the virtual, chase after each other, exchange their roles and become indiscernible.<sup>11</sup>

Such an understanding of reality is hardly compatible with a straightforward documentary contract. And indeed it takes on in *Le joli mai* an ambiguous form, which we will now examine.

As an inquiry film based essentially on interviews, *Le joli mai* does not fit the classical formula of the genre. That type of film generally starts with an introduction by a journalist-reporter. The latter is often filmed in close-up as he looks at the camera, directly addressing the viewer in order to convey to him the contextual information necessary for a proper reading of the inquiry and to present the subjects he will subsequently interview. The powerful referential effect of such direct address to the viewer and, especially, of glances toward the camera have been observed

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<sup>11</sup> Gilles Deleuze, "The Powers of the False", in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, op. cit., pp. 126-127.

by many analysts.<sup>12</sup> The viewer is called upon by the journalist to take what will be said seriously, as a faithful account of reality and, as Bill Nichols points out, he will be all the more inclined to do so the more trustworthy the personality of the anchor person is perceived to be.<sup>13</sup>

In place of direct address, which forcefully establishes a documentary contract, Marker prefers a mode of address that orients the viewer toward a fictional reading. Unlike a literary text, a film can, as many narratologists have noticed in the complexity of filmic enunciation, play on several parameters, both visual and auditory.<sup>14</sup> A film's enunciation can, in other words, endorse a polyphonic nature that is absent in purely linguistic or literary messages. Such a polyphony is present in *Le joli mai*'s prologue.

As mentioned earlier, the prologue imputes some of the rooftop views to the eye of the glasshouse climber. However, in the voice-over commentary about discovering Paris through its inhabitants, Yves Montand is easily identifiable as the speaker. Therefore, the viewer is presented with a dual enunciation whose sound anchoring (a male voice) is different from the visual anchor. Its duality leads the viewer to assume a third enunciator, the

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<sup>12</sup> See, notably, Eliséo Véron, "Il est là, je le vois, il me parle", in *Communications*, no. 38, *Enonciation et cinéma*, Paris, Seuil, 1983.

<sup>13</sup> Bill Nichols, *Ideology and the Image*, op. cit., p. 174.

<sup>14</sup> See François Jost, *L'oeil-caméra. Entre film et roman*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1987, p. 18.

"author" who films and records the previous enunciating subjects.<sup>15</sup> In other words, ambiguity established in the prologue about the identity of the enunciator urges the viewer toward a fictional reading. And the fact that the commentator's voice is not anonymous but that of Yves Montand, recognizable as an actor of fictional stories, reinforces this fictional anchoring of the film. Elsewhere, the written caption that immediately follows the credits--"The scene takes place in the month of May 1962, which some people then called 'the first spring of peace.'"--reinforces the fictional indexation while rendering even more ambiguous the locus of the enunciation by playing on the temporal axis (ie., "1962"; "then said"; "takes place").

For example, in the voice-over commentary in French, Montand employs either the collective form of pronoun, "on", or the first-person plural, "nous", which are both inclusive in voice and used to pull the viewer into the process of discovery of the city as a contemporary observer. Montand's voice-over implies the presence of both an enunciator and a viewer who are contemporary to the event, but the written caption resorts to the deictic "at the time," suggesting that the action preceded the enunciation.

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<sup>15</sup> One could argue that the mere fact of showing a gazing subject leads the viewer to induce an extradiegetic enunciator--the camera--which records his image. One touches here upon the question of the oft-noticed relativity of the filmic reception. Certainly a viewer trained in film analysis would perceive an external enunciator but I believe most spectators wouldn't. The audiovisual dichotomy is a much more powerful indicator of the presence of a third voice, which produces the ultimate message.

Together these elements produce a strange effect of temporal compression since, in 1962, the date of the film's making, viewers of the future (ie., we who watch *Le joli mai* as well as all those who follow) are addressed as contemporaries.

The effect of this address is to inscribe in the film from the very start the "forgotten-ness" of the people and events it accounts for: some day it will be necessary to recall that 1962 was the "first spring of peace" after eight years of an Algerian war. It thus stresses the film's status as a dated document, hinting at its future repository function as a record of the past for those who could not, by the mere passage of time, have experienced this period. Also, underlying the gap between the moment of recording and the moment of viewing, *Le joli mai* dissociates itself immediately from direct cinema's pretense of capturing a quasi-immediacy of perception, whose ultimate achievement is the direct transmission on TV or video screen (the video of surveillance), which some theoreticians have considered as the abolition of the signifier, a pure display of the referent on screen.<sup>16</sup> Of reality, cinema can only show us an image. It is a point that Marker has always found important, long before the Seventies' deconstruction theory began to hammer away at the idea. For example, in *Si j'avais quatre dromadaires*, his 1966 film entirely composed of photographs and voice-over dialogue between an amateur photographer and two of his friends, one of the characters observes:

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<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, René Berger, *La télé-fission, alerte à la télévision*, Paris, Casterman, 1976, p. 25.

There is life and there is its double and photography belongs to the universe of the double. By getting close to faces you have the feeling of partaking in the life and death of living faces, of human visages. This is not true: if you partake of anything at all, it is of their life and death as images.<sup>17</sup>

Had Marker simply dedicated *Le joli mai* to the viewer of the future, he wouldn't have succeeded in expressing the same idea that an event is already bygone as soon as it is recorded and that we can only retain its trace. His "spring of peace" caption offers a good example of Marker's subtle manner of conveying meaning in an economical, even minimalist form.

While stressing film's limits (film can only show traces not reality itself), this caption calls attention to film's power by implying that beyond the eventual death of the filmmaker lies the survival of his images and words, which enable him to communicate as a contemporary with viewers in the distant future. In other words, it offers a variation on the old topos of art triumphing over time. This victory of man over the passage of time is something that fascinates Marker, who will come back to it, notably, in his subsequent work, *Sans soleil*.

While pointing to the film's status as document, this particular written caption does not, however, establish the film's documentariness anymore than the prologue does. Indeed, because of

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<sup>17</sup> Chris. Marker, "Si j'avais quatre dromadaires", in *Commentaires 2*, op. cit., p. 88.

the chronological inconsistency, its enunciation can't be assigned to a real person. Furthermore the formula used, with its definite article--"The scene etc.," (borrowed from the retranscription of theater)--also manages to elicit a fictional approach in the viewer. A last element in the film's beginning that leads viewers toward a fictional reading is its title and subtitles, among which: "Le joli mai," and "Prière sur la Tour Eiffel." Their metaphorical and vaguely enigmatic formula seems more appropriate for a fictional piece than for a documentary (the same could be said about the title presaging the second part of the film: "Fantomas's return").

Nevertheless, despite all the signposts guiding the viewer toward a fictional reading of the film, *Le joli mai* is ultimately perceived as presenting a high level of documentariness. But what are the elements within the film that induce a documentary reading against all fictional indices?

First of all, there are the credits, which, as Metz demonstrates,<sup>18</sup> have an obvious and institutionalized function of address. Here their role is fortified with a strategic positioning--as one following the long prologue. The viewer is forced to pay attention to them since they arrive well into the film. The credits themselves mention the collaboration of various researchers for the film, such reference to sociological inquiry being a clear indicator of the film's documentary intent. Indicative, too, of a documentary reading are the observations and speech of interviewees, identified

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<sup>18</sup> Christian Metz, *L'énonciation impersonnelle ou le site du film*, Paris, Méridiens Klincksieck, 1991, p. 63.



in the film as actual testimonies. At the start of each interview, for instance, captions appear with the name or initials of the interviewee, the place in Paris where the interview transpires and what position he/she occupies in life: "Pierrot le Taxi; 24 mai; rue Jacob; réparateur de pneus (diplômé)" or "J.D.; militant syndicaliste; 12 mai; Ivry", etc.

It should be pointed out that the style of these particular captions (letters in a plain, straight font) contrasts with the more stylized graphics of previous ones. These precise features refer to the cataloguing practice of the historical researcher; they anchor a person's speech in a verifiable frame of time and space, reinforcing his authenticity as witness. Finally, the casual style of most of the interviewees' conversation contains the mistakes that characterize oral speech--grammatical awkwardness, hesitations, repetitions--and which contrast with the literary language of the voice-over commentary, attesting to their authenticity as the real enunciator of their own speech: they do not act out a prescribed text.

The documentary anchor resulting from the fact that interviewees speak in the film as real people is bolstered by Marker's presence on screen as interviewer. The mere appearance of a filmmaker is not always to be interpreted as a sign of its documentarity, of course. Many cases of the filmmaker's presence on screen in identifiably fictional films immediately come to mind. For example, Jean-Luc Godard stars as a filmmaker, known as "the

"Idiot," in *Soigne ta droite* and yet the film cannot be described as a documentary. The documentary anchoring power of the filmmaker's presence depends on the context. In this respect, there is an important sequence worth examining in *Le joli mai*, one taking place in front of the Paris stock exchange. While Marker interviews two fifteen-year old pit-runners who work at the bourse, a stockbroker passing by interrupts the conversation to contest one of Marker's questions. But the filmmaker doesn't let his intrusive objections go unrestrained in the filming. He interrupts him, a clap is shown and Marker's voice-over says: "Ok, the camera is recording. You are free to respond or not." The viewer is confronted here with a strategy that Seventies cinema has banalized to the extreme and whose anti-fictional effects have been the subject of repeated theorizing: laying bare the device of production is a way to "deconstruct", to "break the reality effect." Again, it should be stressed that neither the presence of the filmmaker nor the fact of showing the device on screen is sufficient to radically modify the film's spectatorial regime. As Metz observes in his book, *L'Enonciation impersonnelle ou le site du film*, several films have used this tactic to the benefit of a fictional effect.<sup>19</sup> In the same text Metz correctly expresses reservations about showing the camera on screen, which renders us aware of the problem of enunciation in film that can only be in the enonce: revealing a camera on screen necessarily implies the

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

presence of another hidden camera to film it. Other procedures, such as allowing a sound recorder's boom to peek down in a corner of the screen, are less problematic. In the case of the clapboard in *Le joli mai*, accompanied by Marker's voice-over commentary--"O.K., the camera is recording. You are free to respond or not."--it openly and clearly displays the filmmaking process, asserting Marker's role in its production.

Should one conclude, therefore, that the first-person voice of Montand's commentary be considered as a mere proxy for Marker the filmmaker/interviewer himself? That would be too reductive. Nor should we slice up the film, dividing it into documentary components (i.e., the whole section based on interviews) and fictional parts (the prologue, the epilogue and the scenes in speed-up motion). Such a tack would betray Marker's perspective because the filmmaker has very carefully and deliberately intertwined different regimes. By placing Giraudoux's long quotation after--and not before--the credits (which, in turn follow the prologue), he avoids creation of a neat dividing line between the film's initial lyrical moments and its subsequent, more prosaic street inquiry by mixing up the sequence...presenting first a high level of documentarity and then a high level of fictionality. In another example toward the end of the film he interposes interviews of prisoners from Paris' La Roquette prison between his modernist accelerated exploration of Paris and *Le joli mai*'s final poetic meditation on the human condition. Also, in the film's non-lyrical

parts there are elements which tend to subvert the documentary contract (with its commitment to an "objectivity" of the look) by asserting the subjectivity of the outlook--the authorial perspective--offered on Parisian reality by Marker as artist. At several points, as already mentioned, images of cats or momentary meditations on owls appear, which bring absolutely no information to the film but are purely auto-referential inclusions, reminders of Marker's own legendary fondness for these animals. Both, in fact, appear in a great many of Marker's works, functioning almost as a label, a signature of the filmmaker.<sup>20</sup> The same could be said about the persistent appearance in *Le joli mai* of Marker's fellow filmmakers--Godard, Resnais, Gatti and Varda--and friends such as Jacques Ledoux (late curator of Belgium's Royal Film Archive), who also features as the torturer in *La Jetée*.

Again, what is important isn't so much that his film may be perceived as an authorial work, (indeed, a viewer reasonably familiar with Wiseman's work could certainly identify his stamp on the Neiman Marcus film, for example) as the fact that *Le joli mai* stresses authorial tags in order to emphasize that the film's outlook on Parisian life is a personal one, deliberately molded by the filmmaker's imagination and ideological viewpoint. Marker does believe, as he says in the film's scenario, that those who study the French capital end up revealing themselves: "Ils ont regardé Paris

<sup>20</sup> Among the numerous stories circulating about Chris. Marker, who is said to enjoy cultivating his own myths, one has the filmmaker--pursuant to a magazine's request for a personal photograph--mailing in a picture of a cat.

et ils se sont dit en lui." Here emerges the dimension of Marker's work as auto-portrait.

One can't insist enough on the necessity to respect, against all desire for neat categorization, the ambivalence of Marker's work as far as the representational regime is concerned. The film shuttles incessantly between documentary and fiction.

I would like at this point to take a closer look at *Le joli mai* to analyze the strength of its authorial point of view in the film. It is, of course, in the prologue and epilogue--based on voice-over commentary and characterized by images and selective non-naturalist treatment of sound--and the city symphony sequence, where Marker uses accelerated motion to create rhythmic patterns of movement and light against the tempo of electronic music, that his authorial point of view is most manifest. The mere presence of these sequences in the film breaks its stylistic unity and constitutes an anti-realist strategy.

In the descriptive or informative sequences that introduce, conclude and bridge the interviews, Marker's framing and editing--as well as the soundtrack--are often exploited to convey the point of view on the reality he describes. A striking example is the sequence taking place in a poor alley of La Mouffe. The camera first pans on its dank walls. Then an old man comes out of one of the decrepit houses to wash his hands in a sink placed in a corner, apparently the only supply of water for the families living in the area. With the camera momentarily staring at him, a

recorded radiophonic voice-over commentary announces: "The Paris news. Here are 12 reasons why the Chaillot Residence is the most luxurious building in Paris. One: its facade is made out of white marble from Carrare. Two..." As the voice drones on to describe the "sumptuous" beauty of a place far removed in wealth and style from La Mouffe, the sequence offers an example of what Eisenstein would call a contrapuntal use of sound (ie., sound and image to signify opposite ideas). The choice of soundtrack, while allowing the film to make a blatant statement about the inequalities of French society, also cuts short any form of romantic outlook on misery. Poetic treatment of poverty in cinema is an easy trap to fall into, as Ivens pointedly observed about certain works of the British school, such as *Housing Problem*.<sup>21</sup> Avoiding any such outlook on poverty is certainly one concern of *Le joli mai*'s author. Indeed, through voice-over commentary Marker makes clear that, despite the horrors of new urban construction built on behalf of the underclasses in the 60s, they shouldn't lead anyone to feel nostalgia for the run-down quarters that traditionally housed the city's poor.

In the previous section of this chapter several other examples revealed the care Marker took to distance himself from espousing direct cinema's observational style as based on an effacement of the filmmaker in these informative or descriptive

<sup>21</sup> Joris Ivens, *The camera and I*, New York, International Publishers, 1969, p. 88.

sequences.<sup>22</sup> Rather than dwelling on them, the following pages will concentrate on a specific point: the intervention of the authorial voice regarding the observations of those interviewed in the film. If, contrary to several of his previous films (*Lettre de Sibérie*, *Un dimanche à Pékin*), Marker does not control the monopoly of speech in *Le joli mai*, if he devotes the great majority of the film to the expression of others' views, nevertheless he retains an ultimate position of mastery over them, contrary to what many critics maintain. This is what I would like to demonstrate in the following pages by outlining a series of strategies, by no means exhaustive, in which the authorial voice intervenes in people's speech.

A first element of control is found in the way interviews are led in the film. Indubitably, the choice of those interviewed has not been left to chance. Each interview results in a statement that is pointedly suggested to the viewer. Though it can't be said that Marker forces his subjects' answers, his questions often contain leading points of reflection or analysis that invite--or even taunt--a reaction from the interviewee. For example, he asks a young African: "Once living in the West, isn't there a temptation in freedom, or at least in independence, to forget about African values in favor of those grounded in a technically advanced civilization?"

Marker also herds people along to a logical conclusion of their views by focussing on the concrete implications of the vague,

<sup>22</sup> See pp. 98-101.

absurdist statements they often put forward in conversation. For example, when a woman declares that a certain kind of dictatorship "could be very liveable," he immediately asks her if she would like to live in a dictatorship where she would be the victim. Ever alert to slips of the mind and mores, Marker doesn't let his interviewees get away with their nonsense. If there are contradictions in a conversation, they are teased out for inspection. Le joli mai's clothing salesman, for instance, states up front that he is not happy because he works around the clock and has few enjoyments at home. But later he says he feels fine because he eats and sleeps well. Marker seizes on the discrepancies: "But you told me the opposite before." It is a delicate interviewer's role that he has chosen for himself: provoking and simultaneously retreating from getting too personally involved in a debate. Marker refrains from engaging in true dialogue with the interviewee, preferring instead the role of opinion-gatherer who collects speech and avoids real argument. If his style is laconic, it can also bite with irony, particularly when the filmmaker expresses disapproval. When the older sister of the woman who favors a "liveable" tyranny answers on behalf of her younger sibling--"No, she can't imagine a dictatorship with herself as one of its victims."--Marker intones: "Strange, strange." Elsewhere, in response to opinion that all involved in unlawful acts during the Algerian war should be killed, Marker simply replies: "It is an extreme position!" Needless to say, Marker's approach to his subjects is an intellectualized one, always



imposing a certain distance from the interviewees in order to more coolly assess their words.

Never, though, does he empathize with his subjects. Marker's position of exteriority is reflected in a refusal to appear on screen on an equal footing with the interviewee. The few times he does appear are only in profile or from behind (rather like Thompson in *Citizen Kane*), choosing most of the time the anonymity of an off-screen presence. Only the interviewee is visible in close-up, the interviewee whose gaze attests, by its direction, to Marker's nearby presence.

This choice of framing is significant in that it gives the interviewer an unchallenged authority. It tends to force the viewer toward a position as observer of questions' effects on interviewees (verbal and non-verbal) and away from that as non-partisan witness to a bilateral exchange. He finds himself identifying with the interviewer.<sup>23</sup>

Not all viewers were so coerced, however. Many critics faulted Marker for the cutting irony used against his interviewees. Françoise Giroud, for instance, accused him of "pinning people down like insects,"<sup>24</sup> while Michel Delahaye said Marker was incapable of conversing with anyone who was not an intellectual

<sup>23</sup> This point was made by Francis Vanoye concerning Godard's interview of Camille in *France/Tour/Détour/Deux Enfants* in an article which aims to define the specificity of film dialogue in relation to real-life conversation. Francis Vanoye, "Conversations Publiques", in the bilingual review, *Iris*, vol. 3, no. 1, "Speech in Film, La parole au cinéma", first semester 1985, pp. 104-105.

<sup>24</sup> Françoise Giroud, *L'express*, April 1963.

and, moreover, that he was too judgmental: "One finds oneself placed to the right or left of Chris. according to whether one belongs to a certain religious group or another."<sup>25</sup> Claude Mauriac, for his part, deplored Marker's lack of genuine feeling, even the "lack of love" for fellow human beings.<sup>26</sup> Without necessarily subscribing to the moral condemnation expressed in these criticisms, it cannot be denied that Marker appropriates for himself the high ground in his conversational exchanges, taking advantage of both his position as interviewer and his intellectual superiority over less educated people. A blatant example of such self-positioning is the reply Marker gives to the clothing salesman who says he doesn't watch films like *L'année dernière à Marienbad* or *Cléo de 5 à 7* because he "is a lowbrow."

"So what!?" says Marker. "And who told you they are made for high-brows?" ("Vous savez, moi, monsieur je suis un primaire, je m'excuse." Marker: "Et alors, et qui est-ce qui vous a dit que c'était pour les secondaires?")

Still more disrespectful of interviewee responses than the interviewer's manipulative control over them are the uses of various filmic strategies that undermine their integrity. Through framing and editing, the authorial voice shades individual comments. These interventions become all the more coercive in that they escape the control of those who are directly concerned, since the latter are given no opportunity to reply or object.

<sup>25</sup> Michel Delahaye, "La Chasse à l'I", *op. cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>26</sup> Claude Mauriac, *Témoignage Chrétien*, May 1963.

First, there is the work of the camera. In general, Le jol  
mai's interviewees are framed in close-up, though occasionally the  
camera detaches itself from a person's face to isolate a gesture of  
the hand--I will comment on this later--or to spot some revealing  
physiological trait or detail of personal surroundings. These  
camera movements (which no doubt attest to cameraman Pierre  
L'Homme's remarkable skill at seizing, on the spot, unexpected but  
pertinent visual elements that relate to the conversation we hear)  
present an edited collage of images for the viewer that can either  
serve as a visual translation of what interviewees say or a derisive  
distortion of their words. When our clothing salesman, framed in  
tight close-up, says that he finds himself too pudgy, the camera  
re-frames him in a downward movement, allowing us to check for  
ourselves. When Marker asks a young man on the street if he  
thinks he lives in a democracy, his response--"That question  
should be addressed to those above us."--prompts the camera to  
simultaneously flick up to a decorated door in the background to  
reveal an amusing visage in sculpture. L'Homme, of course, has  
used the immediate setting to give an ironical twist to a banal  
statement. More perverse is an episode centered on an inventor  
who rambles on with no small self-satisfaction about the qualities  
someone in his field must possess. During his discourse the  
camera finds a spider perched on the man's suit. The image is so  
arresting that it effectively ends up diverting the viewer's  
attention away from the prattling interviewee. Indeed, the

deflection is so complete it delves into comedy when Marker alludes in the dialogue to the insect's presence. Feigning agreement with the man, he lets drop a seemingly innocuous comparison--"It is like having a spider on a suit."--to which the inventor, still unaware of what is happening, responds: "Exactly!" Not surprisingly, one learns that this particular sequence infuriated those who disliked *Le joli mai* for its lack of respect toward the people it filmed. To be sure, the film subverts the inventor's authority by placing the all-aware viewer in the position of accomplice. *Le joli mai*'s filmmakers did not have much sympathy for smug individuals and they made this abundantly clear.

While framing is used by the film to convey Marker's stance toward his interviewees' observations, it is nevertheless essentially through editing that the authorial point of view is achieved. As with framing, Marker uses editing to create a visual, simultaneous comment on people's words as they are uttered, either supporting or contradicting them. For example, when the young Algerian recounts how he was roughed up by the police one morning in his own room, the image switches to impoverished housing quarters similar to those where the incident took place; as the clothing salesman speaks about de Gaulle, a scene of the General parading down the avenues of Paris materializes; and when the African describes the first time he actually saw French people in their capital during his maiden voyage to France, images of Parisian crowds in the street appear on screen. Here the visuals are

mostly meant to render conversation more concrete, thus relieving the boredom of the talking head. Yet the film's editing has been very carefully thought out; Marker leaves very little to chance. The decision to accompany certain words with certain images is seldom entirely innocent in that his choices alter, in one degree or another, the intent of his subjects' speech. Accompanying a single sentence or sometimes even a phrase or isolated word with individual shots obviously constitutes a method for emphasizing it. When Cabusse, a small bar owner from La Mouffe who is worried about the effects of gentrification on his neighborhood, says: "We are at home here. If we have to move elsewhere, we'll feel deported." At the word "deported" Marker cuts immediately to a harsh image of barren, housing-complex towers, thus reinforcing the adjective's affective meaning. Elsewhere an autonomous shot of a bag lady provides backing to a comment from Lydia, the beautiful and comfortably successful clothier, who facetiously says she could "easily become a bum." This latter example, however, demonstrates that Marker's editing exceeds its apparent function of merely illustrating words. The concretization of such statements, typical of off-the-cuff remarks people make in conversation, deftly underscores their absurdity for the viewer. This insidious comment may escape the inattentive viewer, but there are other moments in the film where the image represents blatant editorial comment that brutally subverts an interviewee's meaning. When an engineer says that few people work with their hands and that most

of them are unproductive, the film depicts images of Resnais, Rouch and Godard.

An even more striking intrusion of authorial voice are the parenthetical syntagmas. It is important to observe that in these interregna, as well as throughout the film, the commentary is recited by Montand...decidedly not a neutral, anonymous voice. Combined with the commentary's style, which is often sophisticated and literary,<sup>27</sup> Montand's voice lends that of the author a special force, one flowing from its very seduction and one distinct from the plain language most people employ.<sup>28</sup>

Interrupting interviews, the authorial voice proffers a comment on what has been said by a person whose speech it momentarily suspends. Some of these interventions serve an exegetic purpose, the author legitimizing what the interviewee says by adding background information. This is evident, for instance, during the interview of the Algerian--the police victim--who talks about racially-based injustices suffered at work. Marker deliberately cuts to foreign laborers toiling in the street, accompanied by voice-over commentary describing the results of a public survey of the immigrant's dismal position in the job market.

<sup>27</sup> In this respect I disagree with Sadoul's comment who says of *Le joli mai* that "Marker, a brilliant writer, rejects panache in *Le joli mai*, effacing himself to make the others more visible." Georges Sadoul, "Un miroir qui réfléchit. *Joli Mai* de Chris. Marker", in *Les lettres françaises*, no. 977, May 9, 1963, re-published in his collected reviews, *Chroniques du cinéma français, 1939-1967. Ecrits 1*, Paris, U.G.E., coll. 10/18, 1979, pp. 296-302.

<sup>28</sup> Provided, of course, that one likes Montand. Again, this brings us to the complexity of reception studies: there is no universal spectatorial reaction.

Here, the author's voice supersedes that of the interviewee, strengthening and lending authority to his words.

However, Marker's informative additions are a less frequent form of intervention compared to the sequences that contradict or cynically ridicule interviewee statements. One particularly perverse parenthetical sequence follows a statement by the film's young fiancée, whose interview takes place at the end of *Le joli mai*'s first part. "We met at a wedding," she says ingenuously. Her comment is trailed by Marker's caricatured wedding party, described in this paper's previous section on sociology. Finally, as previously noted, the series of "playful cat" interludes, which suspend the engineers' conversation, is equally derisory. In this last case the author asserts his role, even if in humorous fashion, as orchestrator of speech, with all the arbitrariness such responsibility carries. Moreover, the authority Marker arrogates to himself over the spoken word is overtly displayed throughout the film (i.e., addition of music to smother conversation, curtailment of sentences, etc.).

Another powerful strategy of expression of the authorial perspective in *Le joli mai* is the organization of sequences. Their ordering does not follow a chronological but a thematic principle. At several points it appears that interviews have been meticulously juxtaposed so that their respective meanings are modified. For example, comment from the three vacuous bourgeois sisters who feel "Christ is a mutant" seems all the more addle-brained when

presented flush behind the carefully considered reflections of the worker-priest. Casting irony on an architect's bubbly attempt to defend the niceties of collective suburban life is subsequent comment from a poor woman in Aubervilliers who complains of living in an overcrowded neighborhood.

Finally, regarding authorial point of view and the film's structure, it is significant that Marker grants himself the privilege of having first and last word in the film's prologue and epilogue, including a reflective meditation in the latter on the whole series of preceding interviews. One could argue that the impact on the viewer of the opening and closing sequences derives in no small way from their lyricism...where the voice-over commentary exerts its full dominance.<sup>29</sup>

This should suffice to demonstrate the strength of *Le joli mai*'s authorial voice.<sup>30</sup> The author's intervention goes far beyond acknowledgment and exploitation of the effect of subjects' "camera consciousness." This criterion of distinction, often put forward by film critics, is thus insufficient. Actually, aside from certain stylistic similarities derived from the use of lightweight equipment, *Le joli mai* shares little with direct cinema productions. It is only because many documentary film studies tend to grant superiority to

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<sup>29</sup> As proof of their power of seduction, these texts are quoted in several studies on *Le joli mai* such as Paul-Louis Thirard, "Joli Mai", in *Positif*, no. 54-55, op. cit., p. 114; Guy Gauthier, "Joli Mai" in *La revue du cinéma, Image et Son*, no. 274, 1973-1974, pp. 85-98; and *Artsept*, no. 2, op. cit., p. 83.

<sup>30</sup> For further examples see Guy Gauthier, "Joli Mai", op. cit., p. 96.



the technological apparatus that *Le joli mai* has been commonly associated with cinema direct.

To finish this long chapter on *Le joli mai* I feel it is important, as stated earlier, to define more precisely what sets the film apart from *Chronique d'un été*.

The established association between *Le joli mai* and *Chronique d'un été* is no more satisfying than the sole criterion used to distinguish *Le joli mai* from direct cinema works. Though Marker and Rouch and Morin all use provocation, this is done with different ends in mind and according to diverging conceptions of the relationship between the individual and society. In this respect, Rouch and Morin (at least in *Chronique d'un été*) may be closer to the direct cinema outlook than to Marker's views.

As one recalls, there was for many cinema direct filmmakers the essentialist idea of a split between people's appearance--the social front they erect--and their true nature that could only be revealed in private circumstances. In their search for authenticity to counter official images as usually portrayed at the time by the media, most direct cinema filmmakers tried to establish a relationship of "intimacy" with their subject. The conditions, they reminded us, had to be created to catch people behind their social facade, to persuade them to let down their defenses in order to unveil the true self. Lightweight equipment, which added enormous discretion to the recording process (and stripped the filmmaker of his authority as a "professional of the media") was

viewed as a way to achieve such a goal. By contrast, traditional heavy technology was seen to work against it:

You go shoot a documentary in a certain place, with the best intentions in the world, you are going to pick the event on the spot. Then you unpack your projectors, your tripods, your cables and you tell the people to stay quiet. How do you want them to remain quiet once you have set up such a great chamber of torture?

This is why to introduce ourselves to the people we don't insist on the technical aspect of the documentary. I would be real pleased if I could make a film without camera and without magnetophone. What is most important about all this is that we are human beings and that we meet other human beings who are our brothers.<sup>31</sup>

This enthusiastic outpouring of faith in new technology that flourished at the time among American documentary filmmakers still resonates in our memory today. One remembers their exuberant statements on the achievement of direct cinema vis-a-vis new vistas for communication by the individual, on the possibility of approaching the "other," no matter how famous, simply as a fellow human being...a person awaiting discovery. "We are human beings meeting other human beings," Leacock said. Again, in an interview with André S. Labarthe and Louis Marcorelles, Leacock said he covered what he thought to be the key moments in Primary, a film on the 1960 Kennedy-Humphrey race for the Wisconsin Democratic primary whose goal was to show what actually

<sup>31</sup> André S. Labarthe et Louis Marcorelles, "Entretien avec Robert Drew et Richard Leacock", in *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 140, February 1963, p. 20.

goes on during an election. One of Leacock's seminal events was a sequence shot in Humphrey's car, where the filmmaker unexpectedly finds himself when the politician mistakes him for a member of his entourage. Another key moment is shot in Kennedy's office: "I was left alone with him," says Leacock, "with no lights, no cables, no tripod. Nothing. . . And therefore a person-to-person rapport, a relation of friendship, could be established with the person filmed."<sup>32</sup>

The ideas behind American direct cinema are much too well known to expound on them at any length. Moreover, the movement's weaknesses have been sufficiently revealed. Even Leacock himself later withdrew claims about the level of authenticity he was able to reach in his film: "There is much more chance of getting somebody fucking on film than of getting politicians being honest," he confided in the Seventies in an interview with G. Roy Levin.<sup>33</sup> What was less often stressed, however, was the emergence, under Morin's pen, of the same optimistic expectation of a change in the quality of mediatic communication, a similar outlook on filmmaking as a locus for brotherly encounter linked to the use of lightweight equipment. Here, for example, are the hopes inspired in Morin by his discovery of Rouch's work at the ethnographic film festival in 1960:

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> G. Roy Levin, *Documentary Exploration: 15 Interviews with Filmmakers*, New York, Doubleday, 1971, p. 203.

Jean Rouch, with his 16mm camera and his magnetophone slung across the shoulder, can from now on enter a community as a friend, as an individual, and not as a crew director any more (...).

The new cinema-verité, which is still in search of itself, has henceforth its own camera style that enables an author to write his film by himself (16mm camera and portable magnetophone). It has its pioneers who can penetrate beyond appearances, enter the unknown world of daily life (...) Can we now also hope for films that offer humane treatment of workers, the lower middle classes, bureaucrats and the men and women in our enormous cities? (...) Will cinema offer a means to rip away the membrane that isolates us from each other in the street, in the subway, in the stairwell of our apartment building? The search for a new cinema verité goes along with the search of cinema for brotherhood.<sup>34</sup>

Comparing cinema verité to direct cinema, one usually opposes the former's provocative use of the camera to the latter's attempt to conceal its presence. In the case of Rouch and Morin's work, *Chronique d'un été*, which is often considered as exemplifying cinema vérité, it would be more appropriate to speak about an ambivalent camera that is, by turns, provocative, self-effacing, aggressive and empathetic. Morin himself has commented on this ambivalence as an "ideal mode of relationship" to be achieved by the media. He offers a description of the ideal mediatic relation between interviewer and interviewee:

The best interview results from a balance or rather an alternance between the provocative,

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<sup>34</sup> Edgar Morin, "Pour un nouveau cinéma-vérité", in *France-Observateur*, no. 506, January 14, 1960.

even the polemic style and the listener's style. It is important to alternately break through the act and its mask, to get an interviewee to come out of his reserve or to force him in or, at other times, to shut up and let him speak ... The complete interviewer is polyvalent, apt to be altogether provocateur and listener. In this case, he is effectively a true dialoguist.<sup>35</sup>

The idea of a warm, casual, friendly relationship between the filmmaker and his subjects is as much a part of *Chronique d'un été* as is provocation. This longing for a change in the filmmaker-subject relationship, grounded in a rather naive view of human brotherhood, is something Morin shares with the direct cinema movement.

Moreover, even if their strategies differ, both the direct cinema filmmakers and Morin and Rouch share the idea of the subject's duality, a split between social appearance and inner reality. They are moved by the same desire to get people to "interrupt the show," to rip away the social mask and unveil their authentic basic being. Morin defines the in-depth interview he aspires to in his film as "an effort directed toward the elucidation of the hidden self."<sup>36</sup> Of course, there are some basic differences between Morin's thought and that of cinema direct in this respect. Indeed, he considers that people wear a mask not only in relation to others but also for themselves: "The self," he says, "appears not as an irreducible unit but as a system which can be compared

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<sup>35</sup> Edgar Morin, "L'interview dans les sciences sociales et à la radio-télévision", in *Communications*, no. 7, op. cit., p. 70.

<sup>36</sup> Edgar Morin, *ibid.*, p. 69.

to that of the atom. The core itself is not made of a basic element, but involves a dualistic structure around which are alternatively displayed and embodied personalities that are more or less crystallized, some more intimate, secret and deeply embedded; others more socialized (roles). There are often conflicts and misfits between inner 'personalities,' and between the latter and outward social appearance."<sup>37</sup>

Thus the yearning of Morin and others that media could help the individual cope with his atomized personality by establishing better self-knowledge. There is obviously a psycho-analytical dimension to this approach, but one that direct cinema does not confront. Yet at base, the two methodologies share a common distrust for social facades and a conviction that social ritual draws people into a dialectic between the inner self and the image they project to an outside world where falsity and deception abound. They view man in social settings as a puppet, filling out a role for others but a role that also betrays himself. Catch people on film when they break away from such controlled civility, say Morin and Rouch and direct cinema enthusiasts, and you capture the true self. Marker, however, differs from this viewpoint.

He does not subscribe to its somewhat Rousseauist vision with perceived interstices between the social persona and the real

<sup>37</sup> Edgar Morin, *Le vif du sujet*, Paris, Seuil, coll. Points, 1969, p. 153.

person <sup>38</sup> and therefore he does not stand by the importance of establishing intimacy in his approach to interviewing. Such familiarity in documentary filmmaking is no guarantee of authenticity, Marker would maintain. Accordingly, there is no attempt on his part to establish in *Le joli mai* an intimate and casual relationship between himself and his subjects, especially if it were oblivious to the filmic situation. Even with the people he knows well there are few, if any, convivial exchanges. Moreover, he always retains the French language's formal address of second-person plural in *Le joli mai*. Speech is pursued in the film as a social act, but a regulated one.

If Marker, similar to Morin and Rouch, exploits the exhibiting power of the camera, this is done with different ends in view, which Morin himself has accurately denoted:

To interrogate is to question in the double sense of the word: the search of what lies at the bottom of the soul (let's identify it as such)--that which is hidden and precious--can become an act of torture. On the other hand, in a world where relationships are dominated by form, convention, etiquette, roles and masks, the interrogation appears as provocation.

This is true for the extreme form of provocation; but one must also understand 'provocation' in a wider, less dangerous sense: as the tool of humanity's seekers and the pursuers of truth; with camera and microphone in hand, they stir the tranquil surface of daily life and, by their own intrusion, provoke the revealing event. This is the kind of

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<sup>38</sup> Jean-Jacques Courtine and Claudine Haroche develop this point of view in their historical study, *Histoire du visage, XVI<sup>e</sup>-début XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, Rivages/Histoire, 1988.

provocation Marker deploys in front of the Paris stock market in *Le joli mai*.<sup>39</sup>

Contrary to Morin, as the sociologist himself points out, Marker rips away no social masks in order to expose the truth they may conceal about the people he films. Never does he prod his subject into losing emotional control in a ploy to uncover a personality radically different from that displayed in the social contacts of daily life. Morin's reference to the stock market sequence is a key one to understanding Marker's relationship to his subjects in *Le joli mai*.

As one recalls in that scene, Marker is interrupted unexpectedly by a casual passer-by at the bourse who angrily objects to the filmmaker's line of questions and choice of interviewee. Rather than simply carrying on, Marker exorcises the potential spontaneity by interposing a clapboard on screen before allowing the man to speak his mind.

"The clapboard," as Michel Chion puts it, "has long been a distinguished symbol of the seventh art; it is the cinematic equivalent to the majordomo's three knocks in theatre to signal curtain-rise: 'The magical promise of a spectacle to come.'" <sup>40</sup> In *Le joli mai*, speech is not captured or used haphazardly; it is staged...orchestrated as a ritual of cinema, whose rules and constraints are openly displayed. Had Marker felt that

<sup>39</sup> Edgar Morin, *Le vif du sujet*, op. cit., p. 275.

<sup>40</sup> Michel Chion, *La toile trouée. La parole au cinéma*, Paris, Etoile, Cahiers du cinéma, 1988, p. 11.



uncontrolled spontaneity was the guarantor of an expression's authenticity, he would have let the businessman freely intervene.

But this is not the case. To the contrary, Marker encourages self-control and the individual's awareness of the governing social dimension to each interaction. If consciousness of a filmic situation bears influence on people, it produces a deliberate reinforcement of their gestures' natural theatricality. Indeed, for Marker, the social mask people choose to assume is not a cover to be torn away but rather a mode of expression of their inner personality. One is tempted here to surmise that Marker wouldn't disagree with a statement from Lydia, the costume designer whom he interviews at length in *Le joli mai*, who says that costumes "are a way to bring out one's personality."

Considering Marker's outlook on the relationship between private and public sides in the individual, one could expect that considerable attention be given to body language in *Le joli mai*'s depiction of individuals. Portrayal means not only listening to what people have to say, but also observing how they say it, since "each movement of the body is a movement of the soul," says Marker.<sup>41</sup>

Though the bulk of the film's emphasis admittedly falls on speech, people's gestures and facial expressions are scrutinized with remarkable precision by Pierre L'homme's camera; speech is not only uttered but performed in the film. L'Homme does not fail

<sup>41</sup> Chris. Marker, *Coréennes*, Paris, Seuil, 1959, p. 25.

to miss, for example, a young black African's closed fist hitting a tabletop in a sign of revolt when talking about white neo-colonial domination. Nor does he neglect a host of other physical reactions just as expressive: the joined fingers of young lovers as they blandly profess their political indifference to the world; the controlled punctuations of the ex-priest's hands as he explains why he left the cloth; the delicate finger movements of Lydia sewing clothes and caressing her cats. All of these bodily movements add meaning and emotional weight to their owner's words. It is thanks to extensive use of close-up shots--and the very length of those shots--that they are brought to the viewer's attention. By keeping the same framing in close-up on his subjects for extended durations, Le joll mai's filmmaker compels us to observe the slightest change in facial expression, or the ingrained tic that complements speech, such as the nervous forward-tilting bob of the clothing salesman's head as he converses, a gesture that only seems to confirm his earlier revelation to Marker that he "has problems adjusting to modern life."

Occasionally Marker lets body language stand by itself to deliver a silent message. This is sometimes done to powerful effect, as in the haunting close-up shot of an adolescent girl, her pensive and melancholy face staring out from the balcony of her family's new apartment in a public housing project. Preceded by scenes from the enthusiastic tour of their new residence by her mother and siblings, the shot of the girl's perplexed gaze subtly

suggests her apprehension and doubt about living in such anonymous quarters.

At other times faces in several *Le joli mai* sequences are invested with metaphorical value. This is seen in the film's final catalogue of faces that Marker studies for their expression of sorrow which, he seems to be saying, stands for universal recognition of the sadness underlying the human condition or, at least, a certain melancholy coursing through the people of Paris in 1962. To such filmic moments Deleuze's observation about the status of the body in modern cinema accurately applies to Marker's work:

'Give me a body then': this is the formula of philosophical reversal. The body is no longer the obstacle that separates thought from itself, that which it has to overcome to reach thinking. It is on the contrary that which it plunges into or must plunge into, in order to reach the unthought, that is life.<sup>42</sup>

Marker's interest in the body for its fleeting, revelatory gesture is a constant in his work, even becoming in a film like *La solitude du chanteur de fond* a central concern. Such a search for expressivity is paralleled in *Le joli mai* by a proclivity for "photogeny."<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2. The Time-Image*, op. cit., p. 189.

<sup>43</sup> Photogeny as Epstein understood it. On the issue see Jacques Aumont, *L'Image*, Paris, Nathan, 1990, pp. 240-244. See also his "Image, Visage, Passage", in *Passages de l'image*, catalogue of the exhibit bearing the same name, Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou, September 19-November 18, 1990, pp. 61-70.

In a 1958 article for *Les cahiers du cinéma*, Marker observed: "Twentieth-century man does not want to be held back by charm's spell, he wants to deal with things quickly--and we know only too well how disadvantaged he is as far as time is concerned..."<sup>44</sup> Marker's own willingness to submit to and linger on life's charms, however, is evident. Throughout his works of photography and film he constantly expresses fascination for the beauty of the human face. The young girl on the housing project balcony in *Le joli mai* is presented as much as for our contemplation as for what her image may lead us to think about her state of mind.

This is only one among several such affectionate portraits--usually with tight framing--of the human face in the film. Others include the camera's fixation on a blonde woman's profile during the scene involving the theatre audience and Marker's sensitive depiction of a contented emigrant worker and his young son watching TV at home together.

Thus, there is ultimately in *Le joli mai* a real tenderness for filmic subjects and a pleasure in discovering them through the camera's viewfinder. As Marker himself says in his "Letter to G Cat" (*Lettre au Chat G*), a text from his photographic essay, *Coréennes*: "At the heart of this voyage lies human friendship; the rest is silence."<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Chris. Marker, "Une forme d'ornement", in *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 8, January 1952, p. 68.

<sup>45</sup> Chris. Marker, *Coréennes*, op. cit.

**CHAPTER III:**  
**A BIENTÔT J'ESPÈRE**

In March 1967 Marker, accompanied by Antoine Bonfanti and Michèle Boudier, came to southeast France. He was invited by René Berchoud, a member of the workers' cultural organization (C.C.P.P.O.: Centre culturel populaire de Palentes les Orchamps) of La Rhodiacéta, a textile factory in the town of Besançon near the Swiss border. Berchoud sent him the following message: "If you are not touring China, consider a trip to Besançon; I have the feeling important things are happening here."<sup>1</sup> Later joined by his partner, Mario Marret, Marker and his team cooperated with the factory's workforce to produce *A bientôt j'espère*. It takes as its starting point the failed attempt of La Rhodia's workers to go on strike in December 1967 for a second time, following their first successful protest and factory occupation in March of the same year. The thrust of the film, however, goes far beyond mere coverage of these two singular events. It offers an analysis of the protest's *raison d'être*, which its makers felt was to be mirrored on a wider scale in France.

From the very start, the voice-over commentary identifies what Marker perceived as the peculiar interest of the La Rhodia

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpt from a stencilled text signed by the SLON group and distributed prior to the film's screening at the Suresnes Cultural Center along the western edge of Paris on December 13 1969: "Slon = deux films = *A bientôt j'espère* et *Classe de luttés*."

strike: the originality of the strikers' demands--qualitative rather than quantitative--in relation to more "classical" strikes whose aim was limited to obtaining a wage increase. In this sense he interpreted the strike, along with its factory occupation, as symptomatic of a changing trend in the worker movement in France:

March 1967: "the big strike" enters La Rhodia's vocabulary. An original strike for its duration--an entire month--and for its form, the occupancy of an ageing factory neglected since 1935. But above all, original for the idea, constantly expressed, that disequilibrium connected to working conditions leads to disequilibrium in one's entire life, for which no hike in salary can compensate. Indeed, the issue is not to negotiate one's "happy" absorption into a civilization of leisure in the American style, but to question that very civilization itself. The tangible result of this strike is not what percent salary increase is obtained but the education of a whole generation of young people who have discovered the nature of their absorption, the definition of their struggle.

More than simply a demand for improving living standards, this demonstration was, for Marker and Marret, a revolt in the name of human dignity. Such interpretation, clearly stated at the beginning of the film, is supported by interviews of factory employees in the privacy of their homes and often in the company of their wives. They relate in detail the effects their working conditions have on their personal and family lives. In words that echo certain contemporary criticisms voiced by the Situationists<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See the bound compendium of the issues of *Internationale situationniste* 1958-69, Paris, Edition Champ-Libre, 1975. See also

about life in modern society, they denounce the automation of work at La Rhodia that kills personal creativity and dehumanizes daily routine. "In life, you eat when you are hungry," says an employee. "At La Rhodia, you eat when the electronic brain tells you to do so because the production schedule orders a break." The workers declare revulsion for a world where "a guarantee against the risk of starvation is exchanged for the risk of dying from boredom,"<sup>3</sup> a world where work is so exhausting and mentally stultifying that by day's end workers can do little more than collapse in front of their television set.

In contrast to these stark assessments of their daily life the workers describe with great enthusiasm during interviews on the factory floor their memories of the previous, successful strike at La Rhodia in March. The spontaneity, solidarity and celebratory

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Raoul Vaneigem, *Traité de savoir-vivre à l'usage des jeunes générations*, Paris, Gallimard, 1967, pp. 51-57: "What is left of human verve, of potential creativity in a person yanked from sleep at six in the morning, jostled by commuter trains, deafened by clanking machines, wiped out, stupified by the grinding pace, by gestures stripped of meaning, by statistical monitoring, and then thrown out at the end of the day into train station hallways, the departure point for tomorrow's hell? (...) From adolescence to retirement, the 24-hour hour cycle is composed of nothing but a succession of fracturing blows: the breakdown of private rhythms, the tyranny of time-as-money, submission to the boss, the crush of boredom, the crush of fatigue (...) Because automation and cybernetics lead us to expect massive replacement of workers by mechanical slaves, forced work reveals its pure adhesion to the barbaric procedures used to maintain order. The authorities create just the right dose of fatigue necessary to ensure the passive assimilation of televisual diktats." For another (non-Situationist) analysis of the tyranny of the time-clock, see Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the 20th Century*, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1974.

<sup>3</sup> Raoul Vaneigem, *Traité de savoir-vivre à l'usage des jeunes générations*, op. cit., p. 8.



mood the factory occupancy generated was a spiritual release for many participants from the drudgerous constraints of assemblyline labor:

We could come and go into the factory as we liked. We could eat when we wanted. No one bothered us. There were films every night; it was terrific. (...) The best thing was the strike's atmosphere. Everyone felt good about it--everyone. Really, it was great...especially the movies. Some nights there was even dancing. It was fabulous.

Everyone got together and, for the first time, we lived through a collective experience for at least eight hours each day in the canteen and other parts of the factory. We experienced something we had never had before. (...) We came to truly know each other.

In addition, the film probes the mechanisms of public speech and union leadership: what brought certain young workers to become union leaders? how did they learn to stand up and address a crowd? Through such questions, Marker tries to show how the strike--born as a spontaneous, unstructured revolt by a factory workforce--eventually evolves into an plan of action organized and led by established unions. For example, one of *A bientôt's* main focal points is Georges Maurivard, a young C.F.D.T. (Confédération française démocratique du travail) union leader with whom the film opens and ends. His unforeseen leadership, as an ordinary worker in the strike, and subsequent induction into the C.F.D.T illustrates this evolution. (Marker: "How did you first get involved as a protest spokesman?" Maurivard: "Well, there

was a group of us and no leader. So my buddies pushed me forward and said, 'You go do it.'")

Toward the film's end Marker returns to La Rhodia's December strike, which failed. An analysis by Maurivard of the reasons for the movement's abortion brings the film to a close, followed by his assertive encouragement and message of hope for the future, delivered with a wide smile: "Management will get their due because it is in the nature of things. Hope to see you soon." ("A bientôt j'espère.")

In many respects the film, like most of the militant productions of the late Sixties and early Seventies, has not aged well. Imbued with many of the period's illusions, it is vulnerable to the ironic sensibilities of today's audience as it looks back on that era. Moreover, the film's poor overall technical quality, its grayish images--overexposed and ill-focused--the bad sound-track, at times barely audible, demand a considerable share of cultural goodwill on the part of contemporary viewers. Yet the film is valuable for students of social science and radical film history, as well as for those interested in minority access to speech in documentary film and the problems it raises. The following pages will explore these issues in *A bientôt j'espère*.

First, militant films are useful documents for the social historian in that they bear witness to the social struggle of their time. As already noted, *A bientôt j'espère* records a strike of unusual nature for its time--i.e. an impulsive workers' protest and

factory occupancy, combined with an outpouring of communal celebration (dancing, songs of solidarity, etc.). Along with only a few other strikes of similar aim in France during the same year, it pinpoints a social movement whose characteristics would later surface in the "big" wave of demonstrations of 1968, a fact acknowledged by French historians such as Pierre Vidal-Naquet and Madeleine Rebérioux.<sup>4</sup> The social significance of *A bientôt j'espère*, by the way, was sensed by many "soixante-huitards." To wit: students at the University of Nanterre demanded in January 1968 that their professor, Michel Crozier, substitute the film for his sociology lecture. (He refused.) Moreover, Marker himself re-uses some of *A bientôt*'s footage to illustrate the events anticipating France's May '68 social turmoil in his compilation film of 1977, *Le fond de l'air est rouge*, which documents important moments of leftist struggle across the globe during the preceding ten years. But more on that later.

The timing and nature of *A bientôt j'espère*'s understanding of La Rhodia as a strike breaking with conventional pay-related issues is important for those interested in the complex question of how the subsequent and wider protest movement in France was read. It prefigures the famous "breach" discourse ("La brèche") of the following year spawned by Edgar Morin, Claude Lefort and Cornélius Castoriadis in their book of the same name--one of the

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<sup>4</sup> Alain Schnapp and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Journal de la commune étudiante*, Paris, Seuil, 1969, p. 9. Madeleine Rebérioux, "Mai 68 au fil des jours", in *Impact*, revue du cinéma direct, nos. 8 & 9, May, 1978, pp. 12-13.

predominant interpretations in France of May '68.<sup>5</sup> Analyzing the May '68 events in the heat of action, they too argued that the overall protest movement was grounded in a rejection of the degradation of life in modern society and in affirmation of creativity, freedom and self-organization by the various constituents of society. Although strongly challenged, particularly during the 80s,<sup>6</sup> this view was still defended by Castoriadis as late as 1986:

As for most of the Sixties' movement, the ideological atmosphere of May came from a mix of "traditional revolutionary" ideas as well as criticism--though still confused and inchoate--of the traditional structure and agenda of the "worker" and "socialist" movements. Even the worst utopic goals that took place before, during and usually after May were based on a desire to somehow create new conditions for self-organization and spontaneous activity.<sup>7</sup>

Secondly, *A bientôt j'espère* is important for the history of radical filmmaking. The filmmaking group SLON--"Société de lancement des oeuvres nouvelles"--considered the film as the starting point for its involvement in the field.<sup>8</sup> SLON (an

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<sup>5</sup> Edgar Morin, Claude Lefort and Jean-Marc Coudray (pseudonym of Cornélius Castoriadis), *Mai 68. La brèche*, Paris, Fayard, 1968. Republished in 1988 by Bruxelles, Complexe, coll. Historiques.

<sup>6</sup> For a summary account of the various interpretations of May '68, see Laurent Joffrin, *Mai 68. Histoire des Evénements*, Paris, Seuil, 1988, pp. 309-324.

<sup>7</sup> Cornélius Castoriadis, "Les mouvements des années soixante", in *Pouvoirs*, no. 39, 1986, pp. 108-109.

<sup>8</sup> The idea for collective filmmaking--though not fully germinated--was already present in SLON's *Loin du Vietnam* (1966). The film was a protest against U.S. intervention in Indochina and consists of sketches by Claude Lelouch, William Klein, Ruy Guerra, Agnès Varda, Alain Resnais, Michèle Rey and Jean-Luc Godard, with overall coordination by Chris. Marker.

acronym meaning "elephant" in Russian, as Marker reveals in *Si j'avais quatre dromadaires*) was one of the first filmmaking cooperatives formed in France in the late Sixties,<sup>9</sup> followed later by Dynadia, Grain de Sable, The Dziga Vertov Group and U.P.C.B. ("Unité de production cinéma Bretagne"), among others.

Predating the near-mythic moments of 1968--the "Langlois affair" and the "Estates General of the French Cinema"<sup>10</sup>--A bientôt

<sup>9</sup> Another pioneering group is A.R.C., which became "Cinélutte" in 1973. It produced film footage at the beginning of 1968 on the international demonstration in Berlin in support of the Vietnamese revolution. Its images were bought and shown on West German television in February of the same year after the near-successful assassination of the radical student leader from Berlin, Rudi Dutschke. See Guy Hennebelle, *Cinéma Militant*, in *Cinéma d'Aujourd'hui*, no. 5-6, March-April 1976, p. 47.

<sup>10</sup> The Paris Cinémathèque was originally set up as an independent institution but came to enjoy more and more financial support from the French government over the years for its purpose of film preservation. At the same time a growing number of functionaries came to preside on the administrative board. In February 1968 Henri Langlois, accused of administrative incompetence, was relieved of his duties as managing director and replaced by a government appointee. The decision provoked immediate and strong protest from the French film milieu. Press articles, for example, appeared in *Combat*, *Le Monde* and *Le Journal du dimanche*. A support committee was founded in which *Les cahiers du cinéma* played an active role, while a manifesto was published in *Le Monde* on February 10 and signed by 40 filmmakers, including Abel Gance, François Truffaut, Alain Resnais, Chris. Marker and Jacques Rivette. The Cinémathèque's film museum programs were boycotted and major street demonstrations were organized in which many personalities from the film world participated. Eventually the affair spread to other parts of French society and even took on an international dimension when letters of support began to flow in from such luminaries as Charlie Chaplin, Roberto Rossellini and Fritz Lang. This huge wave of protest finally led to Langlois' rehabilitation in April of the same year. See Sylvia Harvey, May 68 and *Film Culture*, op. cit., pp. 14-15. See also Georges Langlois and Glenn Myrent, *Henri Langlois. Premier citoyen du cinéma*, Paris, Denoël, coll. Ramsay poche cinéma, 1986, pp. 319-357. The Estates General of the French Cinema was a vast but ephemeral mobilization--it lasted only three weeks--of the French cinematographic world (technicians, directors, members of the

*j'espère* corroborates the criticism, discussed in the previous chapter, aimed against the interpretation of May '68 as a radical break in the history of French cinema. Politically-committed cinema, of course, was propelled by that event but it had been stirring for some time before. Thus, several of the ideas that would guide collective productions in the post-1968 period, especially that of counter-information, were already present in the making of *A bientôt j'espère*. A propos Marker's pioneering role in alternative cinema, Solanas observed in his seminal 1969 essay, "Towards a Third Cinema": "This [i.e., Marker's experiments with groups of workers] opened up unheard-of-prospects for the cinema, above all, a new conception of filmmaking and the significance of art in our times."<sup>11</sup>

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national actors' union, as well as students in film and photography). It aimed to revolutionize cinema in step with the May '68 wave of protests. The Estates were declared on May 17 during a general assembly of some 1500 people at the Vaugirard School of Photography and Cinema in Paris. Later, on May 26, the assembly was transferred to the Suresnes Cultural Center. Its meetings consisted of endless and unproductive debate during which, among other things, a resolution was passed condemning the "Centre National de la Cinématographie"--the national body that oversaw most aspects of film production, distribution and exhibition in France--and calling for its abolition. Assembly members elaborated numerous projects (19 in all) for a transformation and renewal of cinema, but each failed to win the necessary unanimous approval. Ultimately, the Estates General could only muster support for a short, broadly-worded motion expressing the assembly's opposition to the status quo, but which offered no concrete plan of action for changing it. See Sylvia Harvey, *Mai 68 and Film Culture*, op. cit., pp. 16-27; and Jean-Pierre Jeancolas, *Le cinéma des Français, la Vème république (1958-1978)*, op. cit., pp. 169-172.

<sup>11</sup> Fernando Solanas and Octavio Gettino, "Towards a Third Cinema," *Afterimage*, no. 3, 1971. Also reprinted in Bill Nichols' *Movies and Methods*, op. cit., pp. 44-64.

Criticism of France's official media (radio and television) as conduits for messages the establishment wanted to convey would become, as is now well known, one of the focal points of the May '68 protest movement. Because they were centralized and placed under state control, the media were accused of serving the interests of capitalist society by insidiously molding mass consciousness in order to expand and consolidate prevailing values. Streetside slogans warning against their pervasive effects were plastered across the city's walls: "The police talk to you every morning at 8:00 on your television." ; "Beware: the radio lies!" and so on.<sup>12</sup> This counter-informational movement was fertilized by the spread, a few years before, of the critical theory of the "Frankfurt school," whose reception in France was prepared by the intellectual left's familiarity with Brecht's theories of the apparatus.<sup>13</sup> Its most notorious proponent in France was the German-American philosopher Herbert Marcuse, whose books, *Eros and Civilization* and *One Dimensional Man*, were published in France in 1963 and 1968, respectively. By the early 70s the writings of

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<sup>12</sup> Quoted by Anne-Marie Duguet in *Vidéo, la mémoire au poing*, Paris, Hachette, 1981, p. 67. See also Julien Besançon, *Journal mural*, Paris, Tchou, 1968: "Freedom of information!" (p. 101); "Down with journalists and those who pamper them."; "Down with capitalist, show-biz society!" (p. 141); "Clubbed/Tele-Manipulated/Gassed/Classified" (p. 17), etc.

<sup>13</sup> On Brecht's theories of the apparatus, see Robert Stam's *Reflexivity in Film and Literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard*, Ann Arbor, Michigan, UMI Research Press, 1985. For Brecht's influence on the French Left in the '60s, refer to Guy Scarpetta's *Brecht ou le soldat mort*, Paris, Grasset, 1979.

Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Jürgen Habermas and Hans-Magnus Enzensberger had been translated into French.

Media criticism was, incidentally, part of a wider protest against the cultural domination exerted by the ruling interests over the masses through their control of the "State Ideological Apparatus." The French educational system, for instance, was also a butt of attack prior to 1968. Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron argued in their 1964 book, *Les héritiers*,<sup>14</sup> that mandatory mastery in the school system of bourgeois language as a condition for success in exams excluded a priori members of the lower class and thereby reproduced social inequalities.

The view that the language of the oppressed had value, that giving each and all a guaranteed right to speak and be heard would bring a radical and just change to social structures, reached such a point in the turbulent spring of 1968 in France that Michel De Certeau would offer the following incisive formula in his analysis of the May crisis, significantly entitled *La prise de parole* (The Appropriation of Speech): "Last May, speech was seized just like the Bastille in 1789."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Pierre Bourdieu et Jean-Claude Passeron, *Les héritiers, les étudiants et la culture*, Paris, Minuit, 1964.

<sup>15</sup> Michel De Certeau, *La prise de parole*, op. cit., p. 27. This over-estimation of speech also struck Morin in his on-the-spot analysis during the May '68 period: "Never had we spoken and listened so much; as one anonymous contributor to the many graffiti put it: 'I have nothing to say but I want to say it!'" Edgar Morin, Claude Lefort, Jean-Marc Coudray (pseudonym of Cornélius Castoriadis), *La Brèche*, op. cit., p. 29.



This political and cultural hothouse nurtured a number of film groups that promulgated commitment to struggle in the name of the oppressed and against the control exerted by the ruling class over the production and transmission of messages. They would exploit film's potential as a "weapon" against capitalism. Among them was SLON.

In its first catalogue of films offered for distribution, SLON described its works as "films that ought not to exist." A few years later, in 1971, the group defined more fully its determination to challenge the patterns of domination in official media:

We are told in one breath that film is a profession and that it is a language. By confusing the two notions, one ends up turning language into a privilege, the profession into a monopoly. There is a name for the minority that stands guard over language: the clergy. Should filmmakers be the monks of this New Middle Age whereby they and only they have the right to produce audio-visual works, while others only have the right to consume them? The question has been raised for a long time, and in the last few years some answers are starting to appear: independent production, autonomous groups, parallel cinema. SLON is among them. It is a production co-op, which aims first to function as a tool for those who see a purpose in film and yet who are jostled by the confusion between film language and the entertainment industry. This is not always easy nor convincing, but at least there is an effort to follow a steady course where expression and information cease to be buffeted by money and power.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> SLON, "Répertoire Slon 1971-1972", in *L'Avant-Scène du Cinéma*, no. 120, December 1971, p. 53.

Unlike other groups such as Dynadia, which only produced works to promote Communist ideology,<sup>17</sup> SLON took a leftist approach that was open at the outset to alternative opinion, especially in its refusal to kowtow to one "correct" dogma or another.

If the existence of alternative film groups that express an exact political line is necessary, even requisite, it is also necessary to find a means of production that is open to all projects, even if this occasionally becomes a point of encounter and conflict. Thus the birth of SLON, not as a narrow enterprise but as a non-biased undertaking, whose self-definition depends on the contribution of its members.<sup>18</sup>

SLON is, of course, a left-wing group but we are not sectarian. We are open to multiple progressive currents, and we include several tendencies. There is no one person who lays down the line at SLON.<sup>19</sup>

Later in 1973 when SLON became ISKRA--"Images, Son, Kinescope, Réalisations Audiovisuelles," (another opportunity for Marker to play on words, since ISKRA was also the name of Lenin's newspaper)--it retained its wide-ranging leftist orientation, as confirmed in the era's canned language during an interview of the group by Guy Hennebelle:

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<sup>17</sup> Bernard Duffort et Michel Van Zele (under the direction of), "Dynadia", in *La revue du cinéma, Image et son*, no. 249, April 1971, p. 37.

<sup>18</sup> Bernard Duffort et Michel Van Zele (under the direction of), "Slon, un cinéma de lutte", in *La revue du cinéma, Image et son*, no. 249, op. cit., p. 45.

<sup>19</sup> Guy Hennebelle (interview), "SLON: Working Class Cinema in France", in *Cineaste*, vol. V, no. 2, Spring 1972, p. 17.

Along the front of conflicts based on class struggle and the war against imperialism we enter the fray from a progressivist point of view. (...) ISKRA's political choice takes as its point of departure the reality of struggle--our task is to popularize it and to expand the movements that probe the system we live in.<sup>20</sup>

Though ill-defined, such political openness allowed SLON and ISKRA to tackle a wide spectrum of issues in France and the Third World from eclectic points of view. Indeed, not many subjects escaped SLON's roving eye: Palestine, urban conflict in French cities (police brutality, unbridled commercial development, rent-hike protests, etc.), struggles of the French working class, Cuba's economic failures, political repression in Latin America, anti-colonial war in Africa, and the problems of immigrant workers in France.

Besides a refusal to toe one political line or another, SLON/ISKRA set itself apart from other collective groups in its acceptance of different, or ideologically "incompatible" conditions of screening, distribution and production for its films. Whereas others usually insisted on staying outside established systems, it was willing to work with both alternative and official media networks. SLON films were shown underground, in factories, in commercial cinemas and on major television channels. *A bientôt j'espère*, for instance, was one of the rare politically-alternative films to have been purchased by and shown on France one and

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<sup>20</sup> Guy Hennebelle, "ISKRA: le cinéma militant est une étincelle...", in *Cinéma militant*, op. cit., pp. 36-37.

only (state-owned) television channel known as "O.R.T.F." The film was broadcast in March 1968 on one of its programs called "Camera III" (later suppressed after the May events). The money SLON received for this broadcast helped finance other films, as did sales later on to West German, Belgian, Swiss and Italian TV channels. In other words, promotion of counter-information works, per SLON/ISKRA, did not exclude relations with official media.

SLON also took an active hand in seeing that the films listed in its catalogue were distributed (most, but not all, of the listed works were produced by its own members...one exception being Patricio Guzman's *La première année*, for example<sup>21</sup>). Once released for distribution, however, SLON then relinquished control over how the film would be used. Though it preferred that a film's maker travel along to talk about his work, SLON did not insist--unlike many alternative groups--that a speaker officially accompany each film in order to proselytize. "As we are associated with no political party," said SLON, "we don't have to monitor whether our films are used for one purpose or another."<sup>22</sup>

Nearly all of SLON's productions derived from the goal of counter-information, but it was in the group's film series, *On vous parle* (subtitled: "On vous parle de contre-information"), that this objective was most forcefully asserted. "The purpose of this

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<sup>21</sup> Marker took considerable interest in Guzman's work. He concretely helped the making of the Cuban-Chilian film, *The Battle of Chile*, about the political situation in Chile in 1973 by providing Guzman, following the latter's request by letter, with film stock.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

series," SLON wrote, "is to accord speech to the men and women directly involved in the struggles of our time, without introduction or commentary: either the subjects speak for themselves in the film or they make the film as a statement of their own."<sup>23</sup>

Though it was the first of SLON's works, *A bientôt j'espère* was animated by the same spirit. The film contains its own justification, as expressed by one of La Rhodia's workers:

What turns me off is that when we demonstrated in the streets during the March strike, we were at least four or five hundred strong. But when we watched the news at night they said our number was only about fifty. It was at this point that we realized they were lying. All the people from La Rhodia saw it and they all got turned off. We were all there on the spot; we saw what actually happened. That's why when television people ask for something, it's better to shut up.

Countering the gaps in Gaullist information with images that were not condoned by the establishment--making heard the voices silenced in the official media--was the film's purpose. *A bientôt's* makers knew it was a political act. As stated by SLON prior to a showing of the film in Paris, they hoped to spur social change by "nurturing the views of other militants and workers, who must confront the same problems as *A bientôt j'espère's* subjects."<sup>24</sup>

The film does not, however, grant an exclusivity to the voice of its subjects comparable in degree to that of the *On vous parle* series. It is based essentially on workers' testimony and excludes

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<sup>23</sup> Bernard Duffort et Michel Van Zele (under the direction of), "SLON, un cinéma de lutte", *op. cit.*, p. 46.

<sup>24</sup>In "SLON = deux films = *A bientôt j'espère* et *Classe de luttés*."

that of management, for which classical documentary--in its pretense to neutrality--would have made room. The film's only other voice is that of its makers, who intervene with background information for the viewer about the strike and occasionally inject their own interpretation of events via voice-over commentary and interview questions, subtly expressing criticism toward this or that worker's opinion. In this respect, the film sets itself apart from other alternative productions of the late Sixties and their idealization of the working class, whose words were swallowed whole and filmed indiscriminately as the voice of truth.

Yet its critical stance differs from the biting irony Marker used against interviewees in *Le joll mai*. Instead, there is a palpable sense of affection on the part of *A bientôt j'espère*'s authors toward their subjects, with whom they manage to establish a solid rapport. Concern for finding a common language between filmmakers who were, as SLON put it, "more familiar with Third-World bush fights than with French factories" and, on the other hand, "young militant workers leading their daily grind at La Rhodia in Besançon"<sup>25</sup> was a central challenge for Marker and Marret.

And for other filmmakers in the field as well. In an interview with *Les cahiers du cinéma* in October 1967 a few months before *A bientôt*'s release, Godard speculated on the problems a project of that kind might encounter:

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<sup>25</sup> Again, see SLON, "SLON = deux films = *A bientôt j'espère* et *Classe de luttes*."

The only film that should have been made in France this year is one about the Rhodiacéta strikes. They, indeed, represent a typical case...because of their modernity vis-a-vis the more classical strike [and] because of the intermingling of cultural and financial demands. But there is a problem. People who know cinema don't know the language of strikes and those familiar with strikes talk more like Oury than Resnais or Barnet. Union leaders have understood that people are not equal because all don't earn the same amount of money; one also has to understand that there is another reason why we are not equal: we don't speak the same language. (...)

If a film professional were to make this film, it wouldn't at all be the appropriate one. If the workers made it (technically they could do so if given a camera and some help), then on a cultural level it wouldn't be nearly as adequate a representation of themselves as the actual strikes are. Here lies the gap.<sup>26</sup>

Nevertheless, to have launched the enterprise with a lucid awareness of the difficulties involved and, moreover, to have explored them in the film itself is one of the merits of *A bientôt j'espère*. Its authors understood the need to spend extensive time in debates and discussions not only to gain a deeper inside view of the factory milieu and to avoid the pitfalls of "political tourism,"<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Jean-Louis Comolli, Michel Delahaye et Jean Narboni (interview with), "Lutter sur deux fronts", in *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 194, October 1967. Reprinted in Alain Bergala (edited by), *Jean-Luc Godard par Jean-Luc Godard*, Paris, Cahiers du cinéma, Etoile, 1985, pp. 303-327.

<sup>27</sup> In a round table organized in Rennes on cinema--a large colloquium that took place three years in a row (1977-79) to discuss such problems of militant filmmaking as how to counter the public's indifference toward the field--Gérard Leblanc deplored the fact that many militant filmmakers dealing with the working class never bothered to familiarize themselves with the milieu. "If most militant films are useless--I won't say 'a pain'--that is because

but also to familiarize the workers with their undertaking and to broaden their awareness of what Marker and Marret then believed to be the potential role cinema could play in social struggle.

The C.C.P.P.O. cultural foundation was therefore instrumental in setting up a forum of exchange and discussion between workers and filmmakers. For example, in December 1967 it organized a week of Marxist thought during which it showed films by Marker, Marret and Godard. *Loin du Vietnam* [see footnote no. 8] was featured at Besançon's Casino Cinema and followed by a debate between several of its co-directors (William Klein and Alain Resnais) and the La Rhodia workers.<sup>28</sup> To help legitimize contemporary militant filmmaking, the seminar's organizers also referred to efforts from the distant past when filmmakers put their camera at the service of social change, such as Alexander Medvedkin's "film-train." This interest in Soviet intellectual developments of the '20s is not specific to Marker. Godard and Gorin chose to call their collective "the Dziga Vertov Group," while several film journals and other specialized publications turned

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their objective of shooting images has replaced any preliminary inquiry," he said. "The makers of these films have produced what I call 'political tourism': You drop into a factory, you shoot, you edit and--it's easy--you say: It's a militant film! This is an attitude that has got to change." Gérard Leblanc, in Guy Hennebelle (edited by), *Cinéma et politique*, Paris, Papyrus et Maison de la culture de Rennes, 1980, p. 24.

<sup>28</sup> For a transcription of this debate, see Gaston Haustrate, "Loin du Vietnam", in *Cinéma 68*, January 1968, no. 122, pp. 36-55.



extensively to studies of the period's avant-garde currents in the USSR.<sup>29</sup>

Marker had discovered Medvedkin with great enthusiasm through a haphazard screening of his 1934 film, *Happiness* (originally entitled *Snatchers*) at Belgium's Royal Cinémathèque prior to his involvement at La Rhodia. When he came across a reference to Medvedkin's camera "on rails" in Jay Leyda's *History of Russian Cinema*<sup>30</sup> his interest grew:

I read the page Jay Leyda devotes to him in his history of Soviet cinema where he alone, of all historians, describes the film-train, the "kinopoezd." One train, one man who put cinema "into the hands of the people" (as Medvedkin himself would later tell us); that is reason enough to make a so-called filmmaker dream of new possibilities--especially someone lost in a jungle where fashionable professionalism and

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<sup>29</sup> As Antoine de Baecque notes in his book: "For a few months, mostly between 1969 and 1970, the Cahiers swore only by Eisenstein, Vertov, Kuleshov or Kozintsev--not to mention Lunacharsky, head of Proletarskaia Kultura (the Prolekult). It was a real discovery (this movement had had no precedent in previous Cahiers issues) and punctuated by two key moments: the special issues of May-June 1970 and January-February 1971, entitled *Russia in the 20s* and *S.M. Eisenstein*, respectively." Antoine de Baecque, *Les Cahiers du cinéma: Histoire d'une revue*, Tome II: *Cinéma, tours détours. 1959-1981*, Paris, Cahiers du cinéma, 1991, pp. 240-243. Elsewhere, *Cinéthique*, too, was strongly inspired, if indirectly, by Russian sources. It was indebted to *Tel Quel*, which drew on Marxism-Leninism for its literary theories. (See Jacques Henric's interview of Philippe Sollers, "Écriture et révolution", in *Tel Quel's* selected essays, entitled *Théorie d'ensemble*, Paris, Seuil, 1968, pp. 69-81.) Finally, one should mention the publication in French of Dziga Vertov's writings: *Articles, journaux, projets*, Paris, U.G.E. coll. 10/18, 1972.

<sup>30</sup> Jay Leyda, *Kino. A History of the Russian and Soviet Film*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1983 (first edition, 1960).

corporate control come together precisely to keep cinema out of the hands of the people.<sup>31</sup>

Eventually, Marker's passion for Medvedkin would prompt him, as a member of the SLON group, to co-produce a documentary with Medvedkin in 1971.<sup>32</sup> Meanwhile, his discovery of the kinopoezd in 1967 would inspire a new attempt at putting film "into the hands of the people" after he related the film-train experiment to the militants in Besançon. Out of the ensuing discussion arose the idea of forming a film collective composed exclusively of workers, "the Medvedkin Group." Marker recalls the moment with his usual sense of irony:

One may wonder what spurred a group of French workers new to the field of cinema to call itself the Medvedkin Group. I am pleased to present for the first time a historical answer to this important question. It was the exact moment, in the year of the big strikes in Besançon in 1967, during my description of the film-train experience to Georges, Yoyo, Daniel, Pol, Geo and several others present in René Berchoud's kitchen when I quoted Medvedkin, who said: "We always took pre-filmed captions along with us to insert in our films. And there was one that was duplicated over and over on an entire reel because we always used the caption in every film. It said: "FRIENDS, IT CAN'T LAST ANY LONGER!"<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Chris. Marker, "Le ciné-ours", in *Image et son*, no. 255, December 1971, p. 4.

<sup>32</sup> *Le train en marche* (The Train Rolls On), whose voice-over commentary constitutes a lyrical manifesto for radical filmmaking, is perhaps a better introduction to SLON's views on cinema than the many interviews the group has granted. See the film's scenario in *L'Avant-Scène du Cinéma*, no. 120, op. cit., pp. 11-14.

<sup>33</sup> Chris. Marker, "Le ciné-ours", op. cit., p. 5.

If I include the above anecdote, it is only to demonstrate the intensity of personal relations that surrounded the making of *A bientôt j'espère*. SLON members would later describe the film as the debut of a warm rapport between workers and filmmakers, "a testimony to friendship as much as to a crucial moment in social struggle."<sup>34</sup>

Such a statement should of course be kept in perspective since it was written in a period characterized by strong belief that alternative use of cinema could forge worker solidarity and a new social consensus. Many filmmaking groups that worked with minorities, in fact, made similar claims, arguing that the relationship established with people featured in a film--ie, the learning experience of both subject and filmmaker--was more important than the film itself. Most of their claims were wishful thinking. As far as the making of *A bientôt j'espère* is concerned, however, this was not the case. Indeed, the relationship established between Marker et. al. and La Rhodia's workforce far outlived the film's production schedule. Marker followed the activities of the Medvedkin group for several years thereafter, widening its exposure to cinema, for example, by organizing a meeting in Paris in 1971 between Medvedkin the man and several members of the group bearing his name. According to Pol Cèbe, a Besançon worker and Medvedkin Group participant, Marker took

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<sup>34</sup>In "Slon = deux films = *A bientôt j'espère* et *Classe de luttes*."

the occasion to set up a series of projections so that each side could review the other's work.<sup>35</sup>

A *bientôt j'espère*'s friendly collusion between filmmakers and subjects is reflected in its interviews, whose unmistakable purpose is to aid the strikers in expressing their views. The filming locales chosen for interviews--especially such places as private kitchens--encouraged informality and an atmosphere of trust. Trick questions, hard-pressing queries or sophisticated word-plays that corner interviewees, as in *Le joli mai*, are absent here. In place of provocation there is empathy and acceptance of the hesitations, repetitions and extended silences that mark ordinary speech. Patient listeners, *A bientôt j'espère*'s authors respect the slow verbal rhythms of working-class expression; there is no pressure applied to interviewees to talk, nor are they interrupted in efforts to cut off answers feared too long. Yet neither is the filmmakers' role one of strict passivity, either.

Failure to acknowledge the pitfalls in spontaneous verbal expression is a common fault, since widely criticized, which ran through many radical films promoting themselves as the voice of minorities and under-represented groups. In the name of a universal right to self-expression, they refused to guide or channel interviewee speech by any means except a general question posed as a conversational catalyst. Consequently, we have a legacy of films from the '60s and '70s that inflict the viewer with

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<sup>35</sup> Pol Cèbe, "Rencontre avec Medvedkine," in *L'avant-scène du cinéma*, no. 120, op. cit., p. 9.

ill-focussed, dull and repetitious monologue. Most observers today agree that not everyone has something to say, nor do all say it well or even learn from the experience.<sup>36</sup> As Simone Weil observed years earlier about the difficulties of handling commentary from uneducated sources: "Workers tend to repeat the propaganda of those who are not workers when talking about their own fate."<sup>37</sup> Similarly, a propos *Tout va bien*, Godard said that the workers see themselves via Gabin.

Marker and Marret avoided that sandpit from the very beginning since they understood the limits they would confront in penetrating the bogs of working class speech. While keeping intervention to a minimum, they stepped in when necessary to guide their subjects toward key issues (working conditions, leisure, relationship to the media) and, via short but focused questions, to help them describe in terms as concrete as possible their lives as factory employees.

Another feature that distinguishes *A bientôt* from the majority of militant films in France from the same period is its treatment of the visual. Absolute predominance of sound over image was standard procedure in many of these, as Jean-Paul

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<sup>36</sup> This was René Vautier's opinion on the subject: "Our position at UPCB is to let people express themselves as they like. They'll gradually find forms of expression adapted to what they want to say", in Guy Hennebelle, *Cinéma et politique*, op. cit., p. 23. On the issue see Anne-Marie Duguet, *Video, la mémoire au poing*, op. cit., where she applies this criticism to militant video production, p. 146.

<sup>37</sup> Simone Weil, *La condition ouvrière*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, Tome II, *Ecrits historiques et politiques. L'expérience ouvrière et l'adieu à la révolution*, vol. 2, Paris, Gallimard, 1991, pp. 289-290.

Fargier--one of the first among many detractors to come--deplored in his biting 1976 article, entitled: "For An End to Militant Filmmaking."

What dominates in a militant film is the soundtrack. What dominates in the soundtrack is its speech. Those who make militant films will tell you: when a soundtrack is edited, 99 out of a 100 times speech is the target. The image accompanying the soundtrack follows as it can, merely working as an extra.<sup>38</sup>

By contrast, *A bientôt j'espère* is not an illustrated speech, though it is based on a string of interviews connected by voice-over commentary. This is not to say the film escapes placement of sound over image. For example, when the workers reminisce about their March 1967 strike at several points in the film, there is shown each time a series of eclectic images: photographic and filmic documents of political tracts, banners and graffiti, worker gatherings and street demonstration scenes. This stereotyped iconography of socio-political struggle substantiates and enhances the verbal narration. The visual track sinks to even greater subordination and lower informational content when images reveal, in a long forward tracking shot, the path a worker would take to go to the La Rhodia factory. This is used to illustrate a middle-aged worker's recollection of going to work as a younger man. The image here offers a poor concretization of speech; its function is no more than that of Fargier's "extra."

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<sup>38</sup>Jean-Paul Fargier, "Pour le dépérissement du cinéma militant", in Guy Hennebelle, *Cinéma militant*, op. cit., p: 163.

Nevertheless, imagery is by no means relegated to an ancillary role in the film. There are moments in *A bientôt* when the visual equals and at times overpowers the aural.

An apt illustration of this occurs in a sequence showing the deadening repetitiveness of work at La Rhodia. The camera first takes us inside the factory where a worker, shown in close-up, repetitively executes a two-step task in front of a machine. Simultaneously, we hear the voice-over commentary of another employee: "I would like to find the person who would have the slightest interest in repeating the first gesture 244 times per day and then the other one 244 times per day." This sentence serves as a bridging element to facilitate the camera's shift from the factory floor to shots of the worker-commentator in his kitchen, where the camera frames in close-up the movements of his hands as they mimic the gestures of his work. "One does this, one does that," he says. Here gestual demonstration takes precedent over the accompanying verbal commentary. To fully appreciate the strength of the radical impulse underlying this sequence, which may seem banal to today's viewer, one must bear in mind that *A bientôt j'espère* was made at a time when very few documentary images of the working-class were available in France. As Godard lamented during those years:

If you are looking for an image in France of a worker on an assembly line to illustrate an article, you won't find it, though you will easily find ten thousand images of Kelly at the wheel of a Matra. But as for the workers on the

assembly line at Matra, you will never see them. The fact that they have no right to produce images of their own work, the fact that one must get authorization to film scenes in a factory, these indicate the degree of police control over images.<sup>39</sup>

The importance the film grants to the image is even more manifest during an interview of a working couple employed at the factory. The camera stares at the wife's face (Suzanne) while her husband goes on to talk about the difficulties of combining divergent work schedules with family life, since she works during the day and he has the night shift. Though she intervenes only once to say: "Our work life is empty," the force of her image in this sequence invests the woman's visage with a sense of dignity and authority equalling--if not exceeding--that of her husband.

Suzanne's is but one of the faces on which the camera lingers at length. Interviewees are frequently framed in close-up, as are individuals in mass demonstrations and factory gatherings when the camera isolates their face through choice of framing. Such emphasis on facial expression leads the viewer to conclude

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<sup>39</sup> Jean-Paul Fargier et Bernard Sizaïre, "Deux heures avec Jean-Luc Godard", in *Tribune Socialiste*, no. 23, January 1969 reprinted in Alain Bergala (edited by), *Jean-Luc Godard par Jean-Luc Godard*, op. cit., p. 332. As Gérard Leblanc observes, it is rare for manual labor to actually be shown on screen in audio-visual productions emanating from beyond unions, political parties or independent groups. "The production process is often viewed from a strictly techno-scientific angle," he says. In other words, what is usually shown in films concerning factories and manufacturing sites is their glorified machinery. See Gérard Leblanc, "Le film d'entreprise, une fonction bien particulière", in Marc Ferro, *Film et histoire*, Paris, Edition des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 1984, p. 31.



that SLON's revolutionary point of view of handing over access to expression to the people meant not only giving them back their voice but also their image. SLON views both as equally necessary. As Michel De Certeau and Jean-Louis Bory, two of the few writers who have commented on the film, explain:

This film spells out, with its extraordinarily poignant faces, the power of the working class. (...) The image here has its own strength; it proclaims the revolution: these men are capable of changing everything (...).<sup>40</sup>

They [ordinary working men and women] express their beliefs and hopes with the simplicity and inner peace that come from a conviction felt in their guts. That is wonderful. And what a calm, beautiful smile on the face of the C.F.D.T. worker who bids his farewell message to the factory bosses: "A bientôt j'espère." If only for that smile the film is worth rushing to see when it reaches the theaters.<sup>41</sup>

The importance of the image as a consciousness-raising device would be confirmed in later SLON films. As the group observed in 1971 when quoting Medvedkin in its film, *Le train en marche* (which, significantly, opens with an homage to the vision of Russian filmmakers, notably that of Vertov's *Kino-eye*): "To see oneself in a photo, on a screen, to see one's friends...these are always moving events. Such events can be the lever for common action."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Philippe Blon, "Rencontres avec Michel De Certeau et Jacques Revel", in *Cinéma et Histoire*, I, *Ça Cinéma*, no. 10/11, November 1976, p. 31.

<sup>41</sup> Jean-Louis Bory, "La caméra à l'usine", in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, July 28, 1969, p. 36.

<sup>42</sup> *Le train en marche*, scenario, in *L'Avant-Scène du Cinéma*, no. 120, op. cit., p. 14.

While *A bientôt j'espère* does establish, as previously noted, a more convivial relationship with its subjects than that seen in *Le joli mai*, it also reminds the viewer that what he sees is not the sole product of a friendly and casual depiction of working class life in Besançon but a deliberate filmic interaction between filmmakers and subjects. The latter are well aware of the camera's presence, as evidenced by the glances they sporadically address in its direction. The filmic nature of the exchange is even more pointedly stressed when the sequence involving the worker in his kitchen comes to an end. As the man and his co-workers prepare to take off for the factory, they shake hands with *A bientôt's* film crew before leaving the room. The crew remains off-screen but one sees their hands and a soundman's pole momentarily appear within the frame.

This sequence suggests the contract that links interviewees to filmmakers--literally so, as symbolized by the handshake. Its framing is important for an interpretation of their rapport. Since no camera movement reveals the off-screen space, the frame's border acts as a cutting edge to separate the production space, that of the enunciation, from the profilmic space, thus pointing to the distance separating filmmaker and subject. It calls attention to the power relationship the making of the film establishes between professional filmmakers--those holding the camera and protected from its gaze--and the people placed in front of it. This sequence highlights the impact of the filmic situation on subjects.

The soundpole's on-screen presence--"laying bare the device," as theoreticians in the '70s would put it--confirms filmic mediation between the event and the viewer's perception. As the Medvedkin Group states at the beginning of *Classe de lutte* (1969): "Cinema is not magic. It is technique and science--a technique born out of a science and put at the service of one will: the workers' will to free themselves." No need to delve into this autoreflexive strategy, already widely studied and banalized to the extreme by deconstructionist views in the subsequent decade. Let it simply be said that, while some might attribute these effects to the filmmaker's meager resources or to the film crew's amateurism, A blentôt's exposure of its own filmmaking process could be seen as the underlying motive for the many technical imperfections and quirks occurring throughout the film. What else than a desire to highlight the camera work could explain an obvious change of focus or an abrupt appearance of speed-up motion where nothing in the scene justifies such manipulation? For example, a couple in their living room--TV images blaring in the background--is interviewed about their viewing habits when suddenly the shooting accelerates and a little girl enters the frame in speed-up motion and jumps on the woman's lap as the viewer hears a loud blast. Such arbitrary intervention serves no other purpose than to increase the viewer's awareness of the filmmaking process. Even the sound-track's poor quality can be interpreted as a method to emphasize sound transmission and its mediating effect, though in the case of A

bientôt's voice-over, low sound volume can also be explained by Marker's desire to tone down the filmmakers' voice in regard to that of the workers.'

One touches here on an issue that demands analysis: expression of the filmmakers' viewpoint within the film. Their intervention by no means approaches that observed in *Le joli mai*, but it surpasses the merely "unavoidable" subjectivity of the recording process. The filmmakers do not hesitate to challenge certain statements by subjects nor to use images, voice-over commentary and calculated questions during interviews to interpret the events they record.

One product of this intervention is the skepticism they express toward the workers' overly enthusiastic expectations regarding possibilities for their own "accession" to speech, culture and the accoutrements of society's better half. In a debate about *A bientôt j'espère*, published in *Ça Cinéma*, Jacques Revel notices in one scene that a worker "who confesses admiration for the oratorical skills of the strike's leaders is also the same fellow who--during a general meeting--becomes distracted and forgets to listen to the speaker, perched on a barrel. Very subtly, Marker shades in his doubts about the social utility of speech."<sup>43</sup> Elsewhere in the film Pol Cèbe declares with unshakeable conviction that "for us, our right to culture is equal to the right to have bread or housing." Meanwhile, later in the film one of his colleagues can

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<sup>43</sup> Philippe Blon, "Rencontres avec Michel De Certeau et Jacques Revel", op. cit., p. 27.

be heard to say that the only leisure activities he really enjoys "are fishing and picking mushrooms." These scenes are not adjacent to one another, and it is only the attentive viewer who perceives how discretely the filmmakers express their misgivings in such instances about their subjects' comments.

Intervention is more forceful in the voice-over commentary. Though muted and at times inaudible, *A bientôt's* commentary exudes authorial status. It furnishes the viewer with background information on the work situation at La Rhodia, functions as a bridging element between sequences and proffers interpretation of the worker's strike, both at the film's beginning and end. This last instance, in particular, deserves our attention for its coerciveness. While the image track shows the dejected faces of workers who have failed in their strike, the voice-over commentary says:

Strikes are not a series of alternating revenge between managers and workers, whose results are posted on a scoreboard. They are the steps in a struggle whose victories and defeats merely underlie life itself. These young militants are no more the losers at Christmas than they were the winners in the spring. In each case, they keep learning.

Such comment does violence to the spirit of the workers' image, forcing into it a positive meaning opposite to the one the scene conveys. Supported though it may be by Georges Maurivard, indefatigable union leader, such opinion disrespects--even smothers--its subjects' viewpoint. Furthermore, in presenting

one moment's failure as merely preparing the ground for the next day's success, Marker shoves the film in the direction of political propaganda. This sequence, alongside other elements such as shots of demonstrations and banners and the workers' determinedly optimistic characterization of their December strike as a celebration and expression of solidarity, imbues the film with an "international" slant, as Godard would say.<sup>44</sup>

Ultimately the workers did not fully agree with this outlook on their actions. During a recorded debate on April 27, 1968 (entitled: "Critique/Autocritique") between workers and filmmakers following A *bientôt*'s screen debut, the strikers expressed a certain level of dissatisfaction toward the film, finding it altogether "too bleak because it was lacking perspective and too romantic because it showed militants and strikes but skipped over the preparation for the strikes and the training of the militants, which are the most important aspects of militantism in factories." Responding to their reproach, Marker and Marret replied that such a film "could only be done by the workers themselves." (That ripost was not lost on certain members of the audience, namely those who subsequently formed the above-mentioned Medvedkin Group.<sup>45</sup>)

<sup>44</sup> Jean-Luc Godard: "There are two kinds of militant films: those we call 'blackboard films' and those known as 'Internationale' films. The latter are the equivalent of chanting "L'internationale" during a demonstration, while the others prove certain theories that allow one to apply to reality what he has seen on screen." Marcel Martin, "Le groupe Dziga Vertov", op. cit., p. 87.

<sup>45</sup> Soon after this debate the group began work on a film, completed in 1969: *Classe de luttés*. Centered on a young militant, Suzanne, it follows the hardship of day-to-day militantism and the possible negative repercussions for the personal and professional lives of

Thus, *A bientôt j'espère* cannot be viewed as a fully successful film since it did not achieve what it set out to accomplish.

But even if it fails to overcome the hazards connected to any attempt to grant unbounded speech to minorities, the film stands out for its awareness of the problems, a perceptiveness rarely found in other militant works in France of the same period.

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those who choose to throw themselves into social struggle. As a result of her political battles, for instance, Suzanne suffers a drastic fall--literally--in her career as executive secretary when demoted to the company's packaging department, located in the basement.

**CHAPTER IV:**  
**LE FOND DE L'AIR EST ROUGE**



The second half of the Seventies, during which *Le fond de l'air est rouge* was made, corresponded in France to both a political and cultural withdrawal of the Left.

The retreat got underway at the beginning of the decade, as support for the intense and passionate waves of protest and street demonstration that had mobilized so much energy in the previous years started to recede.<sup>1</sup> The years 1974-75, however, are generally considered as the final turning point for leftist activism in France.<sup>2</sup> Several events around this time deeply shook the movement's convictions and self-confidence. First, let us recall, there was publication in France of Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipeligo*. As many observed, what distinguished the Soviet author's testimony from other dissidents' experience was less the content of his revelations than the extensive audience it reached, provoking widespread investigation into the validity of Marxist-Leninism's justification for one--and only one--party as the alternative to capitalism.

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<sup>1</sup> On the decline of the hopes of the Sixties early in the subsequent decade, see Jean-Pierre Rioux, "Comment changer la vie", in *Les idées en France 1945-1988. Une chronologie*, op. cit., pp. 290-292.

<sup>2</sup> See Jean-François Sirinelli, *Intellectuels et passions françaises. Manifestes et pétitions au XXe siècle*, op. cit., pp. 263-292. Hervé Hamon et Patrick Rotman, *Génération 2. Les années de poudre*, op. cit., chapters 13 to 16 and epilogue.

Another harbinger was North Vietnam's successful military takeover and absorption of South Vietnam in 1975. Conclusion of that event deprived the international left of one of its major rallying points. Not only did justification evaporate for supporting Hanoi's struggle--"a small country crushed by a giant," as Marker says in *Le fond de l'air est rouge*--but longstanding leftist support in the West had to be revised in view of the atrocities soon to be committed in Cambodia in the name of Communism. These developments, along with China's Gang of Four leadership crisis and the subsequent dismantling of Maoism's infallibility, brought an end to the process of transfer by which the left for decades had shifted its allegiance from one country to the next in the hopes that someone, somewhere would achieve the ideal socialist society. Illusions about the Third World and a concomitant faith in its quasi-messianic power to redeem the sins of capitalism consequently also collapsed.<sup>3</sup>

Having already lost their points of reference abroad, French leftist intellectuals were in a state of confusion at home, linked in part to a worsening economic crisis in France. The Communists were at odds with the Socialist-dominated "Union of the Left," whose internal divisions would lead to the left's electoral defeat in 1978...a devastating blow, as Marker would

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<sup>3</sup> See Gérard Chaliand, *Mythes révolutionnaires du tiers-monde*, Paris, Seuil, 1976 and *Repenser le Tiers-Monde*, Bruxelles, op. cit.

observe later that year in his introduction to Le fond's transcript.<sup>4</sup>

The mid-70s represented a watershed in the world of French culture, too.<sup>5</sup> While France's "new" philosophers were on the rise, alternative publications disappeared or began to decline. Jean-François Bizot and Michel-Antoine Burnier's *Actuel*, for example, which for five years had covered counter-cultural movements (women's liberation, rock music, ecology, drugs, underground media, etc.) came to an end in 1975.<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere, the financial difficulties afflicting Maspero's editions of radical political thought were a clear symptom that interest in leftist-related political themes, which had been so lively in previous years, was now crumbling.<sup>7</sup> The notable exceptions were essays on totalitarianism and apostasy by recanting Communists and Maoists.

Nor was the field of cinema exempted. The left's failure to reach its traditional audience became more blatant, both in filmmaking and in film criticism. A popular slogan circulating at

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<sup>4</sup> Chris. Marker, *Le fond de l'air est rouge. Scènes de la troisième guerre mondiale 1967-77. Textes et description d'un film de Chris. Marker*, Paris, Maspero, 1978, p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> See Pascal Ory, *L'Entre-Deux-Mai: histoire culturelle de la France, mai 1968-mai 1981*, Paris, Seuil, 1983, pp. 229-239, and *L'aventure culturelle française 1945-1989*, Paris, Flammarion, 1989, pp. 209-229.

<sup>6</sup> The magazine re-emerged four years later in 1979 in completely different form as an upbeat glossy for the 80s.

<sup>7</sup> Appearing in 1959, Maspero Editions took upon itself to publish the widest possible diversity of leftist political thought, from Marx and Lenin to Guevara to Greece's modern political philosopher, Nicos Poulantzas.

the time--"Cinéma militant? Cinéma chiant!" (Militant films? Boring films!)--reflected the public's prevailing attitude toward the sector. Despite this troubling trend, the French film world had not yet decried the failure of militant cinema. It still had its fierce advocates who soldiered on till the early Eighties.<sup>8</sup> Even these holders of the faith, however, recognized a pressing need to improve radical film production, to broaden its appeal to a general audience. Diverse solutions were concocted to rekindle interest, from joining hands with experimental film<sup>9</sup> to reversion to other media (Super 8, slides, video) that were considered more appropriate than film for conveying radical ideas. Whatever the disputes over the methods needed to secure militant filmmaking's future, a consensus evolved in the mid-Seventies that at least two major changes were in order. First, militant cinema could no longer contemptuously ignore formal considerations or remain insensitive to the viewer's aesthetic pleasure. Second, the oft-favored approach to radical filmmaking--raw, purist and dogmatic--had to be revised if the field was to survive. Major voices, who had previously

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<sup>8</sup> Illustrative of this tenacity was *CinémAction*--an offshoot of *Ecran*--that was founded as late as 1978 to defend militant cinema. Another example was *Autrement's* special issue devoted to radical productions, *Libres antennes, écrans sauvages*, which came out in February 1979. Finally, there were the annual Rennes roundtable debates during the 1977-79 years, which focussed exclusively on problems connected to militant cinema's survival. (See footnote no. 25 of chapter 3.)

<sup>9</sup> See the published debates between militant and experimental filmmakers from the Paris colloquium of 1977 in Guy Hennebelle, Raphaël Bassan and Dominique Noguez, "Cinemas de rupture", in *Ecran*, no. 65, January 1978, pp. 29-47.

sustained a hard-core political line, began to change pitch. In 1974 the *Cahiers du cinéma* made clear its intent to break with its Maoist past in an editorial signed by Serge Daney and Serge Toubiana. If the magazine was defensibly to mount continued support of anti-imperialist films, it had to drop dogmatic criticism and abstract political deliberations and return instead to film analysis.<sup>10</sup> The same year was also a turning point for Jean-Luc Godard. The release of *Ici et ailleurs* marked his estrangement from political militantism, as Raymond Bellour, among others, observed. The film, said Bellour, presaged "the end of political militantism as well as the exportation of its concepts and credo: It no longer falls to us here (in France) to pronounce on the truth elsewhere (in Palestine), nor to adhere to words and images we expect to convey a solitary truth in politics--and politics as the only truth."<sup>11</sup>

Finally, Jean-Paul Fargier, once unswervingly committed to militant cinema as critic (for *Téléciné*, *Tribune socialiste* and *Cinéthique*) and filmmaker, unleashed his controversial 1976 article, "For an End to Militant Filmmaking," (see previous chapter) where he bitterly refuted dogma and the hours wasted "working on film we thought was cinema but which actually

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<sup>10</sup> Serge Daney and Serge Toubiana, "Les 'Cahiers' aujourd'hui", in *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 250., May 1974, pp. 5-10. On this article, see Antoine De Baecque, *Les Cahiers du cinéma. Histoire d'une revue*, Tome II: *Cinéma, tours détours*. 1959-1981, op. cit., pp. 265-275.

<sup>11</sup> Raymond Bellour, "Ici et ailleurs" in *L'Entre-Images: Photo. Cinéma. Vidéo*, Paris, La Différence, 1990, p. 143.

petrified life. Instead of reflecting life, militant film destroyed cinema. Convinced we were doing the right thing, we forced politics to follow dogma."<sup>12</sup>

It was within this prevailing atmosphere that *Le fond de l'air est rouge* was made, which bore the marks of both the contemporary political disarray in leftist circles and the self-doubts surrounding militant filmmaking itself, as this chapter will demonstrate.

The film is a four-hour work of compilation, a stitched-together patchwork of visual documents that, had they been neglected, Marker felt, would have been doomed to oblivion. *Le fond* consists of "unused rushes from militant films originally considered too ambiguous" (many shot by Marker himself) and forgotten TV news--"destined to fade, along with the relevance of the events they recorded"--to which he added excerpts from fiction works as well as new material expressly shot for the film. With these documents Marker tries to retrace the evolution of political issues across the globe from 1967 to 1977 (*Le fond's* subtitle, in fact, is "Scenes from the Third World War: 1967-1977"). It is presented in two parts, symbolically labelled "Fragile Hands" and "Severed Hands." The first section surveys the series of events that guided revolutionary hope in the late Sixties: Vietnam's fight against American hegemony and the protest movements which that conflict prompted

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<sup>12</sup>Jean-Paul Fargier, "Pour le dépérissement du cinéma militant", *op. cit.*, p. 162.

internationally; Cuba as an alternative system to Soviet Communism; Latin America's guerrilla struggles ("Revolution within Revolution"); the workers' movement in France; Red China's influence on the Black Panthers in the USA; and, finally, May '68 and its accompanying faith in youth as a viable political force for effecting change in the world. Marker's organizing theme in this section is the militant enthusiasm that invigorated these developments. But he does not sink into nostalgic evocation of the "good ol' days of revolution." Instead, as will be examined later, his outlook is noticeably critical, especially regarding the left's romanticism.

The second part of the film--"Severed Hands"--deals with the left's successive erosions of faith, starting in the late Sixties, with the unmasking of the Stalinist core within Communist regimes outside the USSR in such countries as Czechoslovakia (the film includes the May '68 Soviet invasion, Slansky's trial and Jan Palach's funeral), Red China and Cuba (Castro's obedient alignment with Moscow), the open dissension between guerillas and regional Communist parties in Latin America, the failure of Allende's popular democracy experiment in Chile and, of course, political conflict in France, where the French Communist Party was divided both against the Socialists within the Union of the Left and by its own internal schisms related to the spreading conviction across West Europe of the necessity to assert independence from Mother Russia's influence.

Nevertheless, this bleak outlook on the left's setbacks does not, apparently, imply Marker's disavowal of his earlier convictions or any shift on his part to the right. Rather, he intimates that it was necessary for the left's own good to take stock of its faults and weaknesses:

Talk of the Left's divisions reminds one of the old metaphor about bringing water to the mill of your enemy. For fifty years certain leftist intellectuals used the hot air of their own denials, calculated ignorance and rejections of evidence to dry up the water running to their adversary...only to discover that the enemy had a windmill.<sup>13</sup>

By the end of the film Marker returns to a brief coverage of various social struggles (out-of-work protesters, labor demonstrations, pro-feminist marches) before closing on a somber note with a metaphor expressing the tragic (inevitable?) outcome of progressive struggle: we watch a scene of wolves hunted down and exterminated by helicopter to the ironic musical accompaniment of "Le temps des cerises," an old French folk song about the return of spring. Resistance is thus presented as doomed to failure in the face of technology's organizing power. Yet in its ensemble the film suggests that, despite the odds ranged against it, political struggle for an improved world is justified when set against the ills of capitalist society...against the corruption, criminality and greed

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<sup>13</sup> Chris. Marker, *Le fond de l'air est rouge. Scènes de la troisième guerre mondiale 1967-77. Textes et description d'un film de Chris. Marker*, op. cit., p. 12.



encapsulated in *Le fond* by the political miasma of Watergate, on the one hand, and the chemical disaster at Minimata, which caused so much ecological and human damage in Japan 20 years previously.

"Hopeless as it may sometimes appear, the fight must never die," is the film's ultimate message, as suggested in its very title (a pun on the French colloquial saying, "*Le fond de l'air est frais*," which, roughly translated, means that it is not really cold, but there is a chill in the air.)

*Le fond de l'air est rouge* engendered a very mixed reception at the time of its release. There was general praise for its impressive research, which unearthed rare footage, but the criticisms levelled against Marker's work were echoed in many quarters. First, it was considered much too allusive and lacking precision in its exposition of events. Indeed, probably more so with *Le fond* than in his other films, Marker did not burden himself with didactic exigencies; the film demands a prior and developed knowledge of the political period examined. Without such knowledge, the viewer is simply overwhelmed by the volume of information dumped on him in concentrated and elliptical form over the duration of 240 minutes. *Le fond de l'air est rouge* was also faulted for the omissions and selectiveness of its view of historical developments.<sup>14</sup> For

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<sup>14</sup> See, among others, Will Aitken, "*Le fond de l'air est rouge*", in *Take One*, September 1978, vol. 67, no. 10, pp. 9-10, and Guy Hennebelle, "*Le fond de l'air est rouge*", in *Ecran 77*, no. 64, December 1977, pp. 43-45.

example, Marker was condemned for including no coverage of the Palestinian issue and practically nothing about urban guerrillas (the Red Army Faction, the Red Brigade, etc.). The film outraged feminists for its lightweight treatment of their struggle's early days; it devotes merely a few brief minutes to their cause--stuck at the film's end. Even then, Marker concentrates on its carnivalesque aspects, ie., women arm-in-arm chanting in the street while kicking up their legs "just like at the Lido," acerbically remarked Nicole-Lise Bernheim, critic for *Le Monde*.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, many felt *Le fond de l'air est rouge* lacked a personal perspective for having merely lashed together heterogeneous political views: "Ultimately," said Jean Narboni at the time, in concluding a debate on the film published in the *Cahiers du cinéma*, "I am tempted to say that it is a 'Maspero Editions' film. Its display of contradictory positions--and nothing else--fits the Maspero spirit."<sup>16</sup>

One can hardly deny the argument that if Marker wished to document the women's rights movement, even in such fleeting fashion, then we could have expected a more dignified depiction of their cause. The same charge, by the way, holds against his portrayal of the black struggle in America. Marker serves

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<sup>15</sup> Nicole-Lise Bernheim, "Notre histoire n'est pas la leur", in *Le Monde*, December 8, 1977.

<sup>16</sup> In Jean-Paul Fargier, Serge Daney, Thérèse Giraud, Serge Le Péron and Jean Narboni, "Table ronde sur *Le fond de l'air est rouge* de Chris. Marker", in *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 284, January 1978, p. 51.

up a most derisory selection of images: instead of peace marches or Martin Luther King we get the near-parodic words of an inarticulate Black Panther spouting off to a small crowd about Mao's thoughts "being all figured out on paper right in this here lil' red book!" The other criticisms of *Le fond*--selectivity of subject, obliqueness, lack of viewpoint--do not reflect a close analysis of the film.

To be sure, had Marker presumed to offer a neutral, all-embracing summary of the period bracketed by the film, such reproaches of allusiveness and partiality would be justified. But, to the contrary, the film works toward a specific point of view, targetting a specific audience. However, it does this indirectly, essentially through treatment of a voice-over commentary spoken by seven different voices, male and female. They are neither neutral..."de-sexed and de-aged"<sup>17</sup> nor deprived of regional inflection as in classic documentary film

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<sup>17</sup> William Guynn defines this neutralization of the voice in classic documentary in his book, *A Cinema of Nonfiction*: "The voice in classic documentary possesses the qualities that Roland Barthes attributes to writing: 'Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing.' The neutralization of the voice--its kinship with the voiceless enunciation of the printed page--is obtained by a work of normalization and resembles the work carried out by phoneticians who attempt to eliminate all individual traits of phonic enunciation in order to produce an average image of sound. The voice has been stripped of its grain, to use Barthes's word. It is not a person, it is a subject. It is not particular, it is general. It has in effect been desexed: always male, a universal, neutered he. It is without age, giving no sign of youth or old age. It is deprived of regionalisms, of sociocultural origins, of signs of class." *A Cinema of Nonfiction*, op. cit., pp. 159-160.

but, rather, distinctive and resonant voices of well-known personalities. Though not labelled in the film, the informed viewer begins to identify the various interlocutors who contribute to the voice-over commentary. The voices of Jorge Semprun, Simone Signoret, Yves Montand, François Périer, François Maspéro and Chris. Marker himself emerge.<sup>18</sup> Nearly all these people are from the same generation (born in the Twenties) and have travelled the same political road together, fought the same causes as fellow French Communists. They do not speak in their own name but function as filmic voices, as Marker stresses in his comments in the film's transcript; nevertheless, the viewer--if aware of their background and whatever personal ties they may have to the topics commented on (some even appear in the film's diegesis due to direct political involvement in the recorded events)--is led to assume that these commentators in some way endorse the voice-over they express. The effect is all the stronger when commentary resorts to the first-person ("I" or "we"). The viewer, then, perceives the film as presenting a collective enunciation but with one voice prevailing over the others: that of Marker the filmmaker. He wrote the commentary and edited the film but is backed up by a polyphony of well-known supporting voices.

This enunciative strategy, with its ambiguous play on the filmic voice versus the personal, has a double effect. First, it

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<sup>18</sup> Le fond's other filmic voices are those of Davos Hanich, Sandra Scarnati and Laurence Cuvillier.

augments the film's credibility by furnishing several trustworthy, anchoring authorities (the voices of "witnesses"). Second, it narrows the film's authorial perspective by defining "the politics of location," as often heard in France during the Seventies. ("Le lieu d'où il parle.") Le fond's perspective on the period covered, as Fargier acutely noted,<sup>19</sup> is that of the generation of French Communists that grew up under Stalin and, consequently, was haunted by the problem of its relationship to the Party.

Such a specific point of view thus seems to justify the omissions in Marker's coverage of the 1967-77 years, as well as the foci chosen...such as the inordinate attention paid to the workers' movement in France or the efforts in Latin America to break away from the influence of Soviet Communism. One should add, too, that the film is most probably addressed to the "children of Stalin." If so, then Marker's purpose is not to inform viewers but to refresh their memory by "retracing the steps" taken by the left during the decade covered by Le fond. The film assembles for the viewer innumerable acts and statements from those years in order to force him to ponder the contradictions and tensions that splintered international resistance movements. *Le fond de l'air est rouge* is political essay, not historical reconstruction.

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<sup>19</sup> Jean-Paul Fargier, et al. in "Table ronde sur *Le fond de l'air est rouge* de Chris. Marker", in *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 284, op. cit., p. 47.

But unlike other Marker films (*A bientôt j'espère*, for instance), the voice-over commentary of *Le fond* does not steer the viewer through the film's material in order to provide interpretation or to establish meaning. This refusal to cast the spectator in a position of passive dependency on authoritative commentary does not suggest a withdrawal of the filmmaker's own voice,<sup>20</sup> contrary to Narboni's complaint. Marker's editing reveals a minute study of the content and form (composition, movement, rhythm, camera position, distance to subject) of each shot before combining them to develop the film's point of view. He relies, in other words, on the relationship between different visual and oral documents, further enhanced with rhetorical effects (metaphor, metonymy, antithesis) to map out the film's argument. His choice of exposition is in line with the mid-Seventies' reaction against dogmatism (referred to at the beginning of this chapter).<sup>21</sup> Deliberately less coercive than

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<sup>20</sup> "Voice" here is to be understood as defined by Bill Nichols: "By 'voice' I mean something narrower than style: that which conveys to us a sense of a text's social point of view, of how it is speaking to us and how it is organizing the materials it is presenting to us. In this sense 'voice' is not restricted to any one code or feature, such as dialogue or spoken commentary. Voice is perhaps akin to that intangible, moiré-like pattern formed by the unique interaction of all a film's codes, and it applies to all modes of documentary." Bill Nichols (edited by), "The Voice of Documentary", op. cit., pp. 260-261.

<sup>21</sup> This hostility has since been reinforced by post-structuralism's critique of 'mastery' and later by Lyotardian post-modernism. See François Dosse, *Histoire du structuralisme*. Tome 2: le chant du cygne, 1967 à nos jours, Paris, La Découverte, 1992 and two books by Jean-François Lyotard: *La condition postmoderne* (Paris, Minuit, 1979) and *Le Postmoderne expliqué aux enfants* (Paris, Galilée, 1986).

authoritative commentary's direct mode of address, it avoids reductionism in historical representation; contradictory positions can be voiced, as Marker himself notes in a statement heavily influenced by the historical materialist filmmakers' view of editing:

Editing, one would hope, restores history's polyphony. No place here for gratuitous linkages or mean-spirited attempts at forcing people to contradict themselves (who hasn't contradicted himself at least once?). Each step of this imaginary dialogue aims to create a third distinct voice, born of the first two. Isn't this, after all, the true meaning of dialectics? For once I have tried to use editing (having certainly abused in my day the exercise of control through authoritarian commentary) to give back to the viewer his own commentary, his own power.<sup>22</sup>

Le fond de l'air est rouge's Vietnam war sequence illustrates Marker's indirect expression of his viewpoint-through-editing. It starts with the musical jingle of Radio Saigon and a D.J.'s upbeat salutation--"Good morning Vietnam!"--as we see a US military jet taking off. This is immediately followed by real-time pictures and conversation of a fighter pilot in his cockpit during a fire-bombing raid on "Charlie." The use of napalm, while horrific, is, for Marker, of less significance than the pilot's gung-ho, cavalier enthusiasm for hunting down the Viet Cong in their villages. "Fantastic!"

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<sup>22</sup> Chris. Marker, *Le fond de l'air est rouge. Scènes de la troisième guerre mondiale 1967-77. Textes et description d'un film de Chris. Marker*, op. cit., pp. 6-7.

we hear, as he beams a smile into the camera when scoring a hit. "Look at 'em run!" His indifference to the suffering and annihilation that his aircraft's 6000 pounds of bombs inflict on the ground below is the focal point of Marker's editing. In counterpoint to the pilot's triumphant parting shot--"I really wish I could go in on a [ground] clearance search just after one of the air strikes to really see how effective they are!"--Lefond's author opposes the faces of Vietnamese burn victims displayed as "living exhibits" during a public inquiry into the effects of napalm.

Similarly, when the man boasts of how his bombs can burst eardrums, leaving their human targets "kind of senseless," Marker again plays on the vertical axis of editing by opposing an image of a man whose body has been scorched into smooth featurelessness. No commentary is needed--or offered. Here, he uses dialectical editing (a discordance between the aural and the visual) to subvert the fighter pilot's words: his vacuous patriotism is tied to unthinkable brutality. The result is an unmistakable anti-American slant.

More subtle but just as manipulative is subsequent footage shot in the USA. One sequence shows a priest in Washington, D.C., surrounded by anti-Vietnam War demonstrators as he recites a prayer in support of draft dodgers. Marker cuts quickly to a close-up shot of a young man, presumably one of the priest's supporters, who explains his group's platform for



political action once elected to office. The color and the grain of the image, together with the shooting style, establish formal continuity between the priest-and-crowd and the young man, whose words--because they abut the prayer--lead the viewer logically to expect an anti-war speech. Gradually one grasps that what he says is exactly the opposite: he belongs to a neo-Nazi group that wants to execute every "traitor to America's cause." This linkage shows how disturbing the film's structure can be for the unsuspecting viewer. Through such abrupt contradiction in the form of juxtaposition--which, in a very different context, Noël Burch calls "structures of aggression"<sup>23</sup>--Marker coerces the spectator to employ his viewing skills by carefully scrutinizing the soundtrack and the visual. After the camera reveals a swastika on the man's arm band, his comrades chant: "Bomb Hanoi!" At this point there is a cut to Wall Street executives who repeat the same slogan, a positively diabolical juxtaposition by which Marker throws both groups into the same political pot. By manipulating archival footage throughout the sequence, a devastating overall impression consequently remains with the viewer that those who participated in or supported America's war with Vietnam were either imbeciles, brutes or fascists.

Marker's manipulative intent is not always negative, however. Sometimes conflicting images or conversations are

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<sup>23</sup> Noël Burch, *Theory of Film Practice*, London, Secker & Warburg, 1973, pp. 122-135.

fused to accentuate the confusion surrounding particular events. For example, a shot of a French worker who asserts that in 1968 "the unions never called for any strikes" is followed by images of union protesters doing exactly that: calling for strikes. Elsewhere, Marker has individual snippets of archival footage build on one another, either increasing a segment's credibility or its emotional impact, such as the film's extended accumulation of statements from workers about their sense of individual pride gained from their involvement in strikes. The series' overall effect conveys their personal glory more forcefully than would a single testimony.

While the editing of archival footage is a principle strategy to develop his argument in *Le fond*, it is not Marker's sole method of intervention. There is also the use of voice-over commentary. Admittedly, it does not overpower subjects' testimony in the film (by granting itself the authority to decide who is right and who is wrong); however, it does more than simply provide background information or contextualize events presented in the diegesis. It offers interpretation that parallels the filmic subject's analysis--sometimes agreeing, sometimes dissenting from it. But again, contradiction or concurrence is not forthrightly stated; it falls to the viewer to uncover it.

Another tactic to express his viewpoint on found footage within a sequence is Marker's use of what Metz calls "non-diegetic inserts." Visual insertions frequently intercut with

subjects' speech to draw attention to one or another selected statement. The result can either be supportive or derisive.<sup>24</sup> Non-diegetic music and colorization of footage are also employed in the film to shade the viewer's perception of found documents.

A study of *Le fond's* May '68 "night of the barricades" sequence reveals several of these strategies. The editing structure consists of a complex intertwining of autonomous voices (the authorial and those of the film's subjects) and images (contemporary and archival) that sets up patterns of correspondence and non-correspondence. Against archival images of this culminating moment of May 1968 Marker creates an aural flux composed of two soundtrack elements that ebb and flow against one another: over the constant, dramatic din of radio newscast and off-screen eyewitness accounts (we hear the excited words of Daniel Cohn-Bendit, for instance) there occasionally arises a sublimely authorial and lyrical voice-over commentary that reminisces "in the present" (ie. from the perspective of 1977) about the event. Coming in intervals, it momentarily dominates the off-screen voices at the center of

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<sup>24</sup> Derisory insertion in *Le fond* occurs, for example, during the sequence where US militant leftist Larry Bensky fervently defends the Sixties' protest movement in America even as it visibly starts to run out of steam. Earlier in the film, Marker refers to these followers of the faith as "racoons who constantly try to wash away the grit and grime of revolution in order to keep its reputation as clean as possible." After Bensky declares in 1974 that "though there are fewer overt signs of political activism [than in the 60s], more people are politically involved than ever before," Marker intercuts with a rapid shot of a racoon.

action. This ethereal, literally poetic (and female) voice--suggestive of all the dreams and illusions the '68 protest seemed to promise--couldn't clash more discordantly with the feverish chatter of the archival soundtracks. The intrusion of lyricism breaks the dramatic tension of the historical voices and diffuses the archival images' impact on the viewer. The process is helped along by Marker's use of musical accompaniment...a cold electronic score audible in the background during most of the sequence. It, too, mitigates against a romantic communion with the Parisian upheaval. Marker himself has commented on this musical style, of which he extracts maximum effect in the film:

I wouldn't want to encourage the popular notion that the synthesizer is an "inhuman" instrument; its possibilities are infinite. But I deliberately chose its most aggressive register as a contrast to the symphonic warmth of Berio's music, which frames the film: [they are] two musical modes that oppose each other just as the glow of lyrical illusion contradicts the icy reality of political conflict.<sup>25</sup>

Notable, too, for its de-dramatizing effect is Marker's insertion of extra-diegetic images. In parallel to the radio announcer's fast-paced reportage of violent confrontation across the barricades the film presents alternating night-time images of the actual event in 1968 and daylight shots of the same sites ten years later: all is normal; traffic flows smoothly; pedestrians

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<sup>25</sup> Chris. Marker, *Le fond de l'air est rouge. Scènes de la troisième guerre mondiale 1967-77, Textes et description d'un film de Chris. Marker, op. cit., p. 24.*

go quietly about their way past the construction fences that have long replaced yesteryear's barbed wire. This temporal disjunction accentuates the passage of time, forcing spectators to relate to the historical documents--both visual and aural--from the distancing perspective of 1977 when Le fond was released; the drama of the archival material is diluted by the intimation that the boiling events depicted in the film ultimately left little, if any trace. Marker's set of past/present incongruities--the mediatic/lyrical in the soundtrack and the '68/'77 split in the visual--excludes any re-living of the "barricade battle" as a heroic moment that a more straightforward montage of archival footage and its contemporary voices would have elicited in the viewer.

A final word on editorial manipulation. Le fond's colorization of archival images in monochromal tones of red or yellow, similar to that of old movies, can be seen as a last procedure for distancing the viewer. Though colorization in the film furnishes emotional connotation, its main goal is to reduce the analogical force of the images by underscoring their status as historical documents, as ghost images of a fading past. In summary, the textual voice in this May '68 night-of-the-barricades sequence uses complementary strategies to confound mythologization of the historical events proper. As the antithesis of nostalgia, they propel the viewer into a critical posture.

The film's complex expository mode, which these pages have tried to illustrate, exerts considerable strain on the spectator's attention and memory, demanding active involvement in conceptualizing the links between the various fragments that the film sews together. The spectator has to participate in the construction of meaning. He has to follow a line of argumentation by deciding how--whether--there is correspondence or dissimilarity between the images and sounds that Marker's editing places into parallel with one another. He must relentlessly determine if each new statement, each new image contradicts or confirms what has transpired previously. In short, watching *Le fond de l'air est rouge* is undeniably laborious.

Elaborating point of view much less clearly than the direct address of classic voice-over commentary, Marker's work can often confuse the viewer and lead to divergent interpretations. That he has pushed complexity of editing too far--interweaving so many fragments, intermingling so many voices that the viewer, tired and confused, can hardly follow the point--is certainly a serious reproach against the film. Several viewings, however, do help to alleviate many of the ambiguities (assuming one has the time to do so). The film's problem is not that it lacks perspective but that its argumentation is too dense. *Le fond de l'air est rouge* inadvertently circumscribes the limits to

the intellectual demands a filmmaker may reasonably levy on his viewer...

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Marker's 1977 production is also a self-reflexive work. As in *A bientôt j'espère* of 10 years earlier, it reaffirms the need for counter-information. Criticism of establishment media runs throughout *Le fond*, with Marker dialectically opposing official representation of events to those offered in militant films. For example, a succession of excerpts from clandestine documents recorded in Mexico, the USSR and Argentina is followed by a sequence from a French television show about the 2500th anniversary of the Persian "crown." The sound of a broadcast journalist's unctuous, celebrity-style coverage of the royal event is overlapped by commentary by one of *Le fond*'s filmic voices, which employs the same vocal pitch and cadence to describe how the Shah oppresses the Iranian people...thus covering Iran's "other" notable events that the TV announcer chose to bury under obsequious drivel. (Marker's critique of televisual information has, of course, become today's cliché: TV news is empty, devoid of content.) The tension between the two--official newsreel and militant film images--is one of both content and form. Marker kept *Le fond de l'air est rouge*'s formal heterogeneity of documents without trying to smooth over their imperfections; information is not to be

presented as a "causa mentale" but as raw material with all its "texture, surface irregularity and splinters."<sup>26</sup> We see radical cinema's blurred, grainy images jostle with TV's seamless cathode images, over which the viewer's gaze glides effortlessly. The problem for Marker, however, is not one of specificity (ie., the superiority of filmic versus cathode-generated images) but how official media handle images. Produced for rapid consumption and bound in a continuous "hemorrhaging" stream,<sup>27</sup> TV images are ephemeral and thus doomed to oblivion. They unfurl a "history without memory":

Because they belong to television news, these images are immediately absorbed by the shifting sands on which they are founded--where illusion passes for perception--and thus disappear into the collective unconscious.<sup>28</sup>

Marker's mission, then, would be to fight History's amnesia by retaining traces of the past. In *Le fond de l'air est rouge* he never veers far from the notion of "cinema as archeology," a concept that, as we have seen, already underpinned the making of *Le joli mai*.

One sees in *Le fond* his fascination for the power of filmic images to capture reality. As the film's second section starts,

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>27</sup> Serge Daney, "Le therrorisé (Pédagogie godardienne)", in *La rampe. Cahier critique 1970-1982.*, op. cit., p. 83.

<sup>28</sup> Chris. Marker, *Le fond de l'air est rouge. Scènes de la troisième guerre mondiale 1967-77, Textes et description d'un film de Chris. Marker*, op. cit., p. 10.



the following question flashes on screen: "Why do images sometimes tremble?" This is immediately trailed with voice-over dialogue between filmmakers (including Marker's unidentified voice): "It happened to me in May '68 on Boulevard Saint-Michel." Another voice chimes in: "It happened to me in Prague during the summer of '68 (...) when I saw the rushes. I saw the shaking images. Though I steadied my hands, the camera still seized the tremulous reality." or "It was in Santiago, Chile. The camera switched into slow motion all by itself..." These exchanges resonate with a quasi-mystical outlook on the filmic image as "imprint sine manu facta," similar to the one that inspired Bazin's metaphor of the Holy Shroud of Turin (minus its Christian dimension).<sup>29</sup>

Yet alongside Marker's awe for the image's power is his doubt about its limits. *Le fond's* author urges the viewer toward a general distrust of images. As seen in his other films, Marker argues against the idea of the transparency of representation. His dialectical style of editing constantly reminds the spectator that *Le fond* is a construct. Within his strategical array, however, certain devices are expressly used to draw the viewer's eye to the film's textual process. For instance, repetition of the same shot in different series calls attention to editing as a process of collating discrete, independent fragments. (Film as an act of writing.) Also, the

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<sup>29</sup> André Bazin, "Ontologie de l'image photographique", *op. cit.*

utter arbitrariness of cutting is pressed upon the viewer via images that have been obviously truncated. These point to--but do not subsequently show--an out of frame space...a blatant violation of one of the basic rules of continuity editing. Rather than create the illusion of a full and seamless reproduction of the real, Marker lays bare filmic vision's partiality. When, in *Le fond*, Régis Debray stares intensively at something off screen in a fleeting shot, we do not see the object of his gaze. Only later does our filmmaker show the same shot in its entirety during which a pan reveals Debray watching a TV report on Che Guevara's death.

Finally, Marker demonstrates the power of sound, via the relationship of the aural to the visual, to determine our reading of an image. This was already accomplished to great effect in *Lettre de Sibérie*, when the same image was accompanied by three different commentaries, each inducing a different reading in the viewer.<sup>30</sup> In *Le fond de l'air est rouge* we hear commentary by Cohn-Bendit--"The students are building barricades"--which slightly overlaps an image that, due directly to the aural's cue, the viewer misperceives. He sees what appears to be a medium shot of water running by a high wall. Not until a giant foot steps on top of the "wall" does he realize

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<sup>30</sup> Regarding this sequence, see Pascal Bonitzer, "Les silences de la voix", in *Cahiers du cinéma*, no. 256, February-March 1975, pp. 27-29, and André Bazin, "Chris. Marker: Lettre de Sibérie", in *Le cinéma français de la libération à la nouvelle vague (1945-1958)*, Paris, Etoile, Cahiers du cinéma, 1983, pp. 180-181.

that what he has been offered is a close-up of a curb-and-gutter. In this teasing way, Marker subverts the reliability of photographic evidence; filmic images are tricky, vulnerable to manipulation and to be accepted only with caution.

Beyond illustration of filmmaking's inevitable filtering and manipulations of reality, Marker moves on to question the very nature of reality itself and how it is depicted in militant film.

For example, *Le fond's* prologue, with its inspirational, anthem-like music and rapid succession of dramatic images (raised fists, angry faces, helmeted police, wounded bodies), could appear to the inattentive viewer as simply Marker's homage to the major political struggles of the previous 10 years. But this is not at all the case. It is "homage" only in the sense that images from these movements are compared to that ultimate filmic symbol of successful popular resistance and heroic martyrdom, Eisenstein's *Potemkin*.

The comparison, however, is not devoid of a certain degree of cynicism. Marker graphically matches shots of gestures of grief, resistance and repression from *Potemkin* to those from militant films covering civil clash in Germany, Belgium, Japan, India and the USA. Through this device he draws analogies between all the images. They are so much alike as to be almost interchangeable, a fact Marker subsequently demonstrates by establishing continuity between shots from *Potemkin* and from militant films of the 60s/70s. This creates,

notably, the illusion of interaction between the Czarist oppressors of Eisenstein's 1925 masterpiece and the wounded protesters from four decades hence.

At the basis of this prologue there seems to lie the meditation of a film editor faced with a plethora of protest scenes that all strikingly resemble one another. How to explain the uncanny similarity of the images if not through their provenance from the same mold, i.e., *Potemkin* and its universally famous Odessa steps sequence? Indeed, Marker's prologue outlines a disturbing reversal between fiction and reality; the Odessa scene served as a model for the posture of resistance behavior in the Sixties. Consequently, those who believed their militant films captured a fresh and spontaneous display of reality were, in fact, only re-capturing (and, in the process, reinforcing) an already well-founded revolutionary myth in film.

Mulling over the uneasy interaction that inescapably unfolds between images and reality, Marker hints at the filmmaker's obligation to distrust his own eyes by shunning simplified and naive perceptions of the world. His admonition has now become a truism today. Witness, for instance, the widespread distrust of images sparked by the continuing controversy over the media's responsibility for propagating untruths about the birthplace of Romania's 1989 revolution. Timisoara's photographed "mass graves"--themselves modelled on depictions of the Holocaust's death pits--turned out to be fakes.

Within *Le fond* Marker uses an explicit example to illustrate his tug-of-war with deception by recounting in voice-over commentary his presence as a filmmaker during a US anti-war demonstration. The event took place in October 1967 in Washington against the Pentagon. A ring of fully-armed anti-riot militiamen protected the building throughout most of the gathering until, following a pre-arranged plan, it withdrew at the last minute, leaving only a few token policemen in place. The threat of resistance thus "removed," the protesters then raced over to the Pentagon. Marker says he filmed that particular moment as a "victory for the protest movement." He also filmed in close-up the bloodied face of a young man--the day's one and only casualty--in such manner that the viewer has the impression that violent confrontation was pervasive. Marker admits that both scenes tricked the viewer, but he felt they constituted a balancing deception against that of the forces of order and their staged withdrawal. The important point here is that the filmmaker knew he was constructing a falsehood. But how often, he wonders, did he unknowingly film a misleading reality?

When you look at all those images of burning buildings in Paris in '68 and then recall the police's stories that they themselves often set fire to their own stations [to stir popular resentment against the left], I have to wonder

just how many of our so-called "victories" were also simply illusions...<sup>31</sup>

Marker's belief in the capacity of militant filmmaking to change the world was based on a "trust in the eye," as fervently expressed in his filmic homage to Medvedkin, *Le train en marche*. "First the gaze," he says, "then the cinema to print the gaze."<sup>32</sup>

The outcome of *Le fond de l'air est rouge's* meditation on the radical filmmaking experience of the 60s and 70s, however, reveals that Marker's faith in the eye and in the value of militant cinema and its claims on political truth have been shaken. How can a work presume to express "the truth" when reality itself is so deceiving, when "you can never know what you film?" The self-congratulatory dichotomy between counter-information and official media that many alternative filmmakers put forward as an opposition between the true and the false became, for Marker, no longer tenable.

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<sup>31</sup> Chris. Marker, *Le fond de l'air est rouge. Scènes de la troisième guerre mondiale 1967-77. Textes et description d'un film de Chris. Marker*, op. cit., p. 180.

<sup>32</sup> *Le train en marche*, scénario, op. cit., p 11.

**CHAPTER V:  
SANS SOLEIL**

Le passé, c'est comme l'étranger:  
ce n'est pas une question de  
distance, c'est le passage d'une  
frontière.

--Chris. Marker

*Sans soleil* continues *Le fond de l'air est rouge's* meditation of militant filmmaking and carries its inquiry into the role and function of images one step further. A self-reflexive film, it, too, acknowledges the limits to filmic images but the objective is no longer to assail the viewer in the name of ideological awareness. Rather, it intends to lure him into the joys and frustrations of creating with images. Marker expresses a desire for, and nostalgic pleasure in, preserving visual memories of "the things that move the heart," he says (quoting the eleventh-century Japanese courtier, Sei Shônagon) and keeps puzzling throughout the film over the proper way to record reality: how to film? how to edit film? how to capture and convey the emotion of fleeting moments?

One of Marker's most intimate works, *Sans soleil* avoids the straightforwardness of first-person address. It unfolds its enunciation by establishing three characters: a "filmmaker" (Marker), and two alter egos--a "freelance cameraman" and a



"video artist." Instead of the formula, "I write to you" (which, notably, begins *Lettre de Sibérie*), it opens with "he wrote to me"....enunciated by a woman to whom are addressed the letters that form the basis of the film's voice-over commentary and which she reads throughout *Sans soleil*, adding her own comments.

The "he" who writes is Marker's first alter ego, the freelance cameraman. He remains anonymous throughout the film until at last identified as a "Sandor Krasna," whose name only rolls by in *Sans soleil*'s concluding credits. A globe-trotter of sorts, he collects images and shares his impressions as traveller and filmmaker with his female correspondent. "Krasna's" trips take him to Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde, Iceland, France, America and, most of all, Japan, where he studies the latter's social rituals, myths, technological growth and daily rhythms in great detail.

This cameraman has a friend, Hayao Yamaneko, a "video artist" and Marker's second alter-ego in *Sans soleil*. Yamaneko manipulates images (including some of Krasna's) with his video synthethizer. Marker, the film's third character, constructs *Sans soleil* by combining Krasna's (beautiful) documentary images and Hayao Yamaneko's "new" (computerized) images with Japanese television footage and excerpts from documentary and fiction films.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Carnaval de Bissau* (Sana Na N'hada), *Cérémonie des grades* (Jean-Michel Humeau), *Guérilla à Bissau* (Mario Marret, Eugenio

The three personae who emerge from the film have no physical presence in it; neither Yamaneko, Krasna nor the filmmaker appear in person. Even their voices are absent, since their words are but indirectly relayed by the female commentator, who is the film's only speaker.<sup>2</sup>

Given the observations-within-observations of *Sans soleil*'s epistolary narration, the choice of single-voice commentary makes room for many ambiguities that surround the identity of the enunciator. The voice-over commentary, for instance, relies on direct speech and indirect free speech. Use of the latter is especially disturbing because the stylistic similarities between the commentator's speech and that of Sandor Krasna often make it impossible to determine whether the narrator is relating her own ideas or those of Krasna.

The viewer is also frequently confused as to whom images should be attributed. The commentary can, for instance, lead him to assume that what he sees is the filmmaker's (ie., Marker's) images, but then a few minutes later within the same sequence the voice-over commentary clearly assigns their origin to Krasna. In the same way, one cannot know whether certain synthesized images, particularly toward the film's end, were created by Hayao Yamaneko or someone else.

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Bentivoglio), *Mort d'une giraffe* (Danièle Tossier), *Islande* 1970 (Haroun Tazieff), *Apocalypse Now*, *Vertigo* and Marker's film, *La Jetée*.

<sup>2</sup>After a hiatus of many years, Marker resorts once again to the single-voice commentary in *Sans soleil*.

Marker has characterized these structural ambiguities as a deliberate strategy to fuse the three filmic characters into a single entity. He said he cast Sans soleil's various "elements" into:

...the fashion of a musical composition, with recurrent themes, counterpoints and mirror-like fugues: the letters, the comments, the images gathered, the images created, together with some images borrowed. In this way, out of these juxtaposed memories is born a fictional memory, and in the same way as Lucy [in Schulz's Peanuts strip] puts up a sign to indicate that "The Doctor is In", we'd like to preface this film with a placard: "Fiction is Out'--somewhere."<sup>3</sup>

Ultimately, this complex and torturous game of enunciation persuades the viewer to perceive a single enunciator within the film but one whose personality is refracted in a three-way mirror. For the spectator familiar with his work several details suggest that it is actually Marker who speaks under cover of the two other surrogate names. Like Marker, the cameraman has travelled across the globe; similar to Marker, he has visited Japan; he is a maker of political films; he has a strong affinity for cats and owls, whose images are sprinkled throughout the film and, as noted in *Le joli mai*, constitute a signature appended to nearly all of Marker's works. Furthermore, several images attributed in *Sans soleil* to Krasna<sup>4</sup> are found in *Le*

<sup>3</sup> Excerpts from *Sans soleil's* press file published in Jacques Gerber, *Souvenir-Ecran*, Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou, 1989, p. 172.

<sup>4</sup> "Krasna" is surely short-hand for "Krasnapolski," Marker's fictional family name. See reference in introduction.

Dépays, Marker's book of photographs from one of his trips to Japan. Finally, Marker the filmmaker also shares similarities with Hayao Yamaneko the video artist (they are both computer freaks, for instance).

One can assume that most viewers would be tempted to identify the film as Marker's personal account and thus to consider *Sans soleil* as "fictive fiction." This is probably what Marker intends in the above, enigmatic statement, "Fiction is Out." A reading of various critics' reviews confirms that this assumption is correct.<sup>5</sup> The multi-partition of enunciation and the use of fictional characters are a ruse to disguise a highly autobiographical film.

Why would Marker turn to such a complex enunciative strategy and all the ambiguities it spawns? Firstly, it allows the filmmaker to take his distance from what is said in order to protect himself, thus avoiding accusation of narcissism, which would counter Marker's well-developed sense of discretion (a form of politeness he appreciates in Japanese society). Behind this shield of anonymity he can talk intimately about himself. It simultaneously accomodates self-assertion and self-effacement.

Secondly, his strategy sidesteps any commitment to stick to "the truth" about himself. Refusal to present as genuine his own self-representation can be construed as stemming from

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<sup>5</sup> For example, J. Hoberman said the film "has the feel of a testament" in his review, "Dis Orient, Dat Occident," in *The Village Voice*, November 1, 1983, no. 44, p. 56.

the issue of the problematic unity of the self-in-time. (As far as the individual is concerned, "there is no referent," observes Barthes.) Yesterday's personal truth can easily become today's lie, and it is only through contrivance that an individual can speak in first-person in the present moment about who he was yesterday. Marker refers to the fissures within self-identity in *Le Dépays*, where he says he composed his impressions, which form a running commentary to the book's pictures, in second-person voice in order to establish distance between "the one who, from September 1979 to January 1981, took the photos of Japan and the one who is writing in Paris in February 1983."<sup>6</sup>

In the same vein, he shuns any obligation to present a true picture of the world around him. The ambiguities enveloping the film's enunciator set up an indeterminate contract with the viewer; as a result, the film dwells in the intersection between fiction and documentary. The undecidability of *Sans soleil*'s status is grounded in the issue of the "indeterminacy of reality" in today's world. And for Marker, Japan's society--hyper-industrialized and media-saturated--is symptomatic of this condition. Indeed, *Sans soleil* illustrates the centrality of images in Japan: TV images, electronic billboards, advertising signs, public art, animated images, computer-generated images and, above all, the omnipresent video screens that leer at the passerby from all corners of Tokyo. In *Sans soleil* Marker

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<sup>6</sup> Chris. Marker, *Le Dépays*, Paris, Herscher, 1982, unpaginated book.

moves along an increasingly blurred line between the real in the Japanese capital and the hyper-real. Here, he contemplates the mesmerizing, cinematic quality of Tokyo department stores and subways via the observations of Yamaneko, the video artist:

More and more, my dreams find their setting in the department stores of Tokyo, the subterranean tunnels that extend them and run parallel to the city. A face appears, disappears, a trace is found, is lost, all the folklore of dreams is so much in its place that the next day, when I'm awake, I realize that I continue to seek in the basement labyrinth the presence concealed the night before. I begin to wonder if those dreams are really mine, or if they are part of a totality, of a gigantic collective dream of which the entire city may be the projection. It might suffice to pick up any one of the telephones that lie about to hear a familiar voice, or the beating of a heart--Sei Shonagon's for example(...). All the galleries lead to stations, the same companies own the stores and the railroads that bear their name, Keio, Odakyu, all those names of ports. The train inhabited by sleeping people puts together all the fragments of a dream, makes a single film of them, the ultimate film. The tickets from the automatic dispenser grant admission to the show.<sup>7</sup>

Sans soleil's nebulous positioning of the viewer is a reflection of Marker's perplexity about the relationship that cinematic representation can establish toward reality. It is an issue to which he returns repeatedly in the film and is framed, in one sense, within the context of a re-evaluation of the political and ideological choices that guided filmmaking activity

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<sup>7</sup> Excerpt from Marker's English-version of *Sans soleil*, published in *Semiotext(e)*, Vol. 14, no. 3, 1984, p. 35.

in the 60s and early 70s. Those who search in *Sans soleil* for a coherent, full assessment of Marker's relationship toward political filmmaking, however, will be disappointed. He merely alludes to it at various moments in the film. Even so, the subject keeps rearing its allusive head to the point of obsession and becomes one of the film's focal points. *Sans soleil* is haunted by the memory of the Sixties.

Though Marker supposedly declares independence from this memory's influence, the breach is by no means as complete as he would have one believe. He, or Krasna rather, states at the beginning of *Sans soleil* that: "After having been around the world a dozen times, only banality now interests me." His sole aim, purportedly, is to portray the ordinariness of daily ritual in the countries he visits. Does this mean Marker has once and for all cast off the wars and militant confrontations that formed the subject of so many of his previous films? It would seem so on the surface. Yet one begins to notice that he is attracted to--cannot help coming back to--highly charged political events in *Sans soleil*: images of public protests, images of social conflict, of guerrilla warfare, of the struggle for independence.

Somewhat inevitably, Marker exhibits ambivalent feelings about the Sixties' ideals. On the one hand he finds its utopianism, its simplistic social vision "exasperating." On the other, he admires the "primal scream" that more settled voices

"could not recall or dare to utter." His evaluation of the movement's final accomplishments, however, is far from ambivalent, in that he shares Miguel Torga's judgment that "every protagonist represents only himself(...). In place of a change in the social setting, he seeks simply, in the revolutionary act, the sublimation of his own image..." Marker criticizes yesteryear's revolutionaries for a romanticism that was as "utterly inadequate" then as it is now for the quotidian hardship of life in the Third World. Its militants, he seems to say, killed one another off--symbolically if not literally--in the name of revolutionary purity. Most of those who survived now count among capitalism's most successful servants, a system they know only too well. "The militants who studied capitalism so thoroughly in order to fight it," he observes, "now provide it with its best executives." Clearly, the filmmaker delivers a severe condemnation in Sans soleil of what he sees as the ultimate perversion of a period's fundamental altruism.

Yet--and yet--his conflicting feelings get in the way of wholesale censure. The "flower power children" may have, per Marker, committed serious ideological mistakes, they may have pursued foolish illusions, but their goals were still noble and he laments how quickly the collective memory of their idealistic struggles has faded. Twenty years ago Western students took to the streets against those upholding imperialism (South Vietnam, Czechoslovakia) or neo-colonialism (Chile) and to



support distant freedom fights (Mozambique, Angola). What happened to the memory, for instance, of independence wars waged not so long ago against the Portuguese in tiny Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde? "Who remembers all this?" Marker/Krasna asks. "History throws its empty bottles through the window!"

Before us, then, is a Janus-faced Marker, split by a longing for a past when efforts to improve the human condition were held in universal esteem (Che: "I tremble with indignation every time an injustice is committed in the world.") and a present-day desire to free himself from that very era's lingering influence and memory. *Sans soleil* is the outpouring of its author's unresolved grief toward the Sixties...a work imbued both with Marker's remorse and misgivings.

His views on the period's militant cinema and its pretensions to effect major change in the world are unequivocal, though. First, there is his reprobation against the attitude that considered radical filmmaking as an "adventure." Marker recoils, in fact, from the term "guerrilla" as a description of militant filmmaking. Its use, he said, was "shamefully inappropriate" when compared to the flesh-and-blood suffering of real combatants in the field.

Second, avows Marker, militant production was misled by reality's appearances. It may have thought it was capturing on film what seemed to be the essence of popular struggle but

instead merely recorded the same signs of struggle, the same revolutionary postures over and over again. Marker's trip to visit Tokyo's Narita airport, recounted in *Sans soleil*, offered him the occasion to reflect on the elusive nature of reality. He travels back to Narita to attend the birthday ceremony of a former victim, from 10 years earlier, of civil protests against construction of the city's airport. Upon his arrival there are, once again, peasants protesting against its construction. Struck by the ritualistic form of the demonstrators' gestures--a nominal display of revolutionary signs--Marker felt the motions were all the more empty since they were wasted on a lost cause. He explains in *Sans soleil*'s voice-over commentary:

The demonstration was unreal. I had the impression of acting in *Brigadoon*, of waking up 10 years later in the midst of the same players, with the same blue lobsters of Police, the same helmeted adolescents, the same banners, the same slogan: DOWN WITH THE AIRPORT! Only one thing had been added: the airport, precisely.

Marker ultimately describes the demonstration as a "shattered hologram of the Sixties' generation" and considers that he can no longer present these kinds of struggles in straight documentary form; to do otherwise would reinforce revolutionary myth. In answer to his anguish over the misleading power of images (as analogous to "reality"), Marker

turns to his friend, Yamaneko, who has found the solution: "If the images of the present don't change, then change the images of the past." (At this point in the film's voice-over commentary one sees computer-altered footage from the Sixties.)

Electronic imagery thus apparently offers redemptive power to a filmmaker who, after decades devoted to the undertaking, has ceased to identify with radical cinema. The following pages shall expand on the reasons for Marker's enthusiasm toward computer technology and its impact on the future of images...an enthusiasm that sets him apart from the pessimistic outlook of so many artists and critics of post-modernity vis-a-vis this phenomenon.

Marker lends his support to electronic images for ethical reasons. Even more than colorization, digital manipulation allows him to reduce the resemblance of filmic images to their referent. It provides a means for blocking, or at least reducing, the illusion of reality that cinematic pictures traditionally produce.<sup>8</sup> These pictures, he says in *Sans soleil*, "are less deceptive than those you see on television. At least, they proclaim themselves to be what they are: images, not the portable and compact form of an already inaccessible reality."

Given Marker's view that every--any--image captures an emotion, he foresees in computerized imagery a method for attaining a wider, fuller expression of human consciousness.

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<sup>8</sup> Marker has always fought against the filmic illusion of reality, as analyzed at several points in this thesis.

While filmic images, as molds or traces, can only be "recollection images" dependent on the presence of the object depicted, synthetic images, by contrast, do not require, as conceptual constructs, that the object represented be there at the moment of its making. They can therefore actualize both memories of a bygone past and imaginative projections of the future. Photography and cinema permit everyone to create a memory for himself of selected experienced moments, but the computer will allow each to construct his own auto-portrait with the creative embellishment of electronic images.

The resulting customized vision of the world, says Marker, would include dreams and fantasies as well as actual experience: "[The] electronic texture is the only one that can deal with sentiment, memory and imagination," murmurs the voice-over in *Sans soleil*. (Indeed, advances in computer-generated virtual reality--largely unknown 10 years ago--are moving precisely in this direction.) Marker says as much toward the end of *Sans soleil* when musing about the work of his "friend," Hayao Yamaneko, who toils away at "electronic graffiti" in his basement studio:

I feel a direct connection to his work because he explores that part of the human soul that compels each of us to scribble a drawing on our cell wall...to etch an outline of whatever is not, is no longer, or is yet-to-be...to trace--or erase--the contours of the heart.

At this very moment all will write their own poetry.<sup>9</sup>

All may not share his views about the potential of computers, but at least Marker's observations better enable one to understand why he considers coexistence of time to be a central coil of the 20th century. New technologies that channel visions of the future and past into the present hold out the possibility for Marker of achieving a homogenous, unbroken temporality...an Eden-like timelessness that welds over the ruptures between present and past, and the suffering they generate. (Pace Marker, 40th-century man, possessing total recall at his fingertips, will experience no lost memory or the suffering it engenders.) Binding the world together through simultaneous awareness--forging temporal co-existence--has been Marker's longstanding dream. It was already prefigured in *Si j'avais quatre dromadaires*, a film made in 1966 and composed of photographs from 26 countries during the 1955-65 years. *Sans soleil* further develops this fascination for the fusion of time zones, as also evidenced in Marker's admiration for *Vertigo* (which he claims to have seen 19 times<sup>10</sup>): "[It is] the only film to have spoken about memory gone mad. Madelene

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<sup>9</sup> Translated excerpt from *Sans soleil's* voice-over commentary, published in *Japon Fiction*, in *Traverses*, no. 38-39, November 1986, p. 266.

<sup>10</sup> As indicated in *Sans soleil*, Marker had already alluded to this admiration for *Vertigo* in *La jetée* in the latter's sequence taking place in the Jardin des Plantes about the sequoia section.

remembers a woman she couldn't have known; Scottie finds Madelene 'again' in the future...beyond her grave."<sup>11</sup>

Despite their limits, filmic images remain nevertheless very important for Marker. "I wonder," he says, "how people remember things who don't film, don't photograph, don't tape." According to Marker, they have a role to play for the individual. They let each person capture his own memory of events at the moment of their occurrence: "I remember that month of January in Tokyo," says Marker, "or rather I remember the images I filmed of the month of January in Tokyo. They have substituted themselves for my memory. They are my memory."<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, Marker believes in the necessity of continuously filming reality, but frets over an adequate way to record it, which touches at the core of *Sans soleil's* self-reflexivity: his constant tussle with filmic method. He reveals his intervention in the filmmaking process, signalling his influence as filmmaker on the final product. The aim in doing so is not to fight illusionism by displaying filmic codes or the film's process of enunciation, nor to uncover the hidden strategies of realism in Brechtian manner, but to share with the viewer the frustration, suffering and joy of his creative work.

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<sup>11</sup> Raymond Bellour identified this connection in the sequence in *Sans soleil* devoted to *Vertigo*, where Marker isolates Hitchcock's famous opening shot of a whorl and takes it as the emblem of a new temporality. See "La double hélice", in *Passages de l'image*, op. cit., p. 51.

<sup>12</sup> *Semiotext(e)*, vol. 14, no. 3, op. cit., p. 39.

As cameraman, Marker defines his mode of approach to subjects. The straight look into the camera, such as those filmed among Cape Verde's people, occurs frequently in *Sans soleil*. By allowing subjects to stare directly at the viewfinder, Marker explicitly dissents from an established rule of filmmaking. "Is there anything more stupid," he observes, "than to ask subjects not to look into the camera, as taught in film schools?"

Elsewhere, he calls attention to the subtle diversity of what is generally referred to as the "gaze into the camera." In one scene he takes a medium close-up of a woman's face in an African marketplace. She sees him but feigns unawareness. As he trains the camera on her face she watches from the corner of her eye, finally throwing, just for a moment, a full-eyed glance in his direction. Accompanying this scene one hears the following voiceover commentary: "I see her--she saw me--she knows that I see her ... and at the end: a real glance, straightforward, lasting a twenty-fourth of second--the duration of an image."

One deduces from this sequence that a glance into the camera can take many forms and that its effects are not as clear as one might believe. It doesn't necessarily imply a direct address from the film's character to the viewer. In the above example the viewer is not the object of a glance but, rather, is firmly placed in the position of witness to it; here Marker hints,

without a trace of didactic insistence, at a more refined understanding of this fundamental filmic mode. At the same time he shares with us his creative emotions...the pleasure he derives from exchange of eye contact between cameraman and subject, an interaction of charm and delicacy--a taboo's fleeting transgression, a desire but momentarily fulfilled. The relationship between filmmaker and subject, Marker suggests, is a passionate one, involving an ever-unsatisfied drive for contact.

In the same way he draws attention to his role as cameraman, Marker reveals his editing work to the viewer. *Sans soleil* is a patchwork of eclectic images stitched together by voiceover commentary. The viewer feels lost and overwhelmed in its vertiginous complexity after the first screening, flowing in part from the global disparity of *Sans soleil*'s images, in part from their dizzying transitions. Even more disorienting are the ways images pop up unexpectedly--and incongruously--in the middle of a sequence for the shortest moment, only to later resurface as part and parcel of an integrated sequence-and-commentary. At the film's beginning, for instance, an image of a dog on a beach is briefly flickered before us, reappearing at the very end of *Sans soleil*, this time with apposite commentary. Or one finds the image of a man rowing on a lake that suddenly intrudes into the middle of scenes from Japanese street-dancing, its short screen



appearance almost escaping attention. It soon re-materializes, however, in a subsequent sequence that recounts the story of a man who loses his wife and then perishes himself from grief.

One could argue that this film about remembrance mirrors the progressive resurgence to consciousness of the past's images, and simply leave it at that. But *Sans soleil*'s structure also lends itself to another interpretation: Marker's attempt to bring forward, to unveil the editor's hand. As in *Le fond de l'air est rouge*, he confirms that images are the raw material a filmmaker selects and assembles at will in order to construct meaning; a film is the collation of separate pieces linked through editing.

But again, his purpose in *Sans soleil* is not to outline the filmmaker's role as progenitor of discourse, but to share with the viewer his experience as a filmmaker...communicating to us, as Terrence Rafferty aptly put it: "the solitude of the film editor at his machinery, his reverie over the footage he's shot (or that has been sent to him by friends) and the scenes he watches over and over again."<sup>13</sup> Just as he returns to certain shots in the film, Marker freezes images at various moments in *Sans soleil* (the face of a beautiful black woman, an old man in a working-class Japanese bar) to divulge to the viewer his near-fetishist contemplation of film footage.

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<sup>13</sup> Terrence Rafferty, "Marker Changes Trains", in *Sight and Sound*, Autumn 1984, pp. 285-288.

Marker adds yet another layer to his reverie as film editor by probing the issue of temporality in film. The freeze-frame, "the temporal equivalent of a close up shot,"<sup>14</sup> points to cinema's relationship to photography and the immobilization of a pregnant moment that it allows. Furthermore, by presenting an isolated image at one moment in *Sans soleil* and then reinserting it later into its proper sequence (ie., the rowboat image), Marker deals with temporal organization in film. He highlights the filmmaker's freedom to represent an action's total duration or, through partial selection, to reorder time to the point of abstraction. *Sans soleil* is made of different fragments of time that Marker haphazardly assembles into an undefined, unanchored past.

Finally, he pursues the issue of semantic effects produced by the juxtaposition and combination of shots in the film's strip. At the very beginning of *Sans soleil*, even before its title appears, the female commentator says:

The first image he told me about was that of three children on a road in Iceland in 1965. He said that for him it was the image of happiness, and also that he tried several times to link it to other images, but it never worked. He wrote: "I'll have to put it all alone at the beginning of a film with a long piece of black leader. If they don't see happiness in the image then at least they'll see the black."

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<sup>14</sup> Robert Stam, *Reflexivity in Film and Literature, From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard, op., cit., p. 234* (regarding slow motion).

After the first sentence the woman pauses, while a brief shot of three children on a road appears, an image in warm golden colors. This cuts immediately to black leader as her voice picks up the commentary again: "...he tried several times to link it to other images..." The leader is broken, just for a moment, by an image of a naval jet-fighter before returning to blackness.

Psychoanalysis would no doubt enrich our interpretation of this sequence--a statement on the inseparability of love and hate, life and death, Eros and Thanatos?--but suffice it to say that Marker makes explicit his frustration at the impossible dissociation of shots in a flood of filmic images. The ineluctable conjunction between shots (on either side of each image is always another) compels the filmmaker to use black leader as a last attempt to confer autonomy to an image he covets. This evokes a central concern that, in the intervening 10 years since *Sans soleil's* creation, has come to preoccupy contemporary artists and critics ad nauseum: the contagious concatenation and interaction of images in our modern, overly mediatic world. "At the back of every image is always another one," says Serge Daney.<sup>15</sup> In fact, Marker's Icelandic sequence brings to mind the conclusion in Godard's film about his own film, *Scénario du film, Passion*. Godard's silhouette detaches itself from a white luminous screen as he expresses in long monologue his

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<sup>15</sup> Serge Daney, "La rampe. Cahiers critiques 1970-1982", Paris, Cahiers du cinéma, Gallimard, 1983.

reverence for the blank space from which cinema will, hopefully, emerge renewed.<sup>16</sup> Both creators, Godard and Marker, formulate in their own way a similar desire to return to the pure visual emptiness of cinema's origins, to re-establish the perennial opposition between light and dark, between before and after, which is the condition necessary for images to recover their true and uncorrupted singularity. (The fact that Marker isolates an image of children is not insignificant: of all images, none corresponds more appropriately to a longing for the happiness of original innocence.)

Later in *Sans soleil* he returns to the idea of the unavoidable interaction between images but in a more humorous

<sup>16</sup> Tu n'inscris plus dans la mémoire parce qu'elle est là, toute blanche (*geste devant l'écran*), l'écran blanc, la toile blanche, le linge blanc comme le linge de Véronique (*le blanc envahit le champ*), le corps du film on disait, Véronique disait le corps du Christ. Tu as dû remonter au fond des temps, jusqu'à la Bible, tu as dû faire des choses défendues (...) et maintenant tu es dans la région centrale (*fondus enchaînés: une étendue d'eau, à peine ridée. Un zoom arrière découvre un ponton, au bout duquel un homme, petite silhouette, regarde l'eau. JLG parle en off*). Tu peux inventer la mer, la page blanche, la plage blanche, la plage, tu peux inventer la mer. Elle t'attend (*l'homme revient vers nous, le long du ponton*), tu es son enfant, tu peux retourner chez elle, elle te tend les brans (*JLG en ombre chinoise de profil, et en amorce, tend ses bras, entre lesquels le personnage tout petit remonte lentement le ponton*) tu peux tout lui dire (*JLG en amorce, de profil, remplit tout l'écran, ombre énorme. Musique*). Et voici la lumière et voici les soldats, voici les patrons, voici les enfants, et voici la lumière, et voici la joie, voici la guerre, voici l'ange, et voici la peur, et voici la lumière, voici la blessure universelle, voici la nuit, voici la vierge, voici la grâce, et voici la lumière, et voici la lumière, et voici la lumière, et voici le brouillard, et voici l'aventure, et voici la fiction, et voici le réel, et voici le documentaire, et voici le mouvement, et voici le cinéma, et voici l'image, et voici le son, et voici le cinéma, voici le cinéma, voici le cinéma...voilà le travail. (*Après ces dernières phrases, JLG a laissé place à une autre image: un avion décolle dans le soleil, face à nous, dans la lumière*)

Jean-Luc Godard, "Scénario du film *Passion*", in *L'Avant-Scène Cinéma*, no. 323-324, March 1984, p. 89.

way. What comes to mind is the sandwiching of two scenes: the first, a black-and-white TV image of a Japanese man shooting a pistol, followed immediately by a color excerpt from Danièle Tessier's poignant anthropological documentary, *Death of a Giraffe*, which depicts a panic-stricken giraffe collapsing to the ground, fatally wounded by gun shot. Aside from the apparent allegories (the subordination of nature by technology; the demise of cinema at the hand of television), the sequence retains our attention both for its arresting imagery and for its play on film language. By constructing narrative continuity with two images, whose formal differences underscore the disparity of their origin, Marker wryly refers to Kuleshov's experiments with cinema's capacity to alter the very essence of raw material...transforming it to create a reality without reference and, in the process, exposing editing's playful aspects. While it may incidentally serve to snatch away editing's camouflage, what emerges above all from this sequence is the enjoyment derived from the fortuitous blending of two shots, a satisfaction comparable to the serendipitous complementarity produced by channel zapping.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> "Zapping Zone" is, significantly, the name Marker gave to his multi-screen installation in Autumn 1990 as part of the "Passages de l'image" exhibit at the Centre Georges Pompidou. It expanded on his project in *Sans soleil* to "fabricate his own legend" by mixing photographic, filmic and synthetic images that he borrowed, created and found. For more detail, see Raymond Bellour's article, "Zapping Zone," in *Passages de l'image*, op. cit., pp. 169-171.

In sum, Marker no longer strives in *Sans soleil* toward confrontation in the name of ideological awareness, as was the aim of so many self-reflexive films in the 70s. Rather, he attempts to draw the viewer into the filmmaker's artistic choices, doubts, regrets, hesitations and, above all, his gratification derived from creating with images.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study has traced how documentary film defined its political role in response to changes in progressive, leftist thought during the 1962-1982 period in France.

Exposing a resurgent drive toward political commitment in cinema by the end of the Algerian war in 1962, the chapter on *Le Joli mai* called for a downgrading of the importance attached to May '68 vis-a-vis the history of radical filmmaking in France. May '68 did not, contrary to most assumptions, constitute a sudden ideological rupture within cinema but, rather, corresponded to a significant expansion of a movement already well underway. Both *Le Joli mai* and *A bientôt j'espère* were animated by the same desire to use film as a tool for social action that would motivate post-'68 collective filmmaking.

Subsequently this thesis examined the crisis of purpose in French radical filmmaking, which corresponded to a political and cultural disarray within the left in the Seventies. The last chapter revealed how this loss of faith and self-confidence within radical currents, as exemplified in Marker's works, led to a widespread abandonment in the early Eighties of the view that cinema could effectively be exploited to effect social change.

Within this historical context, the shifts in film form--as



related to changes in cinema's reading of its social role--have been analyzed for their purpose and effect. My thesis has, therefore, reviewed in succession a number of strategies and the relationship each establishes between film and viewer. First, I examined the extensive use of interviews and the various devices through which Marker powerfully presses upon the viewer his point of view in *Le joli mai* and *A bientôt j'espère*, two films based on a faith in cinema's capacity to change the political agenda. Secondly, I described *Le fond de l'air est rouge*'s dialectical style of editing as an attempt by Marker to avoid political dogmatism and, in parallel, to construct an active viewer by involving him in an intellectually challenging meditation of two subjects: leftist political issues across the globe during the 10 years preceding *Le fond*'s making (1967-1977), and militant cinema's potential and limits. My final chapter analyzed Marker's return to a single voice-over commentary in *Sans soleil*, a self-reflexive film that confronts various types of images while pondering the status of the visual in contemporary post-modern society.

Focussing on four films only, this study hopes to have illustrated how in-depth film analysis can lead to a better theoretical understanding of documentary. It has attempted to refine notions such as "camera as provocator"--via comparison of its role in *Le joli mai* versus *Chronique d'un été*--or of the broad concept of self-reflexivity, whose purpose in documentary films can be demonstrated as varying in time: from didacticism in the

Seventies to ludism in the Eighties. One should add, however, that whatever the conclusions drawn from such a deliberately limited corpus, they require further confirmation based on a wider selection of works.

This thesis also developed the idea of historical relativity of the documentary concept as established in the first chapter. Documentary implies a "faith in reality" now viewed with great skepticism. One of the main sources of the contemporary crisis in documentary film today is found in this loss of faith in reality's identification, rather than in any awareness of the filmmaking process' unavoidable impact on the representation of the profilmic event. Despite its nod to the influence of the camera's presence on subjects' behavior and to the mediation of the object represented by the filmmaker's subjectivity, *A bientôt j'espère* is nevertheless perceived as a documentary. Marker and Marret claimed--both in the film's accompanying pamphlets and in its voice-over commentary--to present to the viewer an authentic rendering of a particular instance of labor protest (in contrast to misleading accounts in the official media of the same event). There is a clear documentary contract at the basis of the film. *Sans soleil*, by contrast, does not presume to establish such a contract, which Marker feels is untenable in contemporary post-modern society where reality is perceived as ever-elusive.

As a final word, I would add that this thesis, while avoiding the specificity of Marker's work as a goal in and of itself,

nevertheless opens the way for further study of his films. Two aspects, in particular, I feel are worth exploring more deeply: Marker's handling of the relationship between sound and images and his treatment of the body.

The former is one of dissociation and complex interaction: neither sound nor image dominates but, instead, alternatively oppose or complement each other, which classifies Marker as a modern filmmaker along with Duras, Syberberg and Godard (see Deleuze's "fusion of the tear"). As for the latter, he takes an intense interest in nearly all of his films in even the slightest gesture or facial expression. For Marker, body language--even when self-conscious or theatrical--is revelatory of a subject's personality and emotions. Among the works deserving study in this respect is *La solitude du chanteur de fond* (1974), a portrait of Yves Montand. This portrayal is constructed using Montand's own comments and a minute observation by Marker of changes in the singer's body language, particularly those involving his hands and fingers, which are framed in repeated close-ups: the singer deliberately uses carefully refined and controlled gestures to convey emotion to his audience.

Marker's interest in the body for its expressivity parallels a proclivity for photogeny...a contemplative relationship to his subjects, noted at several points in this thesis, that lends an endearing quality to most of his films. Indeed, a desire to retain an image of the things that move Marker underlies his entire

corpus as filmmaker and photographer. Each work functions in its own fashion as a constituent element in his on-going "memory album" of cherished moments and human encounters, an album writ large across the world, as Marker observed in his 1966 film, *Si j'avais quatre dromadaires*:

Avec ses quatre dromadaires  
Don Pedro d'Alfaroubeira  
Courut le monde et l'admira.  
It fit ce que je voulais faire.

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## FILMOGRAPHY OF CHRIS. MARKER\*

### LONG AND MEDIUM-LENGTH FILMS:

- 1952: *Olympia 52* (Helsinki, 82 minutes)
- 1958: *Lettre de Sibérie* (62 minutes)
- 1960: *Description d'un combat* (Israel, 60 minutes)
- 1961: *Cuba si* (52 minutes)
- 1962: *Le joli mai* (Paris, 165 minutes)
  - 1. *Prière sur la Tour Eiffel*
  - 2. *Le retour de Fantômas*
- 1965: *Le mystère Koumiko* (Tokyo, 54 minutes)
- 1966: *Si j'avais quatre dromadaires* (52 minutes)
- 1970: *La bataille des dix millions* (Cuba, 58 minutes)
- 1974: *La solitude du chanteur de fond* (Portrait of Yves Montand, 60 minutes)
- 1977: *Le fond de l'air est rouge*
  - 1. *Les mains fragiles* (120 minutes)
  - 2. *Les mains coupées* (120 minutes)
- 1982: *Sans soleil* (110 minutes)
- 1985: *AK* (Portrait of Akira Kurosawa, 71 minutes)

### SHORT FILMS:

- 1956: *Dimanche à Pékin* (22 minutes)
- 1962: *La jetée* (28 minutes)
- 1969: *Le deuxième procès d'Artur London* (28 minutes)
- 1969: *Jour de tournage* ("L'aveu", 11 minutes)
- 1969: *On vous parle du Brésil* (20 minutes)
- 1970: *Carlos Marighela* (17 minutes)
- 1970: *Les mots ont un sens* (Portrait of François Maspero, 20 minutes)
- 1971: *Le train en marche* (Portrait of Alexandre Medvedkin, 32 minutes)
- 1973: *L'ambassade* (Super 8; 20 minutes)
- 1981: *Junkopía* (San Francisco, 6 minutes)
- 1984: *2084* (Centenary of organized labor; co-produced with the CFDT audio-visual group, 10 minutes)

\* This filmography is based on that offered in *L'Avant-Scène Cinéma*, June-July 1991, no. 403-404, p. 142. Some of the films listed as Marker's own work were presented at the time of their debut as unattributed collective works.

**TELEVISION PRODUCTIONS:**

- 1989: *L'héritage de la chouette* (13 x 26 minutes)
- 1990: *Berliner ballade* (Special report for Antenne 2; 25 minutes)
- 1991: *Le tombeau d'Alexandre* (2 x 52 minutes)
- 1992: *Le facteur sonne toujours Cheval* (52 minutes)

**MULTI-MEDIA INSTALLATIONS:**

- 1978: *Quand le siècle a pris formes* (video/multi-screen montage at the Beaubourg Museum's Paris-Berlin exhibit; 12 minutes)
- 1990: *Zapping Zone* (video/computer/film montage at the Beaubourg Museum's "Passage de l'image" exhibit)

**VIDEO WORKS:**

- 1985-1990 works included in the (above-mentioned) Zapping Zone exhibit:
- Matta '85 (14 minutes, 18 sec.)
  - Christo '85 (24 minutes)
  - Tarkovski '86 (26 minutes)
  - Eclats (20 minutes)
  - Bestiaire (9 minutes, 4 sec.)
    - Chat écoutant la musique (2 minutes, 47 sec.)
    - An Owl is an Owl is an Owl (3 minutes, 18 sec.)
    - Zoo Piece (2 minutes, 45 sec.)
  - Spectre (27 minutes)
  - Tokyo Days (24 minutes)
  - Berlin '90 (20 minutes, 35 sec.)
  - Photo .Browse (17 minutes, 20 sec.; 301 photos)
  - Détour Ceausescu (8 minutes, 2 sec.)
  - Théorie des ensembles (11 minutes)

**VIDEO CLIPS:**

- 1990: *Getting Away With It* (London, with participation of the Electronic Group; 4 minutes, 27 sec.)

**CO-PRODUCTIONS AND COLLECTIVE FILMMAKING WORKS:**

- 1950: *Les statues meurent aussi* (Alain Resnais, 30 minutes)
- 1967: *Loin du Vietnam* (115 minutes)
- 1968: *A bientôt j'espère* (Mario Marret, 55 minutes)
- 1972: *Vive la baleine* (Mario Ruspoli, 30 minutes)
- 1974: *Puisqu'on vous dit que c'est possible* (Lip, 60 minutes)
- 1975: *La spirale* (Chili, 155 minutes)

**VOICE-OVER TEXTS:**

- 1956: *Les hommes de la baleine* (Mario Ruspoli)
- 1957: *Le mystère de l'atelier 15* (Alain Resnais)
- 1959: *Django Reinhardt* (Paul Paviot)
- 1963: *A Valparaiso* (Joris Ivens)
- 1966: *Le volcan interdit* (Haroun Tazieff)

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